



## SLIDING DOWN THE SLIPPERY SLOPE – THE NORMALIZATION OF POLITICAL VIOLENCE IN THE UNITED STATES

In September 1962, at a meeting of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference in Birmingham, Alabama, mid-speech, Dr. Martin Luther King was [attacked](#) by a member of the American Nazi Party. Audience members rushed to the stage to protect a now badly beaten Dr. King. They stopped when he shouted, “don’t touch him! We have to pray for him!” For Dr. King, nonviolence was more than just a phrase for speeches and sermons, it was the essence of his being. Here, the week we mark the anniversary of his birthday, we should pause to consider the looming threat of the antithesis.

Political scientists, particularly experts on 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century civil wars, have been warning since the January 6<sup>th</sup> insurrection that the United States is on the slippery slope to a state akin to a civil war, one of the last preconditions for which is public acceptance of political violence. From the early days of Donald Trump’s 2016 campaign, incitement to violence as well as failure to distance himself from violence he stoked have been constant themes emanating from Trump world. While many (including senior Republican lawmakers) may have thought that the spasm of violence, which erupted so visibly on January 6, 2021 but was the culmination of a concerted effort to overturn the results of the 2020 election, would represent a sort of high-water mark in the annals of American political violence, they are sadly wrong. If anything, we have seen a steady increase in recent months in incitement, and there is every reason to believe it will only get worse.

It is important to note that incitement by Trump and other figures on the far right does not flourish in a vacuum. The threat needs to be understood in the context of the creation and online amplification of extremism and hate. But first, some history.

### Historical Antecedents

Rachel Kleinfeld, writing in the Journal of Democracy (“[The Rise of Political Violence in the United States](#)”), notes that, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, partisan identity mixed with race, ethnicity, religion and fear of immigration became a toxic combination. The ensuing violence was driven largely by ordinary citizens engaged in normal civilian life who, in the context of rapidly changing social dynamics, feared they were losing power and status to other social groups. Politicians saw an opportunity to gain electoral advantage, with the Know-Nothing Party in the 1840s and 1850s inciting largely white Protestants to take up arms against largely Democratic-leaning Catholic Irish and Italian immigrants. Sound familiar?

In the South, white supremacist violence, often lynchings, was inflamed by both racism and politics. Democratic Party politicians weaponized racial rhetoric to stir up anger, then stood by as poor whites attacked Blacks. Ironically, once Jim Crow laws cemented control by the Democrats across the south, the violence began to abate (though by no means disappeared).

Starting in the 1960s, political violence was carried out largely by ideological groups clustered in clandestine cells. On the far left, for example, we had the Weather Underground and on the far-right anti-abortion Operation Rescue. Violence tended to target property, with some tragic high-profile exceptions. In the late 1970s, political violence shifted further to the



right with the rise of more anti-abortion groups, as well as white supremacist and militia groups, and the targets shifted to people – people of color, abortion providers and federal agents.

In the past few years, while left-inspired violence is on the rise, the right has been largely responsible for the majority instances of political violence (based on government and independent research). The perpetrators tend to be older, more established, and to have jobs and families. Kleinfeld studies two subgroups most prone to political violence – white Christian evangelical Republicans and those who feel threatened by people of color or women, or both. “The bedrock idea uniting right-wing communities who condone violence,” she writes “is that white Christian men in the United States are under cultural and demographic threat and require defending—and that it is the Republican Party and Donald Trump, in particular, who will safeguard their way of life.”

By the time the 2020 election rolled around, there were regular, if not daily, reminders that during Trump’s presidency political discourse had become more divisive, more hateful, more personal. Trump targeted his enemies real and imaginary – racial, religious and ethnic minorities, journalists and the mainstream media, Democrats and any other politician who dared stand up to him. Trump’s hateful rhetoric spewed forth online and offline. It was personal and it was broad-based. As Dan Rather remarked back in the summer of 2016, Trump crossed the Rubicon in 2015 following his attacks on John McCain and Serge Kovaleski, and he was never called to account when he might have been vulnerable.

