

THE INTEGRATION OF APOCALYPTIC CONSPIRACY THEORY IN THE AMERICAN
CONSCIENCE FROM ANTIQUITY TO CONTEMPORARY TIMES

by

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ABSTRACT

Contemporary American society has frequently been referred to as the “Era of Conspiracy” because of how rapidly divisive misinformation circulates through the nation and how prominent conspiracy theories are within politics. Realistically, modern conspiracy echoes tropes from Apocalyptic theory with roots as far back as the Middle Ages, and can best be understood when examining historical context, particularly through an understanding of the framework applied to the Cold War and the recycled conspiratorial tropes established during this time. In this thesis, I aim to clarify the way conspiracy operates in relation to Biblical prophecy and how it has become so deeply ingrained in the culture of the U.S. Moreover, I identify key elements which permit the maintenance of belief in conspiracy in conjunction with contemporary changes in demographics, as challenges to identity enable Manichean, in-group/out-group dynamics and the obfuscation of complex issues push people to fringe beliefs supported by semiotics and identity politics.

PREFACE

I recall in early 2009, when I was only eight years old, I was leaning on my mother's shoulder in our old house in France as she scrolled through the news, looking to reconnect with her home country, the United States. My parents moved to the suburbs of Paris in 1997 to follow what they believed to be God's calling to spread Evangelical Christianity in the highly secular European country. I spent my entire childhood there, caught between the standards of *laicite* (the highly secular curriculum founded on the removal of religion) of France's public school and my parents' rigid rejection of modern society and progressive ideology. I was an outsider in every space I entered, trying to adhere to social norms while maintaining the Evangelical Christian values injected in me by my parents. Religion was always central to every aspect of my family life; however, until that day in 2009, I had never really seen my parents associate religion with politics. While my mom scrolled through Fox News coverage of the inauguration of the first Black President of the United States, I distinctly remember her fearful words: "Obama is the Antichrist."

I moved to the United States in 2016, my sophomore year of high school. Amidst the cultural shock of living in a highly Christian society, I came to realize that my parent's beliefs were not outliers, but rather a casual norm, particularly in the Bible belt of Texas where a church can be spotted on every other street corner and the Christian God is on the dollar bill, in the morning pledge of allegiance and infused in every policy debate. As a member of Generation Z, I entered American high school during one of the most significant cultural and demographic shifts in history, when White Evangelicals began losing their grip on mainstream culture as their proportion of the population

dwindled and continues to do so. My Texas high school experience introduced a clash of religion in politics in a way I had never before thought possible. I first started paying attention to the news when the former Secretary of State lost her presidential run to an unqualified, provocative billionaire playboy. I became of voting age the same election cycle that alt-right radicals stormed the U.S. Capitol and attempted to overturn the results of a free and fair election. I realized that same year that a lot of the people I thought I could trust around me held cruel views about what they thought people deserved. As it turns out, some of these people thought they deserved a hell of a lot more from this country than I do, or members of other underrepresented groups do for that matter. In earnest, the most shocking element of the increasingly divisive discourse I observed was the way that people close to me bought into the new era of millenarian conspiracy fueled by politics, religion, and misinformation. Over the past four years, I witnessed my mother become part of this movement, a zealot for apocalyptic conspiracy. These conspiracies are not isolated but have gripped a significant portion of the American consciousness, bolstered by anti-intellectualism and misinformation. The growing network of radicalized believers has gained an alarming amount of political and social power. The terrorist attack on the Capitol on January 6th, 2021, is one of the most relevant instances of the influence of weaponized conspiracy. Over 140 people were injured, and five people died while Trump supporters rioted their way into the building, interrupting the joint session of Congress assembled to count electoral votes to confirm the presidential victory of Joe Biden. This historic and frightening moment is just one manifestation of the depth of conspiracy in the United States. Out of sheer curiosity and mild panic over my mother and so many other Americans' embrace of these beliefs, I chose to dive into the what ?

Where ? When ? How ? and why? of the ideology to get a better picture of this major social movement underpinning the fabric of contemporary American society.

Introduction

Conspiracy theories permeate nearly every aspect of contemporary American culture, frequently dominating mainstream discourse and revolving in the shadows of every event of political import. The American Journal of Political Science's 2014 article reveals that over half of Americans endorse at least one conspiracy theory.¹ The most prominent conspiracy theory, which acts as the center of a giant web of spin-off conspiracies, is QAnon. The main premise of the theory is that a cabal of elites runs a satanic sex-trafficking ring and has a nefarious agenda to take down America and subjugate the masses to a Marxist global government. The theory designated Donald Trump as the savior of the movement and prophesied that the former president would take down this evil cabal in an ultimate battle of Good vs Evil. QAnon has a particularly unique format. It began through the anonymous messaging board 4chan, and although it started through a collective effort to decode the cryptic messages by the board leader "Q" (named this way for having alleged Q level clearance in the Trump administration), the theory has expanded beyond its original premise. QAnon inspired people to search for truth through alternative means and doubt expertise and the main-stream media, giving rise to a large number of spin-off conspiracies. Now, misinformation about COVID-19 and many other subjects are spear-headed by Q believers and even embraced by many Americans who do not identify as Q supporters. The format of the Q conspiracy has become the leading methodology for the spread of unfounded misinformation, permeating American culture with many political, social, environmental and health consequences. The base of the theory, the insider cabal of elites operating to dismantle

¹ Oliver J. Eric, and Thomas J. Wood, "Conspiracy Theories And The Paranoid Style(S) Of Mass Opinion". *American Journal Of Political Science* (2014) 58 (4): 952-966. doi:10.1111/ajps.12084.

America, is a recycled Cold War conspiracy trope, but its apocalyptic roots go much further back. To understand contemporary conspiracy, we must look at the roots of conspiracy related to Biblical prophecy, established as far back as the Middle Ages. In the first section of the thesis, I aim to delineate how historic conspiratorial events set the stage for modern conspiracy. Apocalypticism was common in Medieval times because the application of an End times narrative based off of the framework of Biblical prophecy provided a justification and explanation for suffering and enabled hopefulness of redemption and triumph over evil. In contemporary times, conspiracy replicates this by seeking to define opposition in terms of ultimate evil, revolving conflicts around identity where the opposition must be overcome at all costs. Moreover, these events set a precedent for conspiratorial semiotics, meaning people learned to look for signs indicating potential “end times.” In the next section, I look at a slightly closer time in history. The Cold War provided ample room for Apocalyptic speculation, and industries learned how to profit off of mass anxiety, giving rise to the Apocalypse Industry. I also discuss in this section how U.S. President Ronald Reagan played a significant role in engaging Evangelicals in political activism by relating national and foreign policy to millenarian fears. After establishing some historical context for modern conspiracy, I demonstrate the similarities between prophetic and conspiratorial ideology, and show what elements are essential to curate belief in such thinking. By proving that these ideologies reject the scientific method, the groundwork for understanding contemporary conspiracy is established and the reader can understand the self-fulfilling, non-falsifiable nature of viral myth.

In the section titled “Fear Mongering & Demagoguery amidst Demographic Changes,” I argue that a new era of reactionary polarization has risen from rapidly changing demographics, as America is increasingly less White and Christian, and this group is losing control of hegemonic social influence. These changes have created a growing “White anxiety,” which became conducive to race-inflected demagoguery defined by a divisive in-group/out-group narrative. When complex issues become simplified into us-versus-them, leaders are granted the ability to scapegoat the abstract “them” and deflect responsibility, frequently employing misinformation and myth in their endeavor of essentialization. I further argue that this is exactly how Trump carried out his campaign, capitalizing on anxiety and building a coalition of White Evangelicals convinced they were oppressed by immigrants, gays, and democrats. The axis of evil then shifts towards the mainstream media, accusing the nefarious elite of propagating lies whenever anything comes out that is not in the interest of the regime. The past decade has witnessed a growing distrust of expertise, and Donald Trump’s “Fake News” campaign further exacerbated this issue and enabled the relegation of millions of Americans to fringe beliefs as they sought to find their version of the truth. Qanon exists amidst this anguish, perpetuating conspiratorial communities of people dedicated to explaining the problem of evil in the world while ascribing unfounded significance to elements which maintain their agenda. The manifestation of contemporary conspiracy is alarming in its political import. Many people have been led to distrust health experts, policymakers and more, which has immense consequences.

