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"The Aftermath of Historic Chaos": Trumpism as a Totalist Worldview in the Testimonies of Participants in the January 6 Attacks

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Abstract
This article explores how the January 6th attack on the Capitol building is represented in the discourse of the participants in the insurrection. We analyze a self-compiled corpus of depositions and interviews with individuals involved in the January 6, 2021, assault, which we have named TruJan. The TruJan corpus was compiled from the GovInfo website. Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC-22) was used for the analysis to extract the most frequent topics discussed by the interviewees during the hearings, along with sentences that showcase the attitudes of the speakers regarding the most salient issues. The second part of the article offers a close reading of the depositions and interviews with movement leaders or founders: Ali Alexander (Stop the Steal), Henry "Enrique" Tarrio (Proud Boys), and Stewart Rhodes (Oath Keepers). We argue that Trumpism's latent totalist potential was made manifest in the January 6 attacks due to the political setbacks Trump faced when losing the 2020 elections, which was perceived as a state of crisis.

Keywords: crisis, Trumpism, totalism, January 6th, Stop the Steal, Proud Boys, Oath Keepers

Introduction

The past decades have witnessed the sustained rise of radical, anti-globalist, sovereignist-nativist movements, with their often modest size

masking the extent of their influence on establishment politics. For example, nationalist identitarian movements such as Les Identitaires in France or PEGIDA in Germany (Murariu, "We are Fortress Europe" 53-68) have arguably made a disproportionate mark – relative to their size – on the political landscape. The most radical among such movements exhibit totalist ideologies and behaviors, with a potential for undermining what is, for all its faults and complexities, the democratic normative order. Totalism, a system of thought which makes sense of the world according to a set of soteriological-simplifying principles, is used here rather than totalitarianism, which is a short-lasting, uncompromising, coercive implementation of a regime's totalist aims.

Trumpism, in our view, is defined by totalist thinking. We understand it as a set of beliefs and values associated with the discourse of Donald Trump, which includes anti-globalism, anti-elitism, nativism, (white) nationalism, coupled with a populist rhetoric and authoritarian tendencies. Unlike the European cases mentioned above, Trumpism is not a coherent movement, but acts as a nucleus around which several such groups coalesce, allowing them to become unprecedentedly visible in mainstream American politics. On no occasion has this been more apparent than in the January 6, 2021, attacks on the United States Capitol, when groups such as America First, Women for America First, Oath Keepers, Proud Boys, Three Percenters, and Guardians of Freedom came together with the aim of disrupting the democratic process of the 2020 presidential elections in support of former president Donald J. Trump.

Trumpism will be analyzed here through the lens of the theory of totalism. Totalism refers to ideologies based on a totalizing perspective that use binary thinking and dichotomies such as true-untrue or pure-impure to understand major socio-political changes, with no tolerance for plurality and ambiguity. We will argue that Trumpism's latent totalist potential was made manifest in the January 6 attacks due to the political setbacks Trump faced when losing the 2020 election. For this purpose, we will analyze a self-compiled corpus of depositions and interviews with individuals involved in the January 6 attacks that we have named TruJan, a corpus compiled from the GovInfo website. It will be analyzed using Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC-22), with which we have

extracted the most frequent topics discussed by the interviewees during the United States House Select Committee on the January 6th Attack hearings, along with sentences that showcase the attitudes of the speakers regarding the most salient issues. We will then discuss the totalist features exhibited by these attitudes. As a triangulation method, we will also perform a close reading of the depositions and interviews with movement leaders or founders: Ali Alexander (Stop the Steal), Henry "Enrique" Tarrio (Proud Boys), and Stewart Rhodes (Oath Keepers).

Method

Our analysis will focus on the self-compiled corpus, TruJan, which contains 31 depositions and interviews with participants in the January 6, 2021, attacks on the United States Capitol Building. We selected the depositions and interviews of individuals related to the attacks who held no political office, were not associated with the Trump election campaign, and were not government officials. Since our purpose was to analyze how fringe movements come together under a set of totalist ideas, we excluded any person who was part of the establishment.

The documents were selected from GovInfo, a website run by the United States Government Publishing Office (GPO), where all public documents related to the public hearings of the United States House Select Committee on the January 6 Attack are available for download. TruJan consists of the answers of the witnesses in the public hearings, comprising a total of 785.051 words. The documents were manually cleaned: the metatext containing identification data, all preliminary statements regarding legal aspects related to public hearings, and questions by the committee were removed. We excluded interviews and depositions in which the witnesses pled the Fifth Amendment.

