



# The Populist Paradox: Anti-Government Extremism in the Age of Trump

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International Centre for  
Counter-Terrorism

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# Contents

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About ICCT	iii
Abstract	1
America's Age-Old Anti-Government Extremist Fringe	2
The Key Narratives Driving a Government/Anti-Government Rapprochement	4
Fissures and Fractures: Assessing an Uncomfortable Relationship	6
Conclusion	10
About the Author	11

## Abstract

In the Trump era, longstanding American anti-government extremist (AGE) actors have tamed their militant activism, often falling in line with federal government policies instead. This shift, which might be termed a “populist paradox,” marks a substantial break from decades of violent precedent, which culminated in the January 6, 2021, attack against the seat of American legislative power. This ICCT policy brief explores the narratives underpinning the rapprochement between Trump’s federal government and AGE actors, finding that a shared distrust of the so-called “deep state,” hostility to immigration, and Christian nationalist infiltrations into government positions have supported the uneasy relationship. The brief, however, also explores possible cleavages, particularly identifying Trump’s muscular and militaristic foreign policy and inaction over the Jeffrey Epstein scandal as possible exacerbators of the populist paradox. Finally, the paper reflects on future pathways for anti-government extremists once the Trump era concludes.

From the bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City in 1995 to the seizing of the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge in 2016, violence and disruption caused by anti-government extremists have provided a significant thorn in the side of modern American democracy. But when the second Trump administration began in January 2025, it appeared that federal government had a very different relationship with the conspiratorial fringes of American society. This ICCT policy brief assesses the narratives driving the rapprochement between federal government and erstwhile anti-government extremists in the age of Trump, including a shared disdain for federal bureaucracy as well as hostility to immigration, and also looks at several points of tension that might exacerbate this “populist paradox.” The paper concludes by reflecting on the *longue durée* of American anti-government extremists and their prospects for a post-Trump political system.

## America's Age-Old Anti-Government Extremist Fringe

The Oath Keepers militia is among the most prominent anti-government militia groups in the United States. In its original charter, a “Declaration of Orders We Will Not Obey,” the group clearly laid out its goals, centred on the rights of the American people. “We will NOT obey orders to impose martial law or a ‘state of emergency’ on a state, or to enter with force into a state, without the express consent and invitation of that state’s legislature and governor,” one bullet point read.<sup>1</sup> “We will NOT obey any orders which infringe on the right of the people to free speech, to peaceably assemble, and to petition their government for a redress of grievances,” another promised.<sup>2</sup> In the summer of 2016, just months before President Donald J. Trump’s first election victory, Oath Keepers founder Stewart Rhodes clearly laid out his views on the domestic use of military force: “under the Constitution, it is the MILITIA not the standing Army or Navy, that is tasked with executing the laws of the Union.”<sup>3</sup>

President Trump’s 2025 dispatching of National Guard troops into American cities including Washington, DC, and Memphis would accordingly appear to seriously strain the group’s founding principles. One may have been surprised, then, to hear Oath Keepers founder Stewart Rhodes declare in June 2025 that the conditions to “nationalize the [National] Guard” had been met, by way of “an invasion of the United States” and “an ongoing insurrection now by the left.”<sup>4</sup> But the Oath Keepers, in point of fact, had long since abandoned their initial opposition to the federal government, replacing it with a pro-Trump, anti-Democratic worldview. According to Ari Weil, “[t] his shift began in 2017–2018 and was fully solidified by 2020.”<sup>5</sup>

By the time two American citizens were shot dead on Minneapolis streets in January 2026 by federal agents purportedly carrying out immigration raids, it was no longer surprising that the violent actions of law enforcement agents against Americans were roundly defended by the administration’s extremist supporters. The prominent national security journalist Garrett Graff put it elegantly: “At first the series of rhetorical flip-flops may seem nonsensical — as if the world is upside down — but all of them are consistent with decades of evolution of white nationalist ideology and the far-right movement, which isn’t against tyranny per se, just tyranny by the ‘wrong people’: Democrats, women, or minorities.”<sup>6</sup>

1 Eric McQueen, “Examining Extremism: The Oath Keepers,” *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, June 17, 2021, <https://www.csis.org/blogs/examining-extremism/examining-extremism-oath-keepers>.

2 Ibid.

3 Ari Weil, “Strategies of Narrative Coherence: How Militias Justify Embracing State Power,” *Perspectives in Terrorism XVI*, no. 6 (December 2022), 19–33, <https://pt.icct.nl/article/strategies-narrative-coherence-how-militias-justify-embracing-state-power?#>.

4 Alex Jones, “Alex Jones 2025-Jun-13 Friday,” *The Alex Jones Show*, podcast audio, June 13, 2025, 3:59:56, <https://www.spreaker.com/episode/alex-jones-2025-jun-13-friday--66552619>.

