

The Far-Right Fascination With The Electric Grid

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Over the past three years, government agencies have warned that white supremacists and other far-right actors are the most significant domestic threat to the United States' security. One of the pillars of that threat is the targeting of crucial infrastructure, including the electric grid. There is a decades-long history of endeavors to push the country into chaos by damaging electrical stations, and right wing actors have been convicted of such plots since at least 1999. A recent uptick in sabotage attempts across the U.S. is suspected but not confirmed to be tied to far-right plots.

Moore County in North Carolina experienced a blackout in early December 2022 that affected more than 45,000 residents after two local substations were sabotaged in a way resembling white supremacist plots against vulnerable infrastructure.

The events in Moore County were especially dramatic as both of the substations suffered extensive damage from gunfire. According to authorities, the attacker(s) clearly understood how to effectively disable critical equipment. In light of this incident, as well as numerous others in recent months, the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC) has ordered a study of the physical security measures protecting the country's electrical grid:

"In light of the increasing number of recent reports of physical attacks on our nation's infrastructure, it is important that we fully and clearly review the effectiveness of our existing physical security standard to determine whether additional improvements are necessary to safeguard the Bulk Power System."

Rick Glick, FERC Chairman

Under both the Trump and Biden administrations, there have been a variety of instances where the federal government published data proving that white supremacy was a growing domestic threat. Some examples include:

- **October 2020:** The DHS published its Homeland Threat Assessment, which had gathered information from law enforcement and intelligence providers nationwide. The assessment concludes that **"racially and ethnically motivated violent extremists—specifically white supremacist extremists (WSEs)—will remain the most persistent and lethal threat in the Homeland."**
- **June 2021:** The NSC, working with the White House, published a National Strategy for Countering Domestic Terrorism (PDF). Similarly, it states that **"racially or ethnically motivated violent extremists (principally those who promote the superiority of the white race) are assessed as presenting the most persistent and lethal threats."**

Despite these warnings, a Senate report (PDF) released in November found that neither the DHS nor the FBI have taken appropriate steps to combat far right domestic

terrorism. **“In 2019,”** it claims, **“DHS publicly acknowledged white supremacist violence as a major threat to national security for the first time, despite being aware internally of the severity of the threat for 10 years.”** A detailed assessment (PDF) by the DHS Office of Intelligence and Analysis produced in 2009 ended up being dismissed **“due to political pressure.”**

Recently, multiple electrical substations across the nation have been intentionally damaged or vandalized, warning both the industry and government of more frequent attempts.

In a December 13, 2022 hearing of the House Subcommittee on Civil Rights and Civil Liberties, Eric Ward, director of the Western States Center, an Oregon-based human rights nonprofit, warned the U.S. was now **“an environment where individuals feel empowered to carry out political violence on their own in an increasingly unpredictable way”**:

“Reports of attacks on electrical infrastructure in North Carolina, Oregon and Washington are raising the stakes. Law enforcement is reportedly investigating posts by extremists on online forums that encourage attacks on critical infrastructure. Whether the North Carolina attack was intended to disrupt a local LGBTQ event, this [happened] after a series of attacks on the LGBTQ community in recent weeks and months.”

Eric Ward, Director, Western States Center, witness to the House Oversight Committee, Subcommittee on Civil Rights and Civil Liberties Hearing on “Confronting White Supremacy (Part VII): The Evolution of Anti-Democratic Extremist Groups and the Ongoing Threat to Democracy,” December 13, 2022

Accelerationists Pitch Sabotage Campaigns Online

Given the dramatic effect it would have nationwide, destabilizing the electric grid has been of particular interest to racist and far-right actors looking for crises to exploit. Additionally, they have pointed out how security surrounding power facilities is relatively easy to overcome. This summer, a document spread among neo-nazi Telegram channels detailing, among other things, how to cause chaos by disabling the electrical grid. The author calls power stations “**sitting ducks**” and points out most substations are “**largely unprotected and often in remote locations.**”

The author disparages more shocking events like mass shootings as inferior to attacks on substations, typically called “**soft**” targets. While violence is celebrated and encouraged, the author says disabling electricity is “**unquestionably more effective**” at pushing civilian populations into chaos and division.

