

The Anti-Trans Hate Machine

Season Three, Episode 3 No Such Thing As A Lone Wolf

Imara Jones, HOST: Under the cover of darkness – a 20 year old white man slinks through the wooded area of the Community Church of Chesterland, a half hour east of Cleveland, Ohio.

He crosses a grassy clearing that opens up to the small church.

Around him, the smell of gasoline and alcohol mixes in the air. Rage radiates through him. He can't let this place stand.

He places two glass bottles on the hard earth. He's already stuffed both with purple and pink fabric.

A sign just above him in the church's window reads: No matter where you are from, we're glad you're our neighbor.

In just a few days families and children will gather here to watch a drag story hour. Now is his time to act. To stop these events once and for all.

Facing the doors of the church. He takes hold of the bottles once again and sprays them with the gas and alcohol. A match strikes and ignites the fabric inside. He's ready to throw the crudely fashioned molotov cocktails towards the doors of the church. He hopes to burn it to the ground.

I'm Imara Jones, and this is the Anti Trans Hate Machine, a Plot Against Equality.

So far in this series, we have taken a dive into the murky world where Republicans work in lock step with militia groups like the Proud Boys and Patriot Front. We've seen how they are using modern strategies to recruit new people into their ranks often through online communities where anti-trans sentiment swirls in propaganda and memes.

In this final episode, we will unpack the ways in which paramilitary groups that show up in force to protest events like drag story hours seek to catalyze others into taking violent action.

Seemingly acting alone, these individuals are labeled "lone wolves" in the media. But they are actually a key part of the extremist plan to stoke violence and destabilize our democracy. Ohio is a place that is emblematic of these forces.

It's been a [hotbed](#) for white supremacist activity in recent years.

Just last year, in 2023 the Anti-Defamation League ranked Ohio as one of the states with the highest numbers of hate groups. It's right up there with Texas and Florida.

And as you will see, extreme acts of violence have only been averted in Ohio and elsewhere solely by sheer luck. But luck is not a strategy and we don't have to rely on chance.

Despite the dire situation we face at the intersection of gender identity and white supremacist violence, there's actually a number of things that we can do collectively, from efforts large to small, to stop it.

Right now though the effort to prevent hate violence against trans and LGBTQ+ people is falling to courageous people and individual organizations.

Organizations like Parasol Patrol, which rushed to a small town in Ohio to protect a drag story hour. And in doing so came face to face with one of the darkest forces in America.

Eli Bazan: Everybody was armed that day. Everybody was carrying sidearms. Everybody had knives on display. Everybody was putting their hands on their pistol grips.

Eli Bazan is talking about a cold day in Wadsworth, Ohio where he was directing a small team of volunteers dressed in rainbow apparel and holding bright umbrellas to protect a drag queen story hour. That event was taking place in an open air park pavilion with around a dozen parents and kids. Now what should have been an unremarkable event actually turned into a flashpoint. Because hundreds of members of paramilitary groups, many of whom were armed, surrounded Eli and everyone else huddled in the pavilion.

Despite such a fragile situation. Eli and his organization Parasol Patrol were determined to keep the peace.

"This only works today if we are non confrontational.. Do not take their bait.. Do not give them what they want" (FB video [Link](#)1:36)

[^Parasol Patrol's facebook page seems to have been taken offline or set to private. Josephine: I'll email them to request the audio from those v ideo]

Pasha Ripley, a co-founder of Parasol Patrol, remembers the danger of that day all too well.

Pasha Ripley: *We're like whew one wrong step, and it would have been a tinderbox.*

Parasol Patrol is a nationwide organization of volunteers who go to LGBT events targeted by the far-right for protests.

Their goal is to protect children like those in Wadsworth, Ohio from seeing and hearing hateful messages as they enter and exit story hours. Their name comes from the fact that they shield the kids and their parents with umbrellas or parasols.

Part of the reason Pasha and Eli started Parasol patrol was they remember what it was like to be queer kids.

Pasha Ripley: We're both queer af, but we're in a heteronormative presenting relationship.

We both grew up in rural areas, and growing up queer and Asian in rural Oklahoma was no fun for me. And so I know it's corny, but we just want to be that grown up that we don't just wish we'd had, but that we should have had when we were kids. And that's what we try to do.

As active queer community members, Eli and Pasha were supportive when their friend announced in 2019 that he would begin hosting a drag story hour at the comic shop he owned. But what started out as a fun idea quickly brought out a darker element.