I. The Return of Christ, from Medieval Times up Until the 20th Century

In 1 Thessalonians 4:17 and in chapter 13 of the book of Mark, followers of Jesus demonstrate that they expected the return of the Messiah to occur within their lifetime.² 2000 years later, Jesus has still not returned despite Christian communities attempting to predict the date of this apocalyptic event in countless instances, such as the Montanist movement in the second century C.E., which gained many followers under the premise that Jesus' Second Coming was imminent.³ Many other Apocalyptic movements followed.

The patterns and social dynamics established in the late Middle Ages in Western Europe emerged from Judeo-Christian conceptions of history as well as of the future, and now play a large role in contemporary views of End times. The book of Revelations and the book of Daniel laid the groundwork for an understanding of the Apocalypse as it would appear, with the ascent of the Antichrist, the Second Coming of the messiah, and a period of tribulation followed by a Christian triumph over Evil. During the period between the end of the rule of the Roman empire in the West in the fifth century and the beginning of the Reformation in the early sixteenth century, the Church wielded a considerable amount of power over the predominantly illiterate citizens. Disruptions to the divine order such as plagues, the Black Death, and famine lent to millenarian fears, and the clergy used such events to ascribe their own judgements to matters of truth, good and evil.⁴ Moreover, the Church sometimes used people's anguish to manipulate them

² 1 Thes 4:17, Mark 13 (NRSV).

³ "Montanism." *Encyclopædia Britannica*, (Accessed August 2, 2021).
<https://www.britannica.com/topic/Montanism>

⁴ Steven A. Hackbarth, "Apocalyptic Mentalities in Late-Medieval England," (2014) Dissertations (2009 -). Paper 411. http://epublications.marquette.edu/dissertations_mu/411

into repentance and devotion to their authority, yet apocalypticism also provided justification for suffering and a fabricated hope for salvation. Stephen O'Leary defends this point in his analysis of the writings of Bishop Irenaeus, a second-century Christian thinker: "Irenaeus' argument on behalf of the millennial kingdom illustrates the theodocical function of Christian eschatology: the narrative of the Apocalypse provides an explanation for evil that is "fitting" and "just." In the terminology of modern rhetorical theory, the millennium lends narrative coherence to the story of evil. The affliction and suffering of the community of believers will be redeemed when the earthly creation comes to its fulfillment. Placing one's faith and hope in the fulfillment not only provides a 'logical' solution to a theological dilemma; it also enables the believer to define any apparent evil or calamity as a positive good by situating it within the temporal frame of the mythic narrative."⁵ Evidently, people rife with existential anxiety were readily willing to accept an explanation for tragic interruptions to their lives when it came with a promise for a triumphant restoration.

Indeed, the vivid and confusing language of Revelations changes the way one would view suffering. With visions of martyrdom and an ultimate triumph over Evil, the pain of today becomes imbued with the sentiment that it is for a purpose. According to prominent historian Norman Cohn, the Biblical prospect of a clash between Good and Evil ending in a global triumph of Good and a utopian restoration of the world was appropriated in some of the most significant conflicts of human history. In anticipation of the divine plan of restoration, Crusaders were the first to take the violent initiative to rid

⁵ Stephen O'Leary, "Arguing the Apocalypse: A Theory of Millennial Rhetoric," (New York: Oxford UP, 1994), 42.

the human race of those they judged excluded from the right to salvation.⁶ Much further along in history, the Nazi “Third Reich” and the Soviet Union’s prospect of “Final Communism” emulate the martyrous tone of post-apocalyptic redeemed worlds and, according to Cohn, “would have had but little emotional significance if the phantasy of a third and most glorious dispensation had not, over the centuries, entered into the common stock of European social mythology.”⁷ The repetition of an apocalyptic narrative to frame major conflicts emulates what scholar Louie Dean Valencia-Garcia describes as a cyclical view of history, in which a major low point necessitates redemption, and Traditionalists take on individual interpretations of who is granted the elite status of the Redeemed within the cycle. This lends to ‘accelerationism,’ where a group determines that suffering is too great, or their opponents are too evil, and the lowest point of history has been reached. Thus history must begin the conflict between Good and Evil in order to restart.⁸ War-mongers co-opt apocalyptic narratives because they change the framework of the conflict into one where they believe themselves to be not only cleansing the earth of Evil, but also guaranteed victory in their self-ascribed Divinely supported endeavor. Not all advocated for active apocalypticism, or the idea that one must take up arms against the forces of evil, but the idea extended to many major conflicts.

Looking at historic examples of apocalyptic events, a trend emerges. Most apocalyptic movements are paired with semiotic mapping: individuals explicate current events by their correlation to a prophecy, frequently finding justification for suffering by defining the problem of Evil in context of a grander apocalyptic movement in which they

⁶ Norman Cohn, “The Pursuit of the Millennium,” (Rev. ed. New York: Oxford UP, 1970).

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Louie Dean Valencia-García, “Far-Right Revisionism and the End of History,” (1st Edition. Routledge, 2020), 4-5.

believe themselves to be granted a promise of victory and salvation. Semiotic mapping refers to the study of signs and contextualizing these signs in an End times narrative to ascribe significance to them in relation to each other. For example, Joachim de Fiore, the Medieval author who published some of the most significant work on the book of Revelations, projected the world would end within two generations of his lifetime because he believed that the persecution of Christians he witnessed during his lifetime indicated prophecy coming true.⁹ The Church pointed to plagues or floods as proof of the End, and Johann Zimmerman, astrologer and leader of a small sect that built a settlement to prepare for the apocalypse, believed that changes he observed in the stars foretold the Second Coming of Christ, predicted to occur in the fall of 1694.¹⁰

One might imagine that by this time, after so many wrong predictions, people would be more wary of apocalyptic predictions. On the contrary, nearly every new generation has seen a rise of its own adaptation of prophecy, in the cyclical fashion of time, frequently characterized by hierarchical ambitions and promoted through fearmongering and demagoguery.

II. Apocalypticism in 20th Century America

In my outline of the evolution of apocalyptic conspiracies from Jesus' last documented time on Earth to the present year, it is necessary to give credit to changes of the 20th century, including Apocalyptic narratives of the Cold War, for their instrumental

⁹ Bernard McGinn, n.d. "Apocalypticism Explained [Apocalypse! FRONTLINE] PBS," *PBS, Public Broadcasting Service*.

<https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/apocalypse/explanation/joachim.html>

¹⁰ Romeo Vitelli, "Storming The Ark," *James Randi Educational Foundation*, (January 2011).

<http://archive.randi.org/site/index.php/swift-blog/1198-storming-the-ark.html>
<http://archive.randi.org/site/index.php/swift-blog/1198-storming-the-ark.html>

effect in shaping contemporary religious and political thought. For the purpose of specificity, I will be transitioning from a broad view of the tradition of Western apocalyptic conspiracy to its manifestation uniquely in the United States.

In the post-World War II era, American culture was defined by communist trepidation. The ideological battle reflected a strong background of propaganda on both sides, wherein Soviet communist beliefs were demonized and defined as the antithesis of Western moral exceptionalism by agents of the U.S. Tense with nuclear potential, the social environment invited ample speculation amongst secular and religious groups regarding end times. The Vietnam War and fears of overpopulation also fed into the anxiety as people felt they were witnessing the decline of the United States. Famed American biologist Paul Ehrlich's bestseller *The Population Bomb* (1968) fed into the paranoia, arguing that civilization would crumble within decades due to an impending Malthusian crisis.¹¹ People sought answers, hope, and relief to their anxiety, and corporations and politicians offered options.

The 1970s marked the decisive rise in the Apocalypse industry. A small campus preacher in Southern California, Hal Lindsey, was one of the first to profit off of people's millennial anxiety with the publication of his book, *The Late, Great Planet Earth* (1970), which became the number one best-seller of the decade, according to the New York Times.¹² He expertly linked Biblical prophecy to current events including the Cold War, likely nuclear fallout, and the Communist threat. The publication of this book kickstarted a period of investment not only in Apocalyptic literature, but also the rise of

¹¹ Paul R. Ehrlich, "The Population Bomb," (1983).