There is a lengthy history of far-right adherents targeting the country’s infrastructure as part of a grandiose plan for white nationalist revolution and an authoritarian reset of society. This is typically called “**accelerationism**,” but online neo-nazi subcultures understand it to be the “**Siege**” or “**Siege Culture**” mindset; this sect of the neofascist movement is concentrated online in Telegram channels. The name comes from the title of the book “**Siege**,” an anthology of zine-like essays by American neo-nazi James Mason. (Siege is a common term on far-right and related chat servers on Unicorn Riot’s DiscordLeaks data journalism platform.)

In his book, Mason promotes “**friction**” and “**chaos**,” urging readers toward violent revolt and terrorism. By acting in smaller group cells, fascist accelerationists would hope to push society into collapse. Such a collapse would then allow heavily armed far-right groups to impose their vision for society onto a desperate and vulnerable civilian population.

Some groups and individuals have attempted to act on those calls. ‘The Base,’ though now mostly defunct, was a high-profile neo-nazi network run by Rinaldo Nazaro which pushed for infrastructure attacks. And in New Zealand, a man with neo-nazi ideology was arrested in March 2020 for allegedly planning to attack a substation. Slotting these attacks into the “**political extremism**” paradigm is an August 2022 report from George Washington University’s “Program on Extremism”. (PDF)

Government Pushes Warnings re: Utility Attacks; Atomwaffen Prosecutions

The DHS has made specific note of the far right's interests before. In January 2022, a leaked intelligence bulletin said:

[Domestic violence extremists] have developed credible, specific plans to attack electricity infrastructure since at least 2020, identifying the electric grid as a particularly attractive target given its interdependency with other infrastructure sectors.

Two incidents, both thwarted, stand out as being particularly associated with far-right groups or individuals:

- **August 2021:** Four men with connections to the neo-nazi terror group Atomwaffen Division were charged with conspiracy to damage property after being found to have researched and planned an attack on an unspecified power station. The men, two of whom were former Marines, collected and stole explosive materials and firearms. Additionally, one of the men had a written list of locations near transformers and substations, presumably targets. The damage to the power grid that could have been caused was estimated to be more than \$100,000.
- **February 2022:** Three men plead guilty to conspiring to provide material support to terrorists after admitting that they had each planned to attack separate electrical facilities. They spread neo-nazi propaganda, helped recruit extremists online, practiced shooting, and discussed starting a race war in the chaos that would ensue from widespread power loss. The FBI concluded that the attacks were based on **“their adherence to racially or ethnically motivated violent extremist views.”**

Many attacks remain unsolved and have yet to be linked to racist/far-right agendas, but the right's long history of plots against electrical infrastructure reveal a clear desire and willingness to sabotage these sites to further their ideals.

Pacific Northwest a Far-Right Hotspot

On December 2, the FBI sent a memo to Washington law enforcement warning about a number of attacks that have recently occurred in the Pacific Northwest:

Power companies in Oregon and Washington have reported physical attacks on substations, using hand tools, arson, firearms and metal chains possibly in response to an online call for attacks on critical infrastructure. In recent attacks, criminal actors bypassed security by cutting the fence links, lighting nearby fires, shooting equipment from a distance or throwing objects over the fence and onto equipment.

-FBI memo (via Oregon Public Broadcasting)

Six incidents are reported to have occurred in the Pacific Northwest:

- In Puget Sound, two substations were vandalized in late November, but suffered no extensive issues.
- In Clackamas, OR, two substations were attacked in late November. One was damaged to the point where it will cost hundreds of thousands of dollars in cleanup and repairs.
- In Woodland, WA, two substations were vandalized in mid-November, but have since been repaired.

For decades, white supremacists have sought to reshape the Pacific Northwest into a white ethnostate (PDF). Since the 1970s, numerous neo-nazi and white nationalist groups have been fighting to bring about the **“Northwest Territorial Imperative,”** the idea of a racist haven, cut off from the rest of the U.S. Historically, there has been a sizable amount of activity in the area from notorious racist organizations such as the KKK and Aryan Nations.

More recently, groups like Identity Evropa (American Identity Movement), Patriot Front, and the Proud Boys have made names for themselves there. In 2018, Unicorn Riot reported on “Cascadian Coffee Company,” a key Discord server with elements from multiple far-right groups in the Pacific Northwest.

