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In understanding the makings of an extremist, there's a lot of work ahead

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GLOBAL

In understanding the makings of an extremist, there's a lot of work ahead

By ERIKA SIMPSON JANUARY 14, 2021

We simply do not know yet what leads people to become terrorists. They can be male or female; religious or secular; highly educated or from poverty-stricken backgrounds.



Prosecutors expect to arrest hundreds tied to the Capitol riot on Jan. 6, 2021. Barricades have been set up to fortify security on the Capitol in anticipation of further unrest leading up to Joe Biden's inauguration on Jan. 20. *Flickr photograph by Victoria Pickering*

The violence on Capitol Hill was badly co-ordinated by Trump's rabid supporters against democratic institutions during one afternoon on Jan. 6, and there may be more domestic terrorist attacks prior to Jan. 20, inauguration day, and after Joseph Biden's assumption of power that need to be combatted.

[Twitter and Facebook locked outgoing U.S. President Trump's accounts](#), and in an effort to prevent terrorism from spreading, we need to combat lone wolves and armed violent mobs that belong to small groups like the Michigan militia. As the adage asserts, "One man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter," and while Nelson Mandela was considered a terrorist, the use of armed violence—not peaceful protest—by insurrectionists against police and security guards renders them terrorists.

"Don't dare call them protesters," [president-elect Joe Biden said on national television](#). "They were a riotous mob. Insurrectionists. Domestic terrorists. It's that basic. It's that simple."

The [Oklahoma City bombing 25 years ago](#) was the first internet happening that bombed a U.S. federal building and daycare, but armed marauders in future may stage skyjackings, hostage-takings, and

kidnappings that we think are happening in real time, or they may threaten to use mass “super-terrorism” using [chemical, biological, radiological, explosive](#) (CBRNe) weapons.

The highly confidential list of nuclear sites and maps of U.S. facilities declared to the International Atomic Energy Agency was [posted in error in 2009 on the internet](#), so I use the [267-page](#) document with detailed maps of buildings in a role-playing simulation for my classes on global violence at Western University. We discuss in fictional terms how to combat terrorists that have infiltrated a nuclear reactor, [Arkansas Unit One](#), and the ideas raised by class members include using drones, robotic vehicles, as well as slowly starving the terrorists to death.

It is scary to think that such documents could be used for nefarious purposes, but I am trying to teach students how to conceive of ways to defeat terrorists, so we also simulate the theft of anthrax from [Canada’s bio-defence labs in Suffield, Alta.](#)

Michigan has an [active collection of militia groups](#) that posted years ago explicit instructions on how to set up gallows and, like the Ku Klux Klan, use ropes and burning logs to terrify people in their homes. Those explicit handbooks have been taken down, and I caution students not to visit these sites. After it was revealed the FBI stopped [an attempt to kidnap](#) Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer last October, 13 members of the “Wolverine Watchmen” were charged.

An illuminating book on the paramilitary culture in America, [Warrior Dreams](#), by James William Gibson explains how he infiltrated different groups and learned about their disturbing war culture and reactionary tactics.

We need to learn more about violence and manhood in post-Vietnam America. A woman, Ashli E. Babbitt, who was shot by the United States Capitol Police during the pro-Trump rioting had served as a guard of military compounds in Iraq and was exposed to the Air Force’s military culture; [far-right and white nationalist groups online](#) are canonizing her as someone who was standing up for her country and beliefs.

Prosecutors expect to arrest hundreds tied to the Capitol riot. Michael Sherwin, the acting U.S. attorney for the District of Columbia, said on Tuesday that [prosecutors are looking at charges ranging from trespassing to felony murder](#). We may never learn how many of them hold neo-fascist, cultist beliefs that reject the existing order as they await their own versions of Armageddon.

We simply do not know yet what leads people to become terrorists. They can be male or female; religious or secular; highly educated or from poverty-stricken backgrounds. They can be rich like Osama bin Laden or they can be from within the military's higher ranks, like the psychiatrist and army major who opened fire at Ford Hood injuring 32 people and killing 13 ([sentenced to death in 2013, he is a court-martialed former soldier and death row inmate awaiting execution at Fort Leavenworth](#)).

We can stop terrorism by closing security holes one by one, looking for mistakes by groups, and monitoring suspicious individuals.

[Trump could be prosecuted](#) for inciting neo-fascists to march on Pennsylvania Avenue and fight the transfer of power to Joseph Biden, despite the democratic results of the November election. The U.S. can use "[hard power](#)" techniques, like increasing intelligence gathering and military reprisals. But increasing homeland security can [incite more anger](#) if this entails restrictive policies that violate human rights such as racial profiling.

"Soft power" techniques, such as creating more trust between adversaries, and forums to vent anger, can combat primary and secondary "[traumatization](#)" experienced by terrorists and suicide bombers. Ending the transmission of horrifying images through the internet, which can inspire alienated individuals, can lead to charges of censorship, but we need to know more about [the connection between playing violent video games and real-life shootings](#).

In the long run, we must combat belief systems of violent groups by implementing social programs and providing the benefits of nonviolent means. Patrolling and censoring radical online groups does not mean we should check everyone's emails and travel plans, censor the internet, and check people's accounts to determine whether they are joining a radical terrorist group. But we can alert police authorities and medical counsellors, build more healthy schools and health centres, and sponsor conflict management programs like Canada's [PeaceQuest](#), which may not end struggle, but may decrease support among alienated citizens for armed struggle.

Erika Simpson is an associate professor of international politics at Western University; the president of the Canadian Peace Research Association; the author of NATO and the Bomb; and a peer reviewer for the Canadian Institute for Military and Veteran Health College of Peer Reviewers.