5 Weil, “Strategies of Narrative Coherence,” 19–33.

6 Garrett Graff, “Minneapolis Proves the Far-Right Isn’t Anti-Tyranny,” *Doomsday Scenario*, January 27, 2026, <https://www.doomsdayscenario.co/p/minneapolis-proves-the-far-right-isn-t-anti-tyranny>.

The Oath Keepers case provides just one example of a substantial culture shift within the anti-government extremist (AGE) milieu in the US that would appear to be nothing short of an existential threat to their initial and longstanding *raison d'être*. Instead of adhering to their principles of limited government and absolute civil liberties, most AGEs during the second Trump administration have instead thrown their weight behind the government itself. Under this populist paradox, the government-sceptic right's much-vaunted "Don't Tread On Me" sloganeering, best captured by the popular Gadsden Flag, appears to have replaced among AGEs by a freewheeling eagerness to simply tread on others, particularly perceived partisan adversaries or suspected immigrants. One may be tempted to dismiss the odd relationship as mere opportunistic cognitive dissonance, but in reality, the rapprochement has been propelled by several key narratives that allow anti-government actors to relatively seamlessly adopt their new policy platforms.

The American AGE movement is a diverse and fluid network of actors and ideologies, generally united by a scepticism of federal government and its infringement on civil liberties and rights. The movement is divided into several categories, including militia groups who engage in paramilitary training and organising (such as the Oath Keepers and southern border militias), QAnon adherents and other conspiratorial networks, and sovereign citizens who seek to remove themselves from US legal jurisdiction, including the taxation system and forms of identification like driver's licenses. Some of these elements harbour deep-seated anti-statism, manifested in sovereigntist attempts to establish their own "republic" or "states" on the US territory, or their fascination with (para)militarism and arms. Since 2021, federal law enforcement has investigated the AGE movement as part of its anti-government and anti-authority violent extremism (AGAAVE) bucket, which also encapsulates threats from far left anti-government actors, such as the anti-fascist collective Antifa. AGAAVE differs from the racially- and ethnically-motivated violent extremism (REMVE) category, which encapsulates more traditional "far-right" ideological tenets such as white supremacy and hatred of racial and cultural minorities. There is often significant overlap between American AGEs and far-right white supremacists, although they are distinct enough that this paper focuses primarily on AGEs.

The scale of these actors is difficult to measure. Some militia-linked groups have earned as many as 500,000 followers on Facebook, while estimates of QAnon adherents number in the tens of millions.<sup>7</sup> To illustrate the complexity of the AGE scene in the US, circa 6,000 US Telegram accounts were analysed as part of a broader, transatlantic examination of AGE actors. The sweep of accounts as well as deep dives into specific actors reveals an eclectic mix of conspiracists, sovereign citizens, militia men, and neo-Nazis, but also seemingly more traditional party political cheerleaders or boosters. In effect, although it has very unique features – such as its militias – the US AGE scene is undergoing similar trends as its European counterparts, with increased exchanges and mutual learnings with the far-right and conspiratorial milieus.<sup>8</sup> In the US, this rapprochement produces a significant threat to American democracy—and the transatlantic alliance—in both the immediate and long term.

7 Daveed Gartenstein-Ross, Colin P. Clarke, and Samuel Hodgson, *Militia Violent Extremists in the United States: Understanding the Evolution of the Threat* (The Hague: International Centre for Counter-Terrorism [ICCT], 2022), <https://icct.nl/publication/militia-violent-extremists-united-states-understanding-evolution-threat>; and *Public Religion Research Institute*, "New PRRI Report Reveals Nearly One in Five Americans and One in Four Republicans Still Believe in QAnon Conspiracy Theories," February 24, 2022, <https://prri.org/press-release/new-prri-report-reveals-nearly-one-in-five-americans-and-one-in-four-republicans-still-believe-in-qanon-conspiracy-theories/>.

8 Kacper Rekawek, Thomas Renard, Julian Lanchès, Maria Zotova, Menso Hartgers, Morgan Finnsiö, Alessandro Bolpagni, Marco Lombardi, Silvano Rizieri Lucini, and Jacob Ware, "Recent Developments of Anti-Government Threats: Online Activities and Transnational Connections," ICCT-The Hague, March 10, 2026, <https://icct.nl/publication/recent-developments-anti-government-threats-online-activities-and-transnational>.

