



**Middlebury Institute of
International Studies at Monterey**
Center on Terrorism, Extremism, and Counterterrorism

**The Weaponization of Conspiracy Theories: A Growing National Security
Threat**

Statement for the Record by the Center on Terrorism, Extremism, and
Counterterrorism

for the Select Committee to Investigate the January 6th Attack on the United States Capitol

Jason Blazakis, Director
Matthew Kriner, Senior Research Scholar
Erica Barbarossa, Research Lead
Eli Drachman, Research Assistant

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Introduction

The Center on Terrorism, Extremism, and Counterterrorism (CTEC) is housed within the Middlebury Institute of International Studies (a graduate school of Middlebury College) in Monterey, California. Since its formation in 2018, CTEC has studied the spread of mis/dis/malinformation (MDM), conspiracy theories, and violent extremist movements. In particular, CTEC has observed, as will be documented below, a nexus between the spread of conspiratorial thinking and narratives in online spaces and how these often-dangerous ideas can influence the behavior of individuals while offline. There has been no more poignant example of this dynamic at play than the events of January 6 (“J6”) when actors influenced by conspiracy theories stormed the U.S. Capitol.

In the months leading up to J6, CTEC’s researchers published reports that documented a dangerous rise of far-right behavior in both digital and non-digital spaces. In 2020, CTEC researchers published multiple reports on the accelerationist¹ Boogaloo Movement. In May of 2020, CTEC researchers published an article that documented how the Proud Boys were spreading dangerous COVID-19 narratives as part of an effort to undermine government efforts to check the spread of the coronavirus. In April 2020, CTEC researchers published findings related to the Oath Keepers leveraging of COVID-19 conspiracy theories to provoke protests against government efforts to fight the spread of the coronavirus. Prior to that, CTEC researchers Alex Newhouse and Michael Donnelly drafted a report on how QAnon supporters were using multimedia tools, like film, to spread false information regarding the pandemic as part of an effort to undermine trust in government. Finally, in early April 2020, prior to the State Department’s designation of the Russian Imperial Movement (RIM) as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist (SDGT) group, a CTEC researcher documented how RIM used its Facebook page to disseminate COVID-19 conspiracy theories.² While the focus of this testimony is on U.S. based groups and their weaponization of conspiracy theories to do online and offline harm, it is important to underscore that the far-right movement is transnational. RIM is emblematic of the transnational threat posed by far-right extremists to the American homeland. In early 2022, the leader of RIM, himself a designated terrorist by the U.S. Department of State, explained to a U.S.-based investigative reporter that the RIM maintained links to U.S. persons — individuals that played a crucial role in organizing the deadly 2017 white supremacist rally, Unite the Right in Charlottesville, Virginia. To date, it remains the only white supremacist group designated by the U.S. Government.

CTEC’s research on the Proud Boys, Oath Keepers, QAnon, and many far-right groups and militia movements in the lead up to J6, made clear that the U.S. was facing a dire threat — as noted in more detail below, to its national security. This threat has not subsided. Conspiracy theories remain a vital national security challenge. This statement aims to answer the question: how and why do conspiracy theories lead to violence. As you’ll read, the answer is complex, and its historical roots are deep.

Conspiracy theorists gravitate towards violence because they feel *compelled* to act.

Our social identity — how we categorize and perceive ourselves in this world — is essential in giving us a sense of belonging. Humans naturally categorize themselves by establishing in-groups (those we share an identity with, based on factors such as religion, race, or nationality) and out-groups (those excluded

¹ Militant accelerationism is a set of tactics and strategies designed to put pressure on and exacerbate latent social divisions, often through violence, thus hastening societal collapse. Matthew Kriner, “An Introduction to Militant Accelerationism,” Accelerationism Research Consortium, May 19, 2022, <https://www.accresearch.org/shortanalysis/an-introduction-to-militant-accelerationism>.

² “The Russian Imperial Movement and Coronavirus.” Middlebury Institute of International Studies at Monterey, April 20, 2022. <https://www.middlebury.edu/institute/>.

from our self-determined identity).³ This sense of acceptance and belonging is an immensely powerful emotional force on human social structures, both internally at the individual level and collectively at the group level. As such, the introduction of an external enemy seeking to undermine or eradicate that sense of camaraderie and acceptance can represent an existential threat — one that might require forcible resistance to its alleged machinations against the in-group or against humanity writ large. Additionally, the potential loss of an in-group is often intolerable to humans, and we are capable of going to extraordinary lengths to maintain a firm connection with our identified in-group. In the American context, nothing could better exemplify this dynamic than the patriotic resolve of Revolutionary Americans that banded together against the existential threat of British tyranny. Yet centuries later, on J6, Americans witnessed how easily that revolutionary spirit can be hijacked by bad-faith actors and conspiratorial outlooks.

