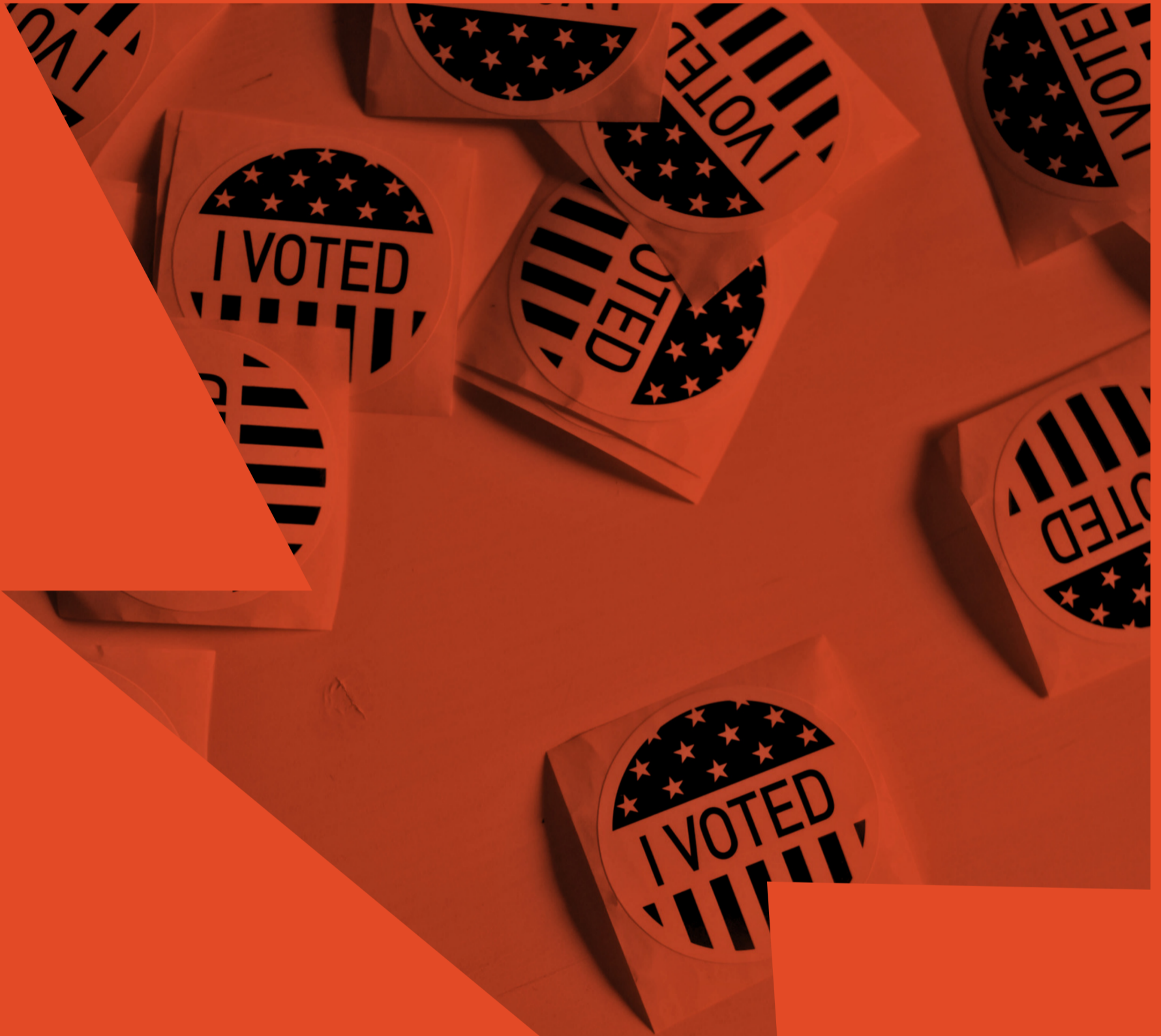




**DANGEROUS
SPEECH PROJECT**



January 2024 Research Brief:

Dangerous Speech & the 2024 U.S. Election

THE PROJECT

As the 2024 United States election approaches, speech that can move people toward accepting violence, what we call “dangerous speech” (DS), is flourishing, and with it, there is a growing possibility of intergroup violence. Working with a team of research fellows, we at the Dangerous Speech Project are collecting and analyzing examples of dangerous speech targeting trans people, migrants, poll workers, and local election officials as well as examples of DS found in campaign ads, related to guns, and referencing the January 6th, 2021 attack on the U.S. Capitol and subsequent trials. Monthly, we release the findings to researchers, journalists, and practitioners working to prevent violence during this period.

