

After the Insurrection:

How Domestic Extremists
Adapted and Evolved
After the January 6
US Capitol Attack

By Jared Holt





The mission of the Digital Forensic Research Lab (DFRLab) is to identify, expose, and explain disinformation where and when it occurs using open-source research; to promote objective truth as a foundation of government for and by people; to protect democratic institutions and norms from those who would seek to undermine them in the digital engagement space; to create a new model of expertise adapted for impact and real-world results; and to forge digital resilience at a time when humans are more interconnected than at any point in history, by building the world's leading hub of digital forensic analysts tracking events in governance, technology, and security.

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FRONT COVER:

The US Capitol Building on January 6, 2021.
(Leah Millis/Reuters)

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By Jared Holt

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January 4, 2022

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TOP/BOTTOM LEFT: Members of Ammon Bundy's far-right People's Rights group shut down a school board meeting in Portland, Oregon, October 25, 2021. (John Rudoff/Sipa USA via Reuters Connect)

About the Author



JARED HOLT is a Resident Fellow at The Atlantic Council's Digital Forensic Research Lab (DFRLab), where he researches domestic extremist movements in the United States and their usage of the internet. Prior to joining the DFRLab, Jared worked as an investigative reporter at Right Wing Watch, an outlet sponsored by People For the American Way. There, he researched and reported on right-wing extremist movements in the United States and how it presented itself online and offline. His work developed a reputation for its aggressive lines of inquiry and its ability to innovate in the field of extremism reporting. Before that, he worked as a researcher at Media Matters for America, assisting team efforts to develop best practices of research on the topics of misinformation and right-wing extremism online. Jared is one of the nation's most visible experts on domestic extremism, appearing on national broadcast media to share his knowledge, and providing his insights to journalists covering extremism in the US. His work has been published in outlets including the Washington Post, Columbia Journalism Review, HuffPost, and GEN Magazine. Jared graduated from the University of Central Arkansas in early 2015, where he majored in journalism and minored in philosophy. He is based in Chicago.

Executive Summary

Domestic extremist movements have evolved and adapted their strategies, infrastructure, and messaging in the year since the insurrection at the US Capitol Building on January 6, 2021. Such movements were initially jubilant at the sight of extremist groups and former President Donald Trump's most ardent supporters crashing through windows and brawling with police, temporarily halting the US Congress as it certified the 2020 election results. But, resulting arrests and scrutiny soured that cheer into a wicked brew of paranoia and fear that played out among these movements, both online and offline.

After a short period of relative inactivity, some radical movements began to resurface publicly. By the summer of 2021, other movements reorganized, making strategic adjustments along the way.

This report by the Digital Forensic Research Lab (DFRLab) provides an overview and analysis of the shifts observed in domestic extremist movements since the 2021 Capitol attack. As noted in the National Strategy for Countering Domestic Terrorism, domestic extremist threats include groups and individuals "whose racial, ethnic, or religious hatred leads them toward violence" and those who incite "imminent violence in opposition to

legislative, regulatory, or other actions taken by the government," including self-proclaimed militias, "sovereign citizen" movements, and others promoting fringe ideological grievances.¹

This research is informed by continued online monitoring and analysis of extremist individuals, groups, and movements, and how their online behavior influences offline activities. Daily monitoring efforts, primarily comprising open-source and investigative reporting, began in the latter half of 2020 and continued through the entirety of 2021, producing a comprehensive record of extremist movements online that informed this report, as well as other efforts to combat the threats that domestic extremist movements pose to democracy and public safety.

These findings portray a domestic extremist landscape that was battered by the blowback it faced after the Capitol riot, but not broken by it. In fact, the sentiments espoused by domestic extremist causes are as public and insidious as ever, making their way into mainstream conservative discourse. This underscores the importance of periodic accounting and strategizing of methods to confront threats. Just as extremist movements adapt and evolve, so should approaches to preventing the harms they produce.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Aftermath of the riot:

- **Various domestic extremist movements and their supporters cheered the January 6 US Capitol attack but became paralyzed by paranoia.** Perceived momentum gained throughout 2020 saw a brief freeze, as initial waves of arrests and public scrutiny disrupted organizing and activities.
- **Various movements or loosely organized groups planned and encouraged follow-up events, but most were eventually canceled.** Widespread suspicion, of both each other and federal authorities, led many movements to discourage attendance at public political events and accuse one another of cooperating with investigators.
- **Social media companies and online platforms took further actions against extremist content and activities, leading to a “great scattering” of extremists and extremist groups across alternative platforms.** Movements, groups, and individuals present during the attack were subjected to additional scrutiny by tech companies. Many central figures lost access to mainstream digital services, forcing them to disperse across alternative online spaces.
- **Many extremist groups and far-right platforms were targets of data scrapes, breaches, and hacks.** Researchers and digital sleuths monitored extremist groups and alternative social media platforms to gather open-source data, while hackers actively infiltrated them. Many of these efforts were made available to researchers and journalists, who, in turn, revealed previously unknown details about them, including personal information.

Adoption of new offline methods:

- **Some extremist movements have attempted to push into mainstream conservative politics.** By forming nonprofits and conducting traditional political activities like phone banking and hosting conferences, extremist movements have sought to establish political legitimacy within mainstream conservative circles to attract support.
- **Others have looked to decentralize their organizations.** Some groups have sought to evade scrutiny by operating autonomously from central national groups and encouraging individuals or small groups to work independently toward broader goals.
- **Movement leaders are overwhelmingly encouraging local over national actions.** This has led many to adopt causes embraced by mainstream conservatives, from fighting COVID-19 restrictions to challenging school curricula, directing their ire at local officials.

Adoption of new online methods:

- **Banned movements and disaffected supporters have utilized a number of alternative platforms, eventually settling on a handful of them.** After migrating from platform to platform, many extremist movements have settled on primary alternative platforms, which vary from community to community.
- **Far-right entrepreneurs dissatisfied with current digital platforms have built alternative ones.** Some extremists and far-right sympathizers have created platforms to maintain control and independence, ensuring content is not removed without their explicit approval. Among these are Gab Chief Executive Officer Andrew Torba, who has stated he is attempting to build a “parallel Christian economy,” as well as video platforms launched by white nationalist Nicholas Fuentes and conspiracist pillow maven Mike Lindell.
- **Movements have resumed efforts to inject their propaganda more broadly into online “culture war” debates.** As a fruitful opportunity for generating outrage and hate, extremists have embraced emotionally charged social issues as an entry vehicle into mainstream online discourse.

Historical revisionism:

- **Right-wing influencers and politicians have worked to obfuscate and distort the events of January 6, engaging in historical revisionism.** Fringe outlets including Gateway Pundit and Revolver alongside politicians such as Reps. Paul Gosar (R-AZ) and Marjorie Taylor Greene (R-GA) have used their platforms to engage in historical revisionism regarding the Capitol riot, disputing the behavior of participants despite documentary evidence to the contrary, and accusing the government of conducting a conspiracy against Trump supporters.

Introduction

This report offers analysis of the ways that domestic extremist movements evolved and adapted during the year following the now-infamous insurrection at the US Capitol Building on January 6, 2021. On that day, supporters of then-President Donald Trump and likeminded members of extremist movements participated in an assault on democracy itself, violently breaking into the US Capitol as Congress attempted to certify President-Elect Joe Biden's electoral victory. Though none of the last-minute plot twists that drew expectant crowds to Washington came to bear, the attack resulted in several deaths, hundreds of arrests, and a nation shaken by what transpired that afternoon.

Since the attack, US public officials and federal law enforcement have repeatedly identified the need for renewed vigilance in confronting domestic extremism as a leading threat to national security.² The Office of the Director of National Intelligence stated in March 2021 that domestic extremist threats posed increased risks, citing the Capitol attack and conspiracy theories as potential motivations for violence. The Biden administration spent its first year in office crafting a policy plan for addressing such threats, including the establishment of the country's first National Strategy for Countering Domestic Terrorism.³ Meanwhile in Congress, the House established the Select Committee to Investigate the January 6th Attack on the United States Capitol.⁴

This report focuses on right-wing extremist movements and groups due to their central role in the January 6 attack and their ongoing affront to democratic values, and because public safety, security, and law-enforcement

officials agree that they present the most immediate, violent threat to public safety in the United States.⁵ Groups identified as far-right and extremist in this report are those that seek to advance agenda items that are based in hate and conspiracy theories, seek to undermine democratic norms and equality, and have records of supporters engaging in violence in pursuit of those ends.

Since the attack, domestic extremist movements have modified their strategies, structures, and ideologies to survive the post-January 6 backlash. This backlash includes public condemnation from elected officials and public figures, increased scrutiny by federal law enforcement and the media, and intensified restrictions by social media platforms and online service providers, among others. Many extremists have turned to alternative online venues to reestablish their digital presence after being de-platformed by mainstream social media companies, as leaders of extremist movements are increasingly encouraging their members to engage at a more grassroots level to spread their beliefs locally while evading the national spotlight. While these efforts have yet to restore many movements to their previous levels of organization and influence, many have plotted new courses, actively attempting to rebuild and rebrand themselves in a post-January 6 world.

The DFRLab is publishing this report with the goal of providing a more granular understanding of the broad spectrum of radicalization that led to the events of January 6, 2021, the state of play among far-right domestic extremist movements, and the ongoing threat of political violence in the United States.

Before the Attack: From Stop the Steal to the Capitol Steps

In the year leading up to the Capitol insurrection, extremist groups and likeminded, but otherwise unaffiliated Trump supporters worked in sync to pursue overlapping ideological goals. This synergy peaked following the November 2020 US presidential election with the rise of the “Stop the Steal” movement to prevent President-Elect Joe Biden from taking office, which frequently featured far-right speakers and extremist groups at pro-Trump rallies.

As the DFRLab previously reported in its timeline of the Stop the Steal movement:

The Stop the Steal movement was far from monolithic, though, and included groups across a spectrum of radicalization: hyperpartisan pro-Trump activists and media outlets; the neo-fascist Proud Boys, a group with chapters committed to racism and the promotion of street violence; unlawful militias from around the country with a high degree of command and control, including the so-called Three Percenters movement; adherents to the collective delusion of QAnon; individuals identifying with the Boogaloo Bois, a loosely organized antigovernment group that has called for a second civil war; and ideological fellow travelers of the far-right, who wanted to witness something they believed would be spectacular.⁶

When the Capitol was attacked, both supporters of extremist movements and individuals who shared their conspiratorial views about the election participated in the event.

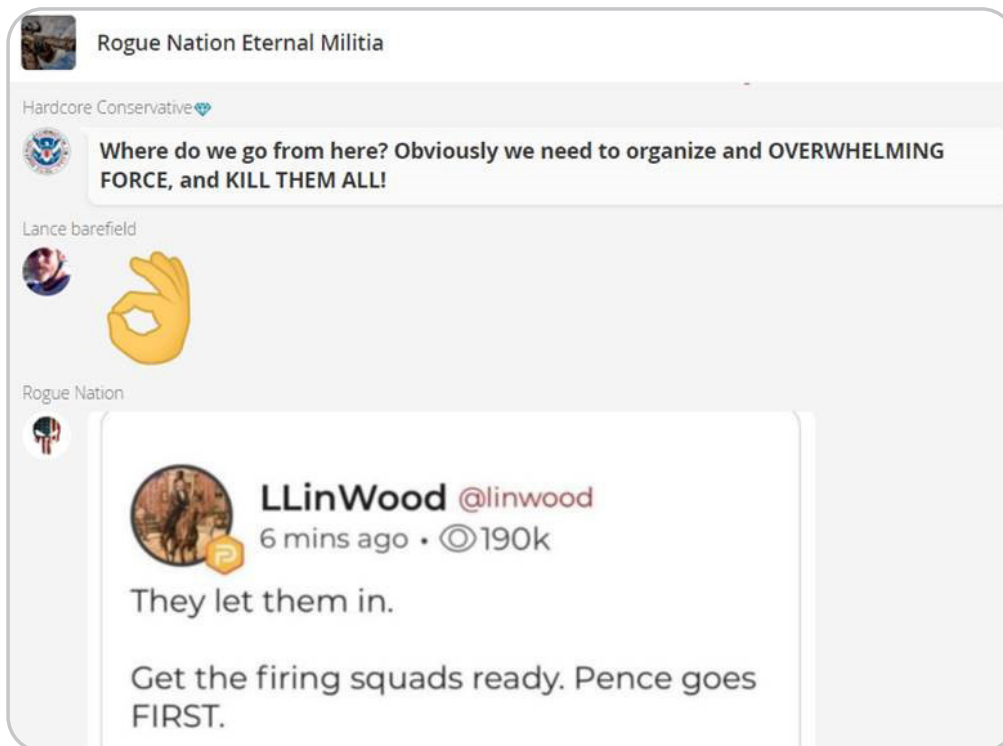
Members of unlawful paramilitary groups like the Oath Keepers and Three Percenters, white-nationalist movements following groups like Nationalist Socialist Club and figureheads like Nicholas Fuentes, conspiracy-theory extremist movements like QAnon, and far-right violent groups like the Proud Boys joined sympathetic Trump supporters in forcing entry into the Capitol.⁷ Outside the halls of Congress, a broader network of far-right and pro-Trump influencers watched as months of extreme rhetoric and calls to action bore violent and deadly fruit.

