

Revolutionary Violence in the New Gilded Age



Insight Forward



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report argues that the United States has entered a **new era of revolutionary violence** that echoes the original Gilded Age in structure but differs dramatically in speed, tools, and targets. Then, violence stemmed from labor uprisings, anarchist assassinations, and a reaction to monopolistic industrial capitalism. Now, **corporations themselves are becoming focal points** of ideological and physical attack. A convergence of trends has driven this shift:

1

There is no longer a clear separation between employee identity and corporate values. Workers expect the organizations they work for to reflect their moral, social, and political beliefs.

2

The boundary between the market and the political sphere has eroded. Corporations are now social and cultural institutions, and CEOs are seen as political actors. As a result, corporate meetings, shareholder events, and leadership forums are increasingly targeted by both internal dissent and external activism.

3

The **social and technological barriers to violence have significantly lowered**. There is a rising tolerance for the use of violence as a legitimate form of expression. Technological tools such as commercial drones, online doxxing platforms, and homemade weapons have democratized access to violent methods.

4

Extremist ideologies rooted in anti-elitism are rapidly gaining traction. Executives are as symbols of systemic injustice, and **the assassination of UnitedHealthcare CEO Brian Thompson by Luigi Mangione marked a symbolic turning point**.

Drawing from historical parallels, digital ethnography, and threat analysis, this report concludes that corporations must urgently adapt their security, governance, and communications strategies. Executive protection must now include reputational monitoring and narrative analysis. Intelligence functions must track ideological ecosystems as closely as they do cybersecurity threats.

Corporate executive leadership must understand that in the New Gilded Age, they are navigating a collapsing social contract in which they have become the contested symbols of power.

INTRODUCTION

In the United States today, a new era of revolutionary violence is emerging marked by **fragmented anger, conspiratorial narratives**, and targeted fury aimed at corporations and the elite institutions they dominate. What observers are witnessing **echoes the turbulence of the Gilded Age** (circa 1870–1900), when explosive economic growth collided with widespread inequality, rapid technological transformation, and political volatility. That period birthed some of the most dramatic labor uprisings and political assassinations in American history, disruptions that were signals of a collapsing social contract.

During the original Gilded Age, industrial titans such as John D. Rockefeller, Andrew Carnegie, and



Leon Czolgosz

J.P. Morgan amassed unprecedented wealth and influence, while the majority of Americans toiled in poverty. Political machines protected corporate interests, unionization efforts were violently suppressed, and anarchist ideologies flourished in the shadow of financial monopolies. The assassination of President James Garfield in 1881 by a disillusioned office-seeker, and later, President William McKinley in 1901 by anarchist Leon Czolgosz, illustrated just how fragile elite authority had become. The Haymarket Affair of 1886, the Pullman Strike of 1894, and other clashes between labor and capital signaled that **political violence was, in many cases, viewed as a justifiable response** to systemic abuse.

Currently, America finds itself at a similar crossroads but under the digital glare of social media, in the midst of unprecedented technological disruption, and with a far more ideologically fragmented society. **Income inequality has returned to Gilded Age levels**, meanwhile, the rise of artificial intelligence, automation, and surveillance capitalism has led to widespread fears of economic displacement and elite control over the future of humanity. Corporations, once expected to remain politically neutral, are now treated as ideological actors, subject to protest, sabotage, and in rare but increasingly noteworthy cases, targeted violence. The assassination of UnitedHealthcare CEO Brian Thompson in 2024 by Luigi Mangione marked a disturbing new precedent. As with anarchist acts in the 1890s, Mangione has become a symbolic figure for online fringe communities who celebrate him as a revolutionary hero.

This report looks at how the United States is undergoing a repeat of the Gilded Age’s core dysfunctions: elite dominance, populist backlash, and the fraying of institutional legitimacy. But unlike the 19th century, the tools of disruption, digital platforms, ideological echo chambers, and open-source attack methods, are far more accessible, and the targets (corporate leaders and institutions) are more exposed than ever. **The line between protest and political violence is narrowing**, and corporations now sit at the epicenter of this unfolding storm.

HISTORICAL ECHOES: THE FIRST GILDED AGE

To understand the roots of today’s revolutionary violence, it is essential to revisit the original Gilded Age—a period of intense economic transformation and social unrest in the United States from approximately 1870 to 1900. It was an era of vast technological innovation, extreme income inequality, political corruption, and growing corporate power. These conditions gave rise to **a wave of radical political ideologies, labor revolts, and, ultimately, acts of domestic terrorism and assassination** that targeted the political and economic elite. Many of the features that defined this age, particularly the **backlash against monopolistic corporations and elite domination**, are hauntingly familiar today.

Labor Unrest and Revolutionary Violence

The Gilded Age was marked by major episodes of labor unrest, many of which turned violent. The **Haymarket Affair of 1886** remains one of the most pivotal. It began as a peaceful rally in Chicago supporting workers striking for an eight-hour workday but ended in chaos when an unknown assailant threw a bomb at police, killing seven officers and at least four civilians. In the aftermath, eight anarchists were convicted (four executed), despite the lack of evidence linking them directly to the attack (Avrich, 1984). The Haymarket Affair became both a rallying cry for international labor movements and an early indicator of the extent to which American industrial tensions could erupt into revolutionary violence, and International Workers’ Day (May Day) still celebrated today coincides with the celebration of the general strike that led to the event.



A commonly reproduced image of the Haymarket massacre.

In **1892, the Homestead Strike** in Pennsylvania became another flashpoint. Workers at Carnegie Steel’s Homestead plant, organized under the Amalgamated Association of Iron and Steel Workers, launched a strike after management proposed wage cuts. The conflict escalated when Carnegie’s

plant manager, Henry Clay Frick, hired 300 armed Pinkerton agents to break the strike. The ensuing battle left at least 10 people dead and was a turning point in public perceptions of industrial violence and corporate authoritarianism.

The most symbolic act of revolutionary violence in the Gilded Age was **the assassination of President William McKinley in 1901**. The assassin, Leon Czolgosz, was a self-proclaimed anarchist who believed McKinley represented a corrupt capitalist regime. Czolgosz was inspired by the writings of European anarchists and by the execution of Haymarket figures a decade earlier. His act was a direct challenge to the American elite's perceived betrayal of the working class and marked the climax of the anarchist wave in the United States.

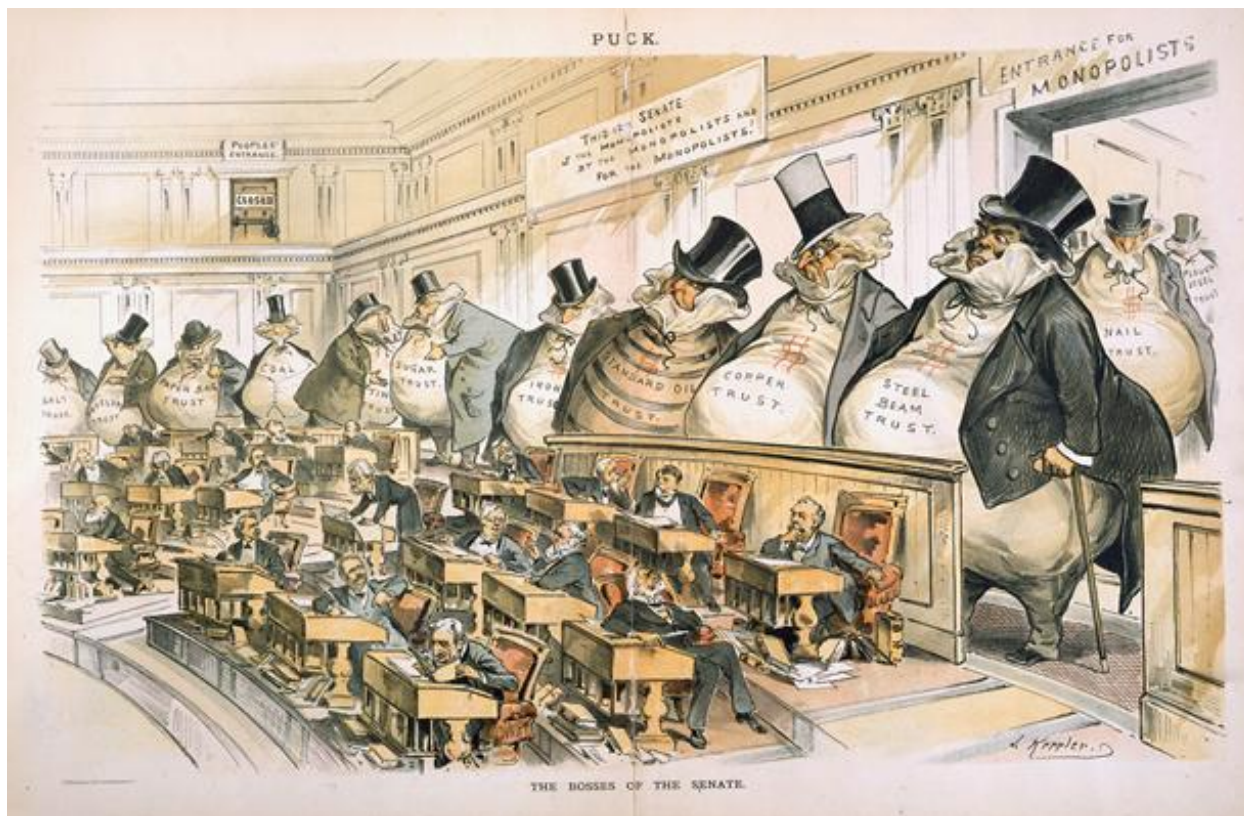
Technological Disruption and Corporate Dominance