Trump’s rhetoric has had untold consequences among his all-too-receptive base. As Brigitte L. Nacos, Robert Y. Shapiro and Yaeli Bloch-Elkon concluded in their 2020 study (“[Donald Trump: Aggressive Rhetoric and Political Violence](#)”), “Trump’s aggressive, divisive, and dehumanizing language was seconded by his followers and inflicted directly or indirectly psychological and physical harm to Trump’s declared enemies.” A study by the [Center for Strategic and International Studies](#) in the summer of 2020 found that right-wing attacks and plots accounted for the majority of all terrorist incidents in the United States since 1994. In 2019, right-wing extremists perpetrated nearly two-thirds of the terrorist attacks and plots in the United States and committed over 90% of them between January 1 and May 8, 2020. On January 6<sup>th</sup>, the flags, the banners, the t-shirts, the social media posts and the words of the insurrectionists themselves said it all. These were Trump’s warriors.

### **Online Spread of Extremism**

There are two other critical features of the political violence landscape today that distinguishes that landscape from bygone eras. First, the media focus on militia groups obscures a more worrying trend: perpetrators are less likely to belong to an organization or group. Individuals are self-radicalizing online. The problem has been exacerbated by the spread of white-supremacist ideas, conspiracy theories and other forms of hate via the mainstream media, including social media.

Malicious content spreads via YouTube, TikTok, X, Telegram, gaming platforms and other online platforms, in the form of videos, memes and other digital images that allow humor, parody and irony to easily disguise hate and other extreme messaging, with the net result that



malign content becomes normalized. An Institute for Strategic Dialogue (“ISD”) [explainer](#) cites scholars who believe the use by the extreme right-wing of memes is intentional to shift the so-called “Overton Window” (a range of policy ideas that society accepts as legitimate), so as to become part of the “broader social consciousness.” (See also [“The Visual Culture of Far-Right Terrorism.”](#))

The malign landscape broadens by the day. ISD, for example, has [highlighted](#) Active Clubs, which are white nationalist extremist groups with histories of violence that emphasize extreme physical fitness and hand-to-hand combat skills, and tracks what it [classifies](#) as “plausibly hateful speech.” Women increasingly have become targets of gendered violence at the hands of misogynistic and male supremacist influencers who openly advocate violence against women and amplify campaigns of hate and disinformation targeting women celebrities and women running for political office. The UN and some national governments now [track](#) technology-facilitated gender-based violence (TFGBV), which is a subset of a larger pattern of online and offline violence against women that includes image abuse, doxxing, trolling and sharing of deepfake images and videos, as well as misogynistic hate speech and efforts to discredit or silence women online, including through the threat of offline violence. Similarly, hate and extremism against the LGBTQ+ communities, including anti-drag activity, is on [the rise](#).

Violence needs foot soldiers. And the online world is a phenomenally successful recruitment tool.

### **Donald J. Trump 2.0**

Over the past few months, I have chronicled the potential parade of horrors that would be unleashed were Trump to be re-elected as president (*see, e.g., “[What do we really mean when we say Donald Trump poses an existential threat to our democracy](#)”*). My most recent [briefing note](#) explored the various ways in which Trump might weaponize the military (including as part of a declaration of martial law following the invocation of the Insurrection Act); the predicate for that declaration would be political violence on the streets of the United States. While Trump does need to be president to declare martial law, he does not need to be president to unleash violence on our streets.

This past week has provided yet more evidence of the political violence we could face. Before I cite the examples, I believe it is imperative to understand the context. First, we should take Trump at his word. Second, Trump knows exactly what he is doing; he knows what words, what phrases, what messages resonate with his base. Third, he will do anything to win, to stay out of jail. I would go one step further and posit that those around him, including his lawyers, are now steeped in the same messaging. I believe, for example, that Trump attorney D. John Sauer was not entrapped when in response to a question from Judge Florence Pan he, in effect, conceded that Trump should be immune from criminal prosecution were he to order the assassination of political opponents, unless he were first impeached and convicted by Congress. This is exactly the message his client wants him to convey, because in his client’s twisted thinking it works. (Incidentally, Sauer has been roundly criticized for getting his impeachment clause argument backwards).



His disdain for the key institutions that underpin our democracy, now most notably the courts, prosecutors, judges, federal law enforcement, knows no bounds and is on full display throughout the news cycle for his public and the rest of us. He does what he does because there appear to be few consequences, so far. We should not be surprised. As David Graham, writing in *The Atlantic* noted (“[A Thought Experiment About SEAL Team 6 Goes Terribly, Terribly Wrong](#)”), while Trump has displayed authoritarian tendencies before, the 2024 Trump is not the same as the 2016 Trump who said “I could stand in the middle of Fifth Avenue and shoot somebody, and I wouldn’t lose any voters.” He is “more ruthless, more dangerous, and more authoritarian than before.” “No normal politician would allow [a claim of immunity for ordering an assassination] to be made on his behalf, especially while sitting in the courtroom. ... Today’s legal argument could very well be next year’s exercise of presidential power.”

