

**Statement of**  
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**to the**

**United States House of Representatives**  
**Select Committee to Investigate the January 6th Attack on the United States Capitol**

**on**

**The Role of Psychological Factors in Contributing to the Events of January 6, 2021**

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My name is Catherine Sanderson, and I am the Poler Family Professor and Chair of Psychology at Amherst College in Massachusetts. Throughout my career—as a doctoral student at Princeton University in the 1990s and as a professor at Amherst College for 25 years—my research has focused on the influence of social norms, the unwritten rules that shape our behavior. My book, *Why We Act: Turning Bystanders Into Moral Rebels* (published in 2020 by the Harvard University Press) describes the power of various psychological factors in leading otherwise good people to engage in problematic behavior, and will serve as the basis for this summary. In particular, I will describe key findings from empirical research in psychology and neuroscience regarding the role of shared identity in group settings, the role of leaders in directly and indirectly prompting such behavior, and the power of gradual escalation in perpetuating problematic behavior. In each case, I will first describe general findings from scientific literature and then describe explicitly how these factors likely contributed to the events of January 6, 2021.

### **Shared Identity in Group Settings**

One of the most consistent findings in the empirical research in psychology is that people will do things in a group setting that they would never do on their own. Real world examples of bad behavior in group settings are abundant from crowds celebrating lynchings of African Americans to college students subjecting their peers to vicious fraternity hazing to sports fans rioting after their team wins (or loses) a championship.

What is it about being in a group that leads people to do things they would never do on their own? One explanation is that people in a group believe they won't be held responsible for their actions because they are anonymous. The frequency and severity of aggressive and offensive behavior is greater if people are wearing a mask or hood or operating in the dark, even if they aren't in a group. As the psychologist Philip Zimbardo found, college students who were asked to deliver electric shocks to another student (thinking that they were participating in a study of creativity) delivered significantly longer—and thus more painful—shocks when they were wearing hoods to hide their identity than when they were not.<sup>1</sup> The same phenomenon has been observed outside the lab. For example, an analysis of violence in Northern Ireland by Andrew Silke at the University of Leicester found that people wearing disguises—masks, hoods, or other clothing to obscure their faces—engaged in more acts of vandalism, harmed more people, and inflicted more serious physical injuries.<sup>2</sup>

Groups may also facilitate bad behavior because they create what is called “deindividuation”—the loss of sense of oneself as an individual. When people lose touch with their own moral standards and forget who they really are, which often happens in a pack, the normal constraints against deviant behavior are removed – and the larger the crowd, the worse the behavior. An analysis of lynch mob behavior occurring in Georgia between 1882 and 1926 by Andrew Ritchey

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<sup>1</sup> P. G. Zimbardo, “The human choice: Individuation, reason, and order vs. deindividuation, impulse, and chaos,” in *Nebraska Symposium on Motivation*, ed. W. J. Arnold and D. Levine, 237–307 (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1969).

<sup>2</sup> A. Silke, “Deindividuation, anonymity, and violence: Findings from Northern Ireland,” *Journal of Social Psychology* 143 (2003): 493–499.

and Barry Ruback at Pennsylvania State University found that although all of the lynchings resulted in death, larger crowd sizes predicted increases in violence, such as burning, hanging, and/or beating the victim.<sup>3</sup>

Recent breakthroughs in neuroscience provide valuable insight into how group settings increase the likelihood of bad behavior by examining patterns of brain activation when people are alone versus in a group. One study by researchers at MIT found that people do in fact think less about themselves when they are in a group than when they are alone – again, as measured by specific patterns of brain activation.<sup>4</sup> Most importantly, people who show lower levels of self-referential thinking are more likely to act in ways that hurt other people, and this tendency is especially pronounced when people are in groups that are directly competing with one another. As noted by Rebecca Saxe, one of the researchers involved in this study, “people’s priorities change when there is an ‘us’ and a ‘them.’”