TruJan was analyzed using the Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count 2022 app created by Ryan Boyd et al., which is a piece of text analysis software with the capacity to identify psychometric qualities of language used in corpora. The Word Count function was used to extract frequent themes and topics in the corpus. The Contextualizer function was used to identify the context of content words and phrases resulting from the

previous topic modelling step. A qualitative analysis was performed to make connections between the topics approached by the speakers.

Since LIWC2022 is software based on frequencies, the results need to be contextualized in order to draw conclusions based on the most frequently used words and phrases. As a triangulation method, a close reading of three interviews (Ali Alexander, Henry Tarrio, and Elmer Stewart Rhodes) will be performed in the second part of the study using the tools of discourse analysis. The usefulness of discourse analysis has been demonstrated in writings on deradicalization (Demant and De Graaf), extremism (Wijsen), and the commonalities of radical rhetoric (Karell and Freedman). Drawing on Norman Fairclough, we look at the presence of totalist rhetoric and themes such as crisis and deadly danger, and the role of absolute truth and (im)purity in the discourse of these three key figures.

Trumpism, Totalism, and Crisis

While acknowledging its lack of central coherence and somewhat ambiguous nature, Trumpism can be defined as a type of authoritarian national-populism with a latent totalist potential. Several recent studies have focused on Trumpism, especially as proof of the rise of illiberalism in the Western world. It has been argued that it is defined by populist rhetoric, anti-system (anti-elitist and anti-globalist) politics and a tendency to disregard democratic norms (Hopkin and Blyth, 101-124). The origins or Trumpism, or Global Trumpism, as some have called it (Blyth), have been identified in Western countries, especially in the United States as: the 2008 financial crisis and the subsequent recession, as well as the shift in the balance of power between labor and capital, which resulted in a weakening and delegitimation of the democratic establishment. This article sets out to analyze the ideological underpinnings of Trumpism in order to gauge its future (re)radicalization potential as an anti-globalist, sovereignist-nativist, totalist movement in a moment of crisis, in light of the upcoming presidential election.

The main theoretical avenue for approaching Trumpism as a radical movement, beyond its populist traits, is a refining of the classical theory of totalism, which originates in the scattered use of the term in 1920s Europe to denote something like an all-encompassing project. By totalist

movements, one means here movements with a totalizing worldview which divide existence and its challenges into true-untrue, pure-impure categories, with a supreme commitment to totality and minimal acceptance of plurality and ambiguity (Murariu, *Totality, Charisma, Authority* 77-78). We foreground the importance of totality in the composition and overall orientation of these movements, which have the potential to become militant. Militant totalism aims to reconstruct the social order in order to achieve "salvation," at the same time claiming to hold a monopoly on interpreting its own ideological truths (Murariu, *Totality, Charisma, Authority* 77-78). The choice of the term totalist over totalitarian is stressed here, the main difference between the terms being that totalism can be peaceful in both its quietist and militant variants, while totalitarianism is always associated with mass coercion and terror and represents a temporary phase whereby the regime attempts to implement its goals without recourse to compromise (Murariu, *Totality, Charisma, Authority* 90).

Totalist movements tend to find or crystallize their identity and to evolve dramatically in moments of crisis when they have the potential to radicalize or at least become increasingly militant. For this reason, crisis will be an important concept for this article, particularly the term nomic crisis, which was popularized by Roger Griffin. In Griffin's view, a society may fail, or begin to fail, when the myths and rituals of its worldview stop providing a coherent sense of communal meaning, purpose, and reality – all of which leads to a liminoid state and potentially to decline and even collapse (285). During such perceived times of profound crisis, totalist movements may view the occurrence of crisis in a dual fashion: as that of a deadly danger and, simultaneously, of a great opportunity to accelerate the implementation of the movement's aims.

LIWC Analysis Results

The most frequent words and phrases used by the witnesses in the public hearings of the United States House Select Committee on the January 6 Attack can be divided into six rough categories. The first category comprises words and phrases relating to the sequence of events that led up to the attacks. The context of these words and phrases reveals that each of

the witnesses experienced this sequence of events differently, but there are some elements mentioned by a majority. The participants in the attack reported that they were in Washington, D.C., either to participate in Donald Trump's rally, mentioning his Ellipse speech, or in a march to protest the organization of the 2020 election, on January 6.

The second category is made up of phrases and words related to former president Donald J. Trump. The name "Trump" is mentioned 872 times, being the most frequent content word in the corpus, and mentioned in all of the interviews. The word "president" appears 571 times, in 31 documents. The name "Trump" is mentioned either in relation to the actions of the former president or his team or to beliefs held by the speakers in relation to Trump: the allegedly unfair election of 2020, the policies that led the speakers to support him, the speaker's interpretation of the attacks. As such, Trump is seen as a leader who has the potential to bring about change, acting also as a group-identity defining element.