Humans do not cognitively manage uncertainty well. We regularly look for quick, simplified answers to assuage the discomfort that comes with attempting to discern meaning in the ambiguity and nuance of significant events, such as 9/11 or the coronavirus pandemic. Conspiracy theories provide one such pathway to resolving uncertainty in the face of reality's complexity and they often present new communities for disaffected individuals. In this new in-group, individuals find fellow travelers of like mind, and most importantly, there is a diminished chance that one's niche, outlandish thoughts will be derided by their peers. Conspiracy theories often present individuals a means to express agency and conduct a personal or collective search for truth — a process of discovery that can reduce uncertainty and provide a sense of purpose. However, conspiracy theories rarely exist in isolation and often overlap heavily with other conspiracy theories, creating suites of similarly oriented outlooks that can be rotated at will by adherents. Thus, the process of discovery can become an all-consuming facet of one's life that perpetually moves the goal posts on identifying "truth."

This process is similar to the notion of radicalization in the counter-terrorism and -extremism fields. As J.M. Berger noted in his book titled Extremism, an in-group's harmful narratives create out-groups, which threaten the survival and success of the in-group. By establishing an "us-versus-them" worldview, the in-group recruits individuals to view out-groups as their enemies.⁴ This mindset lays the groundwork for blaming an out-group for personal grievances, leading to the dehumanization of the out-group and thus the justification of violence against them. To understand how this impacts conspiracy theory communities, we can again turn to J.M. Berger: "Conspiracy theories argue that out-groups directly control, through secretive means, the success or survival of the in-group." Communities that build up around conspiracy theories can empower the individual by providing an in-group that has been bestowed with supposedly unique knowledge, and thus are uniquely positioned to rectify a perceived injustice. As such, these communities regularly frame their narratives and interpretations of society and current events around a sense of crisis that is often rooted in a struggle against an existential threat secretly orchestrated by the evil out-group. In doing so, adherents become primed for violence against a perceived enemy that has been built up considerably within a conspiracy theory's lore. At this stage the uncertainty driven by the perceived enemy's omnipresent threat replaces the original uncertainty that drove the person to the conspiracy theory, and takes on a considerably stronger sense of urgency to satisfy the outrage at why no one else is seeking to stop the evil forces.

The QAnon conspiracy theory exemplifies how a conspiracy theory can prime individuals for violence. At its core, the QAnon conspiracy theory purports that a satanic cabal of elites — primarily high-ranking Democrats and Hollywood celebrities — is engaged in a child sex-trafficking ring. Adherents believe that

³ Mcleod, Saul. "Social Identity Theory." Simply Psychology, January 1, 1970. <https://www.simplypsychology.org/social-identity-theory.html>.

⁴ "Radicalization and Violent Extremism: Lessons Learned From Canada, the U.K. and the U.S." National Institute of Justice, July 28, 2015. <https://www.ojp.gov/pdffiles1/nij/249947.pdf>.

only a shadowy figure named “Q” is privy to the full breadth of the alleged sex-trafficking ring and that by following his digital clues (known as “drops”) they can become empowered with a privileged knowledge the masses fail to see. This sense of privileged knowledge, combined with the belief of a consistent, and brazen, victimization of children by public figures is a crucial element in the QAnon theory's ability to mobilize outraged adherents towards violence. This framework provides the necessary justification for adherents to commit illegal (and possibly fatal) attacks; it also creates a scenario where believers feel they cannot be complicit and must act.

The defense of children was a motivating factor in a predecessor to QAnon — the “pizzagate” conspiracy theory. Adherents of this conspiracy theory widely propagated the idea "that then-Democratic presidential nominee Hillary Clinton and her campaign chief were running a child sex ring from the restaurant's backrooms."⁵ Motivated by outrage that the media and broader society were seemingly ignoring this obvious crime, Edgar Maddison Welch — a 28-year-old father of two from Salisbury, North Carolina — walked through the front door of Comet Ping Pong in Washington, D.C. just before 3:00 P.M. on December 4, 2016, firing his AR-15 rifle three times (fortunately not injuring anyone).⁶ His goal was to heroically rescue the child sex slaves he believed to be harbored at the restaurant. However, unable to find any evidence supporting the "pizzagate" theory, Welch surrendered to police.⁷ In 2018, another individual consumed with Q-related paranoia was arrested after taking matters into his own hands. Michael Lewis Arthur Meyer — a group leader who established a series of camps offering aid to homeless veterans — became convinced that a Cemex concrete plant in Tucson, Arizona was a "child sex trafficking camp" belonging to the aforementioned QAnon cabal.⁸ To prove his beliefs, Meyer committed multiple violations, ranging from trespass to assault.⁹ Another individual, 37-year-old Jessica Prim, also believed that she found one of the cabal's sex-trafficking locations in 2020. Arming herself with over a dozen illegal knives, Prim trespassed onboard the USS Intrepid to "save the children."¹⁰ Prim was subsequently arrested for trespassing and for a plot to assassinate Joe Biden over his presumed membership in the cabal detailed in Q-related messaging online.

Child sexual exploitation is not the only factor of the QAnon conspiracy that motivated individuals to violence. At its inception, the elusive Q figure behind the conspiracy theory appointed former President Donald J. Trump as its champion, claiming that unlike other politicians, President Trump actively combats this nefarious cabal. Implicitly, this positioned the vast majority of political figures in America as

⁵ Siddiqui, Faiz, and Susan Svrluga. “N.C. Man Told Police He Went to D.C. Pizzeria with Gun to Investigate Conspiracy Theory.” *The Washington Post*. WP Company, October 23, 2021. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/local/wp/2016/12/04/d-c-police-respond-to-report-of-a-man-with-a-gun-at-comet-ping-pong-restaurant/>.

