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The Parallax View: How Conspiracy Theories and Belief in Conspiracy Shape American Politics

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by
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Introduction

Conspiracy theories have become a regular feature of American politics. It feels that, no matter the topic; elections, Russians, or even a pandemic, conspiracy theories abound. They spread like wildfire, fragment our ability to communicate, and even the mere mention of one permanently colors the ensuing political conversation. Despite, or perhaps due to, the unprecedented speed and ease of access to information and history, we have thus far failed to shake our conspiratorial tendencies. Instead they've become almost inescapable, popping up on our social media feeds, in interpersonal conversation, and in the workplace. By one analysis, the President himself has retweeted accounts which espouse either the Pizzagate, or its successor QAnon, conspiracy theories hundreds of times to his 68 million or so followers.[1] There is practically no facet of public life we can turn to without encountering some sort of conspiracy theory, some deeply held yet paranoid and insubstantial belief from people who seem otherwise perfectly reasonable.

The history of conspiracy theories is an expansive topic, and covers areas far from traditional electoral politics and government conduct. For the purposes of this project we will focus on these narrow topics, specifically so we can gain a greater understanding of the role conspiracy theories have historically played in our politics, and to center our current moment of mainstream political conspiracism in a tradition. It can be tempting to attribute our current political climate to discrete individuals and their malign influence, but I suggest that it might be more useful to locate current actors and events within a long history of political actors who are

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[1] Rupar, Aaron. "Trump Spent His Holidays Retweeting QAnon and Pizzagate Accounts." Vox. January 2, 2020.

willing to wield conspiracy theories for their political ends. How successful have they traditionally been in this approach? How long do moments like this usually last? What are the lasting consequences? These are all valuable questions to consider and prepare to answer as we steel ourselves to participate in a world, and a political discourse, after years of conspiracy theories dominating political conversations.

One prevailing strain of thought is that conspiracy theories pose an inherent danger in political discourse, which if true, means our efforts to repel them have thus far been inadequate. Even as our networks of fact-checking sites and articles devoted to debunking the new conspiracy of the week have grown, conspiracy theories pop up faster than ever and tax their resources. If anything, it seems the more we try to enforce an objective reality and a common ground of facts, the more people reject the entire premise. This can't just be explained as ignorance or lack of education, though these things can certainly play a role. It seems more likely that we have yet to address the conditions which generate conspiratorial tendencies, something beyond the powers of Op-Eds or editorial boards. We can also consider an alternative premise, that conspiracy theories have the potential to organize and motivate meaningful democratic participation, that in fact we have too long ceded their value to Richard Hofstadter's "bad causes."[2] In either case, it is incumbent on those who think about politics to re-examine the place of conspiracy theories in American politics. Why are they so persistent throughout time, so resistant to traditional approaches of debunking and fact-checking? Is it possible for their persuasive power, their compelling narratives, to be turned towards positive causes or democratic action? While America is far from the only country afflicted with conspiracy theories in their

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[2] Hofstadter, Richard. *The Paranoid Style in American Politics*. 1964, pp. 5.

politics, are there any specifically American conditions which have brought us to this point of mass conspiracism?

For clarity's sake, it is neither the goal nor desire of this project to set about debunking or disproving the allegations at the center of the following conspiracy theories. Instead, the hope is to study conspiracy theories as a natural phenomenon in politics, to be interpreted and understood not by their specific details, but by the deeper messages they communicate. As we will discuss, conspiracy theories are frequently no more than vectors where allegations can be translated into something easily understood by mass audiences, connecting their subconscious anxieties to an easily digestible narrative. It may be helpful to imagine them as a form letter or perhaps a Mad-Libs game. The structure is already all there, designed long ago to be gripping and titillating to any listener, now all that's needed is a personal touch. This significantly reduces the amount of work needed to form new conspiracy theories, and makes them familiar even when one isn't versed in the particulars.

In order to explore the political significance of conspiracy within the history of the United States, this project turns to four case studies. These case studies span the duration of the American state, and form a vivid image of a people wracked with deep anxieties about the nature of their political power; ever under siege as it is by enemies above, outside, below, or within. Similar characteristics are frequent, suggesting a common wellspring from which these conspiratorial beliefs spring forth with alarming regularity, each time enthralling groups of citizens and diverting them from engagement with the political and material realities of their lives. In what follows, I will briefly introduce the four case studies.

Superchiefs in the Colonial Consciousness

Conspiracy theories can take many forms, and some of the most powerful seem to be nothing like the stereotypical notions of backroom plots. As a fledgling American nation first began to expand its territorial reach, the colonization of a vast continent led to conflict with the people already residing there. Though the Native peoples would lose exorbitantly more people in this conflict than the settlers, dispersed instances of reprisals, often the desperate lashing out of a cornered people, began to take on a much more sinister tone in the minds of the settlers. Soon, colonists were whispering that it was all being directed, that hundreds of tribes with unique cultures, heritages, and social structures were in fact secretly aligned against the encroaching colonists. Rumors spread of Native armies comprising over a hundred thousand soldiers, a land power which would have constituted one of the most overwhelming forces in The New World. These beliefs and misperceptions coalesced into a myth, of a superchief guiding the actions of all the natives they would encounter. The fear of such a figure soon jumped from local tale to the attention of the American state, who ruthlessly set out to put down any Native leader they could find who fit the description. Numerous Native chiefs were accused of being this mythological figure and almost all were summarily executed by the state, or hunted down and killed in combat as a result. Bafflingly, at least to the adherents of this theory, this never seemed to stem the tide of attacks on colonial communities, which would continue unabated until the United States changed tactics to more overt ethnic cleansing. Pasley describes two primary archetypes of the superchief in colonial propaganda, "the Indian mastermind or monarch in control of tens of

thousands of warriors, and the unfaithful Indian ally or convert."[3] Both served to cast the

Colonialists as righteous, either in resistance to an overwhelmingly powerful and malicious

Indian king, or defending themselves from a treacherous Indian infiltrator to the communities.

This is a classic tactic in crafting a compelling conspiratorial antagonist, one who is both

all-powerful yet also sneaking and underhanded. This serves to both justify any retaliation

against a perceived threat, while simultaneously obscuring the actual power relationships at play.

Osama Bin Laden and a Climate of Conspiracy

As a nation reeled in the aftermath of the September 11th, 2001 attacks on the World

Trade Center, the American public, from top to bottom, became consumed with paranoid

fantasies about Bond villain terrorists hiding inside mountain fortresses. Where once was a fixed

enemy, the behemoth Soviet Union, they now saw enemies around every corner, who could

strike anywhere, at any time, and with infinite capabilities for devastation. The American public

learned that Osama Bin Laden, the devious mastermind behind the attacks, had made an industry

out of murderers, willing to die just to make Americans bleed, promised paradise in the afterlife

for martyrdom. From the moment those planes hit the towers, Osama Bin Laden ceased to be a

man, he was no longer the scion of a wealthy and well-connected family of Saudi financiers. He

became a vessel, into which the American people could pour every fear and paranoia that

plagued their traumatized sleep. An enemy without reason or rationality, compelled to destroy us

by indiscernible motivations. It became commonplace[4] for people in the media to speculate

wildly about the capabilities of Bin Laden; to fear that he had a dirty bomb ready to go off in

Times Square, a vast array of sleeper cells in suburbia and yet, he was a shadow, effortlessly

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[3] Pasley, pp. 524.
[4] Moore, Molly and Peter Baker, "Inside Al Qaeda's Secret World." in *The Washington Post*. December 2001.

evading detection, possibly through the use of underground facilities. It was not long before the still living man named Osama Bin Laden bore little resemblance to the hyper-competent supervillain in the minds of a terrified public, save a shared visage. The mythology around America's next great enemy continued to grow, until finally, under a different president and different political circumstances, the American state killed him. Yet even death could not break the myth they had spent so many years building, as numerous theories began spreading that the government was lying about the operation that led to his death. Now, however, these theories were consigned once again to the fringes of society, even as it became clear that the government had indeed misrepresented numerous details in recounting how he died.[5] However frustrating it was to the administration hoping to use the assassination to assert their foreign policy bonafides that their signature accomplishment was met with skepticism, it was the natural response of a public which had been cultivated for years to imagine Osama Bin Laden as far more than just a man. What's more, every paranoid fantasy and conspiracy theory about his life and capabilities found purchase in some traditional hall of power. Whether it was cable news, the military, or the President himself, authority time and time again fueled what was quickly becoming a full throated conspiracy theory, with wide reaching consequences.

Anti-Masonry as an Anti-Elite Antibody

Of course, some of the most politically influential conspiracy theories hem closer to the domain of powerful people pulling the strings behind the scenes. On September 12th, 1826, a stone worker named William Morgan went missing from the local jail in Batavia, New York. Imprisoned over a petty debt, he was bailed out late at night, escorted to a carriage, and taken

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[5] Hersh, Seymour M, "The Killing of Osama Bin Laden." *London Review of Books* 37: 2015, pp. 3–12.

away, never to be seen again.[6] Rumors soon began to circulate that his disappearance was related

to his forthcoming manuscript, a tell-all about the practices and secrets of the Masonic lodge.

After all, Morgan had public clashes with members of the lodge before his disappearance, and

some who knew him began to suspect he was being targeted for his intended writing. Still, like

most rumors it was whispered, spoken amongst friends and confidantes, either through lack of

real conviction or fear of reprisal. When Morgan went missing, however, what had percolated

under the surface suddenly rose up in backlash publicly, forcefully, and loudly. That his

abductors received sentences no longer than two years in prison and that the sentences were

handed down by institutions that were populated with Masons only reinforced the creeping

notion that Morgan was killed by a powerful cabal and that his abductors were a party to, and

protected by, this same conspiracy. As word spread of his disappearance and the supposed cover

up thereafter, the recounting of it grew more brutal with distance, and before long metastasized

from gossip into a full-blown political backlash. This spawned America's first third party, and

the first influential population of single-issue voters: The Anti-Masonic Party.

The Products of Pizza Paranoia

As if the 2016 presidential election wasn't volatile enough, a series of leaked emails from

the Clinton campaign were picked up by supporters of then candidate Trump, as well as people

affiliated with his campaign, and crafted into a conspiracy theory almost too strange and

alarming to consider. The whistleblower website Wikileaks released emails that were hacked

from the account of chairman of the Clinton campaign, John Podesta. The emails revealed

dozens of internal communications of various significance, but certain figures in the fringe

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[6] Hofstadter, pp. 5.

right-wing press and anonymous forum posters honed in on conversations around getting food on the campaign; in particular mentions of getting hotdogs or, most enduringly, pizza. From these seemingly innocuous exchanges, members of the right-wing media extrapolated a secretive code, and then gravely intoned to their followers that it amounted to a conspiracy of elite politicians abusing children, all in the basement of a pizza shop. Their allegations of Clinton's participation in a human trafficking ring, disguised in regular campaign communications as inconsequential lunch orders, was compelling enough to go viral. Before long, the hashtag Pizzagate had spread across the country, and even those who weren't convinced by its conspiratorial conclusions were soon at least aware that this was a belief some of the electorate carried. While this could hardly be said to be the only reason for President Trump's upset victory over Secretary Clinton, it provides a glimpse of how political campaigns have grown more nimble and savvy online, strategically boosting and shaping conspiracy theories explicitly to affect votes and drive enthusiasm. Exactly how much effect this effort had is disputable but it marks another instance where conspiracy theories crossover from the fringes and into mainstream political discourse. In response, persuaded citizens aligned themselves with an emergent populist force in American politics, one which at least implied it would arrest those responsible for these heinous crimes, which came to be known as Pizzagate. These people were a familiar type of single issue voter, and, like the Anti-Masonic Party before them, they demanded investigations, arrests, and at times nothing less than the unconditional imprisonment of their political opponents for crimes they were certain had been committed. Unlike the Anti-Masonic party, whose political energy was co-opted by political opportunists who did not share their convictions, the energies of the Pizzagate movement were channeled into a bid for the highest office in the country. They joined

a coalition with the candidate most willing to gesture towards their beliefs, intimate and imply they were taken seriously, and were one component of a coalition which won the White House.

This project will be composed of four chapters charting the history and characteristics of significant American conspiracy theories. The first will discuss the urgency and relevance of re-evaluating our analysis of conspiracy theories and their value in an age of increasingly mainstream conspiracism, before turning to an investigation and discussion of the existing academic literature on the subject. The second will chart two different conspiracy theories, concerning fear of foreign threats and the way the Government has encouraged the proliferation of these theories for their own ends. The third chapter will deal with another angle of conspiracy theories, fear of the ruling class and a desire to see their malicious conduct exposed, how this fear spreads through communities, and what the political implications can be. The fourth and final chapter will close the paper, summarizing final thoughts and conclusions from the survey of America's Conspiratorial history, as well as posing some future questions to be investigated on the subject. We now turn to the history of American conspiracy theories, and a study of how the very belief in conspiracy has shaped American politics

Chapter One:
The Urgency of Understanding Conspiracy and a Review of the Scholarship

On August 1st, 2019, Yahoo News released a leaked memo from the Phoenix field office of the Federal Bureau of Investigations. Distributed to law enforcement agencies nationwide on May 30th of the same year, it detailed the risk that *Anti-Government, Identity Based, and Fringe Political Conspiracy Theories, Very Likely Motivate Some Domestic Extremists to Commit Criminal, Sometimes Violent Activity*.[7] Troublingly, the FBI predicted that "because some conspiracy theories are highly partisan in nature, political developments, including those surrounding major election cycles such as the 2020 presidential election, likely will impact the direction of these conspiracy theories and the potential activities of extremists who subscribe to them over the long term."[8] Their fear isn't merely speculative either, they go on to cite a dozen instances between 2015 and 2018 in which individuals or small groups were motivated to prepare for or commit violent acts by their sincere belief in a grab bag of conspiracies undergirding and shaping society as we know it. But this is far from a new phenomenon, even if "today's information environment has changed the way conspiracy theories develop, spread, and evolve."[9] No, the American Conspiratorial tradition dates back to the founding and settling of the nation; finding footholds in the colonial frontier and enduring all the way to the present.