Eli Bazan: He had lots of threats against the building, lots of threats against the show. Lots of honestly a loss of customers. But he was emboldened enough to continue.

So Eli decided to help by working security at the comic shop that day. He was doing a favor for his friend who never needed protection until now. And he felt it was especially important to shield families from hate.

Eli Bazan: I'm a former marine. I've always been kind of a protector of those around me. And I don't like bullies, especially when they're targeting young children.

It turns out that the parents and kids needed them there. Everyone felt safer.

Pasha Ripley: And shortly after that, we were asked to help shield a drag story hour at a library. And things just kept growing and growing because there's such a need. There are so many hate groups out there now, and so many people kind of coming out to yell at children through bullhorns.

And with the rise of paramilitary groups targeting queer events, Eli and Pasha realized that they had to scale and go nationwide with Parasol Patrol's approach. So that's what they did.

Pasha Ripley: 95% of the time, our events are just really a lot of fun. You get to know your neighbors and, you know, get to see the kids smile. But yeah, that little 5%, we want our volunteers to know that they still need to keep their heads on a swivel and that they do need to take some precautions. In some ways, Ohio was probably the worst we've ever had.

In Ohio, Parasol Patrol volunteers huddled inside the open air-pavilion, shielding the families from the noise of the protestors just beyond.

There were hundreds of them.

Because the rhetoric leading up to the event had gotten really charged – even worse than usual. And as news of the event spread, it became something of a bat signal for a wide range of groups, all with hateful ideologies and a penchant for violence.

Including Patriot Front, who showed up in their uniforms.

And the Proud Boys, in their black and yellow sweatshirts.

Eli Bazan: I had heard about the Proud Boys not long before then, They'd like to pretend they're a big beer drinking club. But then you see them on the street and you see how connected they are. You see they have comms on, you see, they're all wearing tactical vests. You see, they're all armed, mostly concealed. The Proud Boys that I dealt with across the country have been one of the most organized and true militia-like organizations I've had to deal with.

Now Patriot Front and the Proud Boys are groups you have heard about in this series. But among the crowd of yelling anti-drag protestors, there were people clearly banded together that even Eli and Pasha had not seen before.

Pasha Ripley: There were over 400 protesters from every hate group you could possibly imagine. It was the first time we ever saw the Blood Tribe in person.

Pasha says that each Blood Tribe member was dressed in a uniform-of red long sleeve shirts and black pants. They held Swastika flags and were red-faced from shouting obscenities.

Pasha Ripley: There was a news reporter there who was frightened for her safety, understandably so. The Blood Tribe yelling you N-word F-word at her constantly

Blood Tribe is a newer group than the Proud Boys or Patriot Front. It's a highly secretive organization, disguising its actions even from those whose job it is to know what they are up to.

From what we can tell, Blood Tribe began accepting members in 2021 and developed an online following in the thousands, using platforms like Telegram to form community. Just two years later, in 2023, they began showing up offline, in force, as a well-disciplined paramilitary group.

And a key target of their force has been demonstrations at LGBTQ events across the country, especially in the South and Midwest.

Eli and Pasha experienced their provocation first hand in the park that day.

***Eli Bazan:** I had no idea who they were. All I knew was that we had a group of Nazis that were probably numbering, probably 25 to 30 of them, armed as well. And they were marching toward us. It was - it was just surreal in the moment to see swastika flags being carried openly and police officers rushing to surround them to protect them.*

***Pasha Ripley:** And they were screaming, Sieg Heil! They were throwing Roman salutes*

In some ways, Blood Tribe is among the most extreme of the paramilitary groups we've covered this season. Because Blood Tribe takes western chauvinism & great replacement theory to some extremely strange, even occult, places.

Members worship Hitler and see those who join groups like Patriot Front as cowards.

***Pasha Ripley:** The Blood Tribe in a weird, weird, bizarre way are a little more honest in that they wear their hate way out there on their sleeve. And we tell people we've had to shield kids from Nazis, and they're like, oh, you mean like neo fascists, like the Proud Boys or the Patriot Front? And we're like, no, no actual Nazis.*

Now this bizarre organization is led by tattoo artist Chris Polhaus. And Polhaus is affiliated with groups which practice the fringe white supremacist religion called "Odinism."

Named after the patriarch of Norse Gods, the belief system is essentially great replacement theory mixed in with Norse mythology. [According](#) to the Southern Poverty Law Center, Odinism is the spiritual belief that saving white European culture is a divine calling.

But in reality there's very little that's divine about it.

