



Statement for the Record

by

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Select Committee to Investigate the January 6th Attack on the United States Capitol

31 March 2022

**Political Cults and the Use of Cultic Tactics in the Recruitment and Mobilization of
Participants in the January 6 Attack on the Capitol.**

I would like to thank the members of the Select Committee to Investigate the January 6th Attack on the United States Capitol for the privilege of presenting a statement for the record regarding cultic mechanisms involved in recruiting and mobilizing those involved in the Jan 6 attack.

Introduction

I am a social psychologist specializing in the study of cults and totalitarian systems, and currently a visiting research fellow at London South Bank University in the department of Law and Social Sciences. I have over 30 years experience studying this phenomenon. My most recent book is *Terror, Love and Brainwashing: Attachment in cults and totalitarian systems*¹. I would like to acknowledge the research and feedback assistance of Grace Conroy in preparing this document.

There is a great variety of ways in which certain political actors and groups are using cultic methods to influence the current social and political environment. The use of such methods is much more prevalent in our society than is generally recognized. This is important to understand in order to make sense of what may otherwise appear to be irrational behaviour at best, and certainly dangerous and destructive behaviour at worst, threatening our democratic social and political norms.

This statement doesn't claim to explain all these destructive behaviours and forces undermining democratic practices, but there is clear evidence that cultic leadership and

¹ Alexandra Stein, *Terror, Love and Brainwashing: Attachment in Cults and Totalitarian Systems* (London: Routledge, 2021).

methods are at work to a larger extent than is often understood as there is a lack of public knowledge about what constitutes cultic mechanisms. I will briefly highlight the key features of these systematic coercive methods and discuss selected exemplar cases contributing to the Jan 6 Capitol attack.

Background

Cults typically thrive in times of social fragmentation and breakdown². There has been increasing social fragmentation in recent decades with rapid demographic movement, job instability, loss of social and community structures such as unions and social clubs³, unstable communities, and a sharp increase in relative inequality. Adding to this has been the rapid change in the role of women and minorities, along with a change of relative status due to job displacement. Decades of unmitigated cult formation and growth in both the US and internationally have laid a groundwork for the current situation where cultic influence is felt throughout society and, I would argue, has become endemic. The internet provides an accelerant to cult formation and recruitment.

One element that has fed into the environment leading up to the Jan 6 attack has been the contribution of groups that fit closely to a definition of what constitutes a cult, as well as more dispersed movements that use cultic methods. The definition I use in my work consists of five points:

² Robert Jay Lifton, *The Protean Self: Human Resilience in an Age of Fragmentation*. (New York: Basic Books., 1993).

³ Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone : The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000).

- 1) A cultic or totalist system is formed and controlled by a charismatic authoritarian leader (which in later generations may become a leadership group).
- 2) It is a rigidly bounded, dense, steeply hierarchical and isolating social system. Looser front groups may exist for the purpose of recruitment, gaining resources and spreading propaganda.
- 3) The structure is supported and represented by a total, exclusive and isolating ideology.
- 4) The leader sets in motion processes of brainwashing or coercive persuasion designed to isolate and control followers. This involves social and psychological isolation, engulfment within a supposed benevolent cultic system, and the chronic arousal of stress and fear.
- 5) As a result followers are able to be exploited and potentially become deployable agents, demonstrating “hyper-credulity”⁴ and uncritical obedience to the group, regardless of their own survival needs.

The Jan 6th attack included groups that fit this definition. They include among others, a classic cult: Sean Moon’s Rod of Iron ministries, and one of the many far-right hate groups present: The Proud Boys. Others attended who may have been influenced by cultic propaganda, although not themselves yet consolidated into a specific group, such as those radicalised either by Trump’s rhetoric or through the QAnon channel. In general attendees

⁴ Benjamin D. Zablocki, "Toward a Demystified and Disinterested Scientific Concept of Brainwashing," in *Misunderstanding Cults: Searching for Objectivity in a Controversial Field*, ed. D. Zablocki Benjamin and Thomas Robbins (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001).

came from a population that in many ways is already fully or partly recruited into a world saturated with cultic influence and, importantly, where fiction is presented as fact.