The aim of this project is twofold, first to examine and contest the existing academic discourse on American conspiracy in order to develop a framework for interpreting both the real and the paranoid in our political discourse. The goal is to accomplish this task with a thorough

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[7] Author-Redacted, *Anti-Government, Identity Based, and Fringe Political Conspiracy Theories, Very Likely Motivate Some Domestic Extremists to Commit Criminal, Sometimes Violent Activity*. 2019, pp. 1.
[8] Author-Redacted, *Fringe Political Conspiracy Theories.* pp. 5.
[9] Author-Redacted, pp. 4.

examination of the existing literature, highlighting points of contestation with the most

influential works, and in doing so synthesize both a workable distinction between conspiracy and

conspiracy theories, and a functional approach to contesting conspiracy theories as they arise.

The second goal will be to apply this theoretical approach to a variety of American conspiracy

theories ranging from early colonial myths to more recent backlashes. This aspect of the project

is meant to identify the common characteristics in a specifically American conspiracy culture,

examine what external factors contribute to the enduring and recurrent nature of these

conspiracies, and establish a means for addressing the underlying political realities and anxieties

which contribute to the persistence of conspiracy theorizing, without leaving the necessary work

of uncovering real conspiracies to Hofstadter's "bad causes."[10]

One of the trickiest aspects of studying conspiracy theories is defining them as such. By

nature, they are esoteric and twisting, and it has never been easy to draw a hard line between

conspiracy theories and actual conspiracies. Synthesizing a few separate definitions to describe it

as basically as possible, a conspiracy theory is the "belief that a small group of people are

working in secret against the common good."[11] The motivations of those conspiring are largely

irrelevant to the conspiracy theorist; it can be interchangeably "to create harm, to effect some

negative change in society, to seize power for themselves, or to hide some deadly or

consequential secret."[12] conspiracy theorists rarely concern themselves with specific motivations

because they already intrinsically understand the motivations; many conspiracy theories are

spread within and in the context of communities, and as such are instantly resonant to the

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[10] Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style*. pp. 5.
[11] Merlan, Anna. *Republic of Lies: American Conspiracy Theorists And Their Surprising Rise to Power*. 2019, pp. 14.
[12] Merlan, *Republic of Lies*. pp. 14.

listener, and easily transmittable between people with similar social reference points. Because

they do not have to concern themselves with the *why,* what does become relevant is the *how*, the

act of conspiring in and of itself. To those who frame their world in conspiratorial terms, this

begins to undergird every action and event they encounter, both positive or negative. This would

be a fairly simple concept to discredit if not for the persistent habit of people to engage in real

conspiracy.

A real conspiracy is "when a small group of people *are* working in secret against the

common good,"[13] a fairly simple and durable concept which nevertheless describes a wide

variety of plots, schemes, and machinations in the realm of politics, business, or life. The not

infrequent revelations of real conspiracies being carried out in society only serves to reinforce

the beliefs of the conspiratorially minded, and the FBI itself worries that "another factor driving

the intensity of conspiracy theorizing in the United States, and the subsequent threat from

conspiracy-minded extremists, is the uncovering of real conspiracies or cover-ups involving

illegal, harmful, or unconstitutional activities by government officials or leading political

figures."[14] The FBI defines conspiracy as activity "involving illegal, antidemocratic, or harmful

activities by high-level government officials and political elites,"[15] and emphasizes that what

differentiates real conspiracy from a conspiracy theory is that "while a conspiracy theory refers

to an allegation that may or may not be true, a *conspiracy* is a true causal chain of events."[16]

That last point is key to understanding the difficulty inherent in separating real

conspiracies from conspiracy theories. A conspiracy theory is an allegation, and as such is not

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[13] Merlan, *Republic of Lies*. pp. 14.
[14] Author-Redacted, *Anti-Government, Identity Based, and Fringe Political Conspiracy Theories.* pp. 5.
[15] Author-Redacted, pp. 7.
[16] Author-Redacted, pp. 7.

necessarily untrue. Some, like the social theorist and historian Richard Hofstadter, argue that the paranoia which accompanies the conspiracy theory invalidates its core assertions, even if aspects of the theory turn out to be true.[17] As such, conspiracy theories do not function like common causal relationships; the tendency of conspiracy theorists to extrapolate small details and self-generate material makes it impossible for one to find the truth by sifting through and contesting individual points. In the same vein, the disproving of one or more details in a conspiracy theory does little to shake its adherents from their convictions. The historian Frank P. Mintz used Conspiracism to describe this current, defined as a "belief in the primacy of conspiracies in the unfolding of history."[18] The particulars are less important, as the foundational belief of this worldview is that conspiracy is occuring, any event that follows can be retroactively fit within that framework.

Alternative definitions of conspiracy theories, sympathetic or not, are often shaped by the author's relationship to conspiracy theories and their true believers, or relative proximity to power. The FBI, from its position of institutional opposition to conspiracy theories defines them as "attempt[s] to explain events or circumstances as the result of a group of actors working in secret to benefit themselves at the expense of others."[19] Others have abandoned conspiracy theory entirely in attempting to describe this phenomenon. Perhaps no account is as well known or influential as Richard Hofstadter's, laid out in the Harper's essay "The Paranoid Style in American Politics." His Paranoid Style is "the use of paranoid modes of expression by more or less normal people,"[20] and could perhaps best be described as "a pathology suffered by those

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[17] Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style*. 1965. pp. 6.
[18] Merlan, *Republic of Lies*. pp. 14.
[19] Author-Redacted, *Anti-Government, Identity Based, and Fringe Political Conspiracy Theories* pp. 7.
[20] Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style*. pp. 4.

existing outside of the pluralistic consensus who promoted fears of conspiracy."[21] Of course, because the pluralistic consensus has frequently had blindspots, those outside of the consensus have not always been inherently wrong on the substance of the issues they raise. Hofstadter is primarily critiquing a stylistic approach, which in and of itself does not "prevent a sound program or a sound issue from being advocated in the paranoid style, and it is admittedly impossible to settle the merits of an argument because we think we hear in its presentation the characteristic paranoid accents."[22] The case studies to follow make it clear just how blurred the line between real information communicated in a paranoid style and conspiracy theories can become, and just how hard it can be to discern truth delivered in the paranoid style.

Through these stories the American public time and again displayed one of the oldest and most powerful human impulses; to make narratives out of the world, one of the many ways we strive to make meaning out of the randomness of life, the powerlessness we feel when power we feel no control over acts upon us. All of the above cases include details that are true, documentable, and provable to a rigorous degree. All of the above cases include details that are speculative, connections that are tenuous, and evidence that is circumstantial. All are different interpretations of the same anxieties, different expressions of the same tensions, different ways to speak the unspoken, different reflections of our deepest fears. At the core of every real conspiracy and every conspiracy theory is the same thing, a black hole, an absence of knowledge. People try to knit together these connections, piece together a coherent story out of disparate horrors because it provides a sense of agency and control, but also because what is at the core is inherently unknowable. It is defined by its distance from our understanding, and the

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[21] Fenster, Mark, *Conspiracy Theories: Secrets and Power in American Culture.* 2008, pp. 24.
[22] Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style.* pp. 5.

closer one draws to it, the further it flattens out reality, the thinner it stretches plausibility. As we become more desirous of making connections we accept less rigorous evidence and our quality sensor degrades until everything, real and false, becomes indistinguishable.

The American Conspiratorial Tradition can be identified in the earliest days of the American state, and despite our best efforts to foster and encourage reason and logic in society, it has endured to the late stages of the American empire. As an imperial power and its citizenry have been confronted with unending contradictions in the establishment of American power, some contradictions have gone unconfronted, put to the side because they were either too complex to address, or too inconvenient to the interests of those in power. These kinds of tensions never just go away; left unresolved they fester, left unaddressed they are warped. By the time these are finally expressed, they often lack any institutional support and those willing to take up the cause usually reside on the fringes of acceptable discourse. Historically, this has been justification for dismissing them all over again, undermined as they are by their messengers. Yet this has served as little more than an abdication of responsibility, ceding the task of clarifying reality to the paranoid spokespeople Hofstadter so despised, those who have plenty of reasons, whether financial gain or personal gratification, to obscure the material relationships that shape people and society. This redirects people on the path to engaging with politics towards false consciousness, one which at best leads to fringe causes, and at worst is a paralytic on future engagement. So, the question remains; how can we address conspiracy theories in a productive manner, either to root out their malign influence on political discussion or to identify their contributing factors, without at the same time dismissing out of hand the existence of real conspiracy in society? The latter course of action would be equally self destructive as the former,

and would just as likely leave us blind and unprepared to confront the material conditions which encourage people to seek distorted narratives in the first place. The goal is that this project will answer this question, and in the process, illuminate the roots and enduring nature of the American Conspiratorial tradition.

The Scholarly Literature on Conspiracy

The existing scholarship surrounding conspiracy theories is considerable, yet can at times feel narrow in its perspective. While a burgeoning movement is working to update the established attitudes towards conspiracy theories for a new era, much of people's ideas about conspiracy theories and those who subscribe to them are colored by the same beliefs and preconceived notions that were established decades ago. In the interim, the American public has also been made more aware of real Conspiracies perpetrated by powerful elites and the government itself, which has only fed into a societal hyper-focus on conspiracies, real or not, as a means of explaining the world and the actions of the powerful. The situation is tense and polarizing, yet living in turbulent times has a habit of magnifying them, making it feel discrete and singularly untenable. On the contrary, this is far from the first time conspiratorial attitudes have made themselves felt in American political life, and closer examination reveals a wealth of scholarship on the conspiratorial tradition in American politics.

No discussion of the American Conspiratorial tradition can really begin without first engaging Richard Hofstadter's seminal lecture turned *Harper's* essay, "The Paranoid Style in American Politics." This hugely influential text established a new baseline for conceptualizing the American conspiratorial tradition, and all attempts to synthesize the tradition must at least attempt to address his core concepts. Chief among them is the idea that the "Paranoid Style" is a

distorted mode of expression in which "the feeling of persecution is central, and it is indeed systematized in grandiose theories of conspiracy."[23] At its core, Hofstadter is making a stylistic argument, effectively arguing past the circular question of whether a conspiracy theory is true or not by addressing instead how the information is presented. Still, a degree of judgement and a hint of disdain were always a part of Hofstadter's conception of paranoid rhetoric, for he believed that "while any system of beliefs can be espoused in the paranoid style, there are certain beliefs which seem to be espoused almost entirely in this way."[24] It was for this reason he conceived of the very term *Paranoid Style* as a "pejorative, and it is meant to be; the paranoid style has a greater affinity for bad causes than good."[25] The inherent vagueness of the descriptions "good" and "bad" demands deeper explanation, which Hofstadter provides in his belief that it has been the "preferred style only of *minority* movements."[26] He addresses openly the possibility that any conspiracy theory, say fears around state sponsored fluoridation of water, can be proved true "on the substance of their position. But it could hardly, at the same time, validate the contentions of those among them who, in characteristic paranoid fashion, have charged that fluoridation was an attempt to advance socialism under the guise of public health or to rot out the brains of the community by introducing chemicals in the water supply in order to make people more vulnerable to socialist or communist schemes."[27] While he argued that the "single case in modern history in which one might say that the paranoid style has had a consummatory triumph occurred not in the United States but in Germany,"[28] he saw hints of the

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[23] Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics*. pp. 4.
[24] Hofstadter, pp. 5.
[25] Hofstadter, pp. 5.
[26] Hofstadter, pp. 7.
[27] Hofstadter, pp. 6.
[28] Hofstadter, pp. 7.

style in political traditions ranging from the "frustrated nationalisms … [to] the left wing press."
[29] The common theme between these "minority" movements was that they lay outside of the pluralistic consensus view of American History. This was seen to pose a legitimate threat to American democracy, which relies on this pluralistic consensus to ensure the participation of the people as well as their consent. This of course discounts the idea that dominant majority movements can make use of the paranoid style, or be brought under its sway, and instead focuses a discrediting gaze on the views advanced by movements in opposition to a majority who's own positions are taken as a given.

Numerous academics have expanded from this base of analysis, working to establish a common language for describing this trend in American Political Rhetoric. One such paper, *"Conspiracy Theory" and Sound Argumentation*: The Method of Cocaine Politics for resolving "Conflicting World Views" was also initially delivered by Professor Jon Bouknight as a lecture, at a 2004 conference on General Semantics. In this piece, Bouknight attempts to create a common discourse with which to discuss both real conspiracies in the world and the conspiracy theories which always accompany them. One distinctive quality is that the conspiracy theorist, "rather than building clear evidence in support of a given theory, [would use] the theory itself as evidence in support of particular political parties."[30] Another unique characteristic he notes in the worldview of the conspiracy theorist is that "more than a group executing secretive and criminal behavior, conspiracies are seen by the theorist as a force in shaping history."[31] This creates a deeply deterministic worldview, wherein one is boxed in on all sides and has no hope of

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[29] Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style*. pp. 7.
[30] Bouknight, Jon, "Conspiracy Theory" And Sound Argumentation: The Method of Cocaine Politics for Resolving "Conflicting World Views." *E.T.C. A Review of General Semantics*. 2004, pp. 2.
[31] Bouknight, pp. 2.

affecting any real change to their conditions. In this definition, conspiratorial thinking acts as a paralytic agent on political engagement, one which requires a prescriptive method of rhetorical engagement for one to have any hope of penetrating.

