

Trump's Aiding Capitol Violence as World Watches Shows U.S. Is Now Exporting Extremism

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Jan 8, 2021

Also published in NBC News

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Articles & Testimony

The homeland has increasingly been a haven for far-right extremism during the president's tenure, frustrating America's allies and encouraging its enemies.

As a violent mob stormed the U.S. Capitol (<https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/2020-election/trump-commits-orderly-transition-statement-after-mob-stormed-capitol-n1253223>) a few miles from my home and scenes of political violence and terrorism played out on TV and social media Wednesday, my cellphone lit up with texts from friends around the world—all writing from places typically considered less stable, far less democratic and more dangerous than the United States—checking in to make sure I was safe. I assured them that I was physically fine, but that my heart was breaking and the embarrassment was agonizing. I apparently live in a banana republic where political mobs storm the legislature when their candidate (roundly) loses an election and his [personal lawyer tells his foot soldiers](https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2021/01/06/lets-have-trial-by-combat-how-trump-allies-egged-violent-scenes-wednesday/) (<https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2021/01/06/lets-have-trial-by-combat-how-trump-allies-egged-violent-scenes-wednesday/>), “Let’s have trial by combat.”

President Donald Trump and every politician who parroted the falsehood that the election was stolen bear tremendous responsibility for riling the supporters who disrupted the counting of the Electoral College vote confirming Joe Biden’s win. But the culpability doesn’t end there, just as the flames of hatred and violence on display in Washington on Wednesday are not the full extent of America’s extremist problem—and, increasingly, the world’s.

Those friends who contacted me were not alone in watching the travesty unfold and expressing concern about the well being of American citizens and their democracy. The results of Wednesday’s melee don’t only threaten U.S. domestic institutions, but our national security interests and foreign policy priorities. And that’s because, sadly, we have become exporters of right-wing extremism, damaging one of our best weapons in securing our international standing—our example.

Over the course of the Trump administration, the United States has increasingly been seen as a kind of a haven for far-right extremism. In much the same way the U.S. and others pressed Saudi Arabia to take tangible action to curb the spread of jihadist ideology from the kingdom to countries around the world in the years after 9/11, the international community today is pressing America to address the growth of far-right fanaticism here and its transfer abroad. And just as Western countries expressed little sympathy when Riyadh asked for patience as it slowly began to address an issue that presented the kingdom with

uncomfortable religious, social and legal challenges, the international community today is impatient when Washington points to the religious, social and legal hurdles it faces in curbing domestic terrorist activities and extremist ideologies.

While Washington has dawdled, members of [white supremacist and other far-right movements](https://www.counterextremism.com/sites/default/files/CEP%20Study_Violent%20Right-Wing%20Extremism%20and%20Terrorism_Nov%202020.pdf?fbclid=IwAR1J2oqE4GP6F2RKmLlfsr9FhZZTeF8gj_wmf1yQd4DsjXteuE63o8OnIq8) (https://www.counterextremism.com/sites/default/files/CEP%20Study_Violent%20Right-Wing%20Extremism%20and%20Terrorism_Nov%202020.pdf?fbclid=IwAR1J2oqE4GP6F2RKmLlfsr9FhZZTeF8gj_wmf1yQd4DsjXteuE63o8OnIq8) have traveled to fight in overseas

conflicts and to attend training camps in foreign lands. They communicate with one another across borders and oceans, inspire one another and share manifestos, and send funds to support one another. As a result, what we witnessed at the U.S. Capitol on Wednesday only underscores our allies' concerns about our willingness and ability to contend with this U.S.-based but transnational threat.

"For almost two decades," Russell Travers (https://news.yahoo.com/america-seen-as-exporter-of-white-supremacist-ideology-says-us-counterterrorism-official-232420985.html?guccounter=1&guce_referrer=aHR0cHM6Ly93d3cuZ29vZ2xlLnNvbS8&guce_referrer_sig=AQAAAG4_2PC17X6poewEmx-aU1SID-UVHYzk0yDbCcfma5MosUuzb_Q042BB5TTEUnVXDUImpA3w4z9x7V53haw4uLFvWtIY3u77RksCxK9B_pkZ-xS61xNTKOihjZy-r56EY54FbMayfKJKtxQZrhxZHLqbJAsHOFhn5jPxGn934x), a former acting director of the National Counterterrorism Center, noted, "the United States has pointed abroad (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/counterterrorism-era-competing-priorities-ten-key-considerations>) at countries who are exporters of extreme Islamist ideology. We are now being seen as the exporter of white supremacist ideology."

