

**“We Are at War”: QAnon Instagram Comments Before the Capitol Riots**

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Chairman Thompson, Ranking Member Cheney, and distinguished members of the Select Committee, thank you for inviting me to testify about the role of QAnon and social media in the January 6 Capitol riots.

### **Introduction**

Dangerous far-right misinformation and conspiracy theories have escaped their once-fringe corners of the internet to spread rapidly across mainstream social media in recent years. This phenomenon, combined with the polarizing attitudes surrounding the U.S. Presidential election in November 2020, set a worrisome precedent for what was to come as unfounded claims of election fraud drove even more citizens down far-right rabbit holes. The result was a violent and deadly attack on January 6, 2021, where protesters threatened lawmakers and stormed the U.S. Capitol building in an attempt to discredit election results. Since then, researchers of online misinformation, disinformation, and conspiracy theories have felt compelled to point out the many warning signs on social media that preceded the riots, as well as what those signs could indicate for both lawmakers and online content moderators. The following report will focus on QAnon – a group whose adherents took part in the riots that day – through the lens of Instagram comments, in order to examine how social media users helped construct the narratives that motivated January 6. This will be followed by an overview of how QAnon has maintained its relevance ever since, as well as its potential impact on future democratic processes.

### **QAnon, Digital Rhetoric, & Instagram**

#### **Defining QAnon**

QAnon is a collection of far-right conspiracy theories based on cryptic posts known as “Q drops” from an anonymous message board user called “Q”, who claims to be a team of

government insiders with high-level security clearance. According to QAnon lore, Democrats and members of the Hollywood elite are part of a global Satanic cabal that runs a secret child sex-trafficking ring which Donald Trump is meant to publicly expose and punish in a hypothetical event referred to as “The Storm”, thus saving the world and leading the population into a great awakening (Amarasingam & Argentino, 2020). Experts often refer to QAnon as a “big tent” conspiracy theory, as the ideology is so sprawling and ill-defined that most existing conspiracy theories already fit somewhere in the QAnon narrative (Feeld et al., 2018). The first Q drop, which was posted in October of 2017, marked the official start of QAnon as a conspiratorial movement (Rothschild, 2021). However, it grew particularly popular during 2020, when followers of QAnon-related social media accounts increased rapidly on platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram (Wong, 2020). This development was significant, as QAnon did not get its start on mainstream social media platforms, but rather on more alternative networks and message boards like 4chan and 8chan (Phillips & Milner, 2021). These findings support the importance of studying QAnon rhetoric on mainstream social networks, as the fringe-to-mainstream pipeline historically indicates an increasingly viral spread of misinformation.

QAnon also grew more salient in the mainstream media throughout 2020 and 2021, with demonstrable spikes in public interest surrounding the topic (Google Trends, 2021). In the months leading up to the election certification, QAnon was one of several far-right groups that used these highly accessible digital spaces to discuss January 6, where followers shared hopes that Trump would be reinstated as the rightful winner of the 2020 election (Zadrozny & Collins, 2021). According to recent data, “at least 61 of the individuals who participated in the Capitol breach were followers of QAnon” (Jensen & Kane, 2021, p. 7). Two attendees who died

following their participation in the riots, Ashli Babbitt and Roseanne Boyland, both had a history of following and sharing QAnon-centric theories on social media (Jensen & Kane, 2021). With this, the social media discourse of QAnon influencers and those who engage with their content may provide crucial information on how to mitigate future acts of far-right violence, especially among members of online conspiratorial communities.

**Figure 1**



*Instagram image from prominent QAnon influencer, posted Jan. 5, 2021.*

### **Rhetoric in Online Communities**

The internet provides an ideal environment for the development of esoteric communities and persuasive rhetoric, allowing for in-group connections and meaningful benefits of membership (McCulloch, 2019). Web-based rhetorical strategies allow existing members of these communities to attract new members quickly and on a global scale, which is considered a hallmark of successful online communities (Millington, 2012). This appeal is instrumental in

maintaining followers, and comment sections exemplify a space for engagement where those individuals can thrive on relatable discourse.

