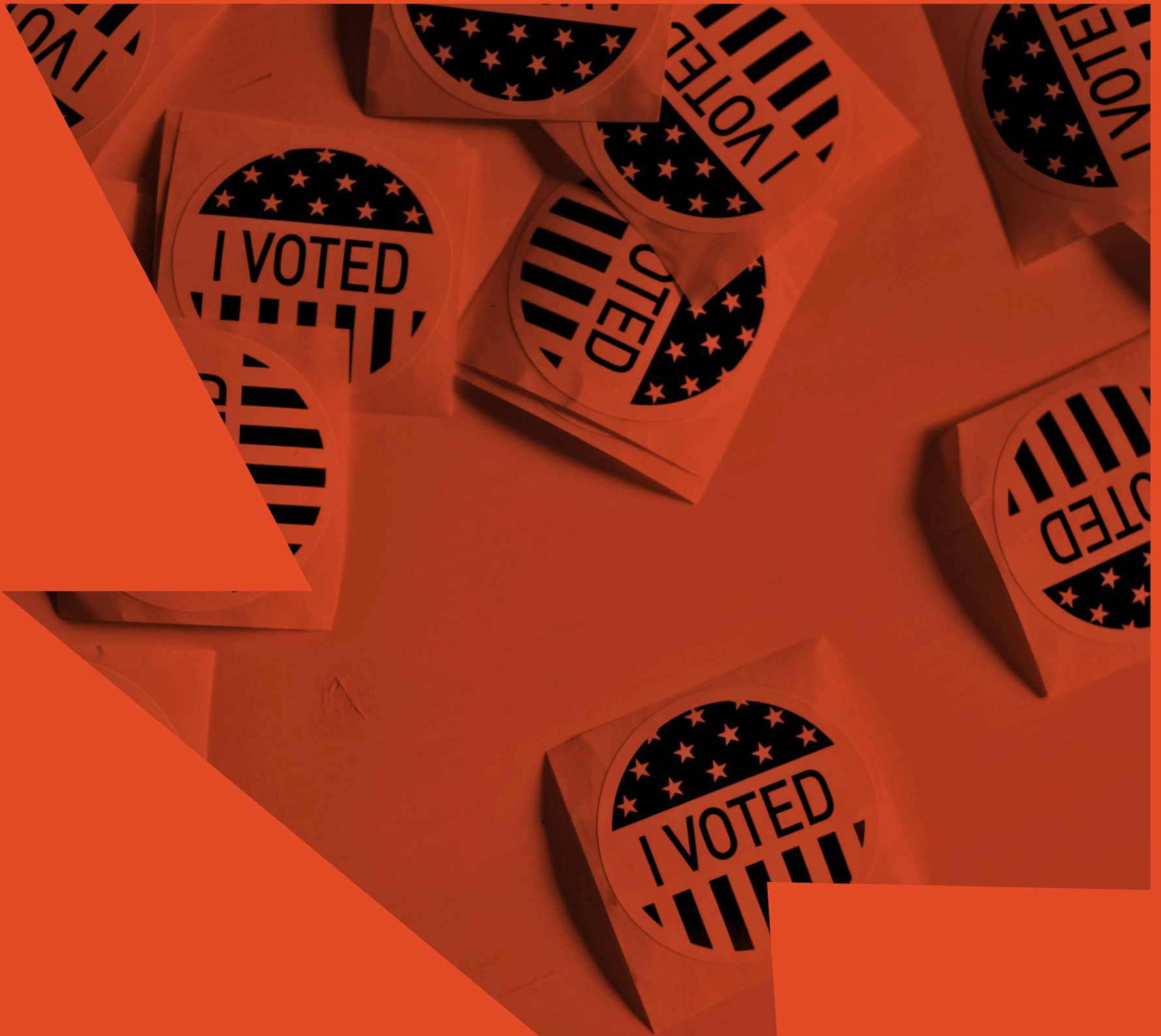




**DANGEROUS
SPEECH PROJECT**



July 2024 Research Brief:

Dangerous Speech & the 2024 U.S. Election

THE PROJECT

As the 2024 United States election approaches, public 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

This month, we delve into a special type of dangerous speech - one that doesn’t attack anyone. Instead, this speech valorizes violence, characterizing it as something honorable and connected to the identity of the in-group. We have noticed this speech proliferating in our media environment in recent months. When used alongside dangerous speech that degrades and devalues members of another group, it creates a volatile context in which there is a heightened chance of killings and attacks. Once people are primed to commit violence, they need only minor prompting to choose a target.