A third category refers to important actors in the events that led up to the January 6 attacks, including both individuals and groups. In terms of individuals, the most frequently mentioned are: Steward Rhodes (597/21 documents), Ali Alexander (358/15 documents), Alex Jones (234/21 documents), Roger Stone (134/23 documents), Kelly Meggs (77/15 documents), Kylie Kremer (194/9 documents), Amy Kremer (172/13 documents), Henry Tarrio (166/13 documents), Cindy Chafian (68/6 documents), Caroline Wren (61/7 documents), Kellye SoRelle (60/11 documents), Dustin Stockton (53/6 documents).[1] The groups mentioned frequently in the TruJan corpus are: the Oath Keepers (571/24 documents), Proud Boys (408/25 documents), Stop the Steal (211/22 documents), Women for America First (139/11 documents), the Tea Party (57/7 documents), the Guardians of Freedom (56/4 documents), and the Three Percenters (52/16 documents).

Perceived adversaries make up another category of words and phrases frequently used in TruJan. Antifa is mentioned 315 times in 26 documents, whereas Black Lives Matter is mentioned 70 times in 19 texts. The media (256/29 documents) is also at times presented as an opponent. As can be seen in Table 1, Antifa is described as a violent extremist group (example 1, 2) from which the speakers need to protect themselves and

their community, and which is not perceived by the mainstream as the real threat it actually is. Black Lives Matter is believed by the speakers to be a movement whose violence is downplayed by contemporary American society (example 3). By contrast, the speakers portray the groups they represent as persecuted when taking advantage of their First Amendment right, while Black Lives Matter members are not (example 4). The media is often described as biased, promoting the interests of other groups (example 5). In fact, these adversaries emerge as a reason for joining fringe movements, the participants in the attacks seeing themselves as righteous, willing to fight against a detrimental force. We will discuss this later on, when analyzing ideologies apparent in the interviews and depositions.

Example	Context left	Word	Context right
1	in our communities such as the destructive behavior of like	antifa	and he thought that i would be interested in joining
2	on the advance crew because we were having incidences with	antifa	and others because we were so far ahead out of
3	legally permitted first amendment chant in the same way that	black lives matter	is in the same way that so many other political
4	between like how the media covers us and how the	media	covers these dudes that just burn down their cities a
5	that a proud boys you can see real time the	media	machine do the globalists dirty work

Table 1. Examples of contexts in which opponents are mentioned.[2]

A further significant set of words and phrases refer to the communication channels used by the participants in the attacks to organize. (Group) chats are mentioned 279 times in 21 documents. Mainstream platforms like Facebook (136) and Twitter (135) are referred to frequently, but alternative social media channels stand out as their means of communication: Telegram (105), Zello (61) and Signal (32). Apart from not raising flags for the authorities, these apps seem to have worked to create group cohesion as they fostered the sentiment that those included had been chosen and privy to a hidden truth.

Finally, a large number of words and phrases frequently used in the corpus relate to the background and ideology of the participants in the Capitol attacks. An interesting aspect regarding the background of the interviewees is that many of them had served in the military, which is referenced 205 times in the corpus. The *Final Report Select Committee to Investigate the January 6th Attack on the United States Capitol* also notes that groups such as the Oath Keepers target "former and current military and law enforcement for recruitment" (512). The word "militia" frequently appears in the corpus as well (142 times in 19 documents), but most speakers deny being part of a militia or being aware they were part of a militia. Michel Lee Wells of the Guardians of Liberty, for instance, mentions that the group identifies as a militia, which is not illegal, but "as described in the Second Amendment and the Declaration of Independence, if the need ever arose, whether it be foreign or domestic enemy, you know, it would activate as a militia and, you know, help out the community mostly in defense of the community" (9). Members of the Oath Keepers and the Three Percenters also express this view, focusing on the defense aspect. Another idea expressed by the three groups is that they would feel summoned if former president Trump were to invoke the Insurrection Act of 1807 or if a state called upon a militia to organize. The word "protecting" is used 54 times in the corpus, suggesting that the interviewees see their roles as defenders of the correct course of politics and history.

