

Case 59: Cincinnati

John Mueller

December 14, 2016

Raised in a suburb of Cincinnati, Ohio, Christopher Cornell converted to Islam in high school and was soon plotting to defend his religion against what he called “the continued American aggression against our people” by planting pipe bombs in the US Capitol building and then shooting government officials as they fled the building.

Although there is no indication that he ever prayed at a mosque or had interactions with any local Muslims, he did link up with an FBI informant who had been working with the bureau because of unrelated criminal charges and who was put on the case when he told the Bureau that Cornell was voicing support for violent jihad on Twitter. When Cornell legally purchased ammunition and a couple of semi-automatic rifles at a gun shop for the deed, he was arrested.

Cornell was diagnosed with adjustment and personality disorders and was something of a loner—his family described him as a “momma’s boy” and said that his best friend was Mikey, his “kitty cat.” He seems to have had no connection or communication with any terrorist group. However, he claimed otherwise and came to identify with ISIS, insisting in a post-arrest interview that “We’re here in Ohio. We’re in every state. We’re more organized than you think.” He said he would do whatever ISIS asked of him, including beheading Americans, and predicted “there will be many, many attacks.” Asked what he would have done had he not been arrested, he said that, since American troops were “coming to our land, stealing our resources and killing our people, raping our women,” he would have put one of his guns “to Obama’s head” and then “pulled the trigger.” Then he “would unleash more bullets on the Senate and House of Representative members, and I would have attacked the Israeli embassy and various other buildings.”¹

Although Cornell’s plans were “unrealistic and irrational” and although the likelihood he would be “capable of actually carrying out his plan on his own is quite low,” notes Cassandra Dula, he did have “a defined mission of revenge and he made it very clear that, had he not been arrested, he would have made every attempt to fulfill that mission.”

Arrested on January 14, 2015, Cornell showed signs of change in 2016. In jailhouse letters to his family he said, “At the start of this...I thought it was fun and cool because of all the attention I was receiving” and “I’m not a terrorist, a criminal or a bad person, I’m just a kid who suffered from problems, that made some bad decisions and stupid mistakes” and “Those stupid terrorist(s) and their ideologies are twisted. They are out killing innocent people and ruining families. They are brainwashing innocent...kids with hate filled propaganda.”² He cried at his sentencing hearing and was deeply apologetic. The judge dismissed his

¹ “Ohio terrorism suspect says he would have shot President Obama,” Associated Press, March 6, 2015.

² Kevin Grasha, “Man in terror plot lived ‘fantasy life behind a computer screen,’” *cincinnati.com*, December 4, 2016.

protestations as “gallows remorse,” and sentenced him to 30 years as recommended by the prosecution. Cornell’s response was, “Fucking bullshit.”³

³ Kevin Grasha, “Man in terror plot: ‘Allah’s in control, not the judge’,” cincinnati.com, December 5, 2016.

Case 59: Cincinnati

Cassandra Dula

December 12, 2016

1. Overview

Around noon on Wednesday January 14, 2015, Christopher Lee Cornell, a 20-year-old Cincinnati native, was arrested on charges of attempting to kill a United States official. His plans included planting pipe bombs in the US Capitol building and then opening fire with two newly purchased M-15 assault rifles on any government officials attempting to flee the building.¹ While the plotting of his attack occurred over several months, Cornell's apparent accomplice was actually an FBI informant who had gotten in touch with the government agency after Cornell reached out to him via social media. Cornell allegedly came to his accomplice with the idea of committing terrorist attacks in the United States in the name of jihad and ISIS.²

Cornell first got on FBI radar when he began tweeting under the alias of Raheel Mahrus Ubaydah about committing violent jihad in support of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS). An FBI informant contacted the bureau about an individual who was posting information to Twitter about violent jihad and support for radical Islam. On August 29, 2014, the FBI informant and Cornell made contact with one another about teaming up for an attack.³ There is media discrepancy about whether or not Cornell made the first contact, although the majority of sources claim he did. Cornell claimed that he had been in touch with ISIS members overseas and that he had fully aligned himself with ISIS. Cornell encouraged his accomplice to meet up in order to make their own group and carry out jihad.⁴ As the two grew closer, they met twice in person—two days in October and two days in November of 2014—and each time Cornell revealed more and more of his plan.

During the first meetings on October 17-18, 2014, Cornell's plans were vague, although his accomplice did state that he had videos of jihadists and instructions for pipe bombs prepared for their meeting.⁵ Cornell said that his plan was to move in December and that their targets would be government buildings in Washington, DC. Cornell was also saving up money during this time period in order to purchase weapons and ammunition.⁶ In a later meeting it was revealed that Cornell was planning on attacking the Capitol building during President Barack Obama's State of the Union address.⁷

¹ Pierre Thomas, Jack Date, Mike Levine, and Jack Cloherty, "Ohio Man Arrested for Alleged ISIS-Inspired Plot on US Capitol, FBI Says," ABC News, January 14, 2015.