⁶ Abrams, Abigail. “Pizzagate Gunman 'Regrets' Comet Ping Pong Pizza Shooting.” *Time*. Time, December 8, 2016. <https://time.com/4594988/pizzagate-gunman-comet-ping-pong-regret/>.

⁷ Kang, Cecilia, and Adam Goldman. “In Washington Pizzeria Attack, Fake News Brought Real Guns.” *The New York Times*. The New York Times, December 5, 2016. <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/05/business/media/comet-ping-pong-pizza-shooting-fake-news-consequences.html>.

⁸ Hernandez, Salvador. “A Man Pushing a ‘Child Sex Camp’ Conspiracy Theory Has Been Arrested for Trespassing.” *BuzzFeed News*. BuzzFeed News, July 24, 2018. <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/salvadorhernandez/a-man-pushing-a-child-sex-camp-conspiracy-theory-has-been>.

⁹ Ruelas, Richard. “2 Arizona Arrests Have Ties to QAnon Conspiracy Theory Movement.” *The Arizona Republic*. The Republic | azcentral.com, August 7, 2018. <https://www.azcentral.com/story/news/politics/arizona/2018/08/07/qanon-ties-two-arizona-arrests-conspiracy-theory-trump/920336002/>.

¹⁰ Celona, Larry, and Kenneth Garger. “Ranting Illinois Stripper Carrying 18 Knives Livestreams Arrest Outside USS Intrepid.” *New York Post*. New York Post, April 30, 2020. <https://nypost.com/2020/04/30/illinois-stripper-live-streams-arrest-outside-the-uss-intrepid/>.

complicit in the abstract child sexual exploitation conspiracy theory. In doing so, it also made them a target. President Trump's conspiratorial villainizations of his political opponents on social media and via press releases inadvertently caused QAnon adherents to conflate any Democrat or left-leaning political figure as an active threat to America. These sentiments led to real-world violence, as was the case with Cesar Sayoc in 2018, when Sayoc sent letter bombs to whom he considered to be President Trump's enemies. High-ranking Democrats, such as Barack Obama, Joe Biden, Hillary Clinton, and Kamala Harris were among Sayoc's targets.

Like other conspiracy theories, QAnon has primarily spread online. The rise of social media has made it easier for dangerous conspiracy theories to proliferate online and among mainstream audiences, radicalizing hundreds of thousands across the internet. The diffusion of once-niche views into mainstream forums of discourse also disperses potential sources of violence across a vast new frontier of individuals that otherwise may have never come into contact with such outlandish views. In the instance of QAnon, social media platforms' recommendation algorithms (a tool designed to show their consumers content that they will like and increase their engagement with the platform) contributed to its contagious nature. As demonstrated on the popular social media sites Twitter and Facebook, users who promoted anti-vax rhetoric, far-right ideals, or President Trump-supporting content on their accounts were then recommended QAnon content and accounts. Once exposed to QAnon content, it is easy for individuals to fall down the radicalization "rabbit hole."

The release of the QAnon documentary *Out of Shadows* also played a large role in the theory's successful advancement from a fringe conspiracy theory to a mainstream narrative for international audiences. The documentary's play on dangerous conspiratorial narratives popular amongst the QAnon crowd resulted in the feature going viral across social media (most concerningly in multiple languages after the production was translated into multiple languages). Along with establishing QAnon narratives worldwide, the documentary and resulting discourse also resulted in the spread of fringe slang, dog whistles, and masked language.¹¹ Examples include references to spirit cooking (the name of a satanic ritual that the cabal allegedly conducts), adrenochrome (a supposed chemical compound made from the blood of children that the cabal allegedly uses as a designer drug for the elite), and WWG1WGA (an acronym for "Where We Go One We Go All," a rallying cry for QAnon supporters). While often innocent on face, these terms have rapidly acquired momentum as allusions to much more dangerous beliefs and conspiracy theories.¹² The development of these dog whistles into hashtags online creates an easy pipeline for individuals to immerse themselves into.

The growth and mainstreaming of the QAnon conspiracy theory among modern conservatives was largely a result of President Trump's public endorsement of QAnon on Twitter. Before he was deplatformed, the former President retweeted posts from many QAnon-supporting accounts.¹³ When asked by reporters, President Trump praised this specific facet of his support base, painting them as American patriots who "loved their country."¹⁴ Emboldened by President Trump's endorsement of their movement, adherents bolstered their presence online by brazenly encouraging and glorifying violence against their perceived enemies. This rhetoric increased in frenzy leading up to the November 2020 President Elections, with some believers even calling for the unconstitutional surging of federal agents to combat their opponents (demonstrating a pre-existing disregard for democratic and judicial processes in their perceived fight

¹¹ Newhouse, Alex, and Michael Donnelly . "Far-Right Communities Are Pushing a Q-Anon Film." RPubS. Center on Terrorism, Extremism, and Counterterrorism , April 15, 2020. <https://rpubs.com/alexnewhouse/outofshadows>.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Nguyen, Tina. "Trump Isn't Secretly Winking at Qanon. He's Retweeting Its Followers." POLITICO. POLITICO, December 7, 2020. <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/07/12/trump-tweeting-qanon-followers-357238>.