Sloan and Quan-Haase (2017) argue that the everyday activity of social media users, as seen in what they call small stories research, provides key information for the field of online communication. Phillips and Milner (2021) concur, stating that “everyday actions are equally deserving of ethical reflection and intervention”, noting the significance of “small scale pollution” in the general information environment (p. 14). In her immersive work on far-right and white nationalist social networks, Lavin (2020) argues that even a small amount of radicalizing rhetoric online can be ideologically detrimental, no matter how seemingly inconsequential, “just as there is no acceptable amount of poisonous gas to let seep into a room” (p. 6). This report argues that Instagram comment sections are significant sources of this smaller-scale pollution, and contributed in part to the harmful rhetoric preceding January 6.

### **Instagram & User Engagement**

Instagram, one of the most well-known social media platforms today, became a popular place for QAnon and other far-right misinformation to proliferate during 2020 (Wong, 2020). Yet when it comes to extremism and radicalization online, the influence of Instagram has been studied far less than that of other mainstream platforms like Facebook and Twitter. Mena et al. (2020) state that “the study of misinformation on Instagram has been minimal, despite the fact that the presence of misleading content on the social media platform is abundant” (p. 1). Therefore, this report aims to highlight the lacking focus on Instagram as a blind spot for researchers of far-right rhetoric.

Woods and Hahner (2019) note that user engagement is encouraged on social media to “create, and continually recreate, a digital or networked public sphere” (p. 49). Notably, the wide

range of content shared within QAnon’s social media milieu, such as message board posts, memes, and influencer theories, provides ample material for followers to dissect and analyze on public forums. Therefore, QAnon’s success on mainstream social media can be credited in part to user participation, as followers are frequently advised to “play an active role in building the movement’s narratives” (Jensen & Kane, 2021, p. 3). The comments on QAnon-promoting Instagram accounts during the week leading up to the Capitol riots demonstrate one way in which this was achieved effectively.

### **Data & Findings**

The following section will highlight some instances of harmful, misleading, and violent rhetoric from Instagram comments, all of which were collected for a previous academic study. Data included content that was shared between December 30, 2020 and January 5, 2021 from five different QAnon-promoting Instagram accounts, as well as their respective comment sections. Accounts were only considered eligible if they directly promoted QAnon-specific content, had at least ten-thousand followers, were active during the week before the Capitol riots, were listed as public, and had daily user engagement. Examples of content that distinguishes QAnon promoters from other adjacent groups include references to Q drops, Q-related memes, content from other QAnon promoters, and popular catchphrases in the QAnon community such as “Where we go one, we go all” (Rothschild, 2021, p. 252). Per the ethical guidelines established at the time of data collection, account handles of Instagram users and commenters have been anonymized here – a practice which has been applied in the past for analyzing QAnon content (Reinhard et al., 2021). Because this study focuses on the week leading up to a specific political event, data was only eligible for analysis if the subject matter of the posts and comments

involved current political figures, the election, the president, election fraud, and plans for January 6, 2021.