¹² Erin A. Smith, "The Late Great Planet Earth Made the Apocalypse a Popular Concern," *the National Endowment for the Humanities*, (HUMANITIES, Winter 2017, Volume 38, Number 1).

sensationalized televangelists, radio shows and more that profited immensely off of fabricated paranoia. Lindsey's book initiated a revolution in discourse around Biblical prophecy, bringing it out of strictly religious dialogue and into a broader cultural environment. His rise to fame granted him political recognition; Lindsey gave seminars at the Pentagon and the National War College with a large, prestigious audience. After the successful marketing of *The Late Great Planet Earth*, a host of literature in the same genre rose to prominence. These narratives characterize the events of the Apocalypse by the degradation of traditional religious values and political shifts leading to the formation of a New World Order, a term that gained significance in conspiratorial circles for its symbolism of the Biblical prophecy of a global government led by the anti-Christ during the Apocalypse. According to Dr. Johann Pautz, literature such as *The John Franklin Letters*, *The Turner Diaries*, *The Left Behind* series, and *Survivors* became definitive works in apocalyptic fiction, renowned for their impact within U.S. culture in applying the concept of end times to a contemporary reality.¹³ These books hold a common thread of White Evangelical solidarity and nationalism in conflict with a determined enemy "other," in a battle that ultimately ends in a glorious defeat of the enemy and the establishment of a utopian society emulating a Biblically prophesied 1,000 year reign of Christ after the events of the Apocalypse. These modern adaptations of Biblical prophecy achieved wide circulation, with Tim Lahaye's *Left Behind* series selling over 80 million copies and prompting the production of five movies. The Apocalypse Industry molded the Evangelical Christian's perception of their individual role in the modern world,

¹³ Johann Pautz, "The end-times narratives of the American far-right" in *End of Days: Essays on the Apocalypse From Antiquity to Modernity*, eds. Carolyn Kinane and Michael A. Ryan, (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Co., Inc., Publishers, 2009).

invited a wariness of elements which may be comparable to the abstract evil “other,” and promoted anticipation for the “Rapture.”

Growing up, my understanding of the Rapture was shaped by the *Left Behind* series, which describes the Rapture as a sudden disappearance of all “born-again” Christians, as God takes them to paradise before the prophesied seven years of “Tribulation” take place on Earth. Those who are taken up get the chance to avoid death entirely due to their protected status as Christians, while anyone who does not declare faith in Jesus Christ is subjected to “the time of distress,” prophesied to be the worst period of human history and marked by unprecedented violence and terror.¹⁴ Through the discourse presented in Lahaye’s best-selling literature, Evangelical Christians were invited to believe in their inherently superior status as believers; they were the moral minority, and in projected times of conflict, their perceived martyrdom would be rewarded.

For the purpose of this thesis, I interviewed my mother, Amy Cross, to gain some perspective on her background. She was born in 1970, the same year *The Late, Great Planet Earth* was published. She grew up in a small Christian community in North Carolina in the midst of rising excitement about the return of Jesus and is now a devout believer that this return is imminent. She frequently sends me articles with sensationalized titles along the lines of “THIS IS NOT A HOAX- Democrats don’t want you to know this” followed by some type of connection between current events and Biblical prophecy. In the interview, she tells me that when she was young, a youth pastor at her church would frequently yell “Rapture practice!” and everyone would jump up and

¹⁴ Daniel 12:1 (NRSV).

run around. “It was a fun thing,” she says. “We were excited for Jesus to come back.”

The popularized notion clearly became an element of romanticized anticipation, where even children were trained to look forward to the obscure date that they would be rescued from all suffering forever.

The Reagan administration motivated reactionary Evangelical Christians to engage in political activism to maintain what they saw as the conservative tradition of the nation. Evangelicals were brought to the polls in response to shifting public policies which they construed as an assault on their religion, and simultaneously an indication of prophetic predictions taking place. In the 1962 court case *Engle v. Vitale*, the Supreme Court voted 6-1 that public schools could not force students to engage in prayer. Just one year later, the court ruled in *Abington Township School District v. Schempp* that compulsory Bible reading in public schools was unconstitutional. The full force of conservative outrage emerged a decade later in the midst of the hippie “radicalization” of American youths. A societal division between an imagined conservative “silent majority” and popular youth culture materialized (characterized by sex, drugs and rock and roll), and older traditionalists designated it an era of extreme moral decline, argued to be linked to the secularization of public schools in the 1960s. The controversy reached a pivotal moment with the decision establishing women’s right to have an abortion in landmark case *Roe v. Wade* (1973), which created one more issue to bring conservative Christians out to the polls. These political changes, known as secular humanism, were frequently compared to communism by prominent evangelical leaders.¹⁵ Thus, secularism was depicted as the primary threat to Christianity around the world. As stated by the scholar

¹⁵ Jeremy R. Hatfield, “For God and Country: The Religious Right, the Reagan Administration, and the Cold War,” (Jeremy R. Hatfield, 2013).

Johann Pautz, “Basing their understanding of the United States on a myth of religious purity sullied by encroaching secularization and loosening morals, many notable Evangelists have described any opposition to a theocratic agenda as religious persecution, and in some instances, the implicit need for armed defense.”¹⁶

Reagan’s 1980 presidential bid grew off of these anxieties by catering to conservative Christians on a platform of returning to traditional values. In a speech to the National Association of Evangelicals, Reagan crystalized his position on social issues and anti-communist foreign policy through heavily religious language. Addressing the issue of abortion, Reagan remarked that the word “promiscuous” had been replaced with “sexually active” and condemned the immorality of young women as they were aided by secular programs giving them access to birth control and contraceptives which promoted this immorality. Further, Reagan catered to parents by speaking on the removal of forced Christianity from schools, saying: “I am calling on the Congress to act speedily to pass it (reversal of *Engle v. Vitale*) and to let our children pray.” There is a clear distinction between good and evil forces in his speech, as he references the Soviet Union as “the focus of evil in the modern world” and admits that the preservation of traditional values is “in opposition to, or at least out of step with, a prevailing attitude of many who have turned to a modern-day secularism, discarding the tried and time-tested values upon which our very civilization is based.”¹⁷ In a bid to manipulate parent’s anxiety about their children, Reagan heightened the emotional value of his diatribe by sharing a story of a

¹⁶Johann Pautz, “The end-times narratives of the American far-right” in *End of Days: Essays on the Apocalypse From Antiquity to Modernity*, eds. Carolyn Kinane and Michael A. Ryan, (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Co., Inc., Publishers, 2009).

¹⁷ Ronald Reagan, “Speech to the National Association of Evangelicals,” *Teaching American History*, (March 8, 1983). <https://teachingamericanhistory.org/library/document/speech-to-the-national-association-of-evangelicals/>

young father from California who claimed he would rather see his little girls die now, still believing in God, than have them grow up under communism and one day die not believing in God. His compelling plea to the audience's pathos overall revealed the general sentiments of Evangelicals as they witnessed a rapidly changing society. The demagogic language of the speech benefited Reagan's campaign by characterizing his Evangelical supporters as heroes within a perilous century, working to preserve liberty and democracy with the blessing of God and ever in conflict with forces trying to subvert the pure national identity.

Underpinning the intersection of Christian prophecy and politics was a society which played an instrumental role in shaping the narrative around millennial conspiracy. The 1970 song "Talkin' John Birch Paranoid Blues" by Bob Dylan demonstrates the senseless anxiety of Americans during the Cold War. Filled with satire and humor, the song is narrated by a paranoid individual who fears the "Reds" are infiltrating his country, and thus joins the John Birch Society to protect himself after investigating under his bed, up his chimney, down his toilet and even himself to find the communists:

Well, I was feelin' sad and feelin' blue
I didn't know what in the world I wus gonna do
Them Communists they wus comin' around
They wus in the air, They wus on the ground
They wouldn't gimme no peace . . .
So I run down most hurriedly
And joined up with the John Birch Society
I got me a secret membership card
And started off a-walkin' down the road
Yee-hoo, I'm a real John Bircher now!
Look out you Commies!¹⁸

¹⁸ Bob Dylan, "Talkin' John Birch Paranoid Blues," The Bootleg Series Volumes 1-3, 1991.