THE FINDINGS

In the run-up to the first contests to choose the Republican presidential candidate for the election in November, dangerous speech proliferated – in campaign ads, in political commentary, and on social media. Tensions at the U.S.-Mexico border and drama emanating from former President Donald Trump’s legal battles (including whether courts will disqualify him as a candidate because he is being prosecuted for trying to steal the last election, among other criminal charges) are prominent themes in the dangerous speech examples collected by the DSP’s researcher’s this month. They coalesce around the idea of an invasion from outside the country, facilitated by the enemy inside. The following themes were particularly noteworthy in the data:

1. Falsely blaming migrants for the U.S. opioid epidemic

During the last two months, we found many examples of dangerous speech that blame foreigners for the presence of highly addictive drugs (especially fentanyl) that are killing large numbers of Americans. Most (but not all) of these examples targeted migrants who have been crossing the southern border in large numbers, claiming that they are “pouring into our country” and bringing deadly drugs with them. This is false: when drugs come into the country across the border with Mexico, [they are almost always carried by US citizens](#).

Yet it is a particularly effective form of dangerous speech as it capitalizes on a real crisis: [more than 112,000 people died](#) from fentanyl overdoses in the United States in 2023, and drug overdoses are now the [leading cause of death](#) for Americans between the ages of 18 and 45. [Similar to the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic](#), when real fear was mixed with lies to turn people against certain groups, the danger of addiction and death creates legitimate panic, and it is easy to aim that powerful emotion at innocent targets.

Yet Trump and his campaign and supporters continue to repeat the baseless claim that migrants are the source of America’s drug problem. In December, when Donald Trump faced backlash for remarking that undocumented immigrants were “poisoning the blood of our country,” his ally, U.S. Senator J.D. Vance (R-OH) defended him, saying “He said illegal immigrants were poisoning the blood of this country, which is objectively and obviously true to anybody who looks at the statistics about fentanyl overdoses.” In another example, an ad paid for by the Trump campaign featured a narrator saying “record numbers streaming across our border,



costing taxpayers billions, and almost as many Americans killed from fentanyl as killed in World War II” while showing images of crowds walking along the side of a road and a headline from Fox News reading, “Border Patrol Seized Enough Fentanyl to kill entire U.S.” This dangerous speech creates a feeling of urgency among those who believe the false claims, and it has the potential to convince people to support calls for using increased force at the southern border.

2. Speech suggesting a need for increased militarization

Across topics, political speech on the far right continues to emphasize the need for increased use of force. Audiences are directed to “prepare for war,” and to “guard the polls like soldiers,” along with numerous calls for the national guard to man polling stations.

Statements recommending an increased role for the national guard speak to a deep mistrust in the federal government, including the armed forces, and the need for (white) civilians to be armed and ready to fight federal institutions to prevent tyranny. National guard forces are under the dual control of state and federal authorities, a fact that came into clear view in mid-January, during a standoff between the federally-controlled border guard and the Texas National Guard under the control of Texas governor Greg Abbot (ongoing at the time of writing). [Trump responded](#) by calling on other governors to send their national guards to support Texas in its battle to “protect the Safety, Security, and Sovereignty” of their state.

The standoff began when the Texas National Guard seized a park on the U.S. – Mexico border and barred federal Border Patrol agents from entering the area. The incident was seized upon by far-right, anti-government voices as proof of what they describe as a growing need to arm the citizenry.

