Statement for the Record

Submitted to the House Select Committee to Investigate the January 6th Attack on the United States Capitol

April 7, 2022

Dear Chairperson Thompson, Vice Chairperson Cheney, Majority Members Lofgren, Luria, Schiff, Aguilar, Murphy, and Raskin, and Minority Member Kinzinger:

Thank you for the opportunity to submit this statement for the record to the Select Committee to Investigate the January 6th Attack on the United States Capitol. I am an associate professor of Communication at Baylor University and possess expertise on reactionary and extremist movements and discourses. Today I will largely be restricting my statement to assessments of those who identify as Sovereign Citizens, and the language underpinning the ideologies thereof. Views presented here, however, reflect my own work and are not official comments of Baylor University or its Department of Communication.

While the attack on the Capitol began the morning of January 6, it was planned and justified months in advance. While much of this Committee's work has focused on the pre-planning for January 6th, this Statement focuses instead on the prior justification for the attack, and potential to future acts of violence.

Sovereign Citizens, sometimes shortened to Sov Cits, are a non-homogenous collection of groups who share a number of overlapping beliefs, most importantly the illegitimacy of at least the federal, but usually also state and local, governments.² These beliefs are professed through a "doctrine of pseudolaw," or "a collection of legal-sounding but false rules that purport to be law." Estimates of the numbers of those who would consider themselves Sovereign Citizens are largely based on "watchdog" organization's best numbers, with governmental counts either nonexistent, or classified. Best guestimates of actual Sovereign Citizen numbers suggest

¹ Heilweil, R. & Ghaffary, S. 2021. "How Trump's internet built and broadcast the Capitol insurrection." *Vox.* Jan 8, 2021. https://www.vox.com/recode/22221285/trump-online-capitol-riot-far-right-parler-twitter-facebook.

² Alexander, Dean C., 2020. "Sovereign citizens: Threats and law enforcement responses." *Security Magazine*. December 30, 2020.

https://www.securitymagazine.com/articles/94007-sovereign-citizens-threats-and-law-enforcement-responses.

³ Barrows, S. 2021. Sovereigns, Freemen, and Desperate Souls: Towards a Rigorous Understanding of Pseudolitigation Tactics in United States Courts, *62 B.C. L. Rev. 905* (2021), https://lawdigitalcommons.bc.edu/bclr/vol62/iss3/5

⁴ Sarteschi, Christine. M. 2021. Sovereign citizens: A narrative review with implications of violence towards law enforcement. *Aggression and Violent Behavior*, 60, p.101509. https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7513757/

between 300,000 and 500,000,⁵ while the Southern Poverty Law Center claims 2021 saw at least 75 active sovereign citizen groups in the United States.⁶

Sovereign Citizens participated in the January 6 attack on the Capitol in multiple capacities. At least two of the indicted participants have engaged in courtroom behavior identified as Sovereign Citizen. Moreover, there is likely a significant but unknowable number of indicted defendants who believe in many tenets of Sovereign Citizenship. While most Sovereign Citizens are likely nonviolent, hundreds of acts of violence in the last 27 years, including Terry Nichols involvement in the bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City, can be directly attributed to Sovereign Citizens. At present, violence against law enforcement is likely the greatest risk posed from Sovereign Citizens, with traffic stops being the main point of contact, though there have been isolated instances of ambush-style attacks on law enforcement. However, the spread of Sovereign Citizen discourses throughout the digital ecosystem of reactionary and extremist groups is perhaps a larger concern.

Social movements, or loosely organized groups largely centered on a collective goal, exist in two related but distinct ways—as an assembly of people who identify with that movement's central tenets, but also as the collection of meaning contained within the symbolic language announcing the ideologies of that group. In the case of Sovereign Citizens, that means the "movement" consists of both the actual individuals who declare the illegitimacy of the federal government but also as the discourses, or collections of communication, that announce, often via conspiracy theory, justifications for extremist anti-government beliefs.

Antigovernment groups use the language of their organizations—how they publicly communicate, as well as their private discussions—to express and create support for their ideological beliefs. The Southern Poverty Law Center defines an antigovernment group as one which understands "the federal government as an enemy of the people and promote[s]

⁶ Southern Poverty Law Center. 2022. The Year in Hate & Extremism 2021. 56. https://www.splcenter.org/20220309/year-hate-extremism-2021

⁵ Ibid.