¹⁴ Lucey, Catherine. "Trump Praises Qanon Followers as 'People That Love Our Country'." The Wall Street Journal. Dow Jones & Company, August 20, 2020. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/trump-praises-qanon-followers-as-people-that-love-our-country-11597883634>.

against evil). This language manifested offline, metastasizing after Joe Biden was announced as the president-elect. Uncertainty over their hero's re-election compounded with the social friction caused by police violence and coronavirus lockdowns led to heightened emotional reactions by QAnon followers. As a tactic, the leaders and figureheads of the Stop the Steal movement harnessed the emotional state of QAnon followers into the galvanizing force that America witnessed storming the U.S. Capitol on J6.

The Stop the Steal movement was comprised of various identities of the political Right, from conservative Republicans to militia members to the aforementioned fringe QAnon devotees. Already existing together under President Trump's banner, these diverse individuals were then unified and fortified by the impressive online coordination of the Stop the Steal movement. Much of this happened because of the fringe and mainstream coverage of this movement, which intended to cause enough fervor to harden individuals sympathetic to President Trump's cause. Within the QAnon community, this was easily done due to the narrative already existing in the space. The fraudulent stolen election messaging created the illusion that the pedophilic and feared cabal had harnessed its power to steal the election from their champion. The consequences of this reality would entail the continued abuse of children and the formidable corruption of America. Understanding this to be an unacceptable consequence and feeling that there was no political solution they could take to combat this, the followers of this theory represented a community primed for violent action.

What we can say with confidence now is that the pre-existing features of the "pizzagate" and QAnon conspiracy theories on the internet, embraced by President Trump's mainstream social media presence, led to a significant presence of Q followers participating in the violent J6 insurrection.¹⁵ Thus, without QAnon, Stop the Steal likely could have never materialized in the violent manner that it did.

Violent extremist movements and groups have weaponized conspiracy theories.

QAnon was not alone on J6, nor has it been the only movement that has weaponized conspiratorial narratives. The Boogaloo and Great Replacement Theory movements have proven just as willing to commit acts of violence in the name of a conspiracy theory. In the subsequent sections, we do not seek to provide a comprehensive explainer of these movements, but rather a concise review of how each entity has weaponized conspiracy theories and at times mobilized violently based on those views.

The Boogaloo

The Boogaloo movement, which coalesced online in late 2019 and manifested offline in 2020, rapidly evolved into a significant domestic violent extremist threat. Boogaloo memes circulated online as early as 2012, before finding traction in 4chan's weapons and politics boards around the topic of a second American civil war. By the fall of 2019, the memes' use had spread with purpose across Facebook, Twitter, Discord, and Telegram messaging platforms, often seeded from established white supremacy, anti-government, and militant accelerationism communities.

Through a distorted invocation of America's revolutionary origins, the Boogaloo movement resonated within the United States' domestic extremist landscape — particularly as it relates to the notion that Americans must fight back against perceived governmental tyranny. In 2020, offline Boogaloo mobilization, including acts of violence (organized and decentralized), markedly increased in response to a series of culturally divisive topics — gun control laws, social justice protests over law enforcement use of force, coronavirus public health lockdowns, and the 2020 presidential election. Noticeably, discourse

¹⁵ "Capitol Hill Siege Cases." Program on Extremism, 2022. <https://extremism.gwu.edu/capitol-hill-siege-cases>.

around each of these mobilizations heavily intersected with pre-existing conspiracy theories and emerging conspiracy theories — such as COVID-19 lockdowns acting as a pretext to martial law. These narratives fit neatly into the Boogaloo’s broader conspiratorial discourse around a looming civil war and federal tyranny.

At the center of the Boogaloo movement’s shared mythos was the conspiratorial outlook that a civil war was imminent or already being waged in a shadow capacity through local and federal law enforcement — particularly through the disarming of the American public. As such, the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and corresponding public health measures enacted to mitigate its spread acted as a catalyst to the conspiratorial outlook latent within the Boogaloo movement. Civil unrest erupted across America in 2020, with an unprecedented number of armed demonstrations — many attended by adherents of the Boogaloo movement and explicit accelerationist cliques. For adherents of the Boogaloo movement, ‘tyrannical’ COVID-19 government mandates, coupled with the murder of George Floyd by a white police officer, served as an acute expression of a tyrannical government preparing for a war on its populace. For accelerationists, the societal upheaval was a moment to exploit the boogaloo narrative and the Boogaloo movement represented a choice opportunity to merge revolutionary sentiment with insurrectionary actions.

