JANUARY 6TH:

AN INSURRECTION FUELED BY FACEBOOK

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ISD | Institute for Strategic Dialogue

MEDIA**MATTERS**
FOR AMERICA

Tech Transparency Project | CAMPAIGN FOR ACCOUNTABILITY

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The deadly attack on Congress on January 6th was the worst assault on our democracy since the Civil War and represented one of the lowest points in our country's history. As the United States House Select Committee convenes investigatory hearings on the deadly siege on the Capitol, we already know Facebook was used to organize the attack. As Mark Zuckerberg said himself, Facebook was weaponized by then President Trump to "incite violent insurrection against a democratically elected government," and internal reports and Department of Justice documents confirm the platform's role.

While the Committee undertakes a thorough investigation of what happened on January 6th, months of research have already uncovered Facebook's role in organizing the insurrection. The platform was used by extremists to organize, recruit, and promote their plans to storm the Capitol in an attempt to block the certification of the 2020 election results and the evidence is overwhelming.

This report outlines what we already know before a single subpoena has been issued or a single witness has been called to testify. It is based on publicly available information and extensive analysis that has been conducted by expert researchers. It outlines tactics that laid the groundwork for the insurrection, including bad actors who fueled conspiracies throughout the 2020 campaign, how they leveraged Facebook's platform to do their work, and how Facebook profited off of this activity that led to five deaths. Furthermore, this report also outlines how despite pledging to take action in the aftermath of January 6th, bad actors remained operating on Facebook, demonstrating how the platform continued to provide extremists with a platform to organize, recruit and promote their activities.

These facts lead to an obvious conclusion: Facebook bears significant responsibility for the events that transpired on January 6th. The Select Committee should use their investigatory powers to dig deeper on what happened on the platform leading up to the insurrection, including behind the scenes to determine who knew what and when, in order to make sure the entity is held accountable for their role in the insurrection.

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19th January 2021

The January 6 occupation of the US Capitol by far-right extremists shocked the world, representing a high water mark of the existential challenge that these threats pose to the safety, security and cohesion of our society, as well as the very fabric of liberal democratic civic culture.

But these events came as no surprise to those of us who have been studying this emerging extremist ecosystem. The events of January 6 represent the inevitable consequence of a long-range campaign by a constellation of actors – from white supremacists to identitarians, anti-Muslim groups to conspiracy theorists – to exploit the rising cultural, economic and identity anxieties of our time. These efforts have been hyper-charged and amplified by sophisticated digital propaganda machineries, enabled by patchy and reactive responses from the online platforms on which they run riot.

The themes of disinformation and extremism through 2020

VOTER FRAUD DISINFORMATION

Throughout the last year, ISD analysts have tracked a long-seeded campaign of disinformation which laid the groundwork for the events at the Capitol building. Our research published in October 2020, which analysed online activity in the months preceding the election, revealed a now widely recognised trend: a small but influential cluster of social media accounts belonging to right-wing activists and media figures were responsible for promoting narratives claiming voter fraud was widespread in the US. What is interesting, however, is the way in which this narrative dovetailed with a campaign laying the ground-work for violence.

The favoured tactic in promoting this disinformation narrative involved highlighting local reports of alleged voter fraud and framing them as indicative of large-scale corruption in the national voting process. Reports highlighting President Trump's comments encouraging voters to submit a mail-in ballot in addition to voting in person were numerous in the discussion around voter fraud. In the wake of the election, the 'Stop the Steal' narrative proved resilient to the sporadic efforts of tech companies to stifle its growth, as demonstrated by ISD's continual identification of groups, pages and communication hubs for the disinformation campaign to undermine the democratic process.

VIOLENT WHITE SUPREMACIST COMMUNICATIONS

In parallel to watching these narratives evolve online, ISD researchers tracked an existing, active alternative digital ecosystem of violent white supremacist communications, hosted in permissive online environments like Telegram, Parler and 4Chan/8Kun. In June 2020, ISD researchers analysed over a million posts across more than two hundred white supremacist channels on Telegram, and found overt support for terrorists and terrorist organisations in nearly two thirds (60%) of them.

It is in these channels that online disinformation narratives hold the potential to lead to deadly offline consequences. Beyond sharing propaganda of terrorist groups and the celebration of terrorists, some groups also actively called for violence. Content included the glorification of terrorist attacks and explicit calls for violence against minority communities and other groups deemed to be enemies, such as police officers, journalists, drug dealers and paedophiles. References to "boogaloo" – an extreme right-wing meme referring to an impending civil war – were made in 117 (56.3%) of the channels identified. Our research shows that the mobilisation to violence began well before the election itself, having been nurtured in these types of online environment for many months and even years.

ONLINE HOSTILITY TOWARD POLITICIANS

Laying the mood music for the assault on the Capitol, our research found an increasingly hostile environment against politicians across a range of mainstream online platforms. An October report measured the scale of online abuse targeting a variety of Congressional candidates in the 2020 US election on Facebook and Twitter. Female political candidates across the ideological spectrum were notably more at risk of being targeted by online abuse than their male counterparts. Our research showed language related to 'treason' was being used to refer to candidates across political parties, and that this became a common feature of US political debate on Twitter throughout 2020.

MAINSTREAMING OF DISINFORMATION & CONSPIRACY THEORIES

Conservative and far-right media outlets have attempted to label the events of 6th January as the work of 'Antifa', turning once again to disinformation as a weapon with which to defend the real perpetrators of these violent acts. In the lead up to the election last year, these same actors sowed ongoing and plentiful disinformation about the so-called violence of Black Lives Matter and Antifa protestors. ISD researchers tracked claims about these groups being involved in 'false flag' attacks and disinformation about their role as 'domestic terrorists', tracing back these disinformation narratives to the murder of George Floyd and the protests that it catalysed in the US and across

the globe. This disinformation flourished on online platforms like Facebook, Twitter and YouTube throughout the year. Research showed that Facebook ads were used to target and amplify these types of disinformation.

The online communities in which the 6th January events were organised, promoted and lauded emerged out of months of disinformation, conspiracy and extremist mobilisation on these platforms. ISD's analysis saw how platforms allowed COVID-19 disinformation and political disinformation to emerge in tandem, as far-right groups and individuals opportunistically used the ongoing pandemic to advance their movements and ideologies. COVID-19 was used as a 'wedge issue' to promote conspiracy theories, target minority communities, and call for extreme violence, as well as being used to advance calls for the 'boogaloo'. Antisemitic hate speech and tropes were adapted to incorporate COVID-19 narratives, and proponents of the far-right QAnon conspiracy theory began advancing a wide range of different narratives off the back of the COVID-19 pandemic, including the idea that the pandemic was being orchestrated to manipulate US politics. ISD analysis of accelerationist discourse online shows it was increasingly dominated by discussion of the virus.

GROWTH OF ANTI-GOVERNMENT MOVEMENTS

At the same time, we also saw how opposition to contact tracers and a proto-anti lockdown movement early in 2020 transitioned into broader anti-government sentiment which transcended COVID-19. Contact-tracing efforts became the focus of significant suspicion, hostility and opposition within some social media communities, particularly among pro-gun and conspiracy-theory groups. Videos containing disinformation and conspiracy theories relevant to contact-tracing were receiving more than 300,000 views each on YouTube and being shared tens of thousands of times across public Facebook pages and groups. The key conspiratorial narratives referenced, including that contact tracers would force people (especially children) into quarantine and/or FEMA camps, framed contact-tracing as a deep state, Satanic or elite conspiracy. A multitude of conspiratorial strands linked contact-tracing to figures such as George Soros, Bill Gates, the Clintons, the Obamas and others, or framed COVID-19 mitigation efforts as a Democratic effort to interfere with the US 2020 elections. These narratives show the dynamic evolution of the conspiracy landscape which helped to precipitate the narratives underpinning the events at the Capitol in January.

The Long Road to the Capitol:

A Constellation of Actors

21st January 2021

The thousands of protesters who turned out in DC on January 6 firmly believed President Trump's claims that the election was rigged and this was their last chance to take action and, in their eyes, protect the legitimate result and prevent Joe Biden from becoming president.

However, voter fraud disinformation was not only pushed by the Conspirator-in-Chief before and after the November 3 vote, but by various online influencers active in fostering pro-Trump conspiracies in QAnon communities, far-right communities and conservative circles also. The results of their sustained efforts over the past few months led to the furious, frenzied anger of thousands who descended upon DC on January 6.

Key players and their emergence throughout 2020

CONSERVATIVE CIRCLES

ISD research, conducted for Politico in October 2020, analysed millions of posts around voter fraud conversations online and found that a small but influential cluster of accounts belonging to conservative activists and media figures were responsible for promoting the bulk of narratives claiming voter fraud was widespread in the US. This research found that figures like Charlie Kirk, James O'Keeffe, Tomi Lahren and Dan Bongino played an early role in supporting Trump's claims of voter fraud. When November 3 did not result in a victory for Trump, other right-wing influencers took on the mantle of organising and mobilising pro-Trump communities.

The Stop the Steal movement quickly emerged as the vehicle for these frustrations, led by activists Ali Alexander, Scott Presler and Amy Kremer (of Women for America First and the Tea Party), among others, who organised online support, caravans and protests in DC. Yet, the movement also allowed more extreme actors and conspiracy theorists to capitalise on the frustrations of angry Trump supporters.

FAR-RIGHT COMMUNITIES

ISD's weekly Lens on Hate newsletter noted in November how Nick Fuentes, leader of the white nationalist Groyper movement, and Alex Jones, host of Infowars, appeared at Stop the Steal events in Georgia to boost Trump's voter fraud claims. Fuentes and Jones spoke of their anger at those within the GOP "working to sabotage President Trump." Both continued to ferment right-wing distrust of the Republican Party and participated in protests in DC on January 6 where large swathes of the crowd raged against "traitors" in the GOP as well as the Democrat Party.

Claims of a rigged election motivated groups more traditionally disposed towards offline mobilisation too. The far-right Proud Boys group were always supportive of Trump, yet the group seized upon numerous pro-Trump protests in DC to participate in their preferred activity – threatening groups and engaging in violence against counter protesters. The Proud Boys benefited from the rise of the social media platform Parler, using it to issue threats of violence against possible counter protesters on January 6 and celebrate deliberate acts of destruction without repercussion from the platform. The group's leader, Enrique Tarrio, was arrested as he traveled to DC on January 4, but other leading Proud Boys figures took part in the violent events in the capital and have since been arrested.

THE QANON COMMUNITY

The role of the QAnon community in the events of January 6 cannot be overstated. How did belief in the QAnon conspiracy spread so rapidly in the months prior to this? ISD research found that membership of QAnon Facebook groups skyrocketed in 2020 while polling carried out by ISD partners in the second half of 2020 showed that about one-in-five Americans recognised and believed in at least one of four conspiracy theories that originated from QAnon. ISD and Newsguard tracked the spread of QAnon on Facebook in 2020 and found that, despite the platform's October 6 ban on QAnon groups and pages, the conspiracy continued to spread through individual "superspreader" profiles who serve as important vectors for the spread of QAnon content, particularly pro-Trump political disinformation.

Since November 3 "Q" has largely been silent, yet a number of key QAnon influencers have stepped into the void. Ron Watkins, the former administrator of 8kun, became a leading voice for QAnon followers after November and used Twitter to float illusory, outlandish theories related to Dominion Voting Systems. Watkins also organised 24/7 surveillance of Dominion buildings in Georgia which led to the targeted harassment of polling workers and encouraged people to attend protests in DC.

Pro-Trump attorneys Sidney Powell and L. Lin Wood were also embraced by QAnon communities as the two attempted to build legal cases for Trump's voter fraud claims. Powell's "Kraken" lawsuit acted as fodder for the QAnon movement, while Wood's descent into the depths of the conspiracy world came to a head on January 1. Days before crowds in DC would call for Mike Pence to be hanged, Wood's suggestion that Pence should face trial for treason and death by firing squad was openly supported among QAnon communities, where threats of violence were always a core feature of their online discourse. ing the idea that the pandemic was being orchestrated to manipulate US politics. ISD analysis of accelerationist discourse online shows it was increasingly dominated by discussion of the virus.

The Long Road to the Capitol: A Hybrid Threat Landscape

26th January 2021

The Capitol attacks represented a perfect storm of disinformation, conspiracy theory, weaponised hate and extremism, the emergence of which ISD analysts had tracked closely over the months running up to the election.

In the summer of 2020, the US grappled with the emergence of significant social justice mobilisation in the wake of the killing of George Floyd. These events, in conjunction with the difficulties caused by the COVID pandemic, meant disinformation proved a constant hazard. Commercial disinformation networks, including established for-profit purveyors of disinformation and extremist content, seized on the turmoil as an opportunity to publish a deluge of written, audio and video content.

LARGE SCALE PLATFORM MANIPULATION

The intersection of disinformation and extremist narratives on standalone websites with social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter and YouTube – all of which play central roles in hosting and amplifying such narratives – has marked the emergence of an increasingly hybridised threat landscape. One prominent node in this landscape studied by ISD was NaturalNews. This commercial enterprise and disinformation empire is presided over by Mike Adams, a businessman connected to Infowars' Alex Jones and anti-government militia group, the Oath Keepers.

In June 2020, ISD research examined the scale and nature of NaturalNews' largely unchecked activity on Facebook, and identified over 18,000 links to NaturalNews affiliated websites that were shared in public Facebook groups and pages over a nearly three-month period at the start of 2020. These affiliated websites engaged with an array of conspiracy theories ranging from health disinformation and climate change denial to anti-immigration narratives. Articles written by Adams and his associates demonised liberal politicians, voters and institutions, and in some cases urged action against these "malign" actors.

The broad range of topics promoted by NaturalNews combined with their expert use of social media to amplify content meant that they were able to reach a vast audience. When this content was shared on Facebook, it may have acted as a gateway into NaturalNews' network of extremist websites and narratives. These narratives, in turn, often used violent and dehumanising language to discuss the 'evils' of liberals, government and big tech companies, and appeared to be aimed at individuals already engaging with anti-government, militia, and "prepper" ideologies. The wide dissemination of these narratives meant NaturalNews' sentiments were then fed into the online ecosystem of right-wing extremists, which includes individuals who entered the Capitol building on January 6.

The residual threat of such large-scale platform manipulation was illustrated in a separate investigation conducted by ISD in June 2020, which revealed how spam-like networks on Facebook were – and still are – being used to distribute potentially harmful and divisive content across the platform at scale. In this investigation, content was amplified to Facebook users in groups and pages focused on topics such as US right-wing politics, right-wing politics in other countries such as the Philippines and Canada, and political wedge issues.

THE MONETISATION DYNAMIC

Aside from stoking division and sowing discord, commercial actors such as NaturalNews also have monetary incentives to make the content on their sites as sensational and engaging as possible while remaining vague enough to attract the broadest audience possible. Unsurprisingly, ISD saw allegations of election fraud and interference ramp up after November 3 2020 (election day), when increased coverage of hot-button topics began to correlate directly to an increase in ad revenue.

But it is not only commercial actors who profit from these large-scale disinformation networks. This monetisation dynamic was highlighted in our assessment of "coordinated inauthentic behaviour" on Facebook, which noted that between July 2018 and July 2020, Facebook made over $23 million in advertising revenue from inauthentic networks that violated the platform's policies.

Major inequalities in the platform policy landscape have been exploited by hate actors. Research published by ISD in October 2020 found that tech platforms such as PayPal, Stripe, Facebook and Amazon accepted payments to a number of US-based hate groups, including certain groups and individuals known to be present in Washington on January 6. ISD's research found that, of the 54 platforms and mechanisms examined, 38% did not contain policies that explicitly prohibited hate groups from using their services. It also found that hate groups were able to use the services of 83% of platforms that did contain policies around hate, showing an overwhelming failure by platforms to implement and enforce their policies.

It remains clear that a sizable minority of social media platforms have failed to put in place policies that explicitly prohibit hate actors from using – and profiting from – their services. They are failings that must be addressed as a matter of urgency. So long as they remain unaddressed, the possibility of radicalisation on these platforms leading to future violence similar to that we saw on January 6 remains likely.

Facebook's narrow ban allows much of the "Stop the Steal" content to remain on the platform

28th January 2021

Facebook's action was also too late --
Republican members of Congress used the platform to promote "Stop the Steal"

In response to the January 6 insurrection, Facebook has moved to remove "Stop the Steal" election misinformation from the platform, but the new policy appears to be extremely limited, banning only posts or groups using that exact phrase. As a result, the social media giant is allowing activity dedicated to stopping nonexistent election fraud to continue to thrive.

On January 6, a pro-Trump mob stormed the Capitol, seeking to overturn the presidential election after then-President Donald Trump -- and his supporters in right-wing media and on social media -- spent months pushing misinformation to subvert the election. Facebook has attempted to both downplay the role the platform played in organizing these events and claim it has sufficiently addressed the issue. In reality, these measures were insufficient to address the misinformation and organizing that enabled the insurrection.

Media Matters has identified posts from Republican members of Congress prior to January 6 that pushed the false notion that Democrats stole the election and promoted "Stop the Steal" rallies. These posts are still on Facebook. Additionally:

- Media Matters identified at least 230 Facebook groups related to election fraud. As of January 28, over 150 of these groups still remain active.
- Of these groups, 91 specifically mentioned "Stop the Steal" or used similar language about a "stolen election" in their name or within posts. As of January 28, Facebook removed 66 of these groups, 2 have been archived, and 23 remain active.

- The additional 139 groups didn't mention "Stop the Steal" specifically, but are related to so-called election fraud. As of January 28, 129 of these groups are still active, despite having similar content to the "Stop the Steal" groups. Facebook removed 6 groups and 4 others have been archived.

Doing the absolute minimum: Facebook's response to election misinformation and "Stop the Steal"

Following the presidential election, right-wing influencers recycled "stop the steal," a phrase initially used in 2018 to baselessly accuse Democrats of election fraud. This phrase quickly proliferated on social media; in fact, only two days after the election, Media Matters identified at least 34 groups and 39 events on Facebook that were dedicated to "Stop the Steal."