## The Key Narratives Driving a Government/Anti-Government Rapprochement

The American populist paradox, understood here as the condition in which a leader of the federal government succeeded in capturing the imagination and support of the country's longstanding anti-government fringe, is driven by at least three narratives.<sup>9</sup>

Firstly, the current administration and AGEs share a deep and lasting distrust of the American political establishment and civil service, variously derided as the “Deep State,” “swamp,” “globalists,” and in more conspiratorial spaces, a “New World Order.” Since he first emerged onto the political stage a decade ago, President Trump has repeatedly placed civil servants in Washington DC in the crosshairs, blaming them for major scandals of his first administration.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, here lies the unique and unparalleled power of President Trump: despite his presence on the political stage for over a decade, Trump has managed to retain his anti-establishment credentials, repeatedly casting himself as an outsider launching his own lonely war against the federal bureaucracy. Such an approach is in line with some members of the AGE movement who claim that God had saved President Trump from a bullet during an attempted assassination in Butler, Pennsylvania, in July 2024, for one reason: “to defeat the deep state.”<sup>11</sup>

Nearly six years ago, the COVID-19 pandemic offered a particularly powerful springboard in elevating AGE conspiracy theories.<sup>12</sup> The pandemic was near-tailormade for an extremist backlash, encompassing everything from widespread economic hardship to vaccination mandates, each of which was interpreted as some shadowy plot by nefarious elites to strip Americans of their freedoms.<sup>13</sup> Trump fanned the flames of such activism, posting tweets imploring his followers to “LIBERATE” Michigan, Minnesota, and Virginia from shutdown orders. In the former case, the governor, Gretchen Whitmer, later that year survived a kidnapping plot led by adherents of the “boogaloo” movement.<sup>14</sup> When the second Trump administration later returned to power, the Telegram page PatriOtsareinContrOl cheered the confirmation of a known vaccine sceptic, Robert F. Kennedy Jr, as the Health and Human Services secretary by writing “Their whole corrupt system is about to come crumbling down.” Others celebrated Pfizer and Moderna stock prices tumbling “the moment they realized [Donald] Trump was going to win and RFK Jr. is going to [Make America Healthy Again.]”<sup>15</sup> Those driven by a fear of government overreach have also long placed Second Amendment rights atop the summit of the rights they insist to protect. Timothy McVeigh, the deadliest AGE in American history, for instance once sold bumper stickers encouraging its reader to “Fear The Government That Fears Your Gun.”

The hatred of the so-called “deep state” also played a significant role in driving the violence of January 6, 2021, a finding has also been reached by other scholars. “The initial shock of Trump’s electoral defeat in the 2020 Presidential Election caused both the populist right and pro-state militias to reject the result of the election by claiming that the Biden mandate was pre-

9 For similar but varying uses of the phrase “populist paradox,” see, for example, Lica Porcile and Norman Eisen, “The populist paradox,” *Brookings Institution*, October 28, 2020, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-populist-paradox/>; Katrin Bennhold, “Hungary’s Populist Paradox,” *New York Times*, April 14, 2026, <https://www.nytimes.com/2026/04/14/world/hungary-orban-populism-magyar-war-imf.html>; Simon Johnson, “The Populist Paradox,” *Project Syndicate*, May 31, 2019, <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/populist-paradox-poor-economy-boosts-support-by-simon-johnson-2019-05>; and Adam Szeidl and Ferenc Szucs, “The Populist Paradox: Economic Pain, Enduring Power,” *Review of Democracy*, March 24, 2026, <https://revdem.ceu.edu/2026/03/24/the-populist-paradox/>.

10 For more, see Rachael Bade and Karoun Demirjian, “How Trump’s Two Failed Impeachments Upended Checks and Balances,” *Lawfare*, October 19, 2022, <https://www.lawfaremedia.org/article/how-trumps-two-failed-impeachments-upended-checks-and-balances>.

11 Avery Lotz, “Oath Keepers founder freed by Trump warns of more Epstein pain,” *Axios*, July 23, 2025, <https://www.axios.com/2025/07/23/trump-epstein-trouble-stewart-rhodes>.

12 Bruce Hoffman and Jacob Ware, *God, Guns, and Sedition: Far-Right Terrorism in America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2024), 191.

13 See, for example, Amelia Thomson-DeVeaux and Maggie Koerth, “How Trump And COVID-19 Have Reshaped The Modern Militia Movement,” *FiveThirtyEight*, September 4, 2020, <https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/how-trump-and-covid-19-have-reshaped-the-modern-militia-movement/>.

14 Bruce Hoffman and Jacob Ware, *God, Guns, and Sedition*, 191.

15 Author’s collection.

determined by federal bureaucrats who were motivated to have Trump removed due to his style of conservative politics,” Dale Pankhurst finds.<sup>16</sup> And in a study of the rapprochement between QAnon and militia supporters around the 2020 election, Gia Kokotakis found that “[a]dherents of both militia ideology and QAnon frequently cite government corruption as a key mobilizing factor,” also noting “recent COVID-19 pandemic conspiracies accelerated these beliefs in government corruption.”<sup>17</sup>