² Ben Brumfield, Pamela Brown, and Dana Ford, "FBI says plot to attack U.S. Capitol was ready to go," CNN, January 15, 2015.

³ U.S. v. Christopher Lee Cornell, Criminal Complaint, January 14, 2015.

⁴ Brumfield, Brown, and Ford, "FBI says plot to attack U.S. Capitol was ready to go."

⁵ U.S. v. Christopher Lee Cornell, Criminal Complaint.

⁶ Lindsey Bever, "Christopher Lee Cornell: The man who allegedly plotted to attack U.S. Capitol 'fulfilling the directives of violent jihadists,'" *Washington Post*, January 15, 2015.

⁷ "Ohio ISIS supporter allegedly planned State of the Union attack," CBS News, August 1, 2016.

During the second meetings on November 10 and 11, 2014, Cornell informed his accomplice that he considered members of the Congress his enemies and that their target of attack was going to be the US Capitol building. His plan was to travel to Washington with his accomplice, gather information on the security of the building, and then execute the plan. Cornell also had additional videos jihad, information on pipe bomb building, and information on Washington buildings on his computer to share with his accomplice during these meetings.⁸ However, at this time he had no weapons, no supplies to create a pipe bomb, and his plans were unrealistic and irrational. He was lacking in resources and it seems as if he had reached out to the informant in the hopes that having someone to work with would increase the legitimacy of his plan as well as the likelihood of its success.

Prior to Cornell's purchase of the weapons, his accomplice had informed the FBI that Cornell viewed the weapons as one of the "final steps" before the attack could be carried out, and the FBI informed the Point Blank Range and Gun Shop of the purchase days before it occurred.⁹ The store's employees had been told by the FBI to allow Cornell to purchase the weapons, although the store's employees did run a background check on him before the purchase that showed no problems.¹⁰ That being said, there is no evidence that Cornell had already obtained the supplies to create a pipe bomb, and no completed bombs were found within his residence, which would mean that this was not the last step, only one of many final steps.

On Wednesday January 14, Cornell entered the Gun Shop and purchased the two M-15 rifles along with 600 rounds of ammunition. Immediately after leaving the store he was arrested by the Joint Terrorism Task Force. He was charged with attempting to kill a US government official and possession of firearms in furtherance of an attempted crime of violence. Later he was also charged with trying to provide support to a terrorist organization.

In August 2016 Cornell pled guilty to three counts, his plea was placed under the condition that the later added charge of attempting to support a terrorist organization be dropped.¹¹ Although he showed signs of remorse in 2016, he was sentenced to 30 years in December.¹²

2. Nature of the adversary

Christopher Lee Cornell, also known as Raheel Mahrus Ubaydah, was born in Cincinnati, Ohio, to John Cornell Sr. and Angela Carmen.¹³ Information

⁸ U.S. v. Christopher Lee Cornell, Criminal Complaint.

⁹ Jason Silverstein, "FBI arrests Ohio man for plotting ISIS-inspired bombing," *Daily News*, January 14, 2015.

¹⁰ Patrick Brennan, "Father: Terror plot suspect was a 'momma's boy,'" *cincinnati.com*, January 23, 2015.

¹¹ Kevin Grasha, "Plea: Green Twp. Man planned terror attack during '15 Obama speech," *cincinnati.com*, August 1, 2016.

¹² Kevin Grasha, "Man in terror plot: 'Allah's in control, not the judge'," *cincinnati.com*, December 5, 2016.

¹³ "Dad Accuses FBI of Setting Up 'Mommy's Boy' Son in Bomb Plot," CBS News, January 15, 2015.

on his birth date, actual birth location, and early life is very limited. His parents said that he had a normal childhood and was a normal student, albeit a quiet one. His family has described him as a “mommy’s boy” and said that his best friend was his “kitty cat” Mikey.¹⁴ Neither of his parents appears to have any ties to Islam, radicalism, or jihadism.

He graduated from Oak Hills High School in 2012¹⁵ and was a wrestler as a student there.¹⁶ He was described as being a loner and spent a lot of his time playing video games. It is unclear whether or not he was employed at the time of his arrest, with some sources saying that he was unemployed¹⁷ and his father stating that he had a part time job.¹⁸ A former schoolmate said that Cornell’s change began senior year of high school, and said that he began to say strange things about the government and anarchy. He said that his friend’s views began to become very extreme and radical.¹⁹

While the actual timeframe is unclear, at some point after graduating from high school, Cornell moved out of his parent’s home. However, he did keep a room at their Cincinnati residence and his father stated that he visited the family every day.²⁰ His father said that Cornell had always been tolerant of other people’s religions and that he had commented on the persecution of Muslims around the world. He had recently converted to Islam and his father had noticed him starting to pray about two months prior to his arrest. It was also noted that he had “found peace in religion” after converting.²¹

It is unclear what may have actually influenced him to convert to Islam, although he did not take to social media under the name of Raheel Mahrus Ubaydah until the summer before his arrest. He has multiple times referenced Anwar al Awlaki, an American born al-Qaeda leader in Yemen, saying that he had already given the “thumbs up” to lone wolf jihadists.²² Similarly, while the content he posted on Twitter clearly shows that he was fully aligned with radical Islamists, it is also clear that he received no formal support from any groups in the Middle East or elsewhere.

