

## The Oath Keepers are Spreading COVID-19 Conspiracy Theories

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### ARTICLE HISTORY

Compiled April 22, 2020

### ABSTRACT

Over the past month, the Center on Terrorism, Extremism, and Counterterrorism (CTEC) has published multiple reports on the radical right's use of disinformation during the COVID-19 pandemic. This report, CTEC's third in the series, highlights the activities of the Oath Keepers, a right-wing anti-government extremist group that blends sovereign citizen and white supremacist dogmas and theories. This tendency has amplified during the COVID-19 crisis. As you'll read in this report by Mr. Alex Newhouse (CTEC Digital Research Lead) and Mr. Sean Kitson (CTEC graduate research assistant), the Oath Keepers have taken to social media to provoke protests and spin disinformation against its enemies - Bill Gates, Anthony Fauci, and others. At the same time, the group's leadership, particularly Stewart Rhodes, have pushed forward anti-vaccine narratives and medically unproven medication and techniques (like extreme weight loss diets) to ward off COVID-19. If you are interested in CTEC's previous research, check out the QAnon report [here](#) and its report on the Russian Imperial Movement [here](#).

## 1. Introduction

Since nearly the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, the activist group/militia organization called "The Oath Keepers" has shown a willingness and even enthusiasm to spread mis/disinformation and harmful conspiracy theories related to the virus and disease. A CTEC investigation of Oath Keepers-related social media accounts shows important figures in the group proliferating, among other dangerous rhetoric, QAnon-related language, false and harmful remedies for COVID-19, and the conspiracy theory that Bill Gates and Anthony Fauci are attempting to control minds through mandatory vaccines.

## 2. Who are the Oath Keepers?

The Oath Keepers are a far-right militia group that also engages in political activism. Ideologically, the Oath Keepers claim to focus on the responsibility of soldiers and law enforcement personnel to keep their oaths to the Constitution above all else. Oath Keepers promote a radically libertarian interpretation of American citizenship and service that holds loyalty to the Constitution as the utmost loyalty a person can give.

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In practice, the group is more akin to extreme sovereign citizen and other far-right movements, with a penchant for associating from the highest levels with racist and anti-Semitic conspiracy theories. Oath Keepers have taken high-profile action by deploying as a (mostly) anti-Black Lives Matter vigilante enforcement group during the protests in Ferguson, MO.

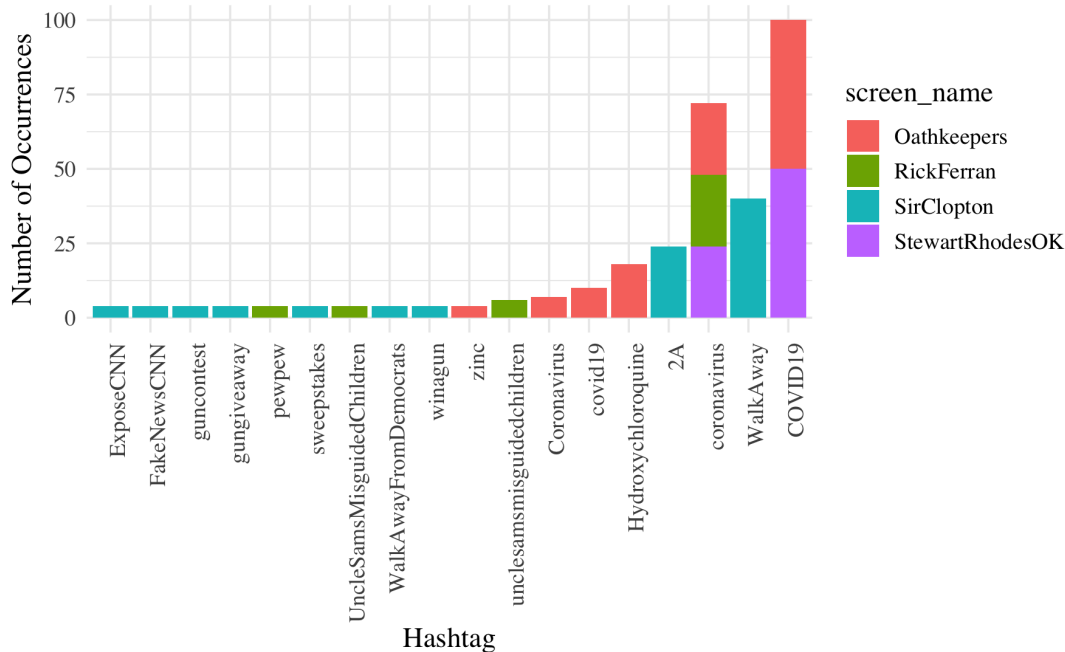
### 3. How are they talking about the coronavirus?