The far-right John Birch Society (JBS) is notable for being an anti-communist Christian organization with many political figures cycling through the society. The JBS' platform defined itself in its opposition to wealth redistribution and economic intervention, and support for limited government. The society opposed globalization and condemned the United Nations, NAFTA, the Central American Free Trade Agreement and other free trade agreements which they claimed were secretly Marxist organizations created to dismantle the conservative values of the United States. The society also opposed water fluoridation under speculation that it was used as a mass sedative for mind-control. Throughout the 20th century, the JBS influenced discourse around conspiracism by raising alarmist concern towards the term “the New World Order,” an expression first introduced in the early 20th century by political figures such as Woodrow Wilson and Winston Churchill to describe a new era of global trade. Collective initiatives to set limitations and principles for international relationships were established with the League of Nations in 1920, the United Nations in 1945, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization in 1949 and international regimes such as the Bretton Woods system. Through the Cold War era, the conceptualization of the New World Order shifted as millennialists co-opted the term to spread anti-communist propaganda. The John Birch Society was instrumental in associating the term with apocalyptic millenarian conspiracies and disseminated theories in the 1960s positing that a secret insider cabal of corporate internationalists were controlling the United States and the Soviet Union and using the UN as a vehicle to bring about this Marxist One World Government. The theory recycled old anti-Semitic tropes of a Jewish international banking conspiracy, popularized about the Rothschild family in the 16th century—a Jewish banking family in

Europe.¹⁹ Interestingly, a prominent member of JBS was Tim Lahaye, author of the *Left Behind* series. In its prime, the JBS had as many as 100,000 dues-paying members around the country. While the John Birch Society was relegated to extremist fringe beliefs in the 1970s by critics, it is argued by some, such as Jeet Heer, in *The New Republic* that “Bircherism” and its legacy of conspiracy never went out of fashion.²⁰ Shocking similarities with rhetoric of the Trump administration convey that it has in fact become the leading philosophy of the modern conservative movement, manifested through identical and adapted versions of their conspiratorial thinking. The JBS chapter in Texas is still present and active, and with support from prominent leaders such as Ted Cruz and Greg Abbott, it doubled in size between 2014 and 2017.²¹

III. Models of Prophecy and Conspiracy Justification

Political scientist Michael Barkun differentiates historic models of apocalyptic conspiracy from modern ones by defining today’s era of conspiracy as “improvisational millenarism,” which characterizes the modern age of conspiracy in the manner in which Apocalypticism incorporates elements from a variety of belief systems without assuming the incompatibility of the mélange. Modern conspiracy endorses the cyclical view of history in its need for ultimate victory over evil as defined by Biblical prophecy, but also finds unique and creative ways to apply modern events into newly constructed

¹⁹ Dorian Bell, “Globalizing Race Antisemitism and Empire in French and European Culture,” *UC Santa Cruz*, (California Digital Library, University of California, 2018), 232.

²⁰ Jeet Heer, “Donald Trump’s United States of Conspiracy,” *The New Republic*, (2016).
<https://newrepublic.com/article/134257/donald-trumps-united-states-conspiracy>

²¹ “The John Birch Society is Back,” *Politico Magazine*, (Accessed July 2nd, 2021).
<https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2017/07/16/the-john-birch-society-is-alive-and-well-in-the-lone-star-state-215377/>

apocalyptic narratives. Richard Hofstadter notes that such beliefs are an intrinsic, long developed part of the American consciousness, which he defines as a symbolic “paranoid style.”²² A study by the *American Journal of Political Science* supports Hofstadter’s analysis through empirical evidence that identifies two factors that are likely indices of conspiratorial tendencies. First, individuals who believe in supernatural or paranormal beliefs are more likely to endorse a conspiracy theory. Second, individuals who endorse a type of Manichean worldview that forces reality into grand narratives of good-versus-evil and right-versus-wrong are more susceptible.²³ Manichaeism is defined by its strict duality of two opposed sides, where nuance is not considered, and everything can be neatly categorized.

These two elements are indicative of tendencies towards conspiracy and can be understood under a Christian framework, where belief in prophecy emulates the presence of the supernatural. This narrative of a Christian triumph over evil typically replicates the Manichean worldview. Since the boom of the Apocalypse Industry in the 70s, prophecy has been culturally normalized and popularized, making it accessible for promoters of conspiracy to weave the narrative into their own agenda and gain support from Evangelicals by co-opting Biblical language and thus easing acceptance of grander narratives. Therefore, discourses of prophecy and conspiracy are intertwined and similar in their ability to provide an explanation for the nature of evil.

A second essential element shared between prophecy and conspiracy which make the two so strongly linked is the inherent rejection of the scientific method. This

²²Richard Hofstadter, “The Paranoid Style in American Politics, and Other Essays,” (1979).

²³ Oliver J. Eric, and Thomas J. Wood, "Conspiracy Theories And The Paranoid Style(S) Of Mass Opinion". *American Journal Of Political Science* (2014) 58 (4): 952-966. doi:10.1111/ajps.12084.

manifests in five key ways which I have identified: first, substituting anecdotal evidence for empirics, applying confirmation bias to semiotics, dismissing conflicting evidence by labeling it propaganda of the conspirator, repetition veracity theory, and finally, divided authority on expertise enabled by the Internet.

As I interviewed my mom about her beliefs, I had to ask her what she believed was evidence of their truth. She responded heartily with an anecdote she had heard on the radio by the daughter of late famed preacher Billy Graham, Anne Graham Lotz. In an interview on the CBN News radio program, Lotz pointed to two relevant factors that she attributed as indices of the imminent return of Jesus: her birth in 1948 and the rejection of Christianity in America. Lotz explains that her birth year, the same year that Israel was declared a state, is indicative that the second coming of Christ will be within her lifetime. She also condemns the increased secularization of American society, reminiscent of the rise of Evangelical politics in the 1970s²⁴. My mom found this argument compelling. It was a kickstarter for her and led her to dive further into the study of Biblical prophecy and specifically the opinions of those who believed contemporary events revealed signs of prophecy coming true. She notes that one of the first gut-wrenching realizations she made on her own was connecting the advent of 5G technology to the “Mark of the Beast,” an abstract prophetic term that has been compared to many different things, including the COVID-19 vaccine. She says, “after that, it was like every day I was learning something new, and it was all coming together.”²⁵

²⁴ Anne Graham Lotz, “I Believe I will Live to See the Return of Jesus,” interview on CBN News, transcript by Mark Martin, (April 2016).

²⁵ Amy Cross, interview by Elle Cross, Houston, July 10, 2021.

Anyone who accepts a prophecy or conspiracy to be true is not looking for evidence to disprove a theory, but rather begins with a conclusion, and manipulates information to fit that narrative. According to my mom, the best method is to “choose what you think is true and then wait to find the evidence.”²⁶ Believers of conspiracy and prophecy immerse themselves in knowledge shared by people who designate themselves experts in semiotics, mapping the modern world to affirm the significance of loosely related events and assigning such connections as proof of the theory they purport to support. Because they believe that nothing is accidental and everything has meaning, they constantly interpret things through the framework that everything is layered, and by creating loose connections with their narrative, they remove layers and the “real facts” of things to make them exist only in relation to their beliefs, which they designate the bottom layer and the “truth,” scraped of its context. Because the foundation for these beliefs relies on confirmation bias, it is easy to understand why so many believers reject science and the scientific method. They are very slow to admit this however, but rather point to their stripped-down networks of allegedly connected ideas and events as empirical evidence. Like Lotz’s connection between her birth and the imminent Apocalypse, this evidence is typically anecdotal and reinforced by repetition. Repetition substitutes for direct evidence as a way of determining veracity. Rumors become self-validating based on the frequency of their spread, a model which is promoted by the viral nature of the Internet.