The Gilded Age was driven by transformative technologies that reshaped American life. The **rapid expansion of the railroad network**, totaling nearly 200,000 miles by 1900, revolutionized commerce and labor markets. The rise of electricity, the telegraph, and mass production techniques enabled by mechanization introduced profound changes in communication, factory labor, and the spatial distribution of economic power. While these technologies created immense wealth, they also generated insecurity and dislocation among workers. **The fear of being rendered obsolete by machines**, replaced by cheaper immigrant labor, or disciplined by mechanized factory routines created the social conditions for backlash. The era's inventors, like Edison, Westinghouse, and Bell, became symbols of both American progress and elite dominance.

Economic power during the Gilded Age was increasingly **concentrated in the hands of a few "robber barons."** John D. Rockefeller's Standard Oil came to control over 90% of U.S. oil refining by the 1880s through aggressive consolidation, price wars, and vertical integration. Andrew Carnegie's steel empire symbolized the sheer scale of industrial capitalism, while J.P. Morgan's financial trusts demonstrated the growing entwinement of finance and industrial control. These monopolies were not merely economic entities. **They exerted massive political influence** through lobbying, bribery, and control over the press, and these industrialists saw themselves as benevolent dictators, entitled to reshape society under the justification of economic Darwinism.

New Politics and Ideologies

In response to all of these changes, **a number of political movements emerged to challenge elite dominance.** For example, the Populist Party (founded in 1891) represented agrarian resistance to financial and railroad monopolies. Its 1892 platform called for nationalizing railroads, direct election of senators, and monetary reform—radical ideas at the time. At the same time, the Progressive movement gained momentum among urban reformers who sought to regulate corporations, break up trusts, and implement labor protections. The American Federation of Labor, founded by Samuel Gompers in 1886, provided a more conservative alternative to anarchist and socialist labor movements, advocating for collective bargaining and incremental labor reform.



Source: "The Bosses of the Senate," and anti-business cartoon from 1889

Yet **these peaceful movements coexisted with more radical ideologies**, many imported from Europe. Anarchism, socialism, and syndicalism spread through immigrant networks and working-class newspapers, creating an ideological environment in which political violence was sometimes seen as a justified response to systemic injustice. The ideological ecosystem of the late 19th century was volatile. Radical newspapers like *The Alarm* and *Mother Earth* published calls to action against capitalism. European thinkers such as Bakunin, Kropotkin, and Marx inspired a generation of revolutionaries in the U.S., particularly among German and Russian immigrants. Meanwhile, the nativist reaction against these movements, embodied in laws like the Anarchist Exclusion Act of 1903, only deepened the sense of alienation among the radicalized working class.

The Gilded Age was not only a time of economic transformation but also of systemic fragility. **Inequality, corruption, and technological displacement did not merely provoke protest, they incited revolutionary ideologies and acts of violence aimed directly at political and corporate elites.** The parallels to today's conditions are not metaphorical, and understanding the dynamics of the First Gilded Age is crucial to recognizing the warning signs in the contemporary period.

THE NEW GILDED AGE: STRUCTURAL SIMILARITIES

The term “Gilded Age” is no longer only a historical reference as it has become a fitting diagnosis for the socio-economic conditions of early 21st-century America. Many of the structural patterns that defined the late 19th century, such as stark **inequality, monopolistic corporate power, technological disruption, and institutional decay**, have returned in updated form. Though the material conditions differ, **the social psychology and systemic stresses remain eerily similar**. Today’s landscape reflects a “New Gilded Age,” in which many of the same seeds of discontent are taking root, with potentially revolutionary consequences.

Economic Inequality

The defining feature of both Gilded Ages is extreme wealth concentration. In the late 19th century, industrialists like Rockefeller and Carnegie controlled entire industries, amassing fortunes previously unimaginable. Today, inequality has surpassed even those levels. According to Thomas



Titans of Business Now and Then

Piketty and Emmanuel Saez’s [longitudinal studies](#) of income and wealth, **the top 1% of Americans now capture over 20% of total income, a share not seen since just before the Great Depression**. More starkly, the top 0.1% (roughly 160,000 households) now hold nearly as much wealth as the bottom 90% combined. This dynamic is reinforced by asset-based capitalism: while the wealthy derive income from capital gains, the majority of Americans remain dependent on wages.

As a [2022 report](#) from the RAND

Corporation notes, had income growth been more evenly distributed since 1975, the bottom 90% would be earning \$2.5 trillion more annually in aggregate. The result is a permanent sense of economic precarity and institutional betrayal, particularly among younger generations.

Technological Upheaval and Obsolescence Anxiety

If the first Gilded Age was defined by railroads, telegraphs, and factory mechanization, the new one is driven by artificial intelligence, automation, biotechnology, and platform capitalism. These technologies promise productivity and convenience but also generate widespread fears of obsolescence and dehumanization. A Pew [Research Center survey](#) found that **62% of Americans believe AI will have a mostly negative impact on workers over the next 20 years**, with younger and lower-income respondents expressing the highest levels of anxiety. Automation has already hollowed out mid-skill jobs across industries, while the gig economy, enabled by platforms like

Uber, DoorDash, and Amazon Flex, has created a new class of precarious, underinsured, algorithmically managed workers. Biotechnological developments such as CRISPR and neural implants are increasingly seen as the province of elites, sparking philosophical and political concerns about human agency and inequality in access to enhancement. These changes disrupt labor markets, destabilizing identity and social cohesion, much as the factory system did to artisans in the 19th century.

Corporate Consolidation and Monopoly Power

Like the trusts of the first Gilded Age, today's corporate behemoths dominate entire sectors. Companies such as Alphabet (Google), Amazon, Meta (Facebook), Apple, and Microsoft are among the most powerful entities in history, not just economically, but culturally and politically. **These firms are essentially becoming their own sovereign entities with individual security and foreign policies.** In digital advertising, for example, Google, Amazon, and Facebook command about [70% of all revenues](#). In cloud computing, Amazon Web Services alone controls [about a third](#) of the global market.

Wall Street Owns
the Country

- Mary Lease, Populist speaker, 1890

#OccupyWallStreet

- Popular hashtag circa 2011

Beyond tech, private equity firms have quietly amassed control over significant swaths of health care, housing, and media. Meanwhile, firms like Blackstone, Apollo, and Carlyle are major players in housing, contributing to higher rents and evictions, particularly in urban markets. This concentration of economic control has renewed calls for antitrust enforcement akin to the Sherman Antitrust Act of 1890. However, despite high-profile hearings and lawsuits, meaningful structural reform has lagged. The economic “barons” of today, like Jeff Bezos, Elon Musk, and Larry Fink, may differ in personality and industry from their 19th-century counterparts, but they evoke similar fears that democratic governments are no longer in control.

Weakening Institutions and Public Trust

Perhaps the most alarming similarity between the old and new Gilded Ages is **the erosion of trust in core institutions**. In the late 1800s, corruption scandals involving railroad companies, political machines, and vote-buying delegitimized both government and electoral processes. Today,

institutional decay is even more widespread. According to Gallup’s 2023 [Confidence in Institutions poll](#), trust in Congress sits at 8%, the Supreme Court at 27%, and newspapers at 18%—record lows in each category and showing little improvement in 2024.