However influential Hofstadter's analysis is, it is not incontestable, and as much literature has been spawned in opposition to his conception as has been shaped by it. One such text is *The United States of Paranoia: A Conspiracy Theory* by Jesse Walker, which explores historical instances of American political culture dating all the way back to the Revolution and the rhetoric of the Founding Fathers. He describes the American conspiratorial tradition as another iteration of *myths*, that being "culturally resonant ideas that appear again and again when Americans communicate with one another: archetypes that can absorb all kinds of allegations, true or not, and arrange them into a familiar form."[32] He focuses on the way these ideas are transmitted and disseminated, noting that "conspiracy tales can change even more dramatically when a story leaks from one social group to another. Different people adopt and adapt these myths for their own needs, keeping the scaffolding of a story line in place while changing the content."[33] Walker also pushes back on Hofstadter's controversial assertion that the paranoid style is most often under the purview of minority movements. Quite to the contrary, he argues that not only are conspiracy theories much too common amongst the public at large to be considered any type of minority, noting that "forty years after John F. Kennedy was shot, an ABC News poll showed 70 percent of the country believing a conspiracy was behind the president's death,"[34] but also that the elites in society, those who are often setting the parameters of acceptable discourse, are just as likely to fall under the influence of conspiratorial beliefs. These bring up some other critiques

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[32] Walker, Jesse, *The United States of Paranoia: A Conspiracy Theory*. 2013, pp. 16.
[33] Walker, pp. 17.
[34] Walker, pp. 11.

of Hofstadter, such as the assumption that conspiracy theories only flourish in times of social

upheaval or change, or amongst people in dire circumstances. Walker argues as much, taking

particular issue against with the adherents of Hofstadter who presents a "revised version of

Hofstadter's argument that accepts that conspiracies are more popular than the historian

suggested, but that still draws a line between the paranoia of the disreputable fringes and the

sobriety of the educated establishment. It's just that the 'fringe,' in this telling, turns out to be

larger than the word implies."[35] On the whole, one of the primary critiques of Hofstadter is that

his analysis of who the Paranoid Style was too narrow.

Another text which engages this subject is *Conspiracy Theories: Secrecy and Power in*

American Culture, by Mark Fenster, which offers an examination of the political uses of

conspiracy theories. One of Fenster's most compelling conclusions is that " although evidence

for the conspiracies is lacking or questionable, the conspiracies themselves are "firm

conclusions" that can then be used as a leverage in political discourse."[36] On the topic of why

Americans are so enraptured by tales of conspiracy, real or false, historical or fictional, he points

to the idea that "it preys on the believer's weaknesses, including their excessive distrust of or

cynicism about powerful institutions, as well as their stupidity and irrationality."[37] As conspiracy

theories are "simple, understandable, and attractive to people seeking an explanation for their

woes," they have the effect of causing "people to believe in falsehoods, to trust duplicitous or

unprincipled sources, and to become alienated from prevailing orthodoxies and institutions."[38]

He also argues that the grand conspiracy theories which are more common recently "may not

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[35] Walker, pp. 10.
[36] Fenster, *Secrets and Power in American Culture*. pp. 79.
[37] Fenster, pp. 8.
[38] Fenster, pp. 8.

focus on politics in its relatively narrow, classically liberal sense because the conspiracy's secret

control of the government is merely one aspect of its power. Nevertheless, the capture of the

state looms as one of the conspiracy's greatest triumphs."[39] It is for this reason he feels the

pre-1990 academic accounts of conspiracy theory were incomplete, as they have focused solely

on the ways conspiracy interact with "political systems and in the politics of a particular

historical period."[40] He believes both the Hofstadter strain as well as much of the literature

contesting his arguments neglect an understanding of the function conspiracy theories serve for

populist politics in America. While he agrees with Hofstadter that a conspiracy theory's "form as

well as its content, its reception as well as its texts … is fundamental to its political significance

and effects,"[41] he argues that conspiracy theories can be a rational response to "real structural

inequalities, albeit ideologically, and they may well constitute a response, albeit in a simplistic

and decidedly unpragmatic form, to an unjust political order, a barren system or dysfunctional

civil society, and/or an exploitative economic system."[42] It is for this reason, he argues, that to

really understand why conspiracy theories exist, one must develop "a better understanding of

how it works as a form of explaining power and as a practice of interpreting the world."[43]

    A more recent text in conversation with Hofstadter is 2019's *Republic of Lies*: *American*

Conspiracy Theorists and Their Surprising Rise to Power, by Anna Merlan, a journalist focused

on the far-right and internet radicalisation. Contrary to Hofstadter, Merlan sees paranoid rhetoric

as a much more mainstream theme amongst the Founders of the American state, presenting as

early as the Declaration of Independence's claims that England's actions against the colonies

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[39] Fenster, pp. 23.
[40] Fenster, pp. 23.
[41] Fenster, pp. 90.
[42] Fenster, pp. 90.
[43] Fenster, pp. 90.

"total up to a plot, what it calls 'a design,' to bring the colonies under 'absolute Despotism,'"[44] or reflected in George Washington's rhetoric of "'a regular Systematick Plan' to turn them into 'tame, & abject Slaves, as the Blacks we Rule over with such arbitrary sway.'"[45] These were the terms upon which the case for emancipation from Britain was advanced, and it is hard to imagine this not having an effect on the way these new Americans conceived of themselves and the political forces witch which they interact. Told from the start of their independent political existence that enemies abroad were plotting their downfall, Americans were encouraged and conditioned to consider political enemies in these explicitly sinister, conspiratorial terms.

Merlan also advances the argument that conspiratorial attitudes are more likely to arise during times of rapid social change, "when we're reevaluating ourselves and, perhaps, facing uncomfortable questions in the process."[46] In support of this claim, she cites the work of the civil liberties lawyer Frank Donner, who in 1980 argued that "especially in times of stress, exaggerated febrile explanations of unwelcome reality come to the surface of American life and attract support," and the recurrence of conspiratorial beliefs in American society "illuminate[s] a striking contrast between our claims to superiority, indeed our mission as a redeemer nation to bring a new world order, and the extraordinary fragility of our confidence in our institutions," which "has led some observers to conclude that we are, subconsciously, quite insecure about the value and permanence of our society."[47]

Across this debate we see numerous explanations and interpretations of why conspiracy theories arise in our discourse. Whether it is from social upheaval or marginalized perspectives,

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[44] Merlan, *Republic of Lies*. pp. 15.
[45] Merlan, pp. 15.
[46] Merlan, pp. 15.
[47] Merlan, pp. 15.

people who feel powerless tend to reach for conspiratorial explanations. There have been many

challenges made to Hofstadter's analysis, arguments that conspiratorial thinking is just as

common within the majority consensus as well as amongst the well educated and powerful than

he presented. Still, much of even the dissenting analysis does seem to agree with the baseline

Hofstadter assumption that conspiracy theories are a negative in political discussion, something

to be identified and then debunked and dismissed, not worthy of real political discussion. All of

these perspectives allow us to synthesize a broader theory of the American Conspiratorial

Tradition, which we can turn towards specific examples. The chapters to follow will investigate a

series of case studies in both contemporary and early American history, charting the similarities

and recurring themes over time. For this purpose it will look to the many historians who have

documented conspiratorial phenomena in American culture, and compare them with

contemporary reporting of similar and related conspiratorial phenomena, some of which the

news itself is reflecting. In the next chapter, the project will diagnose the similarities between the

fears of a superchief threatening colonial Americans and the modern discourse surrounding the

terrorist leader Osama Bin Laden. The intention of the third chapter will be to demonstrate the

synchronicity of two mirrored political backlashes separated by centuries, those being the

Anti-Masonic backlash of the 1830s and the Pizzagate backlash of 2016. The hope is that

following this approach will help to clarify that which conspiracy may obscure and advance the

project of bringing the many Americans who have been diverted from political action by

paranoia away from the dampening pull of conspiracy theories, and back into sustainable

engagement with political realities and material conditions.

Analytic Approach

Having established the academic base being drawn from, as well as the definitions that'll be employed, we turn towards the case studies. These specific instances were chosen because they are moments when Conspiratorial beliefs had profound and material impact on the societies they were created in, whether spurring and intensifying violent reaction or guiding public engagement with politics. They were also selected because, given the benefit of hindsight, we can glean the common threads and characteristics throughout centuries of conspiratorial occurrences, crafting a discerning lens which can be employed to analyze contemporary weaponized Conspiracism, a tactic becoming increasingly common in an increasingly connected world. conspiracy theories are self generative, created out of an information deficit, and despite our ever increasing connectivity much of the post-war American period and the actions of the government have been shrouded in secrecy. This means conspiracy theories are likely to remain a fixture in our political landscape and, given their unique resiliency to traditional strategies of fact-checking and perception management, call for a unique approach to the many wrinkles and complications they introduce to the democratic process.

The characteristics that will be highlighted are informed by the academic literature surveyed earlier in this piece. Specifically, we will be looking for the recurring archetypes discussed by Jesse Walker, the "culturally resonant ideas,"[48] which "can absorb all kinds of allegations, true or not, and arrange them into a familiar form."[49] Walker organized these ideas into five basic categories, some more common than others; *The Enemy Within*, *The Enemy Outside*, *The Enemy Below*, *The Enemy Above*, and *The Benevolent Conspiracy*. For our

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[48] Walker, *United States of Paranoia* pp. 16.
[49] Walker, pp. 16.

purposes we will be focusing mostly on The Enemy Outside and The Enemy Above, though the others will merit some mention at various points. The first two case studies are concerned with Mass hysteria against an Enemy Outside, and how this base, nationalistic impulse was shaped through Conspiratorial expressions to muster the public against a foreign threat. The second two are more grounded, popular backlashes against the elites in society, the Enemies Above, who are held up as symbols of societal ills and to instigate mass action, or in some cases mass inaction. These represent two very different impulses in America's Paranoid consciousness, but both grow out of similar fears and insecurities. No single case study will perfectly embody any one of these categories, "there are few pure examples," as Walker puts it.[50] Indeed there couldn't be, as these archetypes are much more often a suggested outline for fledgling conspiracy theories than a hard set of prescriptions. Often they will drift between each other and cross-pollinate with other popular fears or delusions, ever and always as volatile as any person's imagination. The hope is not that any one of these case studies will totally capture the concept at hand, but rather that by surveying a selection of significant or consequential conspiratorial events we will bring forward what they have in common, and make the skeletons of these stories more clear than the unending particulars.

Additionally, we will discuss the function of these conspiracy theories from a political perspective. Whose interests are being served by belief in a conspiracy? Who is the subject? Who are the believers? Can we discern between a true believer or an opportunist, leveraging popular hysteria for personal advancement? What are the common political conditions which encourage and facilitate the spread of conspiracy theories? How does belief in conspiracy impact

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[50] Walker, *The United States of Paranoia*. pp. 17.

one's engagement with politics, and how do citizens with deep conviction of conspiracy theories, no matter how irrational, affect and change the society around them? Whatever our personal assessment of the conspiracy theories, what was the social and political impact of their proliferation? As William and Dorothy Thomas said in *The Child in America: Behavior Problems and Programs,* "If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences."[51] The chapters to follow certainly bears out this sentiment.

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[51] Thomas, William Isaac, and Dorothy Swaine Thomas, *The Child in America; Behavior Problems and Programs*. 1928. pp. 572.

The Enemy Outside: Conspiracy Theories as Tools of Expansionist Ambition

This chapter will focus on two case studies; two instances in which American fear of an exterior adversary grew to such a fever pitch that the adversary, real or not, took on deeper symbolic meanings to broad swaths of both the public and their figures of authority. The first are the dispersed, yet remarkably consistent instances of colonial conspiracies around a hostile power coordinating the violence between the colonists and the Native Americans they were displacing. Though many different Native leaders would be accused and blamed for conflict between themselves and American colonists, the phenomenon took on deeper significance in the rhetoric of the colonists, and before long was given a name by American authorities, The superchief. The second case study will interrogate a similar outcropping of popular anxiety, encouraged by authorities, about a far-off foreign leader coordinating violence and threatening the American way of life, used as a pretext for the American state to respond with all its force against this organized and dangerous enemy. The subject in this case is one man in particular, Osama Bin Laden, though much like the Native leaders accused of being a superchief, the man would eventually become ancillary to the cause he was a part of, and death itself would do little to quell those persistent conspiracy theories, nor would it mitigate the harm and violence carried out in response.

The concept being explored by investigating these case studies has many different names, and is one of the most common filters through which conspiratorial beliefs are processed. Walker refers to it as "the Enemy Outside, who plots outside the community's gates,"[52] which can

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[52] Walker, *The United States of Paranoia*, pp. 16.

encompass threats both foriegn and alien in nature. These conspiracy theories tend to be less grass roots in nature, seeking and finding confirmation from the powers that be, so long as the conspiracy theory leads people to the desired targets. These are conspiracy theories as tools, using their power to persuade in service of authority, rather than in opposition to it.

