

What is antifa? Is it a group or an idea, and what do supporters want?

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 Conspiracy blames antifa for pro-Trump riot

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Antifa has seen a steady increase in media attention ever since former President Donald Trump took office in January 2017. Republicans often portray antifa as a highly organized group of "terrorists" worthy of national watch lists. Some conspiracy theorists falsely blamed antifa for the January 6 Capitol riots that led to five deaths.

Right-wing media blames antifa members for rioting and looting. Democrats have also condemned such violence, but many on the left say the rhetoric about antifa is greatly exaggerated, and that it's less of an organized movement than just something of "an idea."

But much of what politicians say about antifa isn't quite true. Here's what antifa is, what it isn't, and what you need to know.

Anti, anti, anti...

Antifa is not a highly organized movement, nor is it merely an idea. Antifa is a loose affiliation of local activists scattered across the United States and a few other countries.

The term "antifa" is short for anti-fascist; it's used both by its adherents and its foes.

In general, people who identify as antifa are known not for what they *support*, but what they *oppose*: Fascism, nationalism, far-right ideologies, white supremacy, authoritarianism, racism, homophobia and xenophobia. Some antifa activists also denounce capitalism and the government overall.

Mostly, people aligned with antifa are on the left of the political spectrum. Antifa is not, however, affiliated with President Joe Biden, the Democratic Party or its leaders. Mr. Biden has condemned antifa and called violence "unacceptable."

Antifa actions have included everything from tracking and publicly identifying members of alt-right groups to physically attacking adversaries.



Antifa members and counter protesters gather during a right-wing No-To-Marxism rally on August 27, 2017 in Berkeley, California. Amy Osborne / AFP/Getty Images

In "Antifa: The Anti-Fascist Handbook," author Mark Bray, an organizer for the Occupy Wall Street movement, lays out antifa's methods this way:

"Despite the media portrayal of a deranged, bloodthirsty antifa... the vast majority of anti-fascist tactics involve no physical violence whatsoever. Anti-fascists conduct research on the far right online, in person, and sometimes through infiltrations; they dox them, push central milieux to disown them, pressure bosses to fire them...

"But it's also true that some of them punch Nazis in the face and don't apologize for it."

During public demonstrations, antifa activists often wear top-to-toe black; even before the coronavirus pandemic, they were also known for wearing face coverings at public gatherings.

Antifa has no official national leadership, though followers have organized themselves into small, local cells that sometimes coordinate with other movements, such as Black Lives Matter. Some self-described antifa adherents have organized to confront Patriot Prayer, the Proud Boys, and other far-right groups during public demonstrations. Some of those rallies have devolved into violence.

Some antifa adherents keep a very low profile, while other local groups venture to give themselves a more public profile with a name and a [website](#). One of the oldest such groups appears to be Rose City Antifa, which says it was founded in [Portland, Oregon](#), in 2007. According to its website, its main focus is "any work that prevents fascist organizing, and when that is not possible, provides consequences to fascist organizers. This is supported by researching and tracking fascist organizations."

Antifa in prime time

Over Mr. Trump's years in office, coverage of "antifa" skyrocketed in the mainstream press. That coverage started on the day of his inauguration, when dozens of people took to the streets of the nation's capital in a protest that would soon grow violent. Authorities would later arrest several dozen of them, many of whom later identified [themselves](#) as antifa, and accuse them of starting fires and riots. Charges were eventually [dropped](#) for the bulk of the defendants, while others were [acquitted](#) by juries.

Mr. Trump pointed a finger at what he called the "alt-left" following the [infamous "Unite the Right"](#) rally in Charlottesville, Virginia in 2017. After a white supremacist [deliberately plowed his car](#) into a crowd of counter-protesters, killing a woman named [Heather Heyer](#), Mr. Trump sparked more outrage when he suggested an equivalency between the white supremacists and the protesters on the other side, who despite his claims were mostly peaceful.

"What about the alt-left that came charging at, what you say, the alt-right?" Mr. Trump [wondered aloud](#). "Do they have any semblance of guilt? What about the fact they're charging with clubs in their hands, swinging clubs, do they have any problem? I think they do."

In the years since then, media coverage has identified antifa as participants, and sometimes agitators, in clashes at numerous rallies and protests around the country. That includes a 2017 anti-hate [rally](#) in Berkeley, California, and a Patriot Prayer ["freedom rally"](#) in Portland, Oregon, in 2018.