Trump now calls the insurrectionists who were arrested and lawfully convicted for crimes committed at the Capitol on January 6<sup>th</sup> as “hostages,” many of whom he says deserve to be pardoned. He is not alone; onstage with him is Rep. Elise Stefanik, perhaps as part of her audition for vice president. In Iowa this past January 6<sup>th</sup>, Trump [referred](#) to the insurrectionists as having acted “patriotically and peacefully”<sup>1</sup> and called on President Biden to release them.<sup>2</sup>

All to say then that CBS News [polling](#) from early January should come as no surprise. It found:

- while overall 78% somewhat disapprove or strongly disapprove of the actions of the insurrectionists on January 6<sup>th</sup>, Republican disapproval stands at 70%;
- as for characterizing the January 6<sup>th</sup> assault, while overall 53% agreed it was an insurrection, only 26% of Republicans agreed (Democrats: 83%; independents: 52%);
- on the question of whether the assault was intended to overthrow the government, overall 53% agreed, and only 27% of Republicans agreed (Democrats: 79%; independents: 50%);

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<sup>1</sup> Trump’s phraseology, in the words of Robert Reich in his *Guardian* op-ed today (“[As the election looms, we must be alert to Trump's threats of vigilante violence](#)”), are a “chilling echo” of Hitler’s statements following the sentencing of five members of the Nazi paramilitary unit, the *Sturmabteilung* (SA, or storm troopers), to death for murder committed as part of voter intimidation in the summer of 1932. In a telegram, Hitler declared his “unreserved loyalty” to the men, called the sentences “a most outrageous blood verdict” and promised SA prisoners that “your freedom is a question of honor for all of us, and to fight against the government which made possible such a verdict is our duty.” Herman Göring also sent a telegram of support. (See “[A Night of Violence](#).”)

<sup>2</sup> According to [NBC News](#), Iowa Senator Joni Ernst did fault Trump for his “hostages” comment, but said she was “not opposed” to pardoning those convicted and, when pressed on her position and reminded that in 2021 she had called the attack an “insurrection,” she denied having used the term “insurrectionists.” *The Hill* [reports](#) that a few other Senators did take issue more forcefully with Trump’s “hostages” characterization.



- on the question of whether the assault was intended to keep Trump in power, overall 62% agreed it was, while only 40% of Republicans agreed ((Democrats: 86%; independents: 60%);
- on the question of pardons, overall only 38% support pardons, including 66% of Republicans ((Democrats: 15%; independents: 36%); and
- as a reminder, while overall 61% consider Biden the legitimate winner of the 2020 election, only 29% of Republicans do (Democrats: 93%; independents: 62%). That means 71% of Republicans in this poll believe Trump was the legitimate winner.

The notion that the arrested and convicted insurrectionists have been treated unfairly is as patently false as is Trump’s regularly articulated claim that he won the 2020 election. Trump is trying to whitewash history, he is trying to further undermine the trust Americans may still have in law enforcement, the Department of Justice and the courts, through his continued (and now normalized) characterization of the 2020 election as a rigged election he is creating and amplifying distrust in the electoral system and all those who administer it, and he is potentially setting the stage to call out his citizen warriors in support of his efforts to return to power no matter the outcome of the election. After all, what is the risk of political violence if the leader has promised pardons for “patriots” who engage in that violence, even if it is at his urging.

### **Normalization of Political Violence and Hate**

The greatest danger (and this cannot be overemphasized) is that Trump is normalizing political violence, and he is doing so through rhetoric delivered on stage at campaign rallies and in his political ads. An ad that aired on January 13 had Trump saying the following:

“This is the final battle. With you at my side we will demolish the deep state. We will expel the warmongers from our government. We will drive out the globalists. We will cast out the communists, Marxists and fascists. We will throw off the sick political class that hates our country. We will rout the fake news media, and we will liberate America from these villains once and for all.”