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GLOBAL

Trump's incendiary rhetoric puts deterrence as credible strategy at risk

By ERIKA SIMPSON JANUARY 7, 2021

Outgoing U.S. President Donald Trump has seriously undermined deterrence strategy, because he is so patently unreasonable and irrational. Deterrence is based on rationality even in the midst of crisis.



A mob of Trump loyalists stormed and breached the U.S. Capitol on Jan. 6, 2021, as Congressional leaders convened to certify the victory of Joe Biden. Screen capture via NBC's YouTube channel

This week's [looting](#) of the bastion of American democracy during the sacred transfer of power from the Trump administration to the incoming administration of Joseph Biden did *not* spell the [end of democracy](#) in America. Millions of Americans watched slack-jawed as a few thousand armed and masked insurgents broke windows and invaded Congressional offices, including the office of the House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, which they vandalized and left [threatening notes](#). The army deployed the [Washington D.C. National Guard](#) to the Capitol and the F.B.I. mobilized agents.

However, [Congress resumed election certification](#) after the pro-Trump mob stormed the U.S. Capitol.

President-elect Joe Biden first appealed to Americans in a stirring and lengthy [speech](#), that was followed later by outgoing President Trump's unsubstantiated assertion that the election had been stolen due to voter fraud, and that he loved the protesters. Within a few hours, Twitter [locked](#)

[President Trump's account](#), demanding that he delete tweets that appeared to incite violence, and threatened a permanent suspension. Facebook and YouTube [took down the video](#) of his message to supporters. Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg said Trump would be banned from his social media platforms indefinitely.

Stunned Americans saw first-hand evidence that the president was unhinged, irresponsible, and should be impeached. With only 13 days to go before leaving office, even the Republican strategist Scott Jennings, hitherto supportive of Trump, asked on a [cross-Canada radio show](#) whether Trump could be trusted not to incite further insurrection during his remaining days in office. It was obvious that the president's failure to condemn his supporters' was a dereliction of his duty to protect the U.S. Constitution.

Still, Trump's [finger is on the nuclear trigger](#) while thousands of intercontinental ballistic missiles are pointed at hundreds of Russian cities. However, it is doubtful that the man at the apex of power will order a nuclear strike on Russia over the next two nerve-wracking weeks.

We might expect nuclear threats from North Korea's Kim Jong-un if he thought his power would be usurped—and we have heard his threats to demolish the [U.S. with fire and fury](#) before.

But the United States' Nuclear Command and Control System (NCCS) claims it has a sufficient collection of processes and procedures that would allow for “[senior-level decisions on nuclear weapons deployment](#).” Presumably, the NCCS would somehow prevent a lunatic president from launching nukes, like some kind of crazy [Dr. Strangelove](#) portrayed in the [1964 movie](#): “How I learned to stop worrying and love the bomb.”

Nevertheless, Trump has seriously undermined deterrence strategy, because he is so patently unreasonable and irrational. Deterrence is based on [rationality](#) even in the midst of crisis.

Deterrence cannot survive as a credible strategy if we perceive its executors are irrational and incapable of weighing options in order to decide to take the course that the situation dictates. As Rand Corporation analyst Michael J. Mazarr points out in “[Understanding Deterrence](#)”: “It is the perceptions of the potential aggressor that matter, not the actual prospects for victory or the objectively measured consequences of an attack. Perceptions are the dominant variable in deterrence success or failure.”

Trump's mind is removed from logic and the context of his decision-making is narcissistic and self-focused, weighing only how he can keep the mantle of power.

The travesty of democracy at the heart of Washington politics can only illuminate further the dangers of relying upon nuclear deterrence as a credible strategy. When the new [Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons](#) (TPNW) comes into play as international law on Jan. 22 at the UN, where a majority of countries have signed and ratified it, the non-nuclear countries that resoundingly support the treaty must ask themselves whether the fate of the globe should ever be entrusted to one man.

New studies of the [scientific effects](#) of limited nuclear war between India and Pakistan demonstrate merely the exchange of 100 tactical nuclear weapons spells [global catastrophe](#), nuclear winter, and the complete collapse of the world's economy. In comparison, the pandemic would be a romp in the park.

Yet the leaders of the nuclear- and non-nuclear states in NATO continue to [espouse nuclear deterrence](#) and reliance on nuclear weapons as essential. The NATO allies "[reject any attempt to delegitimise nuclear deterrence](#)." NATO has again panned the UN's treaty to ban nuclear weapons, and [NATO chief Jens Stoltenberg warned](#) last month the deal could undermine global disarmament efforts.

Yet UN Secretary General António Guterres said in October that any use of nuclear weapons would have "[catastrophic humanitarian consequences](#)." And he hailed the new treaty as "a meaningful commitment towards the total elimination of nuclear weapons, which remains the highest disarmament priority of the United Nations."

Guterres calls the treaty "[a tribute to the survivors of nuclear explosions and tests, many of whom advocated for this treaty](#)." With support from the few remaining Hibakusha, who survived the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, as well as all the world's non-nuclear nations, the new treaty will be an early test for Biden. It is now time with the onset of the new ban treaty to reject reliance on the U.S. president in his singular role as one of the few people in the world who can order nuclear war and thus the obliteration of life on Earth as we know it.

Erika Simpson is an associate professor of international politics at Western University, president of the Canadian Peace Research Association, author of NATO and the Bomb, peer reviewer for the

Canadian Institute for Military and Veteran Health College, and board member of the Canadian Pugwash Group. This is her viewpoint and not that of any of these organizations.

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Erika Simpson, How to Address Ten Challenges Facing NATO Using Lessons Learned from Canada *The Brown Journal of World Affairs* (in press January 2021)