How much confidence do you, yourself, have in each one

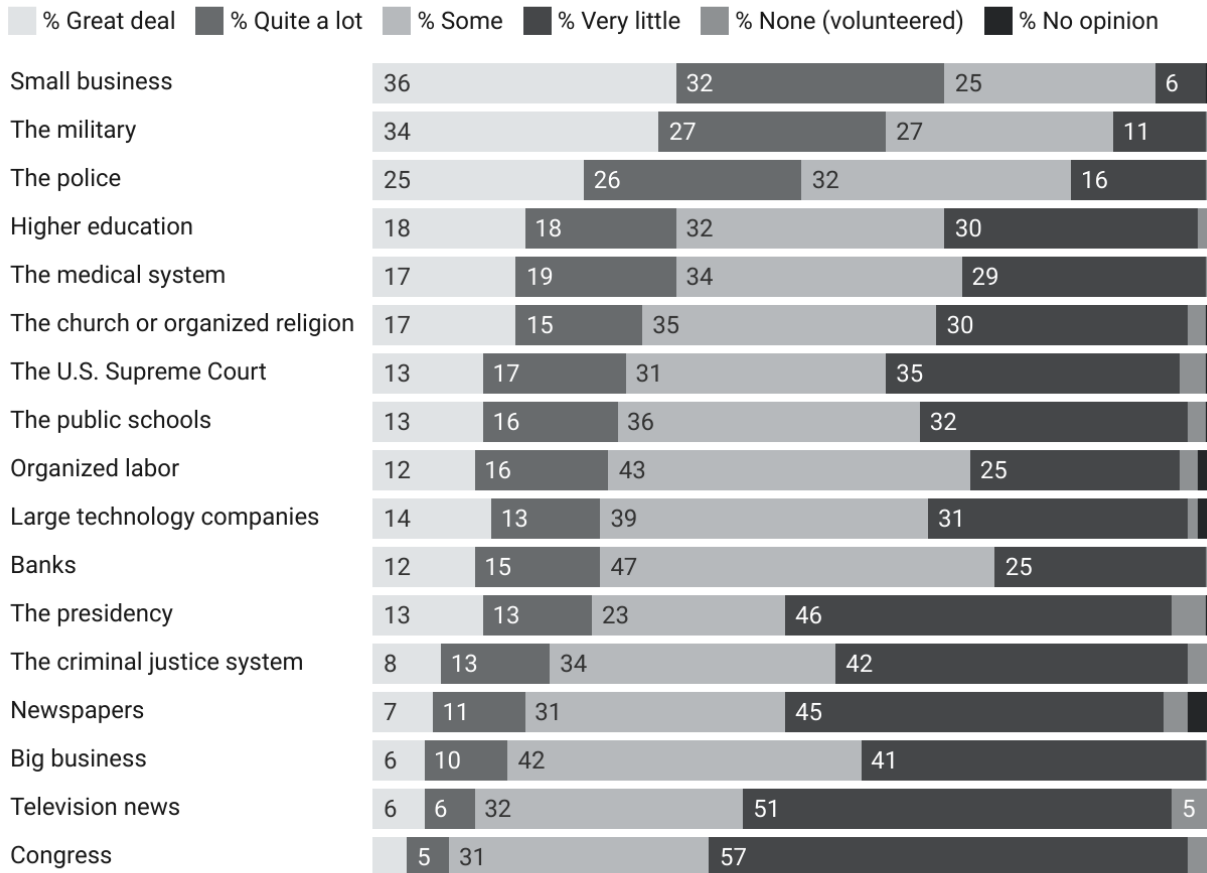


Chart: Insight Forward • Source: Gallup Confidence in Institutions Poll 2024 • Created with Datawrapper

This loss of faith is not confined to the state. Trust in media, universities, banks, and even science has cratered across political lines. Electoral legitimacy itself is contested. In a 2022 [NPR/Ipsos poll](#), nearly two-thirds of Republicans and a third of independents believed the 2020 election was stolen, a belief fueling the January 6th Capitol riot and broader political instability. The sociologist Zygmunt Bauman referred to this condition as “[liquid modernity](#),” a world in which once-solid institutions have melted away, leaving individuals to navigate uncertainty without shared maps or moral anchors. **The vacuum left by decaying institutions is increasingly filled by conspiracy theories, ideological extremism, and populist rage.**

The structural conditions that once drove the United States into a storm of labor revolt and anti-elite violence are again converging. Extreme inequality, disruptive technological change, unchecked corporate power, and institutional collapse have created a volatile environment. If

history offers any guide, this New Gilded Age is a precursor to political crisis. In this environment, the next act may not be policy reform, but revolutionary confrontation.

CULTURAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL DRIVERS OF MODERN VIOLENCE

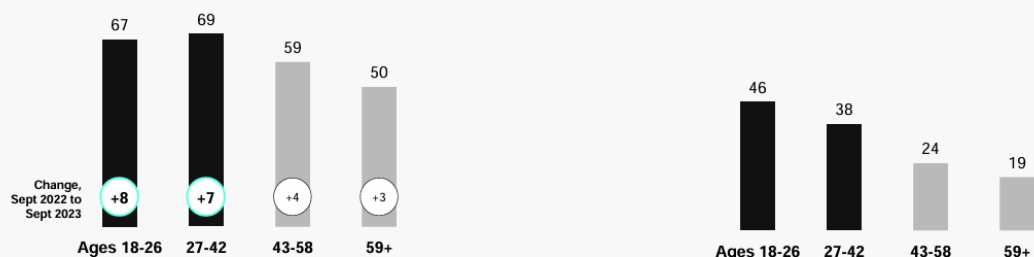
While structural forces such as inequality and technological change lay the foundation for instability, **the spark for modern anti-corporate violence increasingly stems from cultural and psychological shifts.** In the past, there was a clear boundary between a person's identity and their employer's mission, and corporations were largely expected to remain politically neutral. Those norms have collapsed. **Today, corporations are seen not just as economic actors but as moral entities and expected to adopt stances on polarizing issues.** As that expectation has intensified, so too has the backlash. This cultural transformation has created an emotionally volatile environment in which companies and their executives become targets of ideological rage, from both the left and the right.

The Collapse of Corporate–Employee Separation

The relationship between workers and their employers has transformed in recent years. **Employees, particularly younger, college-educated workers, now demand that companies reflect and reinforce their personal values.** A 2022 [Gartner report](#) found that 68% of employees expect their employer to take a public stance on social issues such as racial justice, LGBT rights, and climate change. This shift is partly generational and partly structural. In a society where other institutions (such as churches, civic associations, and political parties) have atrophied, the corporation has become one of the few spaces where people expect ethical leadership and personal alignment.

I frequently engage in conversations with my coworkers about important societal issues

I am regularly so distraught over what is happening in the news that I am unable to function at work



2023 Edelman Trust Barometer Special Report: Trust at Work. CIVIL_ROLE. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements? 9-point scale; top 4 box, agree. Question asked of half the sample. CNG_ATT. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements? 9-point scale; top 4 box, agree. Question asked of half the sample. 7-mkt avg., by generation. All data is filtered to be among employees who work for an organization or corporation (Q437). Year-over-year changes were tested for significance using a t-test set at the 99%+ confidence level.

Edelman Trust Barometer Special Report Trust at Work 2023

This has led to a series of high-profile employee revolts. The [2018 Google walkout](#), in which 20,000 employees protested the company's handling of sexual harassment claims and its secret military contract with the Pentagon ([Project Maven](#)), signaled a new era of moral performance politics in the workplace. At Disney, employee and public [backlash](#) forced the company to respond to Florida's controversial "Don't Say Gay" bill, even as Republican Governor Ron DeSantis retaliated by targeting Disney's special tax status. In each case, companies found themselves caught between competing expectations: silence was interpreted as complicity, while speaking out risked backlash from customers, lawmakers, or political factions.

Employee activism has become one of the most visible expressions of internal corporate dissent, signaling a broader breakdown in the boundary between political identity and professional life. Recent high-profile disruptions, such as the protest at Microsoft's [50th anniversary party](#), where an employee publicly accused the company of complicity in war crimes due to its AI contracts with the Israeli government, highlight how corporate events have become flashpoints for ideological confrontation. In a related case, Microsoft [terminated an employee](#) who interrupted CEO Satya Nadella's remarks to protest the company's military partnerships, underscoring the company's zero-tolerance stance on internal dissent spilling into public view. These incidents are not isolated.