Earlier this month, after the hearing before the DC Circuit on the immunity question, Trump claimed he is being prosecuted because the polls show he is leading President Biden, and then warned that if “they” “win” (he is convicted), “[i]will be bedlam in this country.” Last night, in the [brief](#) submitted on Trump’s behalf to the Supreme Court, in an echo of that earlier comment, Trump’s attorney warned of “chaos and bedlam” if the Supreme Court does not reverse the Colorado Supreme Court’s ruling on disqualification.

The death threats, the bomb threats, “swatting” and online attacks against prosecutors (Alvin Bragg, Fani Willis, Jack Smith), the NY Attorney General Letitia James and judges (Judge Tanya Chutkan – recall the August 4 post, “if you go after me, I’m coming after you!” – and Judge Arthur Engoron) involved in the various Trump cases, threats against the Colorado Supreme Court, the Colorado Secretary of State Jena Griswold and the Maine Secretary of State Shenna Bellows, both following rulings relating to the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment disqualification issue, against election workers and against more than a dozen state capitols, are surging not only as the Trump rhetoric heats up (dating back to the announcement of the first of the



major Trump cases (Alvin Bragg’s indictment)) but in the face of deafening silence from Trump and other Republican leaders. The New York Times [reports](#) that every team of prosecutors leading the criminal cases against Trump have personal security details, and that the FBI has created a dedicated unit to investigate threats *against* it, which have increased three-fold since the Mar-a-Lago search warrants were executed.

Terrorism expert and founder of the Chicago Project on Security and Terrorism (CPOST) Robert Pape referred to America in a PBS [interview](#) last week as “a tinderbox.” While there is support for violence to achieve political aims on both the right and the left, the difference is that only the right has a leader stoking that violence.

What is most striking for Pape, who has studied political violence around the world for over 30 years, is the mainstreaming of support for political violence, starting with the insurrection on January 6<sup>th</sup>. Typically, political violence is a fringe element, but research of the insurrectionist shows over half those arrested for rioting on January 6<sup>th</sup> were middle class, professional Trump supporters, from urban or suburban areas. Only 12% were members of militias. What animates supporters of political violence is the fear of “the great replacement.” Trump rhetoric presents the demographic changes in the country as happening not organically but “maliciously to subjugate a part of the population.” (I first covered the CPOST research in my January 2022 briefing note, “[American Democracy, at an Inflection Point?](#)”)

### **The Effects of the Big Lie**

Looking ahead, as John Sakellariadis, writing in POLITICO (“[Scared to Death: Local election officials on edge ahead of 2024 vote](#)”), noted, while local election officials on the front lines of election administration are confident that they are prepared for foreign and domestic cyber-hacking attempts, they are far less confident that Americans will believe them, and are terrified of the backlash from those who are unwilling to accept the election results. As I [previously reported](#), a Brennan Center study in March 2022 found one in six election workers to have been subject to threats due to their jobs and 77% reported those threats had increased in recent years. Very recent reporting from election workers regarding their interactions with voters suggests that the atmosphere is even more febrile and potentially far more volatile, with the levels of distrust intertwined with conspiracy theories far more widespread and far deeper.

David French, in an op-ed last week (“[The Greatest Threat Posed by Trump](#)”), referring to rage and conspiracy theories wrote, “never before have I seen extremism penetrate a vast American community so deeply, so completely and so comprehensively.” French cites the polling data that finds increasing percentages of Republicans now tempted to embrace political violence. Last October, [Time polling](#) (conducted by Brookings and PRRI) found 33% of Republicans (and 41% of pro-Trump Republicans) agreeing with the statement “because things have gotten so far off track, true American patriots may have to resort to violence in order to save our country” (22% of independents and 13% of Democrats share



that view).<sup>3</sup> In March 2021, only 15% of Americans agreed that violence would be appropriate.

In yet another example of how Trump’s rhetoric has been normalized, a [Des Moines Register/ NBC News/Mediacom](#) poll found, when asked about Trump’s characterization of his political opponents as “vermin” and illegal immigrants entering the United States as “poisoning the blood of our country,” 42% of likely Republican caucus-goers in Iowa said they were more likely to support Trump (while 28% said it would make them less likely to do so). The results in Iowa should not surprise us; a CBS News [poll](#) this past week found 72% of Republicans agreeing with the “poisoning the blood” language, which increases to 82% when the statement is attributed to Trump.