Secondly, the connection between the U.S. administration and AGEs is also driven by a shared scepticism of immigration, which has led to both hostile government policies against immigration as well as border militia activity. Although opposition to immigration has galvanised the MAGA movement from its very origins, the second Trump administration has more openly embraced once-fringe narratives regarding immigration, engaging in rhetoric about “replacement” and “invasion” that was once relegated to the upstart American white supremacist fringe.<sup>18</sup> On the eighth anniversary of the 2017 white supremacist ‘Unite the Right’ rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, one of the organisers for instance proudly tweeted, “Eight years ago you were an extremist if you protested being replaced by immigrants. Your life was over if you talked about stopping or reversing it. Now it is official @WhiteHouse policy. Never give up.”<sup>19</sup> Elsewhere, the Maysville, Kentucky-based Trinity White Knights of the Ku Klux Klan issued a recruitment flyer showing Uncle Sam booting out an apparent Muslim immigrant family. “Proclamation: Mass Deportation January 20<sup>th</sup> 2025,” his scroll blares. “We need your HELP [...] Monitor & Track all Immigrants [...] REPORT THEM ALL[.]”<sup>20</sup>

Less overtly racist AGE groups are also greatly galvanised by immigration. For example, some of the largest militia groups in the country frequently boast of informal collaboration with formal law enforcement agencies like the US Border Patrol. After the 2024 presidential election, a flurry of militia groups contacted the incoming administration, seeking to offer their support and assistance in the government’s promised mass deportation plan.<sup>21</sup> “In support of our nation’s commitments to lawful immigration practices, I wanted to extend my willingness to assist, in cooperation with local law enforcement and community programs, to promote the safety and security of our state,” wrote the leader of the Texas Three Percenters.<sup>22</sup>

In 2025, a nascent opposition to legal immigration joined the nativist clamour, after a high-profile controversy arose around the H-1B visa programme, which offers work permits to high-skilled immigrants. President Trump has repeatedly offered his endorsement of the programme, albeit while openly acknowledging its impact on his support.<sup>23</sup> But others have vehemently challenged the need for legal immigration, such as the Telegram channel Mark Collett, which posted a meme on 18 November featuring the tagline “It doesn’t matter how they replace you, it’s still replacement.”<sup>24</sup>

16 Dale Pankhurst, “When militias go ‘rogue’: explaining anti-government extremism in so-called ‘pro-nation-state’ militias in the United States of America and Ukraine,” *Dynamics of Asymmetric Conflict* 16, no. 3 (2023), 206-223, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/17467586.2023.2219703#abstract>.

17 Gia Kokotakis, “Into the Abyss: QAnon and the Militia Sphere in the 2020 Election,” *GW Program on Extremism*, March 2023, <https://extremism.gwu.edu/into-the-abyss-QAnon-in-US>.

18 Alan Feuer, “In Trump’s Second Term, Far-Right Agenda Enters the Mainstream,” *New York Times*, August 23, 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/08/23/us/politics/trump-far-right.html>.

19 *ibid.*

20 Author’s collection. Department of Homeland Security advertisements have been criticised for employing nativist rhetoric and imagery. See, for example, Grayson Logue, “Homeland Security’s Nativist Pitch to New Recruits,” *Dispatch*, November 10, 2025, <https://thedispatch.com/article/homeland-security-department-messaging-recruitment-american-identity/>.

21 Alan Feuer, “Far-Right Militias Seek Role in Trump Deportation Plan,” *New York Times*, December 11, 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/12/11/us/politics/far-right-militias-border-trump.html>.

22 *ibid.*

23 Myah Ward and Eric Bazail-Eimil, “‘My poll numbers just went down’: Trump defends skilled immigration, breaking with MAGA base,” *Politico*, November 19, 2025, <https://www.politico.com/news/2025/11/19/they-just-dont-understand-trump-defends-his-position-on-legal-immigration-to-his-maga-base-00660769>.

24 Author’s collection.

And thirdly, AGE social media accounts also reveal a salient Christian nationalist undertone, frequently draping their ideology and grievances in religious connotations. Christianity has long played a role in more militant American far right anti-statist activism, dating back to at least the rise of Christian identity groups like the Aryan Nations in the 1970s. But more recently it has entered the mainstream, carried into the heart of Republican politics by insurgent figures like former Georgia Representative Marjorie Taylor Greene, who once declared “I say it proudly, we should be Christian nationalists.”<sup>25</sup> Figures such as General Michael Flynn, a QAnon adherent who briefly served as National Security Advisor in the first Trump administration, have repeatedly elevated Trump as a divine saviour to the country.<sup>26</sup> The relationship was put to the test when Trump appeared to post an AI-generated image of himself as Jesus Christ healing the sick in April. “Blasphemous,” one self-proclaimed Christian nationalist responded, while an AGE Telegram poster disagreed, praising Trump for “healing a nation.”<sup>27</sup>

## Fissures and Fractures: Assessing an Uncomfortable Relationship

AGE’s very nature means that the relationship with the Trump administration is tenuous and transactional: extremist actors maintain their agency, and retain the ability to split from the MAGA movement should they determine that President Trump no longer represents their interests. Here, there are at least three possible cleavages that could cause a more lasting break: foreign policy, including Republican support for conflicts in the Middle East and South America; the Jeffrey Epstein scandal; and the possibility that the administration oversteps in its centralisation of government power.

