

Lucid Interview: Malcolm Nance.

On white privilege, January 6, and the extremist threat

By: [Ruth Ben-Ghiat](#)

I'm very pleased to bring you this interview with Malcolm Nance, who worked as a United States Navy Senior Chief Petty Officer specializing in cryptology and foreign languages - part of a three decades-long career in the US intelligence community. Nance is a four times *New York Times* best-selling author and media analyst for NBC/MSNBC news. He is the executive director of the Terror Asymmetries Project on Strategy, Tactics and Radical Ideologies (TAPSTRI). The interview, conducted on March 2, 2021, has been edited for clarity and flow.

RBG (Ruth Ben-Ghiat): I want to start with a striking observation you made in [The Plot to Betray America](#) (2019): "The Trump Presidency has come to feel like an unbridled psycho-cyber war." Two years later, do you agree with this assessment?

MN (Malcolm Nance): Trump is too stupid to have a strategy, and I say that as an intelligence professional. He doesn't think through things, he's only concerned with "what's in it for me, now, and how can I exploit others around me?" However, that makes him the perfect person to be manipulated and that's where the psycho-cyber war comes in. In that book, and in [The Plot to Hack America](#) (2016) and [The Plot to Destroy Democracy](#) (2018), I talk about how the Russians want to destroy democracy in the West and how Trump served as [Vladimir] Putin's "Western wing," breaking up alliances and things like that.

Putin, a former KGB agent, is executing a KGB-era strategy for dismantling democracy and creating an axis of autocracies, but he's doing it with oligarchs, for money. He's a James Bond villain, an Ernst Stavro Blofeld-type character. He understood early on that people in Russia were not over the Soviet mindset: they were just done with Communism.

RBG: You've been prescient about everything, and yet you said that you were regarded early on as a kind of conspiracy theorist. I find that when people say things that are too unfamiliar or shocking there is often an impulse to reject the messenger. Have you found that to be true?

MN: Yes. There were attempts by [Andrew Sullivan](#) and others to discredit the story I broke in the news media in 2016 about how the Russian information warfare attack was designed to help Trump become President. Here we must also talk about Black evidence. If a Black man or woman says something, it isn't verified until a White person says the same thing. Race factors into the dynamic of what people will find believable.

RBG: Yet another way that white privilege is defended. Let's talk about the Jan. 6 assault on the Capitol, which was the outcome of Trump's legitimization of extremist ideologies. How do you think the coup attempt will be seen in the future?

MN: I'm finishing a new book about the coming Trump insurgency. The Capitol attack was the launch of the insurgency. It is not the end state. I think because the Republicans are so masterful at [twisting](#) history, Jan. 6 could end up as a small footnote in the history books, unless it turns out to have been precipitating event for a massive terrorist attack.

We haven't learned the lessons of the [1995] Oklahoma City bombing, which has been treated as a little tic in history rather than as the seminal event it was. The FBI was doing great anti-terrorist work in the 1980s, but after Oklahoma City, caution about seeming biased [against the right] led to a pullback. In [2009](#), [Department of Homeland Security secretary] Janet Napolitano called rightwing extremism the greatest threat to the US, but the right wanted to keep the focus on Muslims. Then Trump [removed](#) domestic terrorism from investigation. Basically, if it is White, it is not allowed to be investigated. So now we have is a tribal war in the US, with Trump the leader of the White tribe.

RB: What about the dangers presented by civilian possession of military-grade weapons, which were in evidence among the insurgents on Jan. 6? Shouldn't stricter gun laws be part of the push against extremism?



January 6 insurgents. Kent Nishimura/Los Angeles Times/via Getty Images.

MN: There is an obvious problem of fetishizing guns and also fetishizing the military and deifying Special Forces in particular. I've watched the rise of the "Vetbro" and "tacticool" worlds. People are delusional, they don't go to the range to shoot, now they practice like they are Special Forces, putting on all the gear. They have cheap Chinese armored plate carriers with no armor in them, etc., but their guns are real and they shoot them.

RBG: How do we combat this? Your January *Washington Post* [op-ed](#) suggested shaming practices. "Society must make it socially distasteful to the prospective insurgent to believe the nation will ever stand with them," you write, arguing we should focus on their destructiveness and criminality, and spread the word when their family members turn them in, to encourage others to do the same.

MN: We have to launch this shaming counter-ideology strategy, if only to stop the further legitimization of the extreme right, which has already taken over the GOP. When I read gun forums, I used to find them full of moderate, centrist Republicans; now they are hard core. We have to hammer home that January 6 was a criminal action. I was glad to see FBI Director

[Christopher Wray] [call](#) it a domestic terror attack. The FBI knows that capture and kill teams were deployed on Jan.6, and that the larger scale attack was the cover.

RBG: An aspect of coup plotting that gets less attention is making sure that some people don't act: that law enforcement and security [stand down](#) to let the coup happen. We read about the intelligence failures that led the Pentagon, for example, to [delay](#) sending reinforcements to the Capitol on January 6. How do you see it?

MN: The entire national security apparatus was deliberately turned off. That's because the assumption was that they are White, they are Trump voters, and so they will not do anything. This is absurd because anyone in national security knows that you have to take the Israeli mindset. Everyone is considered a potential terrorist and assumed to be carrying a bomb until they are searched. Instead, here the whole national security infrastructure turned off and disarmed itself. The Whiteness of the insurgents was the camouflage that allowed them to close in on their enemies.

RBG: You are trained to live under duress and manage high tension situations, but what do you do to keep serene?

MN: Good question. I keep balance by maintaining my dignity and my honor. My family has served in the armed forces nonstop since 1864. You know, I lost my wife [the architect Maryse Beliveau-Nance] in 2019, and being a widower gives you a different perspective on the world. You are not single, you are married, but in an alternative state of marriage. Anyone close to a spouse who passed away will understand - they constantly communicate with you in distinct ways, they talk to you, giving advice. I built an acre and a half memorial garden for my wife.

Posted with approval by Dr. Ruth Ben-Ghiat

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