Before and during the Capitol attack, participants and their online supporters communicated using mainstream social media platforms and a host of alternatives where they had carved out niche communities. Some of these so-called “alt” platforms—like Parler, Gab, and The Donald—were built to enable them, while others like MeWe were seemingly chosen for convenience.

For months preceding January 6, these movements engaged each other in hope of undermining the election of Joe Biden. As they plotted events and incited each other online, many tech companies and online platforms struggled to adopt policies to address the growing problem.⁸ President Trump paid brief visits to several of the Stop the Steal rallies in Washington via presidential motorcade and Marine One flyovers. Many Republican officials, following Trump’s lead, offered legitimacy to this brewing movement; despite the Capitol attack, one hundred and forty-seven Republican members of Congress voted against certifying Biden’s win. Presented with little resistance, this collage of Trump supporters and like-minded extremist groups carried out a direct assault against a fundamental pillar of US democracy: the peaceful transition of power from one administration to the next.

“They Are Watching”: Bombast, Then Blowback

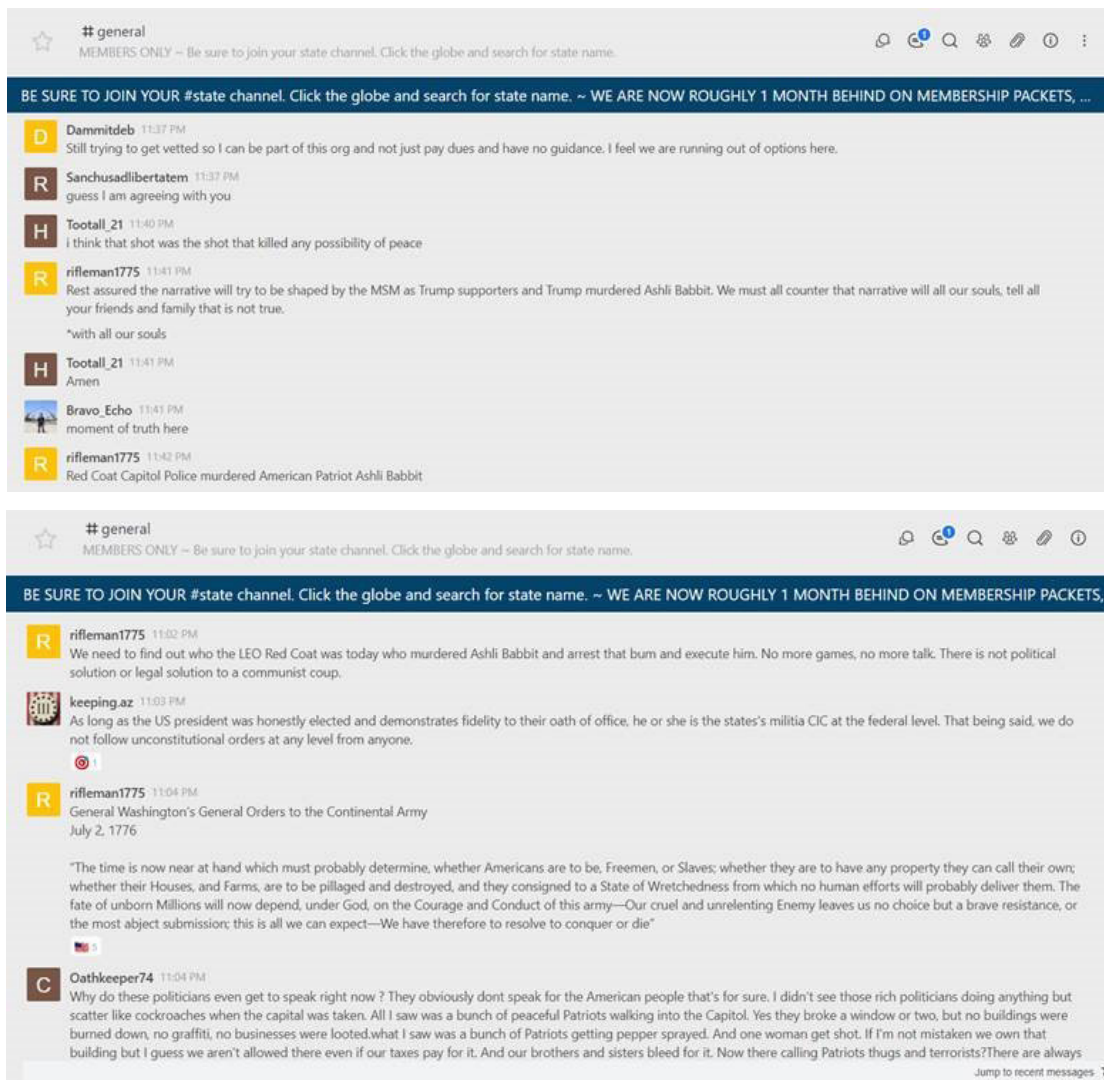
The attack on the US Capitol was initially successful in its brief disruption of the formal certification of the 2020 election, but ultimately failed in its aim of subverting the entire process. In the immediate aftermath, online sympathizers and members of extremist movements cheered the violent scene that had played out before the nation.⁹ One user in a militia-movement group on the social media platform MeWe asked hundreds of others in the group’s chatroom, “Where do we go from here? Obviously we need to organize and OVERWHELMING FORCE, and KILL THEM ALL!” In response, another user shared a screenshot of a message posted by Trump attorney and conspiracy theorist Lin Wood calling to “get the firing squads ready,” and adding that then-Vice President Mike Pence “goes FIRST.”¹⁰



Screen cap of a user post in a pro-militia-movement chatroom on MeWe posted after the January 6 riot at the US Capitol Building, saying those likeminded individuals needed to organize and “KILL THEM ALL.”¹¹

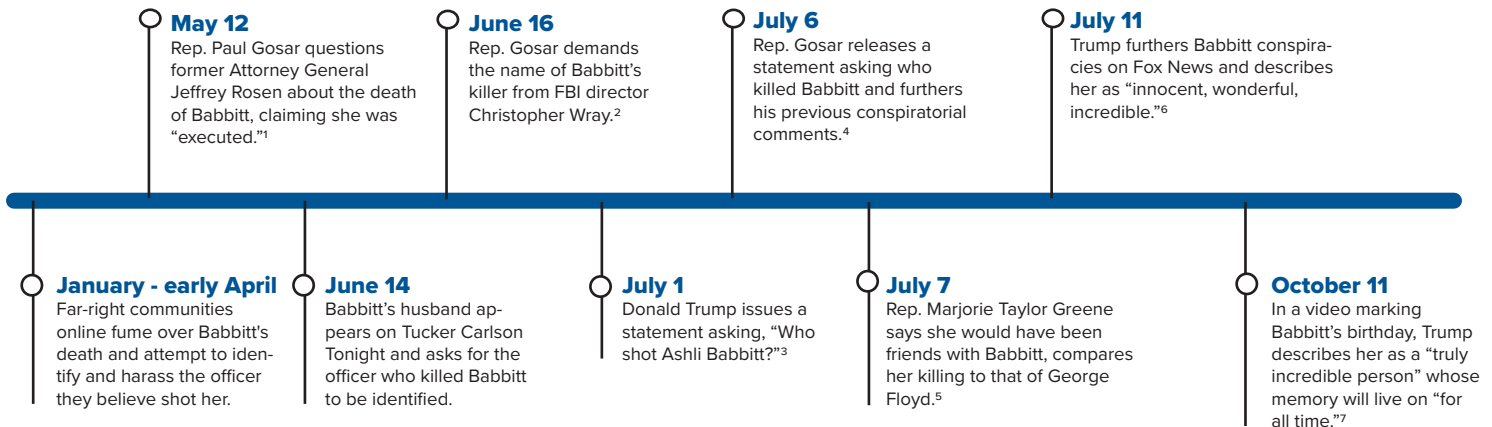
Messages containing identical sentiments were commonplace among far-right audiences in the aftermath of the attack. In several online spaces popular with extremists, January 6 was proclaimed as the first shot fired in a new revolution against the US government.¹² These communities believed that government agencies and officials should be punished for not keeping Trump in office, based on a false belief that they had contributed to a vast conspiracy to expel him from a divinely righteous reign over the executive branch. Several white-supremacist movements invoked imagery of the Capitol attack to celebrate the start of a “white revolution” against the government. Extremist communities mourned and vowed revenge for Ashli Babbitt, who was shot and killed by a police officer while attempting to forcibly enter the US House of Representatives through a window broken by the violent mob.¹³

“We need to find out who the LEO Red Coat was today who murdered Ashli Babbitt [sic] and arrest that bum and execute him,” one user wrote to fellow members of the antigovernment Oath Keepers late on the night of January 6, in a private chat room on the platform rocket.chat. “No more games, no more talk. There is not [a] political solution or legal solution to a communist coup.” Another user replied, “I think that was the shot that killed any possibility of peace.”



Screenshots from the Oath Keepers’ members chatroom on the platform rocket.chat on the night of January 6, 2021, show users discussing the shooting of Ashli Babbitt.¹⁴

NARRATIVE: ASHLI BABBITT IS A MARTYR WHO DIED UNDER UNCLEAR CIRCUMSTANCES



- 1 “The Latest: Hearing on Capitol riot wraps; little new info,” AP News, May 12, 2021, <https://apnews.com/article/donald-trump-capitol-siege-government-and-politics-0813b6f4e80eeleb2914356572fd59f>.
- 2 Julian Mark, “Paul Gosar demands name of Capitol officer who killed rioter Ashli Babbitt, saying she was ‘executed,’” The Washington Post, June 16, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2021/06/16/paul-gosar-capitol-riot-babbitt/>.
- 3 Jordan Fischer, Eric Flack, Stephanie, Wilson, “Who shot Ashli Babbitt? | Inside the effort to make a January 6 martyr,” WUSA9, July 20, 2021, <https://www.wusa9.com/article/news/national/capitol-riots/who-shot-ashli-babbitt-inside-the-effort-to-make-a-january-6-martyr-right-wing-paul-gosar-donald-trump-white-supremacist-anti-semitic-qanon/65-6641f710-99d0-42ba-b657-4c568e132ef1>.
- 4 Jordan Fischer, Eric Flack, Stephanie, Wilson, “Who shot Ashli Babbitt? | Inside the effort to make a January 6 martyr,” WUSA9, July 20, 2021, <https://www.wusa9.com/article/news/national/capitol-riots/who-shot-ashli-babbitt-inside-the-effort-to-make-a-january-6-martyr-right-wing-paul-gosar-donald-trump-white-supremacist-anti-semitic-qanon/65-6641f710-99d0-42ba-b657-4c568e132ef1>.
- 5 Jessica Lycos, “WHO KILLED ASHLI BABBITT?,” Press Release from Paul Gosar, July 6, 2021, <https://gosar.house.gov/news/documentsingle.aspx?DocumentID=4456>.
- 6 Andrew Solender, “Marjorie Taylor Greene ‘Sure’ She Would Have Been Friends With Slain Capitol Rioter Ashli Babbitt,” Forbes, July 8, 2021, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/andrewsolender/2021/07/08/marjorie-taylor-greene-sure-she-would-have-been-friends-with-slain-capitol-rioter-ashli-babbitt/?sh=1b8f538c20dc>.
- 7 Kelsey Vlamis, “Trump called Ashli Babbitt an ‘innocent, wonderful, incredible woman’ and suggested without evidence that a Democratic official was connected to her death,” Insider, July 11, 2021, <https://www.businessinsider.com/trump-calls-ashli-babbitt-an-incredible-woman-implicates-democrat-2021-7>.
- 8 John Wagner, “Trump wishes happy birthday to fatally shot Capitol rioter Ashli Babbitt, calls for Justice Department to reopen investigation,” The Washington Post, October 11, 2021, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/trump-ashli-babbitt-reopen-investigation/2021/10/11/af4ed070-2a7b-11ec-8ef6-3ca8fe943a92_story.html.

In the days and weeks following January 6, far-right online communities floated several ideas for potential follow-up rallies, while vowing to incite more violence and chaos. Proposed events documented by the DFRLab included a “2nd Amendment” armed militia rally on January 9 in Washington, DC; a January 17 armed march on state capitol buildings across the country; and a “week of siege” to be carried out by Oath Keepers members during the period surrounding Inauguration Day.

The last proposal suggested that armed individuals would appear at a variety of locations, including the headquarters of broadcast news outlets like CNN and social media companies like Facebook. One chatroom member rhetorically invoked the name of Timothy McVeigh, the far-right, antigovernment terrorist responsible for the 1995 Oklahoma City Bombing that killed one hundred sixty-eight people and injured hundreds of others. “Can we bond Timothy McVeigh out of prison and give him [Facebook’s] address?” they asked. (McVeigh was executed in 2001.) Ultimately, the most violent fantasies failed to materialize, and the movement’s initial glorification of the attack on the Capitol quieted.



