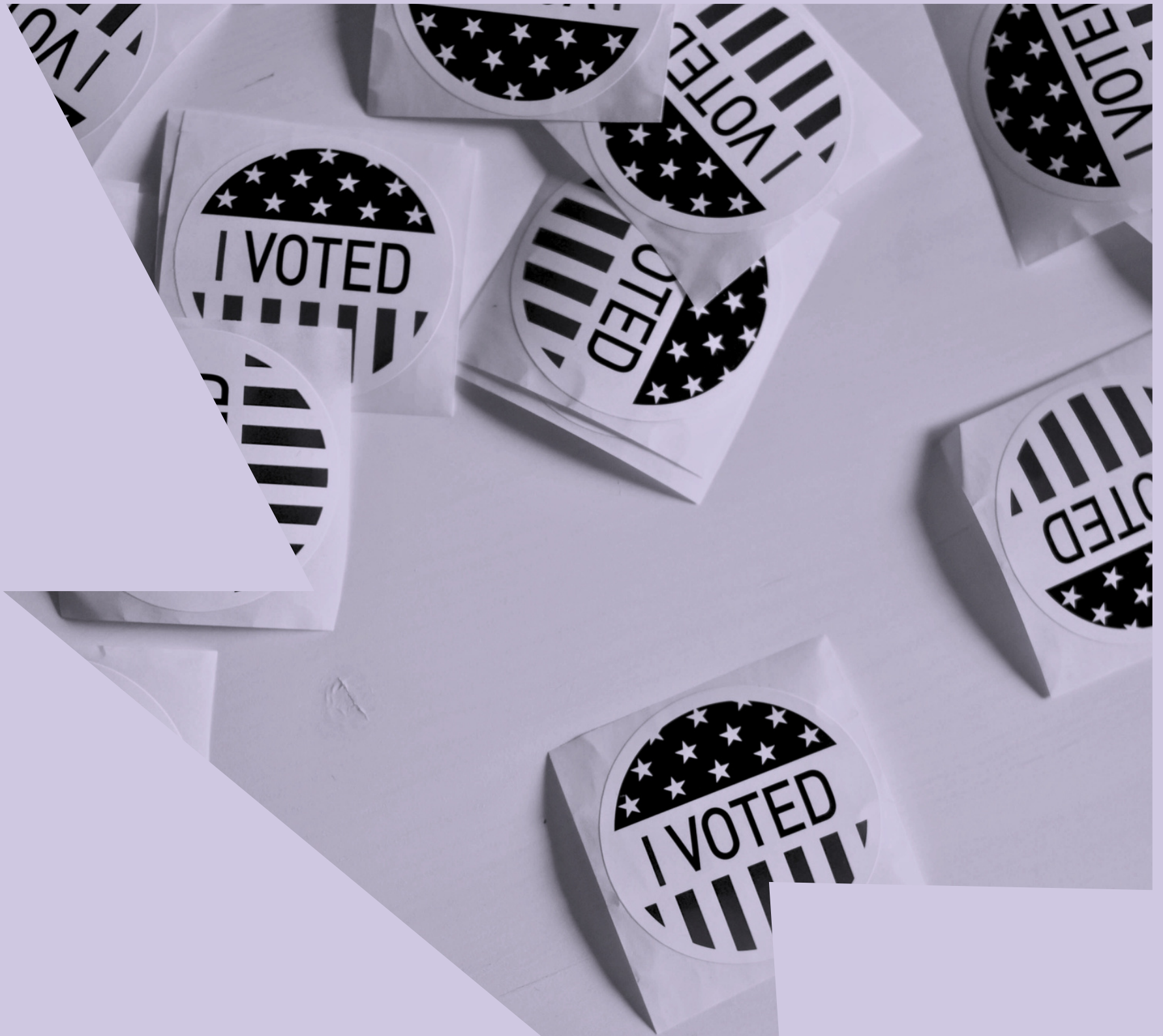


**DANGEROUS  
SPEECH PROJECT**



**February 2024 Research Brief:**

# **Dangerous Speech & the 2024 U.S. Election**

# THE PROJECT

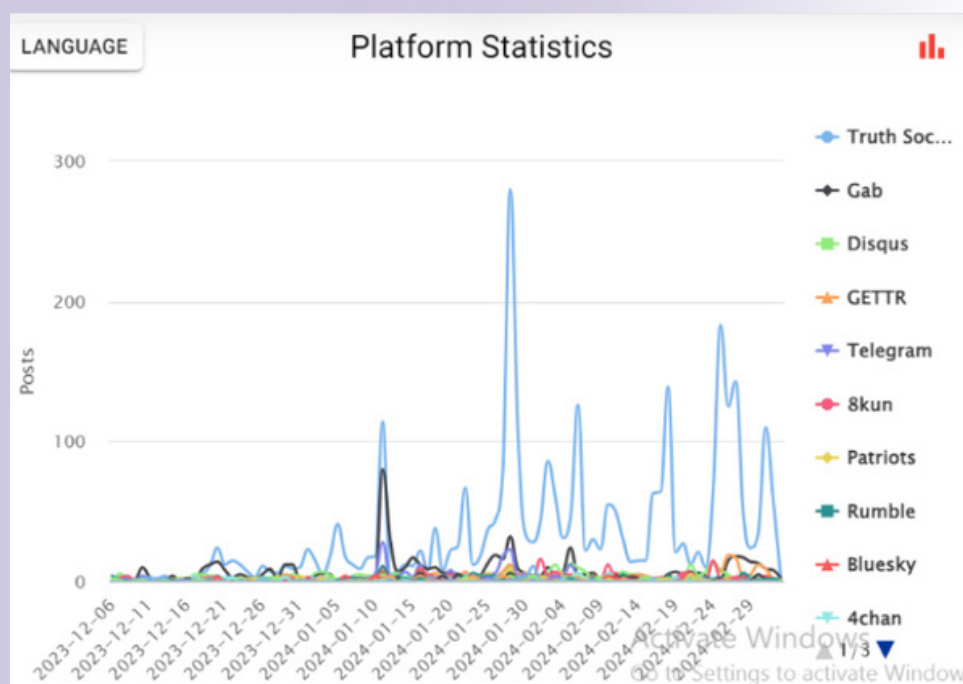
As the 2024 United States election approaches, speech that can move people toward accepting violence, what we call “dangerous speech” (DS), is flourishing, and with it, there is a growing possibility of intergroup violence. Working with a team of research fellows, we at the Dangerous Speech Project are 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

Immigration is the top answer **when Americans are asked**, “What do you think is the most important problem facing this country today?” In this month’s report, we focus on dangerous speech aimed at migrants and explain how such speech is motivating support for authoritarian policy proposals, including a mass deportation campaign.

Since former President Donald Trump began campaigning for the 2024 election, he has **repeatedly promised** that if elected, he would “carry out the largest domestic deportation operation in American history.” On January 27, 2024, at a campaign rally in Las Vegas, NV, Trump repeated this pledge and added, “we have no choice.”

Since the end of January, rhetoric calling for mass deportation has surged across social media, especially on Truth Social, the right-wing social media site Trump founded in October 2021 (see chart below).



The idea of mass deportation isn't novel, and the United States has carried it out in the past, expelling millions of people. In the 1930s in the United States, up to 2 million Mexicans and Mexican-Americans were deported through so-called “repatriation campaigns,” **up to half of whom were American citizens**. Similar to today, support for these deportations was at least partially driven by fear. It was the Great Depression, and the country was struggling to take care of citizens' basic needs. Mexican immigrants were seen as outsiders (regardless of their legal status or

citizenship), taking jobs, money, and food away from “true” Americans. Twenty years later, responding to a report from the Commission on Migratory Labor that **referred to the migrant situation as an “invasion,”** President Dwight D. Eisenhower instituted another mass deportation campaign known as “Operation Wetback,” that removed over a million people from the country.



