

Exclusive: Donald Trump Followers Targeted by FBI as 2024 Election Nears

By [William M. Arkin](#) On 10/04/23 at 5:00 AM EDT

The federal government believes that the threat of violence and major civil disturbances around the 2024 U.S. presidential election is so great that it has quietly created a new category of extremists that it seeks to track and counter: [Donald Trump](#)'s army of MAGA followers.

The challenge for the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the primary federal agency charged with law enforcement, is to pursue and prevent what it calls domestic terrorism without direct reference to political parties or affiliations—even though the vast majority of its current "anti-government" investigations are of Trump supporters, according to classified data obtained by *Newsweek*.

"The [FBI](#) is in an almost impossible position," says a current FBI official, who requested anonymity to discuss highly sensitive internal matters. The official said that the FBI is intent on stopping domestic terrorism and any repeat of the January 6, 2021, attack on the Capitol. But the Bureau must also preserve the Constitutional right of all Americans to campaign, speak freely and protest the government. By focusing on former president Trump and his MAGA (Make America Great Again) supporters, the official said, the Bureau runs the risk of provoking the very anti-government activists that the terrorism agencies hope to counter.

"Especially at a time when the White House is facing Congressional Republican opposition claiming that the Biden administration has 'weaponized' the Bureau against the right wing, it has to tread very carefully," says the official.



Is the FBI weaponizing January 6? Pro-Trump protesters gather in front of the U.S. Capitol Building on January 6, 2021 in Washington, DC. Jon Cherry/Getty

Newsweek spoke to over a dozen current or former government officials who specialize in terrorism in a three-month investigation to understand the current domestic-security landscape and to evaluate what President [Joe Biden](#)'s administration is doing about what it calls domestic terrorism. Most requested anonymity because they were not authorized to talk publicly, were reluctant to stray into partisan politics or feared the repercussions of speaking frankly.

Newsweek has also reviewed secret FBI and [Department of Homeland Security](#) data that track incidents, threats, investigations and cases to try to build a better picture. While experts agree that the current partisan environment is charged and uniquely dangerous (with the threat not only of violence but, in the most extreme scenarios, possibly civil war), many also question whether "terrorism" is the most effective way to describe the problem, or that the methods of

counterterrorism developed over the past decade in response to [Al-Qaeda](#) and other Islamist groups constitute the most fruitful way to craft domestic solutions.

"The current political environment is not something that the FBI is necessarily responsible for, nor should it be," says Brian Michael Jenkins, one of the world's leading terrorism experts and senior adviser to the president of the RAND Corporation.

In a statement to *Newsweek*, the FBI said: "The threat posed by domestic violent extremists is persistent, evolving, and deadly. The FBI's goal is to detect and stop terrorist attacks, and our focus is on potential criminal violations, violence and threats of violence. Anti-government or anti-authority violent extremism is one category of domestic terrorism, as well as one of the FBI's top threat priorities." The FBI further said, "We are committed to protecting the safety and constitutional rights of all Americans and will never open an investigation based solely on First Amendment protected activity, including a person's political beliefs or affiliations."

The White House declined to comment. The Trump campaign was given an opportunity to comment but did not do so.

What the FBI Data Shows

From the president down, the Biden administration has presented Trump and MAGA as an existential threat to American democracy and talked up the risk of domestic terrorism and violence associated with the 2024 election campaign.

"Donald Trump and MAGA [Republicans](#) are a threat to the very soul of this country," President Biden tweeted last September, the first time that he explicitly singled out the former president. "MAGA Republicans aim to question not only the legitimacy of past elections but elections being held now and into the future," Biden said.

Biden's Homeland Security Advisor Liz Sherwood-Randall said: "The use of violence to pursue political ends is a profound threat to our public safety and national security...it is a threat to our national identity, our values, our norms, our rule of law—our democracy."

For Attorney General [Merrick Garland](#): "Attacks by domestic terrorists are attacks on all of us collectively, aimed at rending the fabric of our democratic society and driving us apart."