Three Percenters-1776 Patriots United

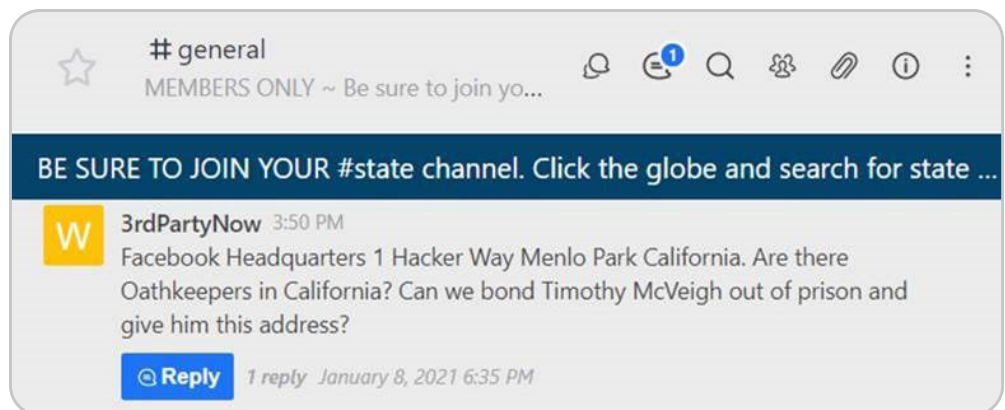


R: 84 / I: 28

Redpill me on this
Million Militia March



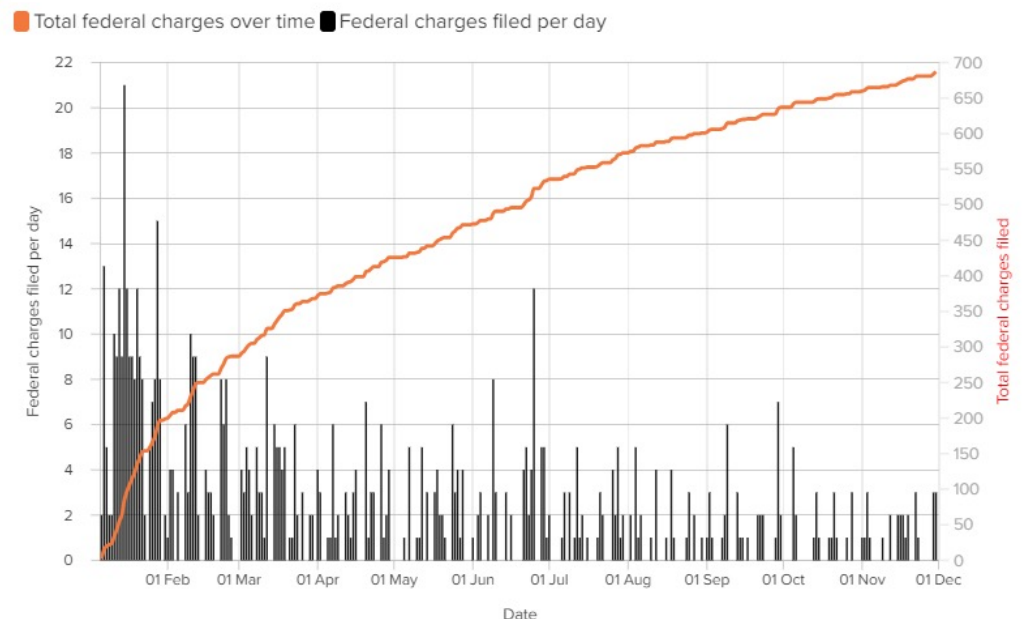
Examples of flyers advertising armed rallies after the Capitol riot, gathered from extremist communities on assorted social media platforms.



Screen cap of a user post to a chatroom used by members of the Oath Keepers, which included the address of Facebook's California headquarters and rhetorically asked whether the group could get domestic terrorist Timothy McVeigh out of prison to attack it. McVeigh was executed in 2001.¹⁵

Meanwhile, hundreds of participants in the January 6 riot were quickly identified by amateur sleuths, researchers, and law enforcement. Police soon began arresting and charging individual rioters, sending paranoia and fear rippling throughout extremist communities online.

Number of people federally charged in relation to the January 6 insurrection



Source: George Washington University Program on Extremism, Capitol Hill Siege Tracker, Accessed December 6, 2021



Graph showing the total number of people charged in the January 6 insurrection by day (bars) and the total number of people charged (line) from January 6, 2021, through December 1, 2021.¹⁶

As of December 2021, law enforcement has charged more than six hundred eighty-five people for crimes committed while participating in the January 6 insurrection; the government has used evidence collected from social media platforms in more than 85 percent of these cases.¹⁷ Those arrested and charged included individuals associated with more than a dozen extremist movements, including the Proud Boys, Oath Keepers, Three Percenters, QAnon adherents, and white supremacists.¹⁸ Though members of these movements participated in the attack, a majority of those arrested were not identified as members of such groups in charging documents.¹⁹

NARRATIVE: THE PEOPLE BEING CHARGED FOR THEIR INVOLVEMENT IN THE INSURRECTION ARE POLITICAL PRISONERS BEING UNJUSTLY CHARGED



¹ Jim Hoft, "The Gateway Pundit Announces: AMERICAN GULAG – The Informational Website on the Jan. 6 Political Prisoners," Gateway Pundit, September 17, 2021, <https://web.archive.org/web/20210922121303/https://www.thegatewaypundit.com/2021/09/gateway-pundit-announces-american-gulag-informational-website-jan-6-political-prisoners/>.

Though the attack initially thrilled extremist movements, it ultimately resulted in severe internal tumult.²⁰ Some group members cautioned each other about saying too much, and users who expressed violent desires were accused of being part of government plots to entrap others.²¹ Leaders of extremist groups tangled in bouts of online insults and infighting, wildly speculating about each other's potential cooperation with law enforcement. Distrust and turmoil extended to real-world organizing, causing many events that had been scheduled for the weeks following the riot to fall apart.²²

PRO TIP: Think before you post. They are watching. I learned the hard way. Be smart. Be safe Pedes. The TRUTH is our most Potent weapon. Mankind worldwide is awakening. That's why they won't debate, courts won't listen, and tech censors. AMERICA WILL BE FREE AGAIN!us 🇺🇸 🇺🇸 🇺🇸 🇺🇸 🇺🇸 🇺🇸 CN

(media.thedonald.win)

posted 7 hours ago by CONN_WYNN +2609 / -3 stickied



Screencap of a user post on The Donald, a pro-Trump forum-board community, in which the user reported that they were visited by federal law enforcement. They posted an image of a business card they received and warned others to be wary of what they post on the forum.²³

Many extremist-movement leaders eventually discouraged their supporters from attending any political rallies for a time, warning that in-person events might be clandestine ambushes by federal law enforcement to bait Trump supporters into the open and arrest them. Stewart Rhodes, leader of the Oath Keepers, sent a “warning order” to his members, urging that they beware “false flags and traps that are now being set” and avoid events at state-government buildings.²⁴ A national Three Percenter organization echoed that call for caution in a public statement, warning that some of the gatherings proposed in response to Biden’s inauguration were either designed to build out federal databases for a domestic terrorist list or to create justifications for changing gun-ownership laws.²⁵ Some groups like the Proud Boys urged members to observe a temporary hiatus from political activity altogether.²⁶ Fear and paranoia soon overrode many extremist movements’ decision-making; as that skittishness spread, those who had proposed events—particularly ones in Washington, DC—largely called them off.

The same hesitancy against real-world organizing carried on throughout the spring of 2021, with just a handful of exceptions. Groups like the Proud Boys continued to discourage attending protests during the trial of Derek Chauvin, the Minneapolis police officer eventually convicted of murdering George Floyd in 2020. Contentious cultural moments like Chauvin’s trial are often targets for far-right organizing, but the broader movement generally obeyed the consensus to stay away.²⁷



Screen cap of a post by Parler account @Mnproudboys stating that the group “will not be attending any protest, counter protest, or any rally” related to the Derek Chauvin case, citing poor public opinion of the group.²⁸

Paranoia was palpable in articles published by right-wing conspiracy-theory blogs popular with extremist movements and election deniers. Gateway Pundit, which acted as a leading hub for election-related misinformation in 2020, published articles discouraging protest attendance and proclaimed feverish allegations about how they had been organized.²⁹ One headline alleged that proposed armed protests at state capitols on January 17 were a “possible sinister plot hatched by radical left to take away gun rights.”³⁰



WARNING: DO NOT ATTEND Armed Protests at State Capitols Before Inauguration! – POSSIBLE SINISTER PLOT HATCHED BY RADICAL LEFT TO TAKE AWAY GUN RIGHTS!

By Jim Hoft
Published January 11, 2021 at 11:35am
33 Comments



Screenap of an article published by Gateway Pundit's Jim Hoft warning that plans for armed protests before the inauguration may be secret plots to change gun-ownership laws.³¹

After users of online forums and groups linked to the attack shared that they were visited or contacted by law enforcement, some communities began posting hostile content aimed at investigators they assumed were observing their digital habitat. Other communities and activists scrambled to avoid accountability for their roles in promoting the conditions and attitudes that ultimately produced the Capitol attack. Major pro-Trump social media influencers like Jack Posobiec deleted tweets that contained references to the Stop the Steal campaign that preceded January 6, while pro-Trump online forum The Donald deleted weeks' worth of material posted prior to the riot from its archive.³² (The Donald later rebranded itself as Patriots.win.)

Ali Alexander, who spearheaded the Stop the Steal movement, reportedly went into hiding and begged his supporters for tens of thousands of dollars he claimed would be spent on private security protection for himself.³³ Some organized extremist groups like The Three Percenters Original—one of the oldest and largest online groups of Three Percenter supporters—shut down altogether, while extremist leaders like Proud Boy Ethan Nordean made public statements announcing their departures from far-right political organizing.³⁴

Meanwhile, in the hours following the riot, social media companies began taking action on their platforms in response to the attack. That evening, YouTube, Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram removed videos uploaded by Trump on their platforms, in which he continued to allege wrongdoing during the 2020 election but told rioters to go home. Facebook also removed a text post from Trump that told participants to “remember this day forever.”³⁵

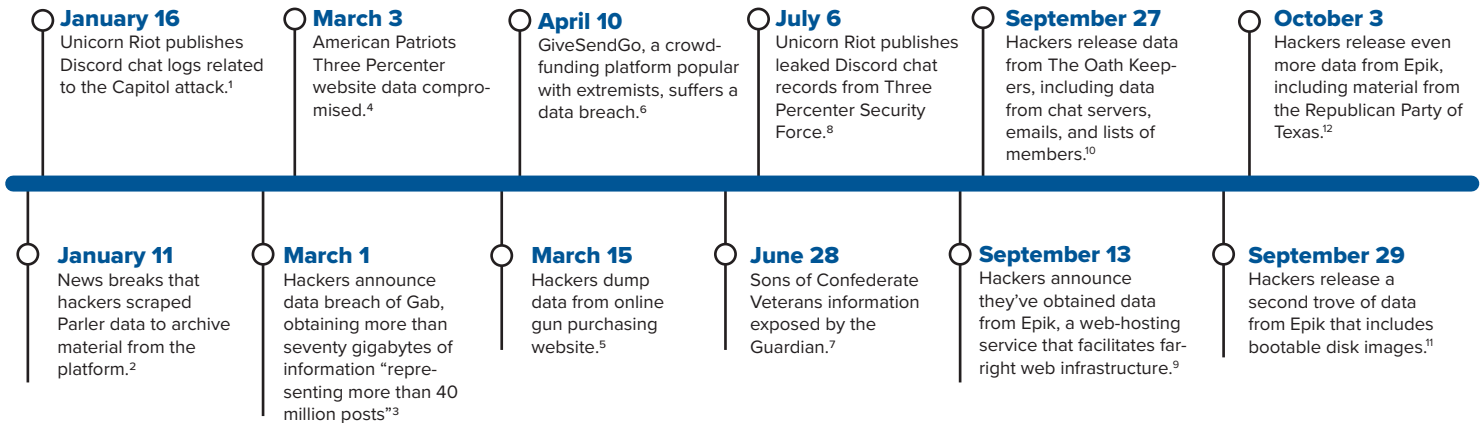
Later that night, Facebook published a blog post stating it was taking increased measures to prevent election misinformation from spreading unimpeded, limiting content in groups with high rates of hate speech, and searching for and removing content that praised the attack or sought to incite further dangerous events.³⁶ Twitter removed

several of Trump's tweets it said violated its Civic Integrity Policy and locked his account for twelve hours, ultimately removing the account altogether.³⁷ Snapchat suspended Trump's account after the riot, as did platforms Shopify and Twitch. Trump was also suspended from YouTube, with YouTube Chief Executive Officer Susan Wojcicki later telling Atlantic Council President Frederick Kempe at a March 4 online event that the "elevated-violence risk still remains," and YouTube would lift the suspension when "the risk of violence has decreased."³⁸ These bans remained in place throughout 2021.