In the months after the election, Facebook took minimal action against election misinformation from Trump and his allies and even less action against efforts to organize and promote "Stop the Steal" events, despite a clear problem. The platform finally made changes after the tragic event at the Capitol, announcing it would remove content with the phrase "stop the steal" in the lead-up to President-elect Joe Biden's inauguration and banning "Stop the Steal" organizer Ali Alexander.

Facebook also temporarily banned Trump from both Facebook and Instagram for at least two weeks until Inauguration Day, claiming that "the risks of allowing the President to continue to use our service during this period are simply too great." Whether or not the former president regains his account is now in the hands of Facebook's Oversight Board.

Even though the platform said it retroactively removed "Stop the Steal" groups and content, many still remain active. It appears Facebook is removing only content that uses the exact phrase "stop the steal," and even then, it hasn't gotten it all.

For example, we found several similar "stop the steal" related posts, some remaining and some removed. One post with "stop the steal" language was removed, and two others that don't have that specific wording -- but are otherwise the same -- remain available.
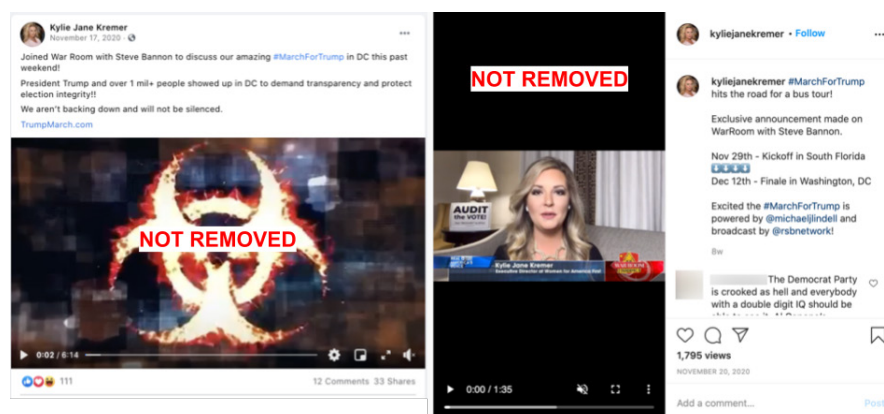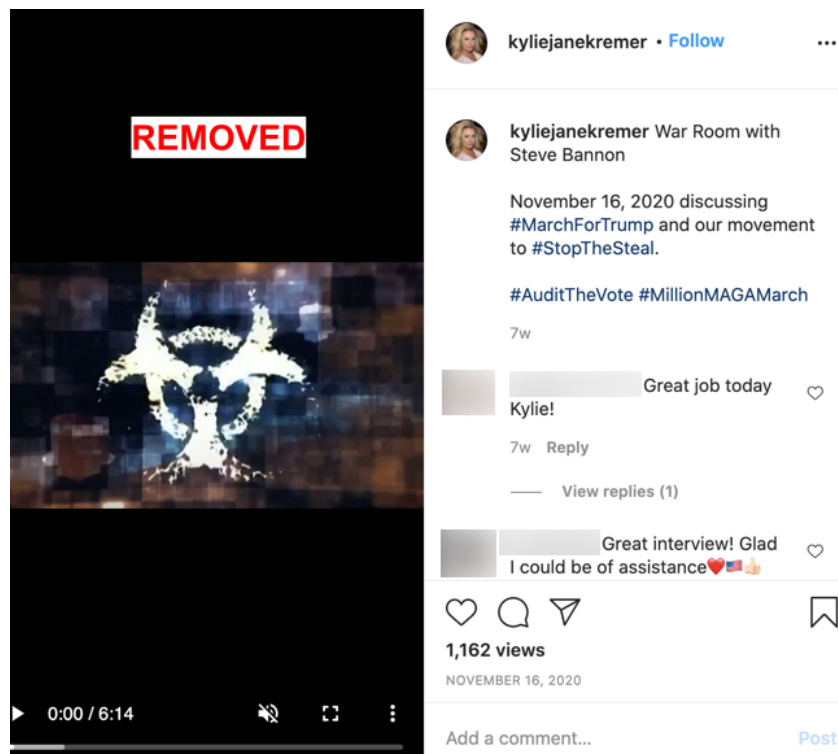
Media Matters has also identified over 190 active posts from Republican members of Congress pushing "Stop the Steal," related events, and other related keywords prior to the January 6 riot. And we identified at least 230 Facebook groups dedicated to the topic of so-called election fraud, roughly 150 of which are still active on Facebook. (This activity also counters Facebook's claims that the insurrection was not organized on its platform.)

Several Republican members of Congress promoted "Stop the Steal" on their Facebook pages. Facebook has not taken down these posts.

Some members of the "sedition caucus" — the 147 Republican members of Congress who voted against certifying the election results after pro-Trump rioters stormed the Capitol — used either their official or unofficial Facebook pages (or both) to promote election misinformation about voter fraud and "Stop the Steal" events.

Between Election Day and January 13, "sedition caucus" members mentioned keywords related to "Stop the Steal" **a total of 193 times on Facebook**. Members pushing "Stop the Steal" include Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene (R-GA), Rep. Ronny Jackson (R-TX), Rep. Louie Gohmert (R-TX), Rep. Madison Cawthorn (R-NC), Rep. Mo Brooks (R-AL), and Rep. Paul Gosar (R-AZ).

MARJORIE TAYLOR GREENE

Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene is a QAnon and 9/11 conspiracy theorist who was a right-wing commentator prior to being elected to represent Georgia's 14th Congressional District. Greene has a history of using social media to spread misinformation and toxic rhetoric -- something that recently got her suspended from Twitter for 12 hours.

Greene's posts about "Stop the Steal" were no exception to this trend. Since Election Day, Greene has used the phrase in posts on her unofficial, or personal, Facebook page **at least 32 times**, with 29 of these posts still active on the platform. At least 12 of these posts encourage users to sign her official "Stop the Steal" petition. She has also made **at least 56 other posts using similar keywords**. (We searched for the keywords stop the steal, stopthesteal, sts, fightfortrump, fight for trump, saveamerica, save america, fightforamerica, and fight for america.)

Greene's official Facebook page has **4 posts with nearly 7,000 total interactions** using these same keywords to refer to "Stop the Steal" without using the specific phrase.
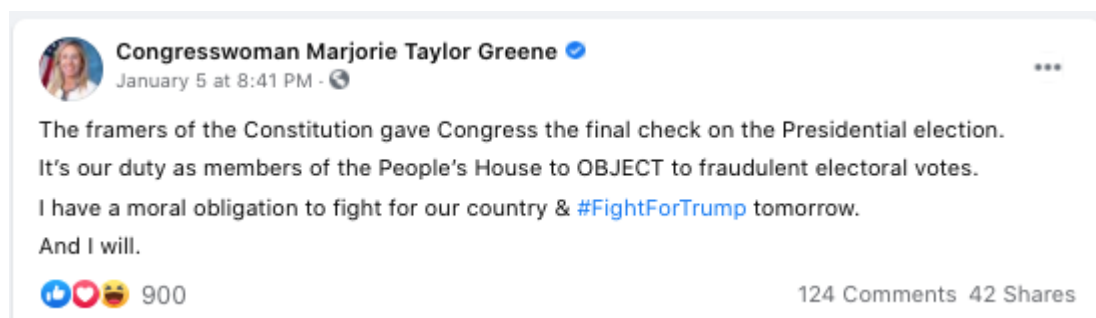
RONNY JACKSON

Rep. Ronny Jackson, a former White House doctor, has made **at least 30 posts** since Election Day using his unofficial page that mention a number of keywords related to "Stop the Steal." Notably, several of these posts appear to have been attempts at fundraising based on the January 6 event, and he even encouraged people to "FIGHT FOR TRUMP" on the morning of the insurrection.

LOUIE GOHMERT

Since Election Day, Rep. Louie Gohmert has made **5 posts using his official page** that mention "Stop The Steal." Many of these posts also included inaccurate content from right-wing media outlets such as Newsmax and The Epoch Times promoting conspiracy theories and misinformation about the election results.
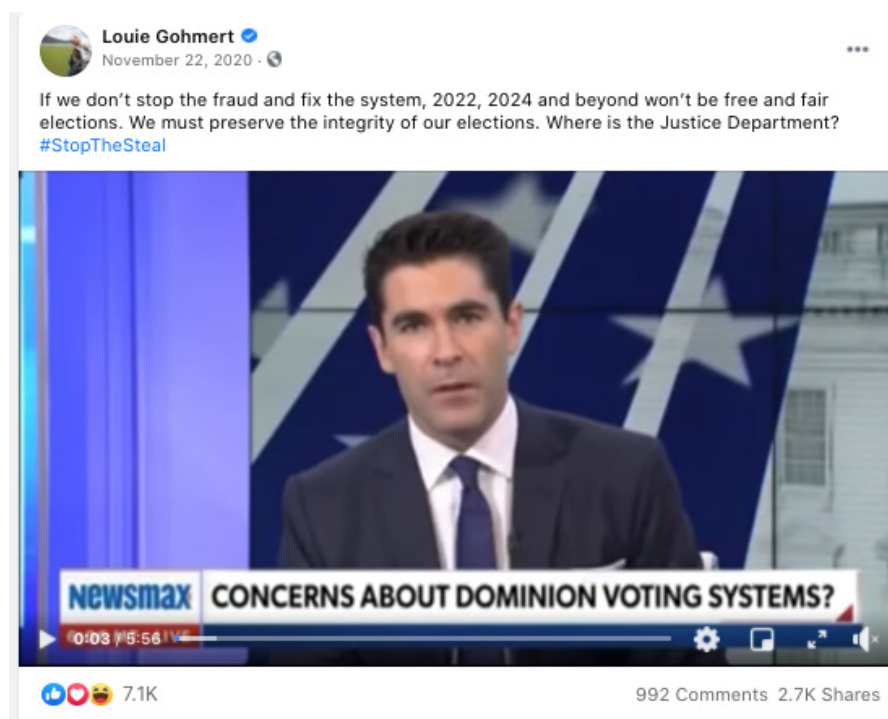
MADISON CAWTHORN

Newly elected Rep. Madison Cawthorn has used his campaign page to promote "Stop the Steal" at least 4 times since Election Day. These posts are self-promotional, encouraging people to donate to "defend our election" or even touting his participation as a speaker at the rally prior to the insurrection at the Capitol.
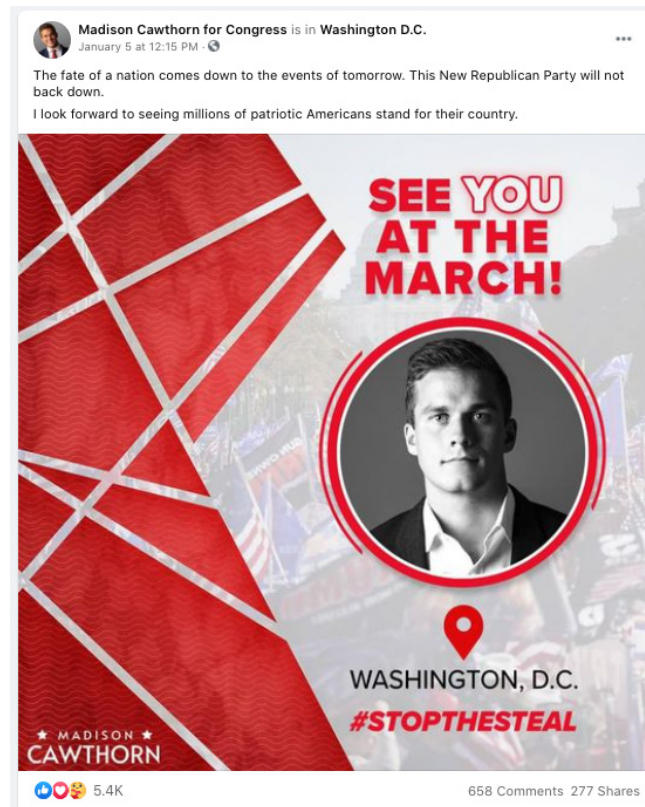
MO BROOKS

Rep. Mo Brooks has mentioned "Stop the Steal" on his official page only once since Election Day, in which he asked people to "tune in" to the January 6 rally and said he was going to "tell the American people about the election system weaknesses that the Socialist Democrats exploited to steal this election." Another official post related to "stop the steal" features a statement in which Brooks defends his involvement with the "Stop the Steal" rally against "Vicious & Scurrilous Fake News Media And Socialist Democrat Attacks." These two posts earned over 18,000 total interactions.

PAUL GOSAR

Rep. Paul Gosar spoke at one of the "Stop the Steal" events held in Arizona, pushing baseless claims of election fraud and falsely claiming that the results of the presidential election could be overturned. He reportedly promoted "Stop the Steal" events dozens of times and even promoted the January 6 event in D.C. with a post from his official government Facebook page. This post earned over 5,000 interactions.

Facebook's narrow policy against "Stop the Steal" content still allows groups dedicated to "stopping" election fraud to thrive on the platform

Media Matters has identified at least 230 Facebook groups related to election fraud that were actively attracting members after the election by referencing "Stop the Steal" or election fraud in their name and/or sharing content related to voting. These groups -- which range from having just one member to thousands -- were also active after the January 6 insurrection.

Notably, 91 of these groups specifically mentioned "Stop the Steal" or similar language about a "stolen election" in their name or within posts. Following Facebook's policy change, the platform removed 66 of those groups and as of January 28, 23 remain active on Facebook, with some of them seeming to have evaded the ban by changing their names. Two groups are archived because they no longer have an administrator to run them. The active groups are:

- Protect the Vote : Wisconsin
- stop the democrats from stealing the election
- Steal The Election Start A Civil War
- Stop the Trump Steal election fraud again Kamala Harris and Joe Biden
- StopTheVoteSteal
- Stolen 2020 Election
- stolen election
- Patriots for a Fair Election (formerly StolenElection2020)
- BIDEN STOLE the Election
- Stolen Election: Biden will never be my President
- MAGA movement 2021 #Trump2024 (formerly Free and Fair Elections, 2020 was stolen.)
- Stop the Count
- Biden stole the election
- Conservatives United (formerly Stop The Theft)
- Theft by the Left
- Stop the vote stealing
- The Election is Being Stolen.

- Joe Biden stole the 2020 presidential election
- Joe Biden Stole the 2020 Election.
- Joe Biden stole the election
- Biden should not be President they stole the Election
- Joe Biden is a kiddy toucher that stole the election
- Biden Stole The VOTE!

Of the 230 total groups, 139 didn't mention "stop the steal" specifically but are related to so-called election fraud. Facebook removed only 6 of these groups, while 4 groups have been archived. As of January 28, 129 of these groups are still active, despite also being dedicated to stopping (nonexistent) voter fraud and having similar content to the "Stop the Steal" groups. Some of these election fraud groups with thousands of members include:

- We the People… Demand the TRUTH! — over 40,700 members

- Demand Regular in Person Voting Option New Jersey — over 18,600 members

- VOTE '22 — roughly 16,000 members
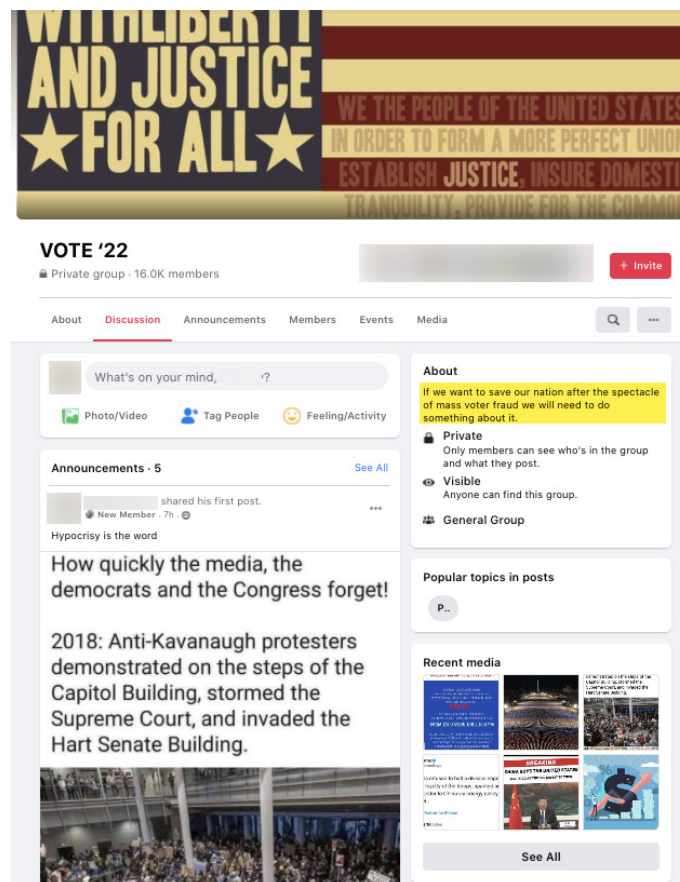
- UNITE LONG ISLAND-Separate Our Votes! — roughly 12,000 members

- We the People (formerly Audit the Vote) — over 9,700 members

Several GOP organizations posted a flyer on Facebook calling for "Operation Occupy the Capitol" with the hashtag "1776Rebel"

13th January 2021

Before the deadly pro-Trump riots in Washington, D.C., several Republican Party organizations used Facebook to post a flyer that called for "Operation Occupy the Capitol" and promoted the hashtag "1776Rebel." Facebook has been a cesspool of pro-Trump insurrectionist activity.

NBC's Ben Collins and Brandy Zadrozny previously reported on an "Operation Occupy the Capitol" flyer appearing "on Instagram and Facebook in December" and wrote that "that call to arms is just one of the many warning signs on extremist sites and mainstream social media platforms that extremism experts say were easy to spot but ultimately disregarded by law enforcement in the runup to Wednesday's riot at the Capitol."

The flyer is connected to a group called MAGA Drag The Interstate, which has organized pro-Trump events across the country.

Media Matters previously reported that several Republican Party organizations -- including the Texas state GOP and county parties in California, Oklahoma, and Texas -- promoted a QAnon-themed flyer connected to that group in September. QAnon supporter Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene (R-GA) promoted the MAGA Drag The Interstate website on October 23.