Another notion that frequently crops up in the TruJan corpus is that the United States is in a state of crisis or of decay, and order needs to be restored. Table 2 shows contexts in which the word "America" is mentioned, for a total of 258 times. Examples 1 and 2 point to various issues that the speakers identify, while example 3 portrays the insurrectionists as the heroes or the saviors, whose political stance is the solution. This depiction of America in danger connects to the notions discussed in the previous paragraphs of the insurrectionists as self-proclaimed heroes who aim to restore a lost order, an echo of the "Make America Great Again" slogan. In this context, the participants in the January 6 attacks consider themselves the true "patriots," a word that appears 85 times in the corpus.[3]

Example	Context left	Word	Context right
1	new york was literally on fire	america	has problems the solution to the problems isn't that it needs to burn to the ground we have the ability to effect change
2	you know they were like we don't want communism in	america	you know there was just a bunch of really mostly
3	january 6th it was actually december like november 14th we became	america	's heroes and then that got messed up i think

Table 2. Examples of contexts in which "America" appears.

A series of problems are identified in American society by the speakers, as seen in Table 3. The Constitution is frequently mentioned in the corpus, with reference to personal interpretations of the document, to such an extent that it takes on the aura of a religious text. For example, Ray Epps mentions that "[t]he Constitution is greatest document ever. I believe – this is my own belief – it was God-inspired" (26). Thomas Anthony Speciale II, speaking of himself and Josh Macias, states that "we're both people of faith, we're both people who love the country and love the Constitution" (16). Jay Thaxton defines a patriot as "[s]omeone who believes in the Constitution. Someone who believes wholeheartedly in the First Amendment" (9). The main motivation for storming the Capitol is also related to this unflinching belief in the speaker's interpretation of the Constitution in their understanding of the electoral process.

References to the Constitution's First and Second Amendments are also very frequent in the corpus, being often used to explain that the actions of January 6 were not illegal. Several speakers mention that they were exercising their First Amendment rights on the day of the insurrection. For instance, Jeremy Liggett states that "there was no collusion. There was no conspiracy, okay, to attack the Capitol, from my perspective" (85). According to him, the individuals present at the Capitol were exercising their First Amendment rights, and it was the fault of the Capitol police that the building was not secured better (85). The Second Amendment is referenced in relation to the idea of militia and to being a

gun owner. Kellye SoRelle argues that any gun owner has a responsibility to undergo gun training, especially if they are "concerned with destabilization of local communities" (76). Therefore, the participants in the January 6 attacks cannot, in this view, be accused of a conspiracy for training with weapons in preparation for the events.

Word	Frequency	Percent of Total Words	Docs with Word	Percentage of Docs with Word
constitution	118	0.0527	18	56.25
first amendment	80	0.0131	16	50
covid	49	0.0219	18	56.25
vote	48	0.0214	19	59.375
gun	48	0.0214	14	43.75
second amendment	23	0.0038	11	34.375
immigration	24	0.0107	4	12.5

Table 3. Words and phrases related to issues identified in American society.

The word "vote" (see Table 3) refers to the speakers' voting preferences and habits, but also to the perceived electoral fraud that motivated the attack for most participants. Some speakers associate lockdowns during the COVID-19 pandemic with this fraud. For example, John D. Wright says: "I think they used COVID to get votes in there that probably shouldn't have been in there" (47). Others mention that they became more politically involved during the pandemic, spending time online, as Patrick Casey points out: "People were at home because of COVID, so they were watching live-streams more often" (35). Both views reflect a distrust in the government, which is perceived to be in a state of corruption because it is controlled by those whose intentions are not pure and who have veiled interests.

The issue of immigration is only mentioned by four speakers, and, in all cases, it refers to the threat that immigration poses to the identity of the speakers. Casey refers to "mass immigration" as an issue that "uniquely affect[s] European Americans" (25). He mentions replacement

theory, arguing that "mass immigration into Western nations is changing the demographics of Western nations" (67). Additionally, in his view, "White people do face discrimination" (68), speaking of affirmative action. Eduardo Durfee mentions participating in an action to try to convince the president not to sign Dreamer legislation (105-106). These ideas reflect a belief in an existential threat or crisis that white Americans face. It is important to note that all references to immigration are racialized. Interestingly, while the speakers make relatively frequent reference to "white supremacists" (it appears in 9 documents) or "white nationalists" (in 5 texts), it is mostly to deny that they identify as such. They often make reference to their mixed-race heritage or minority status. Alondra Propes states that she is "not a White supremacist. I'm a Hispanic female, furthest from it. My group, none of my friends were either" (105). Wells mentions that members of militias have often been called white supremacists, especially since January 6, 2021 (110). He claims that this happens for "bogus reasons, you know. Very not White supremacist reasons. You know, 'Well, you've got White privilege.' And then they'll throw, 'You don't recognize it; therefore, you're a White supremacist'" (110). Like Propes, he also foregrounds his ancestry, mentioning that he is a quarter Cuban.