Beyond Trump himself, far-right and extremist communities that had previously avoided online repercussions also suffered blowback. After the attack, app stores hosted by Apple and Google removed Parler, an alternative platform popular among riot participants and their supporters. Amazon Web Services kicked Parler from its cloud hosting service, effectively taking the site offline. Chatroom app Discord ejected a community of supporters from The Donald forum, where much violent rhetoric appeared prior to the attack.³⁹ Twitter also reinvigorated its efforts to curb QAnon conspiracy-theory messaging on its platform and booted Stop the Steal organizers like Ali Alexander off its service. Some alternative platforms, including Parler, made small efforts to curb extremist content, reneging on their promises to prospective users of a hands-off, "free-speech" moderation practice.⁴⁰

Many groups and activists who participated on January 6 also lost access to online payment processors, hosting providers, and other digital services after those companies faced renewed public pressure to crack down on extremists. A leading Three Percenters website lost its host after Wix ended its service agreement; the Oath Keepers lost access to web hosts and payment processors like Stripe; email listserv platforms ditched Stop the Steal promoters like white nationalist Nicholas Fuentes; and video-streaming platforms like DLive removed notable extremists from their services.⁴¹ Some groups also experienced compromises to their digital infrastructure and security, resulting in their members being identified publicly.

TIMELINE OF DATA BREACHES



1 Morgan Hines Kelly Tyko, "Parler data breach: Archived posts from Capitol riots could reveal platform's role in the insurrection," USA TODAY, January 11, 2021, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/tech/news/2021/01/11/parler-hack-platform-archived-hackers-capitol-riots/6629772002>.

2 Chris Schiano, "Dischord at the Capitol," Unicorn Riot, January 18, 2021, <https://unicornriot.ninja/2021/discord-at-the-capitol/>.

3 Andy Greenberg, "Far-Right Platform Gab Has Been Hacked—Including Private Data," Wired, February 28, 2021, <https://www.wired.com/story/gab-hack-data-breach-ddosecrets/>.

4 Jason Wilson, "US militia group draws members from military and police, website leak shows," The Guardian, March 3, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2021/mar/03/us-militia-membership-military-police-american-patriot-three-percenter-website-leak>.

5 Waqas, "Hacker dumps Guns.com database with customers, admin data," HackRead, March 15, 2021, <https://www.hackread.com/hacker-dumps-guns-com-database-customers-admin-data/>.

6 Jason Wilson, "US police and public officials donated to Kyle Rittenhouse, data breach reveals," The Guardian, April 16, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2021/apr/16/us-police-officials-public-officials-crowdfunding-website-data-breach>.

7 Jason Wilson, "Revealed: neo-Confederate group includes military officers and politicians," The Guardian, June 28, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2021/jun/28/neo-confederate-group-members-politicians-military-officers>.

8 Chris Schiano, "Leaked 'Ill% Security Force' Chats Show Fractured Militia Thirsty for Violence," Unicorn Riot, July 6, 2021, <https://unicornriot.ninja/2021/leaked-iii-security-force-chats-show-fractured-militia-thirsty-for-violence/>.

9 Twitter thread by Stevan Zetti, September 13, 2021, <https://twitter.com/stevanzetti/status/1437482759241469958>.

10 Mikael Thalen, "Data from Oath Keepers leaked online after alleged hack," The Daily Dot, September 27, 2021, <https://www.dailydot.com/debug/oath-keepers-hack/>.

11 Mayank Sharma, "Anonymous has leaked another cache of Epik user data," TechRadar, September 30, 2021, <https://www.techradar.com/news/anonymous-has-leaked-another-cache-of-epik-user-data>.

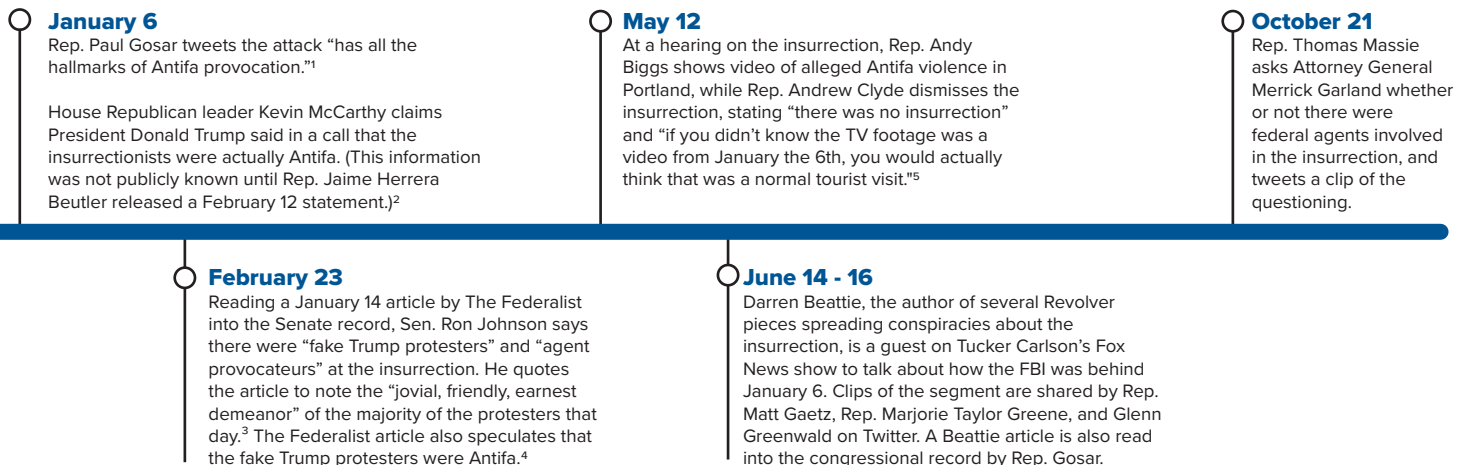
12 Mikael Thalen, "Anonymous releases data on Texas GOP in latest Epik hack dump," The Daily Dot, October 4, 2021, <https://www.dailydot.com/debug/anonymous-texas-gop-epik/>.

In the riot's aftermath, federal law enforcement and national security agencies issued bulletins and gave public statements that identified domestic extremist movements as a leading threat to the US homeland.⁴² Representatives from those agencies assured the public that they would use their resources to prioritize addressing threats within the nation's borders. Members of Congress, meanwhile, have debated drafting new laws, reallocating funds, and devoting resources to understanding and combating homegrown terror. At the time of writing, the House Select Committee to Investigate the January 6th Attack on the United States Capitol continues to investigate and interrogate the events of that day, in hopes of holding accountable those in positions of power and influence who share responsibility for the most blatant assault on US democracy in living memory.

“We Are So Back”: Rehabilitation, Rebranding, and Revisionism

Extremist movements and the threats they pose to democracy are still pernicious and immediate; the post-Capitol attack turmoil left them battered, but not broken. By the summer of 2021, many domestic extremist movements began attempting to rebuild their organizations in hopes of reemerging in mainstream political conversations and regaining the influence they previously experienced during the years of the Trump administration. The sentiments of these groups remain among the leading narratives present in mainstream conservative rhetoric today, regularly receiving sympathy and repetition from Republican officials and partisan media outlets from Fox News to One America News Network. This includes an ongoing process of historical revisionism, rebranding the insurrectionists who attacked the Capitol as patriots and heroes.

NARRATIVE: THE INSURRECTION WAS A FALSE FLAG DONE BY THE GOVERNMENT OR LEFTISTS, NOT TRUMP SUPPORTERS



1 “HERRERA BEUTLER AGAIN CONFIRMS CONVERSATION WITH MCCARTHY REGARDING JANUARY 6 U.S. CAPITOL ATTACK,” Press Release from U.S. Congresswoman Jaime Herrera Beutler, February 12, 2021, <https://jhb.house.gov/news/documentsingle.aspx?DocumentID=402083>.

2 Paul Gosar, Twitter, January 6, 2021, <https://twitter.com/DrPaulGosar/status/1346940816514813953>.

3 “CNN NEWSROOM TRANSCRIPT Senate Holds First Hearing on Insurrection at U.S. Capitol; Security Officials Agree That Insurrection was Planned Attack,” CNN, February 23, 2021, <http://www.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/2102/23/cnr.06.html>.

4 Michael J. Waller, “I Saw Provocateurs At The Capitol Riot On Jan. 6,” The Federalist, January 14, 2021, <https://web.archive.org/web/20210522044529/https://thefederalist.com/2021/01/14/i-saw-provocateurs-at-the-capitol-riot-on-jan-6/>.

5 Luke Broadwater, “Republicans Rewrite History of the Capitol Riot, Hampering an Inquiry,” The New York Times, May 13, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/05/13/us/politics/republicans-capitol-riot.html>.

6 Jake Lahut, “Tucker Carlson baselessly claims ‘FBI operatives were organizing the attack on the Capitol,’ his latest whitewashing of Jan. 6,” Insider, June 16, 2021, <https://www.businessinsider.com/tucker-carlson-baselessly-claims-the-fbi-organized-jan-6-video-2021-6>.

7 Matthew Gaetz, Twitter, June 15, 2021, <https://twitter.com/RepMattGaetz/status/1404971016191942656>. Marjorie Taylor Greene, Twitter, June 16, 2021, <https://twitter.com/mrgreene/status/1405125676429099012>. Glenn Greenwald, Twitter, June 16, 2021, <https://twitter.com/ggreenwald/status/1405153100596404226>.

8 The Columbia Bugle, Twitter, June 16, 2021, <https://twitter.com/ColumbiaBugle/status/1405023243342282753>.

9 Thomas Massie, Twitter, October 21, 2021, <https://twitter.com/RepThomasMassie/status/1451310873604206597>.

Networks of far-right influencers banned from mainstream platforms in the wake of the Capitol insurrection have sought to rebuild their audiences on a range of alternative platforms, with varying degrees of success. Organized extremist groups, particularly those involved in the Capitol attack, have retooled their approaches to building online movements. Unlawful private militias, for example, have posted messages on their respective platforms indicating that their recruitment strategies would incorporate more traditional methods, like soliciting at in-person events. Groups like the Proud Boys have revamped their process for investigating would-be members prior to accepting them into their ranks.

Many extremist groups and activists have instructed their followers to channel their priorities toward the state and local levels, rather than consolidate their numbers at national protest events. While some calls for national gatherings have emerged since the Capitol attack, most have gone unanswered. Even events that received significant publicity, like the September 2021 “Justice for J6” rally in Washington, DC, a far-right solidarity event in support of arrested rioters, failed to produce the kind of turnout seen in the lead-up to January 6.⁴³ Calls to action that were answered often resulted in clusters of local activity, rather than anything at the national level.

Groups that engaged in lower-profile political activism found there is often less media coverage and fewer coordinated resources to oppose them. Able to evade communities’ paranoia over national events, some groups have recently turned to targeting schools and local elected officials to exercise public pressure campaigns in hopes of getting local institutions to bend to their agenda. Surviving far-right movement groups are organizing around many of the same causes they promoted nationally prior to the 2020 election. They have organized protests at city councils, schools, and government buildings to press officials to act on conspiracy theories about the legitimacy of the 2020 election, to channel opposition to racial justice via protests and confrontations over disingenuous allegations that “critical race theory” was being taught to children in public schools, and to express opposition to COVID-19 safety measures, among other issues.

In some locales, extremists have been able to steer their causes under the radar, avoiding national scrutiny.⁴⁴ Outside of Portland, Oregon, far-right groups including Patriot Prayer, People’s Rights, and the Proud Boys spread calls on the messaging app Telegram to appear outside an area school to oppose COVID-related mask requirements. The protest triggered the school district to go into lockdown.⁴⁵ Members of the Proud Boys have also joined protests outside the homes of local public officials, including a school-board chairwoman in Florida.⁴⁶ Across the country, school-board members are resigning due to these pressures.⁴⁷ At the time of publishing, the ballot-tracking initiative Ballotpedia had identified eighty-four separate recall efforts targeting two hundred fifteen school-board officials over the course of 2021; in 2020, there were twenty-nine recall efforts targeting sixty-four officials.⁴⁸

Other extremist movements have taken an opposite approach: attempting to inject themselves into more mainstream conservative political arenas in hopes of building broader support. Some groups have taken cues from mainstream pro-Trump voices to assist their own efforts. Former Trump administration National Security Advisor Michael Flynn, who had been embraced by the QAnon community for many years, told a conference crowd in June 2021 that it was crucial to get involved in their local communities, arguing that local action can have national consequences. His call was subsequently spread among QAnon-supporting communities online.⁴⁹ Similar calls to action have been made by other pro-Trump influencers like Steve Bannon, who has repeatedly urged supporters to seek positions of power in the Republican Party at the grassroots



Members of Ammon Bundy's far-right People's Rights group shut down a school-board meeting in Portland, Oregon, on October 25, 2021. (Source: John Rudoff, Sipa USA via Reuters Connect)

level, and to work their influence upward through the party until they assume broader control.