Tech conferences are now [bolstering security measures](#) to preempt employee-led disruptions, and major firms are revising internal policies and crisis communication plans in [anticipation of politically charged protests](#). As companies like Google and Microsoft have already experienced, internal activism is increasingly organized, moralistic, and uncontained by traditional HR channels. The trend reveals a deeper structural shift showing the collapse of the separation between employee values and corporate mission. **When workers view their employers as moral actors, and sometimes, as moral violators, they are more likely to engage in direct confrontation.** In the context of the New Gilded Age, such confrontations are a leading indicator of the rising potential for symbolic or physical violence against corporate institutions, driven from within as much as from without.

This is also the context in which whistleblower culture has flourished. **Employees now feel both empowered and obligated to publicly expose internal contradictions between corporate values and actual behavior.** Facebook (now Meta) whistleblower Frances Haugen, who [leaked internal research](#) in 2021 showing the company's awareness of its platforms' harmful effects on mental health and political discourse, framed her actions as moral intervention. As she testified to Congress: "The company's leadership knows how to make Facebook and Instagram safer and won't make the necessary changes because they have put their astronomical profits before people." Such statements reflect a broader belief that corporations must now be held to ethical account—not only in courts or markets, but in public moral space.

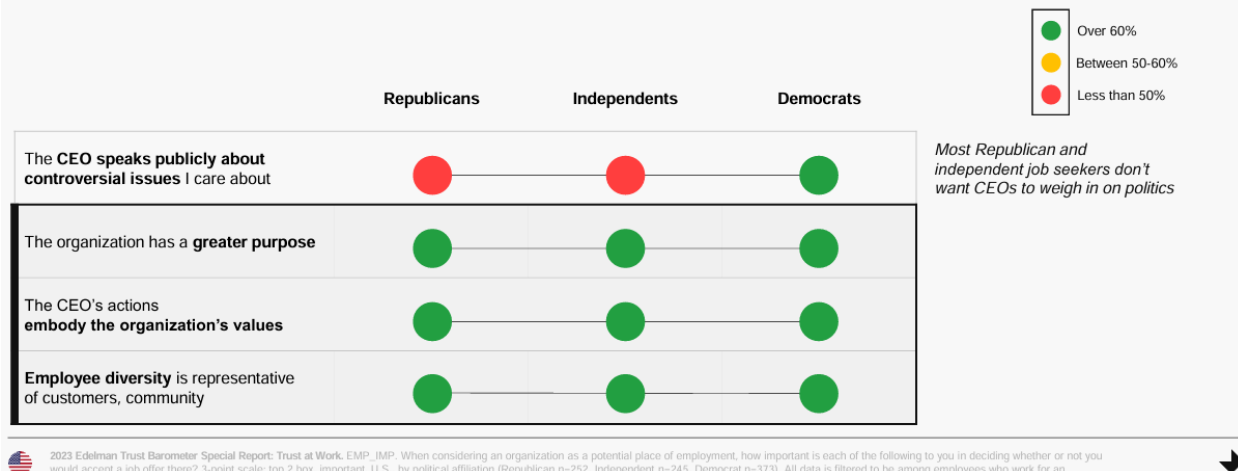
The Politicization of the Corporation

Corporate leaders today are seen as political actors whether they want to be or not. Once, executives could claim neutrality in public debates; now, silence is interpreted as alignment with

the wrong side. This politicization has intensified since 2020, when widespread protests over racial justice, COVID-19 mandates, and electoral legitimacy forced corporations into the center of America’s ideological battles. According to the [Edelman Trust Barometer](#), a 2023 survey of 28 countries found that business is now the most trusted institution globally, far more than government, media, or NGOs, but that trust is also conditional on corporate advocacy.

Consumers and employees alike expect companies to take stands on social and political issues, even as doing so alienates other stakeholders.

Percent of U.S. employees who say each is a **strong expectation or deal breaker** when considering a job



Edelman Trust Barometer Special Report Trust at Work 2023

The case of Bud Light offers a [vivid example](#) of this dynamic. In April 2023, the company sent a promotional can to transgender influencer Dylan Mulvaney as part of a social media campaign. Right-wing media figures, including Matt Walsh and Ben Shapiro, called for boycotts and destruction of Bud Light products, framing the campaign as evidence of “woke corporate capture.” The backlash led to a reported [25% drop in sales](#), widespread threats against Anheuser-Busch employees, and the placement of executives on leave. This event became a symbolic battle over national values, with the brand as a proxy.

Meanwhile, Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) investing has come under coordinated attack from conservative politicians and think tanks, who [accuse large firms](#) like BlackRock and State Street of advancing a “woke agenda” under the guise of shareholder value. In 2023 alone, over a dozen U.S. states passed or proposed legislation to restrict public investment in ESG-oriented funds. At the same time, progressive activists have targeted companies for [failing to live up](#) to their own ESG commitments, particularly in areas like racial equity, labor practices, and carbon emissions. In other words, the corporation is now flanked on both sides.

This politicization has made executives vulnerable in unprecedented ways. Where once business leaders were insulated from political controversy, they are now often portrayed as ideological enemies. Elon Musk’s controversial stance on free speech and his reinstatement of banned accounts on Twitter/X has drawn both admiration and death threats. Amazon CEO Andy

Jassy and other health care and logistics executives have been targeted for allegedly exploiting workers during the pandemic. This reflects a larger shift. **Executives are not just seen as economic stewards, but as embodiments of systemic injustice.**

The collapse of boundaries between employee identity and corporate values, coupled with the politicization of business leadership, has destabilized the role of the corporation in society. Companies cannot assume they are neutral actors in political life as they are now seen as either champions or enemies of one worldview or another. This shift has created a volatile environment in which executive figures, corporate events, and even brand campaigns can become lightning rods for cultural anger. The result is **not only reputational risk but, increasingly, physical threat.**

DIRECT THREATS AND TARGETING OF CORPORATIONS

In a time when corporations are increasingly viewed as political actors and symbolic extensions of elite power, it is no surprise that they are becoming targets by protests, organized disruption, reputational warfare, and in rare but severe cases, physical violence.

Three Key Trends in the Targeting of Corporations

1

The escalation of direct action against corporate gatherings and executives

2

The assassination of a healthcare CEO by an ideologically motivated assailant

3

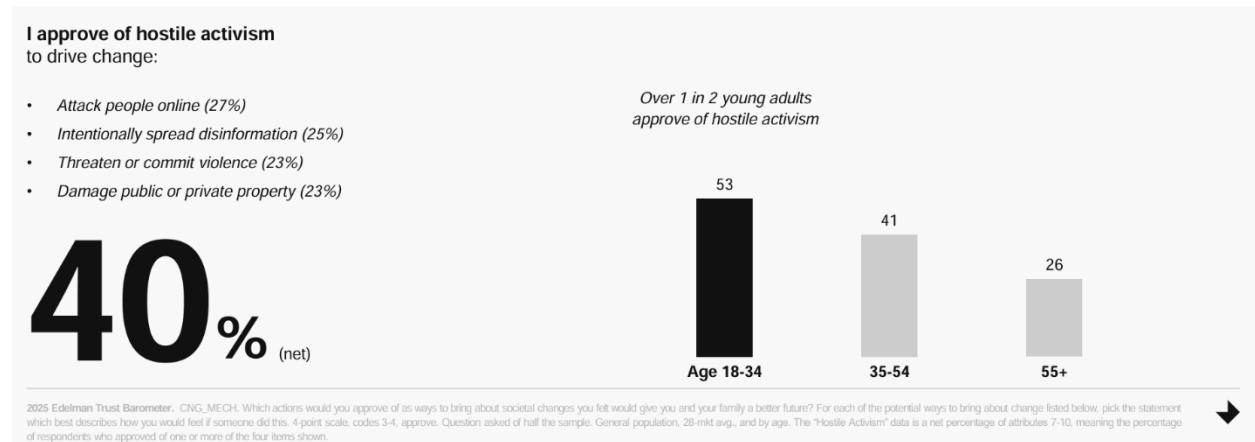
The rise of digital ecosystems that lower the operational barriers to violence through open-source threat infrastructure

Together, these trends reflect a profound erosion of the perceived inviolability of corporate leadership and a growing tolerance, even celebration, of targeting them as agents of systemic injustice.

Physical and Reputational Targeting of Corporate Events

Public-facing corporate events have increasingly become stages for political confrontation. Annual shareholder meetings, luxury summits, and executive retreats are now frequent targets for climate activists, labor organizers, and anti-capitalist demonstrators. The reputational and physical vulnerability of these gatherings has made them high-impact targets for protest.