Superchiefs in the Colonial Consciousness

       One of the most complete accounts of early colonial conspiracy theories was compiled by historian Jeffrey Pasley concerning the myth of the superchief, a social phenomenon during the American colonial period when many of the new European settlers became convinced the Native people they frequently came into contact with were organized by one leader, a singularly powerful and charismatic figure who directed attacks and violence across the frontier. At its core, the Superchief conspiracy theory posited that "Indians of different villages, tribes, and languages were leagued against them, and secretly plotting mayhem even when relations were peaceful and friendly."[53] The reasons proffered for this misperception were manyfold. Pasley suggests that, "in some respects, a conspiracy model of Indian behavior came naturally to Europeans, who struggled to understand or even perceive the complex cultural, social, and political distinctions among the various Indian groups they encountered."[54] Part of this arose from obvious cultural biases, as "it was easy to move from lumping all Indians together culturally to believing that all Indians were working together against the colonists."[55] Lacking, or outright rejecting a nuanced interpretation of the native resistance to encroaching American colonizers, they opted instead to craft a narrative which pitched themselves as just one side in a confrontation between equally

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[53] Pasley, pp. 523.
[54] Pasley, pp. 523-524.
[55] Pasley, pp. 524.

powerful forces. Because of all these contributing factors, this nascent myth of a superchief soon jumped from local tale to the attention of the American state, who were swift in putting down any native leader they could fit within this archetype. Pasley identifies two archetypes which would solidify within the settler communities, "the Indian mastermind or monarch in control of tens of thousands of warriors, and the unfaithful Indian ally or convert."[56] Here we see the blending of forms and structures that are so common in conspiracy theories, both these archetypes would be labeled the superchief in individual cases, yet one hems closer to the traditional Enemy Outside, while the other is seamlessly meshed with the Enemy Within, a separate archetype that focuses on "villainous neighbors who can't be distinguished from friends."[57]

The superchief as a great commander was often more applicable, playing on lack of public information about the size of native forces and emphasizing the horror of native attacks to stoke outrage and fear amongst the populace. One example in this model was that of Philip, sachem of Pokanoket, who became the subject of "New England propagandists,"[58] who depicted him as the cause of their "apocalyptic, region-wide Indian war of 1675-78."[59] As Russell Bourne describes in his book, *The Red Kings Rebellion: Racial Politics in New England, 1675-1678*, propagandists dubbed him King Philip, specifically to emphasize that the conflict was, "not a series of separate raids by provoked people but a brilliantly orchestrated war, conducted by a devilish military genius."[60] For his part, Philip was a local leader chafing under colonial rule, with relations having grown cold as the "local fur trade dried up and agricultural settlement

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[56] Pasley, pp. 524.
[57] Walker, *The United States of Paranoia*. pp. 16
[58] Pasley, "Articles on Conspiracy Theory in Early American History." pp. 524.
[59] Pasley, pp. 524.
[60] Bourne, Russell, *The Red Kings Rebellion: Racial Politics in New England, 1675-1678*. 1991. pp. 118.

expanded, bringing livestock that consumed the Indians' open-field crops and forcing them into

economic dependence upon whites."[61] Pasley attributes the initial idea of Philip plotting against

the colonists to rumors planted by his political rivals, and enthusiastically embraced by the

leaders at Plymouth who "coveted the Pokanokets' land,"[62] to the effect that Philip "planned a

major war, possibly in concert with the French,"[63] against the New England Colonies. Still, this

hearsay was enough pretext so that "when Philip was recorded at a meeting with Rhode Island

officials complaining about his people's mistreatment by Plymouth, and vowing that he was

'determined not to live until I have no country', the mantle of conspiratorial mastermind was

fitted and ready to be forced on him."[64] Though he did participate in the opening of hostilities

"with a much exaggerated raid on the nearby town of Swansea," Philip spent the bulk of the

conflict on the run, while "the Narragansetts, Abenakis, and other tribes around New England

did most of the fighting."[65] Despite his limited influence and participation in the conflict, he

"always remained New England's primary target."[66] Because he was charged as the mastermind

of the conflict, victory for the colonists must necessarily hinge on his defeat, and "by the end of

the war, his village had vanished, his wife and son had been sold into slavery, and his

dismembered body was on display in the town of Plymouth."[67] While his death and ruination had

no material impact on the war at hand, it didn't need to because emphasizing his role in the

conflict was a rhetorical convenience, allowing the settlers "who were authorized by their belief

in this evil plot to ignore the role of their own behavior in the Indians' unrest, take extreme

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[61] Pasley, "Articles on Conspiracy Theory in Early American History." pp. 525.
[62] Pasley, pp. 525.
[63] Bourne, pp. 107 in Pasley, pp. 525.
[64] Pasley, pp. 525.
[65] Pasley, pp. 525.
[66] Pasley, pp. 525.
[67] Pasley, pp. 525.

measures against tribes whose land rights conflicted with their ambitions, and to declare the problem solved when the designated villain was eliminated."[68] His death, of no real consequence to the broader forces of Natives engaged in resistance to the colonists, nevertheless was received as a major victory in Plymouth, and in the minds of their people, marked a substantive end to the conflict.

This case study offers our first example of the archetypes used to translate allegations into culturally resonant totems. The purveyors of conspiracy here did not need to explain all the details or rely on their listener to be familiar with the particular characters involved, because they can instead appeal to the kind of biases, fears, and prejudices within their subject which resonate on a deeper, almost subconscious level. Functionally, the conspiracy served to cast the colonialists as righteous, either in resistance to an overwhelmingly powerful and malicious native king, or defending themselves from a treacherous Indian infiltrator to the communities. This is a classic tactic in crafting a compelling conspiratorial antagonist, one who is both all-powerful yet also sneaking and underhanded. This serves to both justify any retaliation against a perceived threat, while simultaneously obscuring the actual power relationships at play.

Another detail which stands out is the tendency of colonial propagandists to select their superchief largely on the basis of familiarity. As was the case with Philip, time and time again the great threat is a Native who the colonists had interacted with before, traded with, often starting with friendly relations. This would invest the personal into the dramatic narrative they were weaving, increasing the likelihood that those who heard would become invested and feel like it reflected the world around them. Otherwise they would select a native who was part of a

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[68] Pasley, "Articles on Conspiracy Theory in Early American History." pp. 525.

well reported or early skirmish in a conflict, disregarding their actual station or influence in favor of spectacle and drama. Spectacle played a large role in how the superchief died as well. The story came with an ending, one which "celebrated his nobility in defeat,"[69] and created symbolic value for the colonial citizens that it would not necessarily carry for the superchief's own tribe or nation. It should be emphasized that, for the most part, influence and hierarchy in Native tribes worked nothing like how the superchief conspiracy would describe. They almost universally "lacked any sort of true chief executive who could impose his will on his followers,"[70] instead relying on "power not from law or force, but only from the respect and love that his prowess, wisdom, and generosity had garnered among his people, who could obey him or not as they chose."[71] None of these realities about native hierarchy really factored into the picture painted of the many superchiefs, from "Tecumseh, Black Hawk, and Osceola in the early nineteenth century."[72] All that was needed was a gripping figure, allowing the narrative to be transplanted anywhere. It became a lockstep pattern, the creation of a superchief conspiracy would drive "whole frontiers into panic, and such panics usually brought on white military campaigns that would be followed by the expropriation of Indian lands."[73] Essentially, the colonists used the pretext of the superchief conspiracy theory to justify their continued encroachments onto Native lands, as well as whatever brutality was deemed necessary to respond to these outsized threats. Here, conspiracy theories lubricated the hard process of enlisting the populace in slaughter and ethnic cleansing, significantly lightening the load for the colonial authorities.

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[69] Pasley, pp. 525.
[70] Pasley, pp. 525.
[71] Pasley, pp. 526.
[72] Pasley, pp. 526.
[73] Pasley, pp. 526.

Osama bin Laden and a Climate of Conspiracy

It is hard to overstate the degree of panic experienced by the American people in the aftermath of the September 11th attacks on the World Trade Center. At first, some assumed it was all a horrible accident, a tragic malfunction of aviation, and as such many went about their days, going to work and hoping for the best, like any other tragedy that appeared on their morning broadcast. However, as the day wore on it became clear this was no accident, that it was in fact a coordinated attack, fear steadily grew. By or for who this attack was carried out, nobody knew for sure, though within a week the White House was claiming it had classified intelligence tying the attacks to a group of militant jihadists known as Al-Qaeda, and that the attacks had been coordinated by their leader, Osama bin Laden.[74] In a 2002 speech before congress, Dale L. Watson, the Executive Assistant Director Counterterrorism and Counterintelligence branch Federal Bureau of Investigation, claimed that the "evidence linking Al-Qaeda and Bin Laden to the attacks of September 11 is clear and irrefutable,"[75] though he still declined to produce it for the press or public. Lacking anything but scantily sourced hard declarations from authorities, the people speculated. Here we see the virality of conspiratorial thinking, how the existence of one real conspiracy leads people's minds to spiral off into paranoid and unfalsifiable circles. Conspiracy theories came to define the American analysis of Osama bin Laden, and inevitably colored our perceptions of his actual threat.

One of the crescendos of conspiracy in the media occurred on the December 2nd, 2001 broadcast of NBC's *Meet the Press*, when host Tim Russert displayed a graphic produced by the *Times of London* depicting a supposed Mountain fortress in which Osama and his forces were

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[74] Bush, George W., "President Freezes Terrorist's Assets." National Archives and Records Administration, September 24, 2001.
[75] Watson, Dale L., "The Terrorist Threat Confronting the United States." FBI, February 6, 2002.

entombed. He presented this graphic to his nightly audience, as well as his guest, Secretary of

Defense Donald Rumsfeld, ostensibly to inform them of Al-Qaeda's capabilities. Russert went

on to describe the graphic as featuring "a fortress. [...] a complex, multi-tiered, bedrooms and

offices on the top, as you can see, secret exits on the side and on the bottom, cut deep to avoid

thermal detection so when our planes fly to try to determine if any human beings are in there, it's

built so deeply down and embedded in the mountain and the rock it's hard to detect,"[76] as well as

"a ventilation system to allow people to breathe and to carry on. An arms and ammunition depot.

[...] exits leading into it and the entrances large enough to drive trucks and cars and even tanks.

And it's own hydroelectric power to help keep lights on, even computer systems and telephone

systems,"[77] before concluding "It's a very sophisticated operation."[78] Indeed it would be, if the

fortress described even remotely resembled an actual facility operated and inhabited by the

Al-Qaeda militants, but such was simply not the case. Here one might expect Rumsfeld, the

incumbent authority in the room whose word carries significant weight on this nightly broadcast

to the nation, to clarify, and steer Russert away from such fevered speculation. Rumsfeld adopts

a decidedly different approach, responding "Oh, you bet. This is serious business. And there's

not one of those. There are many of those. And they have been used very effectively,"[79] before

deciding to throw a bit more fuel on the fire and adding "Afghanistan is not the only country that

has gone underground. Any number of countries have gone underground. The tunneling

equipment that exists today is very powerful. It's dual use. It's available across the globe. And

people have recognized the advantages of using underground protection for themselves."[80]

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[76] Russert, Tim, *Secretary Rumsfeld Interview with NBC Meet the Press*. NBC, 2001.
[77] Russert, *Interview with NBC Meet the Press*. NBC, 2001.
[78] Russert, NBC, 2001.
[79] Rumsfeld, Donald, *Interview with NBC Meet the Press*. NBC, 2001.
[80] Rumsfeld, NBC, 2001.

Russert is immediately captured by this notion, and asserts "It may take us going from cave to cave with a great group of men I know in the United States military, the tunnel rats, to try to flush out Osama bin Laden,"[81] before following this violent train of thought to it's horrifying conclusion, asking "if need be, would we put gas into those caves to flush them out?"[82] In one quick statement Rumsfeld managed to encourage the initial speculation, lend his authority to support it, introduce the possibility in the mind of the viewer that there were actually *more* of these Bond villain fortresses across not just in the country we were preparing to invade, but many, many more countries as well. Such was the deadly conspiratorial feedback loop of post 9/11 America, a public terrified and seeking answers, a media eager to provide while creating their own narratives, and a government more than willing to abide and contribute to confusion and deception in aid of their objectives. There were those on all levels who were enthralled by their own conspiratorial convictions, but there were just as many who recognized the utility of conspiracy, how it could be used to direct a populace towards the conclusions you wanted them to reach. The *Meet the Press* segment is one illustrative example of the steps by which conspiracizing about an enemys' defenses can spiral within minutes to a suggestion of gassing those enemies, couched in the language of defending American lives from the capabilities they had just invented out of whole cloth. This is not far from the social conditions under which stories of the superchief were disseminated to justify any escalation against a small group of foreign guerilla combatants.

This type of encouraged hysteria will rarely taper off on its own, and will naturally become unmoored from something as arbitrary and fleeting as any particular presidential term

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[81] Russert, *Interview with NBC Meet the Press*. NBC, 2001.
[82] Russert, NBC, 2001.

limit. At the time Barack Obama became President of the United States, bin Laden remained on

the lam, a compelling target for a new executive looking to draw lage distinctions between

himself and the previous administration. Here, the Obama administration had an opportunity to

burnish their credentials of quiet competency and ruthless efficiency, a markedly different image

than that projected by the bluster and speculation of the Bush administration. All this came to a

head with the president's announcement on May 1st, 2011 that Navy Seals had found and

assassinated Osama bin Laden in the early hours of the morning at his compound in Abbottabad,

Pakistan. Bin Laden's death served as just as much a flashpoint for conspiracy theories as his life

had, as in death he could enter fully into the realm of imagination. For the President's supporters,

the assassination served as a repudiation of Obama's critics who frequently painted him as being

in some way soft or unenthusiastic about the War on Terror, while his detractors saw in this

opaque operation oppurtunites to undermine the official narrative and sow doubt as to whether

the Obama administration was being truthful about the circumstances. While bin Laden had

already been supplanted, long before his death, by a projected image of himself which was used

to motivate and guide the passions of the American public, he now existed solely in the domain

of perception management. Essentially, anyone who wanted to could now adopt bin Laden and a

few discrete details about him, and retrofit him into proving whatever ideological point they

were currently pursuing. This isn't to say there was no genuine reaction to bin Laden's death, as

the public celebration of the news, across America, was raucous and well recorded. Whether it

was a stadium full of baseball fans erupting into spontaneous chants of "U-S-A", overpowering

the MLB broadcast in process,[83] or when an arena of wrestling fans did the same upon

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[83] Rubin, Adam. *Phillies Crowd Erupts in 'U-S-A' Cheers*. ESPN. ESPN Internet Ventures, May 1, 2011.

announcement of the operation by newly crowned WWE champion, John Cena, the reaction was palpable and visceral.[84] The whole scene was deeply surreal, a psychic flood of all the pent up emotion and feeling that had been building since the initial attacks. The Obama administration positioned the operation as their crowning military achievement, as proof positive of the validity of their approach, critics be damned.