### **White Christian Nationalism**

An equally worrying trend, in light of the fact that white evangelicals not only are in the vanguard of committed Trump supporters (the base) but also are at the forefront of the movements that supports political violence (at 31%),<sup>4</sup> is the rise of Christian nationalism, with Trump now sharing an ad [God made Trump](#). Christian nationalism is seen by experts as a fusion of Christian identity and American civic life, with its ultimate expression in the sentiment that America should be a Christian nation. A Deseret News/Harris X [poll](#) found that 53% of Republicans see Trump as a “person of faith,” and 81% of white evangelicals voted for Trump in 2016 (79% did so in 2020).

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<sup>3</sup> Respondents who think the country has changed for the worst since the 1950s are twice as likely to justify violence (30% to 14%). White evangelical Protestants are the most likely to justify political violence (31%), while non-evangelical and mainline Protestants (25%) and Black protestants (24%) are close behind. Hispanic Catholics (21%) and white Catholics (20%) are the least violent-prone respondents. While 77% of Republicans think democracy is at risk, only 22% say a Trump re-election demonstrates the proposition, and 64% say a Biden re-election would be worse for the system. Finally, the study found 29% of Republicans subscribe to QAnon theories, up from 23% two years ago.

Overall, 59% of Democrats, 81% of independents and 90% of Republicans think the country is going in the wrong direction.

On the subject of democracy, a December AP/NORC Center for Public Affairs [poll](#) found that 62% (72% of Democrats and 55% of Republicans) believe democracy would be at risk depending on who wins in November. Overall, the top issue appears to be the economy (75%), followed by the future of democracy (67%). Among Republicans the election will be most important for the economy (82% - 73%) while for Democrats the election will be most important for the future of democracy (76% - 61%).

<sup>4</sup> Brookings/PRRI [polling found](#) that white evangelical Protestants remain among Trump’s most committed supporters, and represent the only major religious group in which a majority (61%) rate Trump favorably. The proportion of adults most pessimistic about the country and its culture (American’s best days are behind us) is largest among white evangelical Protestants (67%). While 56% of religiously unaffiliated Americans say they intend to vote in 2024, 78% of white evangelical Protestants say they intend to do so. As for support for democracy, while 58% of Americans believe there is credible evidence Trump committed federal crimes, only 28% of white evangelical Protestants agree.



Anna Marconi, in her 2023 analysis (“[Christian Nationalism in Support for Donald Trump](#)”), posits that this support for Trump flows from the fear of becoming a religious minority as well as a racial one, which then explains the fusion of Christian nationalism with white Christian nationalism. In their 2022 study (“[Christian Nationalism and Political Violence: Victimhood, Racial Identity, Conspiracy, and Support for the Capitol Attacks](#)”), Miles T. Armaly, David T. Buckley and Adam M. Enders explore the interplay with political violence and conclude that “[w]hile Christian nationalism is strongly related to support for specific and abstract political violence on its own, it appears to be most potent when combined with other individual characteristics,” namely white identity, feelings of victimhood and exposure to conspiracy theories.

### **Mitigating the Threats**

We are not powerless to mitigate the threats. After all, democracy has been framed for close to 250 years by perhaps the most consequential political phrases written in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, “We the people.” The consistent and constant drumbeat from Trump, now powerfully normalized, that it is permissible to overturn the election because “I did not win” regrettably has taken hold in far too large a proportion of Republican voters (as evidenced most recently from the Iowa caucus [exit polls](#), which showed that 66% overall, including 69% who supported Trump, do not believe that Joe Biden legitimately won in 2020). “We the people” must ensure, and prove, the integrity of the 2024 election. Election processes will need to be highly transparent, and voters will need to be educated as to what they are seeing, all to counter the potential spark that ignites the “tinderbox.”

Critical communications efforts will need to be undertaken in the context of likely hyper-personalized and intensely sophisticated disinformation campaigns (likely powered by generative AI) designed to sow further distrust in an already distrustful electorate about an already suspect electoral system. The fake messages could be used to suppress votes (through false details or more subliminal messaging) or to incite violence (*see a glimpse into the future*, prepared by national security expert Miles Taylor). And the range of malign actors covers extremists to foreign actors (it being far more beneficial to make voters believe that systems have been hacked, for example, than to actually hack systems). Actors might attempt to hack and be discovered, so as to sow further distrust. The risks are heightened by the rollback of content moderations efforts at the social media platforms (*see my prior briefing note: ['Jawboning' in the age of rampant online disinformation](#)*).

