

Mitigating Harms From Crisis Events: Political Violence and Protests



POLARIZATION & EXTREMISM
RESEARCH & INNOVATION LAB
SCHOOL of PUBLIC AFFAIRS

Manipulation and Harmful Narratives Surrounding the Killings of Renée Good and Alex Pretti

Crisis Background

Two fatal shootings by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) garnered substantial media attention and online discussion in both fringe and mainstream spaces: the January 7, 2026, fatal shooting of Renée Good, a mother and legal observer, and the January 24, 2026, fatal shooting of Alex Pretti, a Veterans Affairs ICU nurse. Both incidents took place in Minneapolis, Minnesota, during heightened immigration enforcement under Operation Metro Surge.

Bad actors continue to exploit these killings to spread harmful narratives via common manipulation techniques. These include using faulty assertions, black and white thinking, and us vs. them narratives. These tactics often targeted LGBTQ+ and Latino communities, deepening polarization surrounding already divisive issues of government violence and protest.

Themes: Harmful Narratives

Posters commonly used logical fallacies and illogical leaps in narratives surrounding discussions of the killing of Good and Pretti. These include **faulty assertions** and “whataboutism,” linking the fatal incidents to other unrelated violent incidents, including those involving George Floyd and Trayvon Martin and narratives diminishing such violence. Posters also asserted definitive assessments of guilt or innocence based on polarized opinions rather than established jurisprudence, a tactic known as “armchair lawyering.”

Posters often used **black and white thinking** and victim blaming narratives, portraying victims of political violence as solely responsible for the harm they experienced. Such victim blaming narratives reduced complex questions about accountability and the use of force to simple, ideological judgments, obscuring the actual responsibility of the perpetrators involved. Critical nuance is lost.

Us vs. them narratives were also common in reactions to these fatal incidents. Some posters accused Good and Pretti of representing a “woke” (e.g., progressive, feminist, pro-LGBTQ+, pro-immigrant) out-group and deserved to die because of their perceived ideology (e.g., allowing “these [immigrant] assholes” into the U.S.). Other users framed ICE and its supporters as the out-group responsible for harming “us,” reinforcing a cycle of polarization.



Targeted Anti-LGBTQ+ and Anti-Immigrant Rhetoric on Gab

The fatal shootings of Renée Good and Alex Pretti (indicated by the dotted vertical lines) coincided with marked increases in the discussion of Minnesota/Minneapolis and ICE, CBP, and DHS on the platform Gab. On Gab, after the death of Good, the count of posts containing anti-LGBTQ+ content increased by 80% for a period of three days then stabilized at an elevated level. By contrast, the fatal shooting of Pretti coincided with elevated levels of targeted anti-Latino rhetoric (+52%) relative to the intervening period between the two fatalities.

● =Anti-Latino Terms ● =Anti-LGBTQ+ Terms

Preventing Manipulation

PERIL's evidence-based research shows that teaching about manipulative tactics is more effective than counterarguing with facts. A starting point is always to point out manipulation as a tactic of bad actors who are trying to persuade you. In addition, these three tactics can be addressed directly through evidence-informed responses:

Faulty assertions can be countered by identifying the fallacies/faulty logic at play, providing counter evidence, focusing on arguments, not actors, and educating about how to engage in more sound logic and arguments.

Black and white thinking can be addressed with messages that challenge harmful narratives by identifying gray areas or use moderate language (e.g. replace “always/never” with “sometimes”).

Us vs. them narratives can be mitigated by shifting focus from divisive labels to common goals while promoting empathy and shared interests.

PERIL analyzes harmful, salient, and fast-moving narratives to inform violence prevention. In this series, we highlight prevalent manipulation strategies that appear in the aftermath of common crises.

Scan QR for more resources developed from PERIL's research.