Though the FBI's data shows a dip in the number of investigations since the slew of January 6 cases ended, FBI Director Christopher Wray still says that the breach of the Capitol building was "not an isolated event" and the threat is "not going away anytime soon." In a joint report to [Congress](#) this June, the Bureau and the Department of Homeland Security say that "Threats from...DVEs [domestic violent extremists] have increased in the last two years, and any further increases in threats likely will correspond to potential flashpoints, such as high-profile elections and campaigns or contentious current events."

The FBI and DHS report concludes: "Sociopolitical developments—such as narratives of fraud in the recent general election, the emboldening impact of the violent breach of the U.S. Capitol, conditions related to the COVID-19 pandemic, and conspiracy theories promoting violence—will almost certainly spur some domestic terrorists to try to engage in violence."

The threats listed in that paragraph are all clearly associated with America's right and in particular with Trump's MAGA supporters. Right after January 6, the FBI co-authored a restricted report ("Domestic Violent Extremists Emboldened in Aftermath of Capitol Breach, Elevated Domestic Terrorism Threat of Violence Likely Amid Political Transitions and Beyond") in which it shifted the definition of AGAAVE ("anti-government, anti-authority violent extremism") from "furtherance of ideological agendas" to "furtherance of political and/or social agendas." For the first time, such groups could be so labeled because of their politics.

It was a subtle change, little noticed, but a gigantic departure for the Bureau. Trump and his army of supporters were acknowledged as a distinct category of domestic violent extremists, even as the FBI was saying publicly that political views were never part of its criteria to investigate or prevent domestic terrorism. Where the FBI sees threats is also plain from the way it categorizes them—a system which on the surface is designed to appear nonpartisan. This shifted subtly days after the events of January 6 when it comes to what the Bureau calls AGAAVE.

"We cannot and do not investigate ideology," a senior FBI official reassured the press after January 6. "We focus on individuals who commit or intend to commit violence or criminal activity that constitutes a federal crime or poses a threat to national security."

But the FBI went further in October 2022 when it created a new subcategory—"AGAAVE-Other"—of those who were a threat but do not fit into its anarchist, militia or Sovereign Citizen groups. Introduced without any announcement, and reported here for the first time, the new classification is officially defined as "domestic violent extremists who cite anti-government or anti-authority motivations for violence or criminal activity not otherwise defined, such as individuals motivated by a desire to commit violence against those with a real or perceived association with a specific political party or faction of a specific political party."



Donald Trump at a political rally while campaigning for the GOP nomination in the 2024 election at Erie Insurance Arena on July 29, 2023 in Erie, Pennsylvania. Jeff Swensen/Getty Images

Though Trump and MAGA are never mentioned in the official description of **AGAAVE-Other**, government insiders acknowledge that it applies to political violence ascribed to the former president's supporters.

"What other name could we use?" asks one FBI officer who spoke with *Newsweek*, and who defends what he says is merely a record-keeping change in response to Congressional pressure to track things better. "Obviously if [Democratic Party](#) supporters resort to violence, it [AGAAVE-Other] would apply to them as well. It doesn't matter that there is a low likelihood of that. **So yes, in practical terms, it refers to MAGA, though the carefully constructed language is wholly nonpartisan.**"

In its statement to *Newsweek*, the FBI said that the AGAAVE threat "**includes anarchist violent extremists, militia violent extremists, sovereign citizen violent extremists, and other violent extremists**—some of whom are motivated by a desire to harm those with a real or perceived association with a political party or faction."

Another senior intelligence official who requested anonymity told *Newsweek*, "We've crossed the Rubicon." In emailed responses to questions, he said, "Trump's army constitutes the greatest threat of violence domestically...politically...that's the reality and the problem set. That's what the FBI, as a law enforcement agency, has to deal with. But whether Trump and his supporters are a threat to national security, to the country, whether they represent a threat of civil war? That's a trickier question. And that's for the country to deal with, not the FBI."