A few mitigation steps (borrowed, in part, from former Acting Assistant Attorney General, and Principal Deputy Assistant Attorney General, for the National Security Division, Mary McCord, and Miles Taylor, and in part from Secretaries of State Jocelyn Benson (Michigan) and David Scanlan (New Hampshire), courtesy of [Keep our Republic](#)):

- State legislatures should be encouraged to pass voting reforms. Michigan, for example, last November passed legislation conforming Michigan law to the new federal Electoral Count Reform Act ([SB 0529](#)), establishing clear procedures for ensuring the legitimacy, fairness and transparency of elections ([SB 0590](#) and [SB 0591](#)) and creating criminal penalties for threats and harassment of election workers ([HB 4129](#)). Minnesota passed legislation prohibiting the use of AI-generated content





without the consent of the person depicted, with the intent of harming a candidate or influencing an election, within 90 days of election day ([Minn. Stat. § 609.771](#)). It is probably beyond the realm of the possible, but federal legislation would be hugely beneficial.<sup>5</sup>

- Election administrators should be communicating early with voters to explain not only how voting will work but also how information will be communicated via legitimate, trusted sources. These could be in the form of PSAs on social media and local media. In view of the ever-changing state law landscape governing voting (changes that may enhance access, or may constrain access), educating citizens is critically important, both to ensure voters can vote and that voters trust the system. (It is ironic that despite the myriad protestations by election deniers, including the denier-in-chief, over more than three years that the 2020 presidential election was stolen, no evidence ever surfaced of widespread fraud and no denier ever advanced the logical corollary that if the presidential ballots were tainted so too were every other electoral victory by a candidate on that same ballot.)
- Election administrators should coordinate with nonpartisan partners – community organizers (including grassroots GoTV activists), faith leaders, law enforcement, sports figures, educators and local businesses – to publicize information about how the electoral processes work, that the electoral systems are safe, and where state law [so provides](#) that there are criminal sanctions for election-related disinformation.<sup>6</sup>
- Election administrators should test their systems and conduct contingency planning exercises well ahead of the elections.
- Election administrators should emulate the examples of New Hampshire and Michigan and create “voter confidence councils” across their states, whose tasks are both proactive (messaging) as well as defensive (rapid response to identified disinformation).

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<sup>5</sup> I note that the President issued an [executive order](#) on October 30 on the safe, secure and trustworthy development and use of AI. It lays out a roadmap for federal agencies but sets out no new enforceable rules.

<sup>6</sup> In the absence of federal legislation (the [Deceptive Practices and Voter Intimidation Prevention Act](#), first proposed in 2007, has never been enacted) criminalizing election-related disinformation (federal law does prohibit foreign efforts related to elections), a growing number of states have updated their criminal statutes since the 2020 election to prohibit knowing dissemination of false information regarding details of upcoming elections (*e.g.*, the time, place and manner of conducting elections), and false or misleading information about the qualifications or restrictions related to voter eligibility. These laws impose criminal penalties on those who knowingly violate the prohibitions; some states also provide private rights of action for voters targeted by election-related disinformation. While many states had election-interference statutes, they understandably did not extend to the wilful spread of online misinformation or disinformation.

It is equally important from a messaging standpoint for people to understand that there are limits to First Amendment protections, and one such limitation, bolstered by criminal statutes, would be the deliberate spreading of false information with the intention of interfering with voters’ rights to vote. That would be fraud.



- Society at large needs to have a far better understanding of how to identify deepfake audio and visual messages, and at the very least where to go to verify suspected fakes. Imagine a range of AI-generated messages (though [examples](#) from 2022 confirm that these messages can be generated without AI):
  - fake personalized text messages or robocalls advising that the local polling station (remember these are micro-targeted) has been closed and voters should just text their votes in or directing them to an alternate (and incorrect) polling place;
  - a fake presidential address saying that foreign hacking had been discovered and so polls would be open for an additional 48 hours;
  - social media messages or robo-texts/calls warning voters that election rolls would be checked against outstanding warrants or unpaid taxes, or that any person ever found guilty of any crime cannot vote and doing so is a crime, or that law enforcement would be manning the polling stations; or
  - videos circulated on social media showing election workers throwing away ballots.

The malign (and regrettably potentially effective) possibilities for deepfake disinformation are endless.