Unfortunately, it would turn out that large and key sections in their account of the operation were almost entirely fabricated, while other aspects were so opaque as to invite skepticism and broad speculation. It all started with his body. After bin Laden was killed, the Obama administration, cognizant of the representational and symbolic value his body would hold to his supporters, decided to bury him at sea. This created a massive opportunity for conspiracy theorists, who suddenly had claims about the death of a major world figure, but in a very literal sense, no physical proof that it was true at all. There was a real, physical gap in the story, one which could be filled by basically any explanation one could imagine. Of course, many were content to believe the word of the Obama Administration, but we already know the conspiratorial mindset and its adversarial stance against authority would preclude conspiracists from accepting this explanation alone. Things only grew more murky as journalists, like Seymour Hersh in his 2015 piece for the London Review of Books, *The Killing of Osama bin Laden,* sourced largely from retired senior intelligence officials in both the US and Pakistani government, exposed large inconsistencies in the Obama administration's recounting of even the most basic details of the operation. For one, their consistent claim that the operation was carried out exclusively by American forces without any coordination with any other nations, least of all the Pakistani

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[84] Pena, Daniel. *John Cena Addresses Osama Bin Laden's Death Following Extreme Rules PPV*. LordsofPain.net, May 1, 2011.

officials under whose nose the operation was supposedly carried out, was contradicted by multiple sources. What's more, Hersh challenged the whole premise of the assault on bin Laden's compound, reporting "from American sources: that bin Laden had been a prisoner of the ISI at the Abbottabad compound since 2006; that Kayani and Pasha knew of the raid in advance and had made sure that the two helicopters delivering the Seals to Abbottabad could cross Pakistani airspace without triggering any alarms."[85] These inconsistencies emphasized the idea that the state was more interested in a narratively satisfying conclusion to bin Laden's story than they were in any strategic blow against an enemy force. Osama bin Laden being killed as a captive removes the illusion of a heroic struggle against a powerful foe, reducing it instead to the state tying off a loose end, some grist for the public. Even in death bin Laden's story did not belong to him, nor even really to his cause. Now though, he could finally transcend into something non-corporeal, more of an idea than a person.

The story of Osama bin Laden, both the real man and the image projected to the American public, is remarkably evocative of the conspiracy theories of the past. The effect of this campaign of misinformation and exaggeration was palpable, at times it appeared the whole country was gripped in fear of an enemy they could neither see nor understand, but who they nevertheless knew posed an existential threat to them and their way of life. This message was reinforced almost daily by all the usual institutions of power, from the President on down to the news media. These are the echoes of the Superchief in American culture, an instinctual understanding of foreign threats at the gates, evoking the nationalist conspiracy theories of the past, while being tacitly supported and fueled by one's own authority figures.

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[85] Hersh, Seymour M, "The Killing of Osama Bin Laden." *London Review of Books* 37: 2015. pp. 3.

One was his ever presence, the sense that he or his proxies could strike at any time, anywhere, even though their capabilities to launch an attack in America essentially came and went with the initial attack. The American public was encouraged to prepare for another attack at any time, and programs like "If You See Something Say Something" reinforced the idea that bin Laden's reach was no less than our very backyards. This was used as pretext for increasing security and police presence across the country, filling our institutions of transit with authorities and the ambient idea of a threat. Another was the exaggeration of threat, the idea that any attack he could carry out would be equally devastating as 9/11, that he had command of legions of soldiers willing to die for their cause. The devastation and lives lost on 9/11 are indisputable, yet future threats on American soil fell flat, or turned out to be, at best, overstated. Post-9/11, the bulk of the casualties one could even plausibly connect to bin Laden himself weren't from devious plots or attacks on the homeland, but in sustained insurgent warfare against a vengeful invading American military. There was certainly nothing approaching the sheer scale of the World Trade Center attacks, though that didn't stop the news from preparing for another calamity. Even a decade later these fears persisted, one Rasmussen poll from 2012 showed that 65% of the sampled Americans believed another 9/11 type attack would come within 10 years.[86]

I drew attention to the discrepancies in reporting his death because they reflect, once again, a desire from the authorities to find a narratively satisfying conclusion to the story, strategic considerations coming in a distant second place. CIA agents tracking down bin Laden and Seals executing a nighttime raid is much more dramatic than the U.S. executing bin Laden after being tipped off to his location by the same people who had him imprisoned in the first

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[86] Rasmussen Poll, "65% See Another 9/11 As Possible in Next 10 Years." Rasmussen Reports. 2012.

place. Much like with the superchief, whether bin Laden was truly running operations and commanding soldiers by the time of his death is largely irrelevant to the symbolic value his death would hold to the American people. The operation didn't need to have strategic or operational value because the conspiracy theories swirling back home had imbued him with meaning and value beyond his actual crimes. No matter what his actual capabilities, people still believed he was a threat, and as such any action to bring him down was justified

Conclusion

The classic *Twilight Zone* episode, "The Monsters Are Due on Maple Street", follows a small suburban street's collapse into chaos after it is suggested that one of the families living there is not who they appear to be, but rather infiltrators from another world, who look like us, but seek human destruction. The episode closes, as all episodes of the *Twilight Zone* do, with a brief monologue expressing the plot's main message, and centering the drama in their aforementioned zone of imagination and fear. However, with this episode, they take a different tack, informing the audience that

> "The tools of conquest do not necessarily come with bombs and
> explosions and fallout. There are weapons that are simply thoughts, attitudes,
> prejudices...to be found only in the minds of men. For the record, prejudices can
> kill...and suspicion can destroy...and a thoughtless, frightened search for a
> scapegoat has a fallout all of its own – for the children and the children yet

unborn. And the pity of it is that these things cannot be confined to the Twilight

Zone."[87]

There are moments looking at these conspiratorial outbursts in American politics in which it

appears large swaths of people are living on Maple Street, both in their obsession with staving

off threats from outside their community, as well as the way that obsession is directed to

violence as "a tool of conquest."[88] Both of these conspiracy theories exemplify instances in

which American authorities fed into public fears about a foreign threat, and maneuvered the

ensuing paranoia into strategically beneficial directions. This is one of our key departures from

Hofstadter's analysis, as here we see authority figures, elites, those with real power willing to

engage with conspiracy theories, utilize them, and in some cases buy into them themselves. Far

from the fringes, these were conspiracy theories *as* the official narrative, distorting the size and

severity of the threat to create a public enthralled by a conspiratorial narrative. All the same beats

are there, but the story is coming from authority figures, trusted media outlets, and the

institutions of power. How exactly would Hofstadter factor this into his analysis, this plain

example of a majoritarian authority buying into and espousing conspiracy theories

indistinguishable from any paranoid spokesmen. One could certainly argue that discussions like

that between Russert and Rumsfeld are wholly cynical, designed exclusively to mislead and

frighten the public, but assuming a modicum of good faith leads to the conclusion that these men

truly did believe at least some of the conspiracy theories and speculation surrounding bin Laden,

and were willing to broadcast those beliefs to the wider public.

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[87] *The Twilight Zone,* "The Monsters Are Due on Maple Street." Ep. 22. Directed by Ronald Winston. Written by Rod Serling. CBS, March 4th, 1960.
[88] *The Twilight Zone,* "The Monsters Are Due on Maple Street." Ep. 22 1960.

The similarities don't stop there, for example, the notion that colonial officials were most likely to cast Natives who were known and familiar to them is mirrored in the oft remarked fact that Osama Bin Laden was at one time working alongside the United States government in a regional conflict against the Soviet Union. At one time he was written about glowingly in American newspapers, and fits neatly into the archetype of an "unfaithful ally."[89] Personal familiarity with the subject is a bit of a tell for conspiratorial thinking, it's hard enough to craft a compelling narrative itself without also having to create new characters as well. As we saw in the many instances of superchief conspiracy theories, having a central figure in a conspiracy theory who is already known to the listener, either through previous interactions, or participation in a well covered and spectacular early conflict, invests the ensuing narrative with a sense of the personal. Whether they like it or not, those hearing these conspiracy theories will already feel a part of the narrative because they feel grounded in the subject, increasing the likelihood that they may be persuaded by its message.

The conspiracy theories in the next chapter follow a similar approach to persuasion, playing upon existing anxieties but heightening them to a fever-pitch. In these cases the villains aren't mysterious and violent foreigners, but rather sinister and self-interested elites, deciding people's fates from behind a curtain and victimizing people for their own edification. These conspiracy theories prove to have varied and unpredictable effects on the political climate around them, and are more often the purview of the masses than the ruling class.

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[89] Pasley, *Articles on Conspiracy Theory in Early American History*. pp. 524.

Chapter Three:

The Enemy Above: Conspiracy as a Democratic Antibody

This chapter will focus on two case studies which display a different type of American paranoia, an anxiety that we have less power in our lives and fates than we are led to believe, that the calamities in our news and events in our lives are actually orchestrated by a small, endlessly influential group of elite powerbrokers. The first case study is of a hysteria that became a political movement, while the second is a political movement which embraced conspiratorial hysteria for its own purposes. These case studies are both built on another common strain of American conspiratorial reaction, The Enemy Above, the belief that the misfortunes and maladies visited on some portion or the entire American public are directed at the behest of a small cadre of powerful elites.

These sentiments have historically proved powerful and animating, and in both cases lead large sections of politically engaged people to new and unexpected avenues of political engagement. Whether the specific allegations at the center of these conspiracy theories have any basis, some more than others, was irrelevant to the resonance they provoked in the people absorbing their expansive narratives. They spoke to a deeper discomfort with the ruling class and their internal practices, and in some cases saw real action being taken to remediate the situation. Though they have different conclusions, and with very different political legacies, their similarities display a pattern of how anti-elite Conspiracy Theories take hold on a society, and how much or how little it takes to create a full blown backlash.

Anti-Masonry as an Anti-Elite Antibody

As the American colonies formed into states, their conspiratorial tendencies persisted, though the narratives did begin to shift with the newly forming society. The new Americans turned from fears of foreign outsiders to anxiety about how power was being distributed in the new state. The first major conspiracy theory in this vein to take hold was in 1826, when William Morgan went missing from the town jail in Batavia, New York. People were even suspicious before his imprisonment, as his forthcoming publication of a tell-all about the local Masonic lodge has coincided with sudden increase in public harassment by local law enforcement, who arrested him repeatedly for petty debts before that final fateful night. Interest increased further when a mob of supposed freemasons gathered before Morgan's office and set a fire which partially consumed the building. According to A.P. Bentley's 1874 book on *History of the Abduction of William Morgan and the Anti-Masonic Excitement of 1826-30*, there were rumors within the town that these seemingly arbitrary applications of the law had more to do with the Sheriff's membership in the Masonic Order, and the salacious details Morgan promised in his book during promotions throughout town, than it did his actual criminal infractions. Indeed, that much attention was being directed at Mr. Morgan at all was shocking, as before announcing his book he "was constantly embarrassed and annoyed by importunate creditors,"[90] frequently moving his wife and two children across the state in search of an enterprise which wouldn't immediately collapse, and known after the failure of his brewery in Little York to have succumbed to a drinking habit. After his family was again forced to flee their homes, this time when Morgan shot a police officer attempting to collect on a creditors warrant, he resumed an

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[90] Bentley, A. P., *History of the Abduction of William Morgan: and the Anti-Masonic Excitement of 1826-30, with Many Details and Incidents Never before Published*. 1874. pp. 8.

old profession that would start his path to infamy, as a stone worker in Rochester, New York.

Between the debts, the drinking, and the rootless existence, he cut an unlikely figure for whom a

disappearance would trigger mass hysteria. According to Bentley's book, it was in Rochester

that he conceived of the idea to publish an expose on the Masonic order, having apparently

joined as a low level apprentice while briefly employed as a stonemason, before using what

knowledge he could glean from those experiences to con his way into higher level meetings at

various lodges across New York. Still, it wasn't until he moved his family once more to Batavia,

New York, that the pivotal events were set into motion. There, he became "boon companions"[91]

with a man named David Miller, who ran an "opposition paper, pitted against the policies of

New York's governor, DeWitt Clinton,"[92] who was himself a prominent Mason. Despite decades

of experience publishing, "Miller was still a struggling newspaperman searching for higher

circulation." Neither he nor Morgan were held in "high esteem by their community,"[93] and "not

surprisingly, both men harbord deep-seated animosity toward Freemasonry, which served as a

symbol for the establishment class."[94] Before long Morgan, and his new partner Miller, began

advertising a scorching exposee on the Masonic order and it's practices, hoping "to make a

fortune out of the gaping curiosity of the vulgar."[95] Interest in the Masonic lodges and their at

times prestigious members had been growing for some time amongst those who would likely

never reach the social standing requisite to enter these lodges, and speculation about their

initiation rituals and possible sacrifices were a common topic.   A curiosity indeed existed, as

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[91] Bentley, *History of the Abduction of William Morgan.* pp. 9.
[92] Bentley, pp. 10.
[93] Burt, Andrew, *American Hysteria: the Untold Story of Mass Political Extremism in the United States*. 2020. pp. 60.
[94] Burt, *American Hysteria*. pp. 60.
[95] Bentley, *History of the Abduction of William Morgan.* pp. 10.

well as hints of anti-Masonic sentiment, but it was also formless and directionless, as meaningful politically as expressing vague distrust of 'elites'. What was lacking was an inciting event, something to shape these latent feelings into action. For now though these sentiments and theories were whispered, spoken amongst friends and confidantes, either through lack of real conviction or for fear of reprisal.

However, when Morgan went missing in the early hours of the morning in Canandaigua, New York, what had percolated under the surface suddenly rose up in backlash loudly, forcefully, and most importantly, publicly. Essential to understanding the allure of the Morgan case is that it was never discovered what *actually* happened to him. Information was scarce, so the public could only cling to a few disparate piece of information to inform their reactions, most explosively the report from the jailer's wife who saw,

> "Morgan struggling with two men and shouting 'Murder!' A yellow carriage
>
> appeared, and four men threw Morgan into it. The carriage went 'clattering' into
>
> the night, and Morgan was never seen in public again."[96]

All of this intrigue naturally "'invested the consequent horror with enchantment,' and as law enforcement and investigative procedures lagged, non-Masons came to believe that a great Masonic conspiracy in the United States had produced a 'cover-up' of the true events."[97]

How this all unfolded was key to the appeal of the Morgan affair, as the central unknowable provided exceptional leeway for speculation and imagination, essentially providing anyone who picked up the story the artistic license to write the ending. As William Preston Vaughn describes it in his book *The Anti-Masonic Party in the United States: 1826-1843*, the

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[96] Vaughn, William Preston, *The Anti-Masonic Party in the United States, 1826-1843*. 1983. pp. 5.
[97] Vaughn, *The Anti-Masonic Party*. pp. 2.