***Eli Bazan:** I've stood against a lot of people who seem to have genuine hatred in their hearts. But for the most part, they just*

want to go out there and yell and scream, and they want to go back home to their family at night and watch TV together. When I stood against Chris Pohlhaus, leader of the Blood Tribe, I just got nothing but evil. Just nothing but absolute hatred. He was there to spread his message of Aryan dominance of this world. Period.

With this mix of religious zealotry, a cornucopia of paramilitary groups and hundreds of armed men, it seemed like just a matter of time before something terrible might happen in Ohio.

***Pasha Ripley:** That's the one event that - the only event that I'm shocked that someone was not hurt and or lost lives.*

As Parasol Patrol attempted to ignore the protestors, someone sprayed mace into the crowd. Immediately, a fight broke out. Amidst the pandamonium, Eli tried to keep the temperature down:

Then he saw a flash of metal in the hand of one of the protestors. And he thought the worst was about to happen.

Eli Bazan: When he pulled the handgun on me it misfires. He looks down at the weapon and misfires. Again, he puts it in his pocket. He looks left and right for cops. There's a cop not ten feet to his left. He pulls the gun back out. It misfires a third time. Then he puts it back in his pocket. And then a big melee started with many people being maced. And we were trying to escort a family through that.

Imara Jones: Where were the police?

Eli Bazan: They were standing with their backs. To the Proud Boys with their backs to the Nazis, in essence, protecting them from us. Our umbrellas were determined to be weapons that day. So we didn't get a whole lot of support from local police.

However, all of this makes me wonder. How long can Eli and Pasha keep doing this, as volunteers? Because it shouldn't fall to private citizens to regularly put themselves directly into harm's way.

Imara Jones: Have you all ever been afraid and doing this work?

Eli Bazan: I mean, we're human. Does it put me evermore on alert? Absolutely. I mean, I, I always - my head's always on a swivel. I'm always looking out for what is around on the next corner because a lot of people know who I am, and a lot of people don't like what I do.

Pasha Ripley: We're not always necessarily as afraid of the hate groups that are more organized, their boots on the ground, as to who they may inspire: that lone gunman or whomever to go out and hop in their car or their truck or whatever, and drive by and do something stupid.

And that's the point. Volunteer organizations like Parasol Patrol can only react to the growing culture of violence, they can't stop it.

And they can't stop the individual acts of violence that that culture spawns.

Despite the blur of that day in Wadsworth, Eli still remembered one individual who stood out from the other protestors, even among all the chaos.

Eli Bazan: He was throwing Roman salutes, calling us all pedophiles that day. He was very, very, very vocal. Trying to get in people's faces as we escorted them out.

The young man that Eli remembers left the clash in Wadsworth, Ohio fired up. Just one week later, he sought to destroy a nearby church that was hosting—you guessed it—a drag story hour.

ARCHIVAL newsclip: Police say somebody threw incendiary devices at that church in Chesterland. The church says it's been getting backlash for holding a kids drag story hour.

The person who threw those incendiary devices was 20 year old Aimenn Penny.

Adhering to great replacement theory, Penny believed that drag was unnatural, an enemy to white families. And he was actively involved in a white supremacist Telegram channel.

But despite these conceptual and virtual affiliations, Ohio was a particular activation point. Penny felt strength in numbers when he joined up with other extremists to harass and intimidate in real life. The fact that so many others shared his beliefs about drag story hour, and were prepared to do something about it, encouraged him to take matters into his own hands.

So on March 25, 2023, Penny fashioned two Molotov cocktails. He hoped to burn the church to the ground.

And that's exactly what groups like Blood Tribe and Patriot Front want.

Jon Lewis: They're looking to create those flashpoints for the next wannabe mass shooter to look at and say, this is my signal, right?

That's Jon Lewis. He's a research fellow at George Washington University. He studies domestic terrorism, especially the white supremacist movement. And he says white supremacists are organizing rallies in the hope that there will be more people like Penny who take action.

Jon Lewis: *When you look at the cases of offline violence that have come out of those ecosystems, I think there's no question that these movements are just pumping in heat, pumping in more fire into these spaces, to get the random individuals to commit violence. And I think that's what's so challenging about this as well, is oftentimes they don't even really care if it's their guy who does the violence.*

This is what happened in Ohio. The show of force by Proud Boys and Blood Tribe helped spur neo-Nazi Aimenn Penny to take action beyond the Wadsworth protest. These flashpoints are designed to embolden him, and others like him.