Further, there is extensive and long-standing intrusion into the highest levels of the government through the late Doug Coe's The Fellowship, also known as The Family, a group that has many cultic elements⁵. Much of Trump's base came from a wide network of mega-churches, televangelists, prosperity gospel and purity culture churches, such as the those led by Paula White, who gave Trump's inaugural invocation in 2016, or Kenneth Copeland's Word of Faith church. These, and many others, operate in a cultic manner and over decades have gained considerable influence in both government and among large sections of the public.

Charismatic authoritarian leadership

Totalistic, ideologically extremist groups are controlled by a charismatic and authoritarian leader (or leadership group). Both charisma and authoritarianism are required as they are the source of the group's central organizing dynamic of "love" (or perceived benevolence) and fear. Charisma alone is not sufficient, but when combined with authoritarianism, a highly controlling, bullying system that entraps followers can emerge. Such leaders are also sometimes referred to as malignant narcissists.

Donald Trump exhibits these traits. He is able to garner a following who endow him with charisma, and who, in many cases even consider him a chosen, holy, god-like figure. But he is also clearly authoritarian, seeking dominance over others in order to serve his own needs

⁵ Jeff Sharlet, *The Family: The Secret Fundamentalism at the Heart of American Power* (HarperCollins New York, 2008).

for power and control. “A trademark of his tenure,” has been for Trump “to assert that his version of reality is the only legitimate one, and that all others are ‘fake’... He uses the gap as a wedge to drive his followers closer.”⁶

Hyung Jin “Sean” Moon, present with dozens of followers at the Capitol attack on Jan 6th, is the son of the late Sun Myung Moon, leader of the Unification Church, popularly known as the Moonies. He established a spinoff cultic group from the Unification Church, called the Rod of Iron Ministries. Sean Moon is known as “the Second King” by his congregants and is often seen carrying a gold-plated AR rifle and wearing a crown of bullets. This “kingly” charismatic role combined with heavily armed authoritarianism follows the pattern typical of cult leaders. Sean Moon continues the militaristic, often violent, and highly controlling environment of his late father’s Unification Church. Cult expert Steve Hassan states: “Troublingly, Rod of Iron Ministries is not fringe; they are actively interwoven into the power structure of the modern GOP,”⁷ carrying on political ties developed over decades by Moon’s father.

Gavin McInnes, founder (though no longer leader) of the far-right Proud Boys who had a front and center role at the Jan 6th attack, is openly racist and a proponent of quite generalized violence, which however, he has insisted is “comedic”⁸. His successor Enrique Tarrio, also promotes violence, though his motivations are unclear given his presumed history as an FBI informant. Authoritarianism is demonstrated in both leaders, however this author does not

⁶ Neiwert in Tom McCarthy, "Is Donald Trump an Authoritarian? Experts Examine Telltale Signs," *The Guardian*, 18 November 2018.

⁷ Steven Hassan, "Rod of Iron Ministries and Its Role in Carrying out the Attack on the Capitol," Freedom of Mind, <https://freedomofmind.com/moon-insurrection/>.

⁸ Southern Poverty Law Center, "Proud Boys," Southern Poverty Law Center, <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/group/proud-boys>.

have enough information about them to determine whether they fit the charismatic element of the profile above, though it is expected that they do.

Isolating Structure

Charismatic authoritarian leaders either establish or inherit a group and create an isolating structure where the leader has total power. The cultic structure consists of onion-like layers of hierarchy, separated by secrecy and increasing levels of disconnection from reality. These layers can include (from the center out) a tight circle around the leader, an unstable lieutenant layer, an inner cadre, rank and file members, supporters, and front groups. Individual members of the lieutenant layer of leadership are frequently promoted, demoted and purged to prevent any possible opposition developing to dilute the absolute and single point of power of the leader. Front groups appear independent and open but are in fact run by the cultic group and serve as transmission belts between the outside world and the cult, performing recruiting and fundraising functions, and dissemination of the group's propaganda.