Unfortunately, the events of January 6<sup>th</sup> were in many ways a perfect storm of what empirical psychology research reveals contributes to problematic group behavior: the group was large and many people wore masks, fostering a sense of anonymity. Others wore hats or shirts or carried flags, all of which served to create a sense of shared identity: this attire wasn’t random, but rather was intentionally chosen to foster a common identity (e.g., Trump, MAGA, Stop the Steal, etc.). These factors all increased the likelihood of problematic behavior, because people lose a sense of who they are and their distinct identity.

### **The Role of Leaders in Prompting Group Behavior**

One of the most famous research studies demonstrating the power of leaders to prompt good people to engage in harmful actions was conducted by Stanley Milgram at Yale University.<sup>5</sup> This study was designed to test whether people would inflict pain on others if ordered to do so by an authority figure, with the intention of understanding the psychological processes that had buttressed the Nazi Holocaust, when millions of innocent victims were murdered by people who claimed that they were simply obeying orders. In a series of experiments, Milgram brought men into his lab at Yale to participate in what was supposedly a study on the impact of punishment on the speed of learning, but in reality was designed to test whether people would be willing to obey orders to shock an innocent victim, if ordered to do so by an authority.

The study participant was told to start by giving the learner the lowest level of shock (15 volts) and to increase the shock level each time the learner made a mistake. At each shock level, the learner responded in a standard way. At the 75-volt level, he began to cry out in pain, and by 150 volts he asked to be let out of the experiment and began to claim that his heart was bothering

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<sup>3</sup>A. J. Ritchey and R. B. Ruback, “Predicting lynching atrocity: The situational norms of lynchings in Georgia,” *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 44, no. 5 (2018): 619–637.

<sup>4</sup>M. Cikara, A. C. Jenkins, N. Dufour, and R. Saxe, “Reduced self-referential neural response during intergroup competition predicts competitor harm,” *NeuroImage* 96 (2014): 36–43.

<sup>5</sup>S. Milgram, “Behavioral study of obedience,” *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology* 67, no. 4 (1963): 371–378.

him. If the teacher hesitated or turned to the experimenter in bewilderment asking if he could stop, he received one of four prompts that prodded him to continue: “Please continue,” “The experiment requires that you continue,” “It is absolutely essential that you continue,” or “You have no other choice but to continue.” The experimenter kept providing these prompts until the teacher refused to continue or reached the highest level (450 volts, which was marked “XXX dangerous”).

Much to Milgram’s surprise, the majority of the study participants—65 percent—were willing to give a person whom they believed to be an innocent participant the maximum level of electric shocks. Many people were dismayed by this extremely high rate of obedience, including the psychiatrists Milgram had consulted before the experiment, who had predicted that approximately 1 percent of the participants would follow through to the very end. Although the Milgram study was conducted more than fifty years ago, similar experiments recently conducted in both Poland and the United States have found similarly high rates of compliance.<sup>6</sup>

Our willingness to harm others when we are following the instructions of an authority figure is also shown in studies that more clearly mimic real-world situations. Researchers in one study asked participants to read various test questions to a supposed job applicant, who was actually an accomplice.<sup>7</sup> The applicant was always played by the same person—a well-dressed man about thirty years old. The researchers told the participants that they were interested in examining how job applicants would react under pressure, so they wanted them to harass the applicant by making statements that progressed in offensiveness, including, “If you continue like this, you will fail,” and “This job is much too difficult for you.” As the “interview” continued, the applicant pleaded with them to stop, then refused to tolerate the abuse and showed signs of tension, and eventually stopped answering the questions in despair. In the control condition, in which there was no authority figure urging them to continue, none of the participants got through all fifteen of the statements. But when the experimenter prodded them along, 92 percent went all the way through the list.