President Trump inflamed anti-government sentiments throughout the pandemic 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, he galvanized an already charged social environment. One such example is the clear connection between President Trump’s repeated targeting of Governor Gretchen Whitmer over COVID-19 public health measures and the expressions of violence that closely mirrored that of the J6. A Boogaloo faction known as the Wolverine Watchmen, motivated by the belief that Governor Whitmer had overreached tyrannically. According to the criminal complaint these individuals “engaged in planning and training for an operation to attack the Capital of Michigan, and kidnap Government officials including the Governor of Michigan.” One conspirator stated they should “snatch and grab, man. Grab the f[*****] Governor...we do that, dude — it’s over.” And additional evidence suggests the conspirators intended to move the Governor to a secure location in Wisconsin for a “trial.”¹⁶

Another exacerbating factor in the Boogaloo movement’s rapid shift towards violent mobilization was the implementation and use of state gun laws colloquially known as “red flag laws.” For the firearm aficionados in the Boogaloo movement, this affirmed their conspiratorial suspicions that the federal government was abusing its power and undermining the Second Amendment with the ultimate goal of disarming the American populace. The death of Duncan Lemp in March 2020 became an inflection point for the movement, as Lemp, a 21-year-old Maryland resident, was killed by state law enforcement during a “no-knock” raid related to an illicit firearms investigation. Lemp was subsequently lionized by many in the Boogaloo movement as a victim of state violence deployed to suppress his constitutional right to bear arms.

The Great Replacement

The most pernicious white supremacist conspiracy theories that exist online embrace the notion that there is an ongoing “white genocide.” This conviction professes that declining birth rates of white people and the increase in non-white immigration to predominantly white countries lead to the demise of the white race. These actions are thought to be engineered by a nefarious Jewish cabal. This framing of whites

¹⁶ Kriner, Matthew, and Jon Lewis. “The Evolution of the Boogaloo Movement.” CTC Sentinel. Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, February 18, 2021. <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/the-evolution-of-the-boogaloo-movement/>.

facing an existential crisis at the hands of a Jewish out-group has led to various anti-Semitic violent events. One of the most notable events happened on October 27, 2018, when Robert Bowers charged into the Tree of Life Synagogue yelling, "[a]ll Jews must die," before firing upon innocent civilians. As justification, Bowers claimed he acted because he believed Jews "were committing genocide against his people," citing the popular white supremacist and anti-Semitic conspiracy theory. Bowers and many others believed that their in-group was experiencing an existential crisis due to a predatory out-group was enough to escalate to violence, verbalized when he said, "I can't stand by and watch my people get slaughtered."

The idea that the white race can only be preserved through hostile action against the out-group was also displayed in two mass shootings in Christchurch, New Zealand, in 2019. Brenton Harrison Tarrant, a 32-year-old white supremacist, initiated one of the deadliest events in New Zealand's history when he attacked two mosques, killing 51 people, and injuring another 40. His 71-page manifesto, titled "The Great Replacement," purported white genocide convictions alongside calls for removing non-white immigrants from "white" lands. This attack inspired 21-year-old Patrick Wood Crusius that same year, leading to his violent attack in El Paso, Texas. Anti-immigrant and white genocide themes heavily contributed to his merciless killing of 23 Walmart shoppers.

Conspiracy theories have proven to produce organized violence.

Amid lockdown measures, political tensions, and the recent social justice protests, there came to be increased media attention on American militias. While social media plays a role in quickly disseminating conspiracy theories, it also allows those with similar beliefs to connect online and offline. Earlier in our statement, we focused on individual adherents who committed acts of violence. Yet, conspiracy theories and their narratives have also inspired organized efforts to justify and engage in acts of violence. Such is the case with the notorious Proud Boys and Oath Keepers; both groups became household names within the America extremist fora after J6.

The Proud Boys

Founded in 2016 in an explicitly pro-MAGA fashion, the Proud Boys have gained mass media attention for their instigation of violence at leftist rallies and protests. The group quickly morphed into a violent right-wing extremist group with chapters across the U.S. and even abroad. This "Western chauvinist" fraternity began with Gavin McInnes looking for a more stringent way to contest ideas he found socially repugnant, such as political correctness, feminism, white guilt, and leftist political ideologies like socialism, Marxism, and communism. **The Proud Boys consider these political ideologies an existential threat to Western culture**, which has led them to weaponize various conspiracy theories against those worldviews, painting liberals as evil or corrupt and the state as the enemy. Like many extremist groups, the Proud Boys tie their success and survival to the need for hostile action against their political opponent(s). McInnes and other leaders set the tone for the street-fighting group by vilifying each of these spaces through anti-Semitic conspiracy theories such as "cultural Marxism" and calling repeatedly for violence against those enemies. Harnessing these conspiracy theories and weaponizing them to further the Proud Boys agenda and radicalize members became an important part of the group's playbook in their activities leading up to J6.

The most prominent conspiracy theory within the ranks of the Proud Boys is the belief in the imminent subversion of Western, and specifically American, society by left-leaning political ideologies, such as socialism, Marxism, and Communism. In some Proud Boys Telegram channels, members share memes and narratives that engage in hate-mongering, racism, and promotion of fascist ideology that overlap with

content found in deeper neo-Nazi accelerationist communities. Concerningly, these abstract threats are frequently pushed down onto casual left-leaning political identities such as the Democratic party in the U.S. In doing so, Proud Boys narratives conflate mundane political identities and views with an existential enemy, allowing any American that identifies as a Democrat or supporter of social justice movements like Black Lives Matter to become a potential target for Proud Boys violence.