VIRTUOUS VIOLENCE

Dangerous speech is usually aimed at members of another group, vilifying and falsely characterizing them as a threat. But dangerous speech can also be meant for members of an in-group, not to vilify them, but to convince them that attacking and even killing others would be a noble thing to do. This type of rhetoric tells them that they can (and should) be the heroic defenders of their group, and is often strengthened by allusions to larger narratives of morality or identity such as religion and national or cultural folklore.



The scholar Jonathan Leader Maynard calls this latter type of rhetoric “[virtuetalk](#)” and defines it as “the rhetorical presentation of killing as demonstrating the laudable character of the perpetrator.” When dangerous speech denigrating the out-group and virtuetalk speaking to the in-group work together, the environment is particularly primed for intergroup violence. Members of the audience feel threatened – and also justified, or even obliged, to use violence to protect against the supposed threat.

Over the past few months, we have seen virtuous violence narratives flourish, especially around two



themes: Christianity and rhetoric connected to the American Revolutionary War. In this report, we focus on the role of Christian rhetoric in legitimizing violence. Next month's report will analyze the use of rhetoric related to the American Revolution.

GOOD VS. EVIL

During the 2024 U.S. presidential campaign, many candidates have used apocalyptic language and claims of divine mandate to galvanize their supporters and demonize their opponents. This kind of rhetoric includes references to existential battles and final struggles, framing political conflicts as divinely ordained confrontations between good and evil. For instance, former President Donald Trump has, on multiple occasions, framed the upcoming election as a battle between good and evil. At the end of June, for example, he told a group at a rally in Virginia, referencing the first presidential debate, "We had a big victory against a man that really is looking to destroy our country. He's the worst. He's the most corrupt, the most incompetent president in the history of our country," said Trump. "And we have to take it back from that party. That's an evil party."

Others have also used this dichotomous framing, like Lara Trump, Donald Trump's daughter-in-law and co-chair of the Republican National Committee (RNC) who, at the end of May at an event in North Carolina, said: "What we have going on in this country right now is not Republican versus Democrat or left versus right, it's good vs. evil."

Framing the election as a moral battle is not confined to Republicans. President Joe Biden has, in the past, spoken of the **"battle for the soul of the nation"** and at the end of May, first lady Dr. Jill Biden said that she believed Americans would "choose good over evil" by reelecting her husband.

We have also seen this rhetoric echoed by everyday users across social media:

- "Something major is going to happen between now and November. I feel it'll be good over evil. God willing Trump will be vindicated." (Truth Social post, July 17, 2024)