What explains this tendency to obey an authority figure’s orders even if it means harming an innocent person? One central factor is the authority figure’s willingness to assume responsibility for any negative outcomes. This allows the person who is engaging in the bad behavior to feel absolved of wrong-doing. The tendency to seek absolution on that basis can be found repeatedly in real-world situations, from the American soldiers who abused prisoners at Abu Ghraib in Iraq to business executives engaging in corporate fraud. Moreover, experimental research demonstrates that people who feel less responsible for committing harmful acts are more willing to do so. Participants in a replication of the Milgram study who were made to feel more

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<sup>6</sup> J. M. Burger, “Replicating Milgram: Would people still obey today?” *American Psychologist* 64 (2009): 1–11; D. Doliński, T. Grzyb, M. Folwarczny, P. Grzybała, K. Krzyszycha, K. Martynowska, and J. Trojanowski, “Would you deliver an electric shock in 2015? Obedience in the experimental paradigm developed by Stanley Milgram in the 50 years following the original studies,” *Social Psychological and Personality Science* 8, no. 8 (2017): 927–933.

<sup>7</sup> W. H. Meeus and Q. A. Raaijmakers, “Administrative obedience: Carrying out orders to use psychological-administrative violence,” *European Journal of Social Psychology* 16 (1986): 311–324.

responsible for inflicting harm—by being told explicitly that they were responsible for the well-being of the learner—stopped the procedure significantly earlier.<sup>8</sup> People who feel more responsible for hurting someone have also been found to be better able to resist explicit instructions to do so. A detailed analysis of the utterances of participants in one of the recent replications of the Milgram study revealed that those who expressed a sense that they were responsible for their actions were more likely to resist the orders and stop delivering shocks.<sup>9</sup>

These findings also help explain the events of January 6, 2021. For years Trump had, with some regularity, encouraged his supporters to engage in violence and had specifically offered to take responsibility for any consequences. For example, at a campaign rally on February 1, 2016 in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, after being warned that some protestors might throw tomatoes, Trump told the crowd, “If you see somebody getting ready to throw a tomato, knock the crap out of them, would you? Seriously. Just knock the hell out of them. I promise you, I will pay for the legal fees. I promise. There won’t be so much of them because the courts agree with us.” He also praised his supporters for engaging in violence on other occasions, including those who confronted Black Lives Matter protestors in Portland, Oregon as well as Kyle Rittenhouse, who shot three protestors (killing two of them) in Kenosha, Wisconsin. Similarly, in the weeks and months leading up to January 6<sup>th</sup>, Trump repeatedly claimed – by tweet and in rallies - that he had in fact won, and that it was essential to “stop the steal.”

On the day of January 6<sup>th</sup>, his instructions became even clearer. He started that day with a tweet calling for Republicans to fight, followed by tweets instructing Republican leaders to block Congress from certifying Biden’s victory. At noon on January 6<sup>th</sup>, Trump spoke at length (70 minutes) about the supposed election steal, providing specific (false) statistics to support his claims. He told the crowd, “We will never give up. We will never concede,” “We fight like hell. And if you don’t fight like hell, you’re not going to have a country anymore,” “When you catch somebody in a fraud, you’re allowed to go by very different rules,” and, “I know that everyone here will soon be marching over to the Capitol building to peacefully and patriotically make your voices heard.” When members of his crowd chanted “Fight for Trump,” he responded positively with “thank you,” clearly conveying that he was in fact endorsing a fight. After Pence released a statement describing his role in overseeing, not overturning, the count, Trump tweeted that Pence “didn’t have the courage to do what should have been done.” All of these statements by Trump provide clear directions to his followers about what the right course of action should be, and thus made it easier for people to feel less responsible for their actions in storming the Capitol.

### **The Power of Identification with Leaders**

Although people are more inclined to engage in problematic behavior if they can blame someone on for their actions, researchers have also found that people sometimes come to identify with

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<sup>8</sup> H. A. Tilker, “Socially responsible behavior as a function of observer responsibility and victim feedback,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 14, no. 2 (1970): 95–100.

