April 2024 Research Brief:
Dangerous Speech & the 2024 U.S. Election
THE PROJECT
As the 2024 United States election approaches, speech that moves people toward accepting and committing violence, what we call “dangerous speech” (DS), is flourishing, and with it, the risk of intergroup attacks. Working with a team of research fellows, we at the Dangerous Speech Project are collecting and analyzing 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.

THE FINDINGS
In this month’s report, we explore the way in which multiple dangerous narratives are reinforcing one another, and even supporting more extreme conspiracy theories. Specifically, we discuss the increased use of the phrase “military aged men/males” used to characterize the majority of migrants crossing the southern border. Alongside this rhetoric are influential speakers echoing the notion advanced by former President Donald Trump that the real threat to the U.S. is coming from within. These two narratives have spread online at the same time as a conspiracy theory suggesting that President Joe Biden and other Democrats are bringing migrants into the country to become soldiers and fight against Trump supporters. This is still a fringe theory that has yet to spread widely, but it provides a useful case study of how belief in dangerous speech can bolster even more extreme conspiracy theories.

“MILITARY-AGED MEN”
Increasingly, people who enter the country across its southern border are being referred to as “military aged men” in a malicious attempt to frame them as a threat. Notably, the focus of this speech seems to be on undocumented migrants from China coming into the country. These false assertions have been supported by Trump and other influential speakers. For example, when asked in April by conservative radio host Hugh Hewitt what he thought was behind the increase in Chinese immigrants, Trump responded, “They're probably building an army. They're probably building an army from within. I mean, you look at what's happening, because they're very healthy young men for the most part.”

We have seen many allusions to this narrative online. For example:
- “30K + CHINESE MILITARY AGED MEN HAVE ILLEGALLY CROSSED OUR BORDER TO DATE. WHY ARE THEY HERE” - Gab user, May 7, 2024
- “Military age men fleeing foreign wars leave with their families. Military age men going to a foreign war leave their families at home...You've seen the photos/videos of nearly exclusively military age men streaming unimpeded or even flown into our Country. Insane. How difficult must it be to leave countries, like China, let alone make the journey. Yet they stream across our border by the 10s of thousands. With no help?Forwarded from Freedom Force Battalion;Joe Biden seems to be determined for an October 7 style event here in America" - Gab user, May 1, 2024
- “Millions of #illegals from 160 foreign countries mostly single military age men -these countries have just two genders- and China has an army in the US because of this porous border! This is a #nationalsecurity breach may be a disaster in the near future! #Obiden #invasion” - GETTR user, April 20, 2024
Framing migrants in this manner stokes fear and suspicion, painting them as a monolithic group of potential aggressors rather than individuals fleeing from conflict, persecution, or seeking better opportunities. Whereas the term “refugee” confers a need for protection, and “immigrant” can elicit a variety of emotional reactions, the notion of thousands of “military aged men/males” conveys a sense of force and corresponds with the false claims of a migrant “invasion.”

The portrayal of migrants arriving at the southern border as "invaders" is a prime example of the manipulation of language to evoke fear and perpetuate a narrative of threat. The term "invaders" conjures images of hostile forces breaching borders with malicious intent. In reality, many migrants flee dire circumstances in their home countries, such as violence, persecution, or economic hardship, and seek refuge and opportunities in the United States. But by labeling them as invaders, certain individuals and groups portray them as a monolithic threat to national security rather than individuals in need of assistance and compassion. This rhetoric not only stokes fear and division but also deflects attention from the underlying causes of migration and from finding humane solutions to the challenges posed by immigration.

THE ENEMY WITHIN
Spreading alongside speech falsely framing migrants coming into the United States as “invading military-aged men” is a narrative suggesting that, despite the purported dangers arising from the presence of outsiders in the country, the real danger is posed by people inside it, namely President Biden and his supporters. In some ways, this type of speech is not unusual for an election period. It is common for opposition politicians to blame a country’s woes on an incumbent. What makes this speech dangerous is the level of threat being attributed. It is one thing to blame an incumbent for a failing economy. It is quite another to falsely assert that there is an existential threat to the people of the country, from the current head of state.

