



Everything You Need to Know About the Alleged Pentagon Leaks

Description

The FBI arrested alleged Pentagon leaker Jack Douglas Teixeira on Thursday, closing the first chapter of an ongoing story that still has many questions to answer – including whether the classified documents Teixeira posted online are accurate or not and how he came to possess them.

Here are the known facts of the case, as of Friday.

Who is the “leaker?” The suspect in custody is Jack Douglas Teixeira, a 21-year-old resident of North Dighton, Massachusetts. Attorney General Merrick Garland said on Thursday he was detained as part of “an investigation into alleged unauthorized removal, retention, and transmission of classified national defense information.”

FBI agents arrested Teixeira without incident at his mother’s home. The FBI said its agents were heavily armed because they had reason to believe Teixeira owned multiple weapons.

“Since late last week the FBI has aggressively pursued investigative leads, and today’s arrest exemplifies our continued commitment to identifying, pursuing, and holding accountable those who betray our country’s trust and put our national security at risk,” the FBI said after the arrest.

Teixeira is an Airman First Class in the Massachusetts Air National Guard, assigned to the 102nd Intelligence Wing at Otis Air National Guard Base, which is located at Joint Base Cape Cod in the eastern Massachusetts town of Bourne, about 50 miles from where the Teixeira family lives. His stepfather retired after serving in the same unit.

The 102nd Intelligence Wing is tasked with providing “worldwide precision intelligence and command and control along with trained and experienced airmen for expeditionary combat support and homeland security.” Among other duties, its personnel process data from reconnaissance planes and drones.

According to the BBC, Teixeira enlisted in 2019 and currently holds the position of Cyber Transport Systems journeyman, which means he works on the Air Force global communications network. He was on active duty at the time he allegedly exposed classified materials and may be punished more harshly as a result. He will probably face at least ten years in prison.

Teixeira would have needed to pass a background check to take the job, since it involves accessing classified information, although most observers of the case are puzzled about how Teixeira managed to obtain documents that were classified at such a high level.

The UK *Daily Mail* on Friday quoted a sworn statement from an FBI agent that said Teixeira “had held a top secret security clearance since 2021, and that he also maintained sensitive compartmented access to other highly classified programs.”

The suspect's mother has worked for veterans' non-profit organizations and posts family photos each year on Veterans Day. His stepfather is retired with 34 years of military service. Teixeira's mother proudly charted her son's progress in the Air National Guard with Facebook posts. When he graduated from tech school in June 2021, she posted a photo of a patriotic balloon tied to the family mailbox to welcome him home.

Neighbors told the BBC that Jack Teixeira was a “good kid, not a troublemaker,” had a “good head on his shoulders,” and was enthusiastic about joining the military.

What did he allegedly do? Teixeira is allegedly a video game enthusiast who created a group called “Thug Shaker Central” on a video, voice, and text platform called Discord during the pandemic lockdowns of 2020.

Gamers commonly use Discord to talk to each other while playing games, but it also offers chat groups and forums, where photos and videos can be shared along with typed messages. It is very easy to install and use – it can even be run within a web browser without installing any software – and basic accounts are free.

According to friends interviewed by the *Washington Post*, Teixeira created Thug Shaker Central under the user name “OG,” one of several accounts he maintained, to discuss his interests in guns, Catholicism, libertarian politics, and games. As with many people, his outspoken persona online was reportedly very different from the modest way he conducted himself in person.

Teixeira's Discord group was fairly small, accepting new members by invitation only. It had about 30 members at its peak, including a number of teenage boys, who enjoyed telling politically incorrect jokes – the name of the group was borrowed from a gay pornography video – and egging each other on to greater heights of verbal transgression. Some frankly racist comments were made in the forum. The *Washington Post* summarized the bulk of the content posted by the group as “memes, offensive jokes, and idle chitchat.”

Some of them created fictitious identities for themselves, including a member living in Kentucky who pretended he was a Russian naval officer, a ruse that apparently prompted early suspicions that Teixeira's group was created or infiltrated by foreign intelligence agents. The members who spoke to the *Washington Post* insisted they were just a rowdy crew of young people looking for online

companionship during the lockdowns. A great deal of steam was blown off, but in addition to the trash talk, some members conducted serious discussions of the Ukraine war and prayed together online.

Shortly after the Russian invasion of Ukraine began in 2022, Teixeira began posting what he described as classified material on the forum. At first, he retyped what he claimed to have seen on these documents, but later he included photographic images of the originals. According to other group members, he switched to photos of the documents when he grew frustrated with the amount of work needed to retype them, and the inability of other members to understand military and intelligence jargon.

Teixeira is accused of ultimately leaking over a hundred purportedly classified documents, many of them pertaining to the Ukraine war. According to reports, he often presented these documents as evidence that every government involved in the conflict is lying to its citizens about the progress of the war. He also allegedly posted materials related to other news stories discussed in the Thug Shaker Central forum, including foreign interference in U.S. elections, U.S. interference in foreign governments, and the Chinese spy balloon saga.