<sup>9</sup> J. M. Burger, Z. M. Girgis, and C. C. Manning, “In their own words: Explaining obedience to authority through an examination of participants’ comments,” *Social Psychological and Personality Science* 2 (2011): 460–466.

those who are giving the orders, at which point they may be choosing willingly to engage in bad behavior. This explanation provides insight into some of the factors that led to the devastating effectiveness of the policies of the Nazis. People were not simply begrudgingly or numbly following orders; in many instances they embraced the broader social vision and mission of fascism. They identified with the dangers that Hitler was articulating, shared his muscular patriotism and nostalgia for a simpler past, embraced his hatred of outsiders, and bought into his vision of a racially pure society. Similarly, and as historian Heather Cox Richardson describes in *The Death of Reconstruction: Race, Labor, and Politics in the Post-Civil War North, 1886-1901*, during reconstruction wealthy white Americans were often quite adept at inspiring like-minded lower income whites to actually carry out aggressive and at times lethal acts against Black Americans, while simultaneously being able to maintain plausible deniability for their own role in perpetuating violence.<sup>10</sup> This tendency to identify with those giving the orders is especially common in the case of charismatic religious or political leaders.

In one study, researchers at the University of St. Andrews and the University of Exeter measured how identifying with a person giving orders affected people's actions.<sup>11</sup> They recruited people to read about the Milgram study and its variants and to evaluate how much they thought the participants in those studies would have identified with the "experimenter" (who was giving the orders), or with the "learner" (who was receiving the shocks). These variations tweaked the procedure in small but important ways. In one, the experimenter gave the orders to deliver shocks by phone instead of in person. In another, the experiment was run not at prestigious Yale University but at an office building in Bridgeport, Connecticut. The researchers then examined how these different variations shifted participants' identification in different ways – whether they would identify more with the experimenter and the scientific community or the learner – and how identification predicted the participants' willingness to obey or resist the orders.

Did identification influence obedience? In a word, yes. The variations that pushed participants to identify with the experimenter—and to see their actions as making a valuable contribution to the pursuit of scientific knowledge—led them to follow the orders to deliver shocks far longer. These findings suggest that people may engage in harmful behavior when they are following orders not simply because they feel absolved of responsibility but because they come to believe that their actions are serving a worthy purpose.

This explanation for problematic behavior seems particularly apt in terms of explaining the events of January 6<sup>th</sup>. Trump had spoken for years – starting with his announcement of his run for the presidency in June of 2015 – about the differences between "us" and "them," with "them" being various different groups (Mexicans, immigrants, Muslims, Democrats, Chinese people, elites, Black Lives Matter protesters, etc.). Trump had also regularly conveyed his concerns that both he and his supporters had been unfairly disadvantaged by various other people, from claims prior to the 2016 election that he wouldn't accept a victory by Clinton (and his continual claims

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<sup>10</sup> Richardson, Heather Cox. *The Death of Reconstruction: Race, Labor, and Politics in the Post-Civil War North, 1865–1901*. Harvard University Press, 2001. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1kwxg15>.

<sup>11</sup> S. D. Reicher, S. A. Haslam, and J. R. Smith, "Working toward the experimenter: reconceptualizing obedience within the Milgram paradigm as identification-based followership," *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 7, no. 4 (2012): 315–324.

of voter fraud and “millions of illegal immigrants” voting, even for an election he actually won) to claims that people of color and immigrants have “stolen” jobs and other benefits from (white) Americans. This us versus them mentality created a sense within his supporters that their actions on January 6<sup>th</sup> were rectifying long-standing and on-going unfairness within a corrupt system.

### **The Role of Gradual Escalation**

One final factor that helps explain people’s problematic behavior in group settings is the role of gradual escalation in fostering such behavior. In many cases, people start by engaging in a relatively small – but wrong – act, and may explain this small act away by seeing it as not such a big deal. However, once you take a small step in the wrong direction, it becomes hard to change course. Why? Once you’ve engaged in even a small wrong act, you need to justify having done so while still maintaining a positive view of yourself (as we all like to do). And then, when the harm escalates, it’s hard to change course without explaining one’s prior behavior. This phenomenon of gradual escalation – the so-called slippery slope - therefore explains why getting away with minor problematic acts makes you more likely to later embark on bigger, more serious transgressions.