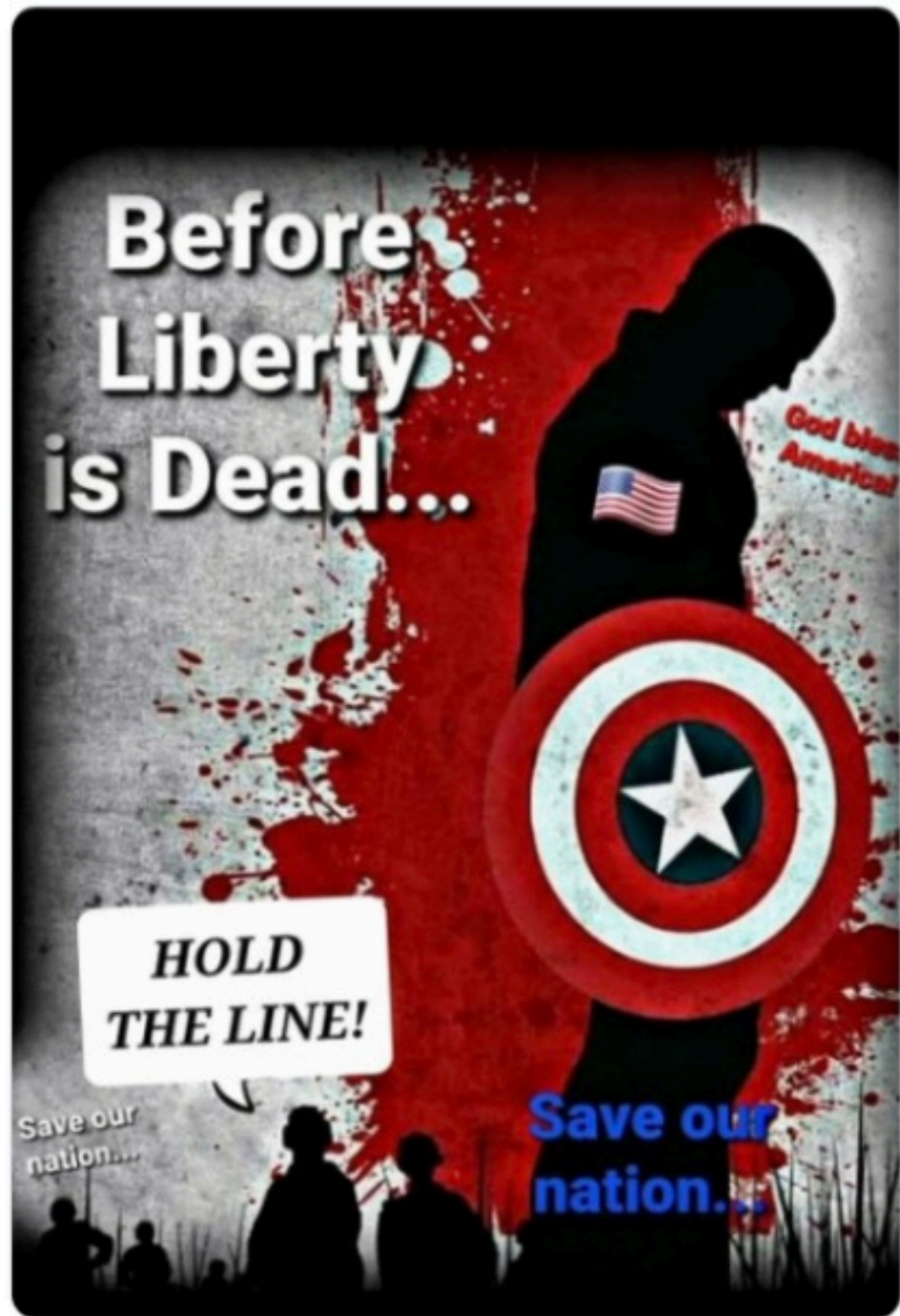


- “trump is the good guy and lefties are the bad guys, unironically. thats the difference. it's a good thing when evil is destroyed.” (4chan post, July 16, 2024)
- “WE ARE WITNESSING ONE OF THE GREATEST CHAPTERS IN OUR ENTIRE LIFETIME.THIS IS CLEARLY A WAR OF GOOD VS EVIL!AND WE ARE ALL A PART OF THESE HISTORIC EVENTS!WHEN THEY SAY IT’S A GREAT TIME TO BE ALIVE!EMBRACE THIS MOMENT!FOR WE ARE WITNESSING THE POWER OF GOD!LIKE WE HAVE NEVER SEEN BEFORE!GOD CHOSE DONALD J. TRUMP FOR THIS TASK THIS GOES WITHOUT QUESTION!NO OTHER PERSON WOULD BE ABLE TO WITHSTAND WHAT THIS MAN HAS GONE THROUGH AND CONTINUES TO GO THROUGH FOR US, FOR AMERICA, ALL BEING ORCHESTRATED THROUGH THE POWERS OF GOD!GOD IS SHOWING THE WORLD THROUGH PRESIDENT TRUMP THAT NO MATTER WHAT THEY DO!NO MATTER WHAT THEY TRY! NO MATTER HOW THEY TRY TO DEFY HIM!GOD IS SHOWING THE WORLD HE IS IN CONTROL!HE IS ALSO SHOWING US ALL THAT HE WILL NOT BE DEFIED!HE WILL NOT BE DEFEATED!HE WILL CONQUER ALL AND CRUSH THIS” (Truth Social post, July 16, 2024)



When influential political figures and their supporters portray their opponents as evil, it becomes easy to see their own opposition to them as an act of righteous defense. Christian nationalist rhetoric often uses violent military imagery to connect the dots between religion, country, and violence. As one slogan that has become popular in 2024 goes, “God, guns, and Trump.”

Dear God, please enlighten our military, our National Guard, and help them in the face of tyranny and treason stemming from a faux and traitorous president. Please protect this nation from Civil War. God, please bless America. Amen.



7:29 PM · Jan 25, 2024 · 109 Views

Other examples of such rhetoric include posts and statements that include prayers to God, asking for protection for the country, such as the one shown on the left.

Religious rhetoric is also used to portray a political figure as being endorsed by God to serve as a conduit in the previously-mentioned battle between good and evil. For example, at a campaign rally in Las Vegas in June, Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene drew a direct comparison between Trump and Jesus, saying, "The Democrats and the fake news media want to constantly talk about 'President Trump is a convicted felon. Well, you want to know something? The man that I worship is also a convicted felon. And he was murdered on a Roman cross.'"