Jon Lewis: *He goes there and he sees, you know, dozens of neo-Nazis from, again, what looked like a bunch of different, you know, big, strong white organizations that must be so powerful because they all are wearing the same outfits and they're all chanting really loudly, that sends that message right to individuals who are on the fence, to individuals who, you know, might just be looking for the right cognitive push to take that kind of action.*

And this is the point.

When it comes to the world of extremism there are essentially no individuals who act unaided and unprovoked, so called "lone wolves." In fact the very idea of lone wolves was created by violent white supremacists in the late 1990s to mask the fact that they were cultivating people to extreme acts through media of the time like white supremacist books and instructional videotapes.

What the organized extremist movement understands is that there needs to be a permission structure for violence, a righteous justification. And everything from online conversations, to social media threads, to public rallies and confrontations at events are designed to normalize fringe views and greenlight the harm of others in pursuing them.

It's called "leaderless resistance" and allows coordinated efforts to be cloaked under the guise of individual actions. That way chaos is sowed but the groups behind it all are shielded from responsibility.

And Penny's attempted firebombing brings this starkly into view.

Upon his arrest, with a neo-nazi manifesto and an array of neo-nazi merch, he told law enforcement officers that his only regret was that he didn't succeed. He will spend the next 18 years behind bars, contemplating his fate.

Even though Penny was successfully prosecuted, this case by case basis to dealing with extremism actually is the problem. Because as we have seen there's little separation between individual acts and the larger extremist ecosystem. And this brings us to a core question. Just why has the US so badly failed at its extremist response? Just how did we get here?

The reality is that we had the opportunity to deal with this threat more than a decade ago. The U.S. government knew about the growing threat of right-wing domestic terrorism. But those with power chose to ignore this growing crisis.

Daryl Johnson is a former counterterrorism leader for the federal government. And he saw what was coming from miles and miles away.

Daryl Johnson: I had developed an expertise in domestic non-Islamic extremists and terrorists. So I was hired specifically to do that function at the Department of Homeland Security.

Daryl is the kind of person who lives and breathes national security. And he started tracking terrorism for the United States back in the 1990s.

In 2008, he got an assignment that would change his life while working for the Department of Homeland Security. Darryl and his team were asked to evaluate the potential threat of domestic terrorism. So they spent months researching the white supremacist movement.

Daryl Johnson: We were seeing a shift in the domestic threat environment from focusing exclusively on preventing the next 911 attack by Al-Qaeda and its supporters to more non-Islamic terrorist attacks by white supremacists, militias, and sovereign citizens.

What they found worried them. While the U.S. security apparatus was laser-focused on preventing Islamic terrorists, white supremacist groups were growing. Daryl's team found out that part of their recruitment strategy was to focus on veterans.

But there was another historic event which turbocharged their numbers. The candidacy and election of Barack Obama as President of the United States.

Daryl Johnson: What surprised me was how quickly it turned violent. So right after the 2008 election, like the very next day, we had an arson attack on a black church. And then that was soon followed the next month by, shooting spree in the suburbs of Boston involving a neo-Nazi, was shooting at interracial couples, people that he thought were Jews, minorities. So in the midst of drafting this report, we have these attacks starting to unfold.

Daryl and his team worked diligently to warn the government about the growing white supremacist movement. They presented their findings to the incoming secretary of homeland security, Janet Napolitano, just after Obama was inaugurated in 2009.

But everything exploded in April of that year. That's when the conservative talk radio show host Rush Limbaugh obtained a leaked copy of the report. And he went on the attack, mischaracterizing the report and accusing the Obama administration of using it to target conservatives.

ARCHIVAL, Rush Limbaugh: So what you have here, you have a report from Janet Napolitano and Barack Obama, Department of Homeland Security. Portraying standard, ordinary, everyday conservatives as posing a bigger threat to this country than Al Qaeda terrorists or genuine enemies of this country like Kim Jong Jong, wait wait wait they wouldn't write anything about Kim Jong Il like this.

This is Barack Obama, and this is an effort to stifle what anybody would consider to be normal political dissent. We are now right wing extremists, and we are arming up.

This was of course, all misrepresentation and disinformation, but as we've reported extensively in this series, lies go a long way in fueling the extreme right wing.

Daryl Johnson: I get the sense it was just purely political, and it just happened to coincide with, you know, the Republicans losing the House, the Senate, the White House, and then just kind of grasping for anything they possibly could to distract away from those steep losses.

And the Republican Party sunk its teeth into spreading disinformation about this report.

Former House Speaker Newt Gingrich [tweeted](#): "the person who drafted the outrageous homeland security memo smearing veterans and conservatives should be fired."