The Oath Keepers, in general, are not heavy Twitter users, but those that do post and reply on Twitter have shown an eagerness to engage in far-right conspiracism that has reached critical mass in the last two weeks. In this brief, we track several Oath Keepers-related Twitter accounts:

- Oathkeepers (the official account of the organization),
- RickFerran (Rick “The Tank Ferran, founder of Oath Keeper-related blog/store” “Uncle Sam’s Misguided Children”),
- RedPillRoadShow (David Kopacz, host of Oath Keepers TV show “Red Pill Road Show”),
- SirClopton (Troy Clopton, Oath Keepers member), and
- StewartRhodesOK (Stewart Rhodes, founder and leader of the Oath Keepers).

Among them, their most-used hashtags are not too surprising: a mix of mainstream conservative sentiment (#2A and #WalkAway, for example) and some Oath Keepers-related promotions (#winagun). They tend to use relatively innocuous hashtags in high volume. In this graph, the only hints at COVID-19 disinformation are “#hydroxychloroquine,” the drug that has been touted by President Trump, without evidence, as a treatment for the disease. Unprescribed use of the drug (and the similar chloroquine) has increased and has been linked to harmful side effects.

Analysis of Top Hashtags Used by 5 Oath Keepers Twitter Accounts



However, there is also substantial evidence that Oath Keepers are attempting to find

a message to rally around with regards to the coronavirus. These users, including the official Oath Keepers account, have used many variations on hashtags that are linked to COVID-19 disinformation efforts. These include support for violent communities like QAnon and for movements targeting and demonizing Bill Gates and Anthony Fauci, claiming they are agents in a plot to control the population through mandatory vaccines.

| Screen Name | Tweet  | Created At          |
|-------------|--|---------------------|
| Oathkeepers | Standing ovation to @EssentialPeople for this! Well done! Just say "no" to Bill Gates & his forced vaccination, Digital ID, perpetual emergency, Big Brother future. #SayNoToBillGates #SayNoToGatesVaccine #nonewnormal Please retweet far and wide. @StewartRhodesOK <a href="https://t.co/7FBoFe4K38">https://t.co/7FBoFe4K38</a> | 2020-04-18 04:52:55 |
| Oathkeepers | Standing ovation to @EssentialPeople for this! Well done! Just say "no" to Bill Gates & his forced vaccination, Digital ID, perpetual emergency, Big Brother future. #SayNoToBillGates #SayNoToGatesVaccine Oh, and #FUCKBILLGATES 🍷 @StewartRhodesOK <a href="https://t.co/JEPY2CH6">https://t.co/JEPY2CH6</a>                      | 2020-04-18 04:49:56 |
| Oathkeepers | #WWG1WGA <a href="https://t.co/sdktbV6ipU">https://t.co/sdktbV6ipU</a>   | 2020-04-18 04:15:01 |
| Oathkeepers | Do you smell a rat yet? @StewartRhodesOK #VaccinateGates #VaccineAgenda #endthelockdown #DefundWHO #COVID19  | 2020-04-16 10:22:03 |
| Oathkeepers | @MrChris_Sanders @Abrahamsson_sv @kastorko1987 @moniqueguild @kuhn_reinhard @BillGates @WHO <a href="https://t.co/yUER7EALjz">https://t.co/yUER7EALjz</a>  | 2020-04-15 13:00:56 |
| Oathkeepers | @kastorko1987 @moniqueguild @kuhn_reinhard @BillGates @WHO Robert Kennedy Jr. said it best. Open your eyes. <a href="https://t.co/UYeKoajHU8">https://t.co/UYeKoajHU8</a>  | 2020-04-15 13:00:06 |
| Oathkeepers | @joely1234561 @Jeper912 @BillGates @WHO Damn right! Not going to take it. @StewartRhodesOK   | 2020-04-15 12:57:10 |
| Oathkeepers | MORE PEDOGATE BOMBSHELLS CSPAN Accidentally Uploaded Long Lost Congressional Hearings On #DeepState's Child Sex & Blackmail Programs Including Teaching 9 Yr Olds To Become Assassins & To Be Sex Slaves For Government Officials & NWO Elitists - HRC Involved <a href="https://t.co/hd2PxtustK">https://t.co/hd2PxtustK</a>        | 2020-04-15 09:32:05 |
| Oathkeepers | #BILLGATES was born with a silver #NWO #Nazi #Eugenics' spoon in his mouth Time to call for a #MandatoryShutDown of the #BillAndMelindaGatesFoundation Bill's been thrown out of India—they caught on <a href="https://t.co/5Fz4Oje5D">https://t.co/5Fz4Oje5D</a>  | 2020-04-14 01:03:08 |