Trump has been particularly open to this framing, even sharing a song on his Truth Social account that calls him the "Chosen One." He has also endorsed a "God Bless the USA Bible," a version of the book containing patriotic imagery and the texts of the US Constitution, the Bill of Rights, the Declaration of Independence, the Pledge of Allegiance, and the chorus to the song "God Bless The USA." (a product from which he receives royalties).

Examples like these create the notion that there is an existential threat to the religious soul of a nation and that God has chosen a side (and, potentially, a leader to work through). Speech like this raises the stakes for religious believers and also inspires trust in the actions of leaders seen to be on the

side of God, as their policies and decisions are seen to have been religiously sanctioned.

"ARMOR OF GOD"

"Put on the full armor of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.

- Ephesians 6:11-12, New International Version

In February of 2022, Gov. Ron DeSantis told a crowd during a visit to a Christian college, "Put on the full armor of God. Stand firm against the left's schemes. You will face flaming arrows, but if



you have the shield of faith, you will overcome them.” With his statement, DeSantis paraphrased the well-known verse to equate the left with the devil, and to call upon his Christian supporters to stand against them.

As sociologist Philip Gorsky [has noted](#), “The full armor of God passage is a favorite amongst certain types of Pentecostals who really do see the world in terms of spiritual warfare.” When used by political figures, the language links spiritual warfare with national survival. Christian nationalist rhetoric often portrays political actions, occasionally including violence, as divinely sanctioned. This belief comes from the idea that the nation has a special covenant with God, and thus, any threats to the nation are seen as threats to God's will. This justifies preemptive or retaliatory violence against perceived enemies.

The phrase “armor of God” has become common in Christian Nationalism discourse, even showing up on [patches sewn onto tactical gear](#) worn by some who stormed the Capitol on January 6, 2021. It is frequently used alongside explicitly political comments or hashtags, for example:

- Time to put this into Motion!!!! Time to take back our God Given Freedoms and Lock up all these Criminals in our government! Stand United Patriots and Pray and put on The Full Armor of God! (Truth Social post July 7, 2024)
- RT @AllianceForTrumpCollect your thoughts and continue praying to God during this time. Much is masked until it can be revealed. 🇺🇸 Ephesians 6:11 Put on the full armor of God, so that you will be able to stand firm against the schemes of the devil. Ephesians 6:12 For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places. 🇺🇸 Vi veri universum vivus vici - “By the power of truth, I, while living, have conquered the universe.” The truth will be revealed in time. May God bless and protect us all in this final battle against evil. Good wins. #GodWins WE win! #Trump2024 #MAGA #TheBestIsYetToCome (Truth Social post July 7, 2024)
- I prayed and I pray again for the armor of God strong armor of God to protect Trump and his family because these demons will do anything the DOJ the FBI the CIA that's how John F Kennedy was killed pure pure evil
(X post, May 22, 2024)

At a rally in April, Republican candidate for Senate Keri Lake explicitly linked the Bible verse with violence, telling her supporters, “We are going to put on the armor of God. Then maybe strap on a Glock on the side of us, just in case.” Lake’s comments immediately drew criticism from influential Democrats like [Arizona Senator Mark Kelly](#), who called the remarks “dangerous.” Lake's comments also inspired [Faithful America](#), a group that describes itself as “the largest online community of Christians putting faith into action for love and social justice” to write a petition, calling on Lake to stop “invoking God to provoke political violence.” The petition, which was signed by over 14,000 people, also discussed the meaning of the phrase “the armor of God,” challenging the common interpretation of the verse as an endorsement of violence. “Christians who follow the Prince of Peace should not be encouraging or threatening political violence, period. To do so is an enormous distortion of our faith,” they wrote.



COUNTERING RHETORIC THAT DESCRIBES VIOLENCE AS VIRTUOUS

Images of virtuous violence can be difficult to counter. They are not usually explicitly hateful, and they are not generally based on verifiable facts. Instead, the statements play off emotion and deeply personal beliefs and notions of identity. Effectively countering such statements requires trustworthy messengers who can connect with an audience through shared identity, providing an alternative interpretation of symbols or beliefs.

An example of this is [Christians Against Christian Nationalism](#), a coalition of faith leaders who have come together to publicly reject the conflation of political and religious authority, and to call on Christians around the country to “stand up to and speak out against Christian nationalism, especially when it inspires acts of violence and intimidation.” On their website, the group includes a 3,023 page document filled with the names of those who have endorsed them. Groups like this can challenge identity-based beliefs from the inside, providing an alternative - and peaceful- interpretation of texts and symbols that have been co-opted by those endorsing violence.

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.