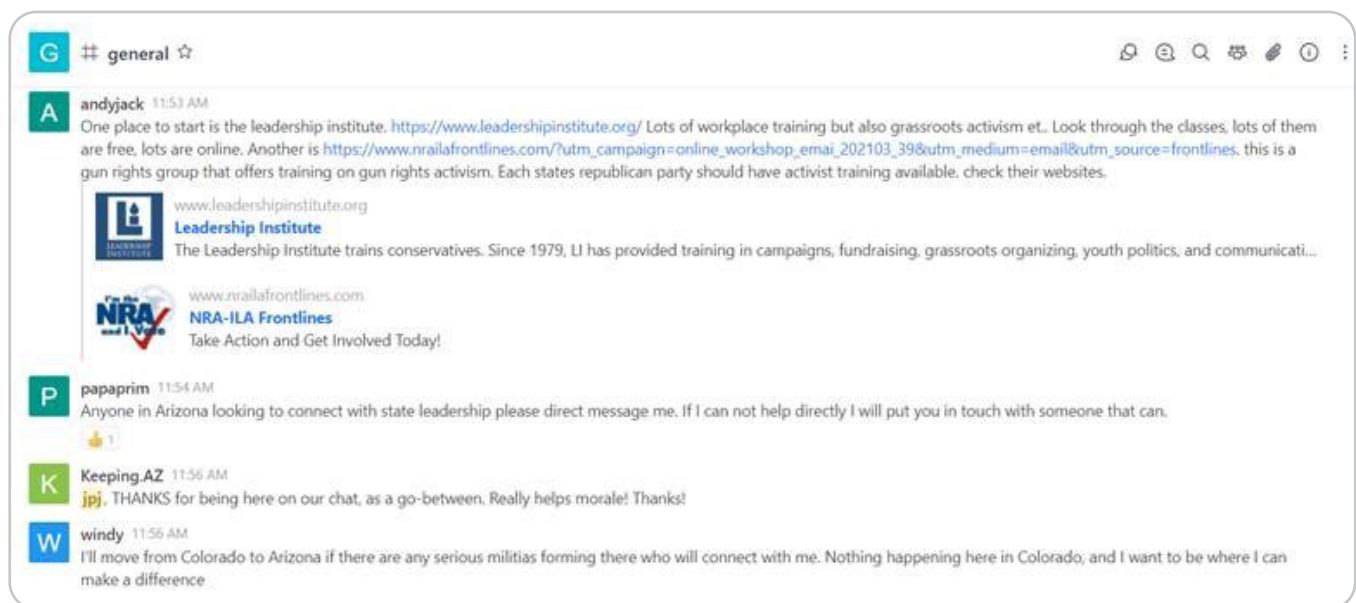
And, it appears that many followers have answered those calls. Bannon's advocacy has reportedly produced waves of individuals expressing new interest in obtaining party positions in key precincts, opening the potential to reshape how those precincts influence elections.⁵⁰ Dozens of candidates who have pushed QAnon conspiracy-theory rhetoric online have declared candidacies for elected offices in the upcoming year, in addition to other far-right demagogues like anti-Muslim activist Laura Loomer, who is running for a US House seat in Florida in 2022. Some far-right activists have organized more traditional activism calls to action like phone banking to promote modifications to a technology bill in Florida backed by the state's governor, Ron DeSantis.⁵¹ The bill, signed into law by DeSantis in May 2021, seeks to enable the state to punish tech companies financially for removing political candidates from their platforms.⁵² And, far-right figures, including Loomer, bragged that their pressure campaigns influenced modifications to the law to increase financial penalties, though lamented that they did not get all the modifications they desired.⁵³

Other extremist figures have launched nonprofits. Nicholas Fuentes, the white-nationalist podcaster involved in Stop the Steal events, launched the America First Foundation, whose mission is "to educate, promote, and advocate for conservative values based on principles of American Nationalism, Christianity, and Traditionalism."⁵⁴ Lauren Witzke, a former congressional candidate in Delaware who has allied herself with extreme political activists and personalities, formed a political action committee

(PAC) that states it will “fight the Godless left so that the church pews remain full and until the Democrat coffers are drained empty.”⁵⁵

True believers who may be unsuccessful in pursuing elected office still find value in the endeavor, believing it will push their opponents closer to their own movement’s ideals, raise their public profile, or be a profitable endeavor. In multiple states, officials have formed coalitions based on lies about the 2020 election, while a group of QAnon-friendly secretary of state candidates from five key states and a potential gubernatorial candidate in Pennsylvania are working together in hopes of taking over election-over-sight bodies.⁵⁶

Organized extremist groups like the Oath Keepers have adopted similar modes of thinking, with instances of members encouraging each other to push into the mainstream GOP and cement their gains from within the party. In one Oath Keeper discussion room monitored by the DFRLab, users passed around resources on activism training by mainstream conservative organizations such as the Leadership Institute and the National Rifle Association.



Screen cap of a post to a chat room for Oath Keepers members sharing resources for activism training offered by mainstream conservative institutions like the Leadership Institute and the National Rifle Association.⁵⁷

Some in the broader extremist movement community turned away from street protests after January 6 in favor of attending conferences, several of which have attracted elected officials. One of the first organized events from a faction of extremists who participated in the Capitol insurrection took place in parallel to the 2021 Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) in Orlando, Florida. (CPAC itself was not involved in the event.) At a nearby hotel conference room, white nationalists including Nicholas Fuentes hosted the event, dubbed the America First Political Action Conference (AFPAC). At the single-night event, ticketholders mingled with supportive far-right media figures and listened to keynote addresses from Rep. Paul Gosar (R-AZ) and former Iowa Rep. Steve King.⁵⁸

The QAnon conspiracy theory movement has also brought together its adherents for real-life gatherings.⁵⁹ Several of these conferences have featured appearances from notable conservative media influencers, political candidates, and elected officials. Neo-Nazi groups, though unable to bring in elected officials to date, have also chosen to bring together supporters at small-scale conferences and gatherings.⁶⁰ These conferences ostensibly serve as more professional and secure gathering places for supporters, as well as revenue streams for their movements' broader ambitions.

Other extremist groups, meanwhile, have decentralized, choosing to decouple from national organizations as a method of survival during a time of increased scrutiny. For example, several disgruntled chapters of the Proud Boys declared their independence from the national organization in early 2021.⁶¹ Pushes to decentralize have also affected communications between members and factions of extremist movements, compartmentalizing internal discussions in the process.

The screenshot shows a forum post on MyMilitia. The user profile for 'Johngo155' is on the left, labeled 'A Valued Member'. It includes a circular profile picture with a blue background and white text, a 'Members' count of 11, and an 'Area Code: 60081'. The post itself is titled 'Posted 9 hours ago' and contains a quote from 'Cynthia Gonzalez' dated '19 hours ago'. The quote discusses the current state of the country and the role of the administration. Below the quote, the user 'Johngo155' responds, agreeing but suggesting a focus on organizing rallies in discreet locations and recruiting members through platforms like gettr.com. The post has two likes from 'DrKarlBuchanan' and 'John St Myers'.

Johngo155
A Valued Member

Posted 9 hours ago

19 hours ago, Cynthia Gonzalez said:

I'm thinking we've reached the point where we take a stand or watch it all go to hell! ! This admin has done everything to weaken destroy and divide this country. Biden is a puppet. Who is the puppet master? I believe our enemy has been in control the whole time!

I agree, just in a different way. I think organizing rallies in discreet locations to stay under their radar is important... And focusing on enlarging our members list here and on other platforms through recruitment (gettr.com, ect.) Although I don't think now is the right time to be recreating anything similar to a capital riot or anything violent or oppressive. That battle still falls under the category of the sharing of critical news exposure and other relevant information imo.


DrKarlBuchanan and John St Myers 2

Screen cap of a user post on MyMilitia, a militia-movement recruiting website, in which the user discusses utilizing alternative platforms to communicate with members and suggests organizing rallies “in discreet locations to stay under their radar.”⁶²

Decentralizing has also extended to extremist movements' organizing efforts. One such effort, calling itself "White Lives Matter," has promoted monthly dates for loosely coordinated action in which its participants stage small protests or place white supremacist propaganda in public spaces. The effort was primarily active in select regions of the United States, but organizers have claimed a degree of participation from sympathizers internationally. Those behind the push, known to be Proud Boys supporters, instructed followers and activists to conceal their identity both online and during in-person events, going so far as to publish a twelve-page operational security guide with instructions for doing so.⁶³ The decentralized ethos of the campaign has also provided windows for the white supremacist movement's most radical elements to participate with other extremist groups under a veil of plausible deniability for less radical groups.

Screen cap of an excerpt of the "White Lives Matter" manual, distributed via Telegram, laying out instructions for extremists to participate in loosely organized national days of protests while minimizing personal risk.⁶⁴

t.me/WhiteLivesMatterOfficial
t.me/battleofeuropa



t.me/WhiteLivesMatterOfficial – Activist's manual


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June 2021 – too many years late

Nothing is gained forever. Civilizations don't last unless they cultivate an inner pride in their existence. A ferocious will of identity and continuity is required for any peoples to survive.

We are in this until the end. Victory or Death.

Feel free to print this material and hand-out to all pro-Whites you meet. Please read and refer back whenever you have questions. Press the  symbol to jump to 1st page.

t.me/WhiteLivesMatterOfficial

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In response to major social media platforms accelerating their moderation efforts against known extremist entities, several movement factions turned more intentionally to existing alternative social media services. Since the Capitol attack and resulting crackdown on certain kinds of misinformation, a host of new platforms have become destinations for audiences—including extremists—disaffected by those moderation decisions. For months, far-right groups and supporters bounced between platforms before largely settling on a small handful of new venues. These communities also urged supporters to ditch mainstream web services for alternatives promising less data collection and tracking. Though some platforms like Parler and Gab experienced security breaches and downtime in the months following January 6, most of those affected managed to return to their prior capacities.

Right-Wing Influencers and Their Engagement on Alt Platforms

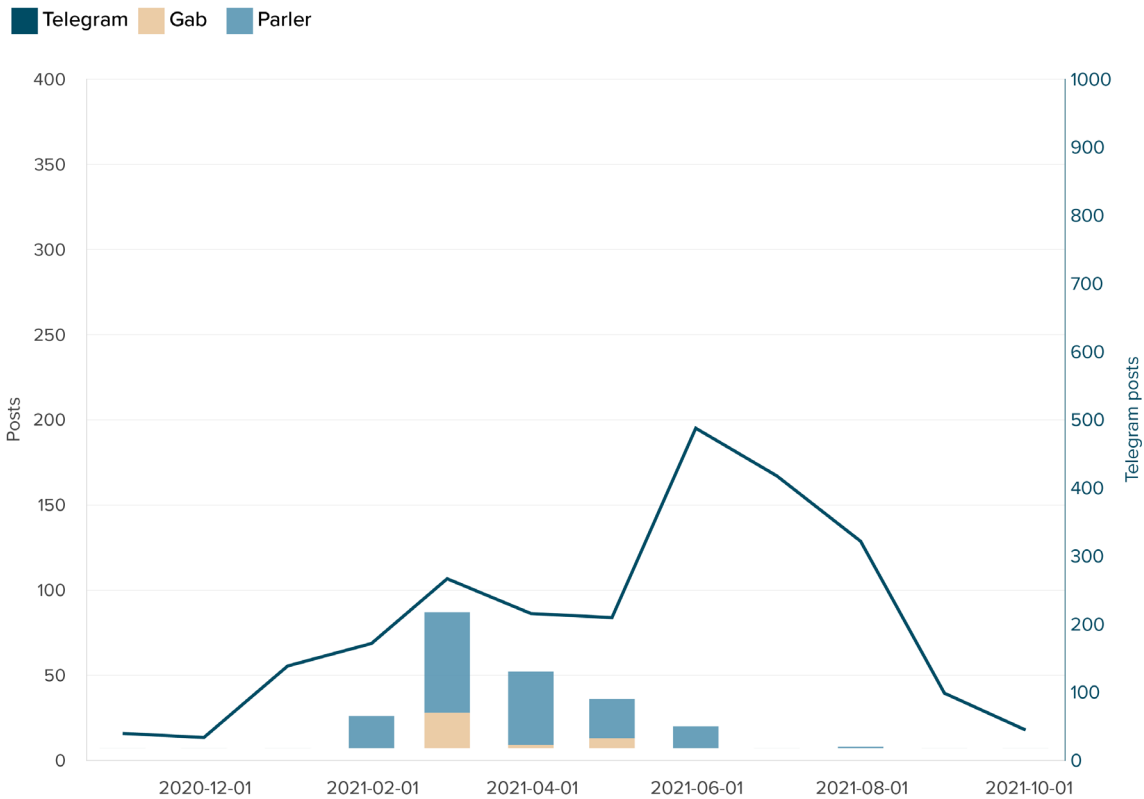
In the wake of the major social media platforms suspending accounts of people and groups who participated in the January 6 attack, communities on the far right began to scatter across alternative platforms, hoping to gain a foothold elsewhere. Some of these platforms, like Telegram, attract a range of users and are more broadly popular, while others like Parler and Gab are niche platforms that cater to the far right. Data collected by the DFRLab represent the monthly volume of posts by right-wing influencers across platforms. Note that data from the Oath Keepers channel on MeWe differ from the others in the set, as they are sourced from a community page rather than an individual's profile.