Members of Trump's family form the tight, secretive inner layer surrounding him. Beyond that we saw during his presidential term, a revolving door and short tenures of his cabinet members and other officials as they displeased him over time. An important characteristic of totalistic, cultic groups is that they are made up of unstable, fluctuating hierarchies rather than the more stable, rule-bound hierarchies typical of bureaucratic institutions⁹. It was notable, and reflects this ultra-centralization of power, that Trump was extremely slow to fill administration positions. Beyond his unstable lieutenant layer "the structure widens to include state politicians, Republican donors, and then finally his fans and supporters, who

⁹ Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. (Orlando: Harcourt Brace, 1948/1979).

may be more or less fervent”¹⁰. Trump was able to bring together a wide set of other often-cultic groups as bases of support, such as prosperity gospel and other mega churches and these functioned as the more outer layers of his regime. Though the origin and internal leadership and structure of QAnon remains unclear, it seems to have acted as a kind of front group serving the functions of propaganda, recruitment and radicalization to support Trump and the far right.

The Proud Boys structure features four levels of involvement, with each higher level requiring further intensification of commitment and moving from violent speech to violent actions. The 2nd degree involves the recruit getting beaten by other Proud Boys. This type of initiation where the group member is themselves a victim of the group’s violence is common in cults, terrorist groups and is also a known element in the training of torturers. The 4th level in the Proud Boys structure, on the other hand, requires active participation in violence towards outsiders¹¹. The Proud Boys may not yet be fully entrenched as a cultic structure, given the current infighting and schisms, but likely will either move towards that, or disperse into other groups.

In 2021 the Rod of Iron Ministries purchased a 40 acre property in rural Texas supposedly as a “safe haven” for its “patriots”. Another isolated property in Tennessee houses families with children, dedicated fulltime to the group. Many more such compounds are currently being planned. Among other activities, they are training members as part of their armed “Peace

¹⁰ Steven Hassan, *The Cult of Trump: A Leading Cult Expert Explains How the President Uses Mind Control* (Free Press, 2020). p. 12.

¹¹ Proud Boys, "Proud Boy," <https://archive.ph/b77lQ>.

Police Peace Militia”¹². This suggests increasing physical isolation in addition to an existing isolating, hierarchical structure inherited from the Unification Church.

In a cultic group the structure serves to isolate followers socially, psychologically, and sometimes physically, from the outside world. They are also isolated from fellow followers in that any doubts or critiques about the group are prohibited from being shared within the group. It is well known that Trump was quick to fire anyone who disagreed with him. Healthy debate and respect for minority opinions, normally important elements of democratic decision-making, are disallowed in a cultic environment.

Exclusive ideology

The exclusive ideology or belief system exists to justify and reinforce the position of the leader and the structural isolation of followers. The important feature of these ideologies is not so much whether they are left, right, religious or any other ideology, but it is rather the *structure* of those beliefs. That is: the ideology is total and exclusive allowing no other thought system to intervene, and claiming to have the single “Truth” and the answers to all possible questions for all time.

The source of all this “Truth” resides solely in the supposedly benevolent leadership: the leader is always right even when the leader is wrong. Cultic, totalistic ideologies paint the outside world in a highly fearful manner as the enemy, satanic, impure, or generally holding back the cause. Fear-arousing, Us versus Them narratives dehumanise outsiders and present apocalyptic visions. The leader is then positioned as the saviour from these fictional threats.

¹² Alia Shoaib, "A Gun Church That Glorifies the Ar-15 and Is Led by the Son of the 'Moonies' Church Founder Has Been Making Alliances with Far-Right Figures," *Insider*, 30 October 2021.

Along with other means, some methods of delivery of the belief system serve to confuse followers by either highly complex (and circular) or over-simplified, highly repetitive types of rhetoric. Critical thought is reduced to “thought-stopping cliches”¹³. The goal of the ideology is in fact to impose the group’s fictional interpretation of the follower’s experience so as to prevent followers from being able to think about their own feelings and experience independently. They are encouraged to “trust the leader” at all times as he has the plan and will disclose it as the follower is deemed ready.