Media Matters found that several Republican Party organizations promoted the pro-insurrectionist flyer -- which encouraged people to head to Washington, D.C., or their local state capitol -- on Facebook.

THE BENTON COUNTY CENTRAL COMMITTEE IN OREGON:

THE DEWITT REPUBLICAN PARTY IN TEXAS:

DeWitt GOP
December 27, 2020 at 10:15 PM · 🌐

American Patriots will be traveling from across the country to Washington DC Capitol Hill. The Fight For Freedom (Protest shutdowns, mask mandates and discuss COVID-19 Vaccines) and Demand for a Constitutional Free & Fair Election (Call to Action).
Confirmed Speakers:
Mike Lindell
Stephen Willeford
Joy Villa
Physicians For Trump, Lawyers For Trump, Pastors For Trump, Latinos For Trump, Vets For Trump, Blacks For Trump, Asians for Trump, etc, just to name a few...

THE HAYWOOD COUNTY REPUBLICAN PARTY IN NORTH CAROLINA:

Haywood County Republican Party
December 30, 2020 at 10:19 PM · 🌐

Who's going to Washington, D.C. or to Raleigh? Please share this!

THE PICKENS COUNTY REPUBLICAN PARTY IN GEORGIA:

Pickens County Georgia Republican Party
January 3 at 12:21 PM · 🌐

🔔 Occupy The Capitol Rally:

(Happening In All 50 States) 🇺🇸

When: January 6, 2021 at 12:00 PM.

Where: Georgia State Capitol

206 Washington St SW
Atlanta, GA 30334

Go to: magadragtheinterstate.com/event for more details.

Dozens of Republican Party groups used Facebook to help organize bus trips to DC for pro-Trump insurrection

12th January 2021

Dozens of Republican Party groups used Facebook to help organize bus trips to Washington, D.C., for events that ended up becoming the deadly January 6 pro-Trump riot at the U.S. Capitol.

"This is a call to ALL patriots from Donald J Trump for a BIG protest in Washington DC! TAKE AMERICA BACK! BE THERE, WILL BE WILD!" wrote the New Hanover County GOP of North Carolina in a Facebook post advertising bus seats. (The phrase "be there, will be wild!" was a rallying cry by Trump to his followers for that day.)

"BUS TRIP to DC …. #StoptheSteal. If your passions are running hot and you're intending to respond to the President's call for his supporters to descend on DC on Jan 6, LISTEN UP!" wrote the Polk County Republican Party of North Carolina in a Facebook post.

"Fight back! Stop the Steal MAGA Bus Trip … Tell Congress - DO NOT CERTIFY THIS VOTE," stated a flier posted by the Bergen County Republican Organization in New Jersey.

Days after the Trump riot, Facebook belatedly said it would remove "Stop the Steal" content. Numerous associated groups are still active on the platform, which served as a key staging ground for organizing the pro-Trump events that culminated in the attack on the Capitol last week.

Right-wing media figures, Republican Party officials, and President Donald Trump also helped incite the deadly pro-Trump riots on January 6.

The following are over two dozen links to Republican Party organizations that used Facebook to help bring people to D.C. on January 6:

- Accomack County Republicans (VA)
- Ashtabula County Republican Party (OH)
- Augusta County Republican Committee (VA)
- Bedford County Republican Party (TN)
- Bergen County Republican Organization (NJ)
- Berks County Republican Committee (PA)
- Carroll County Republican Committee (VA)
- Cheboygan County Republicans (MI)
- Crawford County Republican Party (PA)
- Cumberland County GOP (PA)
- Delaware Republican Party (DE)
- Emmet County Republican Party (MI)
- Hoke County GOP (NC)
- Huntingdon County Republican Committee (PA)
- Huron County Republican Party (MI)
- Martin County Republican Party (FL)
- McLean County Republican Party (IL) [Update 1/13: The link is no longer available.]
- Monongalia County GOP (PA)
- Moon GOP (PA)

- Oceana County GOP (MI)

- New Hanover County GOP (NC)

- Pasco County Republican Executive Committee (FL)

- Polk County North Carolina Republican Party (NC)

- Portage County Ohio Republican Party (OH) [Update 1/13: The link is no longer available.]

- Republican Committee of Chester County (PA)

- Republican Party of Shawano (WI)

- Republican Party of Virginia Beach (VA)

- Robertson County Republican Party (TN)

- Rutherford County GOP (TN)

- St. Johns County Republican Party (FL)

- Sussex County Republicans (DE)

- Trumbull County GOP (OH)

- Washington County Republican Party (WI)

- Waupaca County Republican Party (WI)

- Westmoreland County Republican Committee (PA)

- Williamsburg James City County Republicans (VA)

"Stop the Steal" organizers used Facebook and Instagram to promote events, including the rally that led to a mob breaching the Capitol

12th January 2021

In an interview on Monday, Facebook's COO Sheryl Sandberg falsely claimed that these events were largely organized on other platforms

After a pro-Trump mob stormed the Capitol last week seeking to overturn the presidential election, Facebook finally took action against efforts to organize and promote "Stop the Steal" events on its platform, including by removing "Stop the Steal" content and organizer Ali Alexander from the site. But the pro-Trump group Women for America First and its leaders Kylie Jane Kremer and Amy Kremer, who organized the "Save America March" along with Alexander, are still on Facebook and Instagram even though they post almost exclusively to promote "Stop the Steal" events.

During an interview on January 11, Sheryl Sandberg, Facebook's chief operating officer, dismissed the company's role in enabling the insurrection, claiming that "these events were largely organized on platforms that don't have our abilities to stop hate, don't have our standards and don't have our transparency."

The Recount ✔
@therecount

Facebook COO Sheryl Sandberg says the Capitol Hill riots were not organized on its platform.

"I think these events were largely organized on platforms that don't have our abilities to stop hate, and don't have our standards, and don't have our transparency."

#REUTERSNEXT

12:01 PM · Jan 11, 2021

♡ 852   💬 3K   🔗 Copy link to Tweet
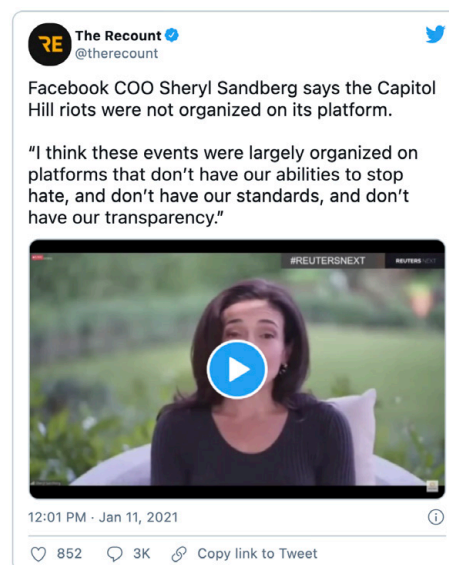
But in reality, Facebook struggled to stop the spread of election misinformation during the campaign and after the election, and the platform's response to "Stop the Steal" and similar efforts has been reactive, despite many clear warning signs. For example, although the platform removed one of the original "Stop the Steal" groups on Facebook in the days following the election, the company ultimately failed to take action against hundreds more similar groups that were trying to delegitimize the election. Earlier, Media Matters had identified at least 70 "Stop the Steal" groups on Facebook, 46 of which were private. Facebook has struggled to enforce its policies within private groups.

The tragic events at the Capitol were a culmination of months of President Donald Trump and his supporters in right-wing media and on social media repeatedly pushing misinformation to subvert the election and promoting events to "stop the steal," a phrase used to baselessly accuse Democrats of election fraud. Prior to the mob's violent attack on January 6, Trump spoke at the "March to Save America," which was organized and promoted by Women for America First and Alexander, and the president urged his supporters "to show strength" and to go to the Capitol.

"You don't concede when there's theft involved," Trump said. "And to use a favorite term that all of you people really came up with, we will stop the steal."

Following the violence at the Capitol, Facebook announced it would remove content with the phrase "stop the steal" in the lead-up to President-elect Joe Biden's inauguration, and the company temporarily banned Trump from its platform.

Facebook also belatedly took down Alexander's Facebook page, profile, and Instagram account on January 11, one day after Twitter and several other tech companies announced permanent bans of the organizer following the pro-Trump riot. Despite Twitter's ban, Alexander still maintains and uses his account on the Twitter-owned live streaming app Periscope.

Tweet by Zachary Petrizzo (@ZTPetrizzo): "Far-right activist and "Stop the Steal" leader Ali Alexander in Freedom Plaza leads the crowd in a "Victory or death!" chant." 2:00 PM · Jan 5, 2021. 224 likes, 196 replies.

But as with many Facebook enforcement actions, the slow removal of "Stop the Steal" events and organizers is too little, too late. Before Facebook took action against Alexander, he spent months pushing election misinformation on Instagram, amplifying Trump and his allies' endorsement of Alexander's events, and promoting "Stop the Steal" events across the country, including the January 6 rally in Washington, D.C. In one post, Alexander even called for a "hostile takeover" and promised to "remove anyone with a title or paycheck in our way."

Facebook has not taken any similar action against Women for America First and its leaders Kylie Jane and Amy Kremer, who organized the "March to Save America" along with Alexander. They still have Facebook and Instagram accounts, even though they use Facebook and Instagram almost exclusively to promote "Stop the Steal" events across the country.

Notable posts from these organizers promoting the "March to Save America" and other "Stop the Steal" events include one telling Trump that "the calvary is coming" on January 6, among these others:

kyliejanekremer • Follow

kyliejanekremer War Room with Steve Bannon

November 16, 2020 discussing #MarchForTrump and our movement to #StopTheSteal.

#AuditTheVote #MillionMAGAMarch

7w

Great job today Kylie!

7w   Reply

—— View replies (1)

Great interview! Glad I could be of assistance ❤️🇺🇸👍🏻

1,162 views

NOVEMBER 16, 2020

Add a comment...   Post

0:00 / 6:14

womenforamericafirst ✔ • Follow
Elipse

womenforamericafirst ✔ THE #MARCHFORTRUMP BUS TOUR CONCLUDES TOMORROW AT THE ELIPSE WITH POTUS! THANK YOU TO EVERYONE WHO HAS COME TO ONE OF OUR MANY STOPS ON OUR BUS ROUTE! (doors open 7am)

SEE YOU TOMORROW!

#StopTheSteal #DoNotCertify

1,490 views

6 DAYS AGO

Add a comment...   Post

womenforamericafirst ✦ • Follow
Washington D.C.

womenforamericafirst ✓ BE A PART OF HISTORY!

January 6th - arrive by 9AM

White House Ellipse

RSVP @ TrumpMarch.com

#MarchForTrump #StopTheSteal #DoNotCertify #ElectionIntegrity

1,601 views
JANUARY 2

Add a comment...   Post

THE BIGGEST EVENT
TRUMP THANK YOU

kyliejanekremer • Follow
Freedom Plaza

kyliejanekremer General Michael Flynn was able to speak, unmuzzled, for the first time in nearly four years on Saturday at our #MarchforTrump rally in DC!!

A special thank you General Flynn and his family for joining us and for never giving in to the deep state.

We are grateful for you!

#StopTheSteal #FightLikeAFlynn #AuditTheVote #WomenForTrump #WFAF

4w

467 likes
DECEMBER 14, 2020

Add a comment...   Post

amykremer ✓ • Follow
Washington D.C.

amykremer ✓ POTUS @realDonaldTrump & the Trump family are grateful for the #MarchForTrump!

Thank you @laraleatrump for the shoutout today.

The ppl are standing strong to #StopTheSteal.

Liked by ____ and others

DECEMBER 10, 2020

Add a comment...   Post

DAVID BRODY
The Water Cooler

Just the News

---

amykremer ✓ • Follow

amykremer ✓ 3 days apart

One of these are not like the other...

📷 1 -
A rally for @realDonaldTrump & he wasn't even there!

📷 2 -
A rally w/ Joe Biden right there on the stage.

#MarchForTrump #StopTheSteal #Trumpwon #AuditTheVote #MAGA #makeamericagreatagain #keepamericagreat #KAG #TeamTrump #WomenforTrump

3w

Liked by ____ and **others**

DECEMBER 16, 2020

Add a comment...   Post

December 12, 2020

December 15, 2020

MyPillow CEO Mike Lindell's Facebook posts are full of insider information from January 6

5th February 2021

Lindell has posted multiple images and videos from January 6 that depict his actions in the lead-up to the Capitol insurrection and potentially implicate others

MyPillow CEO and pro-Trump media darling Mike Lindell has been a leading voice in pushing dangerous conspiracy theories about the 2020 presidential election (and bankrolling the proliferation of this lie) across right-wing media and social media, most recently through a two-hour film filled with disinformation. He pushed this conspiracy theory in appearances at two rallies the day before the January 6 insurrection at the U.S. Capitol. He also visited the White House nine days after the insurrection to reportedly encourage then-President Donald Trump to consider enacting martial law.

Now, several of Lindell's public social media posts appear to reveal additional information about his activities in the lead-up to the events that day -- and could implicate other prominent figures.

"SAVE AMERICA MARCH" VIP SECTION PHOTO

A photo posted on both Lindell's prolific personal Facebook account and his public Facebook page appears to show Lindell, QAnon supporter and former Trump adviser Michael Flynn, and an individual that appears to be Rep. Lauren Boebert (R-CO) in a VIP section of the January 6 "Save America" rally outside of the White House, held just before the Capitol insurrection.

The photo shows Lindell posing with Flynn, and the caption reads: "It has been a long day so far! Becoming great friends...it's an honor to help General Flynn! Donald J. Trump is going to be our president for 4 more years!" ABC News previously reported that Flynn was invited to attend the rally and that a source indicated he had left partway through the event out of disgust for the "pointless gathering."

Another person in the background of the photo appears to be Lauren Boebert, a far-right militia-connected member of Congress from Colorado. (Here are some photos of what Boebert was wearing that day.)

The extent of Boebert's involvement and participation in the January 6 events remains unclear. Boebert does not appear to have publicly acknowledged that she attended the rally, but did tweet on January 6, "Today is 1776." The year is a reference to the American Revolution and is commonly used by followers of the QAnon conspiracy theory.

Boebert was originally included on the Wild Protest website's "invited speakers & featured guests" list for what appears to have been a separate planned event that day -- but Media Matters was unable to find evidence of any remarks she may have delivered. In mid-January, the editorial board of the largest newspaper in Colorado demanded an investigation into Boebert's role in the insurrection. The Washington Post has reported that two Democratic lawmakers saw Boebert leading a "large" tour through the Capitol tunnels days before January 6. (Boebert has denied this.)

LINDELL'S LIVESTREAM VIDEOS FROM JANUARY 6

Lindell has frequently interacted with Trump in recent years, including in the final days of his administration. Videos from his Facebook account on January 6 indicate that his contact with influential figures in the Trump inner circle may have been even more extensive in the lead-up to that day.

Lindell posted four videos to his personal Facebook account on January 6, spanning the hours before and after the putsch at the Capitol.

In a livestreamed video posted at 7:22 a.m. EST, Lindell claimed to have met with Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro's son the night before the insurrection.

"The whole world is watching," he claimed. "I met with Brazil last night, the president of Brazil's son."

(At the start of the video, he told viewers he will be speaking in an hour and a half. However, *Media Matters* did not find any evidence that Lindell delivered remarks on January 6.)

In a second video from 7:26 a.m. EST, Lindell said he spent the previous two days with Flynn, conspiracy theorist and former Trump lawyer Sidney Powell, and unnamed senators; he also claimed to have had contact with then-Vice President Mike Pence.

"I've spent the last two days -- well, actually the last two months, but the last two days with Sidney Powell, Gen. Flynn, senators," Lindell said. "I got to the vice president with a note to him."

It is unclear what the alleged note said, but many pro-Trump conspiracy theories circulating at the time suggested that the vice president had the power to block Congress' certification of the election result on January 6 -- or even to reverse it in Trump's favor.

In a different livestreamed video from 5:07 p.m. EST, which he also posted to his public Facebook page, Twitter, and Instagram accounts, Lindell stated that he was with Flynn the night before the insurrection as well, which aligns with previous reports of a January 5 meeting at the Trump International Hotel that included Lindell, Flynn, several members of the Trump family and inner circle, and several senators. In the video, Lindell says, "I was with Gen. Flynn and all this -- they were getting watched closely last night. And sure enough they did it again."

In his Facebook video, Lindell made Civil War comparisons, repeated false conspiracy theories about Dominion Voting Systems, and called the 2020 presidential election the "biggest crime in history for an election."

Lindell also denied the reality of the Capitol insurrection after the event, calling it a "joke" in a video he posted on Facebook, Twitter, Parler, and Instagram: "First of all, the riots you're seeing on TV, that's a joke. My nieces were down there, and they said 99.99% was -- it was just a peaceful protest."

And Lindell doubled down on his proliferation of the lie that President Joe Biden did not win the election, saying, "There's so much fraud that every state is going to be turned over. It was the biggest election corruption in the history. And Donald Trump is going to be our president for four more years."

Capitol Attack Was Months in the Making on Facebook

19th January 2021
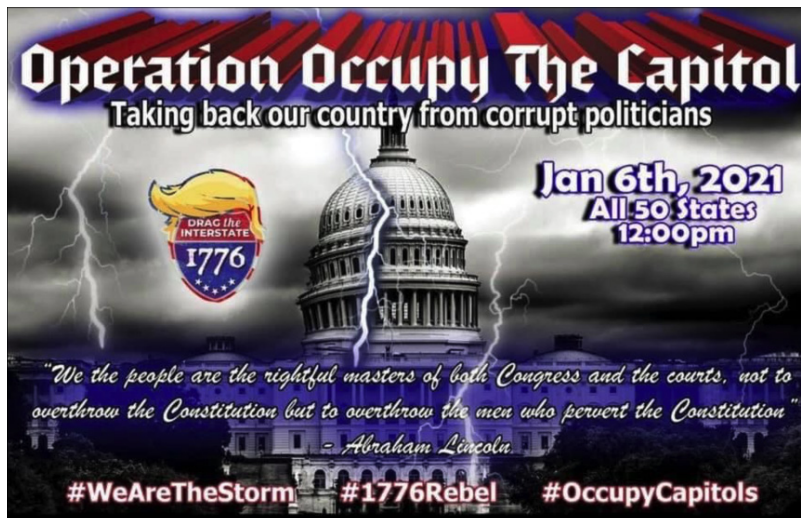
Facebook suspended President Trump following the mob attack on Congress. But the platform allowed organizing for the pro-Trump rally, as well as the spread of conspiracy theories and militant extremism that drove the rioters.