Cornell had no police interactions prior to his arrest in January 2015, and although his hearing has not yet occurred, his interactions with other prisoners and the courts have been very telling in his opinion on law enforcement and the government. In March 2015 Cornell was permitted to give an interview for a radio station, WXIX-TV in Cincinnati from his prison cell in Kentucky. In the interview he told the station that if he hadn’t been arrested he would have taken his gun and “put it to Obama’s head,” also killing “Senate and House of Representatives members.” He also mentioned attacking the Israeli Embassy and

¹⁴ Bever, “Christopher Lee Cornell: The man who allegedly plotted.”

¹⁵ “Cornell case: Here’s what we know; don’t know,” cincinnati.com, January 15, 2015.

¹⁶ “Dad Accuses FBI of Setting Up ‘Mommy’s Boy’ Son in Bomb Plot.”

¹⁷ “Cornell case: Here’s what we know; don’t know.”

¹⁸ “Dad Accuses FBI of Setting Up ‘Mommy’s Boy’ Son in Bomb Plot.”

¹⁹ Alex Johnson and Shamar Walters, “Stunned Dad: Capitol Bomb Suspect Christopher Cornell Was Coerced FBI ‘Snitch,’” NBC News, January 16, 2015.

²⁰ “Cornell case: Here’s what we know; don’t know.”

²¹ Bever, “Christopher Lee Cornell: The man who allegedly plotted.”

²² Bever, “Christopher Lee Cornell: The man who allegedly plotted.”

other buildings in Washington, DC. At this point he had pled not guilty and was continuing to voice his support for ISIS.²³ These interview comments in particular emphasize his irrational and violent nature, serving as concrete examples of just how radical his views were and just how absurd his plans for violence were.

In November 2015, the federal judge appointed to Cornell's case ruled that he had to undergo a mental evaluation in order to determine whether or not he was competent enough to stand trial. This order occurred after Cornell's attorneys filed a motion saying that there was reason to believe that he may be suffering from some kind of mental disease.²⁴ However, by April 2016, a psychologist had seen Cornell four times, and, while he diagnosed Cornell with adjustment and personality disorders, the judge did find that Cornell was competent to stand trial.²⁵

Around the same time that the judge ruled on Cornell's competency, there was a shift in Cornell's appearance and the way in which he identified. He shaved his long beard, cut his hair, and began referring to himself as "Chris" again.²⁶ In August 2016 Cornell and his attorneys changed the plea to guilty of three charges; attempted killing of a US government officer, possession of firearm in furtherance of attempted crimes of violence, and offering material support to a foreign terrorist organization. A fourth charge of solicitation to commit a crime of violence was dropped in the plea bargain.²⁷ It is unclear whether or not the identity and appearance change was due to a genuine change in mindset on Cornell's behalf, or if it was a decision made by his legal team before entering the guilty plea.²⁸

3. Motivation

Cornell's radicalization reasons remain unknown, although some have suggested that it may have to do with the fact that he was a quiet loner in high school who spent his time searching for his place and never really found it.²⁹ It has been shown that he was educated about radical Islam and the doctrines of ISIS and al-Qaeda through social media, primarily Twitter, and while he had always been sensitive to Muslims in the Middle East and their struggle, after he converted to Islam it appeared that he rapidly became more radical in his views.³⁰ This sensitivity to Muslims in the Middle East may be what directed him to more radical sources of information in the first place, seeing as that clearly came before his plans for violence in the name of jihad and his religious conversion.

²³ "Ohio terrorism suspect says he would have shot President Obama," Associated Press, March 6, 2015.

²⁴ Dan Sewell, "Mental evaluation ordered for suspect in U.S. Capitol attack plot," *Washington Times*, November 10, 2015.

²⁵ Kevin Grasha, "Dramatic change in terror suspect's appearance," *cincinnati.com*, April 19, 2016.

²⁶ Grasha, "Dramatic change in terror suspect's appearance."

²⁷ "US Capitol attack plot suspect pleads guilty to 3 counts in Ohio," Fox News U.S., August 1, 2016.

²⁸ Dan Sewell, "Cincinnati man pleads guilty in plot to attack U.S. Capitol," *Dayton Daily News*, August 1, 2016.

²⁹ Johnson and Walters, "Stunned Dad."

³⁰ Bever, "Christopher Lee Cornell: The man who allegedly plotted."