Trump's actions this week only underscore that dynamic. [While he praised](https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/1346578706437963777?s=20) (<https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/1346578706437963777?s=20>) those gathering in D.C. to overturn the election results, he issued a [memorandum](https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/memorandum-inadmissibility-persons-affiliated-antifa-based-organized-criminal-activity/) (<https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/memorandum-inadmissibility-persons-affiliated-antifa-based-organized-criminal-activity/>) barring foreign antifa activists from the U.S. The president's antifa obsession, despite his own [law enforcement agencies saying the far right](https://www.politico.com/news/2020/09/04/white-supremacists-terror-threat-dhs-409236) (<https://www.politico.com/news/2020/09/04/white-supremacists-terror-threat-dhs-409236>) is a more immediate threat, undermines U.S. standing when we press allies to take terrorist threats seriously.

And Trump's actions throughout his presidency have only contributed to this problem. Terrorism prevention relies heavily on working with communities to counter extremism, and over the past four years the president's "Muslim ban" and his discomfiting unwillingness to unconditionally condemn white supremacist groups have significantly undermined the administration's own [stated goal](https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/NSCT.pdf) (<https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/NSCT.pdf>) of working with communities to prevent terrorism.

Now America appears as a paper tiger to its adversaries when the strength of its institutions, democratic processes and commitment to the rule of law come into question. Our allies wonder how reliable a diplomatic or military partner the United States will continue to be abroad if its system of government and domestic security are threatened at home—and that partnership is intrinsic to their abilities and willingness to take on extremist threats.

The United States built a global coalition to defeat the Islamic State militant group, and maintains troops around the world to help keep peace from the Korean Peninsula to eastern Syria. But now even our closest allies are expressing deep concern about the state of American democracy. "In the eyes of the world," Josep Borrell, the European Union's top diplomat, [lamented](https://twitter.com/JosepBorrellF/status/1346933859917639680?s=20) (<https://twitter.com/JosepBorrellF/status/1346933859917639680?s=20>), "American democracy tonight appears under siege."

But there is hope that the siege will be short-lived, because the Trump presidency is quickly coming to its inglorious end and the Biden administration seems intent on quickly rebuilding a degraded interagency national security bureaucracy and decision-making process to [tackle](https://www.wsj.com/articles/biden-administration-urged-to-take-fresh-look-at-domestic-terrorism-11605279834) (<https://www.wsj.com/articles/biden-administration-urged-to-take-fresh-look-at-domestic-terrorism-11605279834>) domestic extremism head on. The Biden transition team has already [met with the Anti-Defamation League](https://abcnews.go.com/US/domestic-terrorism-hate-exploded-2020-biden-administration/story?id=74604589) (<https://abcnews.go.com/US/domestic-terrorism-hate-exploded-2020-biden-administration/story?id=74604589>) and has solicited input on plans to counter domestic terrorism.

This is long overdue. Last year the State Department [designated the Russian Imperial Movement](#)

[\(https://www.state.gov/designation-of-the-russian-imperial-movement/\)](https://www.state.gov/designation-of-the-russian-imperial-movement/) as a foreign terrorist organization —the first time such a designation was applied to a transnational right-wing extremist organization. But no significant action has been taken against far-right groups based in the U.S.

To address this shameful reality, the Biden administration needs to develop tools tailored to the domestic terrorist threat and in line with citizens' constitutional protections. A domestic parallel to the foreign terrorist designation and the related [material support statute used to prosecute \(https://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/text/18/2339B\)](https://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/text/18/2339B) international groups may prove to be a bridge too far, but the country is long past due for tough conversations about where to draw the line when it comes to domestic terrorism, right-wing extremism and its spillover beyond American's borders.

I'm very thankful to the friends around the world who reached out to make sure I was OK, even as their texts mortified me to the core. Now America needs to cleanse this stain and take on the threat of domestic extremism with the same commitment it's shown to countering violent extremism in other countries.

As a former U.S. government official, I pledged to defend the Constitution from all enemies, foreign and domestic. America will be able to hold its head high once more, even after the already infamous events of Jan. 6, 2021, but only once we demonstrate we can lead by example and tackle the threats to our democracy. That will require leadership that puts country over party, and certainly over self.

Matthew Levitt is the Fromer-Wexler Fellow and director of the Reinhard Program on Counterterrorism and Intelligence at The Washington Institute. This article was originally published [on the NBC News website \(https://www.nbcnews.com/think/opinion/trump-aiding-capitol-violence-world-watches-shows-u-s-now-ncna1253336\)](https://www.nbcnews.com/think/opinion/trump-aiding-capitol-violence-world-watches-shows-u-s-now-ncna1253336)



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