Facebook Chief Operating Officer Sheryl Sandberg made headlines for saying the mob attack on the U.S. Capitol was "largely organized" on other platforms, suggesting Facebook had done better than others at taking down dangerous content.

Not only is that assertion false, according to research by the Tech Transparency Project (TTP), but it ignores the fact that Facebook spent the past year allowing election conspiracies and far-right militia activity to proliferate on its platform, laying the groundwork for the broader radicalization that fueled the Capitol insurrection in the first place.

For months, TTP has watched extremist groups use Facebook to organize and incite members, fueled by President Trump's baseless allegations of voter fraud and a "rigged" election. Despite Facebook's new move to suspend Trump's account and other recent actions, the militant movement it allowed to flourish for so long threatens to continue its campaign of violence heading into President-elect Joe Biden's inauguration, and beyond.

For TTP, one of the first signs of mounting danger came from "boogaloo" groups, which we reported in April were using Facebook to prepare for a second civil war, often citing conspiratorial fears about coronavirus lockdowns. Members of private boogaloo groups flagged by TTP later engaged in real or attempted violence—an ominous warning of how online radicalization can spin out of control.

But that was just the beginning. Since last fall, TTP has documented numerous instances of domestic extremists discussing weapons and tactics, coordinating their activities, and spreading calls to overthrow the government on Facebook, up to and including the mob attack on the Capitol, which left at least five people dead. Much of the activity took place in private Facebook groups—insulated communities that allow people to organize out of the public eye while still having access to a large online following.

Here are some of the key takeaways from that research:

- Militant groups had planned a nationwide effort to "back up" police on Election Day against supposed antifa and Black Lives Matter protests. The event carried the logos of the Proud Boys and anti-government militias and was circulated in private far-right Facebook groups with thousands of members.
- Self-declared "patriot" groups on Facebook have ramped up their recruiting efforts tied to the election. Some of these groups promoted the Jan. 6 event at the Capitol.
- Talk of overthrowing the U.S. government increased dramatically in Facebook groups monitored by TTP following the declaration of Biden as the winner of the 2020 vote.
- A pro-Trump Facebook group required prospective members to declare if they would be willing to die for their country in order to join, in what may be a sign of growing extremism.
- Calls to "occupy Congress" were rampant on Facebook in the weeks leading up to the deadly Capitol riot, making no secret of the event's aims. Two different "occupy" event listings were written in a Nazi-style font and began circulating on Facebook in December.
- Since the insurrection, new posts promoting violence, including on Inauguration Day, have popped up on Facebook.

Below is a more detailed rundown of Facebook activity spotted by TTP before and after the Nov. 3 vote.

THE PRE-ELECTION PERIOD

In the weeks preceding the November election, members of various "patriot" Facebook groups organized efforts to intimidate voters at the polls—an early sign of trying to shape the outcome of the election by force.

On Oct. 27, an individual posted to the private Facebook group Ohio Patriot Action Network, as well as to other militia and pro-Trump groups and his personal profile, that veterans should bring their "iron" to the polls—a winking reference to weapons. The same user would go on to post threats to assassinate Joe Biden and other elected officials on his personal Facebook profile, saying "fair warn to ALL Military Snipers! Biden wins... they all GO DOWN!! Say farewell now before you can't!!" (TTP reported these threats to appropriate authorities at the time).

[Images] **Bring weapons to polls and assassination threats**
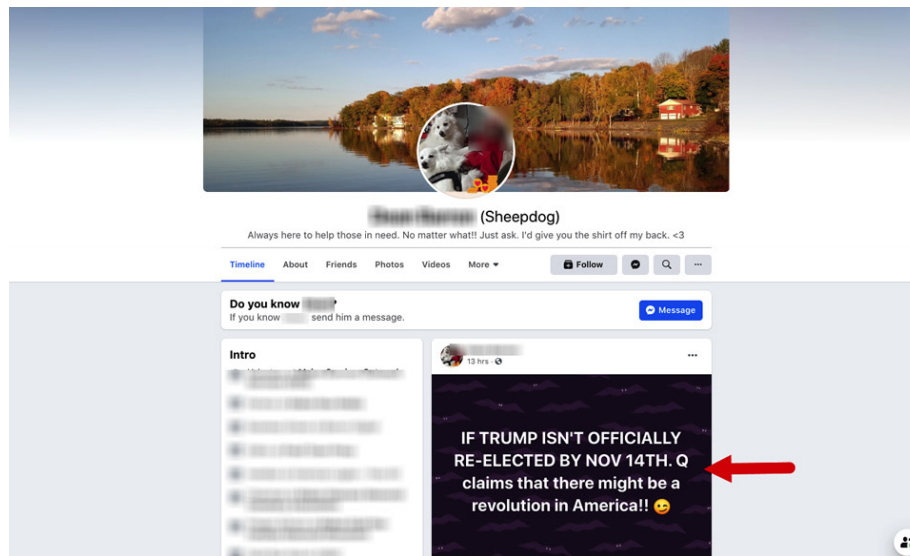
That same week, the administrator of a private Facebook group called "Patriot Riders" posted a Facebook event for an "Election Day Evening Block Biden Ride" in Johnson City, Tennessee, aimed at disrupting a local Democratic party event at voting precincts. The cover photo for the event featured the logo of the Three Percenters, an anti-government militia movement with a "track record of criminal activity ranging from weapons violations to terrorist plots and attacks," according to the Anti-Defamation League.
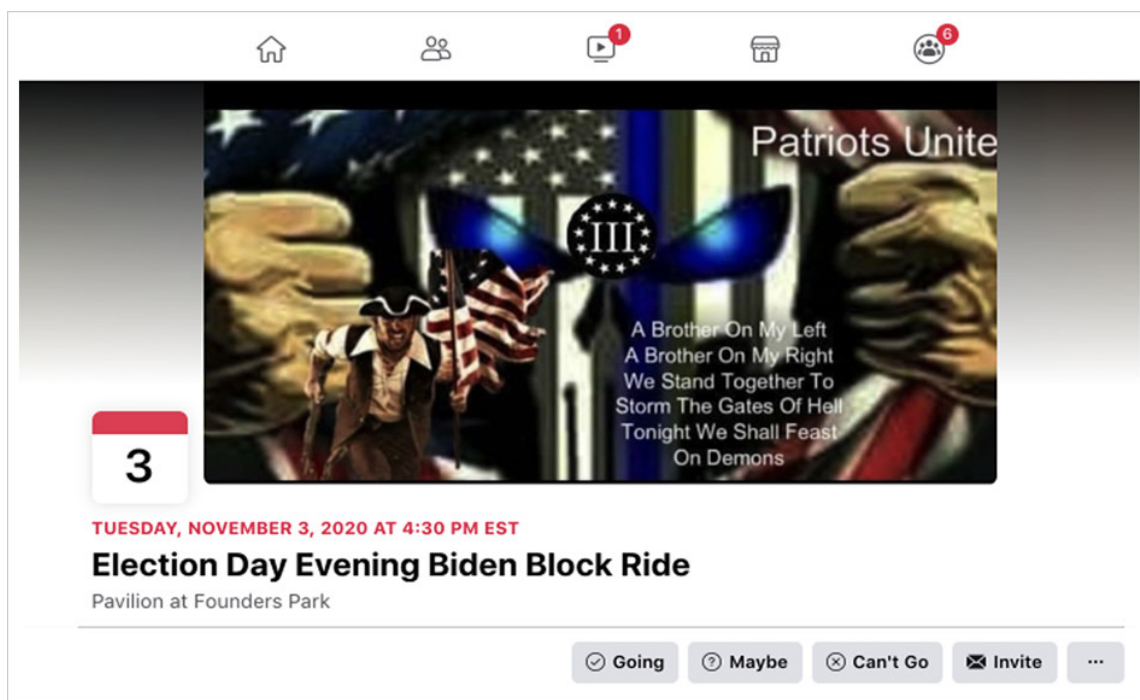
Reports from the Capitol attack have highlighted the military- and police-style preparation of many of the rioters, who were kitted out in bulletproof vests, helmets and batons. Videos show the organized nature of some in the crowd, with one group moving in a disciplined line toward the Capitol building. According to a report from The Guardian, some rioters communicated on a walkie-talkie app, with one saying, "This is what we fucking lived up for. Everything we fucking trained for." This kind of activity was not a surprise to TTP, which has been monitoring how patriot and militia groups on Facebook have put a growing emphasis on tactical training and weaponry.

The activity in a Facebook group called "FLORIDA PATRIOTS" provides a good illustration of this trend. In October, one member called for "well armed" citizens to "join our emergency response unit in all zones," while another requested information on how to "train and meet up and prep." Similar requests popped up in the "Oregon Patriots (save Oregon)" Facebook group, with one member warning not to openly share logistical details about training sessions, saying "that's not really a Facebook conversation."

[Images] **Pre-election militia training and recruiting**

These same groups appeared to ramp up their activity around Election Day.

The "FLORIDA PATRIOTS" posted a nationwide message outlining plans to provide backup to police confronting antifa and Black Lives Matter on Nov. 3. (False, right-wing rumors that antifa and BLM planned riots around the election were debunked by fact checkers.) The message featured the logos of the far-right Proud Boys, the Three Percenters and Oath Keepers, suggesting they were part of the effort. The Oath Keepers are a radical antigovernment group that "claims tens of thousands of present and former law enforcement officials and military veterans as members," according to the Southern Poverty Law Center. TTP reported this call to arms to appropriate authorities at the time.

ATTENTION ALL PATRIOT GROUPS NATIONWIDE

The following Patriot Groups will be on standby in Florida starting Tuesday the 3rd until further notice:

On 11/1/2020, all leaders from all nationwide patriot groups had an historic meeting in Florida. This meeting was held to coordinate logistics, intel and response to the coming violence created by Antifa and Black Lives Matter! We will interact and coordinate with state police, local police and county officials in each state as well as the US Marshalls, Homeland Security and the FBI to thwart all violence, looting and rioting in the coming days and weeks. The National Guard will also play a role in intel gathering and processing of violent radical leftist groups (Antifa/BLM) as well as protecting Federal buildings, Government officals and the rule of law. Patriot groups will be at the ready to provide intel and back up for overwhelmed police precincts in the event that reinforcements are needed. Have your gear ready, ammo ready and police scanner tuned to local frequencies to capture alerts as they come in. Nationwide comms will be provided in Patriot Action Network, coordination provided by local police. Record all events & flareups for prosecution at a later date! WWG1WGA

During this period, TTP also observed an escalation of threats to Biden and other Democratic politicians on Facebook. For example, a member of the "Pro-Police, Pro-Military, Pro-Trump" group in early October said Minnesota Rep. Ilhan Omar should be "sent to Guantanamo Bay," a comment that sparked replies like "Just shoot the bitch" and "she needs a drone strike." The threats to Omar remained active on Facebook as of this writing despite TTP and BuzzFeed highlighting the threat back in October.

At the same time, the rhetoric among these far-right groups began to bend toward insurrection talk. In the giant "Stop the Steal" group—which Facebook only removed after the election—members posted openly about overthrowing the government if Biden was declared the winner. "So IF they give this to Joe, how do we go about over throwing the government," one individual wrote to the group's 338,000-plus members on Nov. 4, prompting replies like, "They come for our guns, but we give them the ammo first."

One member of the "Stop the Steal" group on Nov. 3 called on others to "Gather up arms and meet at election headquarters quickly," in response to claims that conservative poll watchers were not being permitted to view the counting of votes in swing states. This same individual had previously posted on Facebook about taking over election infrastructure and removing Michigan Gov. Gretchen Whitmer by force. (Whitmer was the target of a kidnapping plot last fall.) BuzzFeed reported on Jan. 8—two days after the Capitol riot—that copycat "Stop the Steal" groups were still flourishing on Facebook, providing a continuing space for such threats.