Texas Rep. Lamar Smith [lashed](#) out at DHS, saying that the report wrongly portrayed "law-abiding Americans, including war veterans, as `extremists.'" according to CBS News.

His colleague Florida Congressman Gus Bilirakis [joined](#) him and demanded an apology from Secretary Napolitano for the reports findings.

Now Daryl's team did none of what they were accused of doing. However the document they created was released in an especially charged atmosphere. One when America had just elected its first Black president. And their actions highlight a theme which repeats.

These leaders were willing to embrace extremist views from far-right media in order to further their own goals.

Daryl Johnson: When you've basically sold your soul to the devil, so to speak, and you're, you know, flirting with these groups, you know, taking photo ops with them, going to their meetings and giving political speeches, all to win elections. That's not good. I mean, that's something that we should all be very concerned about because it kind of corrupts the government and co-opts it because you're basically feeding into these extremists and, you're depending on them for your votes. So they look at you as a supporter for them, whether you want to or not.

The heat from GOP lawmakers put the Obama administration on the defensive. So much so that then-secretary of homeland security Janet Napolitano disavowed the report entirely.

Here she is in an exchange with Congressman John Carter at a Homeland Security Oversight hearing.

ARCHIVAL, Congressman John R Carter: I was very concerned about the fact that we labeled our returning veterans as possible recruiting persons for terrorism in this country in this report that I have right here with me.

ARCHIVAL, Janet Napolitano: Well, let me, Congressman, you're right. Some things in my initial days have gone very well of the department, some things have not. And that was probably the worst thing. I apologized for that report. It was not authorized to be distributed. It had not even completed its vetting process within the department. It has been taken off of the Intel websites. And, the lexicon that went along with it was, similarly, withdrawn. ~~Neither were authorized products.~~

But the administration went a step farther.

It made Daryl and his team scapegoats in response to the avalanche of criticism in the media and on Capitol Hill.

The Department of Homeland Security went so far as to *dismantle* Daryl's domestic terrorism unit

Daryl Johnson: Up until that point, I was very idealistic as far as my leadership. I thought they were always there. As long as you were a good, hardworking employee, that they would be there to protect you and to support you and to see them run for cover

and hide their heads in the sand and actually come after us was totally shocking to me. And it took a personal toll on me during that time. A lot of stress.

The Department of Homeland Security did not respond to numerous requests for comment. Neither did other federal agencies, including the FBI or National Counterterrorism Center.

Here were dedicated civil servants, doing exceptional work and trying to stop a crisis in the making. And they lost their jobs for that work.

Imagine if instead of dissolving Daryl's team, the Department of Homeland Security took that groundbreaking work seriously. It's not hard to see that the federal government would have spent nearly a decade gathering intel on extremists, warning other law enforcement agencies about them and disseminating possible ways to counter them.

Instead though, extremists had a chance to feed off of the explosion of racial antipathy during the Obama Administration and grow more powerful. This created the environment for groups like the Proud Boys to thrive. And by the time 2016 rolled around with their avatar Donald Trump, they were ready to go to a whole new level.

Now since being effectively shown the door at DHS, Daryl has continued to track these groups. And he wants us to know that these are terrorists plain and simple.

Daryl Johnson: Terrorism is about politics. It's about social issues. That's the whole point. You know, terrorism is violence directed for political messaging and social change. And so we need to understand and we need to acknowledge and accept that these are political and socially charged issues that these terrorist groups latch onto and put it as part of their agenda.

Daryl's experience shows us that the response of the government has so far not matched the scale of the threat. In fact the Biden Administration just issued the first ever domestic terrorism threat assessment for the LGBTQ+ community last year, in 2023.

But if the US government has dropped the ball, sometimes deliberately so, in dealing with these extremist threats – what have other countries done? because some of these groups, like the Proud Boys, have chapters all around the world.

Well the United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand, and Canada have all classified various U.S. Paramilitary groups as terrorist organizations. Literally placing them on the same list as Al-Qaeda or ISIS. They take this threat seriously.

Now it's hard to overstate how big a deal this is. These countries are some of America's closest economic, defense and intelligence allies. And they-all broke with the US to label these groups for what they are.

Here's Cynthia Miller-Idriss, she's with the Polarization Extremism Research and Innovation Lab or PERIL at American University in Washington, D.C.

Cynthia Miller-Idriss: Our lack of willingness to apply terrorist designations to internal domestic groups is problematic because it makes people think they're a little bit less dangerous. But it's also the case that, like, we export this stuff.

