

## Far-Right Extremists Move From ‘Stop the Steal’ to Stop the Vaccine

Extremist organizations are now bashing the safety and efficacy of coronavirus vaccines in an effort to try to undermine the government.



By Neil MacFarquhar

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Adherents of far-right groups who cluster online have turned repeatedly to one particular website in recent weeks — the federal database showing deaths and adverse reactions nationwide among people who have received Covid-19 vaccinations.

Although negative reactions have been relatively rare, the numbers are used by many extremist groups to try to bolster a rash of false and alarmist disinformation in articles and videos with titles like “Covid-19 Vaccines Are Weapons of Mass Destruction — and Could Wipe out the Human Race” or “Doctors and Nurses Giving the Covid-19 Vaccine Will be Tried as War Criminals.”

If the so-called Stop the Steal movement appeared to be chasing a lost cause once President Biden was inaugurated, its supporters among extremist organizations are now adopting a new agenda from the anti-vaccination campaign to try to undermine the government.

Bashing of the safety and efficacy of vaccines is occurring in chat rooms frequented by all manner of right-wing groups including the Proud Boys; the Boogaloo movement, a loose affiliation known for wanting to spark a second Civil War; and various paramilitary organizations.

These groups tend to portray vaccines as a symbol of excessive government control. “If less people get vaccinated then the system will have to use more aggressive force on the rest of us to make us get the shot,” read a recent post on the Telegram social media platform, in a channel linked to members of the Proud Boys charged in storming the Capitol.



A “Stop the Steal” rally at the Pennsylvania State Capitol in November. Gabriela Bhaskar for The New York Times

The marked focus on vaccines is particularly striking on discussion channels populated by followers of QAnon, who had falsely prophesied that Donald J. Trump would continue as president while his political opponents were marched off to jail.

“They rode the shift in the national conversation away from Trump to what was happening with the massive ramp up in vaccines,” said Devin Burghart, the head of the Seattle-based Institute for Research and Education on Human Rights, which monitors far-right movements, referring to followers of QAnon. “It allowed them to pivot away from the failure of their previous prophecy to focus on something else.”

Apocalyptic warnings about the vaccine feed into the far-right narrative that the government cannot be trusted, the sentiment also at the root of the Jan. 6 Capitol riot. The more vaccine opponents succeed in preventing or at least delaying herd immunity, experts noted, the longer it will take for life to return to normal and that will further undermine faith in the government and its institutions.

Last spring, a common purpose among far-right activists and the anti-vaccination movement first emerged during armed protests in numerous state capitols against coronavirus lockdown measures. That cross-pollination expanded over time.

On Jan. 6, while rioters advanced on the Capitol, numerous leading figures in the anti-vaccination movement were onstage nearby, holding their own rally to attack both the election results and Covid-19 vaccinations.

Events overshadowed their protest, but at least one outspoken activist, Dr. Simone Gold of Beverly Hills, Calif., was charged with breaching the Capitol. She called her arrest an attack on free speech. She was one of several doctors who appeared in a video last year spreading misleading claims about the coronavirus. Mr. Trump shared a version of the video, which Facebook, YouTube and Twitter removed after millions of viewers watched it.



Dr. Simone Gold in a video for America's Frontline Doctors, an organization accused of spreading misleading information about the coronavirus and possible treatments. She was later charged with breaching the Capitol.

In the months since inoculations started in December, the alliance grouping extremist organizations with the anti-vaccination movement has grown larger and more vocal, as conspiracy theories about vaccines proliferated while those about the presidential vote count receded.

With their protests continuing, far-right groups deployed many of the same talking points as the vaccination opponents. Prominent voices in both the “Stop the Steal” and the anti-vaccination movements helped to organize scattered rallies on March 20 against vaccines, masks and social distancing in American cities including Portland, Ore., and Raleigh, N.C., as well as in Europe, Australia, Canada and other countries around the world.

In April, a conference with the tagline “Learn How to Fight Back for Your Health and Freedom,” is set to bring together Trump allies like Michael Flynn and Sidney Powell along with high-profile members of the anti-vaccination effort.