During his interview with the Cincinnati radio station, Cornell also made it clear that he would do whatever he needed in order to assist in ISIS' jihad. He referred to himself as being in the same community as Muslims in the Middle East and he wanted to carry out his attacks because of the war waged on the Islamic State by the US government and specifically Obama. It was clear that he was very disturbed by the intervention of America in Syria and Iraq and accused US soldiers of "coming to [his] land, stealing [his] resources, and killing [his] people, raping [his] women."³¹

In planning his attacks, it seems he may have been in contact with other radical Islamists and did extensive research on buildings in Washington and on bomb making. It does not seem that there was any hesitation in this plan, and by the time Cornell had contacted his accomplice, he had already formulated the plan in his head. There is no indication of whether or not he had any other attacks that he was planning, although he did stress in his radio interview that ISIS was operating all over the US and that "there will be many, many attacks." He made it clear that he believed "We're here in Ohio. We're in every state. We're more organized than you think."³²

Additionally, Cornell had told his accomplice that he was following the rhetoric of Anwar al Awlaki and had decided to take his personal jihad into his own hands, planning and executing attacks on his own.³³ In the end, it would appear that Cornell's solitary nature combined with his later developed interest in radical political thought led him to radical Islamist rhetoric on social media in later years. Through interactions with other radical Islamist propaganda online, and according to him, interactions with other radical Islamists, and his conversion to Islam in the months leading up to his interactions with his accomplice, he was able to formulate a plan meant to retaliate against US aggressions towards Muslim communities in the Middle East.

4. Goals

While the primary goal of Cornell's attack is unknown, it is clear that Cornell was aiming to kill individuals that he viewed as responsible for the persecution of Muslims in the Middle East. Additionally, he believed that by executing attacks such as the one planned on the US Capitol building he would be able to continue the progress of ISIS and al-Qaeda on United States soil. Cornell claimed that he was committing the attack in order to stop the "continued American aggression" against Muslims on their soil, implying that he believed recurrent attacks against Americans on US soil would put an end to American involvement in the Middle East.³⁴

5. Plans for violence

While there were clear plots that included violence, Cornell was never able to actually execute his plans. In the original plot reported on by the FBI

³¹ "Ohio terrorism suspect says he would have shot President Obama."

³² "Ohio terrorism suspect says he would have shot President Obama."

³³ Bever, "Christopher Lee Cornell: The man who allegedly plotted."

³⁴ "Ohio ISIS supporter allegedly planned State of the Union attack."

informant, Cornell was planning on waging jihad against US officials on his own and in the name of ISIS. His plan was to detonate a pipe bomb outside of the US Capitol Building and then shoot government officials as they exited the building.³⁵ He had been planning on taking a trip to Washington, DC, in order to get a sense of the Capitol layout, and had made it clear in his meetings with the FBI informant that he had been proactively researching ways to create pipe bombs.

The day of his arrest, Cornell went out to purchase the guns for his attack. He purchased two M-15 rifles, presumably one for himself and one for the informant, and 600 rounds of ammunition for the attack. While the informant had made the FBI aware of this purchase in advance and they had contacted the gun shop to warn them about the arrest that was about to be made, the owner of the gun store said that he ran a background check on Cornell that came out fine, and he had proceeded with the sale as normal, per the FBI's requests.³⁶

In his interview with the Cincinnati radio station, Cornell also made additional threats of violence against government officials and the President. When asked what he would have done if he hadn't been arrested in January, Cornell said that he would have used the guns that he purchased to shoot the President in the head, and then attack the Senate, the House of Representatives, the Israeli embassy, and other buildings. He also stated that he would be willing to do "whatever ISIS asked of him," a statement that included the beheading of Americans.³⁷ That being said, aside from his plans to attack the Capitol, there were no additional concrete plans for violence.

Cornell did not have any experience in working with explosives or weapons, however he was clearly determined to execute his plans and did carry out the purchase of ammunition and assault rifles. That being said, while he had taken the steps to go to the gun shop, purchase two semi-automatic rifles and ammunition, there is no evidence of him purchasing the materials required to build a pipe bomb, and there is no evidence that he had attempted to build a pipe bomb in the final days before his arrest. It was also clear that Cornell was capable of planning a reasonable attack on his own, seeing as the FBI informant did not seem to play a large role in the actual organization of the plan. He was capable of purchasing the weapons necessary, he had planned on figuring out the logistics of the building, and he had coordinated everything well in advance. Although in this scenario the FBI had been watching Cornell for months and was in control of the situation, it would appear that had they not been keeping an eye on him that there would have been an immediate threat of violence.

Although he showed signs of remorse in 2016, he was sentenced to 30 years in December of that year.³⁸

6. Role of informants

³⁵ "Ohio terrorism suspect says he would have shot President Obama."

³⁶ Grasha, "Plea: Green Twp. Man planned terror attack."

³⁷ Bever, "Christopher Lee Cornell: The man who allegedly plotted."

³⁸ Kevin Grasha, "Man in terror plot: 'Allah's in control, not the judge'," *cincinnati.com*, December 5, 2016.