Trump fits this model of cultic or totalistic rhetoric in, for example, his sweeping depiction of the men, women and children fleeing poverty and crime from Central America as rapists, criminals and drug addicts. Meanwhile he positioned himself as the benevolent force who would build a “big, beautiful wall” to keep (presumably white) Americans safe¹⁴. His methods of delivery are well-known: repetitive, over-simplified and promoting fear of anything opposed to his views. Trump’s roster of 30573 lies, documented by the Washington Post during his presidential term, starkly demonstrates this use of fiction as part of his strategy of control. Nonetheless, the name of his new social network effort - Truth Social – implies only he has the truth. His promotion as chosen by God gives his statements a particular power as being direct messages from on high.

The Proud Boys support Trump’s views and promote “Western chauvinism”, claiming that their view that “West is best” is the “truth” and the only truth. If “West is best” then

¹³ Lifton, Robert Jay. 1961. *Thought Reform and the Psychology of Totalism*. New York: The Norton Library.

¹⁴ Robert Jay Lifton, *Losing Reality: On Cults, Cultism, and the Mindset of Political and Religious Zealotry* (The New Press, 2019).

everything else is bad. They conflate antifa with anyone who is not on the alt-right¹⁵, also creating an Us versus Them, dehumanizing narrative. Despite some statements to the contrary, the Proud Boys actions, alliances, and much of their speech is both racist and misogynist, and consistently glorifies violence against any kind of opposition.

Sean Moon's Rod of Iron Ministries, as its name suggests, worships the gun – and in particular the AR-15 – as a core element of its ideology. Moon cites heavily from the Bible in justifying what he terms “self-defense culture”¹⁶. This includes instructions to followers to engage in martial arts and weapons training to “defend ourselves against an aggressive satanic world”¹⁷. Moon is known as The Father or The Second King, and also states that Trump is “God's representative”. Moon claims that the “root of our kingship” (presumably his kingship) “comes from Almighty God”¹⁸. Like many cult leaders, he claims a direct line of authority from God. Along with other Capitol attackers Rod of Iron Ministries promotes anti-vax, false child abuse and satanic panic conspiracies. The group has been heavily involved in mobilizing for Stop the Steal.

Important propaganda outlets supporting Trump are controlled by “classic” cults aligned with the far right – namely the Washington Times, owned by the Unification Church, and the Epoch Times, run by Falun Gong. Both promote an array of far right conspiracy theories including the white supremacist Great Replacement theory. Of course many other well known and far-reaching outlets such as Fox News, Breitbart, OANN, and conservative talk

¹⁵ Southern Poverty Law Center, "Proud Boys".

¹⁶ Rod of Iron Ministries, "About," <https://www.rodofironministries.com/about>.

¹⁷ Brendan Joel Kelley, "Anti-Lgbt Cult Leader Calls on Followers to Purchase Assault Rifles," Southern Poverty Law Center,, <https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2018/02/09/anti-lgbt-cult-leader-calls-followers-purchase-assault-rifles>.

¹⁸ Ibid.

radio, are engaged in similar propaganda efforts to promote Trump, far right and white nationalist ideologies, along with now familiar conspiracy theories.

Cultic, totalistic ideologies are all-or-nothing, non-negotiable, fear-based sets of ideas, none rooted in verifiable evidence, and this is what we see consistently in the rise of the far-right, culminating in the Jan 6th attack. QAnon has obviously had an important role in disseminating these evidence-free “theories”. Using extreme fear messages of evil conspiracies from the #savethechildren campaign to anti-vax to the Trump-led “Storm”, QAnon’s rhetoric has brought together a range of previously unradicalized persons such as the so-called “Yoga mom” and “wellness” demographics. While most QAnon followers will not go further¹⁹, for some, this will be an entry point into more serious and dangerous affiliations.

Not only are cultic ideologies evidence-free, they are in fact fiction – telling compelling stories that expressly do *not* reflect reality, but capture attention and divert it to the cult’s purposes. These fictional narratives – as, for example, the idea that Trump actually won the 2020 election – are especially dangerous. As Hannah Arendt said:

The ideal subject of totalitarian rule is not the convinced Nazi or the convinced Communist, but people for whom the distinction between fact and fiction (i.e., the reality of experience) and the distinction between true and false (i.e., the standards of thought) no longer exist.²⁰

¹⁹ Sophia Moskalenko and Clark McCauley, "Qanon," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 15, no. 2 (2021).

²⁰ Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*.