[Images] **Stop the Steal group posts**
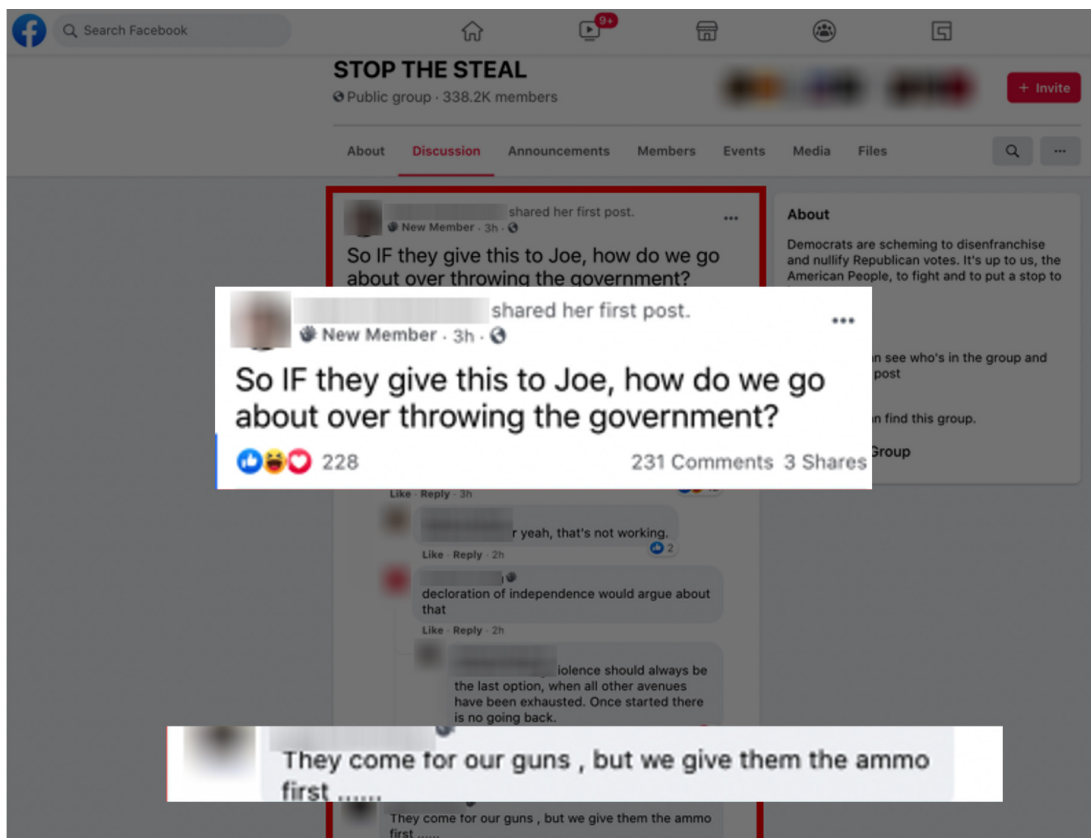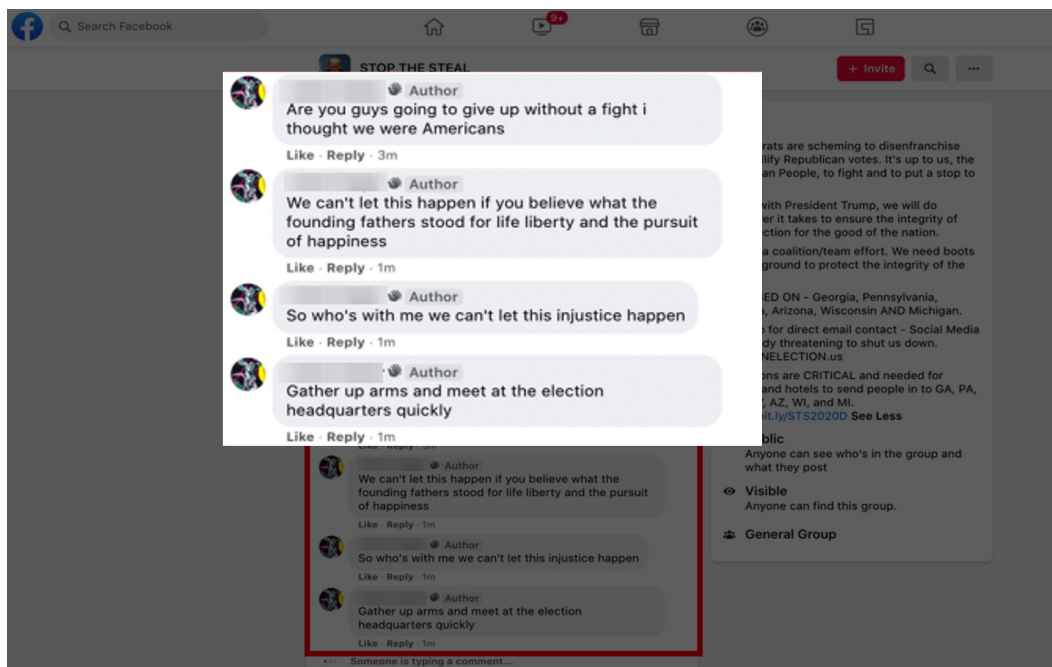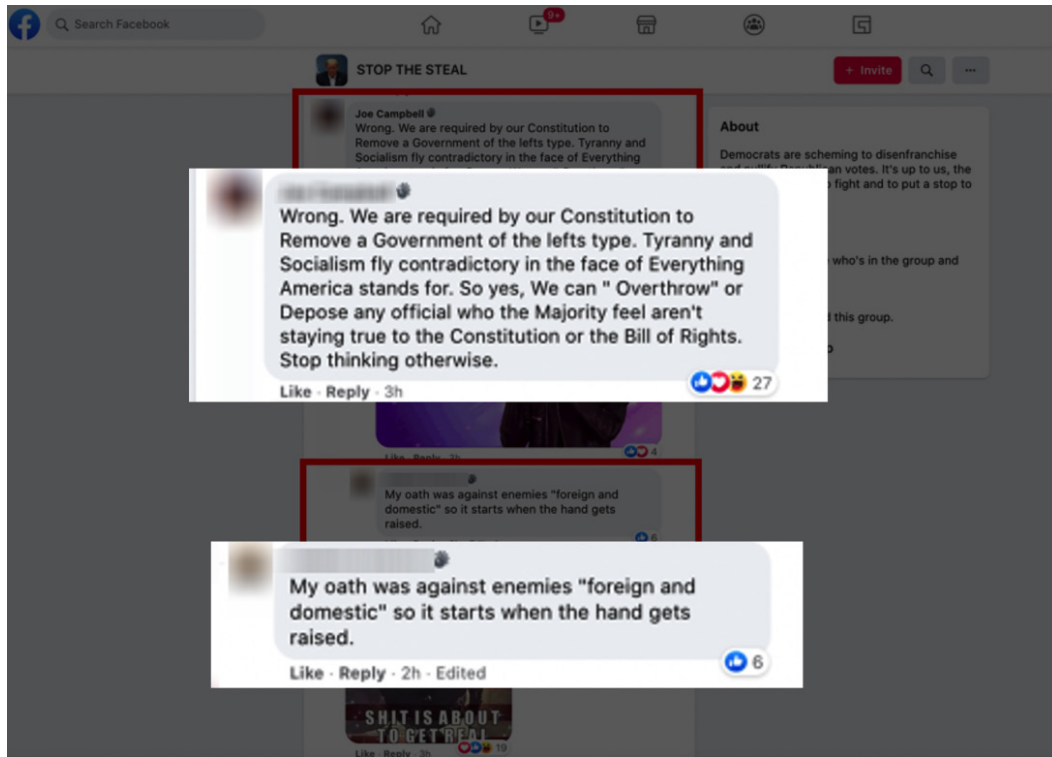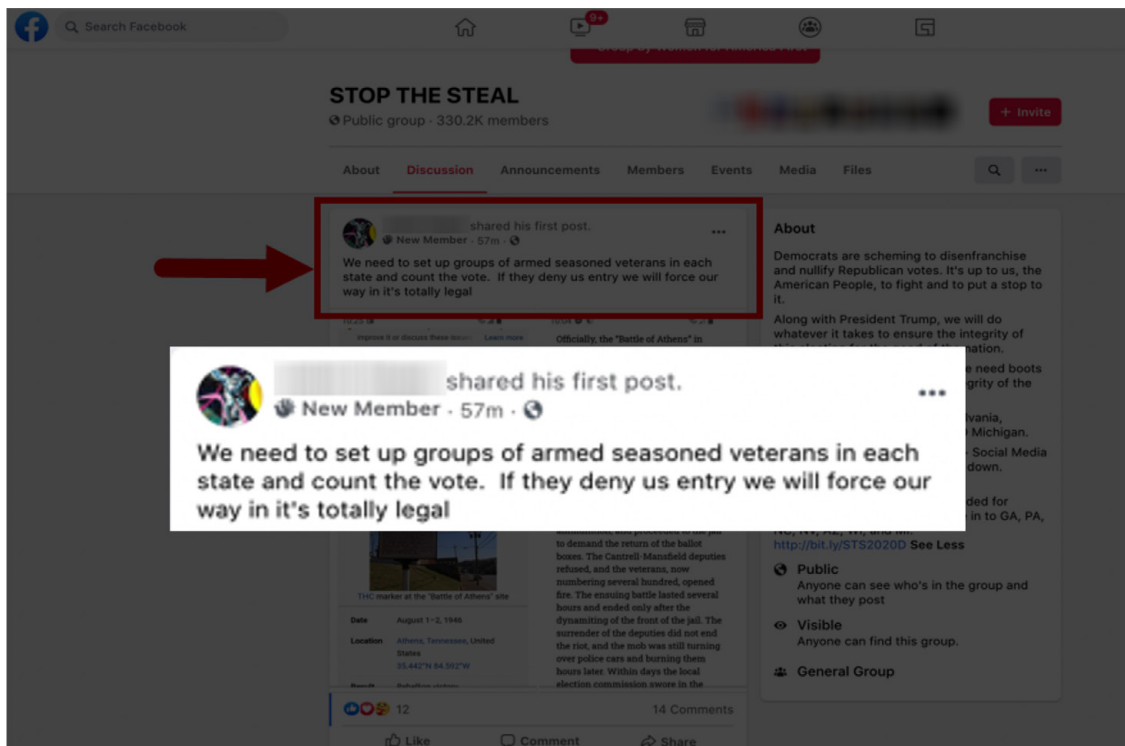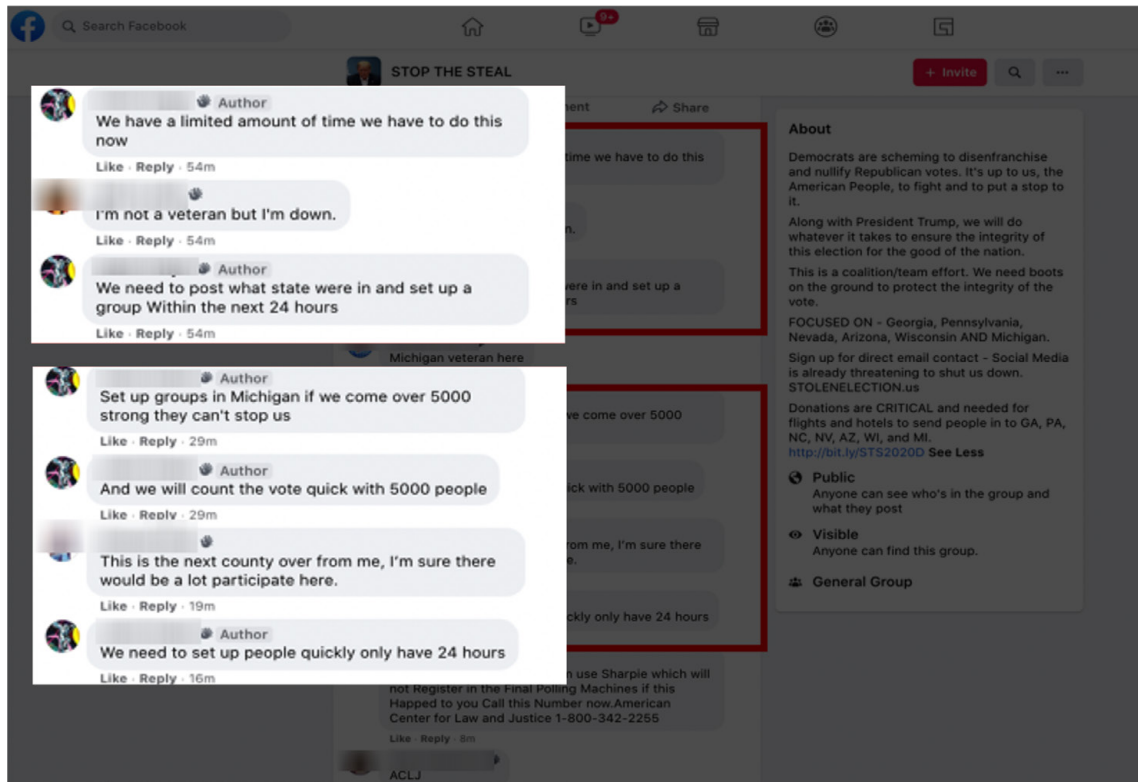
POST-ELECTION

News of Biden's victory sparked increasingly violent talk in pro-Trump and militia groups on Facebook, which allowed the threats to freely circulate.

The Florida-based administrator of a Facebook militia group called "Eagle Team 1 LLC," for example, posted frequent calls to "take down" the government. "The politicians in Washington DC are the biggest threat 2 our country and democracy than any foreign standing Army," read one typical post. Members replied with slogans like "locked and loaded," indicating a willingness to take up arms.

Another group called "Take America Back. California Chapter" ramped up its recruitment drive, posting on Nov. 10 and Nov. 12 about an assembly of "Echo Company, California State Militia, 2nd Regiment," which was described as a "defense" resource for people who want to "maintain life, liberty and property during any 'Severe Controversy' that may arise."

[Images] **Post-election militia organizing and recruiting**
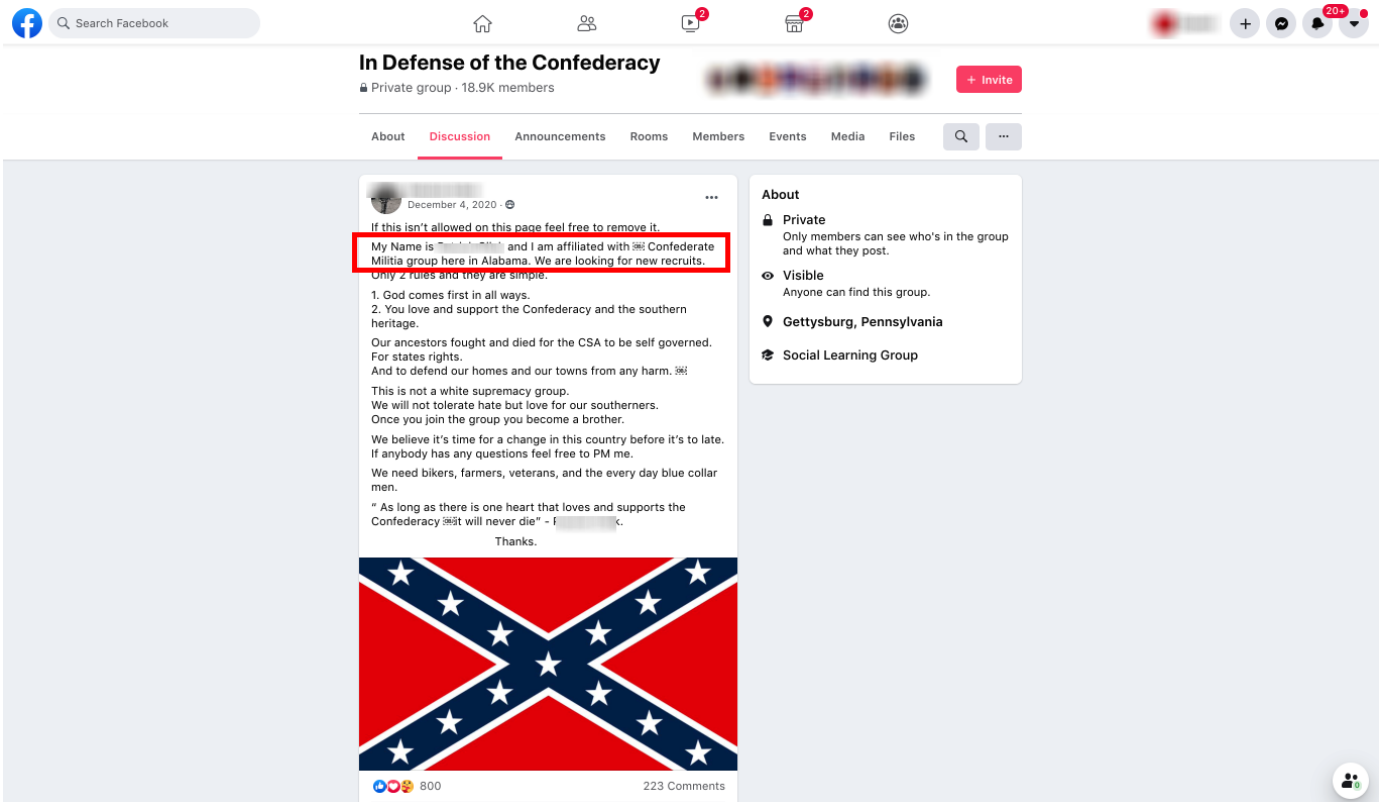
A member of the Facebook group "Patriot Riders," meanwhile, called for people to organize in their local areas, posting on Nov. 7, "I urge all PATRIOTS to develop rapid responce teams in your communities, neighbor hoods and cities to defend against all threats."

This individual also made violent threats on his profile, including a Nov. 10 post that stated, "TRAITORS MUST HANG," with an image of nooses in the gallows titled "Government Repair Kit." Rioters at the U.S. Capitol on Jan. 6 used this same kind of imagery, erecting a wooden frame with a noose dangling from it just outside the Capitol. (The individual described above remains active on Facebook and continues to post threats as of this writing.)
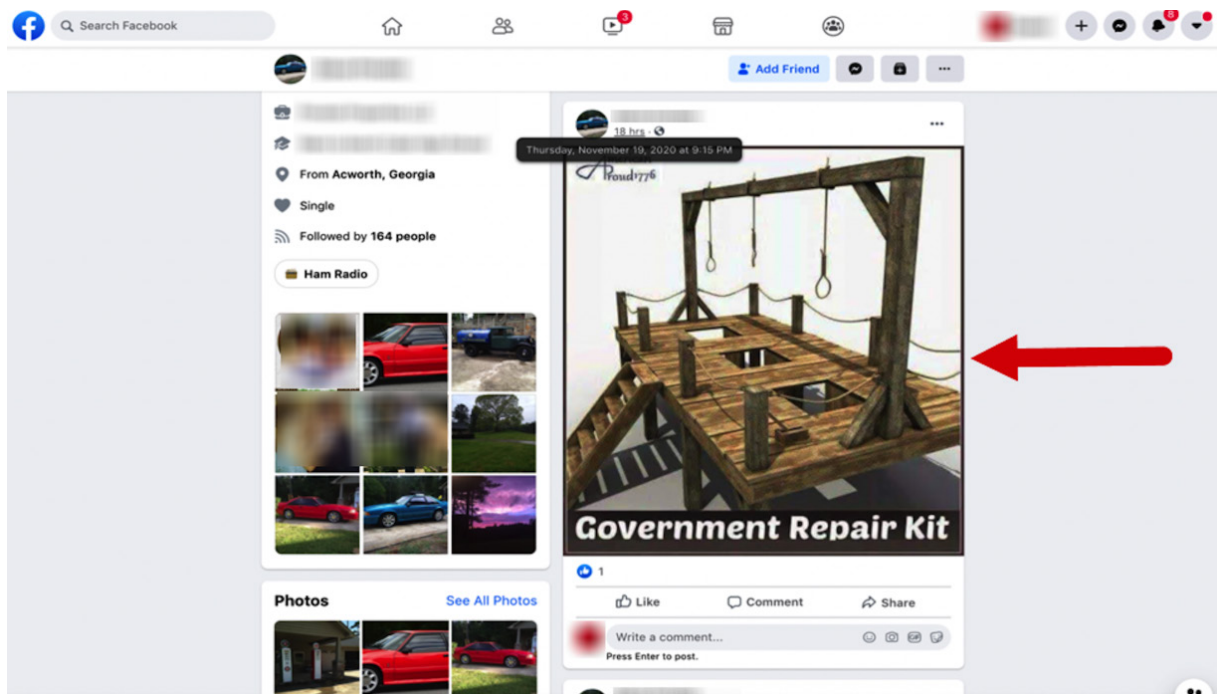
TTP also observed militia members on Facebook using increasingly extreme language in describing their cause in the post-election period.

A Facebook group created on Nov. 17 called "WE THE PEOPLE" required prospective members to answer a series of questions, including one that asked if they would be willing to be a martyr. The "yes or no" question read "Do you support our Freedom , Rights , Constitution of the United States And are willing to fight or maybe even Die for YOUR COUNTRY ?"

Despite Sheryl Sandberg's effort to point the finger at other platforms for the U.S. Capitol riot, TTP identified numerous examples of Facebook users promoting the Jan. 6 rally as an opportunity to "#OccupyCongress." "[S]upporters should storm DC in January 6th #occupycongress and the senate, prevent the vote by a force of nature," read one post, which included the hashtag for Trump's Make America Great Again slogan.

In the "Take America Back. California Chapter" Facebook group, a member on Dec. 23 issued a call to "OCCUPY THE CAPITAL JANUARY 6, 2021," with a poster that included details of the event. The poster included the words "Operation Occupy The Capitol" in the Fraktur font, which is commonly associated with the Nazi regime in Germany. Another post in a Facebook group called "The Patriot Party" included the hashtag #OccupyCongress and the slogan "The Great Betrayal," alongside text that read, "If they won't hear us, they will fear us."

[Images] **January 6th posts**

Supporters of militia and extremist groups became increasingly overt about their role in the Jan. 6 rally in the days and hours leading up to the event. In a Facebook group called "Mouthy Patriots," a member posted an announcement stating that Oath Keepers would be deploying to Washington on Jan. 5 and 6 to "Protect Events, Speakers, & Attendees." On the morning of Jan. 6, a member of the Facebook group "Under the Liberty Tree" posted a meme featuring the Three Percenter logo that said "WE CANNOT WE WILL NOT COMPLY. Prepare to Take America Back."

It was one of several militia-linked memes with calls to action that popped up in far-right Facebook groups hours before the attack on the Capitol, suggesting they may have served as dog whistle to supporters attending the rally in Washington that day. (Republican Rep. Lauren Boebert of Colorado also tweeted that morning, "Today is 1776," echoing a slogan used by far-right groups to reference a new revolution and violent uprising against the government.)

In the days since Jan. 6, Facebook has continued to allow discussion of insurrection and is even profiting from it. Research by BuzzFeed and TTP found that Facebook was pushing ads for weapons accessories and military gear to users who engage in militia and far right groups on the platform. (Facebook later paused such ads until after the inauguration.)