The role of informants was particularly important in this case. The reason that the FBI noticed Cornell initially was because an FBI informant who had been working with the bureau due to unrelated criminal charges told them that Cornell was “voicing support” for violent jihad on Twitter. Information on the nature of the informant’s contact with Cornell has been severely lacking. It is unclear in the criminal complaint who made contact with who first, however the media has implied that Cornell made the initial contact. It is possible that because of the use of social media, the two could have had an interaction that did not involve actual discussion—such as “retweeting” one another or “favoriting” each other’s tweets—prior to the actual conversations about meeting up. It is clear however that the initial contact was made on Twitter, most likely in through direct messages with one another, and then later moved to a separate instant messaging account.³⁹

The informant then met with Cornell in Cincinnati twice before his arrest, two days in October and two days in November. There is no information regarding the location of the meetings, other than that they were in Cincinnati near where Cornell lived. It was during the second meeting that Cornell informed his “accomplice” of his plans for violence in Washington, DC, as well as his views that members of Congress and other government employees were enemies of Islam and therefore his own enemies as well.⁴⁰ All of these meetings were recorded by the FBI using video surveillance, and later used by the Joint Terrorism Task Force in order to better understand the kinds of information Cornell was using to plan his attack.

Unfortunately the identity of the informant remains unknown, presumably because of his criminal background, and very few details have been released by the FBI about his specific role in their investigation.

Additionally, there was speculation—especially in the earlier stages of Cornell’s case—by his father that the FBI had done more than just monitor his son’s behavior. He claimed that there was no way his son could have come up with the attack on his own, and that during the meetings with the informant the FBI was “filling his head” with ideas of jihad and violence against the government. He believed that his son was in a “vulnerable” state and that Cornell was manipulated by the FBI informant to plan the attack and to purchase the guns and ammunition.⁴¹ He said that the FBI informant was only trying to “better his own legal situation” and that his son did not have the mental capacity to come up with the plan on his own.⁴²

Cornell’s father also claimed that his son did not have enough money in his account to have made the purchase of guns on his own, that he only had \$1,200 in his bank accounts before making the purchase at the gun store while the guns and ammunition should have cost over \$2,000.⁴³ That being said, neither the government nor Cornell’s legal team have made any comments regarding the

³⁹ U.S. v. Christopher Lee Cornell, Criminal Complaint.

⁴⁰ “Dad Accuses FBI of Setting Up ‘Mommy’s Boy’ Son in Bomb Plot.”

⁴¹ Johnson and Walters, “Stunned Dad.”

⁴² “Ohio terrorism suspect says he would have shot President Obama.”

⁴³ “Dad Accuses FBI of Setting Up ‘Mommy’s Boy’ Son in Bomb Plot.”

validity of this claim, and it would seem possible that if Cornell was already keeping this much from his parents he would have been capable of hiding exactly how much money he had saved up.

However, since Cornell was already voicing support for jihad when the FBI began monitoring his social media and actions, it is highly unlikely that entrapment could have been used as a viable legal defense. Cornell was also the one to show the plan to the FBI informant in their meeting, and he had been the one with information on how to make a pipe bomb, where in DC to strike, and when the attack should be carried out.⁴⁴

It is unknown whether or not there was an additional monetary incentive for the FBI informant working in this case, and it is unknown what happened to the informant after the arrest and the plea were made. In all official documents the informant was referred to as a Confidential Human Source (CHS).⁴⁵

7. Connections

As far as the media has reported, there have been no actual connections between Cornell and terrorist organizations abroad. Neither ISIS nor al-Qaeda have taken responsibility for his attempted actions, and he was not working with anyone else who may have had connections overseas. The FBI investigation thus far has also shown no indications that Cornell ever communicated with anyone in a terrorist organization.

However, Cornell has stated otherwise in an interview, claiming to be in contact with terrorist organization leaders from around the world including members of ISIS. As far as he was concerned, he was waging jihad on behalf of ISIS, and had been told by his “brothers overseas” that his role was to wage war against nonbelievers in the west.⁴⁶ Although he identifies with the Islamic State, he also says he believed he was to wage jihad under his own orders, making it unclear whether he was acting on his own behalf in the name of ISIS or acting under direct orders from someone he communicated with.

8. Relation to the Muslim community

Cornell had little relation to the Muslim community in Cincinnati or elsewhere. While he did express respect for persecuted Muslims in the Middle East and eventually did convert to Islam a few months before he was arrested, there is no indication that he ever prayed at a mosque or had interactions with any local Muslims in his community. This implies that the Muslim community played no role in Cornell’s radicalization and had no knowledge of his planning to attack on behalf of other Muslims.⁴⁷

A representative with the Cincinnati Council on American-Islamic Relations stated that Cornell was not a part of their community and that members of the Muslim community in Cincinnati were not aware of his plans or conversion

⁴⁴ Bever, “Christopher Lee Cornell: The man who allegedly plotted.”

⁴⁵ U.S. v. Christopher Lee Cornell, Criminal Complaint.

⁴⁶ Tricia Macke and Jody Barr, “Terror suspect Christopher Cornell: ‘I’m so dedicated that I risked my whole life,’” Fox19 News, March 9, 2015.

