

## Harbingers: What January 6 and Charlottesville Reveal About Rising Threats to American Democracy

**Timothy J. Heaphy**

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Timothy J. Heaphy, the lead investigator for the House Select Committee investigating the January 6, 2021, attack against democracy in the United States, shares important lessons from that experience in his fascinating, often disturbing political science expose *Harbingers*.

Heaphy earned his role after leading a similar investigation into the notorious 2017 white supremacist “Unite the Right” rally in his hometown of Charlottesville, Virginia. *Harbingers* discusses both events in detail. Heaphy combed through hundreds of texts, emails, interviews, and other communications to trace the origins of the armed attacks and understand how law enforcement officials failed to anticipate their scopes and prevent disaster.

“Our investigation would create the definitive account of this seminal event in American history,” he explains, stressing the importance of following the facts wherever they led. The book doesn’t rehash all of the investigations’ findings, but it explains how investigators went about their work and focuses on some key aspects of both. It describes in detail how domestic terrorist groups organized online, taking advantage of weak content moderation policies and encrypted messaging apps. It also explains operational errors on the part of police and preparation steps that could have limited damage.

In terms of solutions, the book makes clear the importance of criminal and civil penalties for the perpetrators to deter future attacks. And it suggests a range of actions, from ways to better engage disaffected Americans in civic change to possible changes to Section 230, the part of the Communications Decency Law that limits the liability of social media platforms for content posted on them. Both findings and solutions are presented in a nonpartisan and straightforward manner that anyone interested in violence prevention should find useful.

At a time when political violence in the United States is becoming far too common, *Harbingers* offers important lessons about how it happens and what to do about it.

JEFF FLEISCHER (January / February 2025)

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