To some of the witnesses January 6 presented itself as an opportunity which would allow them to effect great change. Dustin Stockton sees "the objection process as being our opportunity to have all the cameras on and present everything we had found that we thought was compelling" (28). SoRelle believes that "they ruined a perfectly good opportunity to, like, actually have a meaningful challenge to the election" (36). Jason van Tatenhove states that some Oath Keepers saw Donald Trump himself as an opportunity for "legitimacy in the public eyes" (10). The election is, therefore, seen both as a moment of crisis but also an opportunity to right the wrongs of America.

Alexander, Tarrio, and Rhodes

In what follows, we offer a close reading of three of the documents in our corpus to contextualize the ideological trends our LIWC-22 analysis

revealed. All three interviews analyzed, with Ali Alexander, Henry Tarrio, and Elmer Steward Rhodes, take up the themes identified in the previous section: that there is a deep state of crisis in the United States, which their group, as holders of the true interpretation of reality and defenders of their community, can solve once they stop being persecuted for their beliefs by political elites and external actors. All three interviewees use religious terminology to explain their worldview and describe January 6 as a turning point, a moment of great danger, but also of great opportunity. Thus, despite their different personalities and social backgrounds, the three testimonies provide a more detailed, additional layer for better understanding both the distinct worldview of those who planned and executed the Capitol assault, as well as the possible implications of radical Trumpist off-shoots.

Ali Alexander

Regardless of one's own perspective on the origins and impact of American political crises, Alexander is certainly a colorful figure, something which he seems to have used to some effect in enhancing his fame or notoriety. A founder of the "Stop the Steal" campaign, which denied the legitimacy of the 2020 elections won by Joe Biden, Alexander was an important figure encouraging a "loud war" to "change the hearts and minds" (Palast) of Congress through rallies which aimed to pressure politicians to prevent the transition of power. Although ultimately not sentenced, Alexander arguably made an important contribution to the supercharged atmosphere which made the Capitol assault possible.

Alexander's testimony is marked by repeated references to his personal experience in order to demonstrate his complete lack of blame for the January 6 attack. In so doing, he portrays a rags-to-riches scenario, where an individual prosecuted for petty crimes ends up an advisor on criminal reform to the presidential administration, only to be later demonized in "the aftermath of historic chaos and disruption" as a "bogeyman" due to his skin color, ethnic heritage, political-religious beliefs, and even his birth name – Ali Abdul-Razaq Akbar (6-9). His self-perception as someone relegated to an essentially impure, untouchable category is a common thread in the testimonies of Tarrio and Rhodes, too.

Deplatforming is seen as a form of ostracization from the body politic and is associated with political enemies.

The enemies identified by Alexander are Antifa and "other fringe left-wing Socialists, Communists, Marxists, and other kinds of gangs get away with violence unprosecuted," such movements allegedly issuing death threats against him (76). This representation of a powerful, unjust adversary, who is wrongly supported by the status quo, appears frequently in our corpus, as we have seen in the previous section. In line with totalist thinking, these opponents represent the impure elements of society, the epitome of its most debased tendencies.

In contrast to these groups, Alexander justifies his involvement in January 6 by professing an intense commitment to the nation and the well-being of the people. In his statements, he speaks about personal and national salvation, pointing to websites and events such as "March to Save America" or "One Nation under God," to which he contributed. In his testimony, the political, religious, and "spiritual" event called "One Nation under God" was meant to be a "political legislative remedy from the outside," involving Christian and Jewish groups which would not fit into the "Stop the Steal" movement (40). Such events aim to heal a nation in crisis, whose integrity is threatened by increased polarization: "Democrats and media ended the republic" (59). In his own words, "this is my truly held belief that . . . there were election irregularities" (60). The absolute nature of this belief forms the cornerstone of Alexander's actions and opposition to the political transition.

In recounting the events of January 6, Alexander mentions thinking that a civil war was near and that, while not advocating for a civil war himself, he was concerned over the "irreparably divided" nation (55). In an apparent anti-elitist message, Alexander later stated, in a 2022 interview, that polarization has long been increasing, and that he would like to see a confrontation between "the people and the American oligarchs," even going so far as to state that leftist movements such as Occupy Wall Street and Antifa have "a similar texture and ethos" to his own Stop the Steal (Sanderford). Such developments are not surprising, for totalist perspectives, regardless of political ideology, often represent a heterodox position which is at odds with the established elite.