⁴⁷ “Local Muslim community reacts to Cornell interview,” Fox19 News, March 9, 2015.

to Islam. The representative said that the radical view of Islam that Cornell had was misinformed and most likely came from the internet.⁴⁸

9. Depiction by the authorities

The general depiction of Cornell's plot by the authorities was responsible and competent. It does not appear that the danger Cornell presented to the public was exaggerated at any point during the arrest of the proceeding, and the authorities presented a very straightforward, factual image of Cornell's plot and radicalization. In the Department of Justice's press release on Cornell's arrest it was made clear that "the public was not in danger during this investigation."⁴⁹

While it was made clear that the FBI took Cornell "very seriously," all statements from members of the Joint Terrorist Task Force emphasized the risk that home-grown terrorists pose and the impact that specialized task forces can make on investigations like Cornell's. Mark Denny, the Police Chief of Colerain Township, near where Cornell resided, stated that, "Frankly, it has seemed unreal that this could happen here... This kind of incident on our doorstep should be a great reminder of the hard work our officers do and for everyone to remain vigilant."⁵⁰

Neither the FBI, nor any other authorities have opted to release a response to the media publications that have arisen in the wake of this case. However, this is not particularly unusual as the court transcripts have not been released and the case itself has not been closed.

The combination of efforts between the JTTF, the Colerain Police Department, the Cincinnati Police Department, Green Township Police Department, and the U.S. Capitol Police was also emphasized in both the Department of Justice's press release and multiple interviews with members of the police departments in Ohio.⁵¹ The role of the FBI informant has also been acknowledged by the FBI, albeit also downplayed quite a bit, which is not surprising seeing as he was working for them because of other criminal charges and did not have his identity released to the public.

10. Coverage by the media

The media in this situation was very quick to highlight the successes of the Joint Terrorism Task Force and local law enforcement agencies.⁵² Early media lacked details because of the small amount of information being released by agencies working on the investigation, but as more material was given to the media, the emphasis switched more to Cornell's history and the actual events leading up to his arrest.

While the use of an FBI informant would normally raise questions of entrapment and coercion, in this case it was very clear that Cornell had been the

⁴⁸ "Local Muslim community reacts to Cornell interview."

⁴⁹ "Cincinnati-Area Man Arrested for Plot to Attack U.S. Government Officers," Department of Justice Press Release, January 14, 2015.

⁵⁰ Jennie Key, "FBI task force included Colerain officer," Cincinnati.com, January 15, 2015.

⁵¹ "Cincinnati-Area Man Arrested for Plot to Attack U.S. Government Officers."

⁵² Breaking News Staff, "Plea change likely for Cincinnati man in terror plot," WHIO, August 12, 2016.

one to make the initial plans for violence. It has also been implied in media reports that Cornell was the individual who reached out to the FBI's confidential human source, and he was the one who held back his plan until the informant had gained his trust. It was also clear that Cornell had been radicalized prior to his interactions with the FBI informant, and so this was not an issue that could have credibly been raised by the media.⁵³

Aside from the media's appreciation of the federal and local government's role in the investigation, there was a large emphasis on Cornell's past, the way in which his parents were reacting to the arrest, and, later, his actions in the jail in which he was being held. Many of the early media articles included various statements from Cornell's mother and father, which described his personality and how they viewed his transition to radical Islam.⁵⁴ While there was reporting done on Cornell's father's views that the FBI had coerced his son, there was no overt bias by the media on whether or not they viewed this accusation as legitimate.⁵⁵ Claims that Cornell did not have the money to purchase the guns and ammunition on his own were raised in opposition to the FBI's use of an informant, but these claims have not been taken seriously enough to be investigated and were portrayed more as a father trying to justify his son's actions.

As the investigation continued and as Cornell prepared for trial, the media played a large role in synthesizing what was occurring in Cornell's hearings. They were eager to report on the interview Cornell gave while in jail, and utilized the violence and eagerness in his words to show just how serious the threat was had the FBI not caught onto him prior to the execution of his attack.⁵⁶ They also chose to follow very closely the psychological examination that Cornell had to undergo, comparing the results reported with the traits that his parents had talked about earlier in the investigation.⁵⁷ The general consensus of these reports was that the psychological examination report should be taken at face value, seeing as it was really the only indication of Cornell's personality, aside from his parents and one interview of a classmate.

Recently, there has been a plethora of reporting done on Cornell's physical change, as well as his reversion back to his given name. When Cornell decided to plead guilty to all charges, he cut his hair, shaved his beard, and began referring to himself as "Chris" again.⁵⁸ The media emphasized interviews with Cornell's legal team and his parents, discussing possible reasons for the change and what effect this might have on his sentencing.⁵⁹

One of the major limitations in analyzing media coverage in this case was that the government was at no time obliged to respond to any reporting done on Cornell and the investigation. It is unclear whether this was because the media was doing a good job of reporting the facts or because the government didn't view the media as a legitimate threat to the integrity of the investigation. It appears that

⁵³ Bever, "Christopher Lee Cornell: The man who allegedly plotted."

⁵⁴ Bever, "Christopher Lee Cornell: The man who allegedly plotted."

⁵⁵ Johnson and Walters, "Stunned Dad."