This conflation provides a powerful motivator to take extensive measures, including violence, to prevent their perceived enemy's success. As such, the Proud Boys have acted as physical aggressors at numerous political demonstrations that the group's members have assigned conspiratorial intent and backing. Additionally, the group has been heavily galvanized by multiple tacit endorsements of their conspiratorial world views by President Trump, such as his stated desire to label antifa as a domestic terror organization and the portrayal of Democrats as acting secretly on behalf of radical Marxists. A more explicit endorsement of the Proud Boys by President Trump at a 2020 presidential debate, calling for the Proud Boys to "stand back and stand by," emboldened and deepened their sense of support from within the White House — a sentiment repeated frequently by members in the lead up to J6 and on the day of the insurrection.

A few examples of recurring themes within the conspiracy theories embraced by the Proud Boys include government abuse of the Second Amendment, embrace of QAnon, and anti-vaccine and anti-lockdown sentiments related to the COVID-19 pandemic.¹⁷ Like the Boogaloo and other far-right Second Amendment movements, the Proud Boys have promoted conspiratorial views on Telegram that "[g]overnments only want to take your guns so they have the monopoly on violence and then inevitably they tyrannize or kill their own citizens."¹⁸ Firearms have regularly featured in incidences of violence and unlawful behavior throughout the Proud Boys' history. For example, at a Portland, Oregon counter-demonstration in August 2020, prominent Proud Boy Alan Swinney brandished a pistol at protestors during a skirmish. He was convicted and sentenced to ten years of incarceration.¹⁹ And days before J6, Proud Boys Chairman Enrique Tarrio was arrested on charges related to firearms violations in the District of Columbia.

Besides their paranoia concerning governmental abuse of the Second Amendment, the narratives in the Proud Boys are also riddled with hatred, racism, anti-Semitism, and fascist proclivities. For example, until late 2020, shirts adorned with "6MWE" (6MWE refers to the phrase 'Six Million Wasn't Enough' — used frequently by neo-Nazis claiming that not enough Jewish people died in the Holocaust) and Italian fascist iconography (the Roman Legion eagle and fasces surrounded by laurel wreath) were readily available on Amazon's marketplace. Members of the Proud Boys were seen wearing these t-shirts at a MAGA rally in Washington, D.C. in December 2020, where there were fights on the streets with antifa and other left-wing protestors.²⁰

Like much of the pro-Trump, MAGA movement, the Proud Boys have actively embraced QAnon's #Saveourchildren campaign, leading to an overlap between QAnon adherents and Proud Boys members.

¹⁷ Alex Newhouse, Adel Arlett, and Leela McClintock, "Proud Boys Amplify Anti-Vax and Coronavirus Disinformation Following Support for Anti-Quarantine Protests," Middlebury Institute of International Studies at Monterey, May 1, 2022, <https://www.middlebury.edu/institute/>.

¹⁸ "More than Brawlers: The Proud Boys and Armed Extremism." Everytown Research & Policy, July 20, 2021. <https://everytownresearch.org/report/more-than-brawlers-the-proud-boys-and-armed-extremism/>.

¹⁹ Bernstein, Maxine. "Judge Sends Self-Proclaimed Proud Boy Alan Swinney to Prison for 10 Years, Citing His Lack of Remorse." oregonlive. The Oregonian, December 14, 2021. <https://www.oregonlive.com/crime/2021/12/judge-sends-self-proclaimed-proud-boy-alan-swinney-to-prison-for-10-years-citing-his-lack-of-remorse.html>.

²⁰ Palmer, Ewan. "Neo-Nazi Shirts Worn by Proud Boys Supporters Sold on Amazon." Newsweek. Newsweek, December 16, 2020. <https://www.newsweek.com/nazi-amazon-proud-boys-holocaust-1555192>.

(ADL) For example, in August 2020, roughly 150 people — including approximately a third of the Proud Boys Triangle chapter — showed up in Fayetteville, NC to protest human sex trafficking and pedophilia.²¹ Those who marched at the front of the crowd carried a banner that read, “Save Our Children.”²²

In 2020, [CTEC](#) found that Proud Boy accounts on Twitter displayed widespread engagement with violent conspiracy theories, disinformation, and promotion of narratives that downplayed the COVID-19 pandemic. Our analysis revealed an ecosystem of conspiracism and coronavirus trutherism. The COVID-19 pandemic was a significant galvanizing moment for the Proud Boys, who capitalized on the social division by engaging in anti-mask, anti-vaccine, and anti-lockdown “Reopen America” demonstrations. The Proud Boys also actively engaged in the dissemination of popular COVID-19 conspiracy theories on social media. One such example included the fictitious story of Elisa Granato, who was said to have died after receiving one of the first trial vaccines in the U.K. Proud Boys also bandwagoned onto the more popular conspiracy theories surrounding the pandemic, claiming that the pandemic was a hoax or planned by nefarious actors (in most cases Bill Gates, a ‘New World Order’ shadow group, large global institutions like the United Nations, or by Jews — coalescing with the longstanding anti-Semitic Zionist Occupied Government (ZOG) conspiracy theory).