As can be seen in the following charts, some only reestablished themselves after they had been banned elsewhere, including the Oath Keepers community on MeWe, or former Trump attorney Lin Wood relocating to Telegram. Others, including Proud Boys leader Enrique Tarrio, Stop the Steal founder Ali Alexander, and former Trump team lawyer and conspiracist Sidney Powell, began to establish their presence on alternative platforms prior to January 6, only to fully embrace them after their banishment from the more mainstream platforms.

Oath Keepers

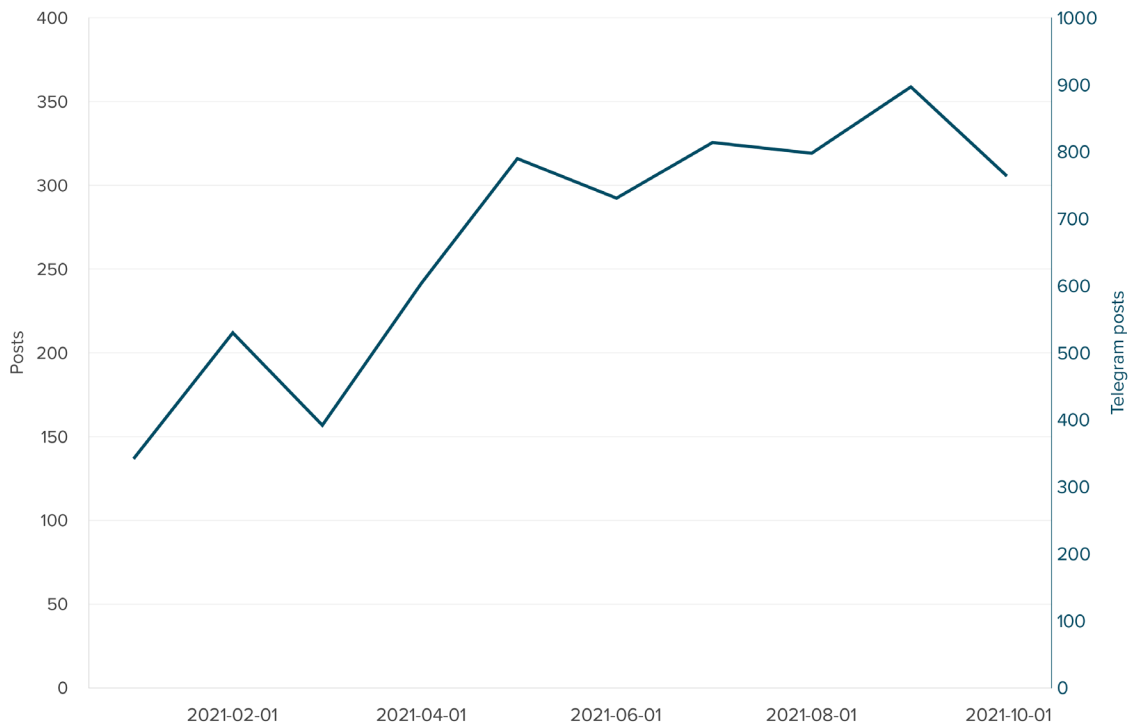


Enrique Tarrío

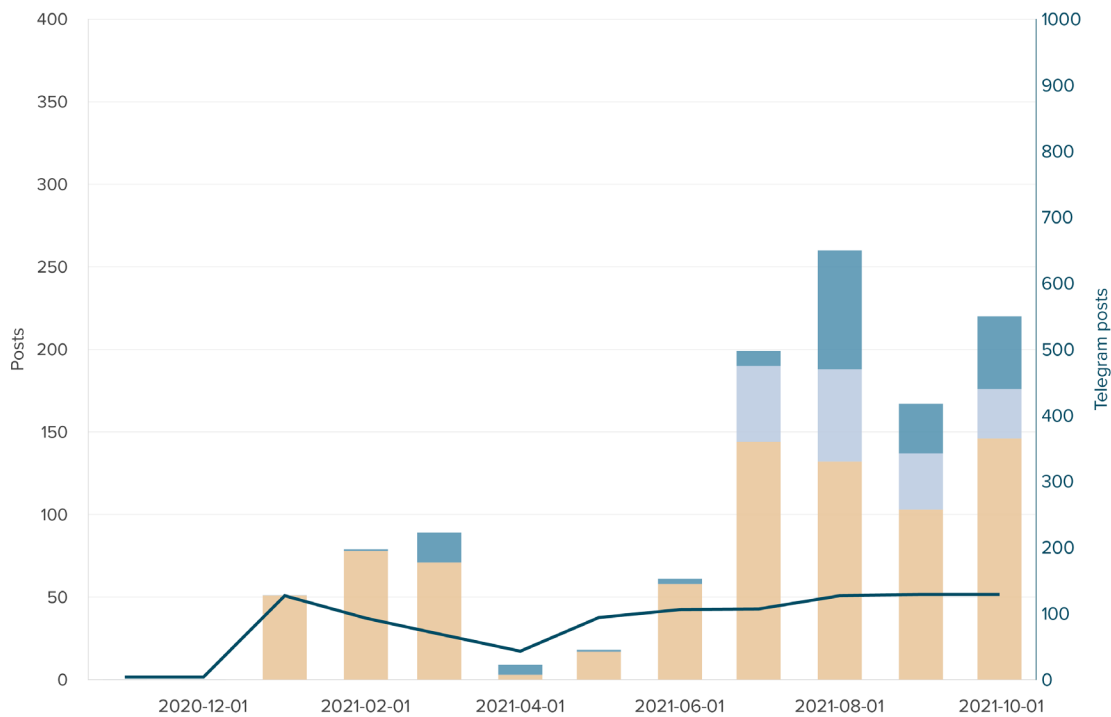


Lin Wood

Telegram

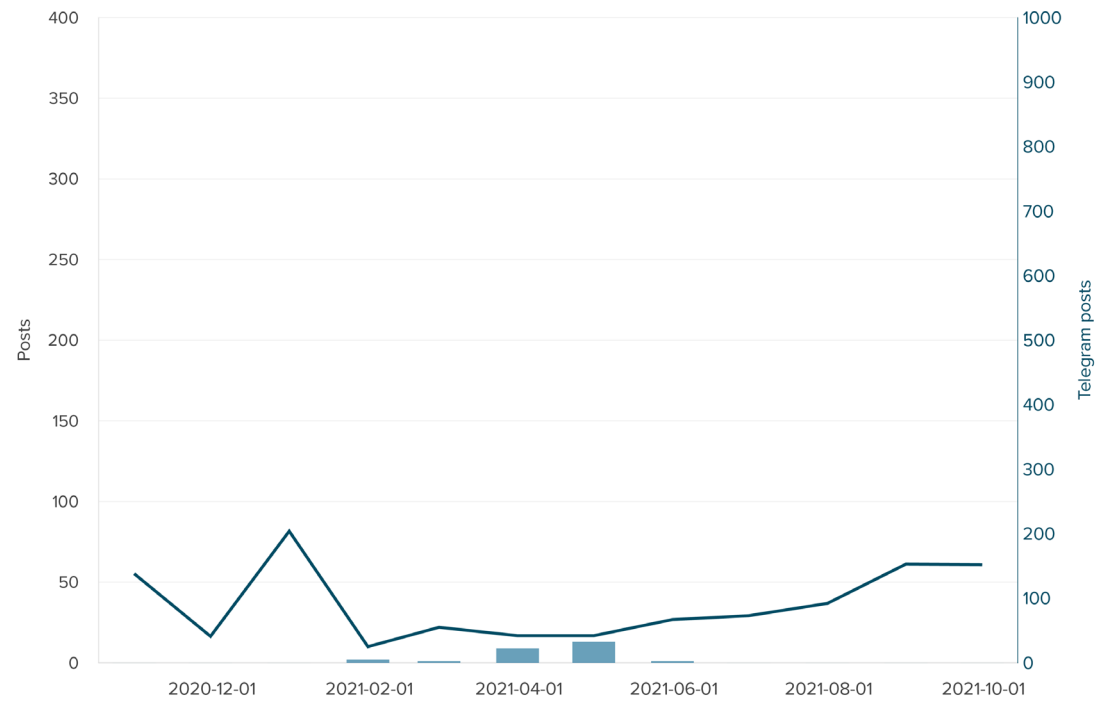
**Ali Alexander**

Telegram Gab Gettr Parler



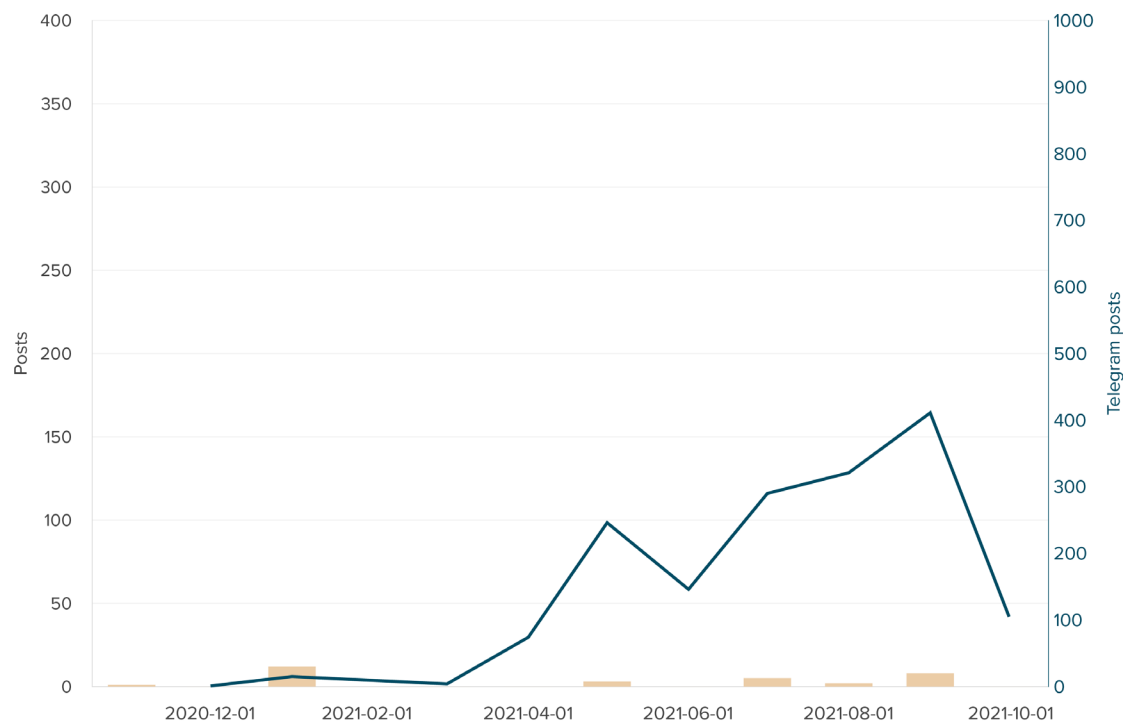
Proud Boys

Telegram Parler



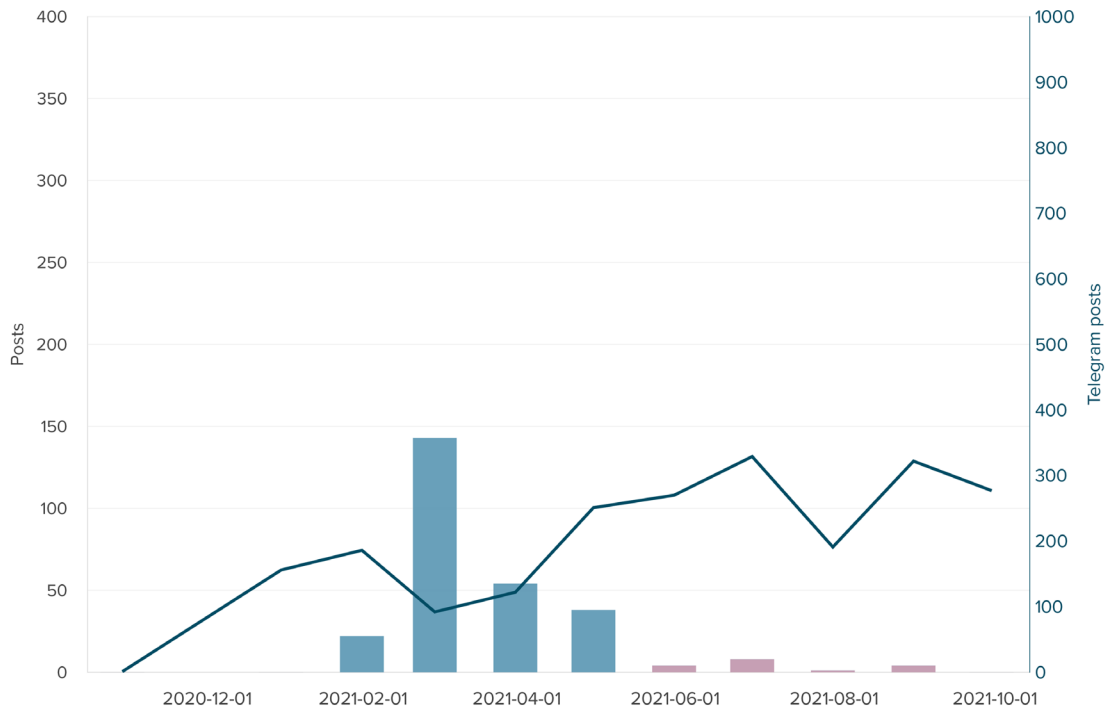
Ron Watkins

Telegram Gab

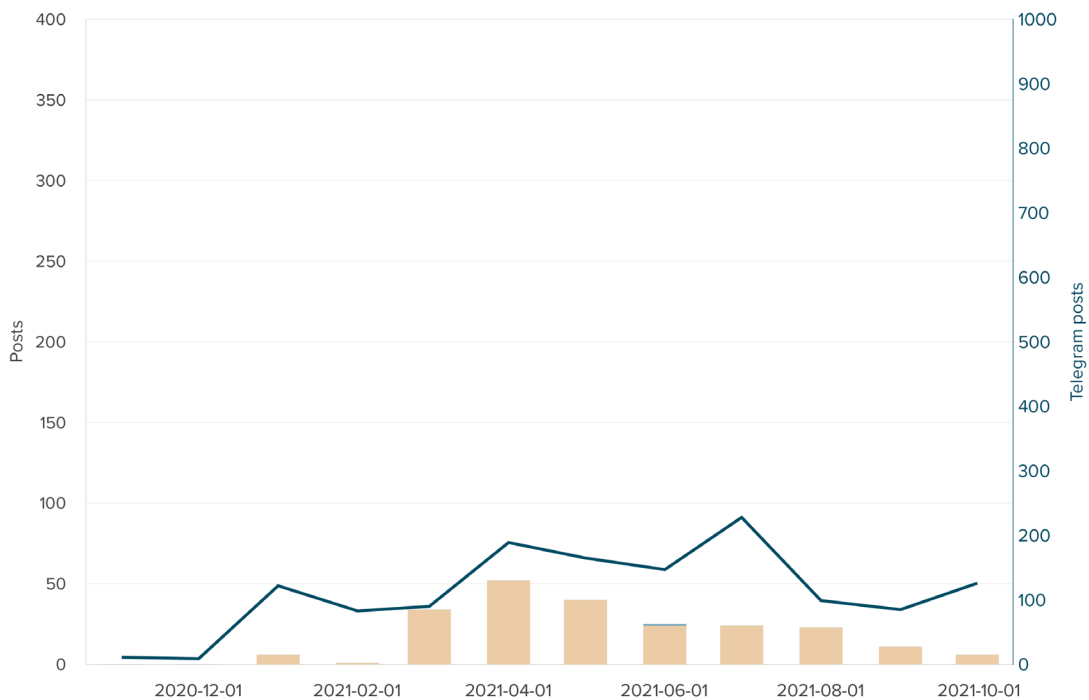


Sidney Powell

Telegram Instagram Parler

**Nick Fuentes**

Telegram Gab Parler

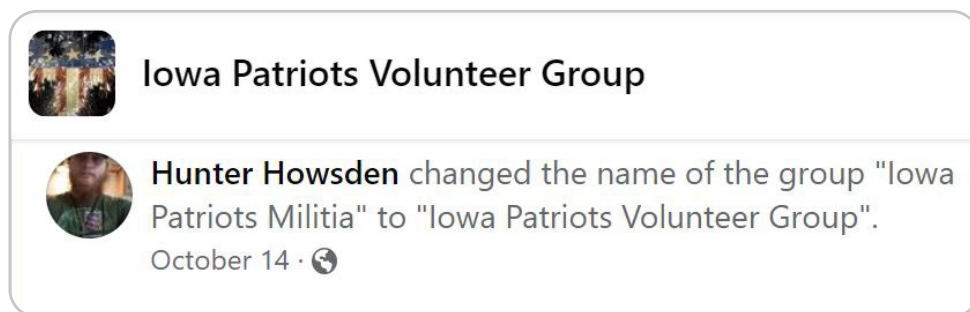


Some social platforms like Gab and video-hosting platform Odysee have actively courted disgruntled, radicalized users. Gab CEO Andrew Torba made his own far-right beliefs a selling point of his platform, while Odysee promised extremists a block-chain-powered service that made content practically impossible to remove from existence.⁶⁵ Other platforms seem to have turned a blind eye to extremist activity, like the crowdfunding site GiveSendGo, which has been utilized by far-right groups and individuals to raise money for legal battles stemming from the Capitol insurrection, among other projects.⁶⁶

Factions of US extremist movements unsatisfied with the offerings on alternative social platforms have created their own platforms, granting them final say over what is taken down (or rather, not taken down) from their domains. Gab's Andrew Torba spent 2021 further expanding his platform's branded web infrastructure to include a web advertising service and a payment processor.⁶⁷ The individuals behind The Donald forum, where a lot of violent rhetoric appeared prior to the Capitol attack, continued to expand to adopt new conspiratorial and far-right communities banned from Reddit. Conspiracy theorist and pillow maven Mike Lindell created a proprietary video-hosting platform, as did white nationalist Nicholas Fuentes and his fellow extremist influencers. Though Lindell and Fuentes' efforts vary in technical sophistication and audience engagement, both exist as independent platforms for extreme content.

"We're back. We've got everybody on the same platform," Fuentes told his supporters during a livestream on his new platform on October 21, 2021. "We can't be censored. We can't be de-platformed. We're all here...I was just looking at that and thinking, 'We are so back. We did it!'"

Movements that sought to return to or remain on mainstream platforms have deployed coded language and parallel rhetoric to evade detection from moderators. Those supporting the QAnon movement, for example, have strayed away from using their shared common language and catchphrases when communicating publicly on major social media platforms.⁶⁸ Militia groups that reemerged on Facebook after the platform acted against unlawful militia groups attempted to do so under branding that obscures their intentions.⁶⁹



Screen cap of the creator of a Facebook group for an Iowa militia group, renaming the group from "Iowa Patriots Militia" to "Iowa Patriots Volunteer Group."⁷⁰