An essential element to the maintenance of conspiracy is the rejection of any conflicting evidence, which is effective by following a standard model. The model

²⁶ Ibid.

establishes the key theory that anything at all which appears to disprove the conspiracy must have been planted by the conspirators themselves in order to mislead.²⁷ Thus, the enlightened minority sets itself apart from the majority, who are assumed to have succumbed to mind control and brainwashing from the mass media. Furthermore, believers can maintain their beliefs with little evidence because they perceive the mass media as a tool of the enemy which censors and suppresses the “Truth”—making it hard to find significant evidence and relegating them to fringe communities which spread misinformation in niche echo-chambers on the Internet. It is essential to note how the Internet has played a role in shaping beliefs in recent years. A constantly updating index of the World Wide Web found that there are currently approximately 3.88 trillion pages on the Internet,²⁸ compared to just 1.3 million in 1995. Because of the sheer volume of information and the lack of gatekeeping, the Internet has fractured expert authority on every subject. As stated by digital humanities scholar Matthew Hannah, “The information dark age is produced by the opposite of ignorance: it is a side effect of too much access to unmoderated information wherein connections between anything can be decoded by anyone at any time.”²⁹ Experts have found it difficult to control the narrative, and as more counter narratives arise, people become more inclined to doubt the authority of experts. For example, the Yale Program on Climate Change and Communication found that almost a third of Americans either don’t think that global warming is happening or aren’t

²⁷ Michael Barkun, “A culture of Conspiracy, Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary America,” *Comparative Studies in Religion and Society*, (second edition, August 2019).

²⁸ Maurice deKunder, “The size of the World Wide Web,” Tilburg University, (accessed July 20, 2021).

²⁹ Matthew Hannah, “QAnon and the Information Dark Age,” *First Monday*, (2021).

<https://doi.org/10.5210/fm.v26i2.10868>

sure,³⁰ despite the reality that over 97% of published climate scientists support the consensus on anthropogenic climate change.³¹ Similarly, pseudo-science spread through Facebook pages has caused people to stop vaccinating their children because of rumors of vaccines causing autism and other unverified claims.

IV. Fear-Mongering & Demagoguery amidst Demographic Changes

To comprehend how the present political climate has become so strongly defined by prophecy and conspiracy, it is critical to acknowledge how demographic changes in the United States promote tribalism and reactionary identity politics. While White Anglo-Saxon Protestants (WASPs) have controlled the social, political and cultural environment of the United States for the majority of the nation's history, recent demographic changes threaten to alter power structures in significant ways.

The racial composition of the United States is changing at an unprecedented rate. Census data illustrates White residents comprised almost 80% of the national population in 1980, yet by 2019, the number decreased to 60.1%. This rapid change is amplified by an increasingly young population, wherein more than 50% of those under age 16 identify as a racial or ethnic minority. The racial diversity of the nation is accelerating as the distribution of ethnic and diverse racial group members of the younger generations flows upward. Furthermore, as of 2019, 27 of the 100 largest metropolitan areas have minority-White populations, including the major metropolises of New York, Los Angeles, Washington, D.C., and Miami—as well as Dallas, Atlanta, and Orlando, Fla., which

³⁰Jennifer Marlon, Peter Howe et. al, “Yale Climate Opinion Maps 2020,” *Yale Program on Climate Change Communication*, (Sep 2020). <https://climatecommunication.yale.edu/visualizations-data/ycom-us/>

³¹ William R L Anderegg; James W. Prall; Jacob Harold and Stephen H. Schneider, “Expert credibility in climate change,” (2010) *Proc. Natl. Acad. Sci. USA*.

reached this status by 2010.³² A very similar shift is occurring along religious lines, as supported by an aggregated Pew Research Study conducted between 2007 and 2019, which found that the number of US adults who identify as Christian decreased from 78% in 2007 to 65% in 2019. Unsurprisingly, the data has a significant correlation with generational gaps. The Silent Generation, born between 1928-45) identify as 84% Christian, in contrast to only 49% of Millennials (1981-96).³³ Coincidentally, these declining groups were a majority of Trump's coalition. A Pew research study on the 2020 electorate in the Presidential election found that 77% of the share of the White Evangelical electorate voted for Trump.³⁴ In her groundbreaking book "Tribal World," Amy Chua breaks down WASP anxiety, explaining that as the US becomes more diverse, WASPs are witnessing a decrease in their social influence, and the media becoming increasingly dominated by multiculturalism feels like a direct threat to their identity. She notes, "America's cultural wars are nothing if not a fight for the right to define our national identity—and it's a bitter, race-inflected battle."³⁵ As a long-time majority, WASPs monopolized the definition of American identity at the expense of minority populations. For centuries, White and Christian cultural hegemony infused mainstream discourse with Western exceptionalism. According to geographer Doreen Massey, places are always constructed out of articulations of social relations, and history cannot be

³² William H. Frey, "The Nation is Diversifying Even Faster than Predicted, According to New Census Data," *Brookings Institute*, (July 1, 2020) <https://www.brookings.edu/research/new-census-data-shows-the-nation-is-diversifying-even-faster-than-predicted/>

³³ "In U.S., Decline of Christianity Continues at Rapid Pace," *Pew Research Center*, (October 17, 2019). <https://www.pewforum.org/2019/10/17/in-u-s-decline-of-christianity-continues-at-rapid-pace/>

³⁴ John Gramlich, "What the 2020 electorate looks like by party, race and ethnicity, age, education and religion," *Pew Research Center*, (October 26, 2020). <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/10/26/what-the-2020-electorate-looks-like-by-party-race-and-ethnicity-age-education-and-religion/>

³⁵ Amy Chua, "Political Tribes," *Penguin Books*, (2019).

separated from geography.³⁶ While WASPs frequently associate their identity with the tradition that offered them their status, they have up until now imbued historical representations of hierarchy with a filter of normalization that marks the experience of oppressed minorities as abnormal, yet the “normal” experience could not possibly be responsible for this structure because its normalcy grants it a neutral condition. Massey adds that the understanding of identity in relation to space (or the Nation) is limited when considered solely from the view of the group which maintains dominance. Realistically, the claims about the contemporary character of a place necessitate varied, rival interpretations of the past to accurately understand Nationhood, yet WASPs build their relationship to the nation with very little nuance and their identity is based around a unitary experience.³⁷ According to Italian Marxist theorist Antonio Gramsci, who wrote about fascism from a prison cell in which he died under Mussolini, hegemonic culture propagates its own values and norms so that they become the “common sense” values of all and thus maintain the *status quo*.³⁸ When the status quo is challenged by change in racial and religious distribution, it becomes symbolic of a perversion of the nation. Members of a dominant group who feel threatened by changing demographics and shifting mainstream culture are motivated by their desire to preserve a system that benefits them. Because they consider their experience the “traditional” American experience, there is no reason to believe that it is at the cost of anyone else’s liberty

³⁶ Doreen Massey, “Places and Their Pasts,” *History Workshop Journal*, (no. 1: 182-92, 1995).

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Simone Marino, “Intergenerational Ethnic Identity construction and Transmission among Italian-Australians,” *Springer nature*, (2020).

because as the majority in-group, their position in the hierarchy is legitimized and justified by their very identity.

A highly polarized environment characterized by White anxiety opens up endless opportunities for demagoguery. In turn, demagogues politicize the romanticized version of the majority's imagined nation and can effectively scapegoat the intrusion of the minority, or "other" as a presumed evil. The concept of demagoguery is the political manifestation of the Manichean framework. Patricia Roberts-Miller in her book *Demagoguery and Democracy* defines demagoguery as "discourse that promises stability, certainty, and escape from the responsibilities of rhetoric by framing public policy in terms of the degree to which and the means by which (not whether) the out-group should be scapegoated for the current problems of the in-group."³⁹ When demagogues like Donald Trump use inflammatory language to condemn opponents, such as calling democrats "radicalized socialists," Muslim congress-woman Ilhan Omar a terrorist, or Mexican immigrants rapists, a binary of good and evil evolves. The discourse around policy becomes centered on identity, and the in-group (or in this instance the Trump coalition) is the moral minority in conflict with a destructive evil. Roberts-Miller explains that people drawn to demagoguery frequently shape arguments based on identity, using deductive reasoning to argue that anything the in-group stands for is right by virtue of its existence as the in-group. Personal conviction is presented as adequate, and does not necessitate proof or empirical evidence to be substantial.⁴⁰ Scapegoating the out-group for the problems of the in-group becomes necessary to fulfill the belief system that the in-group is superior. As identity replaces the need for evidence, it becomes easy to

³⁹ Patricia Roberts-Miller, "Demagoguery and Democracy," *The Experiment*, (2020).