Firstly, factions of the American AGE movement have clashed with the administration’s foreign policy, perceiving Washington’s support for Israel and militaristic rhetoric against Venezuela and various recently designated “narco-terrorist” groups to clash with the president’s stated “America First” doctrine. The AGE movement has long felt some animosity towards the Republican party’s views on Israel. Traditionally, the fiercest (and most antisemitic) criticism has pointed out Israel’s majority Jewish population, but increasingly, the particularly brutal nature of Israel’s war against Gaza has also caught the attention.<sup>28</sup> In October, Tucker Carlson, the former Fox News host fired for spreading debunked claims over the 2020 presidential election, told white supremacist commentator Nick Fuentes that he disliked “more than anybody” pro-Israel “Christian Zionists” who he alleged were “seized by this brain virus.”<sup>29</sup> Notably, a substantial schism emerged on the political right after Carlson invited the neo-Nazi Fuentes onto his show, an early sign of cracks in the more mainstream Republican base.<sup>30</sup>

But the administration’s continuation of the use of military force further afield has also caused consternation among AGEs. Even before the successful operation to arrest Venezuela’s Nicolas Maduro, strikes in the waters near Venezuela did not only cause tensions with Republicans in Congress, but led to many of the administration’s more controversial supporters raising the same spectre of “forever wars” that drove Trump to begin the US withdrawal from Afghanistan

<sup>25</sup> Ashley Lopez, “More than half of Republicans support Christian nationalism, according to a new survey,” *NPR*, February 14, 2023, <https://www.npr.org/2023/02/14/1156642544/more-than-half-of-republicans-support-christian-nationalism-according-to-a-new-s>.

<sup>26</sup> Author’s collection.

<sup>27</sup> Author’s collection; and Adam Gabbatt, “Trump tests his luck with the religious right amid feud with pope and AI Jesus posts,” *Guardian*, April 19, 2026, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2026/apr/19/trump-religious-right-pope-feud-ai-jesus-posts>.

<sup>28</sup> Rachel Leingang, “Tucker Carlson’s interview with far-right antisemite Nick Fuentes divides conservatives,” *Guardian*, October 31, 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2025/oct/31/conservative-reaction-tucker-carlson-nick-fuentes-interview>.

<sup>29</sup> Leingang, “Tucker Carlson’s Interview with Far-Right Antisemite Nick Fuentes Divides Conservatives”; and Odette Yousef, “How the Epstein file saga is fueling extremist conspiracies,” *NHPR*, February 26, 2026, <https://www.nhpr.org/2026-02-26/how-the-epstein-file-saga-is-fueling-extremist-conspiracies>.

<sup>30</sup> See, for example, David A. Fahrenthold and Ken Bensinger, “Under Fire for Tucker Carlson Remarks, Think Tank Chief Pleads Ignorance,” *New York Times*, November 14, 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/11/13/us/politics/kevin-roberts-heritage-foundation-nick-fuentes.html>.

during his first term.<sup>31</sup> As Alex Jones vented on his popular podcast show, “the West continues to destabilize countries [...]. We need to get rid of this globalist Machiavellian system of creating new little demons to fight.”<sup>32</sup> A similar point was issued on the Telegram page The Occupied Times on 18 November, 2025, after Trump signed an arms deal with the Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia, “1 trillion sell out. Maga prefers foreigners own and operate America.”<sup>33</sup>

It was, accordingly, not surprising to see US military strikes on Iran commencing on 28 February met with immediate and vicious rebuke from broad factions of the American right, including AGE fringes. A conversation between Jones and Fuentes saw the former declare that “we are watching Trump self-immolate on live television.”<sup>34</sup> Fuentes even declared that he would vote for Democrats in the next election, insisting “For me, I said, that’s the last straw, I’m out.”<sup>35</sup> Tucker Carlson similarly raged that the attacks were “absolutely disgusting and evil,” while Marjorie Taylor Greene declared that “it feels like the worst betrayal this time because it comes from the very man and the [administration] who we all believed was different and said no more.”<sup>36</sup> On 17 March Joe Kent, the director of the National Counterterrorism Center, abruptly resigned, alleging that Israel had manipulated the United States into attacking Iran. Kent’s career prior to the serving in the Trump administration had been marred by allegations of connections to the Proud Boys, a far-right group which had participated in the storming of the U.S. Capitol on January 6, and his resignation was heralded as principled among many factions of the AGE movement, with The Occupied Times writing “Kent has more of a spine than larping internet cowards & trump.”<sup>37</sup> “Seems awfully convenient that the day he objects to the war and our coziness to Israel he is suddenly a leaker under investigation,” Professor Patriot similarly noted.<sup>38</sup>

Reactions online also indicated a broader outrage among segments of the AGE fringe. The Telegram channel Mark Collett for instance responded to reports that the United States had struck a girls school in Iran, killing over 150 children, by seething: “The Judeo-American empire is pure evil and those who support it have sold their souls to the devil.” Those on the AGE fringe who remained supportive of the administration during the strikes leaned on their Christian nationalist inclinations. “Believe me, it IS Biblical,” the Telegram channel Paul Fleuret wrote, adding that the war “certainly appears to be fulfilling a good bit of prophecy and scripture.”