Following the Capitol riot, TTP also spotted a number of still-active Facebook posts that equated the insurrection with the American Revolution or tried to organize new militias.
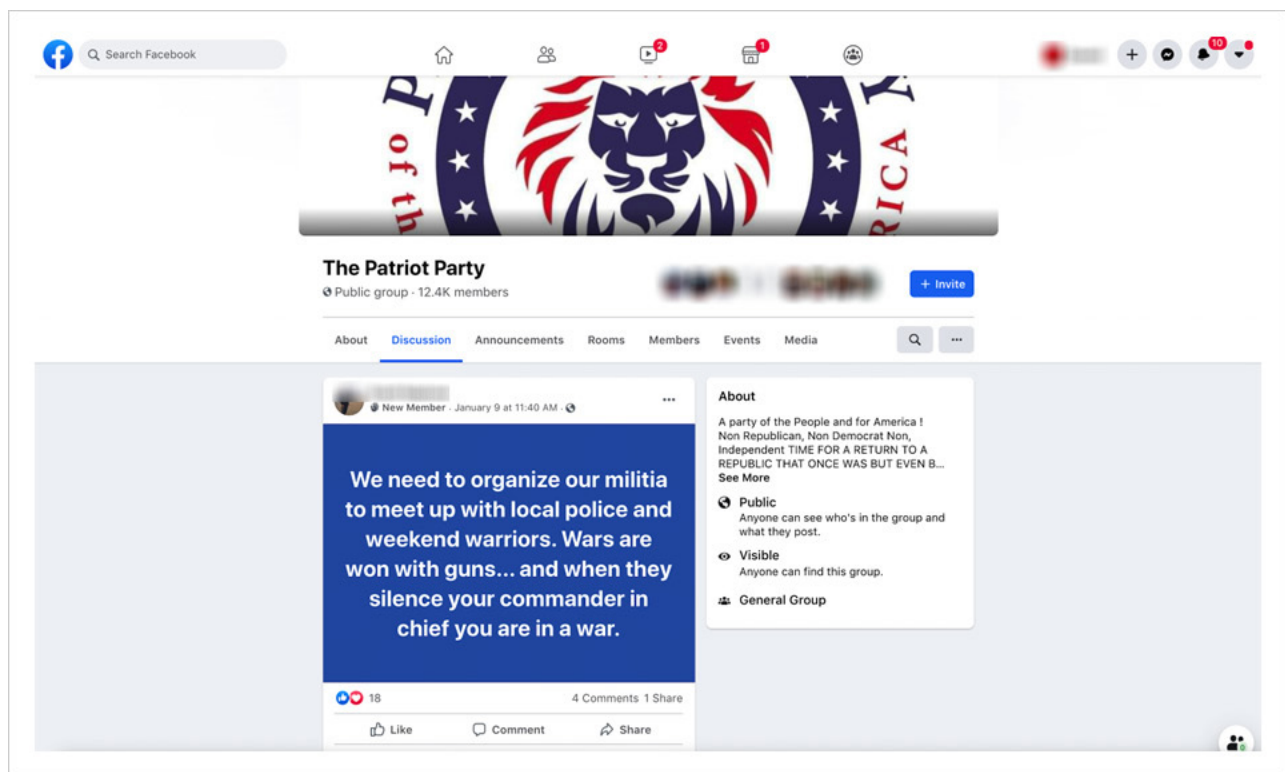
Perhaps more alarmingly, TTP found Facebook posts making new calls for violence, including around the Inauguration. One post referred to Jan. 20, Inauguration Day, as a "Tiananmen Square moment" for self-styled patriots. These messages remained active on Facebook despite the company's statement that its teams are "working 24/7 to enforce our policies around the inauguration."

CNN reported on the new posts identified by TTP on Jan. 18. In response to the report, Facebook said it removed the Tiananmen Square post, and told CNN it had "proactively detected" and was removing the "Patriot Party" group that featured the militia organizing message.
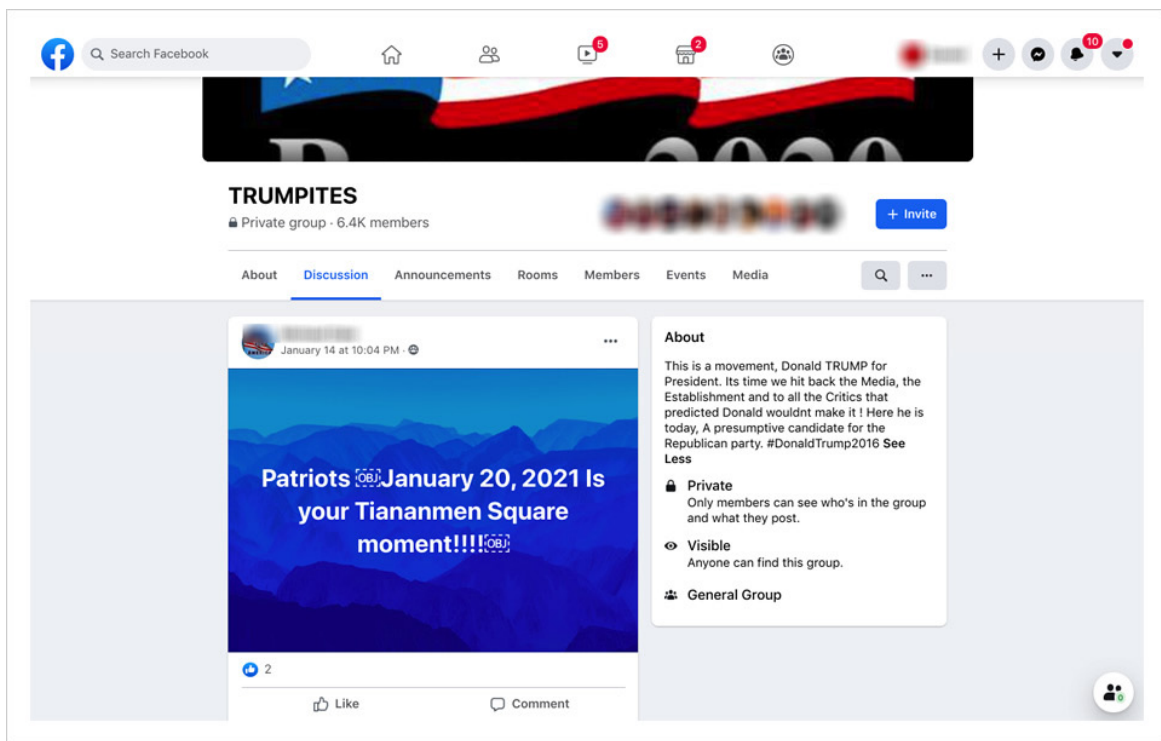
CONCLUSION

Facebook not only facilitated organizing for the Jan. 6 event in Washington that culminated in the deadly Capitol riot; it has spent the past year failing to remove extremist activity and election-related conspiracy theories stoked by President Trump that have radicalized a broad swath of the population and led many down a dangerous path.

Throughout 2020, Facebook's efforts to curb violent activity and disinformation were either too late or ineffective or both. It banned a boogaloo network in June after members of Facebook boogaloo groups were linked to a terrorism plot and murder, but its enforcement of the new policy fell short. Over the summer, Facebook banned militia groups, but it failed to take down the page for a militia event that led to the deadly shooting of two protesters in Kenosha, Wisconsin. The company's new crackdown on the phrase "stop the steal" came only after the mob attack on the Capitol.

TTP watched with growing alarm starting this fall as a broad range of "patriot," militia, and pro-Trump groups grew increasingly bold on Facebook with their organizing efforts, recruitment, and training of new members, and talk of weapons, violence, and government takeovers. As the nation heads toward Inauguration Day and contemplates life under a new Biden administration, Facebook's massive reach and patchy, inconsistent moderation mean it's likely to continue to be a gathering space for extremist groups that seek to do harm.

Facebook Home to Militant 'Patriot Party' Movement

2nd February 2021

Facebook has announced crackdowns on militia groups and "stop the steal" election conspiracies. But it's allowing both to converge in a new pro-Trump "Patriot Party" movement that's growing rapidly on the platform.

Facebook is allowing a far-right, pro-Trump "Patriot Party" movement to take root on its platform, combining elements of militia activity and election conspiracy theories, according to research by the Tech Transparency Project (TTP), which highlights Facebook's continuing problems removing dangerous and misleading content from its platform.

Donald Trump, frustrated by what he viewed as insufficient Republican backing for his effort to overturn the election result, reportedly held discussions about forming a new Patriot Party during his final days in the White House. But TTP found that many Trump followers have already taken up that mantle on Facebook, forming an extensive array of "Patriot Party" groups and pages on the social network.

The effort so far appears to be largely decentralized, but is spreading rapidly, with some groups gaining thousands of members in just days. Many Patriot Party groups have adopted a common symbol associated with white nationalism and are filled with talk of organizing local militia and overthrowing the government. Some of the groups arranged transportation for people to attend "Stop the Steal" rallies in Washington, D.C., including the event that led to the deadly Capitol riot.

The activity is a worrying new sign of Facebook's problems dealing with emerging threats on its platform. Facebook suspended Trump after the Capitol riots, but as TTP recently documented, the social network for months allowed far-right extremism, militia activity, and Trump-driven election conspiracy theories that fueled the insurrection.

The proliferation of Patriot Party groups closely mirrors the spread of so-called boogaloo movement on Facebook that TTP first observed last spring. (Boogaloo supporters believe a second Civil War is coming.) As with the boogaloo movement, Patriot Party groups have used Facebook to coordinate activities, set up local chapters, and talk about violently toppling the current government system.

The Patriot Party dynamic also shows that Facebook, with its vast reach, remains an unparalleled organizing tool for right-wing groups, despite recent moves by many Trump supporters to embrace ideological fringe sites like Parler and Gab.

Here are some of the key findings from TTP's investigation:

- TTP identified 51 Facebook Groups and 85 Facebook Pages that include "Patriot Party" in their name or use iconography that's come to be associated with the movement. Roughly two-thirds of the groups and more than half of the pages were created after the 2020 election.
- Some Facebook Patriot Party groups have gained thousands of members in a matter of days.
- As with other kinds of online extremism, Facebook's algorithms have helped to drive the growth of the Patriot Party movement by recommending content to users through its Related Pages feature.
- Many Patriot Party groups have adopted a lion's head symbol originally associated with the white nationalist group VDARE. Trump retweeted a campaign video that used the symbol in 2019.
- Patriot Party Facebook groups helped organize "Stop the Steal" marches in Washington, D.C., starting in December. Members of these groups have maintained the extremist rhetoric since then, including a call to block Biden's inauguration.
- The deep militia roots of many Patriot Party groups echoes the activity of some European far-right organizations, which have cultivated both political and paramilitary elements.
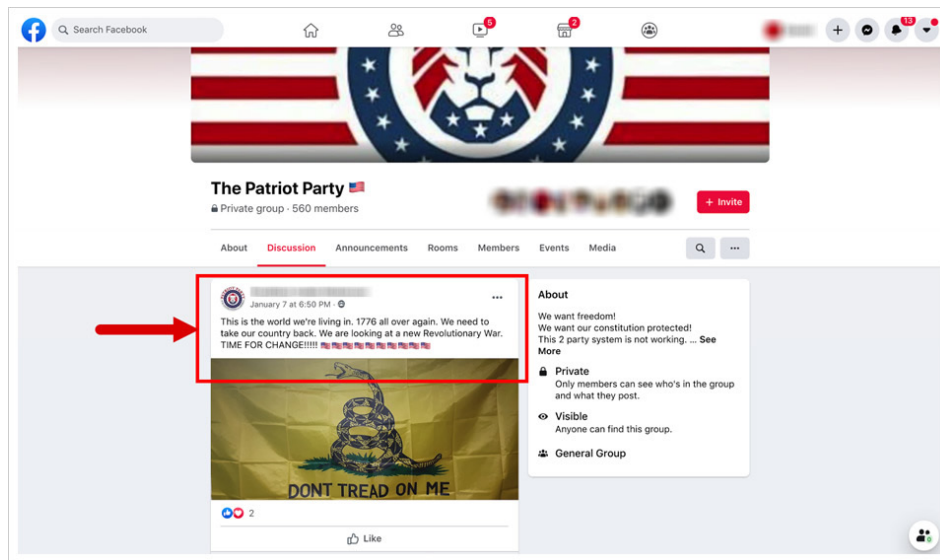
Rapid Growth on Facebook

TTP's investigation identified 51 Facebook groups and 85 Facebook pages that had names or iconography linking them to the so-called Patriot Party. The vast majority of these were created after Trump lost the 2020 presidential election.

The groups collectively had 90,420 members as of Jan. 20, while the pages had a total of 31,555 "likes." Some of these groups quickly amassed large followings. One group called "Patriot Party," created on Jan. 17, gained 105,000 members in eight days, before it was removed by Facebook. Another group called "The Patriot Party," created on Jan. 9, racked up 2,500 members in 10 days. Many of the Facebook pages grew rapidly as well: One page featuring the Patriot Party-linked lion's head logo generated 693 "likes" in just three days.

TTP found that 67% (34) of the Patriot Party Facebook groups were created after the 2020 election. Of those, 14 were created on or after Jan. 6, the day of the U.S. Capitol riot. Nearly half—44% (37)—of the Patriot Party pages were also created on or after Jan. 6. A number of the state-focused pages, such as "Patriots Party of Georgia," "Patriots Party of Indiana," and "Patriots Party of Tennessee," carry matching images and share the same posts, suggesting they were created by a single user or organization.

Roughly 37% (19) of the groups included iconography affiliated with the Patriot Party movement, most commonly the lion's head, in their cover photos. More than half—58%, or 49—of the pages featured these images as well.

Inside these groups, members openly recruit for local militias and exchange information on military tactics, radio communication, and training opportunities, despite Facebook's ban on "militarized social movements." Some of the groups organized transportation and accommodations for "Stop the Steal" events in Washington. Even after the Jan. 6 riot at the Capitol, members of these groups have continued to openly engage in militia recruitment and discuss overthrowing the government.

One post in the Facebook group 'THE PATRIOT PARTY" on the evening of Jan 6, after the Capitol riot, declared "it's time for good men to do Very Bad Things." The post generated hundreds of replies from members expressing support, with comments like "locked and loaded" and "let the civil war begin." One user even replied with martyrdom talk: "I'm ready to sacrifice my life." (TTP recently found similar martyrdom rhetoric in a far-right group on Facebook.)