The revelations that some Trump supporters are being specifically targeted by the FBI fits with accusations from among them that the Bureau has them in its sights and is the political tool of a repressive deep state in Washington, D.C., bent on preserving the hold of the political establishment at the cost of democracy.

Such views are not only from the furthest fringe. Some of Trump's Republican allies in Congress have called for the FBI to be defunded over such accusations and the prosecution of Trump supporters over the January 6 attack. The fight over the FBI is in itself helping to stoke the political temperature ahead of the 2024 election.

"For perhaps the first time in our history, the FBI's counterterrorism operational tempo remains high for international terrorism, state-sponsored terrorism and domestic terrorism, simultaneously," FBI director Wray declared at Texas A&M University this summer.

A senior intelligence official who works at the Office of the Director of National Intelligence says it is hard to digest all the evidence. "When you are used to hearing that the sky is falling every day, when that's the nature of the cable news and [Twitter](#) worlds we live where everything is overstated, there's a lot of room for doubt," he says.

"But I say this as a citizen as much as a government analyst," the senior official says. "We are in a unique moment and the numbers are daunting."

The FBI official says that those who are charged with upholding the law see numbers that are worrying but that there is also a struggle to characterize the specific threat to America—and whether it really should be called terrorism—as well as the proper response.

"This is not media hype. But it's also not easily quantifiable," the FBI official says. "Are we talking just a few thousand Proud Boy types or are we talking 30 percent of the country that are core Trump voters? Are we talking extremists bent on political violence or just a lot of disgruntled and frustrated citizens? I don't know the answer, and I can assure you the answer isn't in any secret intelligence that the government possesses."

The FBI and the other intelligence agencies responsible for domestic matters track the number of terrorist-related disruptions, arrests and investigations, based on its caseloads and its various characterizations. According to the FBI, the number of domestic terrorism-related open cases grew by 357 percent from 1,981 in fiscal year 2013 to 9,049 in fiscal year 2021, a number that has been widely quoted in the media as evidence of a widespread domestic terror threat. The FBI also says the number of FBI domestic violent extremism and domestic terrorism investigations has more than doubled since the spring of 2020—to approximately 2,700 investigations at the end of fiscal year 2022, another marker that's been widely quoted.

THE RISE IN DOMESTIC TERRORISM

Data obtained by **Newsweek** show how the number of disruptions, arrests and various types of investigations rose between 2013 and 2021. *Full investigations* mean there is a factual basis while *preliminary investigations* may be carried out on the basis of allegations or indicative information. Assessments are more speculative still. *Group investigations* look into groups or organizations seen as potential threats.

	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
DISRUPTIONS	136	81	142	184	220	200	183	299	456
ARRESTS	NA	NA	211	229	186	113	107	180	800
ASSESSMENTS	91	122	133	139	487	2,274	2,412	3,502	5,507
PRELIMINARY INVESTIGATIONS	317	274	212	166	142	155	165	183	223
FULL INVESTIGATIONS	1,530	1,352	1,235	1,210	1,241	1,267	1,299	1,865	3,311
GROUP INVESTIGATIONS	43	35	26	20	20	18	16	7	8
TOTAL CASES	1,981	1,783	1,606	1,535	1,890	3,714	4,092	5,557	9,049

SOURCE: U.S. Source: FBI classified and unclassified data aggregated by Newsweek. NA: Not available.

FBI data aggregated by Newsweek shows the rise in domestic terrorism. FBI classified and unclassified data aggregated by Newsweek

Classified numbers seen by *Newsweek* substantiate the FBI public claims while also showing that a significant part of the increases in 2020 and 2021 were related to protests after the murder of [George Floyd](#) and during COVID as well the elections and January 6. That said, the data show clearly that the main targets of the investigations and cases open were of Trump supporters. While the number of investigations in 2021 almost doubled from 2020 to around 9,000, the number of "full investigations" that led to arrests was only 1,446, not much more than the number of 1,146 January 6 protesters who have been charged with a crime, according to the Justice Department.