⁷ Elfer, H. 2021. "Capitol rioter screams and says she has right to 'self determination' as judge sends her to jail." *The Independent*. September 19, 2021.

https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/crime/maga-riot-capitol-screams-self-determination-b1922 883.html. United States of America v. William Blauser, Jr., and Pauline Bauer, Indictment, United States District Court for the District of Columbia. May 2021.

https://extremism.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs2191/f/William%20Blauser%20and%20Pauline%20Bauer%20Indict ment.pdf. Anonymous FBI agent, Statement of Facts, Complaint with Arrest Warrant assigned to Judge Robin M. Meriweather 2021.

https://extremism.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs2191/f/James%20Beeks%20Statement%20of%20Facts.pdf

⁸ Sarteschi, Christine. M. 2021. Sovereign Citizens: More Than Paper Terrorists. *Just Security*, July, 5, 2021. https://www.iustsecurity.org/77328/sovereign-citizens-more-than-paper-terrorists/

⁹ Alexander, Dean C., 2020. "Sovereign citizens: Threats and law enforcement responses." *Security Magazine*. December 30, 2020.

https://www.securitymagazine.com/articles/94007-sovereign-citizens-threats-and-law-enforcement-responses.

¹⁰ Pometto, Joe. 2020. *Sovereign Citizens: Deconstructing, Decoding and Deflating the World's Most Notorious Anti-Government Movement*. ISBN 979-865451734-0

baseless conspiracy theories."¹¹ Included in this definition are at least the Three Percenters, Oath Keepers, as well as Sovereign Citizens—each group of which had members arrested and indicted owing to events of January 6th. In his important work on terrorism, Neil Smelser rightly remarked that "ideologies are forever being resynthesized to resonate with changing conditions and with changing readings of what is ideologically correct for the times."¹² All ideologies existing for any significant period of time undergo a process of syncretism—the successful or attempted merging of multiple views into a singular understanding.¹³ Generally, this word is used in the context of religions, but "the principle of syncretism applies to all ideologies, both those that defend the status quo and those that protest against it, including those that inspire terrorist activities."¹⁴

Reactionary and extremist groups possess crisscrossing and connected understandings of the world. These understandings are conveyed and transmitted through language use. For instance, Sovereign Citizens, anti-vaccine, and QAnon discourses and movements all intermingle at present. The connection these discourses create between related yet distinct groups collectively constructs an environment where groups can openly recruit and market their ideas to each other and the general public. In today's world, that recruitment is not limited by state, or nation-state borders. For example, though Sovereign Citizen groups have previous largely been restricted to North America, modern affordances of globally digital connectivity have meant a Sovereign Citizen protest in Quebec could inspire anti-mask protest in Singapore, or anti-police violence in Melbourne.

The language of Sovereign Citizen ideology builds internal community, creates distrust of nonbelievers, and offers a justification for nearly any desired anti-government action. For those who identify with the written or spoken words of Sovereign Citizenship, other similar believers exist within a real, or imagined community. Like the discourses of nearly any ideology, common beliefs create bonds of similarity, resulting in community. Similarly, especially given the well-beyond the mainstream legal and historical views for which Sovereign Citizenship holds meaning, nonbelievers are understood as either potential recruits or as enemies of the

https://ccjls.scholasticahq.com/article/26321-far-right-extremism-s-threat-to-police-safety-and-the-organizational-legitimacy-of-law-enforcement-in-the-united-states

¹¹ Southern Poverty Law Center. 2022. *The Year in Hate & Extremism 2021*. 45. https://www.splcenter.org/20220309/year-hate-extremism-2021

¹² Smelser, Neil J. 2009. *The Faces of Terrorism: Social and Psychological Dimensions*. Princeton University Press 59.

¹³ Varda, S. J. 2013. "Drew Ali and the Moorish Science Temple of America: A Minor Rhetoric of Black Nationalism." *Rhetoric and Public Affairs*. 16.4: 685–718. https://doi.org/10.14321/rhetpublaffa.16.4.0685

¹⁴ Smelser, Neil J. 2009. *The Faces of Terrorism: Social and Psychological Dimensions*. Princeton University Press 58.