[Images]
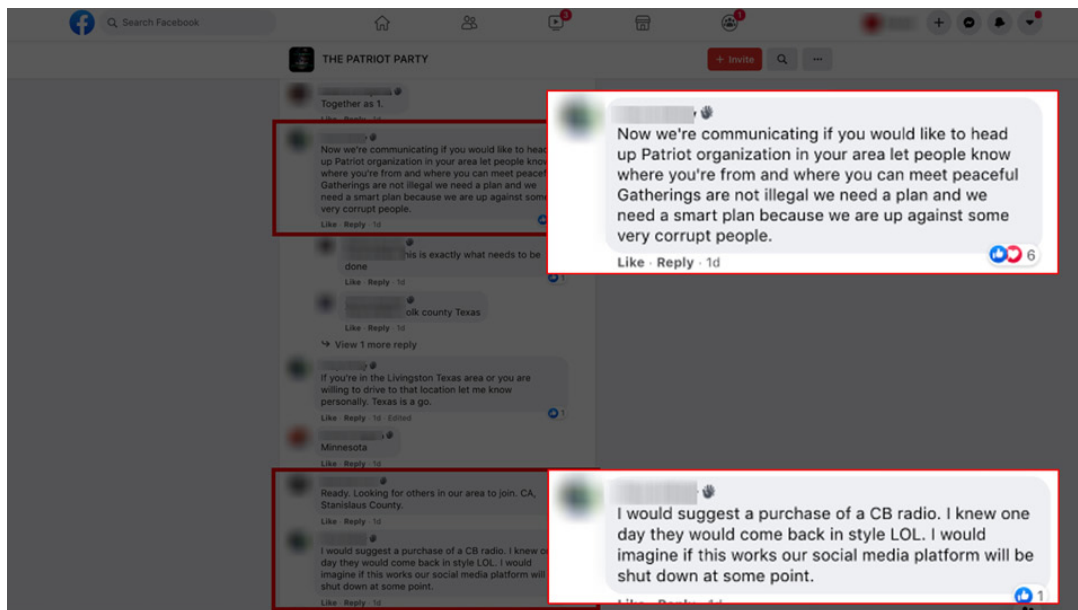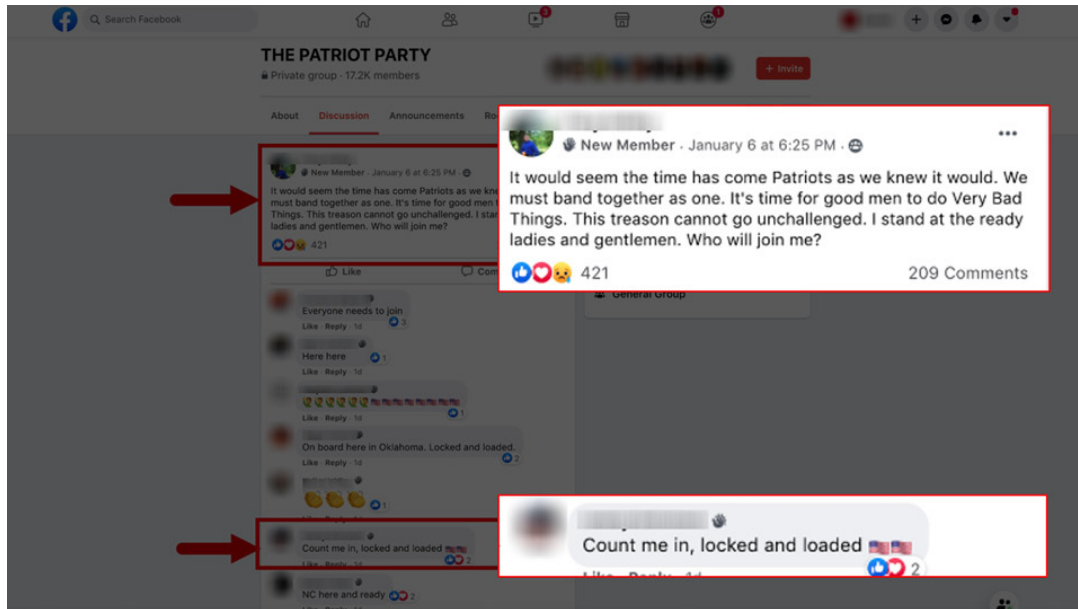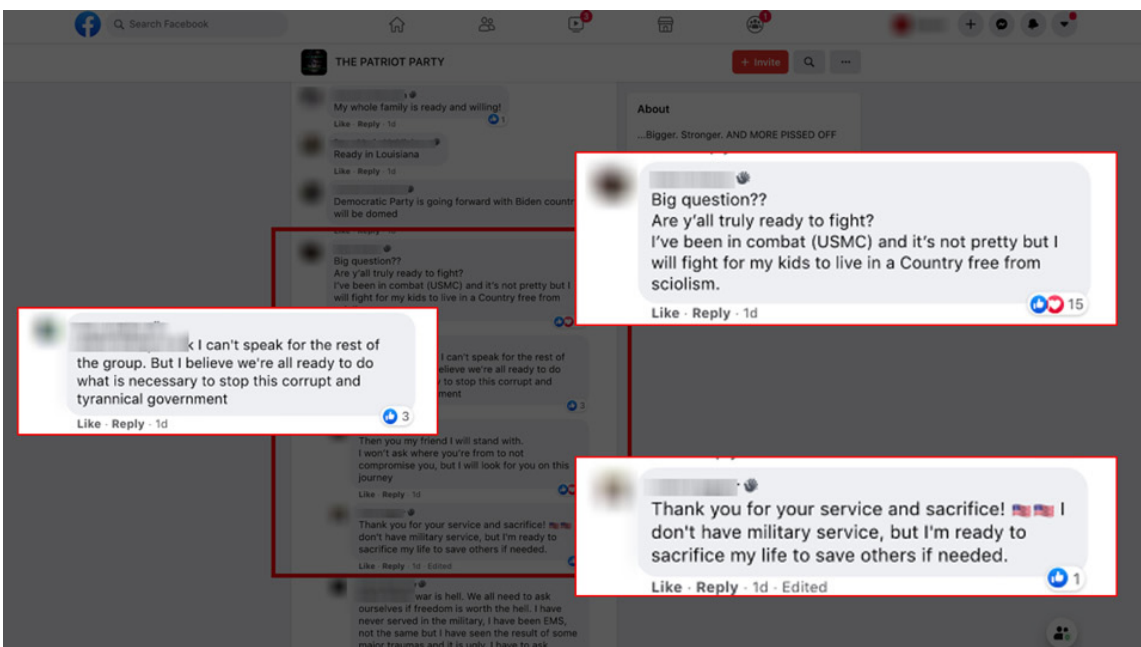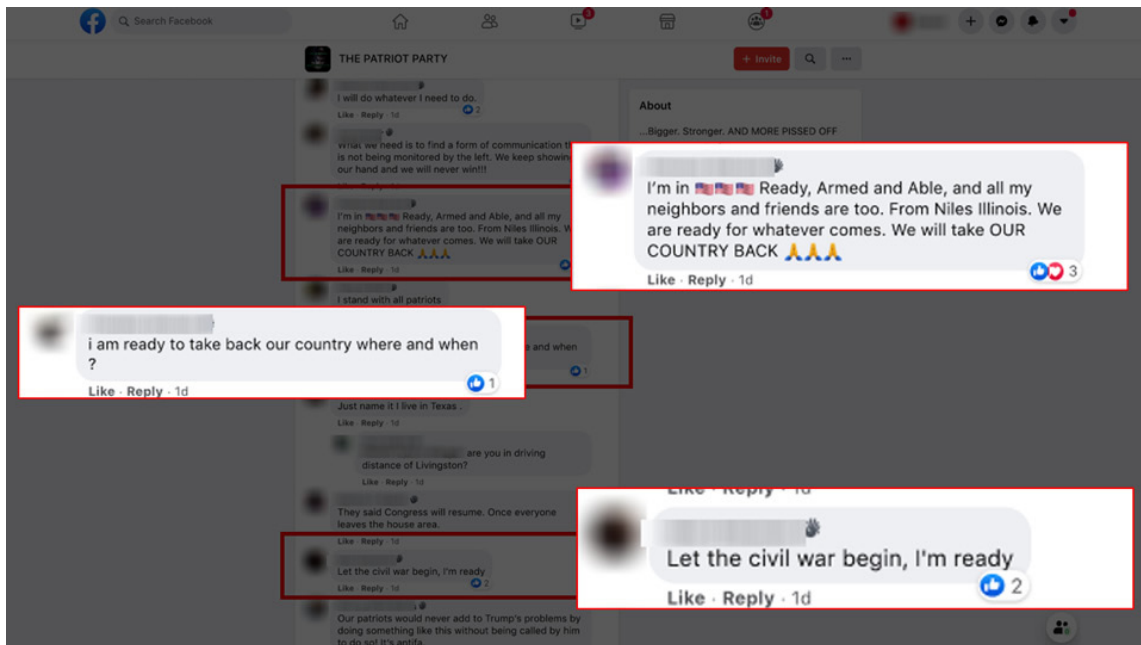
Among the groups and pages identified by TTP that were created prior to 2020 election, most had right-wing origins but recently changed their name to reflect a new Patriot Party affiliation. For example, one 1,320-member group adopted the name "American Patriot Party" on Jan. 8, two days after the Capitol insurrection. The group, originally established in April 2016, was previously called "D.C. Swamp Drainers Trump-Pence Landslide 2020."

TTP found that Facebook's algorithms recommend Patriot Party pages to users who show an interest in such content, likely contributing to the growth of the movement. If TTP's monitoring account "liked" a "Patriot Party" page, Facebook's "Related Pages" feature often pointed to similar pages. TTP discovered the same dynamic with white supremacist content last year, raising concerns that Facebook is contributing to an echo chamber of radicalization.

One of the pages identified by TTP even had a Facebook shop selling Patriot Party-branded merchandise. The shop is an in-app storefront that allows page managers to sell things like T-shirts and stickers to users without forcing them to leave the page. Facebook takes a fee for items sold through these shops in the U.S., meaning the company is profiting off the Patriot Party movement.
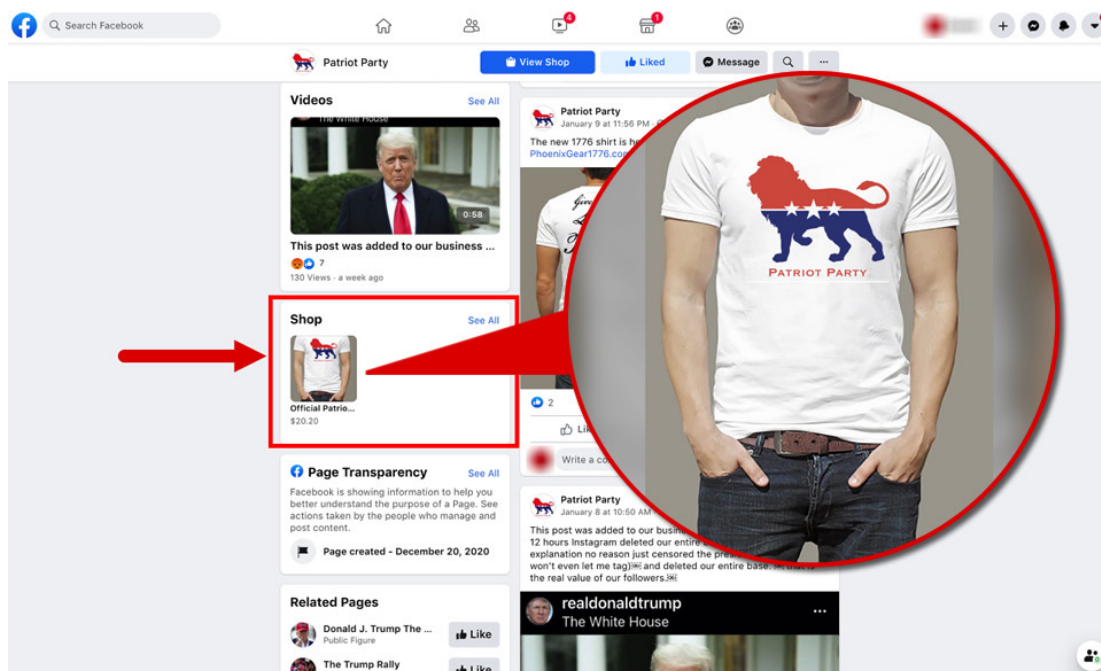
Since Jan. 20, when TTP conducted its initial count, Facebook has removed some of the Patriot Party groups and pages in a piecemeal fashion, but dozens of others remain active on the platform.

Organizing Structure

Facebook Patriot Party groups played a significant role in "Stop the Steal" rallies that culminated in the Capitol insurrection.

One example of this activity is Pat King, the host of "Patriot Party Podcast" and administrator of the Facebook group "Official Patriot Party." (The Facebook group and the podcast, available on Apple and Google Play, feature the same logo, a red and blue graphic eagle.)

"Official Patriot Party," a public Facebook group created on Nov. 13, described itself as "a group of Patriots who are sick of just talking and are committed to taking back our Constitutional Republic." The group's "about" section laid out its mission, which included "providing ground support for MAGA Marches, coordinating events & support for Patriots from all over the country attending events. Guides, Escorts, Security, Lodging & Transportation." The group said it also helps supporters create "subgroups in their areas."

The public group directed users to two recommended, private Facebook groups, "Patriot Party Support" and "PATRIOT PARTY CONNECTIONS (MAGA)." King served as a primary administrator of all three. The groups in this network heavily promoted "Stop the Steal" events in Washington, including an event page for a Dec. 12 rally hosted by King and the "Official Patriot Party" group. King coordinated with members about accommodations for the event, offering a group rate for rooms at the Hilton hotel in Arlington, Virginia, just outside Washington, under the organization name "Patriot Party."

"Official Patriot Party" promoted other pro-Trump rallies, including the Jan. 6 event at the U.S. Capitol. Two days before the Capitol riot, some members of the Facebook group engaged in violent talk. One wrote:
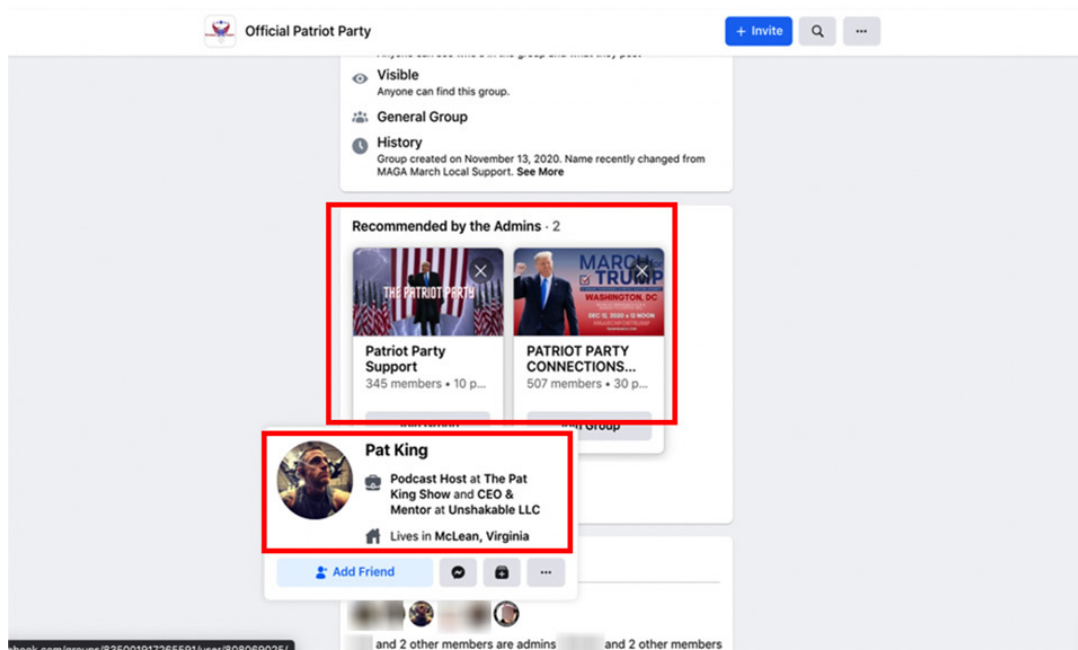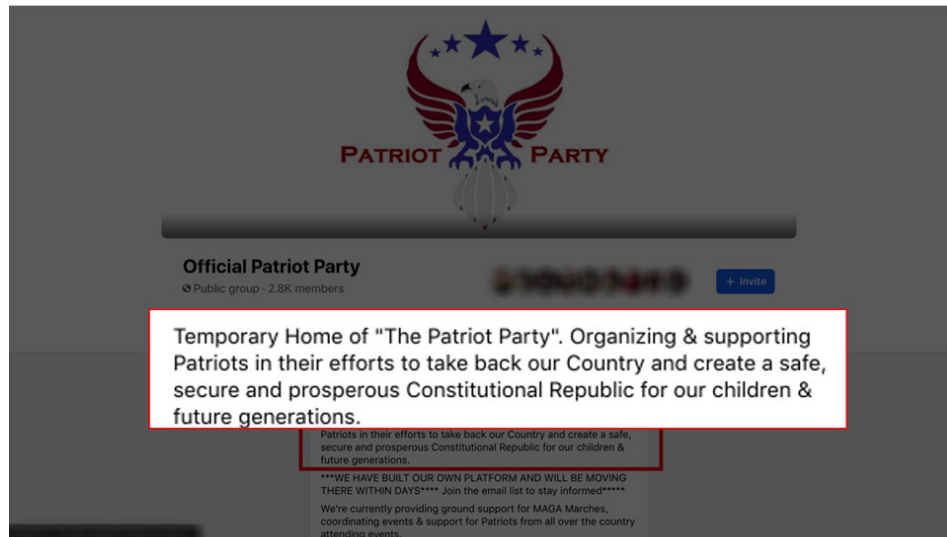
> *The first wave to begin arriving and if "HARM" comes to any of our American Patriot you will witness wave after wave of "US" to defend them and uphold our American Constitution, "We the People" will never "Surrender nor Retreat", we are not Antifa nor BLM We are the People, election Fraud Ends NOW! Audit all legal ballots for this is an ACT OF WAR against America and a treasonous act.*
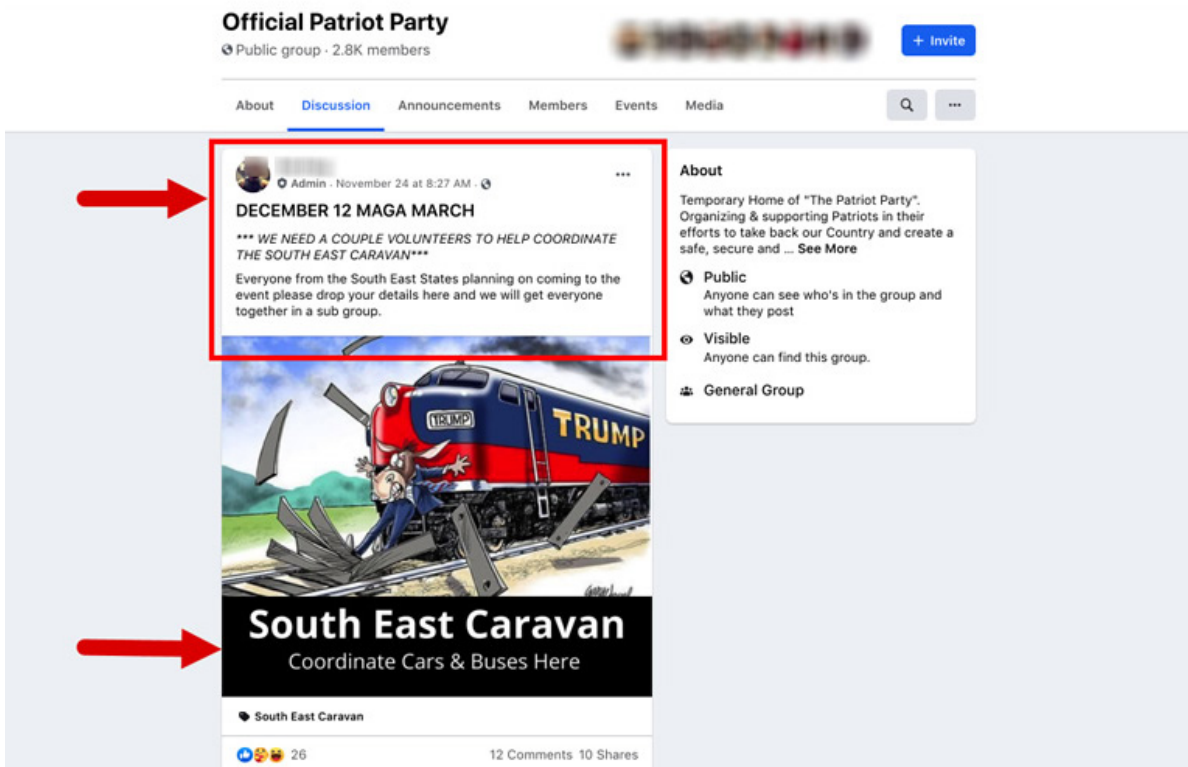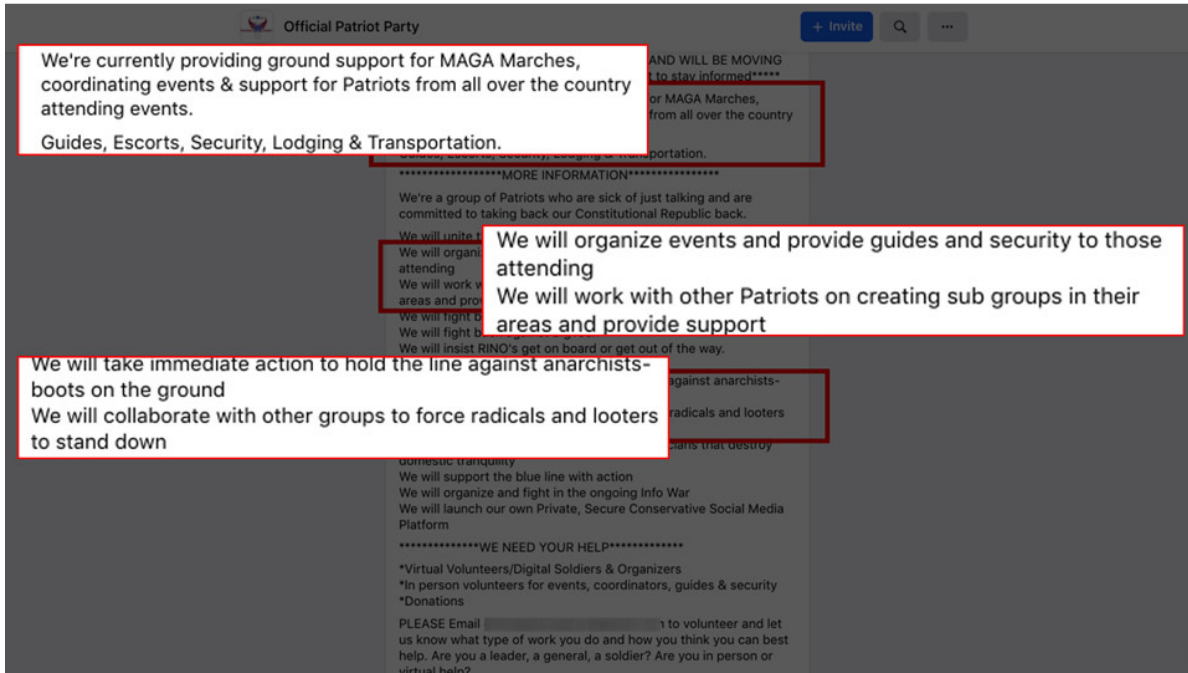
King, in a Dec. 31 episode of his podcast, also appeared to anticipate violence. "Just know that tensions are going to be high that day. ... I would leave the kids at home this time," he warned listeners, adding that Jan. 6 "should be an amazing event, and I'm sure it will be and I'm sure everything will go off."