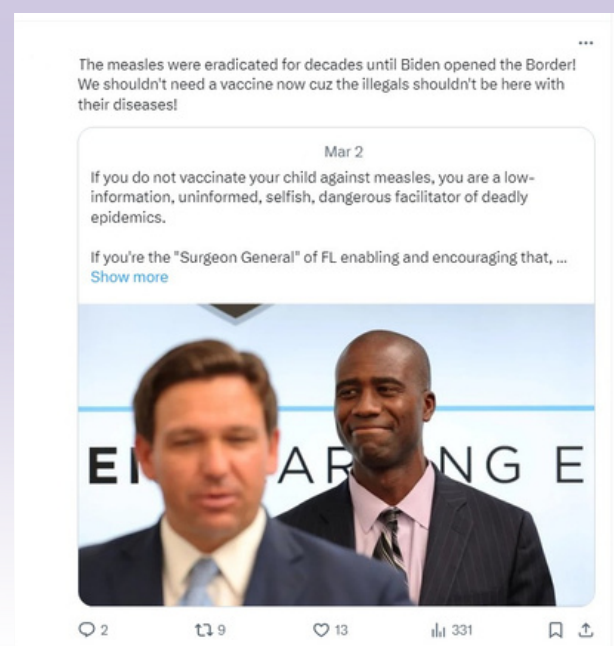
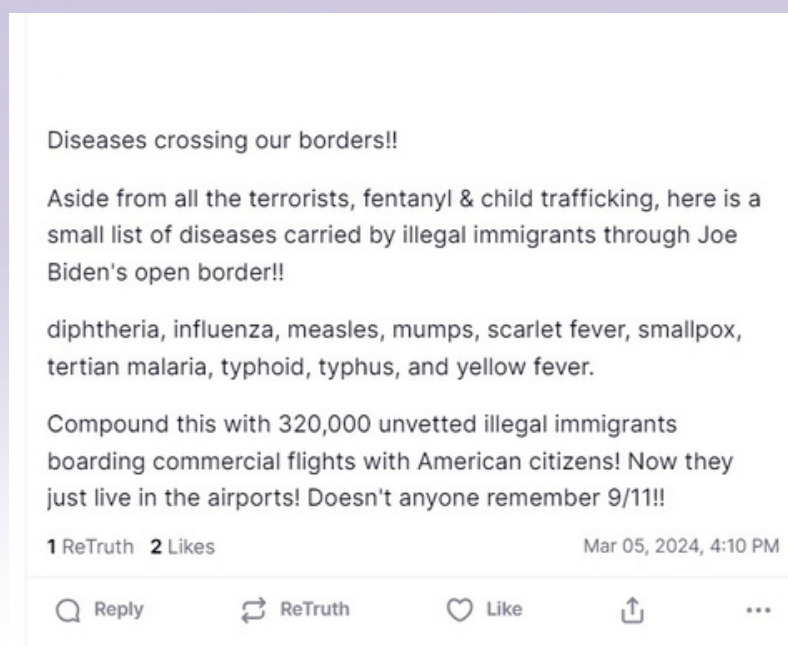
During the past month, our research team has documented many cases of dangerous speech targeting migrants, including from highly influential public figures. These examples often falsely describe all migrants as criminals and a threat to homes and schools around the country.

For example:

- Reacting to a Libs of Tiktok video on X (formerly Twitter) showing school buses bringing undocumented migrants to sleep in a New York City school gymnasium, X owner Elon Musk posted, "This is what happens when you run out of hotel rooms. Soon, cities will run out of schools to vacate. Then they will come for your homes."
- "The city is being destroyed by the migrant crisis," said New York City Mayor Eric Adams during a panel discussion organized by the African American Mayors Association.
- "So how are your sanctuary cities doing with all of your primarily military aged male "migrants" sucking up resources? Are American children able to go to school or are the illegal squatters still imposing on the taxpayers? How are you idiots liking the Biden "migrant" Crime Crisis in your sanctuary cities? I think it's great that you idiots get to reap the rewards of your stupidity! 🤡🤡🤡 Allowing military aged illegal aliens to cross the border unvetted by the millions, some of which were known terrorists, is an invasion of our country and the fact that the Biden administration doing nothing to stop it, is an act of treason, you dummy... three simple words CLOSE. THE. BORDER. are all that feeble minded walking corpse needs to mumble and he refuses to do it..." wrote a user on Truth Social.

Additionally, we have seen an increase in speech linking migrants with rising rates of measles. Although the overall number of measles cases is still low (the [CDC](#) recorded only 58 cases in 2023), they are increasing (as of March 7, 2024 there have already been 45 cases). While reporting on an outbreak of measles in a Florida elementary school on her show on Fox News, host Laura Ingraham said, "Florida has seen the latest outbreak, with nine cases so far. So, it's not just the spread of violent crime across the country caused by the open border, it's the potential spread of contagious diseases." In Trump's proposed immigration plan, the spread of communicable diseases across the border would be justification for a public health emergency - **and the refusal to hear asylum claims.**

There were many examples of similar speech on social media as well. For example:



(Note: screenshots have been anonymized)



## Truth, Lies, and the Support for Violence: The Death of Laken Riley

In the recent [op-ed we published in the L.A. Times](#), we wrote about how weaving together truth and lies can make speech particularly dangerous. While dangerous speech is often completely false, sometimes it is constructed around a few true components that are then used to falsely cast blame on an entire group. The death of Laken Riley, a nursing student in Georgia killed by an undocumented immigrant on February 22, is an example of dangerous speech built on truth. People looking to justify mass deportation have repeatedly cited Riley's death, using it to falsely color all immigrants as dangerous, and it was featured in a Trump campaign ad that has been amplified by his supporters. For example, alt-right political activist Jack Posobiec posted on X, "President Trump just released a new ad about illegal immigration focused on Laken Riley's murder. Share it. No more Laken Rileys. Elect Trump. Deport them all." The post received more than 35,000 likes, and shared more than 20,000 times.



We also saw spikes in comments on unmoderated social media that cited Riley's murder as justification for deportation, including posts by influential figures including two Texas U.S. House Representatives, Ronny Jackson and Troy Nehls.