In recent years, climate activist group Just Stop Oil has disrupted multiple energy-related [conferences](#) and [business events](#). In 2023, protesters interrupted Shell’s [annual general meeting](#) in London, unfurling banners, chanting slogans, and directly confronting executives over continued fossil fuel investment. Some protesters glued themselves to chairs, while others chanted, “Shame on Shell” as police escorted them out. Similarly, at the World Economic Forum in Davos, climate activists, including [Greta Thunberg](#), [organized demonstrations](#) that blocked transportation routes and staged sit-ins at luxury hotels, targeting what they described as the “engine room of elite power.”



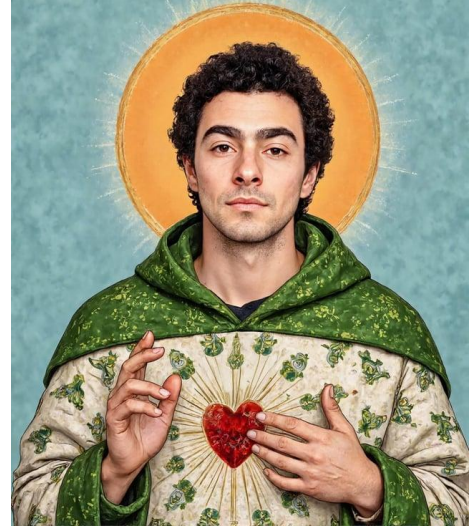
Edelman Trust Barometer 20205 <https://www.edelman.com/trust/2025/trust-barometer>

Corporate logistics centers have also been targeted in recent direct-action campaigns. Amazon facilities across Europe and the U.S. faced blockades and warehouse [disruptions](#) as part of coordinated labor protests against unsafe conditions and union suppression. The campaign, dubbed “[Make Amazon Pay](#),” involved over 80 organizations and highlighted how globalized operations can be disrupted by decentralized activist networks. **While these actions were nonviolent, their symbolic aggression and ability to attract public sympathy reinforce the perception that corporations are fair game for confrontational tactics.**

The Political Assassination of Brian Thompson

The most explicit parallel to Gilded Age revolutionary violence occurred in 2025 with the [assassination](#) of UnitedHealthcare CEO Brian Thompson by Luigi Mangione, a disaffected individual who believed the healthcare system was intentionally causing suffering for profit. According to initial law enforcement reports, Mangione [meticulously planned](#) the attack, citing in his manifesto a mix of populist outrage, online conspiracies that the system “literally extracts human life force for money,” and a desire to “hold the elites accountable.”

Mangione’s act was not only a tragedy, it represents a [new precedent](#) in anti-corporate violence. Like Leon Czolgosz, who killed President McKinley in 1901 under the influence of anarchist ideology, Mangione became a symbol of revolutionary justice for a growing subculture of online extremists. A website established in the wake of the attack—LuigiWasRight.com—hosted a searchable “CEO Database” that includes names, contact information, and net worth estimates of corporate leaders. While the site does not explicitly encourage violence, it operates as a digital infrastructure for targeting, a contemporary analogue to the 19th-century “propaganda of the deed” promoted by anarchist cells.



Luigi Mangione Meme

What makes Mangione’s case particularly disturbing is the online response. On forums like Reddit, Telegram, and 4chan, users hailed him as a martyr who struck a blow against “the corporate death machine.” Dozens of memes, artwork, and videos have framed him as a populist hero, part Robin Hood, part vigilante. Shockingly, immediately after the assassination an [Emmerson College poll](#) showed that 41% of respondents supported the violence, and another 16% were “unsure” or “neutral.” This mythologization mirrors the romanticization of violent radicals in earlier eras and **illustrates a shift in public tolerance toward violence as an acceptable form of protest** when institutions are perceived as irredeemably corrupt.

Threat Architecture Online

The **digital transformation of threat capability has dramatically lowered the barriers to planning and executing anti-corporate violence.** In prior eras, radical groups required clandestine meetings, print propaganda, and physical reconnaissance. Now, much of that infrastructure exists online, which is open-source, anonymous, and widely accessible.

Sites like Doxbin, Pastebin, and encrypted channels on Telegram and Matrix allow users to publish personal information on executives, coordinate disruptions, or share guides on surveillance evasion and low-tech sabotage. Terrorism researcher Jacob Ware refers to this as the [third generation](#) of online radicalization. As he wrote, “While the larger social media platforms that defined the prior generation continue to play an important role, the latest developments in social media radicalization are defined in no small part by a newer online culture that prioritizes anonymity over notoriety and even friendship.”

A 2023 [Europol report](#) noted that “terrorist and violent extremist environment is becoming more decentralised and volatile. Diffuse actors connect and inspire one another, uniting behind grievances beyond ideology or group affiliation. This context is ripe for self-radicalisation and for lone actors to begin engaging in attack planning, and poses significant challenges for preventing and combating terrorism and violent extremism in the EU.” Moreover, the aesthetic of resistance

has become a genre in itself. YouTube documentaries, TikTok “explainer” threads, and even gamified protest guides turn real-world targeting into participatory subcultures. This is not fringe; it’s a growing part of youth political culture.

In the past, corporations and their executives could largely rely on a buffer of social respect, legal protection, and structural distance from public outrage. That buffer has eroded. Executives are now seen not only as symbols of systemic injustice, but as direct agents of harm. **What began with protest has escalated to reputational warfare, digital targeting, and now most ominously, assassination.** As both ideological polarization and operational capability rise, corporate security must adapt to an era where the threat is not only financial or reputational, but existential.

FACTORS LOWERING THE BARRIERS TO VIOLENCE

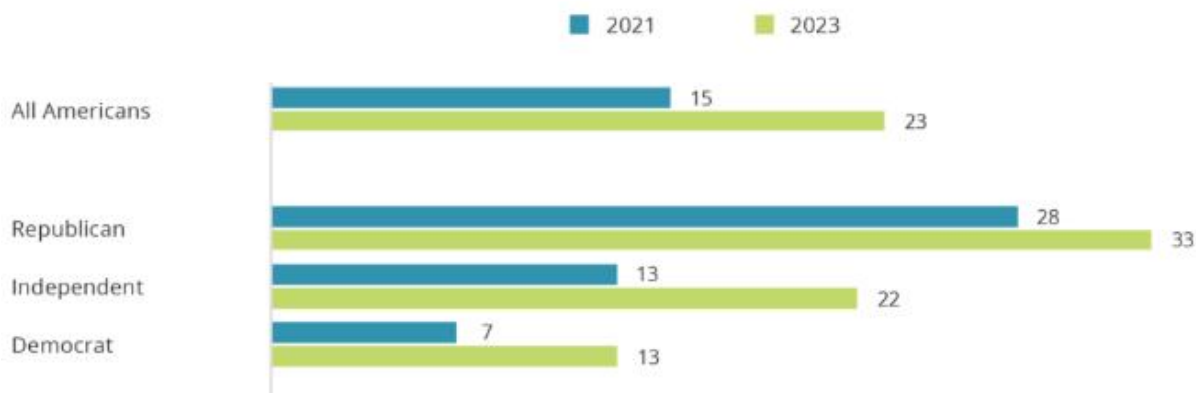
While structural grievances and ideological polarization provide the motivations for anti-corporate violence, the mechanisms that enable such violence are now more accessible than ever. **What was once the domain of organized groups or state actors can now be executed by lone individuals with minimal resources.** This shift has been driven by the rising social acceptance of violence as a legitimate tool of political expression, the availability of low-cost, high-impact technologies, and the psychological dynamics of mimicry and radicalization in an age of media saturation. Together, these forces reduce the threshold for violence and increase the likelihood that symbolic figures will be targeted.

Social Acceptance of Violence as Legitimate Political Expression

One of the most [alarming shifts](#) in recent years is the **growing number of people who believe political violence is acceptable under certain circumstances.** The Public Religion Research Institute [found](#) disconcerting results in that large minorities of Americans now believe that “true American patriots may have to resort to violence in order to save the country.” In 2023, 23% of Americans accepted that statement, including 33% of Republicans, 22% of Independents, and 13% of Democrats. The University of California – Davis found [comparable levels](#) in their survey, showing that 25% of Americans believed that violence is usually or always justified for political objectives. Similarly, a 2021 University of Chicago Project on Security and Threats [study](#) found that 8% of Americans—equivalent to over 20 million adults—believed the use of force was justified to restore Donald Trump to the presidency. On the left, support for violent protest against fascism, police brutality, and environmental degradation has also gained traction in activist circles, especially among younger demographics.