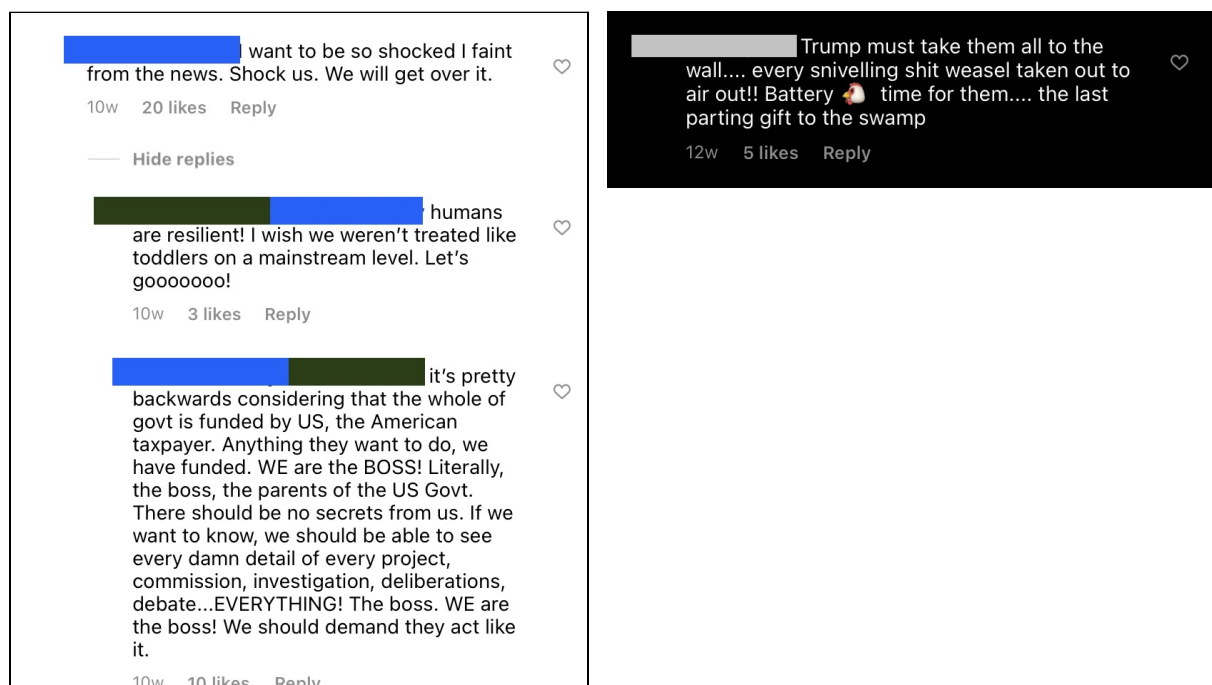
### Discursive Themes of QAnon Instagram Comments

For the Instagram users who engage with QAnon content online, comment sections serve as a venue for meaningful discussion and in-group construction of reality. This section will highlight how such discussion legitimizes this content's value, thus shaping the worldview of those who are vulnerable to believe it. The following examples show three common themes from comment sections, categorized as follows: Violent or threatening rhetoric, deep suspicion of Mike Pence, and advice/warnings for attendees.

#### *Violent or Threatening Rhetoric*

In the week leading up to the Capitol riots, many comments on QAnon promoters' posts indicate a desire for the use of force or violence, as seen in Figure 2.

**Figure 2**



On the left, one user – commenting on a post about the imminent transition of administrative powers – says they want to be “shocked” by what happens. The user then follows up by suggesting that the American people should be privy to all details of “every project, commission, investigation, deliberations, debate...EVERYTHING!” They conclude by arguing that the government should be treating citizens like “the boss”, and that if they don’t, people “should demand” it. On the right, a user responds to a photo of Democratic politicians, arguing they should be “taken out”, and that Trump should “take them all to the wall” – an assumed reference to death by firing squad, which is a call to action that has been noted before in QAnon discourse (Timberg & Dwoskin, 2020).

The misguided belief that protesters inherently hold a higher authority over the United States government, as well as the belief that Trump could simply execute those they disagree with, may have helped attendees rationalize their plans to occupy the Capitol building. It is worth noting here that besides the physical violence of January 6, demonstrators also expressed violent and threatening ideation symbolically – including the noose erected outside the Capitol building (Romey, 2021). Therefore, the normalization of this violent discourse may have informed the actions and expectations of rally attendees.