Secondly, the Jeffrey Epstein scandal contains a thicket of challenges for the administration. In fact, Epstein, and the documented relationships that many high-profile political figures—including president Trump himself—held with the disgraced former financier and convicted paedophile, has delivered arguably the most serious blow to the president’s anti-establishment self-image. “I believe 90% of his own base understands that Epstein was up to something, and we know that’s the tip of the iceberg,” the leader of the Oath Keepers militia for instance told an audience in Texas in July. “It’s really disheartening to see President Trump just declare that to be a hoax. I don’t think it is. And I think it’s going to cause him trouble in his own base. It already is.”<sup>39</sup> Some media reporting suggested that a 21-year-old assailant who was shot dead after breaching the security perimeter at Mar-a-Lago in February had been inspired by the Epstein story.<sup>40</sup>

31 See, for example, Noah Robertson, “Republicans who once opposed Trump’s military impulses now lower their guard,” *Washington Post*, October 24, 2025, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2025/10/24/trump-military-strikes-republicans-war-powers/>; and Edward Wong, “Trump Supporters Are Uneasy About Military Actions Against Venezuela,” *New York Times*, October 23, 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/10/23/us/politics/trump-supporters-venezuela.html>.

32 Alex Jones, “Alex Jones 2025-Jun-13 Friday,” *The Alex Jones Show*, June 13, 2025.

33 Author’s collection.

34 @AutisticClips, “Alex Jones: ‘We are watching Trump self immolate on live television,’” X post, March 3, 2026, <https://x.com/autisticclip/status/2028925834732449858?s=46>.

35 @FuentesUpdates, “Nick Fuentes: You HAVE to vote Democrat in 2026,” March 3, 2026, <https://x.com/fuentesupdates/status/2028923376627073041?s=46>.

36 Bill Hutchinson, “Trump’s Iran decision sparks backlash from Tucker Carlson and some MAGA supporters,” *ABC News*, February 28, 2026, <https://abcnews.com/US/trumps-iran-decision-sparks-backlash-tucker-carlson-maga/story?id=130622270>.

37 Author’s collection. See also Brian Slodysko, “GOP’s links to extremism surface in congressional primary,” *Associated Press*, July 27, 2022, <https://apnews.com/article/2022-midterm-elections-donald-trump-campaigns-race-and-ethnicity-be616cae0967ca6ee9c78ac1efee8e31>.

38 Author’s collection.

39 Lotz, “Oath Keepers Founder Freed by Trump Warns of More Epstein Pain.”

40 Terri Parker, “Epstein files writings found in car of man shot, killed at Mar-a-Lago entrance, investigators say,” *WPBF*, February 23, 2026, <https://www.wpbf.com/article/florida-mar-a-lago-shooting-epstein-files-writings-found-car-florida-austin-tucker-martin-trump/70469068>.

Pro-Trump conspiracy communities, such as Pizzagate and QAnon, have long centred their narratives around hunts for paedophiles, and Trump's perceived protection of the contents of the so-called "Epstein files" has therefore caused great discomfort among factions of the president's far right base. "Epstein transparency NOW!!!" one poster pleaded on the message board TheDonald, given its name because of the steadfast support for the president.<sup>41</sup> And Jacob Chansley, the so-called QAnon Shaman who earned global fame after January 6 for rioting in a horned fur hat, launched an expletive-filled rant against the president, calling him a "fraud."<sup>42</sup> For his part, President Trump has criticised "some stupid Republicans and foolish Republicans" who "fall into the net" of conspiracy theories. This, too, has caused anger. "Don't [lash] out at your own base... That makes you look guilty," one TheDonald poster responded.<sup>43</sup>

Interestingly the anti-Epstein and anti-Israel themes often merge: on 19 November, for instance, the PatriotAU Telegram page posted quotes claiming "We have learned that certainly Jeffrey Epstein and most likely Ghislaine Maxwell were members of the Israeli Mossad."<sup>44</sup> Such merging allows AGEs to fold current events into common narratives of powerful, and usually Jewish, overlords that attempt to suppress the freedom of Americans and threaten the safety of its children. The story has thus contributed to a rapprochement between the AGE and more anti-Semitic far-right. President Trump and the MAGA movement are often viewed sceptically by factions further to the right, particularly neo-Nazi and white supremacist forums who seek more violent solutions to their perceived problems. A post from 26 August by the Totally Awesome Friends Telegram page (a pseudonym for the American Futurist, a neo-Nazi network) claimed that "So far we're pretty happy with the Trump Administration," particularly celebrating "Massive anti-government sentiment from all sides as people look for more extreme politics seeing the system as a failure."<sup>45</sup>