¹⁵ Parkin, W.S., Mills, C. E., and Gruenewald, J. William. 2021. "Far-Right Extremism's Threat to Police Safety and the Organizational Legitimacy of Law Enforcement in the United States." *Criminology, Criminal Justice, Law & Society*. July, 2021.

¹⁶ Southern Poverty Law Center. 2022. *The Year in Hate & Extremism 2021*. https://www.splcenter.org/20220309/year-hate-extremism-2021

¹⁷ Southern Poverty Law Center. 2022. *The Year in Hate & Extremism 2021*. 15. https://www.splcenter.org/20220309/year-hate-extremism-2021

¹⁸ Max Matza, 2020. "What is the 'sovereign citizen' movement?" *BBC News*. August 5, 2020. https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-53654318

Sovereign Community. In short, believers' uncritical acceptance of Sovereign Citizen discourses, as well as the ego-protecting denunciation of nonbelievers results in a "binding effect," strengthening the in-group to itself, and increasing the rejection of outsiders. ¹⁹ Moreover, the resulting bonds created between the Sovereign Citizen in-group encourages members to accept increasingly conspiratorial thoughts as long as they are discursively connected to Sovereign Citizen ideologies. ²⁰

Moreover, the discourses shaping the beliefs of Sovereign Citizenship, especially their reliance on jargon and pseudolaw, exists as a ready-made template for anti-state activity, and may be leveraged by related groups to justify their own distinct and potentially more violent interpretations of the world. As used in courtrooms, pseudolaw had long been used in the deployment of "paper terrorism," a tactic employing frivolous lawsuits, directed at government officials, demanding huge sums of money, that inevitably slows the mechanisms of the American legal system. Besides a tactic against the court system, however, Sovereign Citizen pseudolaw is particularly appealing to adjacent reactionary and extremist groups. At root, pseudolaw is both deeply oppositional to the centralized authority, yet also surprisingly "politically agnostic," as it is resoundingly rejected by established courts who encounter it. In other words, Sovereign Citizen pseudolaw has become incredibly attractive to adjacent reactionary and extremist groups who may find willing recruits in Sovereign Citizen communities. As such, these seemingly divergent groups become an incubator for recruitment across various extremist groups.

Strong digital networks of support in socioideological enclaves, or echo chambers, have been demonstrated to correlate with radicalization and militancy.²³ The algorithmic spread of these ideas via social media is often advanced through affective connections, or messages based primarily on feelings.²⁴ Discourses of Sovereign Citizenship employ feeling-laden labels (regular people are "slaves," police are "road pirates," "lawful rebellion under clause 61," "Bootlicker," "tyranny," "corrupt," "totalitarian regime") are often grafted with other emotionally charged conspiracy theories, and are announced largely through pseudolaw.²⁵ Even absent ecosystem

¹⁹ McRoberts, C. 2019. Tinfoil Hats and Powdered Wigs: Thoughts on Pseudolaw. *Washburn Law Journal*, 58.3. 2019. 658. https://ssrn.com/abstract=3400362
²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Sarteschi, Christine. M. 2021. Sovereign citizens: A narrative review with implications of violence towards law enforcement. *Aggression and Violent Behavior*, 60, p.101509. https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7513757/

²² Netolitzky, D. J. 2021. A Revolting Itch: Pseudolaw as a Social Adjuvant. *Politics, Religion & Ideology*, 22:2, 164-188, DOI: 10.1080/21567689.2021.1924691

²³ Anastasio, N., Perliger, A., & Shortland, N. (2021). How Emotional Traits and Practices Lead to Support in Acts of Political Violence. *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 1–21. https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610x.2021.1905141
https:/

²⁵ Pometto, Joe. 2020. *Sovereign Citizens: Deconstructing, Decoding and Deflating the World's Most Notorious Anti-Government Movement*. ISBN 979-865451734-0. Hodge, E. 2021. "The Sovereign Ascendant: Financial

spread, some researchers feel comfortable asserting the language underpinning Sovereign Citizen ideology results in a worldview where "illegal actions" by law enforcement to uphold regulations of civil society (and nearly all law enforcement actions are "illegal" in the Sov Cit ideology) justifies (in the minds of adherents) violence and murder against law enforcement. Collectively then, the intermingling of these emotionally charged discourses from Sovereign Citizen sources has the potential to not only help recruit members to reactionary and extremist groups, but may also serve to further radicalize them by supplying a language based justification for violence against the state and any representative thereof.