The power of gradual escalation helps to explain why most participants in the Milgram study fully followed the orders of the authority figure to deliver dangerous shocks to an innocent person, which started with the delivery of only a very small – 15 volt - shock. Most people initially felt fine about obeying the experimenter’s request; after all, they believed they were doing so in the interest of important scientific research. But this gradual escalation of intensity meant that they had no easy way to justify a decision to stop giving shocks later on, as the intensity of the shock escalated into increasingly dangerous territory. Once one heads down the road of giving that first shock, it becomes very hard psychologically to extricate oneself.

To test whether engaging in small acts of dishonesty makes people more likely to engage in larger ones later, researchers at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill conducted a study in which they asked college students to complete a series of 19 math problems.<sup>12</sup> Some students always received \$2.50 for each correct answer, others receive no money for a right answer on the first two trials but would receive \$2.50 for each correct answer on the third trial, and still others (those in the gradual escalation group) were told they would earn 25 cents for each correct answer on the first trial, \$1.00 for each correct answer on the second trial, and \$2.50 for each correct answer on the third trial. The researchers then measured how much students in each group cheated, by taking more money than they were in fact owed. As predicted, people in the third group, with the gradual increase in reward, cheated the most—at double the rate of those in groups one and two. For people in the third group, the initial lie was very minor—they only received a quarter for lying, so it didn’t seem like a big deal. And once they had lied on the first trial, it was easier to continue doing so on subsequent trials in which the rewards for doing so were greater.

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<sup>12</sup>D. T. Welsh, L. D. Ordóñez, D. G. Snyder, and M. S. Christian, “The slippery slope: How small ethical transgressions pave the way for larger future transgressions,” *Journal of Applied Psychology* 100, no. 1 (2015): 114–127.

Real world examples of the power of gradual escalation are numerous. Fraternity initiation procedures also often follow this pattern of gradually escalating demands: small orders, such as running errands or cleaning someone's car, are followed by more severe ones, such as forced drinking or even physical beatings. Similarly, cases of corporate fraud often begin with small acts of unethical behavior leading to more substantial—and criminal—ones. Executives who have been found guilty of accounting fraud often describe a series of steps that led to the fraud, and they often can't recall exactly when their bad actions began.<sup>13</sup> Here's how one former chief financial officer described it: "Crime starts small, it progresses very slowly. First you work off the books. Some people say it's not a crime, okay, we'll rationalize it and say it's not a crime." And once you start down this path of bad behavior, it's really hard to pull yourself out. "It may seem like it's . . . it's, you know, trivial or benign or whatever the term you want to use, when you first cross the line," said one former administrative officer, "but all you have to do is put your toe across the line . . . then you're in, and once you're in, you're in." Other types of bad behavior—from academic cheating to sexual harassment—often play out in precisely the same way. The phenomenon is often referred to as the "boiling frog effect," a reference to the (false) belief that a frog dropped into boiling water will immediately jump out, whereas one that is dropped into lukewarm water that is slowly brought to a boil will stay put, as it fails to recognize the gradual increase in temperature—until it is too late.

Another factor that helps explain why engaging in small transgressions makes it easier for people to engage in larger ones is that over time people adapt to problematic behavior over time. People initially experience unpleasant physiological arousal when they engage in problematic behavior—because they do recognize that it's wrong—but over time, they adapt and no longer experience such a reaction. For example, people show lower levels of activation in the amygdala—a part of the brain that processes emotion—after repeatedly seeing negative images (of violence, death, anger, and so on).<sup>14</sup> Research in neuroscience also demonstrates that engaging in problematic behavior desensitize our brains to the negative emotions that typically occur when we do something we know is wrong—which, in turn, makes it easier to engage in bad behavior in the future.<sup>15</sup> This research shows that if—for whatever reason—a person takes a small step in the wrong direction, it can lead to bigger and bigger steps in the same direction.