In the days after the Capitol insurrection, members of these Facebook groups continued posting militia content and threats of violence. On Jan. 9, a member of the "Patriot Party Support" group shared the logo of the Three Percenters anti-government militia, whose followers have been charged in connection with the riot. Another member replied, "We need to do something big."

Facebook later removed "Official Patriot Party" and its two affiliated private groups. Under pressure following the Capitol riot, the company on Jan. 11 announced it would remove content containing the phrase "stop the steal" from its platform because of its connection to the violence in Washington.

[Images]

We're currently providing ground support for MAGA Marches, coordinating events & support for Patriots from all over the country attending events.

Guides, Escorts, Security, Lodging & Transportation.

We will organize events and provide guides and security to those attending
We will work with other Patriots on creating sub groups in their areas and provide support

We will take immediate action to hold the line against anarchists- boots on the ground
We will collaborate with other groups to force radicals and looters to stand down

Official Patriot Party
Public group · 2.8K members

About   **Discussion**   Announcements   Members   Events   Media

DECEMBER 12 MAGA MARCH

*** WE NEED A COUPLE VOLUNTEERS TO HELP COORDINATE THE SOUTH EAST CARAVAN***

Everyone from the South East States planning on coming to the event please drop your details here and we will get everyone together in a sub group.

South East Caravan
Coordinate Cars & Buses Here

About

Temporary Home of "The Patriot Party". Organizing & supporting Patriots in their efforts to take back our Country and create a safe, secure and ... See More

Public
Anyone can see who's in the group and what they post

Visible
Anyone can find this group.

General Group

Patriot Party Symbolism

The Facebook groups and pages identified by TTP use a specific set of logos and images to represent their "Patriot Party" affiliation.

The most common iconography is a red, white, and blue lion's head in a circular logo surrounded by stars. Other frequently used symbols are a red, white, and blue graphic of colonial man meant to resemble a patriot; a blue and red side profile of a lion's body with white stars across the center; and a red and blue graphic eagle.

President Trump retweeted an amateur campaign video in 2019 that featured the circular lion's head, a symbol that originated with the hate website VDARE and the "Lion's Guard," a pro-Trump vigilante group.

The Southern Poverty Law Center has designated VDARE as white nationalist and describes it as an "anti-immigration hate website," while the "Lion's Guard" was a self-styled "militia-style security force for attendees at Trump rallies," according to a 2016 report from Bloomberg News. (The Lion's Guard Facebook page, which is still active as of Jan. 29, promotes a quote from Italian dictator Benito Mussolini.)
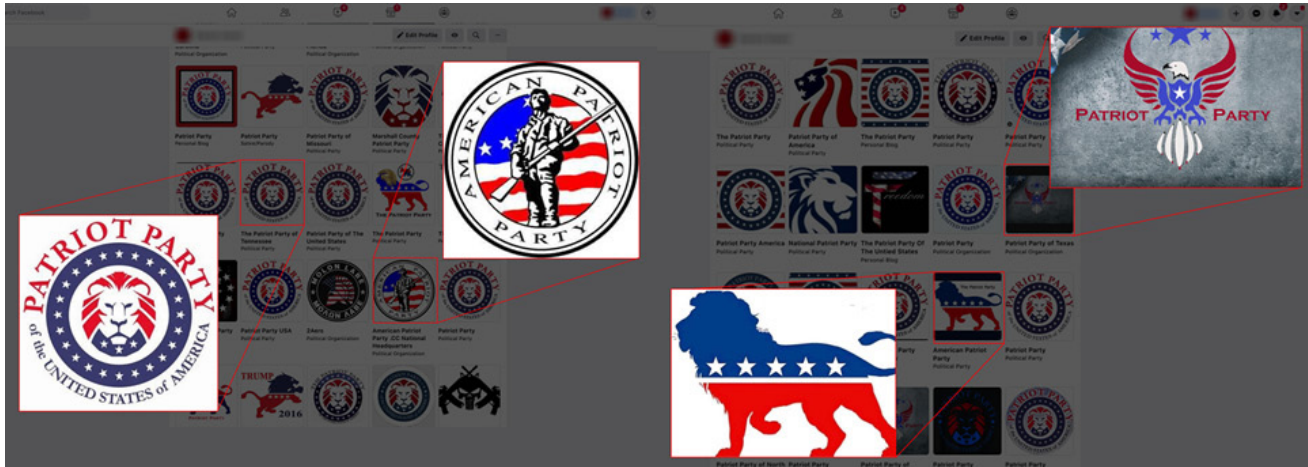
Facebook has cracked down on VDARE, removing a network of pages, accounts and groups linked to the website in spring 2020 for violating policies against "coordinated inauthentic behavior." But the lion's head symbol is enjoying a new wave of popularity with the Patriot Party movement.

The symbol also featured in the Capitol insurrection, with at least one rioter carrying a flag emblazoned with the circular lion head.

Paramilitary Features

Patriot Party groups on Facebook have deep militia connections. Many of the administrators of these groups, as well as individual members, openly flaunt their association with militias, despite Facebook's ban on "militarized social movements."

For example, the administrator for the group "Patriot movement of America" features the logo of the Three Percenters in his Facebook profile. Meanwhile, the admin for the Facebook group "United Patriots of Arizona" expresses supports the Oath Keepers, another anti-government right-wing militia. (Followers of the Oath Keepers have also been charged in the Capitol violence.)

One member of "United Patriots of Arizona," in a Dec. 24 post, called for organizing a militia and running a training program with small security teams. The user's profile cover photo prominently features the flag of the boogaloo movement.

[Images]
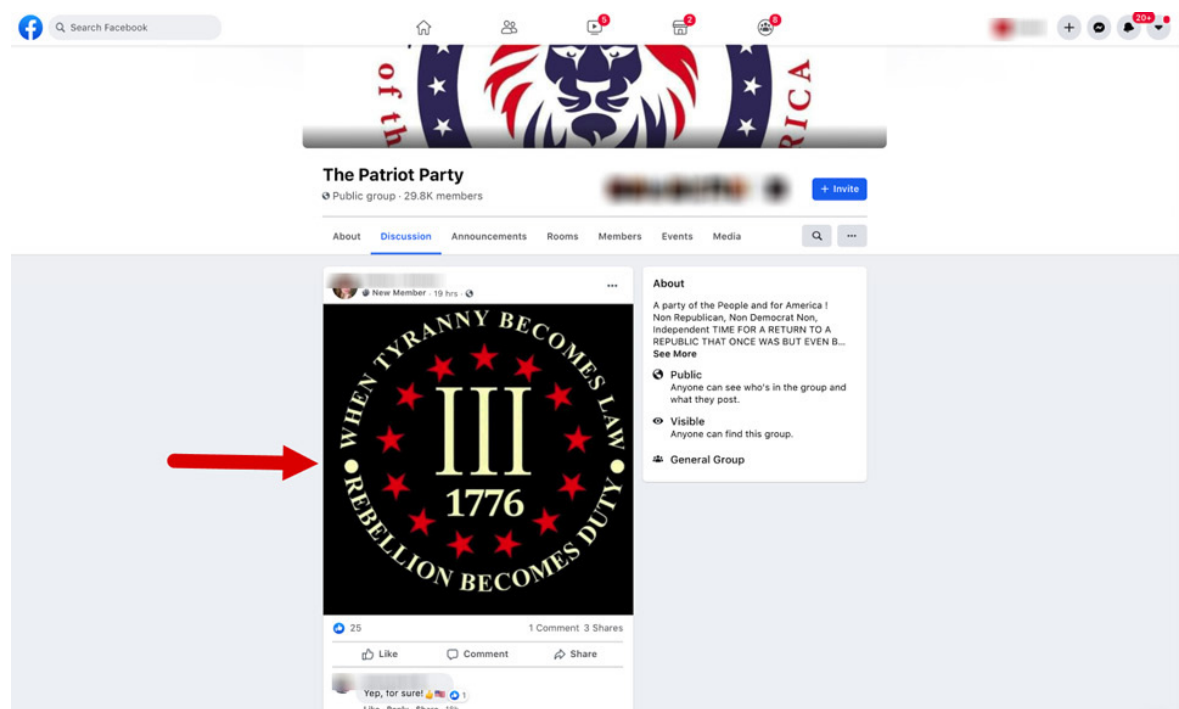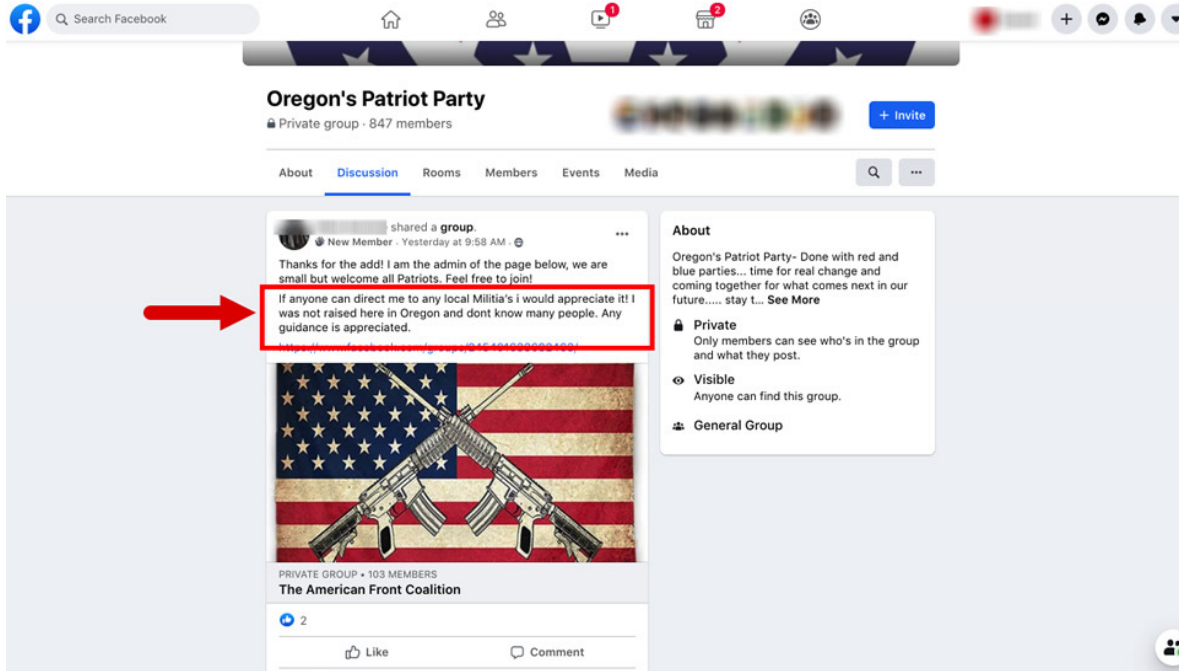
Other signs of "patriot" militancy have been building for months. A Facebook group called the "Patriot Action Network," which used the lion's head symbol, was among a group of far-right and militia organizations that promised to "back up" police on Election Day against supposed antifa and Black Lives Matter protesters. (Facebook has removed the group, but its YouTube channel is still active.)

One of the accused Capitol rioters, Eric Munchel, famously nicknamed "zip tie guy" after researchers identified him as a man photographed with plastic restraints inside the Capitol, included the lion's head logo on his Facebook profile. TTP gathered the images before Munchel was arrested for his role in the insurrection and his Facebook account taken down.
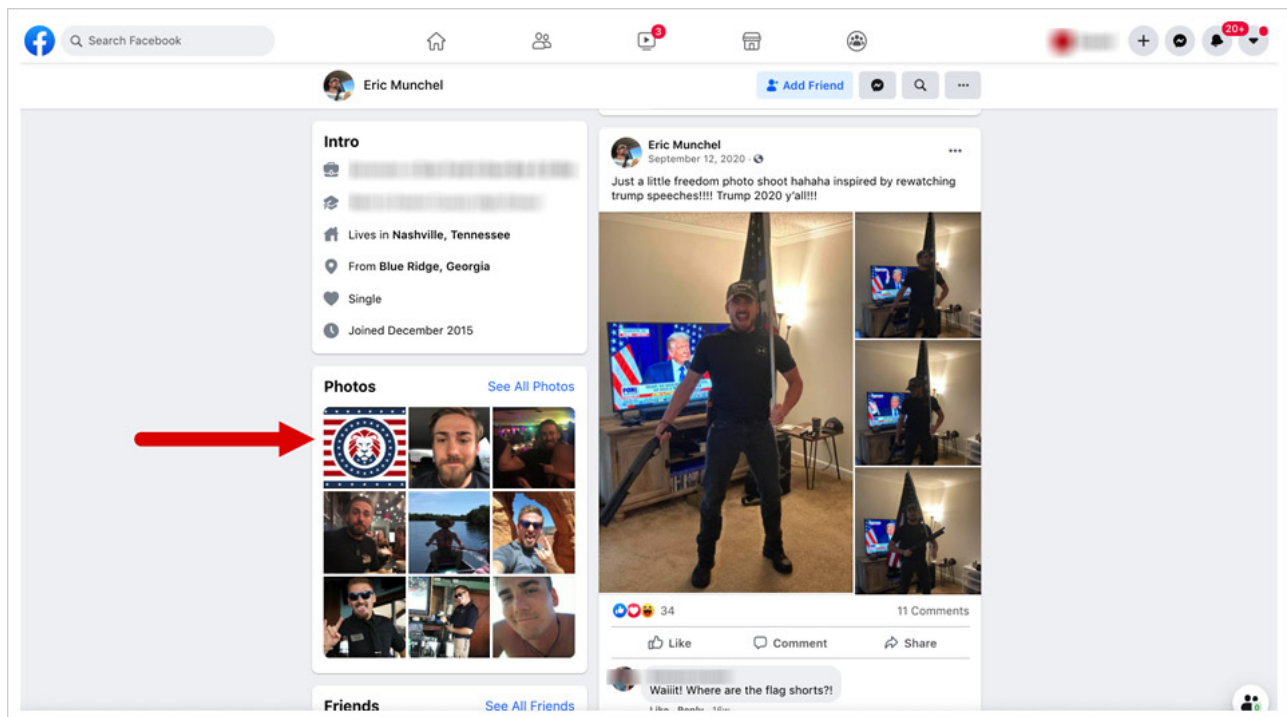
The threats continued after the insurrection. On Jan. 10, a user in the group "Official Patriot Party" targeted the inauguration, posting "HOW CAN WE STOP BIDEN FROM BEING SWORN IN??" TTP also identified a post in the Facebook group "Patriot Party" calling Jan. 20 Inauguration Day a "Tiananmen Square moment" for patriots. After CNN reported on the post, Facebook took it down along with the offending group.

TTP's investigation also found that Facebook is blocking the hashtag #patriotparty, with searches for the term generating a notice that says the results are hidden because some content associated with those posts "goes against our Community Standards." It's not clear why Facebook is blocking this hashtag while allowing various Patriot Party groups to exist on its platform.

Trump has given mixed signals on the Patriot Party. After he reportedly discussed the idea in the waning days of his term, the Trump campaign disavowed any connection with a fundraising effort by the Patriot Party. The Washington Post, however, has reported that Trump sees the third-party threat as leverage over Republican senators, to keep them in line during his impeachment trial.

If the "Patriot Party" ever becomes a true political organization linked to Donald Trump, the movement's militia-fueled origins would put it in similar company with European far-right groups that have established both political and paramilitary arms.

In Ukraine, for example, the far-right militant Azov movement, which is known for training white supremacists from around the world, has its own political wing. Facebook, which banned the group more than a year ago, has struggled to get it off the platform, with reports detailing how Azov is continuing to use Facebook for organizing and spreading its ideas.

Elsewhere in Europe, Hungary's right-wing Jobbik political party founded a uniformed vigilante group called Hungarian Guard that has patrolled local Roma populations. Militia groups affiliated with Germany's extreme-right National Democratic Party, meanwhile, patrol German cities, including neighborhoods with large numbers of immigrants.

In the U.K., the far-right group Britain First, which calls itself a "patriotic political party," has been deemed a "pseudo-paramilitary group." The group developed patrol units to target Muslim communities, and made heavy use of Facebook to attract followers. Facebook banned Britain First in 2018 for posting "content designed to incite animosity and hatred against minority groups," but the group has been active on the platform since then.

A Familiar Pattern

Facebook has been slow to deal with the expanding "Patriot Party" movement on its platform, despite the fact that it fuses together anti-government militia activity and Trump-fueled election conspiracies—two things Facebook has promised to remove.

It's another troubling sign of the social network's problems recognizing new threats. The stakes are especially high, given how social media-driven radicalization fueled the U.S. Capitol riot.

The Patriot Party groups and pages proliferating on Facebook appear to be largely decentralized, even as they adopt common symbols and extremist language. Trump remains suspended from Facebook, with his fate now in the hands of the company's Oversight Board, but if he decides to form a Patriot Party political organization, he'll have a militarized Facebook following ready to join the cause.