Together, these developments offer extremists sufficient conditions to continue metastasizing and recruiting. Though most online tools adopted by extremists enable them to reach smaller audiences than those possible on mainstream social media, they may be more effective in intensifying the radicalization of individuals already engaged with them. Shifts in prioritization toward local action also demand less of movements' access to mainstream platforms and the mass audiences they can engage, because would-be participants in such actions make up a smaller, targeted set of individuals. And, conducting activism on smaller scales enables them to operate without the scrutiny or detection that doing so on a national scale often brings with it.

In this setting, the attitudes and talking points of conspiracy theorists and extremists have crawled further up the conservative ideological food chain since January 6, reaching major figureheads like Fox News host Tucker Carlson. The mainstream adoption of far-right talking points makes the networking component of any given extremist organization less important, and their access to large audiences less necessary, for spreading their ideas.

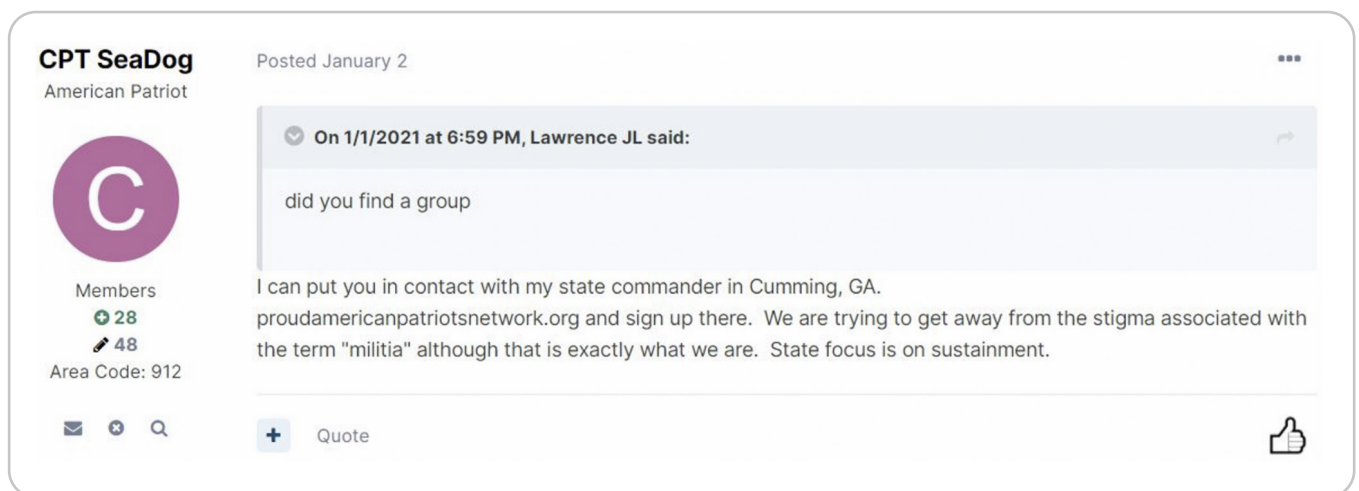


Screen cap of a Twitter post from white-nationalist podcaster Nicholas Fuentes, applauding Fox News host Tucker Carlson for channeling far-right conspiracy theories into primetime cable news coverage on his network.⁷¹

Many of the new extremist groups that emerged in 2021 channel the ideologies of preexisting movements and organizations but under new names or presentation styles. The Washington state chapter of People's Rights, founded by long-time anti-government activist Ammon Bundy, who participated in a violent standoff with the US government in 2014, renamed itself Neighbors United in March after the organization began receiving some of the public scrutiny that other far-right movements faced after the Capitol attack.⁷² Despite the name change, the organization is still firmly planted in Bundy's People's Rights organization, spreading messages for both Neighbors United and People's Rights Washington in its Telegram channel and appearing at the same events together.

Some groups have moved much of their conversation out of the public eye, or have embraced two-front communication styles, presenting one image to the public and another image behind the scenes. In this approach, groups and movements promote themselves on publicly viewable channels for would-be recruits, media outlets, and other community members, while maintaining smaller private chat rooms for vetted members.

In September 2021, the DFRLab published an investigation into a Pennsylvania-based group called Proud American Patriots Network that appeared to conceal its Three Percenter movement connections beneath the veil of an unremarkable political nonprofit group.⁷³ The group, spearheaded by a husband-and-wife duo, endorsed candidates, offered a scholarship, and solicited donations and sponsorships. But, within documents reserved for its members, the group stated its desire to build a training facility to train members in lethal force, as well as its connections to Three Percenter ideology. Online, supporters of the group solicited members from a pro-militia forum board. After local backlash, the group took further efforts to obscure its foundations in the militia movement.