And this is something that we often miss in our domestic conversation about extremism, that we are a source of these movements globally. Because of our lack of action here, other countries are forced into responding to these invigorated and modernized forms of white supremacy.

Cynthia Miller-Idriss: So we export the majority of white supremacist propaganda that circulates globally in the English world. We export groups like, you know, ideas like QAnon, the Proud Boys, if that was happening from any other country with any other type of propaganda, you can imagine how the US would react.

In Canada, being on the terrorist watch list means that it's harder to send donations to these groups or to find them online, and it subjects these organizations to a higher level of surveillance.

Cynthia Miller-Idriss: In the US, we are really like 20 years behind everybody else, of our allies, I would say, in talking about prevention.

Now there are a lot of reasons why a national terrorism designation might not work in the US. Our nation's history makes potential abuses easy to see.

The FBI infiltrated the Civil Rights movement. The CIA under the Nixon administration had covert operations to disrupt the anti-war movement. During the height of the Iraq War, an array of people from senior Members of Congress to everyday Americans were put on the terrorist no fly list without justification from the Bush Administration.

And these sorts of abuses still happen—for instance, Black Lives Matter protesters have been targeted by the federal government in recent years.

But just because it doesn't make sense for the US to use the same tools as our allies, doesn't mean that there's nothing we can do. That we just have to give up and live in fear.

So far this series has been a lot. Learning about the reality of rising extremism, and the role that hatred for trans people is playing in its resurgence, can be overwhelming. But part of what's frustrating to me, after having spent so much time with this subject, is that a whole toolbox of strategies to turn this around already exists.

First, there are structural approaches that we can take which don't require a modern domestic terrorism law.

For example, one strategy lies in enforcing laws already on the books. Jacob Glick, the January 6th investigator we heard from earlier in this season, has been working to get people in power to respond to the threat of paramilitary groups.

Jacob Glick: I think there's a lot of helplessness that people can feel because there's this idea that is shared by law enforcement and local officials because they just believe that these groups are allowed to do what they will, right, and they're not.

That's because under the law, state governments are the only entities allowed to have militias. These are actually called the National Guard.

In fact, according to Jacob, a lot of these anti-drag and anti-trans protest groups are illegal.

To get this message across, Jacob has worked at the Institute for Constitutional Advocacy and Protection at Georgetown Law or ICAP.

ICAP has been successfully combating the right wing extremist movement for nearly a decade. Working with local officials, ICAP sued several of the paramilitary groups who were at the Unite the Right Rally in Charlottesville. And they won the suit, forcing several groups to disband via court-order.

Jacob's work at ICAP has been necessary because white supremacist and far-right extremist groups have infiltrated local police forces across the country. That's according to a leaked 2006 report from the FBI.

Jacob Glick: There are significant, small, but significant chunks of law enforcement that don't want to because they see themselves as aligned with these groups.

And so you see that there are instances where local law enforcement are explicitly friendly with private paramilitary groups when they're ideologically aligned.

And even when they aren't outright sympathetic to paramilitary groups, law enforcement are still often ignorant of how they can combat them.

And that's why Jacob is committed to educating leaders across the country.

Jacob Glick: One thing we try to do at ICAP, is provide guidance, guidance documents, private guidance, training to local officials who want to try to better understand what tools are at their disposal, to combat sort of organized, armed efforts by these private paramilitary groups. Because there's a lot of misinformation that makes it difficult to act.

Misinformation and disinformation don't only prevent people in power from making meaningful change. It's also a way that paramilitary groups are attracting new recruits and acculturating them to violence. And they are doing so online. Here is Cynthia Miller-Idriss again.

Cynthia Miller-Idriss: There's this whole world around online gaming servers and live streams, communities, right, that are built up like Discord communities.

Now, as we have shown throughout this series, using platforms like Telegram and Discord to recruit adults is not new to these groups. But what is new is the recruitment of kids as young as 8 using video game chat rooms and live streams.

Cynthia Miller-Idriss: It's a place where they connect with each other, where they try to one up each other where they can communicate and plan and plot in coded form.

I'll just say like on the online gaming side, there's pathways where people invite you to encrypted rooms, drop a URL and give you a way to access them in other places. And then there's also deliberate tactics to try to get people, kids, to harm other people.

There are bad actors who literally are there to groom kids for bad purposes, terrorism, but also other types of exploitation.

This indoctrination of children is incredibly concerning. Because the average child spends at least 90 minutes online gaming everyday. That's according to a study published by the American Academy of Pediatrics in 2023.