⁵⁶ Bever, "Christopher Lee Cornell: The man who allegedly plotted."

⁵⁷ Grasha, "Dramatic change in terror suspect's appearance."

⁵⁸ Grasha, "Dramatic change in terror suspect's appearance."

⁵⁹ Sewell, "Cincinnati man pleads guilty."

the media was fairly unbiased and chose to focus on the good investigating done and emphasize the emergence of homegrown, radical Islamic terrorists. It was stressed in various articles that in the past, terrorism was something seen as only possible overseas in areas that were near conflict, but since 9/11 terrorism has continued to move closer to home. Instances such as Cornell, a young adult from Ohio who never before traveled abroad and had no connections to radical Islamist groups, are becoming more and more common.⁶⁰

11. Policing costs

The total costs of policing and detaining Cornell have not been explicitly discussed or estimated anywhere. However, there was some collaboration required by this case, and multiple departments offered up officers and agents in order to apprehend Cornell.⁶¹ This collaboration was emphasized in police reports and the Department of Justice press release, but how much certain offices, such as the US Capitol Police, contributed to the investigation does not seem to be much.

While the FBI has not overtly stated that their informant was getting paid, this is a topic that Cornell's lawyers brought up in court and could add to the potential total cost of the case.⁶² Additionally there has been mention of video surveillance that was used during the meetings between Cornell and the informant.

The JTTF, run by the FBI and supplemented by various state and federal law enforcement agencies, was the supervising agency in this investigation. As mentioned previously, the task force also coordinated with the Colerain Police Department, the Cincinnati Police Department, Green Township Police Department, and the U.S. Capitol Police, meaning that resources had to have been allotted from those agencies as well in order to communicate with the JTTF and keep tabs on the investigation, which would have driven up the total policing costs.⁶³

There were two US Attorneys on the case, Acting US Attorney Benjamin C. Glassman and Assistant US Attorney Timothy Mangan. While there have been several hearings to determine Cornell's competency and to receive his pleas, Cornell eventually pled guilty to three charges, part of his plea deal being that a fourth charge was dropped, suggesting that the actual trial costs should remain somewhat low.⁶⁴

12. Relevance of the internet

In this case, Christopher Cornell used the internet to read jihadist literature, watch radical political media, and potentially talk to other radical Islamists. In his meetings with the informant, he also had information on how to create a pipe bomb and on the jihadist mission he believed to be taking.⁶⁵

⁶⁰ Key, "FBI task force included Colerain officer."

⁶¹ "Cincinnati-Area Man Arrested for Plot to Attack U.S. Government Officers."

⁶² Grasha, "Plea: Green Twp. Man planned terror attack."

⁶³ "Cincinnati-Area Man Arrested for Plot to Attack U.S. Government Officers."

⁶⁴ "US Capitol attack plot suspect pleads guilty to 3 counts in Ohio."

⁶⁵ U.S. v. Christopher Lee Cornell, Criminal Complaint.

The internet was also where Cornell first made contact with his supposed accomplice, the FBI informant. Cornell had been active on Twitter from August 2014 to January 2015, and his Twitter account had been used specifically to discuss radical Islamic rhetoric and ideology. Cornell used this Twitter account to communicate with his potential accomplice and to set up the meetings between them that occurred in November and December of 2014.⁶⁶ Cornell's Twitter account was how the FBI found him in the first place, and while it facilitated his radicalization to some extent, it is also what prevented him from taking action in the end.

Additionally, Cornell has alleged that he used secure communications on the internet in order to send and receive messages to and from leadership in ISIS and other terrorist organizations abroad. This has not been confirmed by law enforcement and it appears that he did not actually communicate with any international terrorist organizations, but it is another possible way in which the internet might have influenced the plot.⁶⁷

13. Are we safer?

There are multiple considerations as to whether or not the arrest of Christopher Cornell has made the public safer. He had no criminal background, had not been violent in the past, and had only recently been radicalized. Additionally, he was heavily reliant on his parents for resources, only maintained a part time job—if that—and was mentally unstable. However, his thoughts and opinions on violence and Islam were extreme, and warranted caution. By high school he had become interested in radical political ideology and sometime in the summer of 2014 had converted to Islam. Soon after converting, Cornell became radicalized, most likely through online sources and social media propaganda that played on his preexisting sympathy for Muslims in the Middle East being subjected to violence.⁶⁸ His radicalization was quick and severe, causing him to immediately take to social media in an attempt to connect with other radical Islamists. Specifically, he had sought out radical propaganda that emphasized jihad and violent acts against the US and the west.

While his father may have tried to convince the public and the media that Cornell's plan was really created by the FBI, all evidence suggests that Cornell was completely capable of concocting the plan of attack on his own. It is also possible that he would have connected with another radical Islamist had the FBI accomplice not been the person he reached out to. He had found resources online that contained radical rhetoric, he had located instructions on how to create a pipe bomb, and he had been the one to describe his plan to the FBI informant.⁶⁹ Not only do these actions suggest that he was not coerced, but he had also stated in his interview from jail that he was willing to give up his life for Allah and Islam. He had a defined mission of revenge and he made it very clear that, had he not been arrested, he would have made every attempt to fulfill that mission.