Perhaps the most impactful conspiracy theory adopted by the Proud Boys was the whole cloth embrace of the “Stop the Steal” campaign and the belief that President Biden illegitimately took office. Driven by this conspiracy theory, Proud Boys mobilized offline numerous times between the November 3 election and the J6 insurrection. For example, on the evening of December 12, 2020, members of the Proud Boys tore down a Black Lives Matter banner from the Asbury United Methodist Church and burned it in the street.²³ Soon thereafter, some of the Proud Boys began pointing and shouting at a lone Black man (Phillip Johnson, a 29-year-old Washington, D.C. resident) standing against a wall next to Harry’s Bar in D.C.²⁴ Although some members attempted to dissuade the other Proud Boys, some of the members approached Johnson and punched and kicked him. Johnson then stabbed four of the Proud Boys, and he was among the dozens of individuals arrested that night.²⁵

Despite the significant political and legal pressure on the organization in the wake of the J6 insurrection, Proud Boys have regularly mobilized offline in numerous capacities. Over the last year, the group has found significant overlap with the Republican party’s anti-CRT campaign at the state level. As such, the organization has turned its eyes to local school boards and inserted itself into the political discourse through intimidatory practices. As shown in this statement, they have been engaging in dangerous rhetoric far beyond mainstream conservatism. They have been at the forefront of pro-civil war advocacy, and their past shows that they have been particularly willing to turn to violent action.

The Oath Keepers

²¹ Michael Futch, “‘No Issues’ Reported during Saturday March in Fayetteville Held to Protest Human Sex Trade,” *The Fayetteville Observer* (*The Fayetteville Observer*, August 30, 2020), <https://www.fayobserver.com/story/news/2020/08/29/no-issues-reported-during-saturday-march-fayetteville/5670732002/>.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Morales, Christina. “Man Is Arrested in Stabbing at D.C. Election Protest.” *The New York Times*. *The New York Times*, December 13, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/12/13/us/politics/trump-election-protests-violence.html>.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Davies, Emily, Rachel Weiner, Clarence Williams, Marissa J. Lang, and Jessica Contrera. “Multiple People Stabbed after Thousands Gather for pro-Trump Demonstrations in Washington.” *The Washington Post*. WP Company, January 7, 2021. https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/trump-dc-rally-maga/2020/12/11/8b5af818-3bdb-11eb-bc68-96af0daae728_story.html; <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/12/13/us/politics/trump-election-protests-violence.html>.

Founded in 2009 by Elmer Stewart Rhodes (aka "Stewart"), the Oath Keepers is a deeply conspiratorial group that has aggressively portrayed the American government as a tyrannical force engaged in a protracted campaign to violently strip the American people of their natural rights. It is not hyperbole to state that the group's entire existence is premised on promoting a long list of conspiracy theories that seek to stoke fears and anxiety of hidden actors within an armed populace looking for a justification to defend a warped sense of patriotism. Below is a short list of events that became lightning rods for Oath Keepers' conspiracism:

- **Hurricane Katrina** – Following the hurricane's devastating impact on New Orleans, Oath Keepers were instrumental in perpetuating the conspiracy theory that the federal government was using the emergency orders as a pretext to institute martial law and confiscate firearms.
- **Jade Helm** – Oath Keepers pushed the conspiracy theory that the military training operation Jade Helm was secretly being used by the federal government for a planned institution of martial law.
- **Sandy Hook** – Oath Keepers, via Stewart Rhodes' numerous appearances on conspiracy theorist Alex Jones' show Infowars, perpetuated the conspiracy theory that the atrocious school shooting was being used as a pretext by Democrats to strip Americans of their Second Amendment rights.
- **COVID-19** – Oath Keepers and Stewart Rhodes perpetuated numerous conspiracy theories surrounding the public health measures associated with COVID-19.²⁶
- **2020 Election** – Oath Keepers, and in particular its leader Stewart Rhodes, heavily rejected the results of the 2020 Presidential general vote, claiming it was rigged. As such, Rhodes and by proxy much of the Oath Keepers, heavily embraced the "Stop the Steal" campaign that culminated in their central role in the J6 insurrection conspiracy charges brought by the Department of Justice.

Throughout these various events, recurring conspiracy themes were leveraged by Oath Keepers: that the federal government was planning to put "dissenters" and political opposition (fed and democrat are interchangeable here) into concentration camps run by (FEMA); that United Nations, Marxist, or "globalist" forces were working to subvert American sovereignty; and that America was on the precipice of a collapse and/or a second civil war.

From this position of paranoia and fear-mongering about alleged government tyranny and civil war, Oath Keepers have engaged in armed demonstrations and standoffs against the U.S. government and its federal agencies numerous times. This history, in part, informs the Oath Keepers' commitment to the "Stop the Steal" conspiracy theory and role in seeking to disrupt the electoral confirmation process in Congress on J6. This commitment marked a stark departure from the group's prior stance towards the federal government, which was reactive rather than proactive and often defined by brinkmanship and the implicit threat of violent actions. By directly and explicitly targeting the seat of America's government with the goal of preventing a peaceful transition of power, the group's posture firmly shifted into a category of open antagonism and insurrection.