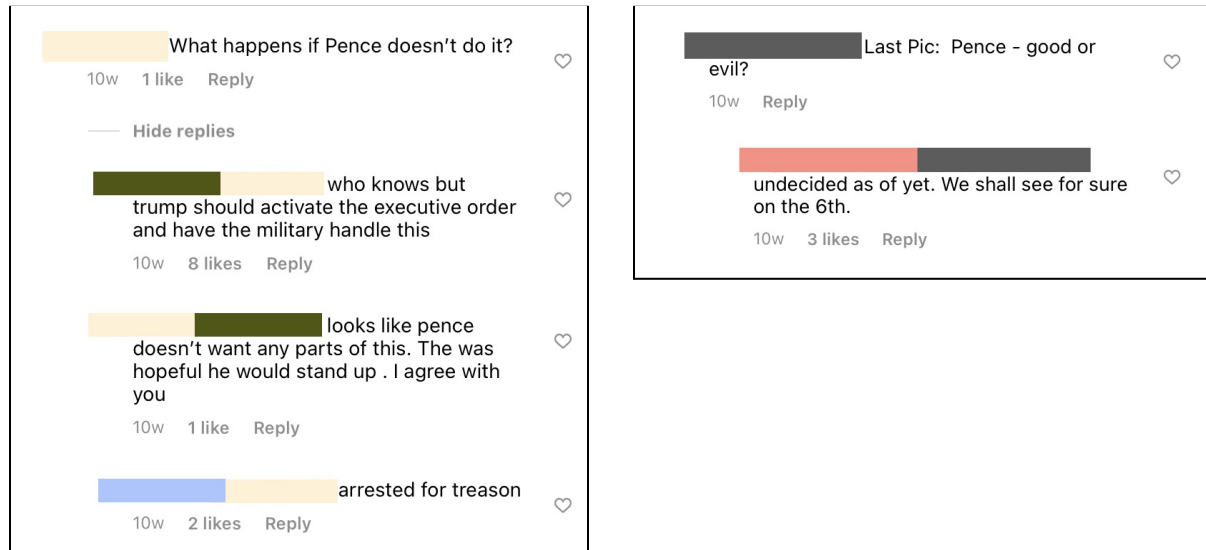
### ***Deep Suspicion of Mike Pence***

It is not unusual for QAnon social media comments to indicate suspicion of Democrats, as is to be expected given the premise of the theory. Yet in the week before January 6, users who engaged with QAnon content on Instagram directed many of their accusations towards Mike Pence, who they were hoping would take charge in overturning the election results to ensure a Trump win – despite multiple credible sources saying he had no way to do so (Timm, 2021). The



exchanges in Figure 3 are in response to QAnon promoters who posted about Pence and his intentions.

**Figure 3**



On the left, one user asks, “What happens if Pence doesn’t do it?”, referring to what happens if Pence does not overturn Joe Biden’s election win. Responses to this comment suggest that the “military handle this”, or that Pence should be “arrested for treason”. On the right, a user asks whether Pence is “good or evil”. The reply that follows – which provides assurance that everyone will “see for sure on the 6th” – proves just how much faith Trump supporters were putting in Pence that day, as well as how quickly they were willing to cast him as “evil” if he were to continue with the certification of Biden.