These findings of course also help explain the events of January 6<sup>th</sup>. Prior to January 6<sup>th</sup>, far-right protestors had already planned and, in some cases, carried out attacks on lawmakers. In April of 2020, protestors with rifles entered the Michigan State Capitol building to demand an end to the restrictions Governor Gretchen Whitmer had put in place to reduce the spread of COVID. In October of 2020, members of a militia group plotted to kidnap Governor Gretchen Whitmer, following Trump's public denunciations of various restrictions she'd implemented to reduce

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<sup>13</sup> I. Suh, J. T. Sweeney, K. Linke, and J. Wall, "Boiling the frog slowly: The immersion of C-suite financial executives into fraud," *Journal of Business Ethics* (July 2018): 1–29.

<sup>14</sup> B. T. Denny, J. Fan, X. Liu, S. Guerreri, S. J. Mayson, L. Rinsky, et al., "Insula-amygdala functional connectivity is correlated with habituation to repeated negative images," *Social Cognitive and Affective Neuroscience* 9 no. 11 (2014): 1660–1667.

<sup>15</sup> N. Garrett, S. C. Lazzaro, D. Ariely, and T. Sharot, "The brain adapts to dishonesty," *Nature Neuroscience* 19 (2016): 1727–1732.



the spread of COVID, including his tweet in August to “Liberate Michigan.” In December of 2020, protestors stormed a meeting at the Oregon State Capitol, insisting that lawmakers remove covid-related restrictions. These protestors chanted “let us in” and “arrest Kate Brown” (the governor of Oregon), shattered glass doors into the Capitol, and carried firearms and bear spray (and sprayed officers who intervened with various chemical agents). These examples all illustrate that protestors were practicing for an eventual attack on the United States Capitol – if necessary – and their behavior modeled and likely inspired other like-minded supporters to attend the rally on January 6<sup>th</sup>.

Trump himself had previewed his goal for January 6<sup>th</sup> in the weeks leading up to this event. On December 19<sup>th</sup>, he had promoted this event several times by Tweet, including, “Big protest in D.C. on Jan. 6. Be there, will be wild!” This description clearly conveys that his intent is not for a peaceful protest, but rather will involve some type of chaotic and extreme (potentially unlawful) behavior. Not surprisingly, his supporters understood his intent and responded accordingly. On January 1<sup>st</sup>, one of his supporters tweeted “The calvary [sic] is coming, Mr. President!”, which Trump endorsed with a tweet describing that response as “A great honor!” In sum, the events of January 6<sup>th</sup> didn’t start that day: Trump laid the groundwork for those events weeks before, and his supporters planned, practiced, and prepared accordingly.

## **Conclusions**

In sum, empirical research in psychology clearly illustrates the role of numerous factors in contributing to the events of January 6<sup>th</sup>, including the anonymity provided in a group setting, the role of gradual escalation of problematic behavior, and the power of leaders to both reduce feelings of responsibility and inspire followers to act. Although my background is psychology, and thus I’ve focused specifically on summarizing the relevant scientific research in explaining the events of that day (and the days leading up to that day), similar factors help explain perhaps the most major event in our nation’s history: the Civil War.

After President Lincoln’s election in 1860, seven Southern states declared secession from the United States in the following months and several other states contemplated such a move, motivated by a fear that slavery in the South would be abolished. Although Lincoln initially took no action against the secessionists, he also refused to surrender federal property in these states to the “Confederate States of America,” eventually leading Confederate President Jefferson Davis to give orders to fire on Fort Sumter, and thus starting the Civil War. In this case, as was the case on January 6<sup>th</sup>, different constituencies within the United States recognized – and followed orders from – different leaders.

Did President Trump give a direct order to his supporters to storm the Capitol and hang his Vice President? No. But when someone as powerful as the President of the United States tells a large group of his supporters — who he knows are unhappy, weapons-brandishing, and action-oriented — to “fight like hell,” his supporters understand his implicit instruction. And I think the former president knew that, counted on it, and – at least in the privacy of the White House – celebrated as they stormed the Capitol on his behalf.