Indeed, towards the very end of his testimony, when pressed over his online use of "1776," the year of American independence, of "promoting the imagery to the Revolutionary War rather than to a peaceful movement," and of "advocating for a revolutionary war," Alexander simply denies this interpretation, while not specifically denying the use of revolutionary imagery (233-234). This idea of supreme polarization, or of a revolution, or especially of a civil war – a deadly danger, yet, in itself, also a great opportunity for overturning the corrupt status quo – is typical of totalist ideologies.

Henry Tarrio

According to his own testimony, Tarrio made a living selling printed T-shirts, his online shop, "1776," providing merchandise with right-wing political messaging (Glaser). At the same time, Tarrio's importance lies in his status as the chairman of the Proud Boys, and his role in the January 6th assault, when, despite not being present in the city, he organized the action and communicated online with the Proud Boys who were the vanguard of the assault on the ground. He was ultimately convicted of seditious conspiracy and sentenced to 22 years in prison, the longest of the sentences, with the judge explaining that Tarrio had been "motivated by revolutionary zeal" (Rabinowitz).

Although the Proud Boys have always functioned as a loosely organized movement, Tarrio's testimony deals with some of its major themes. In their article on Proud Boys telegram channels between 2018 and 2022, Zhong et al. find that their discourse is dominated by "a strong undercurrent of gender-based resentment and animosity towards women," but also by contemporary politics and critiques of liberal perspectives (33). In Tarrio's own words, echoing founder Gavin McInnes, the requirements to be a Proud Boy are simple, namely, to be a "Western chauvinist," to "refuse to apologize for creating the modern world," and being "born a male" (39). In further defining Western chauvinism, Tarrio sees Western civilization as essentially "civilized society," rather than a Third World country, equating it with "extreme patriotism" towards America and its "many, many diverse hues" (44).

Along with what he terms male-centric Western chauvinism, Tarrio is at pains to depict a form of loyalty to a distinct kind of exceptionalism based on difference from the rest of the world, America being considered a free country and society, where one may own property, practice any religion, and love whoever one wants (45). Moreover, he includes Trump among the public figures who embody Western chauvinism due to his law-and-order approach, his support for First Amendment rights, and because "he inspired a lot of people to be able to say the things that they want" (47). He sees Trump as a leader who can offer a solution to the crisis, a group insider who, in spite of being part of the elite who opposes the views of Tarrio's group, has the ability to right its wrongs.

The main threat to the idea of "Western chauvinism" and the modern world are twofold in Tarrio's view. The first is an external threat from "the other superpowers," including misinformation campaigns from other countries, which helps polarize American society online (47). The second, and seemingly far more important, is the internal threat, represented primarily by Antifa and its use of violence. The impact of Antifa was enough to cause the Proud Boys to hold rallies called "End Domestic Terrorism," which sought to expose Antifa violence and to illustrate the difference in what Tarrio considers positive media coverage for looters and arsonists in comparison to the coverage of his own group (53).

Tarrio depicts irreconcilable, antagonistic forces plotting within the country, including a demonization of Trump supporters by the political establishment and the media (209). He also says there is deep unhappiness with the government among working-class Americans, all the while taking pains to describe himself as not possessing a binary worldview (210-212). The threat of division permeates his speech. Like Alexander and Rhodes, Tarrio feels that he is a part of a persecuted group that holds the solution to a deep crisis in American society, and that was presented with an opportunity to effect change on January 6.

Elmer Stewart Rhodes

Rhodes is perhaps the most important of the three individuals analyzed. A graduate of Yale Law School (at age 35), he worked as a clerk in the Arizona Supreme Court and, until being disbarred in 2015, as a lawyer.

As founder and leader of the Oath Keepers, Rhodes was well-known among like-minded movements. He prepared his organization for a potential civil war, being ready to deploy it as a private militia for Trump. Convicted of seditious conspiracy, and described by the judge as "smart," "charismatic," "compelling," and thus "dangerous," Rhodes was sentenced to 18 years in prison (Kunzelman et al.).

Rhodes, like Alexander and Tarrio, claims to be a political victim of tyranny. He depicts a scenario of deadly danger to the country, believing that the government had already "crossed the Rubicon" in its disregard for the Constitution during the Bush administration (29). Opposing what he considers gross violations of civil rights and the way police personnel were following "unconstitutional orders," Rhodes decided to form an organization comprised of people in the military and law enforcement in order to "remind them of their oath" (29). In this respect, a key part of Rhodes' worldview is the "duty and obligation" to not follow "unlawful orders" (30). Consequently, his organization aims to reach out to "those who have taken the same oath," to "teach them more about the constitutionally sworn oath to defend," and, lastly, to "inspire them to do the right thing under pressure" (32). The role of the Oath Keepers, as Rhodes describes it, was henceforth to protect people and property during riots (34) and to prevent white nationalists from establishing themselves as "protectors" of Trump followers when confronted with Antifa or similar groups (40). Furthermore, the nation is depicted as naturally and absolutely polarized due to a sense that "the country is turning into a dictatorship" (48).