"initial reaction of the non-Masonic public was intense but not hysterical."[98] People were

shocked by the abduction itself, but few at first connected the whole business to Morgan's

antagonistic relationship with the Masons. It was only after the conflict escalated again, when

"roughly seventy armed Masons rallied at a tavern, while a constable presented [Miller] with a

warrant for his arrest on questionable criminal charges."[99] Luckily for Miller these charges fell

through once he reached the town of Le Roy, and he was quickly returned to Batavia by "his

lawyer and an armed posse."[100] It was then, "as Miller and his crew returned to Batavia,"[101] that

the story began to really pick up steam amongst the community. The discourse around the issue

also began to shift, as "the question of one man's fate was translated into public concern as to

whether there existed a secret society powerful enough to establish its own system of justice and

to prevent punishment of the Morgan collaborators."[102] As the story was spread throughout the

state, it began to focus "on this aspect of the story — on how the elite Masons had turned the

public interest into a private one, and how the government itself may have been perverted in the

process."[103] In response, the communities "private sentiment began to shape public action,"[104]

and about two weeks after the initial abductions there were a "series of heavily attended public

meetings," which while initially created to solve Morgan's disappearance, were "equally about

calming the public's fear. There was no guarantee, after all, that what happened to Morgan could

not happen to others."[105] What was distinct about these meetings was that these were true

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[98] Vaughn, pp. 5.
[99] Burt, Andrew, *American Hysteria: the Untold Story of Mass Political Extremism*. 2020. pp. 62.
[100] Burt, pp. 62.
[101] Burt, pp. 63.
[102] Vaughn, The *Anti-Masonic Party*. pp. 5.
[103] Burt, *American Hysteria* pp. 63.
[104] Burt, pp. 63.
[105] Burt, pp. 63.

"people's committees [...] No government authorities were called in, none were relied upon, and none, many suspected, could be trusted."[106] The committees opted to send their own "agents into neighboring towns to investigate the abduction, gathering facts and taking down testimony."[107]

Now while these committees and investigations were formed to calm the public, and clarify the situation at large, they ended up doing anything but. On the contrary, as "citizen representatives of the committees traveled through upstate New York spreading the story of Morgan's abduction everywhere they went," they ended up validating the fears of people farther and farther from the initial event, those who had perhaps only heard about the case through their local newspaper, and those who were skeptical could now hear "witnesses attest to the truth of the affair."[108] Worse, the increased geographic scope also led to the details to become more sensational, with some claiming Morgan had actually been "murdered in some sort of occult Masonic ceremony, [...] his tongue removed with a knife."[109] It is hard to know whether these sensationalized accounts did the most damage, or whether it was the committees introducing "new seeds of doubt about the government's ability to handle its own responsibilities — a group of citizens, after all, had taken the matter of justice into their own hands."[110]

Before long these citizens took more than justice into their own hands, as the fervor grew into a genuine movement. Their initial concerns were with righting the wrong done to Morgan for reasons of simple principle, and there was sincere concern that if those guilty were "not brought to justice, nothing prevented the same crime occuring again."[111] But as the backlash

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[106] Burt, pp. 64.
[107] Burt, pp. 63.
[108] Burt, pp. 64.
[109] Burt, pp. 64.
[110] Burt, pp. 64.
[111] Burt, pp. 64.

grew, so too did the counter-backlash. In a perplexing move from a public relations standpoint, "many Masons began publicly — and inexplicably — to defend Morgan's abduction, and many of them were public figures to boot."[112] In his book *American Hysteria*, Andrew Burt reports that one former member of the New York legislature stated, "If they are publishing the true secrets of Masonry, [we] should not think the lives of half a dozen such men as Morgan and Miller of any consequence in suppressing the work,"[113] while a Masonic judge "on the Genesee County Court stated that, 'whatever Morgan's fate might have been, he deserved it — he had forfeited his life.'"[114] Unsurprisingly, these public statements from local authorities did little to quell fear of a conspiracy, especially because, as far as the public was concerned, "only a few Masons were guilty of any crime."[115] If this was the case, why would there need to be public defenses of the abduction from other Masons? This strange evolution in the conversation deepend the rift between the public pursuing justice in the case and the elites who seemed to be downplaying the issue at every turn, and soon "the Masonic organization began to look more culpable as a whole."[116]

As the Masons scrambled to respond to the case, and as their "organization began to look more culpable as a whole,"[117] the anti-Masonic movement took new shape as the Morgan case began to be heard in courts. One groups of masons were "indicted on charges of rioting and assault for the attempt to imprison Miller,"[118] in October, and the next month four Masons were indicted "for the conspiracy to seize Morgan from his jail cell in Canandaigua, and then for

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[112] Burt, pp. 64.
[113] Burt, pp. 65.
[114] Burt, pp. 65.
[115] Burt, pp. 64.
[116] Burt, pp. 65.
[117] Burt, pp. 65.
[118] Burt, pp. 65.

abducting him in the carriage that took him wherever he went next."[119] All of these indictments

culminated in a January 1827 trial "where teams of lawyers, bankrolled by local Masonic lodges,

assembled to represent the defendants."[120] Large crowds gathered to observe the proceedings and

by this point even the "governor himself had taken an interest in the affair, requesting his own

attorney general to attend the event on his behalf."[121] The trial began routinely, with the

defendants submitting pleas of not guilty, though it quickly went south when the key witness,

David Miller, failed to appear in court, causing the judge to adjourn until a day later. For his part,

Miller claimed he had "simply forgot that he was meant to appear in court,"[122] and that he lacked

the funds to travel the fifty-mile distance to the courthouse, though "many would later allege that

he had been blackmailed or bribed into refusing to testify."[123] The second day of the trial things

became even more unusual, as "three of the defendants immediately changed their pleas to

'guilty' for the conspiracy to abduct Morgan,"[124] with the fourth acknowledging that the

kidnapping had happened. They admitted to taking him from his cell and forcing him into the

carriage, though none "claimed to know where Morgan was headed, or what had happened to

him once the carriage departed."[125] These pleas had the affect of fundamentally altering the scope

of the trial, "no longer a matter of convicting the four men of kidnapping or murder, or shedding

light onto the larger conspiracy as a whole."[126] All that was needed now was to prove the men

were in Canandaigua that night. The men "were sentenced to lenient terms, ranging from two

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[119] Burt, pp. 65.
[120] Burt, pp. 65.
[121] Burt, pp. 65.
[122] Burt, pp. 65.
[123] Burt, pp. 66.
[124] Burt, pp. 66.
[125] Burt, pp. 66.
[126] Burt, pp. 66.

years to one month in prison, for nothing more than forcibly moving Morgan from one place to another."[127]

This outcome provided the public with neither justice nor clarity, and for those who were already "deeply concerned about the conspiracy against Morgan, the trial proved fulfilling in another sense, for it gave renewed purpose to their outrage."[128] Brent argues it was at their sentencing that the full extent of the "public's alarm first became clear, thanks in no small part to Judge Enos T. Throop."[129] As he pronounced sentence upon the Masons "in front of a rapt courtroom, and reprinted in papers across the state, [he] revealed that their trial was now about something greater than their criminal offense alone."[130] He declared their crime was "daring, wicked, and presumptuous,"[131] which had "polluted this land,"[132] leaving Morgan's family "helpless,"[133] while simultaneously protecting "the rest of the culprits from being brought to justice."[134] However, none of this was, as Throop put it, "the heaviest part of your crime."[135] That crime, in his evaluation, was that,

> "Your conduct has created, in the people of this section of the country, a strong feeling of
> virtuous indignation. The court rejoices to witness it — to be made sure that a citizen's
> person cannot be invaded by lawless violence, without its being felt by every individual
> in the community. It is a blessed spirit, and we do hope that it will not subside — that it
> will be accompanied by a ceaseless vigilance, and untiring activity…. We see in this

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[127] Burt, pp. 66.
[128] Burt, pp. 66.
[129] Burt, pp. 66.
[130] Burt, pp. 66.
[131] Burt, pp. 66.
[132] Burt, pp. 66.
[133] Burt, pp. 67.
[134] Burt, pp. 67.
[135] Burt, pp. 67.

public sensation the spirit which brought us into existence as a nation, and a pledge that

our rights and liberties are destined to endure."[136]

Throop's comments describe a conflict over Morgan's disappearance that "wasn't simply about

outrage," but was in fact evidence of "the spirit which brought us into existence as a nation."[137]

Unspoken in this sentiment is the worry that this spirit is at its essence threatened, by the conduct

of these defendants, and by any co-conspirators, in positions of authority one could now easily

imagine them holding. Soon, names were affixed to those posts, such as the trial over Sheriff Eli

Bruce's participation in Morgan's kidnapping. Bruce had become a target due to evoking his

fifth amendment rights when appearing as a witness in previous hearings, and no less than the

Governor had professed to believe Bruce was "a participant in the said abduction."[138]

Anti-Masons saw in his trial an opportunity to prove for sure that Morgan "had in fact been

kidnapped, and to place Bruce behind bars in the process."[139] It was reasoned that, as Sheriff of

Niagara County, one of the counties Morgan was thought to have been carried through, and a self

professed Mason, he "must have tacitly allowed the kidnappers transit, with full knowledge of

the crime."[140]

As if in fulfillment of Throop's vision, the anti-Masonic movement began to make a real

push into the political sphere in the wake of the two prominent court cases, shedding local

propagandists like Miller for more ambitious figures like one Thurlow Weed. Weed, like Miller,

was a printer by trade who noticed the burgeoning anti-masonry movement and asserted his

personality to guide it into a political party. He first became involved through his service on

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[136] Burt, pp. 67.
[137] Burt, pp. 67.
[138] Burt, pp. 71.
[139] Burt, pp. 72.
[140] Burt, pp. 71.

"Rochester's Anti-Masonic 'Morgan Committee, [...] one of the most prominent bodies set up in the aftermath of the kidnapping,"[141] but had his sights set higher, "helping to recruit Anti-Masonic candidates for local elections, and stirring up public support for the Anti-Masons platform — which consisted, at this point, in simply removing Masons from elected office."[142] To put into perspective just how unexpected the Anti-Masonic party's success was in the 1827 elections, the president John Quincy Adams' party "elected twelve members to the New York legislature,"[143] while at the same time "the newly minted Anti-Masons elected a shocking fifteen."[144] If it wasn't yet, Anti-masonry was now an inescapable aspect of New York politics, and quickly cropped up in neighboring states. By the time the 1828 elections came around, Weed was acting as President Adams' "campaign manager in western New York." Adams was at this point "openly aligning himself with the Anti-Masons by declaring that "I am not, never was, and never shall be a Freemason" — no small feat for both Weed and his new party," particularly within the span of a year.[145]

Their success was not to last. The party proved too disorganized and uncompromising in their central tenet to work with politicians who did not agree with their diagnosis, and soon "questions about the party's ability to handle routine political tasks [...] began to be asked with increasing frequency."[146] Their most lasting contribution to the American political landscape also proved to be their undoing. The 1832 presidential elections were approaching and the party planned to hold a "national nominating convention, the first of its kind in American politics, and

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[141] Burt, pp. 70.
[142] Burt, pp. 70.
[143] Burt, pp. 70.
[144] Burt, pp. 70.
[145] Burt, pp. 71.
[146] Burt, pp. 75.

one that is emulated by political parties to this day."[147] It was a revolutionary concept at the time,

eschewing party leaders selecting the nominee, "delegates to the convention, each representing

their local supporters, would elect the party's candidates,"[148] which burnished their credentials as

an anti-elite, populist force in politics, and focused on "bridging ideological differences within

the party.[149] Unfortunately, it also introduced the dreaded factionalism into their once unified

party, and the rank and file soon began to turn on the leadership like Weed, accusing them of

deception and compromising with Masonic sympathetic candidates. Around the same time the

Morgan trials finally came to a close, and with them enthusiasm for the anti-Masonic movement

began to wilt. Despite all their work to build a political movement, the Morgan case remained the

primary motivator for their whole cause, the hinge on which the whole project hung. They were

able to sustain the movement through the ups and downs of electoral politics by providing all the

necessary spectacle and intrigue to keep their base of voters engaged. When the trials failed time

and again to deliver the satisfying conclusion the anti-Masons desired, with Morgan's

disappearance still officially unsolved and the statute of limitations closing the case, it seemed

the injustice which brought the movement together in the first place would remain open ended.

Though their presidential candidate won Vermont and some anti-Masonic counties across the

country, enthusiasm faded, and by one account the party "seemed as if by magic, in one moment

annihilated."[150] This defeat combined with the anti-climax of the trials marked the final

dissolution of the anti-Masonic party, succumbing to the weight of its unfulfilled expectations

and growing contradictions.

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[147] Burt, pp. 76.
[148] Burt, pp. 76.
[149] Burt, pp. 76.
[150] Burt, pp. 78.

A full analysis of the political significance of "The Morgan Affair" and the ensuing backlash would not be complete without recognizing the full context in which it arose. It is frequently alleged by both witnesses at the time, as well as subsequent historians, that many of the more theatrical and explosive conflicts between Morgan, Miller and the Masons, such as the fire that claimed their office, were in fact carried out and orchestrated by David Miller himself. While he and Morgan shared a common financial objective in marketing their tell-all manuscript, Miller also had a political conflict with the authorities in New York State, from the governor down to local officials. As an opposition writer he had an incentive, both financial and political, to create the most shocking and inflammatory conflict between himself and his perceived political adversaries as possible. Controversy sells papers so the bigger the spectacle, the more papers he'd sell and the more righteous his crusade against governor DeWitt Clinton would appear.