On the opposite side of the country, the state of Florida has experienced six substation “intrusions” recently. Duke Energy, the same company that owned the substations attacked in North Carolina, filed reports with the U.S. Department of Energy showing that all six stations were intruded within the span of thirteen days.

- On September 10 and 13, an intruder broke into the Bay Ridge substation.
- On September 18, an intruder “targeted” the Orange Blossom substation.
- On September 21, an intruder “targeted” the Zephyrills substation
- On September 21, an intruder managed to trip equipment in the Zephyrills North substation causing a nine-minute outage.
- On September 22, an intruder caused a two-minute outage by tripping equipment in the East Clearwater substation.

In contrast to the North Carolina and Pacific Northwest incidents, the Florida intruders didn’t bother to damage equipment, but instead reconfigured it to cut the power. Based on the knowledge intruders had to disable equipment, inside involvement is suspected. Questions prevail about connections to the far-right, but as of now nothing has been proven.

Appendix: Power Grid Sabotage Chatter in Leaked Discord Logs, 2018-2021

Content Advisory: Violence, Bigotry, Sexual Assault

Messages from 12 far-right and racist Discord chat servers logged in Unicorn Riot's DiscordLeaks journalism database show discussions about targeting power grids taking place over the last 4 years. While the conversations vary in seriousness, they demonstrate how the concept of power grid sabotage is firmly lodged within the mental pantheon of online neofascist subculture.

‘The Right Cafe’

Source

In one chat group called ‘The Right Cafe,’ used by far-right gamers, racists and neo-nazis, one user with a since-deleted account wrote in November 2018 that they were **“waiting for the day when we will blow up all the power grid.”**

Similar conversations in January 2019 in ‘The Right Cafe’ echoed the same theme, in which a Discord user with the chat handle ‘Commisar Femto’ wrote **“I support terrorism but I have aspects on when to use it.”** ‘Commisar Femto’ went onto say that in his view, **“the system needs to be brought down and fast”** and that a **“quick blow”** on **“the power grid... will cripple the system.”** ‘Commisar Femto’ also wrote a message praising the **“day of the rope,”** a reference to a scene from the neo-nazi sci-fi fantasy novel ‘The Turner Diaries’ in which all Jews and People of Color are killed in a violent uprising to create a whites-only utopia.

In a vetting channel for a separate Discord server, ‘Commisar Femto’ described himself as a **“white american”** and **“fascist/NS [national socialist]”** whose political goals include a **“fascist totalitarian ethnostate.”**

‘FreedomφClub’

Source

In another far-right chat server called ‘FreedomϕClub’ (the name is taken from the writings of Unabomber Ted Kaczynski), a Discord user posting under the name ‘Tato’ pontificated on January 15, 2020 that **“the best way to disenfranchise massive amounts of people is to wait for conditions to deteriorate to the point where you can just toss a pamphlet at them and then they’re down.”**

Another racist discord user with the chat name ‘thenwerd’ (a not-so-subtle reference to the infamous anti-Black slur) replied **“*ahem* power grid”** – later suggesting that a **“saboteur squad”** could **“yeet a pipe bomb into a substation.”** The conversation then went on to include ‘Tato’ and ‘thenwerd’ discussing saving money and getting out of debt in order to be able to afford to plan an attack.

Messages by ‘Tato’ strongly imply that he lives in Canada; as of Jan. 2020 he said he was studying agricultural science.

‘Zeducation’

Source

In the discord chat server ‘Zeducation,’ created by Minnesota-based far-right Youtuber Tyler Zed, some of Zed’s fans discussed sabotaging power grids in their area.

A username ‘Negan’ wrote on March 5, 2021 that he wanted to **“destroy the power grid.”** Chat participant ‘DrewDaPilot’ replied with an apparent interest and desire to participate: “I could take down the power grid for my county if I wanted to. All I need is someone to break into the local power distribution center and add a raspberry pi into their internal network.... tldr; it’s easy.”

A January 2021 report by Unicorn Riot found that 6 people involved in the ‘Zeducation’ Discord server claimed to have been involved in the January 6, 2021 attack on the U.S. Congress.