In February of this year, during his address at the National Religious Broadcasters International Christian Media Convention in Nashville, Trump asserted that the “greatest threat is not from the outside of our country — “I really believe it is from within. It's the people from within our country that are more dangerous than the people outside.” By framing internal actors as more dangerous than foreigners, Trump seeks to depict his opponents as enemies and consolidate support by positioning himself as the defender against these perceived domestic perils.

This framing of the insider as the one to blame for a threat posed by an outside is a trope that Trump has long bandied. In 2021, we wrote about his use of the lyrics of the song (and fable) “The Snake,” which describes a woman who rescues a half-frozen serpent, only to have it betray her kindness with a lethal bite. During his 2020 presidential campaign Trump read “The Snake” at least a dozen times, at political rallies and gatherings, falsely framing the speech as illustrative of the dangers posed by immigrants and the naiveté of Democrats for allowing them in. In contrast, these days, Trump and his supporters maliciously describe Democrats as calculating rather than naive - knowingly allowing (or even helping) immigrants to cross the border in order to increase the party’s power.

It is not just Trump making these false claims, and not all claims name Biden as the threat. For example, during an episode of her Rumble show, Loomer Unleashed, far-right internet personality Laura Loomer said, “Last week while reporting from the Darién Gap in Panama
I discovered that much of the illegal immigration to our country is not simply passing through that region, but it is being supported by a number of non-governmental organizations.” According to Loomer, it is liberal NGOs that are the threat as they are aiding would-be migrants to come to America.

Similarly, Bernie Moreno, a Republican nominee for the U.S. Senate from Ohio, posted the following on X: "In his nearly two decades in the Senate, @SherrodBrown has repeatedly voted against securing the border, building the wall and deporting illegals. His open border policies are killing Ohioans” along with an image containing the mugshots of three immigrants, one of whom was accused of aggravated murder.

THE CONSPIRACY: BIDEN’S CIVIL WAR
When false dangerous speech becomes normalized and accepted as truth within a group, it can provide support for increasingly extreme conspiracy theories among fringe members of that group. In our research on over 30 unmoderated social media sites this month, we saw evidence of exactly this. Specifically, we saw evidence of a fringe conspiracy theory falsely suggesting that the Biden administration wants a civil war and is bringing military-aged men into this country to populate the US armed forces. For example:

- “the enemy is the D politicians cabal and there imported illegal immigrant army, which is exactly why they are importing military age males, prepare yourselves for the civil war between PATRIOTS vs evil D politicians and there illegal alien army”

This conspiracy theory seems to have been bolstered by the findings of an Illinois court on March 8th in which gun charges were dropped against Heriberto Carbajal-Flores, who was living as an undocumented immigrant in Chicago when, in 2020, he was charged with breaking a federal law that bans undocumented immigrants from owning guns. A judge ruled that the law
was unconstitutional, and that Carbajal-Flores’ charges should be dropped, as there was no evidence that he was a risk to public safety. Some who already view undocumented immigrants as a threat saw this as evidence of government collusion.

It’s important to note that we did not see evidence that this narrative was spreading widely. Instead, it is an illustration of how extreme conspiracy theories come to be believed by those in the fringe. If one hears about the court case and accepts the lies that undocumented immigrants are invading and that Biden and his supporters are the real danger, then it is no
longer such a long leap to believe the conspiracy theory purported by these users. Dangerous speech becomes the scaffolding on which even more extreme and dangerous messages are propped.

Throughout the electoral campaign we will continue to track these online narratives as well as new rhetorical lightning rods as they emerge. To get our monthly reports as soon as we write them, click here to sign up.

Have 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.

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