⁴⁰ Ibid.

propagate any claim about the threat of the out-group, as long as it maintains the simplified, black and white hierarchy. Instead of searching for solutions, public discourse becomes motivated by the need to triumph over the other side. It is made effective when it is paired with fear mongering, where the existence of the in-group is defined by the danger of extermination by the out-group, while simultaneously including claims that the triumph of the in-group is predestined. This rhetoric is a nearly identical model of apocalyptic conspiracy but enables its application in a political sense.

Thus, the Manichean framework is established, and political and economic elites are granted leverage to obfuscate complex issues, deflect responsibility, and redirect populist anger.⁴¹ These three elements are prerequisites to the rise of conspiracy when propagated top-down. In our analysis, we must try to grasp the sheer knitted-together strength of conspiratorial discourse and its very close ties to the enabling socio-economic and political institutions. These institutions enable the rampant spread of rumors in order to manipulate and polarize anxious citizens.

V. Trump in a Reactionary Era

This phenomenon overtly distinguishes the Trump regime's relationship with its coalition. Former president Donald Trump's 2016 campaign slogan, "Make America Great Again," is not only reminiscent of a time when WASPs controlled every aspect of society without objection from other groups, but also carries a similar tone to Reagan's

⁴¹ Johann Pautz, "Death Panels on the Prison Planet: the New World Order Conspiracy and the Radicalization of American Politics," In *Manufacturing Phobias*, (University of Toronto Press, 2016), 209-241.

campaign to return to traditional values, echoing a binary of good versus evil. The campaign capitalized on cultural polarization and heightened anxiety through sensationalized demagoguery and fear mongering, embroidered with lies and rampant misinformation. Early on in his campaign, Trump promoted a multitude of unfounded, incriminating theories about his opponent Hilary Clinton. Through incendiary language, Trump made a caravan of immigrants appear to be the biggest threat to American security, just for them to be turned away at the border and forgotten in the public consciousness within weeks. By creating alternative realities clouded with racialized and religious tension, the campaign manipulated its supporters into believing that the mainstream media should be doubted, a legacy of one of the key tools of demagoguery around the world. A CBS News/YouGov poll found that just 11 percent of strong Trump supporters trust the mainstream media—while 91 percent turn to the president for “accurate information.”⁴² Trump famously popularized the term “Fake News,” further exacerbating the previously mentioned growing distrust of expertise in the country. The legacy of this deliberate attempt to undermine the institution of the press lends people the authority to consider themselves experts, capable and responsible for individually uncovering alternative truths through fringe claims rather than verified expert opinions. Furthermore, Trump’s regime frequently endorsed unfounded myths. Trump even repeatedly retweeted or shared information that was synthesized by conspiratorial groups. Data collected by Alex Kaplan found that Trump amplified tweets from supporters of the

⁴²“Americans Wary of Trump Tariffs’ Impact, but Support Plan to Aid Farmers — CBS Poll - CBS News,” *CBS News - Breaking News, 24/7 Live Streaming News & Top Stories*, (2018). https://www.cbsnews.com/news/americans-wary-of-trump-tariffs-impact-but-support-plan-to-aid-farmers-cbs-poll/?utm_source=newsletter&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=sendto_newsletter&stream=top.

QAnon conspiracy movement at least 185 times, including more than 90 times since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic.⁴³ At one campaign rally, Trump pointed at a family wearing Qanon merchandise, appearing to legitimize the movement in the eyes of believers. QAnon members have also been granted press passes at his rallies, Trump has promoted conspiratorial misinformation, and the group's presence at the storming of the Capitol on January 6th was substantial. An interpretation by media scholar Ethan Zuckerman notes that Trump could have three motives for amplifying conspiracy: first, he could be giving a voice to groups who support him regardless of their affiliation, second, he might be trying to cater further into the conspiratorial electorate to gain support, and third, he might genuinely believe the conspiracies and see himself as the savior of the movement.⁴⁴

Ultimately, while apocalyptic conspiracy has been shaped and molded through centuries of development, it is defined today by the divisive discourse that was promulgated by the Trump campaign's demagogic rhetoric in an era of heightened insecurity because of demographic changes. The manifestation of demagoguery is observable in the exponential rise of conspiracy theorists throughout the Trump regime.

VI. What is Q-Anon ?

⁴³ Alex Kaplan, "Trump Has Repeatedly Amplified QAnon Twitter Accounts. The FBI Has Linked the Conspiracy Theory to Domestic Terror," *Media Matters for America*, (August 2019), <https://www.mediamatters.org/twitter/fbi-calls-qanon-domestic-terror-threat-trump-has-amplified-qanon-supporters-twitter-more-20>

⁴⁴ Ethan Zuckerman, "QAnon and The Emergence of the Unreal," (Issue 6: Unreal, no.6, 2019). <https://doi.org/10.21428/7808da6b.6b8a82b9>

I previously mentioned that Qanon is one of the most prominent examples in the 21st century of what Michael Barkun would call improvisational millenarism, where old apocalyptic conspiracy fuses with modern ideas. I have referenced the conspiracy group a multitude of times throughout this thesis, but what is QAnon, really? It originally rose to prominence in 2017 when an anonymous poster calling himself Q (named this way for his alleged “Q level clearance” in the Trump administration’s intelligence) began posting cryptic messages on the loosely regulated message board, 4chan. The main premise of QAnon is that a secret cabal of elites (including Hillary Clinton, Barack Obama, and George Soros as well as numerous Hollywood elite and past presidents) runs an underground sex trafficking ring engaged in demonic child-eating rituals, blood sacrifice, and Satanism, and is ultimately responsible for all the evil in the world. This myth was originally propagated on 4chan and 8chan under the nefarious title “Pizzagate” and played a large role in the smear campaign against Hillary Clinton during her campaign in 2016. The viral conspiracy is seen as the predecessor to QAnon. QAnon theory promotes the narrative that aforementioned globalist elites work behind the shadows to install a totalitarian regime, strip Americans of their freedom and eliminate democracy permanently, all under the stringent hand of control of a one-world government. Furthermore, QAnon followers believe that Trump is the world’s only hope to defeat the “deep state.” Post the inauguration of Joe Biden, it is unclear how their views on this have changed, although the significant number of Americans who believe that Donald Trump lost due to election fraud suggests that their views are still the same. However, it is important to note how this element of the conspiracy replicates the story of Biblical prophecy, in which Donald Trump becomes the messianic figure designed to triumph

over evil. Many Americans have consequently embraced a status of martyrdom and discipleship, fully radicalized and prepared to do anything to pave the way for their savior. A post by the verified account @neonrevolt, who has nearly 700k followers on Gab.com echoes this sentiment, just days after the storming of the Capitol⁴⁵:



NEON REVOLT   @NeonRevolt



Jan 9 · 

You belong here, [@realdonaldtrump](#).

We've readied this place for you. Readied it and built it up for the past 4 years.

All that awaits is for you to make the call.

Although the contemporary USA is filled with a multitude of conspiracy theories ranging from UFOs to who committed 9/11, I am ending this paper by discussing QAnon because of its role as an apocalyptic super-conspiracy that incorporates a plethora of smaller conspiracies and engages a significant portion of the U.S. population. These smaller conspiracies are all linked in their accusation of inner elite control of government, but manifest in a variety of ways. It is easy to see how the main QAnon claim about a secret cabal doing things behind the scenes allows people to connect the dots to other conspiracies, as a feeling of mistrust of a certain entity paired with an accusation that they are engaged in evil acts brings credibility to anxiety. Notably, QAnon myth has frequently merged with COVID-19 pandemic conspiracy theories, maintaining the trope

⁴⁵ Post by @NEONREVOLT on Gab.com, Jan 9, 2021.
<https://gab.com/NeonRevolt/posts/105525012557881119>

that communists are infiltrating the government (arguably the same ones who are eating babies), manufactured COVID to increase their control of people, and are working to create a One World Government, also known as the New World Order (drawing from the conspiracies of the John Birch Society). Much of the current conspiracy is nothing but recycled Cold War propaganda merged with Evangelical prophecy and promoted by politically motivated lies. According to Travis View from the Qanon debunking podcast known as QAnon Anonymous, “Whoever wrote the Q drops had encyclopedic knowledge of old conspiracist tropes.” While QAnon is not explicitly partisan and has followers from all sides of the political spectrum, it does view Donald Trump as the savior of the movement, believes that he rightfully won the 2020 election, and opposes progressive policy because of its relation to an alleged communist agenda. Because of these elements and the deliberate incorporation of historic apocalyptic language, conservative Christians do turn out to be the largest demographic of Q followers. A survey by the Pew Research Center conducted between August and September 2020 found that 51% of QAnon supporters identified as Protestant, and 22% identified as Roman Catholic.⁴⁶ Lifeway Research, an organization that conducts surveys on behalf of the Southern Baptist Convention, found in January that 49% of pastors reported frequently hearing conspiracy theories from members of their church.⁴⁷ At its peak, close to 30 million Americans may have supported QAnon.⁴⁸ The group’s reach is massive,