In at least one instance, a person self-identifying as an antifa supporter has been linked to a deadly attack at a protest. Michael Forest Reinoehl, 48, was considered a prime suspect in the [August 2020 killing](#) of 39-year-old Aaron "Jay" Danielson, a right-wing activist who was shot during heated demonstrations in Portland. Reinoehl was later [shot to death](#) by federal authorities as they moved to arrest him.

▶ [Portland protest shooting suspect killed 08:04](#)

Reinoehl had described himself in a social media post as "100% ANTIFA."

The "T" word

In the summer of 2019, Republican Senators Ted Cruz and Bill Cassidy introduced a resolution calling for antifa to be labeled as a domestic terror organization. President Trump voiced his support on Twitter.

Major consideration is being given to naming ANTIFA an “ORGANIZATION OF TERROR.” Portland is being watched very closely. Hopefully the Mayor will be able to properly do his job!

— Donald J. Trump (@realDonaldTrump) August 17, 2019

But at the time, the Trump administration's own Department of Homeland Security and FBI didn't appear to view antifa as a leading threat. A DHS draft document from September 2020 reportedly named white supremacist groups as the biggest terror threat to America. That same document doesn't mention antifa at all.

The FBI also considers far-right groups the "top of the priority list." FBI director Christopher Wray said in February 2020 that the FBI places the risk of violence from racially-motivated extremist groups "on the same footing" as the threat posed by foreign terrorist organizations such as ISIS and its sympathizers.

That's not to say the FBI hasn't also taken aim at antifa. After arson and looting broke out amid the protests in Minneapolis following the death of George Floyd, Wray said: "We're seeing people who are exploiting this situation to pursue violent, extremist agendas — anarchists like ANTIFA, and other agitators. These individuals have set out to sow discord and upheaval, rather than join in the righteous pursuit of equality and justice."

But the idea of designating antifa a terror group worries some civil rights advocates.

"The designation would grant federal law enforcement broad powers, under the federal terrorism code, to surveil and investigate anyone labeled as antifa," the Southern Poverty Law Center said in a statement. "It could also allow federal law enforcement to broadly target anyone involved in protests viewed unfavorably by the Trump administration, even retroactively."

The center added, "President Trump's announcement is rooted in politics, not the present realities of the terror threat in the U.S."

False flags

Antifa has earned its reputation for sporadic violence. But many other rumors about antifa have been spun from whole cloth, sometimes by people later identified as right-wing extremists. In June 2020, Twitter shut down multiple fake antifa accounts that were inciting violence against white suburbs; subsequent investigations tracked the accounts to Identity Evropa, a white supremacist organization.



ANTIFA America
@ANTIFA_US



 ALERT 

Tonight's the night, Comrades 

Tonight we say "F [redacted] The City" and we move into the residential areas... the white hoods.... and we take what's ours 

[#BlacklivesMatters](#)

[#F \[redacted\] America](#) 

1:03 PM · May 31, 2020 · [Twitter for iPad](#)

501 Retweets 213 Likes

A screengrab of a tweet that Twitter says was posted by white supremacists posing as supporters of the left-wing anti-fascist movement antifa.

Right-wing figures and other commentators on social media also have falsely accused unspecified antifa members of starting wildfires on the West Coast, prompting police and fire officials to appeal to the public to stop spreading what one agency called "an UNTRUE rumor."

Another common conspiracy theory has alleged, without evidence, that billionaire philanthropist George Soros is funding antifa.

Fresh attention after Capitol riots

After the January 6 Capitol riots that left five dead, including a Capitol police officer, false rumors claimed antifa was behind the attacks. In fact, among the hundreds of criminal complaints filed so far, dozens involve suspects affiliated with right-wing organizations including Oath Keepers, Proud Boys, Three Percenters, and pro-Trump followers of the QAnon conspiracy theory, according to federal prosecutors.

One alleged rioter reportedly told friends that he planned to pose as antifa to fool law enforcement.

"When we looked at the data around the insurrection, we saw literally millions of pro-Trump [internet] posts that repeated the phrase 'antifa,'" said CBSN tech reporter Dan Patterson. "[But] when we look at the data, this boogeyman is nonexistent."