"How about the Laken Riley No More Illegal Aliens Act that starts with mass deportation of all parasitic freeloaders? That would be great," said another user on TheDonald.

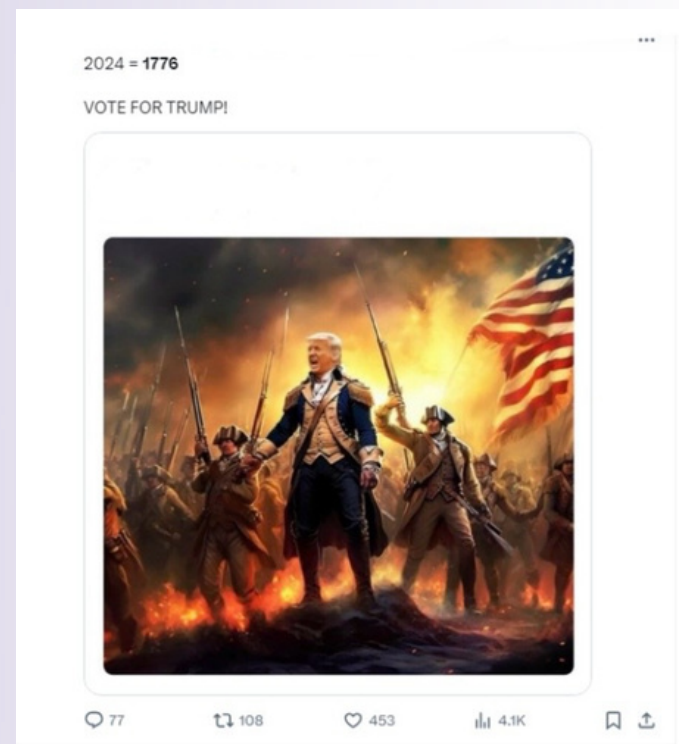
This speech is particularly dangerous and difficult to counter, as those who believe it can point to the elements of the messages that are true and use them to justify violence and authoritarian policies against all members of the perpetrator's group as retaliation or under the guise of prevention.

## When virtuetalk and dangerous speech collide

In [last month's report](#), we wrote about the standoff between the Texas National Guard and federal Border Patrol agents along the Texas border. The standoff has continued throughout February alongside rhetoric that stitches together dangerous speech targeting migrants and "virtuetalk," which [Jonathan Leader Maynard](#) describes as a "valorization of violence by associating it with a range of praiseworthy characteristics."

In the United States as in many other countries, the political violence that birthed the nation is widely seen as virtuous and justified. References to 1776 (the year independence was declared from Great Britain), Revolutionary War imagery (such as the Betsy Ross flag that was used prominently during the January 6th insurrection), and accusations of "treason" all are meant to make the case that political violence is equally justified now.

This convinces people that standing up to what they believe to be treason - even with violence - is honorable and necessary. It also plays to narratives of the valiant (generally male) protector stepping forward to guard his family, community, country, etc.




The southern border has become evidence of this as convoys and militias, spurred on by dangerous speech, have headed south to join efforts to “guard” the border. On January 22, former Fox News commentator Tucker Carlson fanned the flames on X:

“So it’s unanimous: **everyone in power**, from the White House, to the hedge fund managers, to the Supreme Court of the United States has **decided to destroy the country** by **allowing it to be invaded**. That **leaves the population to defend itself**. Where are the men of Texas? Why aren’t they **protecting their state and the nation?**”

When thousands joined “Take our Border back” rallies and convoys less than two weeks later, some claimed they were **responding to Carlson’s call to defend the border**. Incidents like this demonstrate the power when virtuetalk and dangerous speech come together: while dangerous speech describes a threat and reifies it in the minds of the audience, virtuetalk helps people see their endorsement of violence - and even carrying it out - as honorable.

In addition to potentially increasing support for violence against members of other groups, dangerous speech during elections has the potential to push voters to seek out anti-democratic solutions to perceived existential threats, such as **vigilante actions** and so-called “strongman” candidates - authoritarian political





leaders who have (or claim to have) popular support. Increasingly we are seeing generalized claims about the need for such a leader - someone who can “protect” the people. The tagline from a Trump campaign ad that was posted on social media last month is a good example. “You’re not safe in Joe Biden’s America,” it read. Speech like this normalizes the expectation of violence among audience members.

Throughout the electoral campaign we will track online discussions of this issue, 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](mailto: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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<sup>1</sup> Throughout the report, we have not included links to the dangerous speech examples and have hidden the identities of internet users who are not public figures both for privacy reasons and so as not to drive additional traffic to their accounts. If you would like more detail for journalism or research purposes, please reach out to [info@dangerousspeech.org](mailto:info@dangerousspeech.org)