The Great Replacement theory, along with a Christian Bible-based justification, with well-established roots in anti-semitism, has united the far right, including the forces mentioned above. As Miller-Idriss explains:

The Great Replacement is a white supremacist conspiracy theory about demographic change. It claims that there is an intentional, global plan orchestrated by national and global elites to replace white, Christian, European populations with non-white, non-Christian ones. Great Replacement-type theories seek to create a sense of urgency and call whites to action.²¹

The purpose of this ideology is to frighten, to create a polarising in-group/out-group narrative, and to position the various far right groups and their leaders as saviours. The Great Replacement theory dovetails neatly with the totalistic ideologies of Christian nationalism and dominionism - “the theocratic idea that regardless of theological camp, means, or timetable, God has called conservative Christians to exercise dominion over society by taking control of political and cultural institutions”²². These ideologies, which have decades-old roots, seem now to be merging under a more and more unified far right movement.

Psychological Control - Brainwashing

The leadership, structures and ideologies of these groups provide an environment – the cultic milieu as Lifton²³ described it – in which a process of gaining control of follower’s thoughts, actions and resources can take place. This is popularly known as brainwashing, but is also

²¹ The Committee on Foreign Affairs’ Subcommittee on the Middle East, North Africa, and International Terrorism and the Committee on Homeland Security’s Subcommittee on Intelligence and Counterterrorism, *Meeting the Challenge of White Nationalist Terrorism at Home and Abroad*, 2019.

²² Frederick Clarkson, "Dominionism Rising a Theocratic Movement Hiding in Plain Sight," Political Research Associates, <https://politicalresearch.org/2016/08/18/dominionism-rising-a-theocratic-movement-hiding-in-plain-sight>.

²³ Robert Jay Lifton, *Thought Reform and the Psychology of Totalism* (New York: The Norton Library, 1961).

referred to as thought reform, coercive persuasion, coercive control, radicalization, grooming, or mind control.

There are many varied pathways into violent far right extremism²⁴. Most people join such groups by “accident, on their way to other goals.”²⁵. The process generally begins with recruitment (though there are other entry points, such as being born and raised in an extremist group). Propaganda is the public face of the group’s ideology, and as such it must be somewhat understandable – and acceptable – to outsiders, yet it is cloaked in “heavenly deception” (as the Unification Church says) in order not to frighten off potential recruits. Similarly, recruitment to extremist, militia groups can take place in venues which may not appear to have any obvious connection to the group in question, ranging from the military to martial arts groups, and from white power music to skateboarding groups²⁶.

Beyond the initial recruitment phase, the development of an ongoing bond with a cultic group and the resulting creation of a deployable follower takes a predictable form. Cultic groups isolate the target from their prior relationships, engulf followers within the cultic group, and then claim they, and the leader, are the only source of goodness and truth, and the only ones who care about the follower. But at the same time, the cult creates stress and feelings of threat through constant, alarming messages about oncoming disasters and what will happen if followers are not loyal enough. A cult will also humiliate followers, and make them feel guilty and ashamed for not doing enough. Rewards and punishments are wielded to remind followers just who has the power.

²⁴ Travis, Alan. 2008. "Mi5 Report Challenges Views on Terrorism in Britain Exclusive: Sophisticated Analysis Says There Is No Single Pathway to Violent Extremism." in *The Guardian*. London.

²⁵ Crenshaw, Martha. 2011. "Radicalization and Recruitment into Terrorism." Paper presented at the Processes of Radicalization and De-Radicalization, April, Bielefeld, Germany.

²⁶ Cynthia Miller-Idriss, *Hate in the Homeland* (Princeton University Press, 2022).

Human beings have evolved to seek comfort from a trusted other when anxious or stressed. Cult leaders abuse this normally healthy instinct by setting themselves up as the only supposed trusted other – even as they are creating the stress. If the follower has been successfully isolated, this method of alternating “terror” with “love” can result in a trauma bond where the follower becomes too afraid to do anything but cling to the group. Without being able to fight or flee from the group-created threat, followers freeze in both their thoughts and their feelings, as state known as dissociation. They become unable to think about their own feelings and their own experience, meaning the group can begin to do their thinking for them. Followers can end up becoming totally dominated by the cult, and unable to protect themselves or their children.