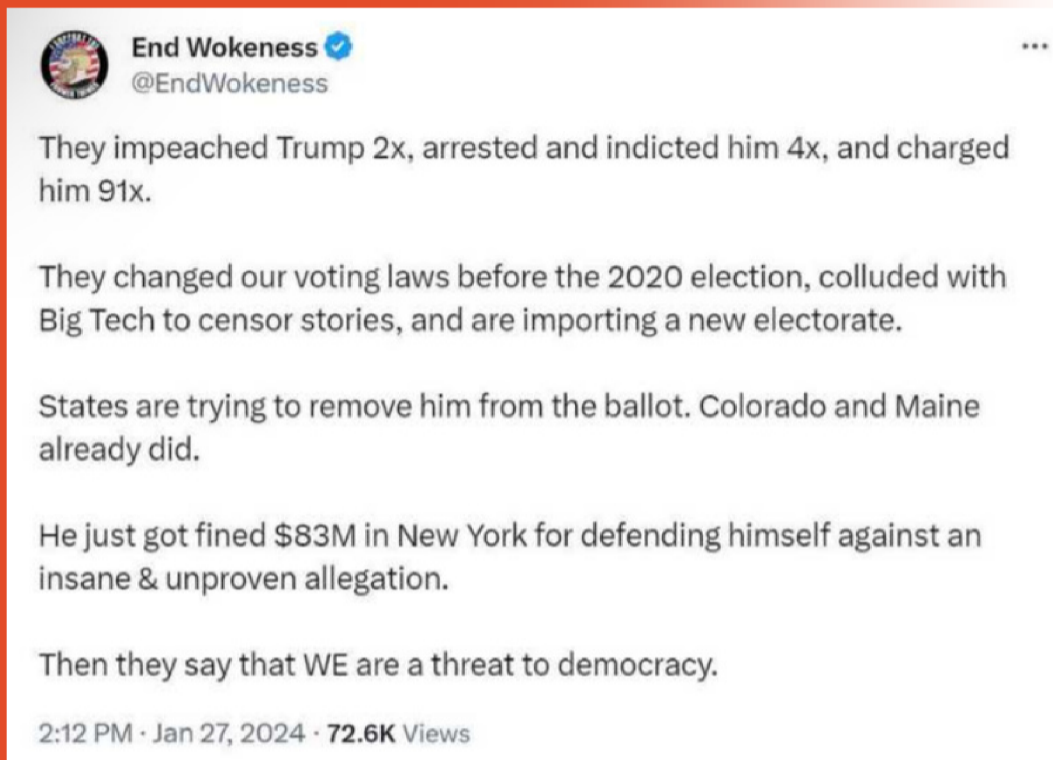
- Alex Jones, for example, [posted a video on X](#) of a man chastising members of Texas National Guard for not fully obeying Gov. Abbot, followed by images of Jones at a pro-Trump rally and his voice saying, “So, I am telling you now, we have reached the thick of the battle, we have reached the heart of the war, we are entering the most important phase of the war against tyranny, started by their undeclared, their unrestricted war against us.”

The juxtaposition of the election denial protests with the conflict between state and federal forces over the southern border adds fuel to a unified conspiracy theory of tyrannical, anti-democratic, government overreach.

3. Speech that portrays President Joe Biden and the left as “threats to democracy”

Our researchers saw an increase in rhetoric by influential right-wing speakers around the idea that Biden is doing exactly what Democrats accuse Trump of – violating the U.S. Constitution, behaving like a dictator, and endangering democracy.

- "It's no wonder Biden and the far-left lunatics are desperate to stop us by any means necessary. They are willing to violate the U.S. Constitution at levels never seen before in order to win. They will do anything to win. They will do whatever they have, whatever they can, and remember this - Joe Biden is a threat to democracy. He is a threat." – Former President Donald Trump at a campaign rally on December 16th, 2023 in Durham, NH.



This is an interesting iteration of the dangerous speech hallmark "[accusation in a mirror](#)": attributing to one's enemies the very acts of violence the speaker hopes to commit against them. In the examples above, Republicans are, in essence, accusing Democrats of using this rhetorical technique – claiming that Donald Trump and his supporters are violating people's rights, when rather, it is Democrats who are doing so.

4. Claims that dissent is being criminalized

We found many examples of dangerous speech this month from Trump and the far right about the supposed criminalization of dissent in America. They say the Biden-led government is taking away constitutional rights including freedom of speech and intends to assert "total control" of American citizens. For example:

- "Every abuse of power the fake news is ridiculously claiming I will commit is in fact being committed by Crooked Joe and his thugs. They're trying to lock up their political opponents. They want to lock up their political opponents, in particular, me. Thank you very much. It's an honor. They're trying to criminalize free speech and take total control over the American people. But then I came along and I'm standing in their way. And now millions of Americans are joining us, millions and millions are joining the Republican Party." – Donald Trump during an address at the NY Republican Club on December 9, 2023.
- "They are truly acting like the fascist dictators that they wanna say Trump is. I'm trying to figure it out. I'm like wait, you wanna arrest other people for practicing their religion. You're not allowed to speak up against police tyranny. They're trying to jail their political opposition. They'll censor the others and/or disproportionately jail them...someone gets 2mo in prison for doing something but if you knock over a fence somewhere in DC you get 17 years. It's not the same." – Donald Trump Jr. on his podcast Triggered. Originally aired December 7, 2023.



- "They will do ANYTHING to defeat Trump. You've got the convergence of forces right now. You've got the lawfare, right. Look at Rudy yesterday, \$148million ...you got Trump, 700 years in prison, 700 years in federal prison, for what? They're trying to take him off the ballot in what, nine states, with the 14th Amendment? The Justice Dept and the FBI--the FBI has become the Modern American Gestapo. We see that on January 6th. The DOJ is not any better." – Steve Bannon, former chief strategist for the Trump administration, during Turning Point USA's "AmericaFest 2023," broadcast across social media.