Maligning the coronavirus vaccines is obviously not limited to extremist groups tied to the Capitol riot. There is deep partisanship over the vaccines generally.

One third of Republicans surveyed in a CBS News poll said that they would avoid getting vaccinated — compared with 10 percent of Democrats — and another 20 percent of Republicans said they were unsure. Other polls found similar trends.

About 100 members of the House of Representatives, roughly one-quarter, had not been vaccinated as of mid-March, according to Representative Kevin McCarthy of California, the House minority leader.

It is unclear where Mr. Trump will fit into the vaccine battle. The former president, who has been vaccinated, endorsed getting the shot recently, provoking some disbelief in QAnon and other chat rooms. “I would recommend it, and I would recommend it to a lot of people that don’t want to get it, and a lot of those people voted for me frankly,” he said in an interview with Fox News.

Protesters at anti-vaccination demonstrations are using similar imagery as those at “Stop the Steal” rallies. Elijah Nouvelage/Getty Images

Across right wing-channels online, certain constant memes have emerged attacking the vaccine, like a cartoon suggesting that what started with mask mandates will end with concentration camps run by FEMA for those who refuse vaccinations.

Numerous channels link to the government website called VAERS, for Vaccine Adverse Event Reporting System, to energize followers. It had reported 2,216 deaths among people vaccinated for the three months before March 22, with 126 million doses administered. The Covid-19 vaccines in use, like most vaccinations, are considered overwhelmingly safe, but inevitably a small percentage of recipients suffer adverse reactions, some of them severe. The deaths have not been directly linked to the vaccinations.

The raw, incomplete VAERS statistics are meant for scientists and medical professionals, but are widely used among extremist groups to try to undermine confidence in the vaccine. One video consisted of a person reading the details from the chart aloud barking “Murder” where the chart said “Death.”

On Telegram, channels frequented by tens of thousands of QAnon followers are full of videos warning of the dire consequences of taking the vaccine. For example, David Icke, a British serial conspiracy theorist, posted a video called “Murder by Vaccine” saying that it transformed the nature of the human body. (The claims that the vaccines change human DNA are false.)

Mr. Icke was previously best known for pushing the idea that the world was controlled by shape-shifting alien lizards who inhabited a global network of underground tunnels.

The general proliferation of conspiracy theories by QAnon followers for years has helped to create a shared vocabulary among far-right organizations, experts said, which smoothed the way for spreading false information about the vaccines. “The last year with Covid has just been a perfect storm that whatever your crazy conspiracy belief is, there is someone who has a Covid conspiracy to match it,” said Melissa Ryan, chief executive of Card Strategies, a consulting firm that researches disinformation.

Anti-vaccine protesters shouted and waved signs at health care workers waiting in line to enter the Super Bowl in Tampa, Fla., in February. Zack Wittman for The New York Times

The vaccines are sometimes referred to as a “potion,” sometimes as a “bioweapon,” and there are claims that vaccinated people are “shedding mutant viruses.”

Telegram is the locus of much of the disinformation and fear mongering. On one channel, there are claims that the vaccine is an instrument of depopulation. “A massive death wave will be witnessed later this year among those who took the vaccine,” read one posting.

In Idaho, the far-right activist Ammon Bundy helped to push for a proposed state law to ban any mandatory vaccines, although work stalled after the legislature suspended its work on March 19 for more than two weeks because too many lawmakers contracted the coronavirus.

The question is where this newly forged alliance goes from here. Some analysts believe its life span will prove limited, with the far right pivoting to some other issue, like immigration. Eventually, hundreds of millions of Americans will be vaccinated, they noted, and vaccine skepticism is not the same thing as being anti-vaccination. Some doubters will soften if time proves the vaccines effective.

A new report by the Network Contagion Research Institute at Rutgers University noted, however, that although the deplatforming of extremist groups made their campaigns harder to follow, the alliance has the potential to meld disparate factions into a large anti-government movement united around public health issues.

“It increases the opportunity for a big tent enemy,” said Joel Finkelstein, a fellow at Rutgers who runs the institute. “If you are feeling dispossessed, like all these right-wing groups are, boy do I have a tent for you.”

Ben Decker contributed research.