Thirdly, it remains possible that Trump would overstep in the eyes of the AGE movement and centralise power too much. Interestingly, Ammon Bundy, a scion of the famed Bundy family that launched several occupations of federal land to protest the government, has issued warnings about Trump, telling readers of the *Salt Lake City Tribune* that "to give a person that much unchecked power politically, almost [to the point] of worshipping [him], that is very dangerous."<sup>46</sup> Such lust for power has caused the demise of other world leaders, to include Hungary's Viktor Orban earlier this year. Describing the broader "populist paradox" around the world, Katrin Bennhold explained that "Some populist leaders win on promises to drain the swamp and fight corruption. Then, once in power, they chip away at the institutions that help guard against corruption, while using it to entrench their rule."<sup>47</sup> Others in the AGE space, however, welcome this development. On 12 November, Paul Fleuret, a pro-Trump Telegram page with over 47,000 followers, wrote that "Article II, Section 2 of the US Constitution [...] has the power to make a President a 'dictator,'" adding that "this is why they have been calling him a 'King,' or a 'dictator' – because they know that at some point he is gonna take full control and do what must be done to save the Republic."

Here, the Second Amendment is a particularly volatile cleavage. President Trump has consistently supported the Second Amendment throughout his presidencies, but after Minneapolis resident Alex Pretti was killed by Customs and Border Patrol agents while he was legally carrying a firearm, Trump offered that "certainly he shouldn't have been carrying a gun." The comment sent shudders throughout the American right, and within the AGE right, vigorous debates took place on the validity of the killing. "To the 'dont bring a gun to a protest' crowd, f&^\* you," a member of a Boogaloo-inclined Facebook page wrote. "To the fucking turn coats thinking disarming is the

41 Mike Wendling, "How Epstein case is tearing apart Maga's online conspiracy wing," *BBC*, July 25, 2025, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cdx5xzy8kn1o>.

42 Madeline Sherratt, "Even the 'QAnon Shaman' has turned on Trump," *Independent*, July 24, 2025, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/us-politics/qanon-shaman-trump-epstein-jan-6-b2795134.html>.

43 Wendling, "How Epstein Case Is Tearing Apart Maga's Online Conspiracy Wing."

44 Author's collection.

45 Author's collection.

46 Mark Eddington, "Exclusive: Anti-fed fugitive Ammon Bundy has a warning for MAGA crowd about Donald Trump," *Salt Lake Tribune*, May 1, 2025, <https://www.sltrib.com/news/2025/05/01/fugitive-ammon-bundy-offers/>. In January 2016, an armed group of militia members descended on the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge in Harney County, OR, to protest federal land policies. The occupation lasted 40 days.

47 Bennhold, "Hungary's Populist Paradox."

answer and don't think it would happen to you as well, fuck you. To the federal government who I've watched murder citizens just for saying no to them, fuck you. Shall not be infringed."<sup>48</sup>

As strong as the possible cleavages are, the relationship could also move in the other direction: greater affinity and collaboration, possibly even including the Trump administration deputising AGEs to aid in its more controversial pursuits such as, for example, invoking of the rarely-used Insurrection Act to use armed force to crack down on some perceived domestic threat in American cities. This move, in the minds of some of the AGE proponents, would allow AGE militias to participate in the action and suppress protesters. Such militias also have more limited aims that could nonetheless further seal their alliance with the administration. For example, they appeal to the president to allow them to offer security to prominent conservative speakers, claiming a militia guard could have saved right-wing political activist Charlie Kirk's life.<sup>49</sup>

Interestingly, political violence from the broader American far right (including anti-state and anti-government elements present in the AGE macrocosm or gravitating towards its conspiratorial thinking) substantially declined in 2025, with one report noting that "2025 marks the first time in more than 30 years that left-wing attacks outnumber those from the far right."<sup>50</sup> A perception that the Trump administration now advances the ideologies and goals of the far-right white supremacist and AGE movement is at least partially responsible.<sup>51</sup> "We won," Proud Boys leader Enrique Tarrío proudly declared. "We've got what we wanted." Or, as one prominent AGE expert presciently quipped just months into the first Trump administration, "You can't be anti-government if your guy has the top job."<sup>52</sup>

Compellingly, as early as October 2020 – before both Trump's electoral defeat and January 6 – scholars Carolyn Gallaher and Jaclyn Fox previewed a possible rapprochement, warning that "militias could become paramilitaries in two ways: one, by making common cause with White nationalists who want to use violence to create an authoritarian, White ethnostate; and two, by acting as enforcers for Donald Trump and allied Republican politicians."<sup>53</sup> The relationship, in other words, is increasingly driven by what Dale Pankhurst calls "ideological alignment" between the militias and the Trump administration.<sup>54</sup> Pankhurst's finding portends trouble ahead should the United States embark on a resurrection of liberal democratic values and norms, particularly should such a transition be led by a Democratic president. January 6 was sparked by a "rapid swing from pro to anti-governmentalism by militias [indicating] how volatile non-state armed groups can behave in a democratic society."<sup>55</sup> In the era of the populist paradox, such a swing would more than likely be replicated in the eventuality of political inroads against Trump and his MAGA movement.