⁶⁶ Bever, "Christopher Lee Cornell: The man who allegedly plotted."

⁶⁷ Macke and Barr, "Terror suspect Christopher Cornell: 'I'm so dedicated'."

⁶⁸ Johnson and Walters, "Stunned Dad."

⁶⁹ Johnson and Walters, "Stunned Dad."

Cornell's violent statements from his interview alone suggest that the American public is safer after his arrest. While he may not have been as successful in his plan as he had envisioned, it was very clear that he was willing to go to great lengths in order to harm American government officials. He was able to overcome the fact that he would most likely lose his own life in his attempt to retaliate against the US government for their actions in the Middle East, and had taken it upon himself to sacrifice the lives of others in the name of his own higher cause. That being said, he was severely lacking in resources, and the likelihood of him being capable of actually carrying out his plan on his own is quite low.

14. Conclusions

While there has not been a large amount of academic research done on the topic, the role that social media plays in terrorism, especially in recruitment and radicalization of new terrorists, has been growing. Social media and other online methods of communication have made it easier for terrorists to spread their messages and their fear to more potential recruits and more potential victims. "An entire generation of Muslim youth has been and continues to be radicalized online by violent images and incitements to murder," stated a *Forbes* opinion piece from 2015.⁷⁰ This can be especially important where lone actor terrorists are involved, because it allows for individuals, like Christopher Cornell, who have never before been to the Middle East to become radicalized just by turning on their computer. In this case in particular, social media also played a critical role in catching Cornell before he was able to act, and this is something to take into consideration when examining how terrorists utilize social media and how law enforcement can exploit this usage to track terrorists before they act.

This can beg the questions, how do we draw the line between free speech and terrorism prevention and how can we reign in the spread of radical rhetoric online? It has long been up for discussion whether or not posting online about violence in the name of radical Islam is protected by the Constitution—in the case of US run social media companies—and how to best combat the use by terrorists of social media. Perhaps this is something that more resources should be devoted to in the future especially as social media usage seems to be one of the Islamic State's specialties.

In his article, "A Staircase to Terrorism," Fathali Moghaddam discusses the process by which individuals join terrorist organizations and how this process makes it difficult for individuals to leave the organizations they join.⁷¹ While this was written in response to individuals who formally join terrorist organizations, it could be argued that the same analogy can be used for individuals who decide to act alone. In the case of Cornell, he can be seen taking the same progression of steps in order to decide that violence in the name of terrorist organizations was the only logical next step. He perceived the injustices around him and in the Middle

⁷⁰ Yigal Carmon and Steven Stalinsky, "Terrorist Use of U.S. Social Media Is A National Security Threat," *Forbes*, January 30, 2015.

⁷¹ Fathali Moghaddam, "A Staircase to Terrorism," *American Psychologist*, February-March, 2005.

East, he believed that only radical actions could stop these injustices, he was inclined to use violence because it was the example set by others who had perceived those injustices similarly, and he distanced himself both emotionally and psychologically from the people he was planning on harming.

Perhaps one does not need to formally connect with a terrorist organization in order to take these steps, and this could imply that the same prevention methods suggested by Moghaddam may be applicable to lone actor terrorists. Moghaddam suggests improvement of initial conditions, the increased usage of procedural justice, the education against traditional terrorist thinking, and the promotion of dialogue between the public and those who may be inclined to turn to terrorism.⁷²

Finally, it cannot be ignored that Christopher Cornell's life was by no means an indicator that he would grow up to become a terrorist. Two parents in the suburbs of Cincinnati raised him, neither of his parents were ever involved in any radical Islam or radical political groups, and he had no history of violence. While he was a quite student and son, there are plenty of introverted individuals who go on to lead very normal lives with no desire to join radical terrorist organizations. This can further emphasize the role that social media plays in the radicalization of "home grown" terrorists and the ways in which this may change the typical characteristics of domestic terrorists. It is important to take into consideration the fact that even though good parents raised Cornell, he had a high school education, and he was never exposed in real life to any terrorist organizations, or terrorists for that matter, he was still radicalized and identified strongly with the rhetoric of radical Islam.

While it is definitely possible that Cornell's "normalcy" was overemphasized and that he was in fact a much more radical thinker than his parents have made him out to be, it should still be noted that the propaganda directed at vulnerable westerners who already sympathized with Muslims in the Middle East managed to radicalize him to the point that he was willing to give up his life and identify with a group of people whom he had never before been in contact with. The power of this kind of propaganda should be noted, as should the demographic of people it is targeting in the West. There are millions of Americans who sympathize with the Muslims in the Middle East who are subjected to violence, and the internet is a tool that can reach almost all of them. Assuming that Christopher Cornell was as normal as his peers and parents made him out to be, this case illustrates the power of propaganda on social media and the internet in the modern day.

⁷² Moghaddam, "A Staircase to Terrorism."