Virtually all of the 2021 increases are specifically related to these events, including the enormous growth in what the FBI calls "assessments," which more than doubled from 2019 to 2021 and are revealed here for the first time.

Assessments are the most speculative of any FBI investigation, where a special agent or intelligence analyst only suspects wrongdoing because of association or encounter and further looks into someone's background. Assessments are the closest thing to domestic spying that exists in America and generally not talked about by the Bureau.

The data from the FBI shows a significant decline in the number of investigations and cases opened in the past year, in 2022, below 2020 levels—including a drop in the number of anti-government and anti-authority extremists (AGAAVEs) as a result of the closure of so many January 6-related cases.

And, according to FBI data obtained by *Newsweek*, 31 percent of its investigations now relate to AGAAVEs and 60 percent of all investigations include cases categorized as AGAAVE and "civil unrest"—marking a significant shift away from investigations associated with race-related causes or armed militias. Drilling further into the individual cases behind the numbers, nearly two-thirds of the FBI's current investigations are focused on Trump supporters and others suspected of violating what the FBI calls "anti-riot" laws.

In its statement to *Newsweek*, the FBI said that the investigations are not only limited to Trump supporters. "These violent extremists have targeted both Republican and Democratic members of Congress," the FBI notes in its statement to *Newsweek*.

"We cannot and do not investigate ideology," says a senior FBI official. "We focus on individuals who commit or intend to commit violence or criminal activity that constitutes a federal crime or poses a threat to national security." And indeed the number of investigations of groups has dropped by four-fifths over a decade to only eight groups investigated in 2022.

In their June 2023 report, "Strategic Intelligence Assessment and Data on Domestic Terrorism," the FBI and the DHS further observe that racially motivated violence from those other than white supremacists had posed a generally low threat of violence. The threat from militias has also declined, with armed groups "more disjointed than in previous years." Other groups such as the [Oath Keepers](#) and the [Proud Boys](#), prominent at the U.S. Capitol, have since lost local chapters and members following convictions over January 6.

All sides use the FBI numbers to further their aims—the FBI and the administration at the front of the line, stressing that it is doing more and that the threat demands more resources and a freer hand.

Republicans, on the other hand, see the FBI's focus on January 6th and the law-breaking associated with it as "weaponization" on the part of the Biden administration, to suppress GOP voters, to stigmatize the right wing and to transform what they see as principled dissent against societal norms—for example with regard to abortion, about what children are taught in public schools or in rejection of transgender categorizations—as extremism.

The left sees these same numbers as proof that Donald Trump and his supporters are not just dangerous to democracy but also that the government isn't doing enough. Michigan Senator Gary Peters, chairman of the [Senate](#) Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee, consistently argues that the FBI is failing to fight the "full scope of white supremacist terrorist attacks." Others argue that the FBI (and law enforcement in general) is too sympathetic to white

supremacists, a view punctuated by an assumption made by many after January 6 that a disproportionate number of protesters and those arrested were veterans or members of law enforcement (an allegation that isn't true when compared to their numbers in the general population).

Some experts, such as Brian Michael Jenkins, question whether conceiving of disgruntled Americans as terrorists is even a helpful exercise. "These are not people who are going underground," he says, referring to domestic terrorist organizations of the past such as the Black Panthers, the Weather Underground or the IRA or Red Brigades overseas. As Jenkins sees it, those we label as domestic terrorists—people marching with guns or those wearing military-like uniforms—are more performative than indicative of some true terrorism class in America. "This is not the '60s or '70s," when radical groups, even the civil rights and peace movements, were driven to violence," Jenkins says. "I don't think terrorism is a particularly useful framework for viewing this problem."



The enemy within? The Proud Boys chant anti-antifa slogans during a Defeat the Steal rally on November 14, 2020 in Salem, Oregon. Protesters gathered across the country after news outlets predicted Joe Biden had won the election. Nathan Howard/Getty

An Outsized Response to January 6

January 6, like 9/11, provoked an outsized response from a domestic intelligence apparatus that had failed to warn or prepare for the likelihood of mass violence on that day. Once the breach by Trump's supporters occurred, the FBI, the Department of Homeland Security and the White House began their almost singular focus investigating and charging the perpetrators at the U.S. Capitol and extrapolating from January 6 into the future. In his first week in office, President Biden directed the intelligence community to undertake a 100-day review of the domestic threat.