48 Alex Gangitano and Sophia Cai, "'WTF': Pro-gun groups warn vulnerable GOP seats on the line after Pretti response," *Politico*, January 31, 2026, <https://www.politico.com/news/2026/01/31/2nd-amendment-advocates-issue-dire-warning-over-trumps-pretti-gun-remarks-00758740>; and David Gilbert, "Right-Wing Gun Enthusiasts and Extremists Are Working Overtime to Justify Alex Pretti's Killing," *WIRED*, January 30, 2026, <https://www.wired.com/story/right-wing-gun-enthusiasts-and-extremists-are-working-overtime-to-justify-alex-prettis-killing/>.

49 Ali Breland, "Proud Boy Enrique Tarrío: MAGA Has Figured Out How to 'Play Dirty,'" *The Atlantic*, September 17, 2025, <https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/2025/09/proud-boys-enrique-tarrio-charlie-kirk/684247/>.

50 Daniel Byman and Riley McCabe, "Left-Wing Terrorism and Political Violence in the United States: What the Data Tells Us," *Center for Strategic and International Studies* (CSIS), September 25, 2025, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/left-wing-terrorism-and-political-violence-united-states-what-data-tells-us>.

51 Breland, "Proud Boy Enrique Tarrío: MAGA Has Figured Out How to 'Play Dirty.'" See also Feuer, "In Trump's Second Term, Far-Right Agenda Enters the Mainstream."

52 Alex Yablon, "Right-Wing Militias Are Now Actively Supporting Some State and Local Pro-Trump Politicians," *The Trace*, August 7, 2017, <https://www.thetrace.org/2017/08/right-wing-militias-actively-supporting-pro-trump-politicians/>.

53 Carolyn Gallaher and Jaclyn Fox, "Could Anti-Government Militias Become Pro-State Paramilitaries?" *Political Research Associates*, October 27, 2020, <https://politicalresearch.org/2020/10/27/could-anti-government-militias-become-pro-state-paramilitaries>.

54 Pankhurst, "When Militias Go 'Rogue.'"

55 *ibid.*

## Conclusion

Although AGEs have traditionally chafed against federal power, in truth, they have always held more of an affinity with the political right, in large degree due to partisan divides on the Second Amendment and the right to bear arms.<sup>56</sup> But, in a key development, President Trump and the AGE fringe are now also linked by loyalty. In January 2025, hours into his second administration, President Trump pardoned over 1,500 convicted January 6 rioters, while commuting the sentences of the more serious cases and effectively reframing the narrative away from an AGE attack on American legislators and towards a patriotic and pro-government effort to shed heroic light on election thievery.<sup>57</sup> The populist paradox reached its apex, as an American president forgave and endorsed an attack on the government.

The American AGE movement, however, often harkens back to the founding fathers and the Revolutionary War (a January 6 planning document, for instance, was called “1776 Returns”), placing its struggle in an historical context. The Trump moment, in other words, is a mere blip in the *longue durée* of American AGEs, and the movement is sure to outlast the administration. Whether AGEs will rise to further heights in a post-Trump government or are sidelined away from Washington, DC, will depend on several factors, not least the Trump administration’s continuing counter-immigration efforts. Deeper splits also remain possible, particularly as the administration expends time and treasure pursuing a muscular foreign policy in South America and the Middle East, outlined in the new National Security Strategy’s promise to “*expand* by cultivating and strengthening new partners.”

Amid the volatility of this populist paradox, the onus lies with pro-statist actors both within and outside the Trump administration to ensure that democratic institutions at both the federal and local levels remain robust and maintain their ability to provide important services to their constituents. Allowing forces within the administration to complete its purge of the so-called “Deep State,” deepen its immigration crackdown, or further entrench Christian nationalism, would not only cause lasting damage but encourage further steps towards the AGE dystopia, both in the United States and abroad.

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56 For more on the fluctuating relationships between anti-government extremists and politicians they may support, see Amy Cooter, “US Domestic Militias’ Intersections with Government and Authority: How a Sociology of Individualism Informs Their Praxis,” in Dieter Neubert, Hans-Joachim Lauth, and Christoph Mohamad-Klotzbach (eds.), *Local Self-Governance and Varieties of Statehood: Tensions and Cooperation* (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2022), 31-49; and Damon T. Berry, “‘Good Militias’ for Trump: Race, Religion, and Legitimacy in the Modern Militia Movement,” *Religions* 14, no. 12 (2023), 1465, <https://www.mdpi.com/2077-1444/14/12/1465>.

57 See, for example, Hailey Fuchs and Kyle Cheney, “How House Republicans plan to rewrite history of Jan. 6,” *Politico*, September 28, 2025, <https://www.politico.com/news/2025/09/28/how-house-republicans-plan-to-rewrite-the-history-of-jan-6-00583234>.

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