Rhodes brings a personal dimension to his apparent objection to racial nationalism of any kind on account of him being "a poor Mexican," coming "from a family of Mexican-American migrant farmers" on his mother's side (64). Nonetheless, and despite this description of his ancestry, Rhodes sees the collapse of American borders as part of the deadly danger, represented by Communists "who seek destruction of the United States, that want to see our borders erased and our national sovereignty destroyed, our Constitution destroyed, and . . . to impose a Communist dictatorship" (125).

While considering himself a constitutionalist, very libertarian (29), and "a Three percenter as far as ideology or mindset" (83), Rhodes

defends the role of his organization as an essentially virtuous brotherhood (123), which must protect the majority of the population from the extremes of both right and left. These are described as "two polar opposites of fascists, real fascists and real communists," who "are trying to manipulate the middle population to get them on their side," which, in his view, is "a battle" of keeping the two extremes from dominating (98). However, this is not to suggest that this view is a form of centrism.

From Rhodes' point of view, the mission of the Oath Keepers has strong anti-elitist connotations, fighting, for instance, to protect small shop owners who are at the mercy of corporations and the government (117), while also opposing what he calls "socialist" solutions to the problem (149). The political-financial elites, "the 1 percent at the very top," are singled out as enemies of their own people, tricking "all the rest of us into hating each other over artificial political divisions rather than focusing on them and their corruption" (149). These are elements of the "deep state," including the well-known military-industrial complex, but also the "prison-industrial complex," powerful actors and structures which profit from "pitting Americans against each other" (149-150**)**.

According to Rhodes, if summoned by the president as "militia" during the summer of 2020 "to suppress the open insurrection across the country, we would have done it, absolutely," but by "respecting free speech and assembly, because a deadly insurrection does not suppress the First Amendment if they're trying to set it aside" (132). This would have supposedly involved resisting any orders deemed unlawful, such as disallowing protests in general or confining protesters to a certain town (133). The only solution "to right the ship and fix this country – on both sides, Republicans or Democrats," would be a mass declassification of data, "exposing" individuals compromised by blackmail or foreign governments and enabling their arrest, either by federal allies of the president or by the Oath Keepers themselves (150).

Thus, a fundamental contradiction to one's values – incarceration as punishment for transgressing the existing order – is reacted to by maintaining or hardening the original attitude, reinforcing the belief system which contributed to the conflict. The display of reinforced belief in the absolute correctness of one's cause is set alongside the historical parallels used, such as the time of the Reichstag fire. This seems to

explain the otherwise contradictory notion of an individual who has "never broken a law" in his life, who takes his oath very seriously, yet who is treated like "enemy number one of the republic," as part of the wider demonization of Trump, his followers, and anyone on the right (142). The threat of a civil war seems not only imminent, but also inevitable, with Rhodes asserting in messages during and after January 6, made available by the Justice Department, that "we aren't getting through this without a civil war" and portraying the Oath Keepers and their rifles as the "final defense" (qtd. in Johnson).

Conclusions

Throughout this article, we have looked at the discourse used by a variety of Trumpist organizations and movements, highlighting common threads in the interpretation of a national crisis in 31 interviews and depositions with participants in the January 6 attacks. Our corpus analysis has shown that the speakers consider themselves participants in a great historic event, whereby their worldview and actions represent the salvation of the nation in a time of deep crisis. They feel ostracized by the status quo and were willing to take advantage of the great opportunity offered by the January 6 joint session of Congress. They refer to elements of a wider-ranging crisis, including claims of a stolen election, distortions of the Constitution, conspiracies related to the COVID lockdowns, immigration and uncontrolled borders, and threats posed by left-wing groups, elites, and the mainstream media. The interviewees envision themselves as part of a dormant militia, waiting to be called up to solve these problems, being able to do so because they have the right interpretation of documents and events, which they describe in religious terms. These findings are consistent with other studies that have analyzed the discourse of participants in the January 6 attacks (Donovan et al.; Zhong et al.).