Layered on top of that partisan tension was a dynamic where marginalized figures came together in anti-Masonry to oppose a Masonic Order that was viewed as being comprised of elites. Despite his book and relative local infamy, Morgan was essentially a debtor, a man trying to scrape by and relying on ingenuity and schemes to make it to the next day. His adversaries, or at least those most frequently charged as his abductors, occupied a distinctly different position in the local community. While there were moments when anti-Masonic attitudes bled into fear or pushback against the rank and file masons, in most cases the charges of real conspiracy were leveled at those who both wielded influence within the local Masonic lodge and the community itself: the Sheriff Eli Bruce, the Governor Dewitt Clinton, and local politicians that the anti-masonic candidates looked to unseat. These were all people who already pre-figured into

any conception of a hierarchical power structure, and who therefore could be integrated easily

into roles as Masonic plotters or allies in a conspiratorial narrative. Indeed, as Andrew Burt

describes in his book *American Hysteria The Untold Story of Mass Political Extremism in the*

United States, in general, "Masons were overwhelmingly men of middle and upper middle class

status — doctors, lawyers, and businessmen — who had the time and leisure to join what

amounted to a social club for the well to do."[151] Many influential figures in New York alone were

affiliated with the Masons, from Governor DeWitt Clinton who "was not only a Mason, but had

been the Grand Master of the Grand Lodge of New York and the highest-ranking Mason in the

country."[152] In his book, Andrew Burt claims "by one estimate, more than half of all publicly

held offices in New York were occupied by Masons,"[153] contributing to an anxious dynamic

between Masonic officials and the people they served.

It was also a pivotal moment in America's political development; Morgan's

disappearance in 1826 was only fifty years past the Declaration of Independence, as the

American state was forced to chart a course for the first time without its revolutionary leaders.

That same summer saw "the deaths of both Thomas Jefferson and John Adams on the Fourth of

July," as emblematic an event as any of the uncertain future facing the fledgling nation.[154]

Uncertainty pervades in these times. Said the politician Daniel Webster at the time, "It cannot be

denied that with America, and in America, a new era commences in human affairs."[155] New

authorities would have to fill the void, and there would be an understandable anxiety about

whether these new leaders would follow the founding generations ideals, or if they would be

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[151] Burt, *American Hysteria.* pp. 62.
[152] Burt, pp. 61.
[153] Burt, pp. 61.
[154] Burt, pp. 59.
[155] Burt, pp. 59.

waylaid by any number of sinister forces which inhabited the public imagination. This ambiguous relationship between the public and the authorities is evident throughout the responses to the Morgan disappearance, from the legal authority lent to his abduction, the public posses assembled to ensure Miller's safe return, and the investigatory committee which eschewed the assistance and oversight of any local government officials.

In their book *Freemasonry in Context,* authors Autoro de Hoyos and S. Brent Morris provide a succinct description of the function and motivations behind Anti-Masonic conspiracy theories. They describe Anti-Masonry as just another permutation of the

> "proposition that 'the people' are held down by a secret conspiracy of wealthy secret elites manipulating a vast legion of corrupt politicians, mendacious journalists, propagandizing schoolteachers, and nefarious bankers. Freemasons are frequently accused of being behind the plot. This is not part of a healthy political skepticism or legitimate call for reform of government or corporate abuses. This is an irrational fear of powerful longstanding covert conspiracies that has hardened into an ideological worldview."[156]

Now there were certainly some aspects of the Masonic order which invited speculation, from "its ceremonies and rituals, all of which involved strange symbols and bizarre oaths,"[157] as well as the fact that, "most strikingly, the group met in secret. Their insularity would help create a sense of community within the organization, granting the air of privilege to new members while shielding the group from the world outside."[158] It was the combination of real power wielded, for example when "groups of worried Masons began harassing the pair with prosecutions for petty

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[156] de Hoyos, Arturo, and S. Brent. Morris, *Freemasonry in Context: History, Ritual, Controversy*, 2004. pp. 273.
[157] Burt, *American Hysteria.* pp. 60.
[158] Burt, pp. 60.

debt, with the tacit cooperation of the county sheriff, who briefly placed Morgan in Jail,"[159] combined with the inherent intentional secrecy of their movement which set outsiders' imaginations loose. Even without the in-person harassment, any opponents of the Masons in their communities knew that the latter were in association with no less than the Governor himself, if not higher still. Worse, they could not be sure which officials and members of their community were involved with the organization as well, as there was no requirement to publicly disclose one's membership. This was the type of soft power that the Mason's could wield, which paired with the hard power of sympathetic or colluding law enforcement made them at times a genuinely menacing force to those that opposed them. As it turned out, the influence of both groups was to be short lived. Yet because their conflict happened to coincide with a volatile moment in American politics in which there was deep public anxiety that self-interested elites would undermine the democratic principles of the nation, it erupted. That it is a conflict which was historically contingent on its specific moment does little to dim its resonance in our current moment.

This isn't to say there were not any elites working within their class to personally enrich themselves at the cost of immiserating regular citizens. Rather, that when people lack the vocabulary or ideological background to describe these processes, they often create their own. There is a real need to identify and address many of these conflicts, but they are expressed in flawed and reactionary ways. The reaction was never really about Morgan's disappearance alone, rather how his disappearance had illuminated and "exposed the existence of a powerful group, shrouded in secrecy, manipulating the law for their own purposes. Both Miller and Morgan had

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[159] Burt, *American Hysteria.* pp. 61.

initially been dragged away legally, after all."[160] This marks another distinct departure from

Hofstadter, who addressed this particular case in his *Harper's* essay, describing it as "animus

against the closure of opportunity for the common man and against aristocratic institutions."[161] In

his analysis, anti-Masonry shared many characteristics with the "Jacksonian crusade against the

Bank of the United States,"[162] and despite the fact that the Anti-Masonic movement "happened to

be anti-Jacksonian,"[163] it was "altogether congenial to popular democracy and rural

egalitarianism."[164] While Hofstadter willingly concedes that "a secret society composed of

influential men bound by special obligations could conceivably pose some kind of threat to the

civil order,"[165] and that therefore the anti-Masons argument had some merit, he ultimately

concludes that their style marks them as having "little expectation of actually convincing a

hostile world."[166] Hofstadter identifies this style as necessarily anti-social, as any attempt to

ground itself in facts as a means to "accumulate evidence in order to protect his cherished

convictions from,"[167] the "secular political world."[168]

Yet, this doesn't seem to accurately reflect the actions of the anti-Masons, who undertook

real democratic action in response to a perceived problem, one which Hofstadter is more than

willing to accede posed some real risks. What's more, should compelling evidence of Masonic

participation in Morgan's initial imprisonment be discarded, just because people worried the

same extrajudicial abuses might reach them express fear, exaggerate, or are too uncompromising

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[160] Burt, *American Hysteria.* pp. 63.
[161] Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style.* pp. 15.
[162] Hofstadter, pp. 15.
[163] Hofstadter, pp. 15.
[164] Hofstadter, pp. 15.
[165] Hofstadter, pp. 36.
[166] Hofstadter, pp. 36.
[167] Hofstadter, pp. 36.
[168] Hofstadter, pp. 36.

in their opposition? Does their style really discredit their actual grievances, or for that matter, the resulting consequences of their beliefs? The concept of a democratic nominating convention had enough merit to remain around after the anti-Masonic movement disbanded, so why is Hofstadter so instinctually dismissive of anyone who approaches problems from this style? Could it not be more productive to answer their concerns with political engagement, identifying the material conditions that have led them to conspiratorial thinking, and even, perhaps, address them? Conspiratorial beliefs left unaddressed rarely resolve themselves, something that becomes all too clear in the section to come.

The Products of Pizza Paranoia

The 2016 United States Presidential election was contentious and historic and perhaps the most covered campaign in American history. There has been endless ink spilled to explain and diagnose the reasons for Donald Trump's upset victory over Hillary Clinton, but for our purposes we will hone in on one particular storyline, which arose initially as a blip in the middle of a long general election campaign, and was quickly and summarily dismissed by the national media and their fact checking departments before the campaigns moved on to other headlines. It was easy to dismiss after all, even the name its adherents gave it sounded like a joke — Pizzagate. It sounded like yet another weak attempt to connect Hillary Clinton to some convoluted third-order scandal, another in a long line of what Secretary Clinton had once referred to as a vast right-wing conspiracy, against her family. In some ways it was, yet it also had staying power, and even out of the light of the news cycle it managed to sustain and reproduce itself. It metastasized and spread in dark corners of the internet before it broke containment in a public and violent act

which thrust this growing conspiracy theory back into the spotlight. Those who had tossed it off as a joke from what felt like ages ago now suddenly had to confront the fact that, according to one poll taken only three months after the election, "14% of Trump supporters think Hillary Clinton is connected to a child sex ring run out of a Washington DC pizzeria. Another 32% aren't sure one way or another," and "only 54% of Trump voters expressly say they don't think #Pizzagate is real."[169] How did we get here? What were the consequences? What follows is an attempt to craft a comprehensive account of Pizzagate's development.

Pizzagate began as an unintended consequence of broader political events. The central allegations of Pizzagate emerged at a time in which the United States 2016 Presidential election had been growing evermore contentious and in recent months was rocked by the revelation that the DNC and Clinton campaign had their emails hacked, many of which began to be released via the whistleblower site Wikileaks. The slow drip of emails, consistently arising whenever there was a lull in the newscycle, kept the story present in the American consciousness, and fevered coverage across cable news provided an ever replenishing sense of urgency to the story. These leaks were extensive and there were certainly emails that contained substance and insight into the operations of the DNC and Clinton campaign. For example, the revelation that CNN contributor Donna Brazile had "shared questions with the Clinton campaign before a debate and a town hall during the Democratic primary,"[170] an abuse of position that resulted in her resignation from the network shortly after the email leak brought her actions to light.[171] While these discoveries seemed to hint at the sort of elite collusion which Clinton's opponents usually decried, and was

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[169] Press Release "Trump Remains Unpopular; Voters Prefer Obama on SCOTUS Pick." Public Policy Polling. 2016. pp. 2, 13.
[170] Gold, Hadas. "New Email Shows Brazile May Have Had Exact Wording of Proposed Town Hall Question before CNN." POLITICO, October 12, 2016.
[171] Gold, Hadas. "CNN Severs Ties with Donna Brazile." POLITICO, October 31, 2016.

consequently heavily reported on in the mainstream political press, this particular conspiracy theory instead honed in on some of the most innocuous and inconsequential looking emails therein — the lunch orders.

Across online forums, most notably the controversial imageboards 4chan and 8chan, "a few motivated and suspicious individuals combing through Podesta's daily communicae decided that references to pizza and pasta were in fact code words for sexually abusing children: 'cheese' for a little girl, 'pasta' for a little boy, and on in that manner, reasoning that "the first letters in the words "cheese pizza" are the same as in "child porn."[172] The exact starting point for this interpretation is challenging to identify, largely because it formed from many disparate discussions and posts, brought together and knit into a narrative by the connectivity of the Internet. One aspect some have pointed to is the instance when "users on 8chan read a Podesta e-mail that revealed that Democratic activist David Brock had dated the owner of Comet Ping Pong pizzeria, James Alefantis,"[173] which created an association between Comet Ping Pong and even pizza itself, with the founder of Correct the Record. Brock founded Correct the Record to act as "a Super PAC that defended [Hillary] Clinton against defamation by online trolls,"[174] which is to say an organization with which the users of 4chan would be personally acquainted and hold pre-existing animosity towards. Amanda Robb, in her piece on Pizzagate for *Rolling Stone,* identified its origin as derived from an October 29th, 2016 Facebook post, "written by a sixty year old Missouri attorney named Cynthia Campbell."[175] The post went up in the evening after "then-FBI Director James Comey announced that the bureau would be reopening its

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[172] Merlan, *Republic of Lies.* pp. 58; Robb, Amanda. "Pizzagate: Anatomy of a Fake News Scandal." Rolling Stone, June 25, 2018.
[173] Robb, *Pizzagate.* 2018.
[174] Robb, *Pizzagate.* 2018.
[175] Merlan, *Republic of Lies.* pp. 58.

investigation into Clinton's use of a private e-mail server while secretary of state,"[176] and that

"data from the server had been found on electronics belonging to former Rep. Anthony Weiner

(the husband of Clinton's close aide Huma Abedin), who had been caught texting lewd messages

to a 15-year-old."[177] Campbell's Facebook post, written under the pseudonym Carmen Katz,

alleged that her "NYPD source said its much more vile and serious than classified material on

Weiner's device. The email [sic] DETAIL the trips made by Weiner, Bill and Hillary on their

pedophile billionaire friend's plane, the Lolita Express. Yup, Hillary has a well documented

predilection for underage girls. . . . We're talking an international child enslavement and sex

ring."[178] This was more than enough for the members of these online message boards, where

anonymous users began to add fuel to the fire. One of the more significant posts was "on July

2nd, 2016 in an Ask Me Anything forum on 4chan,"[179] in which a user who went by FBIAnon

purported to be a government whistleblower, specifically on the subject of the "Department of

Justice's inquiry into the Clinton Foundation, which federal prosecutors never formalized."[180] He

encouraged readers to "Dig Deep," and stated that "Bill and Hillary love foreign donors so much.