⁴⁶ Zachary Kliger, “Who are QAnon Supporters? 5 Revealing Findings from Survey Data,” *The Morningside Post*, (March 2021). <https://morningsidepost.com/articles/2021/3/8/who-are-qanon-supporters-5-revealing-findings-from-survey-data>

⁴⁷ “Half of U.S. Protestant Pastors Hear Conspiracy Theories in Their Churches,” *Lifeway Research*, (2021). <https://lifewayresearch.com/2021/01/26/half-of-u-s-protestant-pastors-hear-conspiracy-theories-in-their-churches/>

⁴⁸ Zachary Kliger, “Who are QAnon Supporters? 5 Revealing Findings from Survey Data,” *The Morningside Post*, (March 2021). <https://morningsidepost.com/articles/2021/3/8/who-are-qanon-supporters-5-revealing-findings-from-survey-data>

and should not be easily dismissed. The fastest growth of Q believers at the beginning of COVID-19. It was a perfect time for frustrated people stuck at home to dive into the depths of the internet and find communities that reassured their anxiety and gave them purpose and an explanation for the rapid changes in the world. Data collected over the course of 2020 found that QAnon membership grew by 581 per cent, with the most substantial rise occurring in March, when the national pandemic containment strategy began to take full effect. The movement particularly gained traction by spreading COVID-related conspiracy theories and disinformation but became further entrenched with support from members with political office. Researcher Alex Kaplan of the U.S. not-for-profit publication Media Matters found that in 2020, 62 QAnon believers ran in congressional primaries in 27 different states, running predominantly under the Republican party.⁴⁹ Promoting QAnon tropes has become a demagogic tool, permitting those seeking office to manipulate fearmongering and lead people to demonize opposing candidates based on false allegations of their affiliation or unwilling cooperation with the so-called Deep State agenda. Marjorie Taylor Green is the star congresswoman of QAnon, and has openly endorsed myths championed by the group and is famous for making inflammatory comments about virtually everything (including that Muslims do not belong in the government, calling George Soros, a Jewish Democratic megadonor, a Nazi, and a variety of other racist suggestions). QAnon's reach is huge; a poll conducted by NPR in February of 2021 found that 17% of adults believe that "a group of Satan-worshipping elites who run a child sex ring are trying to control our politics and media,"

⁴⁹ Marc-Andre Argentino, "QAnon and the Storm of the U.S. Capitol: The Offline Effect of Online Conspiracy Theories," *The Conversation*, (2021). <https://theconversation.com/qanon-and-the-storm-of-the-u-s-capitol-the-offline-effect-of-online-conspiracy-theories-152815>

while 37% said they weren't sure. Moreover, the poll found that 39% of Americans believe that there is a deep state working to undermine President Trump.⁵⁰ The fact that over a quarter of Americans are unsure whether the country is being undemocratically steered towards dissolution by a small group of malevolent elite is, at the minimum, concerning.

VII. The Methodology of Q

What makes QAnon so pervasive within contemporary society is the way it feeds off of engagement from followers. Q's cryptic message drops are followed by a whirlwind of "bakers" and "Qtubers," people who found popularity on Youtube discussing topics related to QAnon, who attempt to decode the meaning and connect it to current events, accepting input from followers and leading to long debates within the threads on the message board (previously on 8chan, then 4chan, and now on 4kun). Author Walter Kirn identifies Q as a storyteller who has mastered a fundamental truth of narrative on the internet: "The audience for internet narratives doesn't want to read, it wants to write. It doesn't want answers provided, it wants to search for them."⁵¹ In a thread called "Research Operation's War Room" on the channel endchan.net, I found the following post:⁵²

⁵⁰ Joel Rose, "QAnon Conspiracy Theories and Misinformation," *The National Public Radio*, (December 2020). <https://www.npr.org/2020/12/30/951095644/even-if-its-bonkers-poll-finds-many-believe-qanon-and-other-conspiracy-theories>

⁵¹ Ethan Zuckerman, "QAnon and The Emergence of the Unreal," (Issue 6: Unreal, no.6, 2019). <https://doi.org/10.21428/7808da6b.6b8a82b9>

⁵² Anonymous post on Endchan.net, 10/19/2019, No. 19890 in /qanonresearch/. <https://endchan.net/qanonresearch/>

(14.31 KB 255x255 the-great-awakening.jpeg)



🗨️ • **'The Great Awakening' welcome to the light, fren EDITION 2**
Anonymous 10/19/2019 (Sat) 00:01:20 📌 [Preview] No. 19890 [Reply] [X] [Last 50 Posts]

Welcome to the Global War

You are now entering the mind of Patriots worldwide, and to our fight we welcome you. Since late 2017, Q Clearance Patriot, more commonly known as Q, has tasked us with compiling events and evidence of the world-changing circumstances that have, and have yet to transpire.

We are anonymous; We are your friends, your family, your co-workers, and strangers alike. Just like you, we knew there was something wrong with the world around us. Like you, we had a desire for our world to achieve peace. And like you, we found ourselves here in the forefront of information warfare. We stand for truth. Will you join the fight? Will you brave the depths of the unknown with bravery and courage?

Know that the corruption that you are about to unravel is not the fault of any one person. The pervasive systems of evil being unveiled and dismantled here have pitted us against one another since before your birth. Be strong, stand together, and stay united. We are with you. Together we are unstoppable! United we are invincible!

Show no fear, as now is the time for We The People to make our final stand in this battle between good and evil! Love shall prevail!

May your thoughts be clear, your wits be sharp, and your heart be strong. For in this digital age, the mind is the battlefield, and it can be your strongest ally or the greatest enemy.

The thread was full of allegations about the COVID vaccine and memes about the return of Donald Trump. The highly demagogic language in the above welcome message has immense emotional value in its call for people to participate in the search for truth:

“Show no fear, as now is the time for We The People to make our final stand in this battle between good and evil! Love shall prevail!”

Although the base of the theory about globalist elites remains, QAnon theories take on hundreds of different forms as believers insert their own beliefs into the narrative and search for meaning and justification of countless different theories. The original poster, Q, has been silent since the inauguration of Biden, but messaging boards stay

active as people maintain the echo chambers of misinformation as Q intended. Thus, the ecosystem has grown into a super conspiracy, where believers are permitted to reject what doesn't seem fit and incorporate whatever makes sense to them. For this reason, all progressive policies have become targets of non-falsifiable accusations because of their link to a baseless communist agenda, a common trope which has been embraced even by mainstream right-wing news outlets such as Fox media because of the effectiveness of misinformed fearmongering.

VIII. Political Impact of QAnon

QAnon is much more than just a growing thread of fabricated stories internalized by a few loyal supporters or contemplated by a large portion of anxious Americans. It has gained enough political attention to be considered a terrorist threat by the FBI and numerous acts of violence have been carried out in its name. The promotion of individual pursuit of truth has enabled the radicalization and ensuing terrorist violence of a significant number of individuals. On December 4, 2016, Edgar Maddison Welch entered the Comet Ping Pong pizza restaurant in Washington D.C. with an AR-15 and .38 revolver to rescue the children he was convinced were trapped in the building. On June 15, 2018, Matthew Wright drove an armored truck onto a bridge near the Hoover Dam and stood outside the vehicle over the course of a 90-minute standoff with the police, holding a sign calling for the release of the "OIG Report" which QAnon followers believed to contain information incriminating of a variety of government actors. More recently, on April 29, 2020, Jessica Prim drove into a pier with a car full of knives and threatened to kill Joe Biden on a live-stream, in which she accused him of complicity in

the sex-trafficking ring. QAnon-inspired radicalization reached a climax on January 6th during the storming of the U.S. Capitol, in which thousands of people claimed the election results were fraudulent and Donald Trump was the rightful winner. Advance Democracy, a nonpartisan nonprofit that tracks misinformation, found that 1 in 7 tweets about “#Dominion” since Nov. 5 originated from accounts that self-identified as QAnon accounts. Tweets featuring the #Dominion hashtag rose from about 75 tweets per day to over 35,700 each day in the last week.⁵³ QAnon ideology undeniably played a role in the attempted coup, and their success in entering the Capitol building is a marker of their power, which should not be undermined.

