

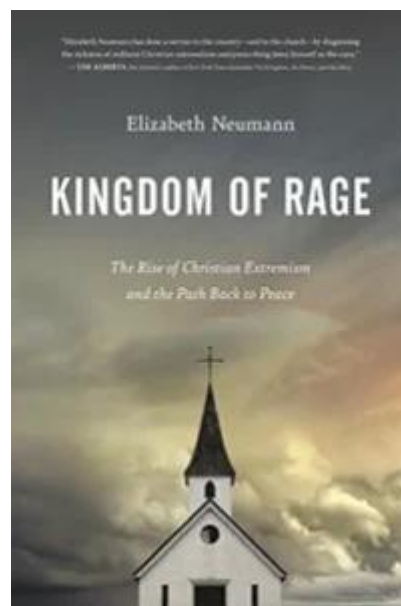
# Former Trump official combats Christian extremism

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WASHINGTON (RNS)—As Elizabeth Neumann watched the events of Jan. 6 unfold, the former assistant secretary for threat prevention and security policy in the Office of Strategy, Policy and Plans at the Department of Homeland Security was horrified.

Reared in conservative Christian communities, she found herself deeply disturbed by the violence, but also the preponderance of Christian flags waved by insurrectionists and the prayers some shouted as they attacked the U.S. Capitol.

“You had this intermixing of Christian ideas, symbols and Scriptures, somehow justifying this violence that happened on Jan. 6,” Neumann said in a recent interview.



Months before, Neumann had resigned from the Trump administration, claiming the then-president was dismissive of domestic terrorist threats. In the years since, she has grown increasingly convinced that conservative Christians are being exploited not just by politicians, but also by extremist groups, giving rise to a dangerous form of faith-infused radicalism.

In a new book, *Kingdom of Rage: The Rise of Christian Extremism and the Path Back to Peace*, Neumann chronicles this exploitation and offers ways to prevent further radicalization. She recently spoke with RNS to discuss her findings and share where she finds hope for the future. The interview has been edited for length and clarity.

### **What drove you to write this book?**

It actually came out of an interview that I gave to *Politico* in February 2021, a month after Jan. 6. They asked about what we saw on Jan. 6 from the Christian community. A cross on Capitol grounds. People praying over bullhorns in the Senate gallery. Placards with different Bible verses.

In December, before Jan. 6, you had the Jericho March, where they tried to play out the Israelites marching around Jericho and praying over Washington that we're going to "defeat the evil."

### **On Jan. 6, you felt your community had completed a "rage-filled metamorphosis into violent extremists." Terms like radicalization and extremism are common in your work, but can you say more about your choice of words?**

Somewhere in the *Politico* interview, I labeled it Christian extremism. I hadn't given much thought to that label, but I definitely felt as if we had Christians present who were demonstrating extremist activity and belief.

I spend some time introducing the reader to the way the counterterrorism community views extremism. I offer a definition of extremism and radicalization and then try to help people understand what the evidence shows us about why somebody radicalizes.

If somebody says: "This is the most consequential election of our lifetime. If Donald Trump doesn't win, then the country's going to go to hell. So, therefore, I'm going to go vote for Donald Trump," that is not extremism.

The premise is maybe not healthy, spiritually or psychologically, but it's not extremism.

But if somebody's "therefore" is, "I'm going to go monitor polling places wearing my military fatigues and carrying my AR-15, just to make sure no funny business happens," you're moving into intimidation and harassment and also into something that's illegal. That's the difference.

**You note in the book that white nationalism and Christian nationalism movements have taken advantage of Christian communities. How did we end up here?**

Some are coming from legitimate places of fear and grievance. The sexual ethic in this country has changed drastically in the last 10 years. *Obergefell v. Hodges* (the Supreme Court decision establishing marriage for same-sex partners) is a key moment. The law of the land used to adhere to a traditional biblical sexual ethic, and it kind of changed overnight. We're still catching up as a community to try to understand what that means.

In that great uncertainty, we can become really vulnerable to extremists. Extremists are really good at painting black and white pictures, and they offer this certainty that comes from some form of hostile action.

As the Christian community identifies itself with that political right, they're also intermingling with extremists. That confluence is where there's great danger. Most people are not going to go be violent extremists, but if we want to reduce the amount of violence in the country, we need to reduce the exposure to extremism.

**What broader factors are at work?**

We know that (social media companies) make money off of our fear, anger and outrage. They are incentivized to keep us in this perpetual state of outrage in a way that our forefathers back in the 1950s just didn't deal

with.

But there are also other what I would call society-wide factors—the fact that we are increasingly isolated. In the online space, we get a dopamine hit of belonging, even though it's not real belonging. That real-life connection is important, and the less we have, the more we have a need that is going unfilled, which can be exploited by extremists.

The other underlying need that we understand motivates people toward extremism is a need for significance. You have all these pastors and Christian authors writing books about what postmodern society has done to our souls, how we have increasingly lost meaning.

I compare that to what I know is happening in the extremist movement: One of the most rapidly growing types of violent extremism is a nihilistic version of extremism. It's like: life does not matter, so I should go out in a blaze of glory.

### **How has this changed people's relationship to their faith?**

The cultural Christian community has responded to these trials by turning to politics for solutions—turning to a politician as a savior figure, or turning to a political party. “If you could only get the government to work right, it would solve my financial difficulties.”

We keep turning to tools of man to solve what are ultimately spiritual problems. We've taken power politics and government and turned them into the ultimate thing, as opposed to something that falls under our faith. We've reordered, if you will, in the incorrect order: Politics is the premier, as opposed to our trust and faith in Jesus.

### **Are there trends you are particularly concerned about?**

We're in an election year, so we are increasingly seeing politicians use

violent rhetoric. (Arizona U.S. Senate candidate) Kari Lake, two or three weeks ago, said at a rally that you need to put on the armor of God, and “maybe strap on a Glock.” We are also seeing militias regroup. They’re organizing on Facebook again. I’m not sure why Facebook’s not cracking down on that.

More people are embracing the Christian nationalist label in kind of a funny way—almost like a backlash to critiques about Christian nationalism. Most Christian nationalists are not concerning from a security perspective, but there’s a smaller segment who are trying to put some significant rigor into their arguments.

I’m thinking in particular of Stephen Wolfe, author of *The Case for Christian Nationalism*. At the end of his book, he has these appendices that include a supposed theological justification for why violence is okay.

That is more concerning to me, because he’s laying out with some rigor—and by rigor, I mean lots of words—an argument for why violence, under his interpretation of Scripture, is appropriate for building the kingdom of God. That kind of stuff can influence a certain personality, a certain type of group.

**You write, “Can I tell you the good news up front? You are one of the best hopes we have in healing the country and preventing more violence.” How can readers of your book help prevent extremism?**

Being disrespected, psychological distress, a recent crisis or feeling like a helpless victim—those are all some of the top reasons why people are radicalized to extremism. I think the church has really great answers for what do we do when we’re disrespected: Scripture tells us Christ experienced the ultimate humiliation and modeled how we endure that.

The fact that a large portion of our country thinks that a biblical Christian ethic on sexuality is outdated puts us squarely where Jesus said we would

be—that we would be rejected, that our ways are not like the world's. The answer to that disrespect and that humiliation is in Scripture: We pray for those who persecute us. We do not retaliate in kind.

When I walk pastors through these details, the light bulb comes on. They're like: "Oh, you're not telling me to do anything new. Because Jesus has had these answers for 2,000 years."

There really, truly is nothing new under the sun. It's just that the social sciences caught up to the wisdom of what Jesus taught.