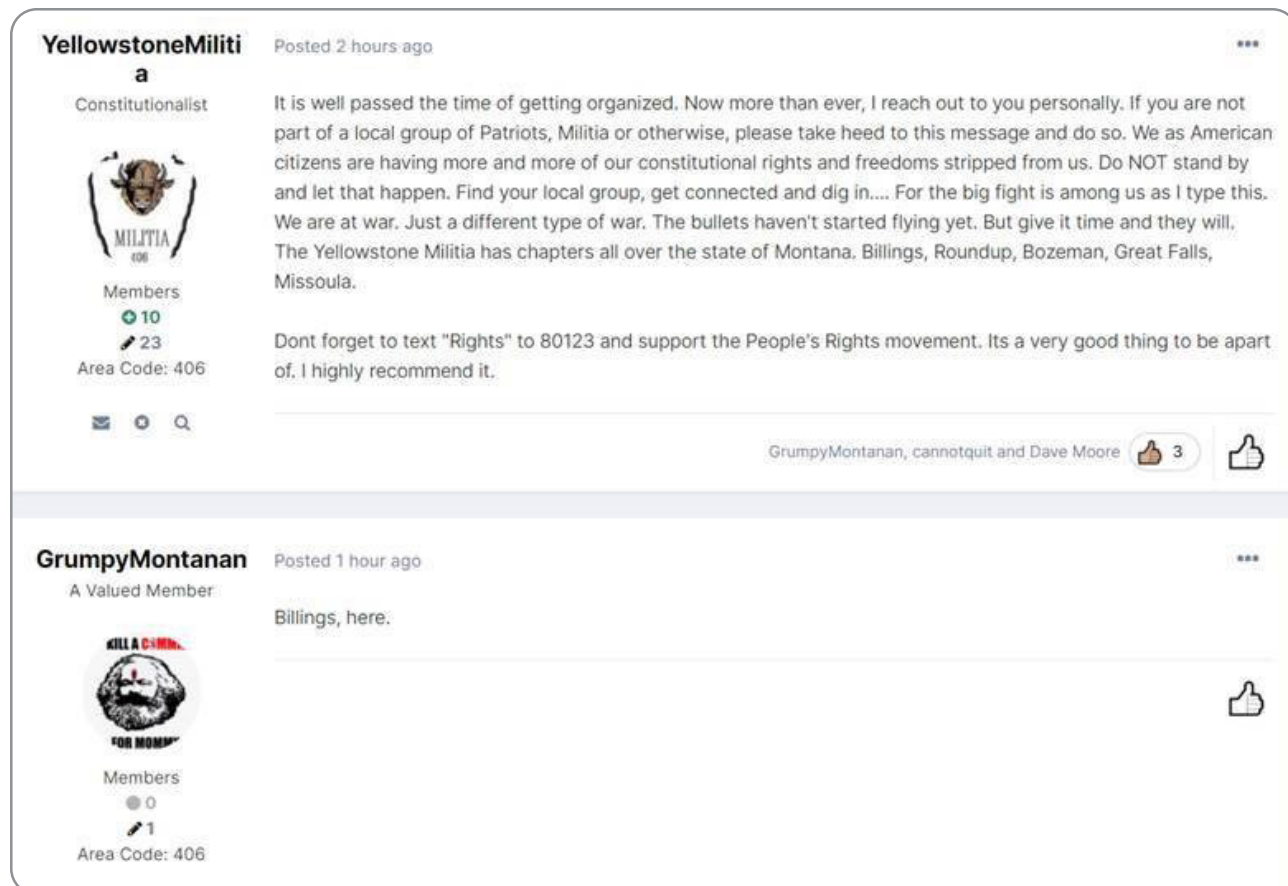
Screen cap of user “CPT SeaDog” posting a link to the Proud American Patriots Network website in a subforum of MyMilitia, a militia-movement recruiting website.⁷⁴

“A Parallel Society”: Prepper Mentality Spreads

The notion of creating a separate mode of living that can self-sustain a nominal type of Christian, hyper-conservative way of life and weather a perceived societal collapse has gained traction among some extremist and conspiracy communities, particularly in the wake of Capitol-riot fallout. Channeling their own interpretation of “prepper” philosophy, many influencers popular with far-right audiences have gone as far as to sell doomsday supplies like buckets of food and tactical supplies.⁷⁵

The post-January 6 landscape also reinvigorated discussions of a looming civil war or “national divorce”—the latter of which, according to its proponents, would seek to split the country legally rather than through violence.⁷⁶ Extremists and mainstream Republican commentators alike have produced online content weighing the legitimacy of such ideas, and many have come across as generally sympathetic.

Some extremist elements, including militia groups, have used similar rhetoric in their recruitment pitches. “We are at war. Just a different type of war,” a post from MyMilitia user YellowstoneMilitia read. “The bullets haven’t started flying yet. But give it time and they will.”



Screen cap of a post by MyMilitia user YellowstoneMilitia, pitching would-be recruits with a message that the country is in “a different type of war.”⁷⁷

Several far-right individuals and groups have advocated creating parallel tools for far-right political supporters to utilize that do not rely on mainstream internet infrastructures. Gab Chief Executive Officer Andrew Torba has been a staunch advocate of this push, using his company to build online what he calls a “parallel Christian economy” comprising a social platform, a web commenting system, video hosting, an advertising service, and a payment processor.⁷⁸ Torba has been clear that his intentions behind doing so stem from a desire to allow his own far-right sentiments to survive online despite moderation actions by major platforms to limit hate speech and extremism online.⁷⁹

“We must do everything we can right now to peacefully protect our freedom by building a parallel society,” Torba wrote in a September 9 blog post. “It’s baffling to me how people do not recognize the urgency of the situation we are in. We have lost so much over the past 18 months and we will never get it back unless we start taking a stand right this second.”



The Parallel Christian Economy

gab



gab
TV



vimeo



gabads



gabpay



Screen cap of an image posted by Gab CEO Andrew Torba, outlining his vision for creating a “parallel Christian economy” online by creating alternative digital infrastructure.⁸⁰

On August 15, Torba invoked the idea of a parallel society after the Taliban rapidly regained control of Afghanistan following the withdrawal of US and allied forces, writing on his Gab profile that the takeover was something of which his likeminded followers could also be capable. “All we have to do is exit their system and build our own,” he wrote.⁸¹

Narratives about the formation of a parallel society have caught on, particularly with Christian nationalists and separatists.⁸² They have also found homes in hardcore conspiracy-theory communities online. Many of these calls effectively build on growing antigovernment sentiment in far-right online communities and drive action toward disengaging with society on a broader scale to weaken the United States under the Biden administration and exist apart from what they perceive to be the intolerable liberal consensus formed in society.

Michael Hill, leader of the Neo-Confederate hate group League of the South, urged secession in a January 29 blog post, arguing that US citizens should “withdraw your consent to being governed.”⁸³

“State and local governments, the lesser magistrates, to interpose themselves between their citizens and the corrupt DC regime and, when necessary, to nullify any attempts to deprive those citizens of the protection of the law as given us by our Founders,” he continued. “And we encourage them to begin looking seriously at the prospects of secession.”

HOW HIGH-PROFILE INDIVIDUALS AND ENTITIES HAVE USED SEPARATIST RHETORIC POST-JANUARY 6

NATIONAL DIVORCE	Dan Bongino has posted videos about how it is time for a national divorce, or past time for a national divorce. Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene posted on Telegram describing national divorce as a “civil legal process,” and not a civil war. Notably, the idea of a national divorce has been repudiated by authors in outlets like the National Review.
COLD CIVIL WAR	In an op-ed from the Federalist written seven days after the January 6 insurrection, author Ben Weingarten described the insurrection as a way for leftists in government to solidify their power and crack down on the civil rights of conservatives. He implied that the left endorses Nazism and said that the incoming attack by the left will affect every aspect of one’s life, and that this Cold Civil War will “push us to ideological segregation, which will only further fuel hostilities.” Both Dan Bongino and Ben Shapiro have posted videos devoted to a Cold Civil War. A Telegram post by Ali Alexander explained there were fundamental differences between the left and right as a reason for why a Cold Civil War was occurring in the US. Alexander had previously predicted civil war as the likely outcome for the United States.
WAR/ SECESSIONIST LANGUAGE	Laura Loomer described January 6 as a “walk in the park” compared to what would happen as Americans “take their country back.” A Boogaloo movement leader on Infowars said, “If they want a war, let it begin with us.” League of the South, a neo-Confederate group, has urged secession. Gab CEO Andrew Torba said that the Taliban retaking Afghanistan from the US-backed government meant “there’s no reason we can’t too. All we have to do is exit their system and build our own.”
PARALLEL SOCIETY	Gab CEO Andrew Torba exhorted people to build a parallel society, and stated that may mean “pull[ing] your children out of school” in a blog post. Echoing this language, a conspiracist Telegram channel stated after the failed Arizona audit that one must “take your children’s futures into your own hands and start forming a community in your state to prepare for what’s coming.”

Additionally, a small crop of tech experts has emerged to offer guidance to individuals on creating more private, less dependent technology arrangements for themselves. One such advocate is Jeffrey Peterson, a pro-Trump tech entrepreneur. On Telegram, Peterson has provided advice and instructions for transitioning to Linux operating systems and deploying software like virtual private networks (VPNs) to protect users' digital privacy. In an October 11 post on Telegram, Peterson stated that his channel was started "with the goal to help Americans defend against 'big tech' tyranny" by teaching "a way of completely taking back your Digital Freedom, starting at the 'system level' of your devices."⁸⁴ Though unalarming in themselves, Peterson's channel and lessons have been amplified in prominent QAnon communities on Telegram and by movement influencers like Ron Watkins. One popular pro-QAnon Telegram channel called "We the Media" forwarded a message by COVID-19 conspiracist @KanekoaTheGreat promoting Peterson as a likeminded "tech entrepreneur who is willing to build a parallel digital economy."⁸⁵

Other efforts to disengage from society have assumed more traditional methods, like purchasing land to facilitate a degree of separation from society. Both Owen Benjamin, an extremist former comedian, and Rod of Iron Ministries, a pro-Trump church that conducts worship services while carrying rifles, have purchased land for their followers to live on and visit.⁸⁶



Sgt Rock > Andrea Graham

We are a survival/prepper group that that is located in Gilmer county and are very conservative; We believe in the American way of life, the 2nd amendment, our constitution and protecting our families and the ones we love. We go by the name of the **"Home Guard"**. No we are not a militia! We are always in a defensive posture. If someone(s) attacks us and tries to take what we have worked for we will defend it. We are very well organized and highly trained. Our facility has live stock, an orchard, gardens, two wells, a creek, nut trees, citrus trees and much more. We are made up of veterans and first responders but do accept civilians that have special skills that will benefit the group or "Colony" as we refer to it. There are positions from bee keepers, a barber, cooks and yes security positions too. Too many to list here. If this sounds like something you might be interested in you can contact us by going to RMCCITIZEN@GMAIL.COM. We take our OPSEC very seriously. Leave a message and let us know if you are a vet, first responder or civilian with a skill. A short description/message would help too. Someone from our group will respond to you. We do NOT discriminate for any reason. The responsibility of all Home Guard Patriots is to act in relation to others, without regard to age, Veteran status, race, colour, ancestry, creed, sex, marital status, sexual orientation, religion, national origin, or a non-job related handicap. We do operate the colony and train under military protocol. If you're serious about protecting the American way of life and your family then you might want to check us out.

Thank You for your Patriotism,
1st Sgt Rock
GFB Home Guard

🕒 1 hour ago 👍 Report

Screen cap of a user post on MyMilitia advertising the group to another user and mentioning that the group maintains a "facility" for what it calls its "colony" of members.⁸⁷

Meanwhile, a Telegram channel promoted by leading election conspiracy theorists that advocates for reviews of all fifty states' 2020 election results launched into a tirade in late September, after a long-anticipated partisan review of election results in Arizona only managed to prove that Trump lost the state by a higher margin of votes than originally anticipated.⁸⁸

"Are you going to sit around and be told what the next move is by people that clearly don't know what's going on or how to conduct a timely audit without internal leaks, OR are you going to take your children's futures into your own hands and start forming a community in your state to prepare for what's coming?" the America First Audits channel posted on September 30. "Your children and family are TOP PRIORITY. We are all here fighting for them. We have to be able to brace this storm PREPARED."

"We will not survive this without a revival across the nation," it continued. "Start doing your part to make that happen."⁸⁹

Conclusion

This report is an attempt to synthesize observations and data-driven analysis conducted by the DFRLab over the course of 2021 to provide better understanding of the still-growing threat of domestic violent extremism and political violence in the United States in the aftermath of the January 6 insurrection at the US Capitol. Indeed, the participants and supporters of the Capitol insurrection included many on a broad spectrum of radicalization: enthusiastic Stop the Steal partisans hoping to bear witness to a spectacular historical event; conspiracy-theory adherents believing a prophecy would be fulfilled; ideologues willing to overturn the results of the 2020 election by any means necessary; racially motivated violent extremists; and explicitly antigovernment groups. Each represents an overlapping, connected, but analytically distinct challenge.

Through analysis based on more than a year and a half of daily monitoring, the DFRLab identified key trends based on the disruptions these groups faced after January 6, their adoption of new offline and online strategies, and a sustained effort of historical revisionism to rewrite what happened that day.

Many extremist groups have so far failed to fully recover from disruptions post-January 6, including dissension among their ranks, increased national scrutiny, and suspensions by social media platforms. However, others have made troubling progress by shifting to alternative online platforms, embracing rhetoric to engage more broadly with the mainstream conservative base, and engaging in new political activities, particularly public health and education issues at the local level. A common thread remains how the online information environment has accelerated radicalization, hardened increasingly extreme views, and supercharged community engagement.

Far-right influencers who have bolstered extremist ideology to large audiences sought to legitimize antidemocratic attitudes. Their efforts, in many ways, are succeeding. Polling has shown that a low number of conservatives see the Capitol riot as the threat that liberals and independents do, indicating a lack of shared understanding and common concern about January 6's open assault on US democracy.⁹⁰

Altogether, the threat of political violence in the United States may be diffuse, but it is growing. Strategies to counter domestic extremism must adapt, especially in the online information environment. Though extremist movements face more exposure and scrutiny, the threats they pose to the nation's security and democratic foundations remain a paramount concern.

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