FIGURE 3. Support for Political Violence in Response to Direction of the Country, by Party and Religious Affiliation

Percent who agree that “Because things have gotten so far off track, true American patriots may have to resort to violence in order to save our country.”



Source: Public Religion Research Institute

This normalization is reflected in both discourse and practice. Right-wing groups such as the Proud Boys and Boogaloo movement openly celebrate “Second Amendment remedies,” while segments of the far-left, including anarchist and eco-radical groups, advocate for sabotage and “decolonization” through force. The January 6th Capitol riot and the 2020 antifa-led attacks on federal buildings in Portland are not equivalent in intent or outcome, but both reveal a culture in which the threshold for using violence as a political tactic is rapidly eroding. **Violence is increasingly seen not as a failure of politics, but as a legitimate continuation of it**, especially when institutional pathways are perceived as rigged, broken, or corrupt.

Cheap and Asymmetric Tools of Disruption

In prior eras, political violence required access to resources, networks, or state weapons. Now, disruption is decentralized, asymmetric, and dramatically more affordable. A single person with a drone, a 3D printer, or access to a dark web marketplace can cause chaos once reserved for paramilitary actors.



Drones, once the preserve of militaries, are now available cheaply. They have been used in Ukraine for kamikaze attacks, in Venezuela to target President Nicolás Maduro, and by protestors in Hong Kong to conduct reconnaissance. In the United States, the FBI has repeatedly warned about drone-enabled attacks on power stations and public events. “An attack could be conducted by one person or several people using a commercially available, off-the-shelf (drone) to target venues which attract large crowds, such as sporting facilities, concerts, and transportation terminals, or public figures.”



IED (Improvised Explosive Device) tutorials are widely accessible online. As the Department of Homeland Security [stated](#), “[T]he Internet facilitates training and communication among terrorists, serves as an effective recruiting tool, and encourages lone wolf attacks.” This allows them to make “homemade explosives, which are made from common household items that are easily accessible.”



Cyberattacks are another critical threat vector. In 2021, the Colonial Pipeline [ransomware attack](#), executed by a relatively small group using off-the-shelf malware, shut down fuel supplies across the southeastern United States. Similar tactics could be used to sabotage corporate servers, leak employee data, or disrupt logistics networks.



Swatting, the practice of calling in fake police emergencies at a target’s home, has become a [favored method](#) of intimidation. Executives, public officials, and journalists have all been targeted.

In each case, the tools of disruption are available, cheap, and hard to trace—making lone-wolf actors as capable as small insurgent groups once were.

Psychological Contagion and Ideological Reinforcement

The copycat effect, a well-documented psychological phenomenon in which high-profile acts of violence inspire imitators, is now amplified by the algorithmic structure of social media. As mass shootings, assassinations, and protests dominate the news cycle, they are transformed into digital content that can spread virally, reinforcing the notion that such acts are impactful, even heroic. For example, video footage, manifestos, and real-time updates provide not only inspiration but operational guidance. The 2019 Christchurch shooter’s live-streamed massacre became a model for subsequent attacks in El Paso and Buffalo, with perpetrators explicitly citing and referencing prior events. Scholars Adam Lankford and Eric Madfis have [specifically argued](#) that because many mass shooters seek fame, the “fame-seeking offenders are particularly dangerous because they kill and wound significantly more victims than other active shooters, they often compete for attention by attempting to maximize victim fatalities, and they can inspire contagion and copycat effects.”

This effect is not confined to mass shootings. Research by the Network Contagion Research Institute (NCRI) has [found](#) that political violence is increasingly being normalized in American discourse, particularly among younger, highly online, and ideologically left-aligned segments of the population. The July 13, 2024, attempted assassination of Donald Trump marked a turning point, triggering a wave of online rhetoric that not only justified the act but treated it as morally defensible or even commendable. This surge in tolerance for violence builds on earlier reactions to the assassination of UnitedHealthcare’s CEO, where viral narratives across fringe and mainstream

social platforms framed the killing as an act of justice. NCRI's analysis, which combined open-source intelligence with original survey data, reveals an emerging “assassination culture” within sectors of the U.S. political left. Key findings include that 38% of respondents viewed the murder of Trump as at least somewhat justified, while 31% felt the same about Elon Musk. Among self-identified left-of-center respondents, these figures rise to a staggering 55% and 48%, respectively. Nearly 40% of all respondents said it would be at least somewhat acceptable to destroy a Tesla dealership as a form of protest.

These attitudes strongly correlate with support for Mangione’s killing, ideological polarization, and participation in hyper-partisan digital spaces. Platforms like BlueSky have become key amplifiers of this radicalization, where memes lionizing Mangione are used to signal or incite support for future acts of violence against elite figures. The emergence of cultural artifacts such as California’s “[Luigi Mangione Access to Health Care Act](#)” ballot measure further illustrates how online rhetoric is bleeding into political expression. These trends suggest **the crystallization of a new assassination culture, one in which violence against elite individuals is not only imagined but increasingly seen as a morally permissible form of resistance.**

The **barriers to political violence that are psychological and cultural appear to be declining** precipitously. A significant minority of Americans believe violence is justified. The tools to execute that belief are cheap, accessible, and increasingly effective. And **the digital environment rewards imitation while providing moral and operational justification.** In this context, corporate leaders and institutions, symbols of systemic power, are especially vulnerable. High motivation, low friction, and viral visibility create a volatile formula for targeted violence in the New Gilded Age.

Anti-Elitism and Conspiratorial Thinking

The rise of anti-corporate violence in the New Gilded Age is not merely the product of structural inequality or political polarization. It is also deeply rooted in cultural narratives of betrayal, manipulation, and elite conspiracy. In this environment, **corporate executives are perceived as the architects of a corrupt system responsible for inflation, censorship, job loss, and cultural decay.** These perceptions are amplified by online communities that traffic in conspiracy theories and radicalize their members around anti-elitist ideologies. This section examines the evolving symbolism of the CEO, the role of conspiracy theories in violent radicalization, and the growing infrastructure of digital spaces that propagate these narratives.

Executives as Symbols of Elite Betrayal

In the late 19th century, figures like John D. Rockefeller and J.P. Morgan became symbols of economic domination. In contrast, contemporary corporate executives, especially the tech CEO or health care mogul, function as a lightning rod for grievances about everything from job insecurity to political censorship. Modern populist rhetoric routinely paints CEOs as puppet masters. Elon Musk, Jeff Bezos, and Jamie Dimon have each been accused of manipulating markets, suppressing dissent, or undermining democratic values. In times of economic stress, public anger often turns toward these figures. A 2023 U.S. News-Harris Poll found that [77% of respondents](#) think there is a

“leadership crisis in corporate America today.” The [2025 Edelman Trust Barometer](#) that surveyed 33,000 people in 28 countries found that 61% globally have a moderate or high sense of grievance, “defined by a belief that government and business make their lives harder and serve narrow interests, and wealthy people benefit unfairly from the system.”

We feed the world
We clothe the world
We work for all
Why are we poor?

- Labor Slogan during the Gilded Age

We make the profits
They take the profits

- Labor Slogan Now

This hostility is intensified by visible symbols of elite excess: multimillion-dollar stock buybacks, executive compensation packages exceeding hundreds of times the average worker pay, and offshoring of jobs for cost-cutting. According to the Institute for Policy Studies, [CEO pay](#) at S&P 500 companies in 2022 with the lowest median worker pay levels was 603 to 1. These kinds of disparities are not interpreted as impersonal market outcomes but as betrayal. Executives are viewed as corrupt stewards of a broken system. They are **cast in the role of villains**, comparable to the monarchs and industrial oligarchs targeted in earlier revolutionary movements.

Conspiracism as Radicalization Fuel

In this **anti-elitist atmosphere**, conspiracy theories serve as explanatory frameworks that simplify complex economic and political developments into coherent narratives of intentional harm. Believers are radicalized into viewing violence as a necessary act of justice against those in power. Movements like QAnon, the Great Reset, and anti-ESG activism have created a narrative in which global elites, especially corporate leaders, are [accused of orchestrating](#) social control, cultural degradation, or even genocide. According to the Anti-Defamation League, QAnon-inspired beliefs [still persist](#) among millions of Americans, with CEOs often named as participants in supposed plots to depopulate the planet, harvest children’s organs, or collapse national sovereignty. Such

conspiracies don't remain rhetorical. They incite action, from threats and harassment to sabotage and, increasingly, targeted violence.