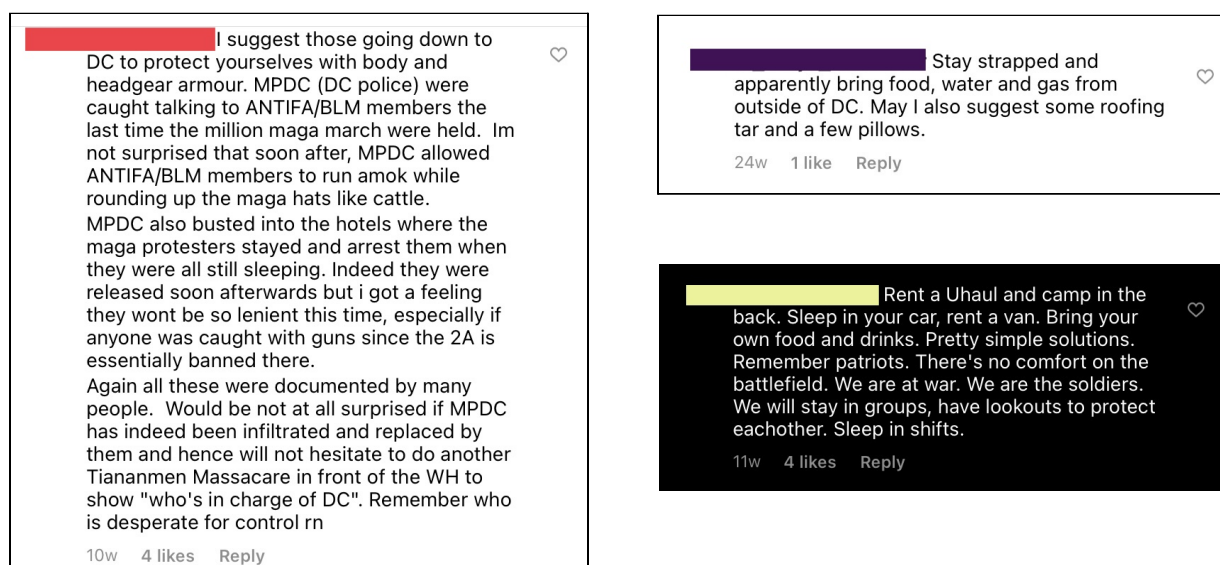
What is most dangerous about these exchanges is that they entertain the possibility that Pence could rightfully have reinstalled Trump as the president. This projection, paired with the unfounded claims of election fraud that informed it, administered false hope to an audience which was already vulnerable to believing in conspiratorial content. Arguably, such discourse

could have been flagged as misinformation, as it was rooted in unequivocally false claims – but instead, it was permitted to remain publicly on Instagram, both unchecked and unchallenged.

### *Advice or Warnings for J6 Attendees*

Paranoia over infiltration and instigation permeated QAnon Instagram long before the Capitol riots began. Whether or not QAnon promoters expressed any explicit intention to attend the rally, users in the comment sections frequently offered advice for anyone planning to do so, often in the form of ominous warnings such as those seen in Figure 4.

**Figure 4**

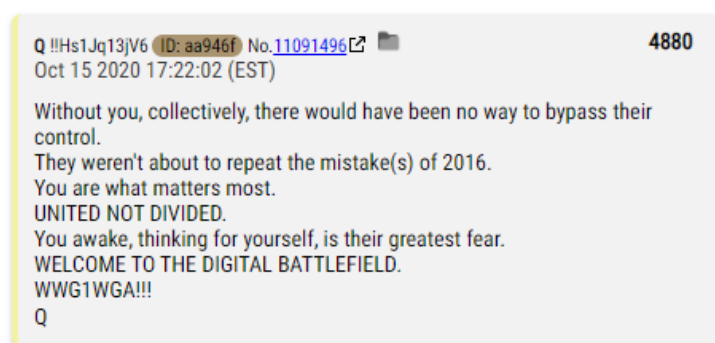


The comment on the left suggests that the D.C. police may have been infiltrated by members of Antifa and/or Black Lives Matter, inferring that law enforcement would be working against attendees. On the top right, one user recommends that the attendees arrive armed (“stay strapped”), and makes a reference to the act of tarring and feathering. Finally, on the bottom

right, a user suggests deploying military tactics such as keeping watch “in shifts”, stating definitively: “We are at war.”

Encouraging attendees to treat a pro-Trump rally like a battlefield is a clear invitation to violence, and painting law enforcement as a potential enemy only fans the flame of their existing paranoia. Notably, Capitol police have testified regarding the physical and verbal abuse they ended up experiencing that day (Naylor, 2021). It should also be acknowledged that Q frequently reinforced the “battlefield” rhetoric in their posts, as evidenced by Figure 5: A Q drop posted on October 15, 2020.

**Figure 5**



With this, it is argued here that QAnon Instagram accounts, as well as those who engaged with their content, helped foster an environment where potential attendees of January 6 were addressed like soldiers and, therefore, emboldened to treat the D.C. demonstration like a battle against the enemy.