There are three other mitigation steps to consider. The first is to craft strong bipartisan statements in support of electoral systems and against political violence (there were some examples in 2020). The second is to make a greater effort to enlist local and national businesses in support of elections and against political violence. The third is that major media outlets must do a better job of countering the normalization of Trump's anti-democratic threats and incitements.

As to the first, there has been little evidence to date of any willingness on the part of Republican lawmakers to speak out and court Trump opprobrium. The modest reaction to threats of violence directed against Republican House members who declined to support Jim Jordan for House Speaker is one of the few examples of Republican leadership speaking out.

As to the second, I have explored in previous briefing notes ([Global political risk](#) and [Enlisting the business community](#)) the potentially significant positive role the business community can play in support of democracy, a position that can at once be both altruistic and consistent with protecting shareholder value.

As to the third, in addition to complementing the efforts outlined above, as I explored in a previous briefing note ("[The dire warnings we are at risk of failing to hear, and heed](#)"), there is an urgent need for media across markets to abandon their hyper-equivalence as well as their insistence on treating the 2024 presidential election as simply another normal political contest between normal candidates. Media outlets need to spell out what Trump represents and what is at risk if Trump wins again.

This touches on a related point, namely that the fight against demagoguery, as evidenced by the unanimity of views of the Founding Fathers (more on this in a moment), should be nonpartisan, as is the related fight to stave off political violence. Yet, far too many fear embracing and properly characterizing these concerns, apparently for fear of crossing into



partisan territory, with the consequence that a cult of personality is being normalized. That fear seems to harken back to a time when traditional Democratic-Republican policy divides were the norm, and when it was safe to disagree without threats and the risk of violence. Today, that world regrettably is no longer extant.

### Concluding Thoughts

The most harmful aspect of all of this is the “normalization” of conduct that at the very least is hateful and an affront to the Constitution, and at worst, in the words of President Biden (spoken in 2022), represents a “dagger at the throat of democracy.” Trump’s statements and conduct are repetitive, day after day. After a while, one shock recedes as the next wave hits. It cannot be overstated, the Big Lie, the incitement of the deadly assault on the Capitol and the myriad efforts to halt the peaceful transfer of power have no parallels in modern US history. The failure of the establishment Republican Party to repudiate Trump’s agenda for revenge and retribution, and his incitements to violence, only amplifies the normalization. The problem is that far too many people are listening to, and accepting the conspiracy of lies of, a demagogue.

What we face today was foreseen at the founding of the nation. George Washington raised the concern in 1787 when he reportedly **warned** that anarchy could be exploited “by some aspiring demagogue who will not consult the interest of his Country so much as his own ambitious views.” Visiting Vanderbilt University scholar Eli Merritt has **written** that “Washington, like his peers, did not use the word ‘demagogue’ as an insult or epithet. He did not employ it as ammunition against those he identified as his political opponents. For the steady, rational Washington, ‘demagogue’ was a forensic term that described a well-known class of political actors, known since Greek and Roman times, who obtain power through emotional appeals to prejudice, distrust and fear. Irrespective of party affiliation, demagogues were a distinct personality type that knew no bounds of politics except fiery self-aggrandizement.” In the records of speeches given at the Constitutional Convention (that survive), the term “demagogue” was used 21 times by the framers as they fashioned the checks and balances against despotism and tyranny embedded in the Constitution.<sup>7</sup>

Ultimately, we will find a way to bridge the polarization and convince sizable majorities of all of our communities that what we have in common far outweighs our differences. In the interim, meaning between now and the day Americans begin to cast their ballots later this year, every effort must be made to reduce the likelihood that sparks will set the tinderbox

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<sup>7</sup> Madison referred to the dangers of demagogues twice, and Hamilton referred to those dangers seven times. Ron Chernow **reminded** us, “So haunted was Hamilton by this specter that **he conjured it up** in “The Federalist” No. 1, warning that ‘a dangerous ambition more often lurks behind the specious mask of zeal for the rights of the people than under the forbidden appearance of zeal for the firmness and efficiency of government. History will teach us that . . . of those men who have overturned the liberties of republics, the greatest number have begun their career by paying an obsequious court to the people; commencing demagogues, and ending tyrants.’”



alight. That starts with assuring Americans that all their votes will be counted and given effect.

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**Mark S. Bergman**  
**7Pillars Global Insights, LLC**  
**Washington, D.C.**  
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