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“TRUMP WON” and “LET’S GO BRANDON” flags are also visible in the video.

Another conspiracy theory that’s gained traction in recent years is the “great replacement” theory, which is a racist notion that there is a plot to replace white voters with non-white immigrants. There’s an antisemitic element too, that somehow Jews are behind it all. The mass shooters in Pittsburgh in 2018, and El Paso and Christchurch in 2019, all embraced the replacement theory.

Then, in the spring of 2022, it happened again, this time in Upstate NY. A white gunman from near Binghamton murdered ten Black people at a supermarket in Buffalo. It was one of America’s deadliest hate crimes in recent history. Before the mass shooting, the gunman published a manifesto online about replacement theory.

In the fall of 2021, months before the Buffalo shooting, North Country Rep. Elise Stefanik’s campaign released an ad on Facebook that appeared to echo the great replacement theory. It claimed that Democrats were plotting “a PERMANENT ELECTION INSURRECTION” by granting amnesty to millions of “illegal immigrants.”

Stefanik denied any embrace of the replacement theory and told a CNN reporter that she condemns racism. “I’ve never made a racist comment,” Stefanik said, “and I’m known nationally as expanding the Republican party by supporting Black candidates and Hispanic candidates.”

Stefanik has amplified other conspiracy theories and normalized far-right rhetoric, like repeating false claims about the 2020 election long after they were debunked. She blamed Nancy Pelosi for the Jan. 6 attack on the U.S. Capitol and described Democrats as “pedo grifters” in an apparent nod to the QAnon conspiracy theory, though Stefanik has denied that connection.

“I think what [Stefanik] does, and what a lot of politicians do, is they lean into radicalization because the base is kind of asking for it,” said Joe Henderson. “If you have political elites that are normalizing violent rhetoric, I don’t care what your party is – I worry about that. I worry about that because there’s going to be some small element that is going to take that toward action.”

## Acting on conspiracies and far-right ideologies

On Jan. 6, 2021, more than two thousand people illegally entered the U.S. Capitol with the ultimate goal of overturning the presidential election.

For years, a constellation of groups and ideas had been brewing among anti-government militias, white supremacists, and other groups. They all converged on Jan. 6. The threat manifested into something a lot more visible, real, and dangerous.

Dozens of people from Upstate New York went to Washington on Jan. 6. A town official from the Albany area organized a bus to D.C. that day. She later resigned. A mother and son from Wassertown were among the mob that broke into the Capitol; they were convicted for helping steal Nancy Pelosi’s laptop from her office. And young man from Glens Falls named James Bonet served two and a half months in federal prison for illegally entering the Capitol.

We met James Bonet outside his home last September. Bonet said he went to D.C. that day to learn the truth about the election.

“There was a lot of people like me, that, we know the election was stolen,” Bonet said. “Being in Jan. 6 and being there, there was a lot of Americans there that were like, ‘We want answers on this.’”

He is still convinced Donald Trump won the 2020 election and that there’s a deep state working against the former president. Bonet is convinced the truth will come out. “I think right now we’re going through a process of a deep cleaning, and I think through the other side of it’s gonna be awesome,” he said.

According to Bonet, that “deep cleaning” doesn’t necessarily mean violence. But a recent poll found that nearly a quarter of Americans believe “true American patriots may have to resort to violence [...] to save the country.”

Many people who believe in extremist ideologies believe they are the true patriots – that their group or their ideas will save this country from corruption or tyranny. What security officials and experts worry about is what people will do with those beliefs.

*This reporting is part of a podcast on far-right extremism in Upstate New York called “If All Else Fails.” The podcast received grant support from Grist and the Center for Rural Strategies.*