In March 2021, the review resulted in a public declaration that merely stated that domestic violent extremists posed "an elevated threat." It concluded that the most lethal threat came from two groups: racially or ethnically motivated violent extremists—specifically white supremacists—and militia violent extremists. "Our experience on the ground confirms this," Attorney General Garland said. "The number of open FBI domestic terrorism investigations this year has increased significantly."

Referring to Garland's comments, a defense intelligence official who participated in the review told *Newsweek*: "'experience on the ground' here means January 6 and other protests questioning the results of the 2020 elections."

But in thinking about the new threat, the review fell back upon two decades of experience fighting international terror, the official explained. That skewed the bias toward seeing groups such as the Proud Boys and Oath Keepers, as well as militia movements around the country, as *the* problem ... because that was what the counterterrorism apparatus was used to focusing on, groups such as Al-Qaeda and [ISIS](#).

Second, the official says, groups—as opposed to individuals—present a framework that lends itself toward a strategy to stop violence before it starts even if there was a shift toward the risk of more "lone wolf" attacks by those radicalized on social media. Organized groups fit more neatly into the intelligence community's skill set.

The Threat of 'Misguided Americans'

"It seems to me that the very word terrorism is more representative of the state of our discourse than a description of the threat," says a civilian terrorism expert who used to be a government official. "Is political violence on the rise in America? Yes, it is. But everything that is extreme is on the rise, whereas terrorism, violence intended to bring America to its knees or overthrow the state, really doesn't exist. One might not like that so many reject the current political order, but they are still trying to get their candidate elected, not pull off some coup to overthrow the government. That never happened on January 6th and despite even a president like Donald Trump, it's not possible in America."

Jenkins prefers the term "domestic political violence" over "domestic terrorism" and he reaches back into history to stress that the current state of play is maybe not quite as dire as some claim. Violence in America at alarmingly high levels, protesters and groups dangerous to our society, dividing the nation into armed camps—these are all descriptions, Jenkins says, that appeared more than five decades ago in the 1968 "Report of the National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence."

"For all the implied homogeneity in 'red' states and 'blue' states, they are more-complex mosaics—in terms of race, ethnicity, religion, and politics—than north versus south ever was," Jenkins writes.

Former White House head of counterterrorism Christopher P. Costa argues that while there is "an overriding government aim" in protecting U.S. citizens and "unflinchingly focusing on the rule of law, the anti-government domestic terrorist threat comes from only a small percentage of misguided fellow Americans."



Donald Trump supporters watch a video featuring their candidate inside the Erie Insurance Arena before a political rally for the former president as he campaigns for the 2024 nomination on July 29, 2023 in Erie, Pennsylvania. Jeff Swensen/Getty Images

The FBI, despite its rhetoric and numbers, seems to agree. The Bureau applies only limited resources to deal specifically with domestic terrorism, and those resources haven't really increased. The FBI has only about 4,500 agents, intelligence analysts, attorneys and other staff in its field offices focused on terrorism, according to the Bureau. Only about one-quarter of these focus on domestic terrorism (the Bureau allocates about 1,100 personnel, or an increase of about 300 full-time people since January 6). The total is only about 3 percent of the FBI's employees.

Classified data from the office of the Director of National Intelligence shows that the number of intelligence reports issued on domestic terrorism remains relatively minor. Of 11,945 intelligence reports prepared by the domestic agencies between 2017 and 2021, only 901 (or fewer than 10 percent) related to domestic terrorism, the remainder mostly dealing with international matters and critical infrastructure protection.

"For a problem the Biden administration and the FBI describes as existential, the resources are meager," says another terrorist expert working at a government-funded think tank. "Maybe that's the way it should be, that the FBI is strictly staying in its lane. But it is certainly not what the public thinks or expects."