Online Radical Communities

The digital infrastructure for conspiracy-driven radicalization is expansive, resilient, and growing. Platforms such as Telegram, 4chan, Gab, and increasingly Matrix and Odysee serve as incubators for ideological extremism. These platforms enable users to bypass moderation, form encrypted networks, and share radical content, ranging from [dehumanizing memes](#) to tactical guides for violence.

Telegram, in particular, has become the primary venue for extremists to organize campaigns, recruit members, and share propaganda. [Research](#) by the Program on Extremism at George Washington University and [investigations](#) by Pro Publica have shown how terrorism has spread rapidly on Telegram. 4chan's /pol/ board has long been a breeding ground for stochastic terrorism, where calls to action are cloaked in irony and plausible deniability. Yet **threads frequently list CEOs by name, celebrate incidents like Mangione's assassination, and encourage harassment campaigns.**

Meanwhile, Gab and newer platforms like Patriots.win often host content portraying CEOs as agents of globalist tyranny, conflating vaccine mandates, economic policy, and social liberalism into a singular authoritarian threat. These communities do not operate in isolation. Content created in fringe spaces frequently filters into mainstream social media, especially TikTok, YouTube, and X, through reposted videos, viral threads, or AI-generated content. The result is a cultural bleed, where conspiratorial anti-elitism becomes part of the ambient political discourse.

In the New Gilded Age, corporate elites have become symbolic targets of a deep cultural narrative of betrayal, conspiracy, and systemic violence. The CEO has become a character in a morality play about corruption and collapse. **This anti-elitist sentiment is increasingly mainstream**, fueled by economic grievances, amplified by conspiratorial media, and hardened in online echo chambers. As trust in institutions wanes, conspiracy becomes logic, and violence becomes justice.

EMERGING CATALYSTS FOR FUTURE VIOLENCE

While structural conditions have laid the foundation for unrest, the **escalation into violence is rarely spontaneous**. It is often catalyzed by shocks—political, economic, technological, or symbolic—that transform frustration into action. In the New Gilded Age, these catalysts are becoming more frequent and interconnected, forming an increasingly volatile environment in which corporations, executives, and critical infrastructure are viewed not only as culprits but as fair targets. This section explores the primary domains from which the next wave of political and anti-corporate violence is likely to emerge.



Political Legitimacy Crises

Modern liberal democracies are facing a slow-motion legitimacy collapse. In the United States, faith in elections, courts, and legislatures continues to erode.

Key Trigger: Contested Elections

Future results seen as existential by both camps; manipulation claims → targeted violence against funders.

- **Contested Elections:** The 2020 U.S. presidential election was marked by widespread belief in fraud, with many voters in some states expressing doubts about the legitimacy of the result. Future elections, particularly in 2026 and 2028, are likely to be viewed as existential by both sides, and perceived manipulation will credibly provoke targeted violence, not just at politicians, but at corporations viewed as funders, enablers, or suppressors of democracy.
- **State Collapse Scenarios:** In fragile democracies like Brazil, South Africa, and India, increasing inequality and erosion of state capacity will likely lead to elite-directed anger targeting multinational corporations. Western companies operating in the Global South will credibly become proxies for perceived colonial or capitalist domination, much like De Beers and Standard Oil were in past eras.



Economic Triggers and Class Tensions

The original Gilded Age was punctuated by violent labor uprisings and class war. Today's economic conditions are primed for similar responses.

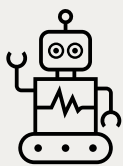
300 M jobs at risk from generative-AI layoffs

- Goldman Sachs, 2023

- **Mass Layoffs During Automation Waves:** AI-driven labor displacement is accelerating. A 2023 [Goldman Sachs report](#) projected that 300 million jobs globally will credibly be affected by

generative AI, especially in white-collar fields. If mass layoffs coincide with record executive bonuses, a symbolic flashpoint is inevitable.

- **Cost of Living Crises:** In the United States, housing prices have outpaced wage growth in [80% of metro areas](#). Combined with student debt, healthcare costs, and inflation in basic goods, this produces a tinderbox of economic rage with no clear outlet.
- **Perceived Elite Parasitism:** If another economic crash is met with corporate bailouts and stock buybacks, as occurred in 2008 and again in 2020, executives will likely once again be targeted as class enemies.



Technological Disruption as Moral Provocation

Technological shifts threaten jobs and are perceived as existential violations of human dignity, fueling philosophical and political backlash.

Three quarters of adults do not trust businesses to use AI responsibly.
- Gallup, 2024

- **AI Dystopia Fears:** ChatGPT, Sora, and other advanced systems have raised concerns that human creativity, decision-making, and agency are being automated. A 2024 [Gallup poll](#) found that 77% of adults do not trust businesses much (44%) or at all (33%) to use AI responsibly.
- **Biotech as Corporate Eugenics:** CRISPR and synthetic embryo technologies are moving faster than regulation. If access to enhancements becomes stratified by wealth or if biotech firms are caught suppressing research, it will likely trigger leftist or religious violence akin to past reactions to forced sterilization and eugenics policies.
- **Surveillance Capitalism Exposés:** If it is revealed that major corporations are feeding consumer or biometric data to authoritarian regimes or predictive policing tools, reputational outrage will credibly give way to sabotage, cyberattacks, or even bombings.

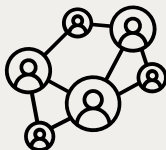


Cultural Backlash and Identity Radicalization

The moral politics of identity are becoming flashpoints not just for protest, but for strategic violence.

Involvement of major Western brands in geopolitical controversies will credibly trigger boycotts, sabotage, or even assassinations.

- **DEI and Anti-DEI Extremism:** As corporations publicly support DEI (Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion), they are attacked from both sides. Progressives will likely accuse firms of hypocrisy and demand radical reform, while right-wing extremists see DEI as cultural subversion. The 2023 Bud Light boycott and threats against Target executives following Pride displays are early indicators of what will credibly become direct action.
- **Mass Disillusionment Events:** When reformist movements implode, such as the collapse of crypto firm FTX, or environmental organizations accused of complicity in greenwashing, it can trigger nihilistic radicalization among idealistic former supporters. The historical analog here is the disillusioned 1890s socialists who turned to syndicalism or anarchist terror.
- **Religious Civilizational Flashpoints:** Involvement of major Western brands in geopolitical controversies like Israel/Palestine or religious freedom disputes in India will credibly trigger boycotts, sabotage, or even assassination campaigns. Cross-border militancy will likely target companies seen as aligning with imperialism or sacrilege.



Symbolic Spectacle and Networked Insurrection

In the networked age, the symbolic value of an attack often exceeds its material effect.

Deepfakes have already threatened 1 in 10 companies
- *business.com, 2024*

- **CEO as a Meme-Villain:** Executives involved in mass layoffs, pay scandals, or political lobbying are already demonized online. As with Luigi Mangione’s killing of Brian Thompson, targeted assassinations will likely be framed as revolutionary justice and rapidly mythologized in online communities.
- **Digital Swarming and Corporate Infiltration:** Anonymous actors coordinating online can breach security at shareholder meetings, hijack virtual events, or leak sensitive internal data, turning boardrooms into viral spectacles. These “info-attacks” can precede or incite kinetic threats.
- **AI Deepfake Disinformation:** Fabricated videos of CEOs making racist comments, conspiring with politicians, or mocking workers will likely ignite flash outrage. A single convincing deepfake will credibly trigger reputational collapse or violent reprisal before it’s proven false.



Environmental Catastrophes and Resource Politics

The climate crisis will redefine the geography and legitimacy of corporate power.

Frustrated by inadequate climate action and increasing repression, some environmental activists may grow desperate, concluding that action is imperative and needed to "save the world". For some, more radical environmentalists, the only response will be increasing levels of violence.

- **Climate-Driven Radicalization:** Activists are increasingly rejecting symbolic protest in favor of sabotage and violence against “planet-killers.” Environmentalists are already targeting refineries and private jets. If extreme weather leads to blackouts, deaths, or water shortages, the corporate villains will be named and attacked.
- **Supply Chain Conflicts:** Companies profiting from disaster logistics (e.g., food distributors, pharmaceutical firms, or defense contractors) will likely be viewed as war profiteers. Cyberattacks, drone disruptions, or physical blockades are likely responses, especially in the Global South.
- **Geoengineering as the Next Moral Panic:** If a company like Alphabet or SpaceX launches a solar radiation management test without full transparency, it will credibly provoke violent backlash from both environmentalists and national governments, who view it as reckless technocratic overreach.