#### 4. Support for Reopen America Protests

The Oath Keeper accounts have also supported the anti-Shelter in Place protests that have arisen over the past week across the United States.

Governors have instituted these measures on advice from medical professionals and epidemiologists, who state that social distancing must be enforced in order to stop the spread of the virus. Some far-right organizations and communities have perceived this as inexcusable government overreach and have flouted the directives, congregating in public places and shutting down thoroughfares. Trump has inflamed the sentiment by calling to “liberate” states under shelter-in-place orders, even while there is mounting evidence that these protests have led to spikes in infection.

| Screen Name | Tweet   | Created At          |
|-------------|---|---------------------|
| RickFerran  | LIBERATE MINNESOTA!   | 2020-04-17 15:57:14 |
| RickFerran  | Chinese people have been eating weird shit, live rats, dogs, bats, and anything they can get their hands on and all of the sudden they are sick from a virus supposedly connected to eating bats? Sounds sketchy when all of the sudden you don't hear about the HK protestors anymore.   | 2020-01-25 14:48:52 |
| RickFerran  | @RadioFreeTom @redsteeze It's truly appalling the level of ignorance display in your comments. You want Americans to eat out of garbage trucks? You want our students to be shot in the streets for protesting? So you want to give the government total control of our lives? Are you a fucking idiot? <a href="https://t.co/PpgPhyqZQJ">https://t.co/PpgPhyqZQJ</a> | 2020-01-31 10:30:01 |
| Oathkeepers | We see police in NC declaring that a protest against the shutdown is an unlawful assembly because protesting is now “non-essential.” And police in MS shutting down Easter services, declaring them “non-essential”. The First Amendment says otherwise.  | 2020-04-16 08:00:40 |
| RickFerran  | Fertilizing protestors refusing to move out of the public's way, what will they grow into? 🍷 <a href="https://t.co/DH96BG6Xhn">https://t.co/DH96BG6Xhn</a>  | 2020-02-23 03:46:48 |
| Oathkeepers | @TruthRaiderHQ @raleighpolice & see the First Amendment to that Constitution. The right of the people to peaceably assemble and petition government for redress of grievances -to protest- is a core right of political speech & assembly, protected by the First Amendment. It can't be wiped out by .gov decree.  | 2020-04-16 16:11:39 |
| Oathkeepers | .. public health & safety. They can't just ban all protests by declaring them non-essential activity. They have to find the least restrictive means while respecting the right of the people to assemble, protest, free speech or worship.  | 2020-04-16 17:10:33 |

## **5. Conclusion**

The Oath Keepers have engaged in violent COVID-19 conspiracy theories, including accusations that Gates and Fauci have criminal intent and that the Chinese government deliberately created the virus. They have also taken the side of “Reopen America” protesters, who have flouted public health guidelines in recent weeks. As protests continue, the Oath Keepers should be monitored as they are likely to participate while heavily armed.