There is limited research on Sovereign Citizens and additional funding should be allocated through various channels for multiple, interdisciplinary approaches to the study of the group, its discourses, and its ideological spread. Compared to research on other extremist groups, the research on Sovereign Citizens is rather limited.²⁷ Some researchers simultaneously hold that there are undeniable benefits to studying extremist organizations individually, but also note how the overlap between groups' ideologies necessitates understanding the interconnectedness of the groups in toto.²⁸ In short, studies of individual extremist groups often "ignore the shared beliefs and the shared members of these organizations."²⁹ In the case of Sovereign Citizens, however, research into the groups and supporting discourses necessarily includes research of related groups.

From a security or law enforcement perspective, prevention of acts of targeted violence is a goal shared at all levels of government. Some models of understanding assessments of extremist risk, like the Terrorist Radicalization Assessment Protocol (Trap-18), have shown significant promise in preventing targeted violence "if there is a focus on fact-based behaviors, and threat management is in place." Moreover, the TRAP-18, a theoretical model so named for its collection of 18 "observable patterns of behavior" based criteria of analysis, has demonstrated some success "for the early detection and case management of radicalization processes." At least one study has also found the TRAP-18 to be an effective post-dictor of Sovereign Citizen violence. Similar approaches, like the interdisciplinary work assessing the connection between "emotional traits, support for extremist groups, and willingness to engage in political violence"

Collapse, Status Anxiety, and the Rebirth of the Sovereign Citizen Movement." *Frontiers in Sociology*, 26 Nov. 2019. https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fsoc.2019.00076/full.

²⁶ Sarteschi, C. M. 2020. Sovereign Citizens: A Psychological and Criminological Analysis. Springer. 2020. 25.

²⁷ Sarteschi, Christine. M. 2021. Sovereign citizens: A narrative review with implications of violence towards law enforcement. *Aggression and Violent Behavior*, 60, p.101509.

https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7513757/

²⁸ Baldoza, A. C., 2009. Assessing domestic right-wing extremism using the theory of collective behavior. Thesis. Monterey, CA: Naval Postgraduate School. https://calhoun.nps.edu/handle/10945/4391
²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Allely, C.S. and Wicks, S.J., 2022. "The feasibility and utility of the Terrorist Radicalization Assessment Protocol (TRAP-18): A review and recommendations." *Journal of Threat Assessment and Management*. Feb. 2022. http://usir.salford.ac.uk/id/eprint/63180/

³¹ Ibid.

³² Challacombe, D. J.. and Lucas, P. A., 2019. Postdicting Violence with Sovereign Citizen Actors: An Exploratory Test of the TRAP-18. *Journal of Threat Assessment and Management*, 6(1), 51–59. https://doi.apa.org/doiLanding?doi=10.1037%2Ftam0000105

also show promise at predicting violent political behavior.³³ Additional grants for research, likely through the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), National Institute of Justice (NIJ), National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH), and/or the National Institutes of Health (NIH), would likely offer better understandings of how to prevent targeted violence, as well as potential lone actor Sovereign Citizen violence.³⁴

In short, self-identified Sovereign Citizens likely played a small role in the events of January 6th. However, it is also likely that many participants in the attack on the Capitol trafficked in Sovereign Citizen discourses, and that moving forward, additional resources ought to be brought to bear for the researching of both Sovereign Citizens and related reactionary and extremist groups. While there exists some research suggesting how Sovereign Citizen targeted violence may be reduced, the research is still limited, and should be supported from multiple agencies in an interdisciplinary fashion.

I thank the Committee for the opportunity to share my views.

Sincerely,

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³³ Anastasio, N., Perliger, A., & Shortland, N. (2021). How Emotional Traits and Practices Lead to Support in Acts of Political Violence. *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 1–21. https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610x.2021.1905141

³⁴ Bell, D.M. 2016. The Sovereign Citizen Movement: The Shifting Ideological Winds. Monterey, CA: Naval Postgraduate School. https://www.hsdl.org/?view&did=792306