The three testimonies by Tarrio, Alexander, and Rhodes reflect these views as well. However, they are influenced by their context, being in positions of weakness as they are under investigation or on trial rather than of power, when the discourse would have been unrestrained by potential self-incrimination. In fact, Tarrio admits as much when stating that people are afraid to talk to the political establishment and that no

matter how many testimonies they take, they will never understand the core of the issues, which are caused, according to him, by demonization, selective media censorship, and abandonment of the people to corporate interests by the elite (209). Nonetheless, even in this restrictive context, several totalist features stand out.

Firstly, from the perspective of each witness, their organization is a virtuous one, built on deeply held soteriological-simplifying principles such as "Western chauvinism" (Tarrio), Christian values and the integrity of the republic (Alexander), and the oath before the Constitution to preserve individual liberties (Rhodes). United in their patriotic beliefs and values, the actions of this core of committed followers are essential for the salvation and welfare of "the people," despite the sacrifices involved. This is notable in Alexander's self-portrayal as a (non-violent) soteriological figure using political-religious and revolutionary imagery when describing his strategy to save the country, in Tarrio's view of being unfairly targeted by the mainstream media, and in Rhodes' insistence on the absolute lawfulness of both his actions, and, equally important, his worldview in a society that treats him as public enemy number one. Moreover, this appeal to virtue is indirectly confirmed by the perceived unjust demonization in the media and deplatforming which occurred in all three cases, a fact that is rationalized as political-ideological persecution based on value contradiction rather than on the unlawfulness of the January 6 attack.

Secondly, there is the threat posed by counter-ideological factors, impure manifestations of some of the worst excesses found within society. The most important ones mentioned are the radical left – unlawful and destructive to property and the body politic (Rhodes), who use "totalitarian force to back up their ideas" (Alexander 55), and the political elite, who are seen as partisan and out of touch with the people (Tarrio), who have stolen the election, thus ending the republic (Alexander), or who are profoundly corrupt or compromised by blackmail (Rhodes). In this respect, despite considering the radical left their main ideological enemy, the three witnesses share a similar anti-elitist, anti-oligarchic position.

Lastly, the severity of the counter-ideological factors necessitates an absolute, all-encompassing solution which alone could work as a remedy for the existing order and its many tensions and troubles. Thus,

the moment of deadly danger – the approaching political transition – is simultaneously seen as a time of great decision and opportunity, when civil war is possible, but also when revolutionary imagery and discourse mark the movements as agents of historic change. The nation can be saved from its turmoil through rebellion and fighting for liberty just like in 1776 and 1836 (Alexander), through combating the presence and influence of the radical left (Tarrio), while elites must be swept away in a grand, executive-led revelation of all those corrupted or compromised (Rhodes). The alternative is the ascendance and destructive potential of the radical left and the dominance of corrupt political-financial elites working against their own people.

The imminent moment when political transition is to be formalized became a critical juncture in the history of the nation, which was apparently in danger of succumbing to chaos or collapse. Faced with the increasingly slim chances of Trump maintaining power, individuals and groups affiliated to or influenced by Trumpism and the discourse surrounding the topic, likely interpreted this alternative as an unacceptable counter-ideological factor, a fundamental contradiction to their value systems and potentially even their political survival. Rather than accepting the ultimately banal transition typical for a pluralist society, in the interpretation of these actors, the contradiction was part of a deep-seated crisis which could only be met by an equally fundamental action, namely, preventing the transition from taking place by direct means, in pursuit of what amounted to a grand narrative of national purification and rejuvenation.

The manifestation of totalist perspectives within Trumpism-influenced groups can be encountered beyond the typical progress of charismatic heterodoxies which do not conform to at least some important values of their host society. This is due to the impact of social media, which amplifies their potential in an environment marked by sovereignist-nativism, due to their increasingly networked nature and susceptibility to manipulation. As the importance of sovereignist-nativist narratives has arguably not diminished in the years since the January 6 attack, it remains to be seen whether the result of the 2024 elections will provide new strength for such totalistic perspectives or whether they represent something akin to a historical accident. In any case, the enduring issues

identified by participants in the attack suggest the continued resilience of their totalist potential.

Notes:

[1] These numbers might be affected by the fact that the individuals are sometimes referred to by their full name, or just their first name/ last name/ nickname. With the exception of Roger Stone, Alex Jones, Kelly Meggs, Cindy Chafian, Kylie Kremer, we have included the depositions and interviews of all other individuals mentioned in this list.
[2] "Context left" and "Context right" show the words that proceed and follow a key term.
[3] The word "patriots" appears frequently as part of groups names, such as the Zello channel "Real patriots," which also points to an identification of these groups with a select group that holds the answer in a world that has lost its way.

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