The next phase of revolutionary violence will not emerge from a single crisis but from the intersection of many. Political illegitimacy, economic despair, technological overreach, cultural fragmentation, and ecological collapse are converging to create a new kind of insurgency, one that does not target the state alone but focuses its rage on the perceived architects of modern dysfunction: corporations and their leaders. In this volatile mix, the traditional lines between protest, terrorism, and revolution are beginning to blur.

IMPLICATIONS FOR CORPORATE SECURITY AND GOVERNANCE

The emerging landscape of revolutionary violence, characterized by ideological targeting, conspiratorial narratives, and technological accessibility, necessitates a strategic shift in how corporations conceive of and implement security. In the Gilded Age, robber barons hired Pinkertons to suppress labor unrest. In today's parallel moment, the threat is more diffuse, symbolic, and digitally networked. Executives are avatars of systemic power, and their visibility in the cultural and political sphere makes them targets not only of protest but of physical and reputational assassination. Security in this era must be reimaged as an interdisciplinary function, blending protective intelligence, digital surveillance, cultural analysis, and crisis communications.

EXECUTIVE PROTECTION

The scope of executive protection must expand beyond traditional physical security and travel logistics to account for reputational and digital targeting. Online viral events now generate real-world violence: reputational crises that go unaddressed can trigger doxxing, stalking, or even lone-wolf attacks. Executives, particularly in sectors such as healthcare, tech, energy, and finance, are vulnerable to online campaigns that rapidly escalate into physical risk. The assassination of UnitedHealthcare's CEO exemplifies this evolution of threats. Thus, corporate security must include OSINT monitoring, deep social media sentiment analysis, and coordinated response protocols that fuse legal, communications, and physical protection functions. Family members' digital footprints, such as social media posts, must be integrated into protective posture, as attackers increasingly map executive ecosystems rather than focusing on individual targets.

INTELLIGENCE

Companies must build intelligence capabilities that can monitor ideological ecosystems across the digital fringe. Platforms such as Telegram, 4chan, Gab, and niche Substack communities are increasingly where anti-corporate narratives gain traction. These narratives, ranging from “woke capitalism” and the “Great Reset” to anti-DEI and anti-pharma conspiracies, are not isolated

rhetorical devices; they are catalysts for real-world action. Firms must develop intelligence teams or partnerships capable of tracking threat actors at the narrative level, not just at the behavioral or tactical level. This means identifying early-stage memes, slogans, or user clusters that signal intent, not just capability. Risk assessment should be able to triangulate ideology, influence, and visibility, rather than rely solely on traditional metrics like prior criminal history or threat proximity.

CRISIS MANAGEMENT

Crisis management and governance processes must also evolve to reflect these emerging risks. Boardrooms must engage in pre-mortem analysis of non-traditional crises, including those stemming from reputational sabotage, politically motivated violence, or employee radicalization. Tabletop exercises should simulate everything from cyberattacks to natural disasters to the viral spread of a deepfake implicating an executive in hate speech to a coordinated online leak of internal emails framing the company as exploitative or treasonous. The reality of a CEO being targeted by a lone actor with a drone or an IED must be treated as plausible. Governance should be realigned so that security, legal, communications, and human resources operate under a unified crisis framework. Threat convergence between ideological grievance, insider disillusionment, and digital exposure means that siloed departments will fail to detect or mitigate risk before it metastasizes.

STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION

Strategic communication has become a frontline security function. In an age where silence can be interpreted as complicity and statements are mined for ideological cues, how a corporation speaks can ignite or defuse violent backlash. Public statements on political issues must be carefully calibrated. Firms need to conduct narrative risk assessments that ask: who might misinterpret or weaponize this statement? How will this be perceived in fringe ideological spaces? Should we communicate values in broad principles or take specific, public stances? Overexposure of executives at highly visible events—such as Davos, Aspen Ideas Festival, or tech summits might have to be re-evaluated, especially when these platforms are associated with elite consensus-building that triggers populist rage. Furthermore, companies need frameworks for countering disinformation when they are implicated in conspiracy theories. Blanket denials or “no comment” responses often embolden radicals. A measured, transparent communications strategy paired with employee briefings and external messaging that contextualizes the issue can reduce risk.

INSIDER THREAT

Internally, corporations must also confront the possibility that the next reputational crisis or violent actor may emerge from within. As employees increasingly expect their employers to mirror their personal and political values, disillusionment becomes a potential security threat. Insider threat

assessments should go beyond traditional fraud detection or access violations and include sentiment monitoring, culture audits, and whistleblower protection programs that do not suppress moral dissent but channel it constructively. Recent incidents demonstrate that when values and actions diverge, radicalization can occur inside the perimeter. Employees who feel morally betrayed by their employer's behavior are increasingly likely to leak, sabotage, or in rare but growing instances, engage in physical violence. Security and HR must therefore collaborate on behavioral threat assessment, digital forensics, and early-warning systems rooted in employee culture.

The modern corporation must abandon the notion that it can remain a neutral actor in a polarized world. Corporate security should not be reduced to a back-office function or outsourced liability. It must be an adaptive, intelligence-driven capability embedded into the governance architecture itself. This will require companies to invest not only in technology and training, but in cultural analysis, political forecasting, and moral literacy. The corporations that survive the coming era of unrest will be those that understand that they are now symbolic institutions of power operating in an increasingly revolutionary age.

TOWARD A NEW SECURITY PARADIGM

The arc of history does not repeat itself exactly, but it rhymes with unnerving clarity. **The United States' original Gilded Age was marked by rapid industrialization, staggering inequality, ideological fragmentation, and elite impunity, culminating in a wave of revolutionary violence that shattered the illusion of political and economic neutrality. Observers are witnessing the re-emergence of these conditions in a digitally mediated, globally interconnected, and ideologically unstable environment.** The same structural forces, including technological displacement, economic stratification, corporate consolidation, and cultural alienation, are now producing a new form of violence: one that targets the symbolic organs of power that dominate public life in the 21st century. That is, corporations and their leaders.

In this landscape, the traditional assumptions of corporate security and governance are collapsing. The idea that security is a narrow, technical domain focused on access control, executive travel, or cyber hygiene is dangerously outdated. So too is the myth that corporations can remain apolitical entities insulated from ideological conflict. As is shown by the evidence, **the boundary between political activism and violent targeting is eroding.** Executives are now public actors in cultural battles, economic scapegoats in populist narratives, and symbolic enemies in revolutionary mythologies. They are increasingly attacked not for what they do, but for what they represent. The perceived elite control over technology, wealth, and national destiny.

To survive this moment, corporate leaders must embrace a strategic shift in how they understand and defend themselves. **Security must become narrative-sensitive, attuned to the physical risk based on reputational triggers (real or fabricated) that can spiral into violence.** It must be intelligence-driven, with systematic monitoring of fringe ideological ecosystems, conspiratorial meme flows, and extremist mobilization around corporate symbols. And most critically, it must be

integrated into governance. Boards must include security expertise in risk deliberations, conduct scenario-based crisis simulations that reflect ideological threats, and understand that reputational legitimacy is a security imperative.

This will require new capabilities and cultural shifts. Firms must hire security and intelligence professionals who understand political extremism, disinformation campaigns, and digital anthropology, not just physical protection or cybersecurity. Internal policies must evolve to include emotional temperature checks, insider threat monitoring grounded in employee disaffection, and moral clarity in how layoffs, executive compensation, and social advocacy are framed. Communication and protective intelligence teams must work together, not in parallel silos, to navigate the dangerous terrain between silence and provocation.

History offers a chilling warning. **The original Gilded Age did not culminate in peaceful reform but in waves of deadly conflict.** Labor uprisings, anti-capitalist violence, and class revolts continued until the political system was forced to enact systemic reform. The New Deal and the progressive era reforms were born as reactive concessions to sustained unrest. The world stands on a similar precipice. **The current moment offers a narrow window where strategic foresight and security adaptation could prevent history from repeating itself** in blood. That window will not remain open forever. Executives, board members, and security leaders must understand that they are frontline figures in a new era of symbolic politics, ideological conflict, and revolutionary volatility. The next era of corporate leadership will be defined by the ability to navigate violence, legitimacy, and narrative in a destabilizing world. Those who fail to understand this will become the next targets. Those who succeed will survive.



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