Trump’s rhetoric about “caravans” of rapists ready to “rip off our country” is an example of how this fear can be stirred up. At the same time he disparages weak, “pathetic Republicans”, “RINOs” – Republicans in name only. He stokes an ongoing urgent apocalyptic sense of threat unless: “We fight like hell, and if you don’t fight like hell you’re not going to have a country anymore”²⁷. Meanwhile he positions himself as the only person who has, for example, “any idea how corrupt our elections were” and “We” have to fight to restore them²⁸. The message is: Fear others and trust Trump.

Sean Moon wages a fight against Satan and the forthcoming “death of America” and has even published his own Constitution of the “United States of Cheon Il Guk”. He talks about God (and himself as having a direct line to him) “guarding the flock not as a dictator, but as a loving father” with the rod of iron²⁹. Again, the message is: Fear others and trust Moon.

²⁷ Brian Naylor, "Read Trump's Jan. 6 Speech, a Key Part of Impeachment Trial," National Public Radio.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Amir Vera, "Pennsylvania Couples Clutching Ar-15 Rifles Renew Wedding Vows," CNN.

Trauma researchers have shown that higher level cognitive functions – our language and logic-based thinking – are disrupted in conditions of trauma³⁰. In the long-term relational trauma of life in a cultic milieu this can therefore disrupt clear thinking about what is happening in one’s environment, and disrupt the ability to make plans for one’s own survival. Lack of sleep, time, and access to information, along with the group’s fictitious explanation for what the follower is experiencing, adds to this deficit in clear thinking about one’s situation. The fear element of this process includes the ideological component of the threat of whatever “outgroup” serves the group’s agenda at a given time, as well as accusations about the follower’s own shortcomings – a Trump follower trying to protect America from the supposed immigrant hordes certainly doesn’t want to be labelled as a “weak, pathetic Republican” and so may double down their commitment to following the “plan”.

This dynamic of alternating fear and “love” is the same thing we see as in cases of controlling domestic violence, of the Stockholm Syndrome or, frequently, with pimps and prostitutes, as well as in human trafficking. Like the controlling boyfriend who starts out charming and full of loving gestures, but ends up isolating and threatening his victim, cult leaders use these exact same methods to control their followers.

This creation of a tightly bonded, dissociated follower is only possible if the follower is isolated from alternate trusting relationships where they might seek comfort and share doubts. In a cult, one can’t share doubts – this is the biggest “crime” and those sharing doubts will be criticised or punished. This keeps followers from talking about and understanding the control mechanisms and reality of the group. It is for this reason that we can predict that cultic

³⁰ Schore, Allan N. 2009. "Attachment Trauma and the Developing Right Brain: Origins of Pathological Dissociation." *Dissociation and the dissociative disorders: DSM-V and beyond*:107-41.

systems will attempt to interfere with, and control, any alternative close relationships a person might have. To fail to do so would allow the follower to find a safe haven elsewhere and potentially escape the emotional and cognitive control of the group.

Testimonies from right-wing formers have described this social and psychological isolation and close control of personal relationships³¹. One way cults do this is by controlling their intimate relationships and sexual lives. Cults universally breach followers' personal boundaries and this is a red flag predicting other controlling behaviours. For example, In the Rod of Iron Ministries, marriages must be to others in the group and are blessed in mass ceremonies complete with guns, following the model of the Unification Church's mass weddings. The Proud Boys have a code limiting when and how to masturbate, and tightly define the role of wives who may not join the men-only group. The purity culture of many of the mega churches involves highly controlling rules on sexual activities (even as, so often, the leaders themselves flout these rules). Most of these types of groups will strongly discourage any type of relationships or friendships with outsiders.

The extreme, polarising nature of the cultic ideology also isolates people: QAnon followers' families were torn apart, non-believers pushed away by their loved ones' obsessive, irrationality. This also often happened with the families of Trump's followers. It is key to the group's control that the follower's loyalty be primarily to the group and that they are no longer connected to any potentially trusting relationship where they might share doubts or questions about the group.