That's one reason why Cynthia's group PERIL has a unit focused on countering extremist propaganda. She says that people are responding to materials that alert them to disinformation.

Cynthia Miller-Idriss: We have a whole video based division that does short form video for the public in more mainstream online

spaces that helps them recognize the manipulative tactics of propaganda, conspiracy theories, and other harmful content. Those are really effective because it turns out that people don't like to find out they're being manipulated.

But more is needed to inoculate young people against the dehumanization that's at the core of supremacist violence. Cynthia says that we need programs which show what we all have in common as human beings.

Cynthia Miller-Idriss: And you can't do that in any other way than education. Right? And education about harms and about humanity and about exploitation, consent, to have conversations early and often about, respect and about, recognizing each other and learning how to trust and be in relationship with each other and have conversations, across differences in respectful ways. And I think, you know, we're not really learning those types of skills.

This type of concerted education effort, in schools and communities, can help equip the next generation with the tools they need to reject anti-trans hate and extremism.

Cynthia says that other countries have already integrated this type of approach nationwide. She wishes the United States had the political will to do the same. She points to Germany as one example to follow.

Cynthia Miller-Idriss: They put the most money in the world really into prevention because of their history of the Holocaust. And they put a lot of resources, billions of euro into primary prevention. So education, media and digital literacy, they have federal agencies and state agencies in every state that are just supposed to keep the public informed about basically what an inclusive democracy looks like and how to live democracy in that way.

Cynthia thinks it's important to focus on preventative measures that can be scaled up. That's what they're doing in New Zealand after white supremacist violence shook the nation to its core in 2019.

Cynthia Miller-Idriss: I think New Zealand had an exceptionally good response to the Christchurch terrorist attack. They had a massive set of changes that came about, including establishing the first ever national center on prevention that just got launched and will be designing and testing strategies for prevention of violent extremism. They also rooted a lot of their efforts in equity, recognizing that, that actually it's

not enough to just focus on the perpetrators, but that the more you improve, equity and diversity at all levels of society, the better we are going to be as a society to reduce the fertile ground in which these things thrive. And I think they've done a really remarkable job investing on both sides of it.

Clearly we don't have these types of nationwide preventive efforts. But let's say that we did. We still wouldn't be able to stop every potential recruit from falling prey to white supremacy and paramilitary groups. So what then? When people become radicalized into far-right extremism, is there actually a way to get them out?

Eric Ward is a nationally-recognized expert on preserving inclusive democracy. He's a community organizer with an extensive resume, and he's seen first hand the kind of transformative change for radicalized individuals that can happen when the right conditions are met.

He says it comes down to understanding why people are even attracted to far-right extremism in the first place.

Eric Ward: I've grown up long enough in the United States to understand quite fully why some white people and increasingly, some people of color are attracted to the white nationalist movement and how the white nationalist movement is able to to recruit them and take advantage of them and exploit their anxieties, exploit their fears, exploit the fact that they, too, reside in a country that, is more willing to deliver for billionaires than someone who has to work 2 or 3 jobs.

Conservative media and far right extremists have been working to convince the public that their problems are caused by marginalized folks like trans people, instead of those in power.

To fight back against that, Eric has engaged with white supremacists in order to deradicalize them. And that indoctrination about trans people being the enemy isn't easily unlearned. But it is possible.

Eric Ward: What I have found to be most successful is really just to be present at the time of transition. And that means making yourself known to the person in advance, not, being seen as someone who is combative, but, being genuinely curious.

The white supremacist movement is something like a cult.

Once someone's in, it's hard for them to get out—so people don't leave unless they're really motivated. And when someone does decide to leave, they need a lot of support.

Eric Ward: If the person doesn't have relationships with someone outside of the white nationalist movement, it is unlikely, right, that they will have a path out. So quickly, ensuring that person at that point has psychological support and counseling that there's vocational training and employment, community engagement and social integration. The deep isolation from leaving, these political extremist movements are quite heavy. Family involvement. Right? Reengaging family who have been ostracized is deeply important. Those are the components that work each, and every time, I think, in providing the most healthy path for people, just seeking to give to get their lives back.

Eric knows this work isn't for everyone. But he sees that providing the support for people to leave the movement is both a moral and a practical imperative.

Eric Ward: If the society we seek to build is one that is grounded in inclusion. If we truly believe, as those of us committed to social change and social justice, right, that people's unconscious bigotry and anxiety are being organized and manipulated and turned into political power of exclusion. We fundamentally still believe in people. Then we have to believe that all folks are redeemable.