The discourse surrounding those tried and convicted for their actions on January 6th has also begun to evolve, with some (including [Donald Trump](#) and [Republican Representative Elise Stefanik](#)) now referring to them as "hostages" (although many still call them "political prisoners.") This language is concerning and has potential implications for the potential for violence in the country. In January 2020, Political Scientists Nathan Kalmoe and Lilliana Mason [conducted a survey of Americans](#), presenting them with a range of hypothetical scenarios and asking whether, under those hypothetical circumstances, political violence would be justified. Close to 60% of people surveyed said that the following circumstances warranted political violence: "imprisoning critics, government corruption leading to special favors, racial and religious discrimination, and government leaders who escape prosecution for crimes while prosecuting their opponents," (p. 116).

5. Dehumanizing speech against trans people

Our research has revealed that dehumanizing speech (a hallmark of DS) that weaves together religious and anti-trans discourse is continuing to spread, including comments from politicians and other notable public figures comparing trans people to demons, imps, and aliens. For example,

- While debating a Florida bill that would make it a crime for a person to use a bathroom that doesn't match their gender assigned at birth, Republican Rep. Webster Barnaby said, "I'm looking at society today and it's like I'm watching an X-men movie... it's like we have mutants living among us on planet Earth... I'm not afraid to address the dysphoria or the dysfunction. The Lord rebuke you, Satan, and all of your demons and all of your imps will come and parade before us. That's right -- I called you demons and imps who come and parade before us and pretend that you are part of this world."
- "You can't transcend God's creation. I don't care how hard you try. The transgender movement in this country, if there's a movement in this country that is demonic and that is full of spirit of the antichrist, it is the transgender movement." - North Carolina Lt. Governor Mark Robinson, speaking on Sebastian Gorka's podcast, "The Manhood Hour."

This speech is dehumanizing, and its dangerousness is increased because it is being shared in a context that [valorizes violence in service of Christian nationalist causes](#).



CONCERNING CONTEXT: DEMOCRATIC COLLAPSE

Much has been made of the inciting power of Trump's proclamation to January 6th rally attendees that "if you don't fight like hell, you're not going to have a country anymore." This belief in the threat of the destruction of democracy has only strengthened since 2021 and is present on both sides of the aisle. For example, according to the [Public Religion Research Institute's American Values Survey](#)

- 72% Democrats, 42% Independents, & 22% Republicans agree that if Trump wins in 2024, democracy is broken.
- 64% Republicans, 37% Independents, and 18% Democrats agree that if Biden wins in 2024, democracy is broken.

If Trump ends up being the nominee, and if beliefs stay relatively stable on this question, that means that no matter which candidate wins the election, in its aftermath a substantial number of Americans will believe that the U.S. republic and, very likely, their place in it, are being destroyed. This is troubling, as existential threats (to self, community, or way of life) often make intergroup violence seem acceptable or even virtuous – that's why they are a common feature in dangerous speech.

We are closely watching to see whether, and if so, how, this belief presents itself in political speech as the campaign continues. Here is one example from this month's data collection:

- "The humiliation rituals will continue and if they continue unabated how does that end? Ask yourself, honestly, how does that end? If they're treating you like you're subhuman, what are their plans for you? If they won't let you say what you think, they don't consider you human. Period. Free speech is not some abstract concept, free speech is what delineates a free man from a slave. The slave has to shut up and do what he is told, his opinion is not welcome. A free man, a citizen, can by definition express what he thinks, and there's nothing anyone in authority can do about it, ever." – Political commentator [Tucker Carlson](#), [addressing the crowd at Turning Point USA's annual event, AmericaFest](#) on December 20, 2023.

Not only encouraging his listeners to feel victimized and humiliated, Carlson directs them to see their well-being as directly tied to the U.S. presidency. This sort of rhetoric makes people see the result of an election as victory - or a direct attack on their personal well-being.

We are worried.

Throughout the electoral campaign we will track online discussions of this, the other themes discussed above, and new rhetorical lightning rods as they emerge. To get our monthly reports as soon as we write them, [click here to sign up](#).

Have other questions? Please email Cathy@dangerousspeech.org



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The Dangerous Speech Project is a team of experts on how speech leads to violence. We use our research to advise internet companies, governments, and civil society on how to anticipate, minimize, and respond to harmful discourse in ways that prevent violence while also protecting freedom of expression.



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