## **Conclusion**

The Capitol riots were not planned in just one day, and the ideologies that informed them do not exist in a vacuum. What occurred required months, if not years, of persuasion through

worldbuilding and fostering passionate communities – much of which took place on mainstream social media. While the aforementioned examples do not illustrate specific plans for January 6, this report highlights some crucial rhetorical themes of those who discussed political or election fraud-related content on QAnon Instagram accounts in the week prior to the storming of the Capitol.

### **Limitations**

Unfortunately, many January 6 participants deleted social media accounts, photos, and posts that revealed evidence of their involvement in the riots shortly thereafter (Billeaud, 2021). For this reason, it is likely that there were far more examples of effective rhetoric and explicit plans on Instagram which were simply not accessible at the time of data collection. If any accounts or posts were deleted within that window of time, or if such accounts were made private, that information could not be accounted for here. Also, while most names and account handles were anonymized and coded for this report, many who discuss QAnon online are deliberately anonymous already. Several QAnon promoter accounts from this study did not use their real names as usernames, did not include photos of themselves, and never revealed any other personal identifiers. With this in mind, it is possible that some accounts were controlled by more than one person, were run by automated bot networks, or were taking part in the discourse ironically to sow division. However, Phillips and Milner (2021) argue that intent may not make a difference in the rhetorical power of harmful social media content: “No matter the motive, the outcome remains the same: the message pings across more and more networks, prompting more and more responses from more and more participants along the way” (p. 160). Therefore, this research encourages readers to think beyond the reasons *why* conspiracy theorists spread such

content, and consider instead its lasting effects on those who engage with it, as well as how those effects are felt beyond the confines of the internet.

## **Looking Forward**

There have been significant developments since January 6, 2021 that benefit our understanding of what occurred and how to better prevent it in the future, such as emerging research on domestic right-wing extremism (Argentino et al., 2021). Also, tracing the misinformation spread by promoters of the Capitol riots shed light on the role of Facebook and other social networks as catalysts for the spread of harmful content online (The Associated Press, 2021). These are notable strides, and their significance should not be discounted.

The reality, however, is that what led to the riots did not cease to exist after they concluded. Far-right groups and media personalities continue to use leftist movements like Antifa as a scapegoat for the actions of right-wing extremists (Anderson, 2021). Remnants of election fraud paranoia permeated the discourse surrounding the gubernatorial elections of 2021, namely those in New Jersey and Virginia (Reimann, 2021). At the time of this writing, right-wing and anti-government movements against COVID mandates continue to make their presence known in the form of a trucker convoy in the D.C. area, with supporters and speakers that have been charged for their participation in January 6 (Silverman, 2022). Furthermore, QAnon remains pervasive in political discourse, including that of congressional candidates and prospective administrators of elections (Kaplan, 2022). With this, it is not a question of whether or not conspiratorial and extremist rhetoric will one day permeate those with great power and influence – it is, in fact, already happening.

The fact that QAnon content on Instagram inspires any sort of discussion or deliberation at all should be an indication of its rhetorical power, as well as its ability to affect

meaning-making in the offline world. If social media content moderators are not made aware of the unique rhetorical strategies used to legitimize conspiracy theories online, then such legitimization – as well as the consequences that result from it – cannot be adequately prevented. Meta, the umbrella company for several social networks including Instagram and Facebook, explains on its website that both artificial intelligence and human review teams are utilized for determining which content violates the platforms’ community guidelines based on its potential to lead to harm (Meta, 2022). With this in mind, it is proposed here that social media companies place a higher priority on comment sections as sources of misinformation and radicalization.

Rothschild (2021) refers to the Capitol riots as “the nightmare that disinformation specialists and extremism researchers had feared”, noting how social media provided fertile ground for election-related misinformation, including that espoused by QAnon, to take root (p. 157). In all likelihood, it is too late for this to be entirely reversed. Yet academics, journalists, lawmakers, and technology companies alike still have a chance to curb the growth of conspiracy theories online with deliberate mitigation strategies informed by communication research. January 6 showed us the blind spots; today, we are tasked to learn from them.

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