But even if we don't hold those types of values, we should also be strategic and understand we should leave the white nationalist movement with no constituency to recruit from, and that means white folks that they are actively trying to recruit. And we have to be the bridge out of that movement for any person seeking to, to escape, the authoritarianism and the nihilism of being in the white nationalist movement.

Now Eric was among the last interviews we did for this series. And as we wrapped production of this series, I couldn't get it out of my head that we have been here before. A political party, seeking to undermine democracy from the inside out, by using an attack on gender identity, with an embrace of paramilitary violence.

This seemed too powerful to ignore.

So in the closing days of doing interviews for this production, I picked up the phone to speak with someone I met way back in Season 1. Anne Nelson. I knew she could help me unpack this troubling moment and what it means.

Ann has spent years investigating the far right and the Christian Nationalist movement in the US. But she's also written about the history of Nazi Germany in her book Red Orchestra. And she can't help but see the parallels between then and today. In the years after World War I, Weimar Germany was marked by a period of cultural flourishing and artistic freedom.

Anne: The backlash was when the Nazis in the late 20s used a combination of economic tensions and the lust for political power among major economic forces to try to disrupt the government that made these freedoms possible. And to do that, they had to find, basically whipping boys. Right. And they identified two principally, and one was the Jews. And they blame them for the social and economic problems of Germany. And the other was the LGBT, the gay community in Germany was blamed for corrupting the culture, as opposed to helping to create this incredible artistic flourishing.

And right now, history is repeating, as trans people are being blamed by the Republican party for corrupting culture. As we've shown throughout this season, this has led directly to queer people being targeted for violence.

Anne: We've had this real upsurge in political violence in the United States in recent years that has, I mean, honestly shocked me.

It's existed in small places like the Idaho militias and so on in past years. But now it's spread and it's been highly coordinated, often through online groups, QAnon, Reddit groups, but also political organizations that exploit this desire to disrupt.

It also happens in terms of suppressing Americans civil and political rights, especially the LGBTQ communities where gatherings and pride parades and so on, are increasingly taking place in an atmosphere of fear and intimidation.

And that's what's been bugging me for over a year. We can see where this can go. This isn't new.

Now that doesn't mean that we're on cusp of experiencing a second Holocaust. History never repeats itself in exactly the same way.

But the warning signs are too eerie and the stakes far too high to ignore.

One of two political parties in the US, the GOP, has made common cause with white supremacists through anti-trans ideology. Their anti-trans bond is instrumental to the rise of authoritarianism and political violence in the United States.

But right now, our country has an opportunity to stop the slide into a violent dystopian nightmare. This moment may not last long. So we must act.

Curbing the rising tide of fascism will take a multifaceted approach. None of the strategies we have touched upon in this episode – be they systemic or individual, ranging from law enforcement, education, online strategies, the role of parents and caretakers, to individual deradicalization efforts – can work alone.

What actually gives me so much hope is that there are a broad range of solutions to extremist violence that *can* have an impact though. What's been missing so far is commitment and nerve.

But not on the part of people in countless communities across the country.

Not on the part of any of the experts who spend day and night figuring out how to stop these groups.

And not on the part of the activists working to fight for an open future, and keep others safe.

They know what it takes to push back against the threat of rising far-right extremist violence in this country.

The bottom line is that America as-a-whole needs to match the energy of the problem solvers that we've met throughout this series. It's the only way to turn the tide.

But if it doesn't, we might look back on January 6 as just a warmup.

I'm Imara Jones, the host and executive producer of the Anti-Trans Hate Machine.

Thank you for listening to this series.

You can support our journalism by making a tax-deductible donation to TransLash Media. And you can help get the word out by leaving a review on Apple Podcasts.

To learn more about our investigation and the work we're doing, you can visit translash.org and follow us on social media @translashmedia on all the major platforms.

Not surprisingly, a series like this takes an entire team of dedicated people to make it happen. And they've been working incredibly and painstakingly hard to get this season to your ears.

Josephine Jaye McAuliffe is the producer for this series and Rebekah Robinson is the associate producer. Our story editor is Nicole Kelly. TransLash Media's Sr. Sound engineer, Xander Adams sound designed and audio engineered the Anti-Trans Hate Machine.

Fact checking for this episode was done by Henry Carnell.
Zak Lanius was the rough cut engineer for this episode.

Oliver-Ash Kleine is TransLash Media's Director of Podcasts.

They've all been doing extraordinary work to get this crucial investigation out in time for voters to make an informed choice in November.