Why did he allegedly post classified documents? Teixeira's friends told reporters he does not view himself as a "whistleblower" in the vein of Edward Snowden, the NSA contractor who claimed his exposure of classified materials was conducted to defend privacy rights and expose government surveillance overreach.

Instead, Teixeira evidently posted these documents because he wanted to impress and educate other members of his Discord group, especially the younger members, who he viewed as proteges. The poster identified in reports as Teixeira escalated his activities when he did not think the others were paying enough attention to his opinions and the material he was exposing.

"He's a smart person. He knew what he was doing when he posted these documents, of course. These weren't accidental leaks of any kind," a teenage member of Thug Shaker Central told the *Washington Post*.

"He got upset, and he said on multiple occasions, if you guys aren't going to interact with them, I'm going to stop sending them," another said of the shared documents.

One of his friends said Teixeira saw his Discord forum as a means of "keeping kids informed about real-world issues."

The leaker swore other group members to secrecy about the materials he was posting – a promise they kept with surprising fidelity, all things considered. Some of them told the media it took them a while to accept that he was posting genuine classified material, instead of fabrications he boastfully invented to make himself look important.

Several group members have told the media their forum was thick with "irony" and sarcasm, so it was difficult to tell exactly where Teixeira was coming from. He appears to have crafted a persona as a fiery libertarian individualist, an "anti-war Christian" who distrusted the U.S. government and had serious qualms about its Ukraine policy.

One forum member said Teixeira came to regret joining the military because he concluded it was "run

by the elite politicians” and threatened to “kick [his] ass if I thought about joining.”

How did he get caught? The code of silence on Thug Shaker Central held remarkably firm until last month, at which time some of the members began sharing “OG’s” posts and classified documents in other Discord groups, apparently because they wanted to impress other users or win arguments with them.

This brought the alleged document leak to the attention of the media, generating a few big headline news stories and sparking an intense media manhunt for the original leaker. Open-source investigation website Bellingcat reported on Sunday that the *New York Times* (NYT) began digging into the story after five documents related to the Ukraine invasion were shared in Russian channels on the messaging platform Telegram.

Some of Teixeira’s docs were also posted on the notoriously rambunctious 4chan system, where one poster employed a classified document to win a petty argument with the message, “Source this dick, at least my piece of paper is more credible than hearsay.”

Bellingcat found another exposure of classified material in a March 4 Discord feud between players of the Minecraft computer game that concluded with one of them saying, “Here, have some leaked documents.” The accompanying images were of ten documents concerning the Ukraine war, some of them visibly stamped “Top Secret.”

These heated comments from 4chan and Discord users perfectly capture the overall tenor of the most embarrassing national security breach since Edward Snowden.

Bellingcat also found documents posted on a Discord channel dedicated to a Filipino YouTube celebrity. The investigators considered these “bizarre” venues for such potentially explosive disclosures, so they kept looking for the original source of the documents and eventually found the Thug Shaker Central group. It then took the *Washington Post* about a week to hunt Teixeira down.

According to the Associated Press (AP), Teixeira knew he was in trouble after the *NYT* story on his documents was published last week. He then held a video conference call with other Thug Shaker Central members to apologize for the consequences that might fall on them.

“Basically what he said was, ‘I’m sorry, guys, I prayed every single day that this wouldn’t happen.’ I prayed, and I prayed, and now it’s only up to God what happens next,” another group member told the AP.

How did he get so much sensitive information? This is perhaps the biggest lingering question of the Teixeira story. If the documents are not all fakes, then how did a young, low-ranking member of the Air National Guard get access to them?

Bellingcat noted that once Teixeira began sharing images of the classified material, they appeared to be photos of hard-copy documents, not scans or computer-generated images. Some of the photos appear to have been digitally manipulated when they were passed along by other users, especially the Russians on Telegram, but it was not clear if any of the original copies posted by Teixeira are manipulations or fakes.

“When asked how such a young service member could have had access to highly sensitive documents, the Pentagon spokesman, Brig. Gen. Patrick Ryder, said it was the nature of the military to trust its very young service members with high and sometimes grave levels of responsibility, including high levels of security clearance,” the AP reported on Thursday.

“We entrust our members with a lot of responsibility at a very early age. Think about a young combat platoon sergeant, and the responsibility and trust that we put into those individuals to lead troops into combat,” Ryder said.

“National security is our foremost priority and any attempt to undermine it compromises our values and degrades trust among our members, the public, allies and partners,” said the National Guard.

The *NYT* described Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin as “struggling” to explain how his department did not know about the leaks until they spread across the Internet and caught the attention of reporters.

“Well, they were somewhere in the web. And where exactly and who had access at that point, we don’t know. We simply don’t know at this point,” Austin said. The *NYT* archly observed that even more classified documents were being discovered online by media outlets while Austin was speaking.

According to the *NYT*, the Joint Chiefs of Staff acted last Friday to implement “procedures to limit the distribution of highly sensitive briefing documents and restrict attendance at meetings where briefing books containing paper copies of the documents were available.”

by JOHN HAYWARD

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