Furthermore, QAnon ideology plays a role in local and national policy-making. Not only does it lend to opposition to progressive policy, but the last few months have also given rise to reversal of existing policy regarding women’s rights and the teaching of racial history in early education. This opposition is inflamed by connecting policy to Marxist conditioning, a conspiratorial tool that has been co-opted by mainstream news sources. The term Critical Race Theory has been repeated by right-wingers over and over in the past few months, followed by the implication that the Left is aligned behind a secret theology emerging from Marxism to indoctrinate children into uniform thought to criminalize White people. Although CRT is actually uniquely taught in law school, the term sounds scary enough to mobilize individuals to vote against it. Consequently, a sweeping wave of legislation has passed through the States limiting education in schools.

⁵³Ben Collins, “Qanon’s Dominion voter fraud conspiracy theory reaches the president,” *NBC News*, (November 2020). <https://www.nbcnews.com/tech/tech-news/q-fades-qanon-s-dominion-voter-fraud-conspiracy-theory-reaches-n1247780>

In less than four months, the Brookings Institute found that Fox News mentioned “critical race theory” over 1,300 times. On July 20, 2021, the Texas Senate passed a bill eliminating the requirement for public schools to teach that the Ku Klux Klan was morally wrong and dropped the study of Martin Luther King’s “I Have a Dream” speech from the curriculum.⁵⁴ Eight states have passed anti-CRT legislation, while nearly 20 additional states have introduced or plan to introduce similar legislation. A sponsor for an anti-CRT bill in Rhode Island noted “This act would prohibit the teaching of divisive concepts and would prohibit making any individual feel discomfort, guilty, anguish or distress on account of their race or sex.”⁵⁵ This highlights the paranoid sense that White Americans feel regarding the changing demographics and growth of the racialized other and blaming it on Marxist brainwashing is a clear way right-wingers fear-monger issues which threaten their power. The legislation passed mostly bans the discussion, training, and orientation that the U.S. is inherently racist as well as any discussions about conscious and unconscious bias, privilege, discrimination, and oppression.⁵⁶

Ultimately, QAnon’s leading premise that Donald Trump would defeat the evil cabal of elites was proven wrong after Biden was inaugurated to the presidency. Many believed the group would dissolve under the new administration, but the nature of the conspiracy continues to propel new myths, particularly surrounding Covid-19. The anonymous poster Q no longer has any control over the narrative, but rather the self-

⁵⁴ Mary Papenfuss, “Texas Senate Bill Drops Teaching Requirement That Ku Klux Klan is ‘Morally Wrong,’” *Huffpost*, (July 2021). https://www.huffpost.com/entry/texas-senate-education-bill-white-supremacy_n_60f50cf6e4b01f11895b2dc3

⁵⁵ State of Rhode Island in General Assembly, “An Act Relating to Education - Curriculum,” 2021 H 6070, LC001895, (March 03, 2021).

⁵⁶ Ray Rashawn and Alexandra Gibbons, “Why Are States Banning Critical Race Theory?” *Brooking Institute*, (July 2, 2021). <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/fixgov/2021/07/02/why-are-states-banning-critical-race-theory/>

assigned truth-seekers of the Dark Web. What remains of QAnon is the methodology of belief which has been embraced by many Americans, inspired by fear of changing times and motivated by the theme of a glorious, apocalyptic victory against the evil dark forces. QAnon has inspired a massive distrust of leadership and has permanently set the stage for challenges to democracy. The establishment of myth-sharing groups on Facebook and other uncensored platforms like Gab, Rumble and Telegram have enabled the perpetual circulation of mistruths, which can be expected to change and adapt to contemporary events through the coming years. QAnon no longer is a unity premise, but a growing community of distrustful people who mostly grew up during an era of Biblical Apocalypse indoctrination and were trained to see the world through a simplified, Manichean framework.

It's easy to dismiss believers of conspiracy as unhinged lunatics. The lack of evidence behind their ambitious claims frequently creates a wall that defies logic and disables the possibility of discourse. Attempting to disprove or penetrate the layers of self-supporting argumentation surrounding Q is usually not worth the time. However, it is possible and even imperative to understand the anxieties underlying conspiratorial beliefs, which in many cases are based in concerning realities. A short investigation into the division of power in America reveals shocking inequalities in the nation. Data from the Fed in 2020 shows that the top 1% of Americans have a combined net worth of \$34.2 trillion, in contrast to the bottom 50% which hold just \$2.1 trillion.⁵⁷ Furthermore, while most Americans suffered the weight of economic collapse over the course of the

⁵⁷ "The Fed - Distribution of Household Wealth in the U.S. since 1989," *Federal Reserve Board*, (accessed July 20, 2021).
<https://www.federalreserve.gov/releases/z1/dataviz/dfa/distribute/chart/#quarter:0;series:Net%20worth;demographic:networth;population:1,3,5,7;units:levels;range:2005.2,2020.2>

pandemic, billionaires lined their pockets with an additional \$637 billion.⁵⁸ Political power has also been concentrated in the hands of a few over the decades. The Bushes and Clintons have dominated American public life for an entire generation, and fourteen members of the House and Senate have served in the federal legislature for more than 35 years.⁵⁹ We can agree with conspiratorial thinkers that a small group of people have gained and maintained power and wealth at the detriment of the rest of the American people, as wealth becomes increasingly disproportionately concentrated in the hands of a few. However, we must challenge the ways in which they connect the dots from this truth to the prophetic and conspiratorial theories propagated from internet forums or even religious messages they have been exposed to since childhood.

⁵⁸Hiatt Woods, “How billionaires saw their net worth increase by half a trillion dollars during the pandemic,” *Business Insider*, (Oct 30, 2020) <https://www.businessinsider.com/billionaires-net-worth-increases-coronavirus-pandemic-2020-7?IR=T>

⁵⁹Aaron Coyle-Carr, “Is QAnon a prophet or provocateur?” *Baptist News Global*, (August 2020) <https://baptistnews.com/article/is-qanon-a-prophet-or-provocateur-and-how-should-christians-respond/#.YOdGC5NKjjB>

Conclusion

Many Americans can say they know a family member or a friend who was lost to the conspiracy sinkhole over the course of the pandemic or within the past few years. I don't have the expertise to propose a de-radicalization solution, and even experts struggle to find an infallible technique to bring someone back to logic and common sense aside from the believer's own disillusionment with their theories. I wrote this thesis to map all the elements which contribute to contemporary Apocalyptic conspiracy. The tropes of Millenarism go way back, and patterns developed since the Middle Ages contribute to modern narratives in their obfuscation of complex issues, frequently at the intentional hands of a higher power like the Church. In the same way that people explicated their suffering in times of plague or famine in the Middle Ages by ascribing apocalyptic narratives to their situations so as to maintain the faith that redemption and victory would ensue, modern conspiracists try to define the problem of evil in a way that they can predict the outcome and set themselves apart as redeemed. In all matters of apocalypticism, people tend to essentialize complex issues into categories of bad and good, such as radicalized right-wingers who point to progressive policies as proof of the evil hand of Marxism, rather than nuanced ideas seeking to respond to complex issues. Politicians like Donald Trump and Marjorie Taylor Greene encourage this essentialization because it polarizes the public and leads their coalition to maintain voting patterns along identity lines rather than through deliberation and intellectual integrity. QAnon exists as the modern model for conspiracism, in an era in which the internet provides outlets for anxious people to find communities which make their own stories to explain the world, rather than trusting expertise. The collision of conspiracy and

prophecy, in a stage of improvisational millenarism, consistently subverts the scientific method, and normalizes this story-telling methodology. It is unclear where conspiratorial thinkers will lead American culture over the next decade, but the mindset that we are living in End times is inscribed in the conscience of many, and thus will continue to manifest in various ways.

But, as my mom says, in the end, we shall all see.

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