So what exactly is terrorism when applied to American citizens, and does it apply to the current political situation? Domestic terrorism is defined in federal law as domestic activities that involve acts dangerous to human life that are a violation of the criminal laws of the United States or of any state; and appear to be intended to intimidate or coerce the civilian population; influence the policy of the government by intimidation or coercion or affect the conduct of a government by mass destruction, assassination or kidnapping.

The government generally uses the terms domestic terrorism and domestic violent extremism interdependently, though there are subtle differences, the most important being that terrorism is statutorily defined and extremism avoids the label of terrorist. According to the FBI and DHS, the word "violent" is important because advocating political or social positions and activism, the use of strong rhetoric and even a generalized philosophic embrace of violent tactics does not necessarily constitute violent extremism and is thus constitutionally protected.

In defining the federal crime of terrorism as an offense, there is no distinction based on political views; it is simply a matter, as the FBI stresses, of holding those who break the law accountable, and in the post-9/11 paradigm, collecting intelligence and "targeting" domestic actors to prevent them from breaking the law.

A BLEAK SECURITY PICTURE

As the 2024 presidential campaign season gets under way, all across America, federal, state and local police departments report increased threats of political violence and civil disruption as America faces unprecedented levels of intolerance and discord.

- ▶ Threats to election workers and officials, prosecutors and judges are on the rise, as are an increase of mailings of fake "white powder" substances to public officials.
- ▶ Threats made against lawmakers have drastically increased, with nearly 10,000 in the year since January 6, according to the U.S. Capitol Police, the agency responsible for the protection of members of Congress.
- ▶ Threats against law enforcement officers, federal and local, have reached unprecedented levels, and those killed on the job peaked in 2021, the highest annual number since 9/11, according to the Justice Department.
- ▶ Gun violence is at unprecedented levels. FBI director Christopher Wray says that the Bureau arrested more than 20,000 violent criminals in 2022, "an average of almost 60 bad guys taken off the streets per day, every day."
- ▶ Mass shootings in America continue rising, with the year 2023 on track to surpass 2021, the year with the greatest number ever recorded.
- ▶ Hate crimes have become so serious that the FBI has elevated them to its highest-level national threat priority.
- ▶ The Anti-Defamation League says that 2022 was the highest year on record for antisemitic incidents across the United States.
- ▶ The number of "anti-government extremist organizations" in the U.S. surged last year to 702, a 44 percent increase since 2021, according to the Southern Poverty Law Center.

Experts agree that as the 2024 election approaches, there will be greater pressure to prevent law-breaking, one that necessitates infiltration of political circles and other controversial government activity.

Because of the difficulty in proving motivation with regard to a charge of domestic terrorism, most prosecutors, being practical, tend to charge individuals with other crimes instead, even in clear cases of political violence. The [Department of Justice](#) has used an array of criminal statutes to prosecute individuals who engage in domestic violent extremism, including charges associated with firearms, arson, riots, attacks on federal officers and, in the case of January 6th, even trespassing on government facilities.

"Even my friends and colleagues debate as to whether January 6th was an act of terrorism," says Jenkins. "If you have the people who have been writing about this for 30-plus years struggling with the formulation, you can imagine how difficult it must be for the public." Jenkins thinks that the term itself is a distraction.

The senior intelligence official who works at the Office of the Director of National Intelligence said Biden's rhetoric on domestic terrorism could goad his opponents into taking more extreme action—particularly those who have now lost their faith in elections or believe the system is rigged against them.

"So we have the president increasing his own inflammatory rhetoric which leads Donald Trump and the Republicans to do the same, which influences the news media, which influences the rhetoric," he said. "The FBI? It's just in the middle of this mess, probably heading for trouble but mostly left out on a limb by the anger and indifference of the American public."

<https://www.newsweek.com/2023/10/13/exclusive-fbi-targets-trump-followers-2024-election-nears-1831836.html>