³¹ Stein, Alexandra. 2017. *Terror, Love and Brainwashing: Attachment in Cults and Totalitarian Systems*. London and New York: Routledge.

Violence internal to the group – even if sometimes only symbolic – is another frequently seen element of this control. The Unification Church, from which Rod of Iron Ministries descends, engaged its members in long sessions of beatings and slapping of each other and themselves. The Proud Boys initiation-type ritual involves submitting to a beating by other members. This violence is alternated with expressions of acceptance and belonging to the group – another way the alternation of fear and “love” is enacted.

Cultic groups usually threaten those who leave (unless they are willing to continue in some supportive role) and so make it extremely challenging and frightening to do so. The threatened violence reinforces the message that there is no life for you outside of the group. Trump’s support of Jan 6 attackers calling for the hanging of Mike Pence is a stark example of this. Trump now abuses and threatens to primary any Republican who broke with him after the Jan 6th attack. For example, Trump said of Liz Cheney: “To look at her is to despise her”³² along with other vicious insults. If the threats fail to keep the follower in line then shunning follows, further isolating the remaining followers from any expressed dissent.

Outcome

All these mechanisms – the charismatic authoritarian leader, the isolating structure, exclusive ideology and brainwashing methods - work together as a system with predictable qualities. Hannah Arendt saw this same pattern in the regimes of both Hitler and Stalin. As we see so many of these mechanisms at work in most of the groups currently organizing under the far right, it is sadly predictable, therefore, that they are going to, if they have not already, move towards these closed, cultic forms.

³² Jordan Williams, "Trump Calls Liz Cheney a 'Smug Fool'," *The Hill* (2021).

What results from these cultic or totalist systems are followers who will believe anything and do anything on instruction from the leader or group. Judith Herman refers to this as being a “willing victim”³³. This does not happen overnight, but can be a gradual process as followers are drawn in step by step. This is also not a robotic model – people do have doubts, and do get out at different points. But while under the intense pressures and influence of the group – and *even while having doubts* (in some cases) – a follower can be deployed for the purposes of the leader, even if that is in opposition to their own survival interests.

The hyper-credulity element – believing and supporting everything the leader says – is illustrated in a not-atypical quote from a CNN interviewee when he said he would believe Donald Trump over Jesus Christ³⁴. At a recent rally held by Steve Bannon, a woman said: “Never in my life did I think I would like to see a dictator, but if there’s gonna be one, I want it to be Trump!”³⁵

The hyper-obedience element – having the follower do whatever the cult demands – is the ultimate goal of the leader. Trump, Moon, and the Proud Boys all demand that followers give their lives to the cause:

³³ Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery* (New York: Basic Books., 1992).

³⁴ CNN News, "Pulse of the People," (2017).

³⁵ The Damage Report, "Raging Trump Supporter Wants to Be Dictator," (2019).

Trump:

"We have no choice. The fate of any nation ultimately depends on the willingness of its citizens to lay down and they must do this—lay down their very lives to defend their country"³⁶

Moon:

“The place that you will raise your wife and children will be hell. And they will be taken from you, especially your children. And you will live in perpetual guilt for not doing the right thing." He went on say that “securing the re-election of Trump, the last man sent by God that can save the world, people must give up anything that holds them back from giving their entire effort. – including their lives.”³⁷

At an early rally, one of the Proud Boys leader’s, Kyle Chapman, egged on an attendee:

“Are you ready to bleed?” Mr. Chapman shouted at the man.

“I’m ready to bleed!” he yelled.’³⁸

Cultic indoctrination results in deployable followers who are detached from reality, who can’t think clearly, who are bonded to the leader and group and, lastly, who cannot advocate for their own survival interests. We see all these signs and symptoms in the current far right and

³⁶ Bess Levin, "Trump Tells Supporters They Must Fight to the Death to Stop Schools from Teaching Kids About Systemic Racism," *Vanity Fair* (2022).

³⁷ Timothy Nerozzi, "Pennsylvania Church Tells Followers to Be Ready to Die for Trump in 'a Gun Fight with Police'," *Religion Unplugged* (2020), <https://religionunplugged.com/news/2020/11/13/moonies-rev-hyung-jin-tells-followers-to-die-for-president-trump-fight-persecution>.