‘Nick Fuentes Server’

Source

On August 8, 2018, a chat participant using a since-deleted account in a Discord server created by neo-nazi Nicholas J. Fuentes encouraged Fuentes and others in the chat to **“blow up federal buildings”** and **“blow up your local power grid.”**

‘NEWS AND POLITICS’

Source

On February 24, 2020 two Discord users – ‘**luke5135**’ and ‘**BigAL**’ – discussed power grid attacks in ‘NEWS AND POLITICS,’ a server tied to the far-right and neo-nazi-affiliated /pol/ board on 4chan.

“**War is more logistics and strategy than killing**” wrote ‘luke5135.’ “**You have to know what to do and then kill,**” ‘Big_Al

‘ reflected. ‘Luke5135’ then suggested a plot to “**take out the entire U.S. power grid**” – and claimed to “**know a place [where] I could take the entire power grid around me.**”

‘Carpathid’s Imperium’

Source

In ‘Carpathid’s *Imperium*’, a neo-nazi chat named in reference to the tabletop miniatures game Warhammer 40K, a user with a since-deleted account encouraged other chat participants to “**read Siege and take down a power grid.**”

‘Call-In Show Server’

Source

In a ‘Call-In Show Server’ created by bigoted far-right anti-LGBTQ commentator Matt Christiansen, a chat user posting as ‘AlexandertheBased

‘ described himself as “**heavily armed**” and claimed he had plans to “**start tampering with the grid.**” ‘AlexandertheBased

‘ wrote that he hoped a power blackout in winter conditions would cause “**90 % [of people] to die of exposure here.**” Others discussing the idea with ‘AlexandertheBased ‘ fantasized about being able to “**control the fucking power grid and create a rape based economy.**”

‘Athens’

Source

On September 9, 2019, Discord user ‘Arthur Grayborn’ posted in ‘Athens,’ a far-right “**free speech**” chat, about his thoughts weighing different approaches to attacking power grids at a national versus municipal scope. “**Take out four or five major power plants and you knock out half the nation’s electric grid... Whereas a smaller scale model would be far more resilient. Take out four or five power plants and four or five cities are without power.**”

‘gear queer’

Source

In ‘gear queer,’ a racist/far-right 4chan-affiliated chat for gun and body armor enthusiasts, several Discord users also discussed hitting power stations.

On December 3, 2019, usernames ‘Cataclysmo’ and ‘glacial pace’ debated the strategic implications of a campaign to knock out electrical utility services.

‘Cataclysmo’ was skeptical about the effectiveness of targeting various infrastructure points simultaneously, speculating that **“if enough substations were hit at once, someone would notice and send people to the remaining ones just to strengthen them.”** ‘glacial pace’ felt that such a plan could still work as long as those involved were sworn to secrecy: **“like yeah you could do it. if you had 20 people who did everything perfectly, and didn’t talk.”**

Also in the ‘gear queer’ chat, later, on February 27, 2020, someone chatting on Discord as ‘Ann Hiro’ claimed that they **“implied to”** an acquaintance that **“I was going to bomb the power grid so the elite can’t forward their agenda.”** The chat handle ‘Ann Hero’ is a play on “anhero,” an older artifact of 4chan slang that is shorthand for committing suicide.

‘RobertGrulerEsq’

Source

In the chat server ‘RobertGrulerEsq,’ created by Arizona-based far-right attorney and Kyle Rittenhouse apologist Robert Gruler, a Discord username ‘Dreadnaught’ ominously claimed on December 18, 2020 that **“If the Right decided to revolt, the power grid will be down very quickly. Food is going to disappear and we are all going to be in a position where we will be forced to chose sides.”**

Predictions by ‘Dreadnaught’ of a right-wing revolt appear to not have been entirely inaccurate, as less than three weeks later, thousands of far-right Trump supporters stormed the US Capitol in a nearly-successful antidemocratic coup attempt. The crowd that stormed the Capitol included at least four members of Gruler’s chat server, if their messages claiming participation that day are accurate.

Luke Huizenga is a freelance journalist covering white supremacy, far-right fringe movements, and the growth of online extremism. You can follow him on Twitter: @huizengard. Chris Schiano and Dan Feidt of Unicorn Riot contributed additional reporting.

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