The ramifications of that shift have been significant for the Oath Keepers. The ongoing federal investigation into the Oath Keepers' J6 activity threatens the group's existence. In January 2022, Stewart Rhodes' long devotion to conspiracy theories led to his indictment on seditious conspiracy charges, and a

²⁶ Newhouse, Alex, and Sean Kitson. "The Oath Keepers Are Spreading COVID-19 Conspiracy Theories." Middlebury Institute of International Studies at Monterey. Center on Terrorism, Extremism, and Counterterrorism, April 22, 2022. <https://www.middlebury.edu/institute/>.

federal judge ordered him held without bail pending trial.²⁷ Although the organization's days could be numbered, the narratives and ideographs leveraged by the Oath Keepers may outlive the group itself. Today, the warped patriotism narratives that the group has deployed are far more common than during its founding and are being discovered and embraced by new audiences, such as QAnon, the Boogaloo, and others. This trend ultimately means that the Oath Keepers are but one of a range of anti-government movements that continue to thrive in a consistently permissive environment for domestic violent extremist actors.

Conclusions and Policy Recommendations

Conspiracy theories are a considerable driver of political violence. This statement largely focused on the pathways that led our nation to the horrors of J6. However, those same actors were heavily engaged in conspiracy theories related to Islam, anti-Semitism, and more, long before Stop the Steal was conceived. The 2017 'March Against Sharia' campaign featured Proud Boys, Oath Keepers and Three Percenters, all of which were represented at the J6 insurrection. There is also no denying the instrumental role social media and communications platforms have played in the weaponization and spread of conspiracy theories and their mobilization to violence today.

However, we cannot expect everyday individuals to consider how social media companies measure their success or how that measurement affects everyday consumers. Social media companies aim to maximize user engagement with their platform and are not afraid to use the tools, such as recommendation algorithms, at their disposal to make that happen. While fundamental in platforms' success in user engagement, these algorithms enable social media personalities to radicalize their viewers by leading them to more extremist content over the course of the user experience. The consequences of this systemic radicalization include increased violence, hate speech, and hate crime. It has also produced a resurgence of militias and domestic extremism. These consequences culminated in the events of J6.

So, how can the federal government combat the weaponization of conspiracy theories by extremist movements? As you might imagine, it is challenging for social media companies to modify their recommendation algorithms so that they do not promote extremist and conspiratorial content while simultaneously avoiding a negative impact on user engagement with the platform. To avoid events like J6 in the future, the federal government should continue to support collaborative efforts between extremism researchers and social media companies to combat the radicalization "rabbit hole" (e.g., see the recent grant from the Department of Homeland Security supporting the collaborative effort between Middlebury's Center on Terrorism, Extremism, and Counterterrorism and educational game designer iThrive, which will produce "a new simulation game and curriculum designed to build resilience among adolescents and give them the tools to recognize and reject overtures from violent extremist recruiters").²⁸

Counter-messaging by government voices, however, is unlikely to check the spread of conspiracy theories. In fact, active government in countering propaganda efforts may result in conspiracy theorists doubling down on their dangerous ideas. In the online world, governments should play the role of enabler — chiefly enabling or encouraging the private sector and academic world to do what they do best —

²⁷ Hsu, Spencer S., and Mary Beth Gahan. "Oath Keepers Founder Stewart Rhodes to Remain Jailed Pending Trial on Jan. 6 Seditious Conspiracy Charge." *The Washington Post*. WP Company, January 27, 2022. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/dc-md-va/2022/01/26/stewart-rhodes-jailed-seditious-conspiracy/>.

²⁸ Diehl, Stephen. "Middlebury Institute Team Will Develop Game to Counter Extremist Recruitment in Schools." *Middlebury Institute of International Studies at Monterey*, November 16, 2021. <https://www.middlebury.edu/institute/news/middlebury-institute-team-will-develop-game-counter-extremist-recruitment-schools>.

innovate and tackle the challenges through nuanced engagements with civilian populations that may be at risk of radicalization. The Department of Homeland Security's Center for Prevention Programs and Partnerships (CP3) and comparable programs should be the government's lodestones in the future. CP3's work with universities and private sector funds important initiatives that are designed to prevent radicalization from occurring in the first place. The government's light touch in this regard is critical. Yet, CP3 funding, in relative terms within the CT and CVE worlds, is insufficient. That needs to change.

Further, there is a need to bolster digital and media literacy programming for society. Extremists want media coverage to gain notoriety, spread their propaganda, and use coverage as a source of recruitment. The plight of journalists is discovering how to safely and ethically cover extremist events without inadvertently giving into the extremists' manipulation. Much of media coverage today consistently lacks careful nuanced insights that would better educate the public and prevent media manipulation by extremists themselves. Hence, there is a need to educate journalists on covering extremist groups and movements, especially the more obscure and commonly misunderstood entities such as accelerationism. Additionally, efforts should be made to reinforce critical thinking skills among the populace to identify and evade extremist messaging and radicalization online. To really check the spread of disinformation and conspiracy theories, an informed individual who understands their own digital identity and how real research works, such as the labor that goes into evaluating sourcing. That process often requires corroboration and vetting — skills that, simply put, those who live in the world of QAnon have not valued or understood. That's why bottom-up educational approaches to fighting disinformation and conspiracy theories need to begin in the classroom as early as possible. At CTEC, we are committed to playing this role and it is why we are always willing to leave our ivory towers, roll up our sleeves, and build the skills of the next generation so they can do better in the fight against disinformation and conspiracy theories. If we don't enter these educational spaces now — the next J6 may arrive sooner than we would like.

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