³⁸ Alan Feuer and Jeremy W. Peters, "Fringe Groups Revel as Protests Turn Violent," *New York Times* (2017), <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/02/us/politics/white-nationalists-alt-knights-protests-colleges.html>.

Trump-supporting movements involved in the January 6th attack, and who continue to recruit and mobilize.

Recommendations

Prevention

It is critical to take a broad, public health approach to begin to educate the population about these mechanisms of control. Prevention should ideally reach people before they experience a recruitment attempt.

Prevention requires teaching people, across the educational system, in an ideologically neutral way, specifically about the methods and structures of cultic or totalist groups and relationships. This would teach people to recognize not just recruitment to extremism, but other dangerous relationships such as domestic abuse, bullying and so forth. Along with media literacy, we need to also teach relational literacy: how to recognize recruitment attempts into dangerous groups or relationships. Some of the key warning signs visible early on in an encounter with a cultic group are listed at the end of this document. This work should start at the university level in order to begin to train future trainers and public facing professionals.

Legislation

Cultic or totalitarian leaders are perpetrators who use isolating, engulfing and fear-based methods to entrap people within their organizations in order to subjugate them and deploy

them for their own purposes and benefit. It is therefore contingent upon democratic societies to criminalise these processes. Persons directing such processes would then be subject to criminal sanctions – regardless of ideology or whether the leaders were directly culpable of violent crimes. If effectively implemented such laws could allow earlier intervention to prevent attempts to radicalise followers. If focused on repeated “patterns of controlling or coercive behaviours”³⁹ intended to subjugate followers, then such a law would not breach freedom of speech, nor of association.

Some models exist. In France, the About-Picard law criminalizes “mental manipulation”. In the UK, the 2015 Coercive Control element of the Serious Crime Act⁴⁰ spells out relevant patterns of behaviour on the part of the perpetrator. If this law was expanded to include groups, it could provide a good basis for new legislation. Clearly defined laws that spell out these processes of control can resolve the false dichotomy between violent and non-violent extremism and the pitfalls of focusing solely on ideology that can currently confuse thinking in this field. Such a law would target totalitarian leaders and their top lieutenants.

³⁹ This quote is from a progressive 2015 law in the UK that, unfortunately, is restricted to “intimate and family relationships”. However it describes behaviours that should also be applied to groups and would do well to be extended to those. See Home Office. 2015. *Controlling or Coercive Behaviour in an Intimate or Family Relationship Statutory Guidance Framework* Congress, (https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/482528/Controlling_or_coercive_behaviour_-_statutory_guidance.pdf).

⁴⁰ Home Office, "Controlling or Coercive Behaviour in an Intimate or Family Relationship Statutory Guidance Framework," ed. UK Home Office (UK: Home Office, 2015).

Warning Signs⁴¹

- The group/person has the answer to all questions for all time. No other inputs are needed.
- Attempts to isolate from prior close relationships: Encouragement to cut ties with family or friends, unless you can recruit them.
- Increased demands, “opportunities”, that begin to take up a lot of time.
- Encouragement to drop other activities and interest.
- Extreme, immediate and/or inappropriate friendliness or attention.
- Promises of perfection and transformation if only you adhere to their program
- Initial “gut-feeling” tells you something is wrong. The group will tell you to ignore this.
- The group creates conditions of extreme stress, threat or fear (emotional and/or physical)
- Not answering questions, or turning them back on the questioner.
- Inappropriate personal boundaries
- Loaded language: strange language or jargon you initially can’t understand. Canned, repetitive phrases.
- A hard sell for further commitment, programs or contact.

⁴¹ From: www.alexandrastein.com

- Secrecy, inappropriate “confidentiality”.
- Lack of privacy - constantly with group members, constantly busy with group activities.
- Ends justifies the means. It’s OK to lie to others in the name of the Cause.
- Challenging your fundamental identity: Your strengths are criticized as your weaknesses.
- Once you’re in, heavy pressure to stay in.
- Those who do leave are shunned. They become the enemy, or objects of pity.
- No criticism allowed of the group or leader. The group/leader is always right.
- Deception: what you thought you’d get on joining or attending an activity turns out to be something else.

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