They get paid in children as well as money."[181] When asked in reponse by a user "Does Hillary

have sex with kidnapped girls?" FBIAnon simply replied "Yes," bringing renewed speculation

and attention to this conspiracy theory on these corners of the internet.[182] Eventually, Katz post

found its way onto Twitter through a complex web of Facebook groups and potentially

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[176] Robb, *Pizzagate.* 2018.
[177] Robb, *Pizzagate.* 2018.
[178] Robb, *Pizzagate.* 2018.
[179] Robb, *Pizzagate.* 2018.
[180] Robb, *Pizzagate.* 2018.
[181] Robb, *Pizzagate.* 2018.
[182] Robb, *Pizzagate.* 2018.

automated accounts, where within its first five weeks of life it was "shared roughly 1.4 million times by more than a quarter of a million accounts."[183]

At the same time, the conspiracy theory was working its way through a seperate network, one of Trump campaign surrogates, affiliates, and associates who began sharing the theory while it remained largely unnoticed by the Clinton campaign and its staffers. The story was picked up by Douglas Hagmann, a "self proclaimed private investigator and host of a conspiracy-leaning podcast"[184], who spoke about it at length on a broadcast of *Infowars*, the conspiracy-leaning program hosted by Alex Jones, who at his peak in 2017 was averaging "around 480,000 viewers and listeners," per episode, and on whose show Donald Trump himself appeared in 2015.[185] Two days later none other than, "Erik Prince, the brother of Trump's future Secretary of Education, Betsy DeVos, 'confirmed' that the terrible rumor was true in an interview on Breitbart," lending legitimacy to what was until that point a story exclusively on the fringes of political discourse.[186] Prince, while best known as the founder of Blackwater USA, a private military contracting company, was at that point also an "an informal adviser on intelligence and security issues" to Trump after he made a $250,000 donation to the campaign.[187] In his Breitbart interview, Prince followed an identical structure as the Campbell post, alleging that "Because of Weinergate and the sexting scandal, the NYPD started investigating," he said. "They found a lot of other really damning criminal information, including money-laundering, including the fact that Hillary went to this sex island with convicted pedophile Jeffrey Epstein. Bill Clinton went

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[183] Robb, *Pizzagate.* 2018.
[184] Merlan. *Republic of Lies* pp. 59.
[185] Hardy, Elle. "Alex Jones Looks Set To Be Brought Down Once And For All." GQ, July 10, 2019.
[186] Robb, *Pizzagate.* 2018.
[187] Robb, *Pizzagate.* 2018.

there more than 20 times. Hillary Clinton went there at least six times."[188] These inflammatory

claims made by a mainstream figure lit up the right leaning media. Completing the feedback

loop, that same afternoon on *Infowars* Alex Jones cited Prince's interview and said "When I

think about all the children Hillary Clinton has personally murdered and chopped up and

raped . . . yeah, you heard me right. Hillary Clinton has personally murdered children."[189]

Amanda Robb reports that this *Infowars* broadcast was "viewed on YouTube more than 427,000

times. Prince's interview was shared another 81,000 times. On Twitter, the numbers were

increasing exponentially – 300 percent in just six days."[190] Empowered by the reach of the

internet and the droves of alienated people who use it for refuge, Pizzagate was able to move

swiftly from the fringes into the newscycle.

From there the story was picked up by Jack Posobiec, "a well-known alt-right troll whom

Trump himself has retweeted,"[191] who was at that time "special-projects director for Citizens for

Trump, a never-officially-organized voter-fraud prevention group."[192] He decided to live stream

himself personally investigating both Comet Ping-Pong and another pizzeria in the D.C. area,

describing to his viewers "what's really going on."[193] While the evidence he turned up amounted

to "a double pane of glass near an oven, security cameras, a texting cashier," it was more than

enough for Posobiec to conclude "it's like in the movie *Jurassic Park,* Nedry had the shaving

cream bottle. And you could press the top and a little bit of shaving cream came out. . . . The

bottom part is where they had the dinosaur embryos."[194] Essentially, the lack of visible evidence

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188 Robb, *Pizzagate.* 2018.
189 Robb, *Pizzagate.* 2018.
190 Robb, *Pizzagate.* 2018.
191 Robb, *Pizzagate.* 2018.
192 Robb, *Pizzagate.* 2018.
193 Robb, *Pizzagate.* 2018.
194 Robb, *Pizzagate.* 2018.

was now evidence of a cover-up. After this, there was no putting Pizzagate back in its box. According to *Rolling Stone*, the day before Posobiec's live stream, "there were roughly 6,000 tweets about Pizzagate. Now, it was closer to 55,000."[195] Soon the owner of Comet Ping Pong was inundated with death threats, and received little relief from law enforcement.

This was when Pizzagate truly became a conspiracy theory unto itself, untethered from any evidence or specific piece of information, a self-generative allegation. A *New York Times* piece published to debunk the theory fell largely on deaf ears, which Harvard's Yochai Benkler attributes to the development of the ring-wing-media into a feedback chamber that was "so hyperpartisan, so self-referential and so superinsular it often simply ignored information that's disconfirming."[196] Rather, they just turned the mainstream media attention around on itself, using it as another "way to 'legitimate' their claims."[197] *Rolling Stone's* sample shows that, the day the *Times* piece came out, "Twitter traffic about Pizzagate hit unprecedented levels: some 120,000 tweets."[198] *Infowars* began releasing long-form explainers of the theory with titles like November 23rd's "Pizzagate Is Real,"[199] or November 27th's "Down the #Pizzagate Rabbit Hole,"[200] or December 1st's "Pizzagate: the Bigger Picture."[201] While Jones has since scrubbed these videos from the internet and his own website, they were viewed by his hundreds of thousands of listeners across the country. One such viewer was Edgar Maddison Welch of North Carolina, who, just three days after Jones's 'Bigger Picture' video, walked into Comet Ping Pong Pizzeria with "an AR-15 semiautomatic rifle, a .38 handgun and a folding knife," proceeding to shoot the

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[195] Robb, *Pizzagate.* 2018.
[196] Robb, *Pizzagate.* 2018.
[197] Robb, *Pizzagate.* 2018.
[198] Robb, *Pizzagate.* 2018.
[199] Robb, *Pizzagate.* 2018.
[200] Robb, *Pizzagate.* 2018.
[201] Robb, *Pizzagate.* 2018.

lock off of a door and discovering cooking supplies therein. Opening another door revealed "an

employee bringing in fresh pizza dough. Welch did not find any captive children."[202] Welch

followed Jones and others down the rabbit hole, went searching for the answers they all claimed

to seek, and instead found himself inside "solitary confinement in a Washington, D.C., jail," by

that night.[203]

In response to this shocking act, and the potential violence it implied, many of the same

media figures who had carried the story forward began to dissociate themselves from Pizzagate

advocacy. Some, like Alex Jones, would offer apologies to the owner of Comet Ping Pong for

the vitriol he had used his show to direct, while others opted to deny altogether that they so much

as engaged with the theory. Alas, it would be too much to hope that the theory itself would fade

with its advocates. Instead, the people whose ears they reached remained profoundly alienated,

and now ostracized for good measure.

While the exact origins of Pizzagate can be hard to trace, it displays once again the

archetypical structure that these theories grow out of. The people who encountered the

#Pizzagate memes proliferating across social media and were taken in by them weren't sold

because they tracked down some old Facebook post alleging crimes or because they personally

read through each and every leaked email. They were convinced because the idea of elite

politicians they already distrust secretly participating in the ritual abuse of children as a method

of solidifying their class bonds, or for some occult higher purpose, is already familiar to them.

They've heard it before in fiction or in news broadcasts during old satanic panics. Moreover, it

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[202] Robb, *Pizzagate.* 2018.
[203] Robb, *Pizzagate.* 2018.

conformed to their existing perception of their political enemies, that their claims of benevolence

and progressivism obscured a dark purpose, a sinister intent.

Much like the other conspiracy theories described up to this point, there can also be

strategic benefit to those that subscribed to the theory, because it fundamentally shifted the

conditions of the conflict. Accepting these ideas will naturally deepen their personal commitment

and identification with the cause, while justifying any escalation of rhetoric, or eventually, force.

After all, if you truly believe your opponents are satanic beings who will use their power to

continue abusing and sacrificing children, maybe even your children, your stake in the election is

radically different than even the most committed partisan, much less the largely apathetic voting

public in general.

Of course, there is also the angle that in fact this conspiracy theory's spread was not quite

as grass roots as it initially appeared. This can be evidenced by the fact that many of the initial

accounts to post about Pizzagate and its preformed elements were anonymous, and even when

their identities were tracked down, they hardly fit the profile of someone carefully piecing

"together not only the story that Clinton was a sex-trafficking pedophile, but its details: NYPD

officials, Weiner's laptop, Jeffrey Epstein's private jet."[204] On the contrary, they were frequently

middle-aged women from the midwest without a history of political conspiracism. The profile

they do fit, according to Clint Watts, a cyber and homeland-security expert at the Foreign Policy

Research Institute, is that of the mark, those regular citizens sought by online propagandists who

"plant false information on anonymous chat boards, hoping real people will pick it up and add a

'human touch' to acts of digital manipulation."[205] All the originator would have to do is plant the

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[204] Robb, *Pizzagate.* 2018.
[205] Robb, *Pizzagate.* 2018.

story or meme on one of these anonymous messageboards, make it just frightening or alluring enough to draw the attention of a random user, and wait for that user to spread the story to the broader media ecosystem. Additionally, one of the most high-profile proliferators of Pizzagate in the rightwing press was the alt-right activist Jack Posobiec, who was employed by the anti-voter-fraud organization Citizens for Trump at the time he started amplifying Pizzagate stories, while also working for the Office of Naval Intelligence. Erik Prince was affiliated with the Trump campaign at the time he began fanning the flames of Pizzagate, and was similarly familiar with the ins and outs of military intelligence operations from his work with Blackwater. While this can and should be considered conjecture, it paints a picture of motivated actors engaging with and spreading conspiracy theories for political purposes; to damage opponents, motivate supporters, and alienate other voters from the political process by portraying politics as hopelessly compromised. A clear parallel emerges here between a motivated online propagandist, and one David Miller, his own era's style of propagandist; knowledgeable, effective at spreading stories, and politically motivated. In the same vein, William Morgan, destitute as he was, presented an ideal mark through which a motivated actor could produce and channel a story.

There were also people spreading the conspiracy with no clear connection to the Trump campaign, but who instead saw the conspiracy theory as a useful rhetorical bludgeon against their own separate and distinct opponents. The *Rolling Stone* piece points to Mehmet Ali Önel, a Turkish TV anchor whose network "is linked to the government of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, which was facing international condemnation (including from the Obama State Department) for proposing a law that would risk decriminalizing pedophilia for offenders who

married their victims."[206] Önel noticed the growing fervor around Pizzagate online and regularly

began tweeting to his nearly 200k followers that "Americans had no right calling out Turkey for

sex crimes with Pizzagate erupting in their own capital."[207] He was one of many Turkish

commentators who retrofitted Pizzagate into their own political tool, and his posts helped bring

wider, international attention to the conspiracy theory. It was only a few hours after Önel's most

popular Pizzagate tweet, sent on November 16th, 2016, that Jack Posobiec took it upon himself

to investigate Comet Ping Pong, a pivotal moment in the proliferation of Pizzagate to a wider

domestic audience. Perhaps this is one of the wrinkles in how conspiracy theories spread over the

internet vs. in person, it is able to be noticed and refashioned by anyone who wants to, adjusted

ever so slightly to support their particular political project, with little interest or regard for what

the original issue ever was.

This aspect of Pizzagates profiligration would be familiar to Hofstadter, who identified in

the Anti-Masonic movement a number of political officials and leaders who "had only mild

sympathy with its fundamental bias," yet were compelled to align themselves with anti-Masonry,

not out of any commitment to its mission, but because "it was a folk movement of considerable

power, and the rural enthusiasts who provided its real impetus believed in it wholeheartedly."[208]

Despite identifying these rich political topics he could explore, Hofstadter chooses to emphasize

is the "apocalyptic and absolutistic framework in which this hostility was commonly expressed."

[209] In his evaluation, any valid grievance the people may have had against the Masons, as well as

any positive or negative consequences of their grievances, is washed away by an unwillingness

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206 Robb, *Pizzagate.* 2018.
207 Robb, *Pizzagate.* 2018.
208 Hofstadter, pp. 15.
209 Hofstadter, pp. 17.

to not just "say that secret societies were rather a bad idea."[210] He cites the author of *The Standard Exposition of Anti-Masonry*, who "declared that Freemasonry was "not only the most abominable but also the most dangerous institution that ever was imposed on man. . . . It may truly be said to be Hell's master piece."[211] Hofstadter poses his critique as one of rhetoric, that the appearance of the paranoid style negates the critique within, and marks the deliverer as untrustworthy in political discussion.

A similar approach was taken with the people who first spread and advocated for the Pizzagate theories. In some cases this seems to have been the correct course of action, as many of its loudest advocates revealed themselves to be cynically latching onto a topic they felt they could leverage for personal fortune, or politically motivated actors who leveraged the popular topic to their ends and then discarded it. Yet when these opportunists were revealed or moved on to other grifts, they left in their wake thousands of real voters who were now deeply alienated from the political process, and a public unwilling to engage with them because of their distorted perception of real life. Hofstadter's approach leaves these people out in the cold, to either correct their thinking alone or grow ever more distant from ever again engaging in any sort of political action.

Conclusion

In both of these cases, the anti-Masonic movement and the Pizzagate backlash, we can see a reflection of all that goes into creating a conspiracy theory from the ground up, and the different paths the ensuing backlash can take. Even in these cases where the state was less

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[210] Hofstadter, pp. 17.
[211] Hofstadter, pp. 17.

involved in developing the theory, it still took dozens of motivated and committed partisans for each to spread and reach its target audience. From afar, this could all look like a large scale political project; advocating, spreading information, organizing communities. It does not really reflect a minority on the fringes in either case, and that is without considering that for a time, their candidates were quite successful in their elections. Conspiracy theories are, in these cases, sometimes useful organizing principles, providing all the investment and drama to keep people engaged and supportive. Some of this efficacy goes to the same simplicity of message that Hofstadter condemns. People heard their messages, whether it be that Masons cannot be trusted to hold public office or Democratic politicians were engaged in child abuse, and they intrinsically understood which fears were being expressed. They weren't put off from these ideas because of scolding from authorities because something *felt* true about the conspiracy theories, even if every single detail was wrong. Regardless of the specifics of Morgan's disappearance, it uncovered a societal discomfort with leaders and authorities being engaged in an exclusive brotherhood, accountable only to each other. Likewise, while there was no real evidence that pizza was a codeword for child abuse, the conspiracy theory uncovered a widespread discomfort and fear of the culture of sexual and instituitonal abuse which can be found in our government. Both cases displayed a fear that the ruling class was bound together by private bonds which regular people could neither see nor understand.

However, these cases ended in markedly different places. Where the anti-Masons organized in their communities and participated in mass democratic action, the Pizzagate believers retreated further from politics, deeper within themselves and this new font of imagination they just uncovered. This reveals two paths conspiracy theories in politics can take,

either growing outward in mass action, or retracting inward, beating oneself down with a non-stop torrent of social pain and hopelessness. Conspiracy theories, at their most productive, encourage people to connect with their fellow citizens over shared issues, while at their least, drives them further from anyone who could help them address these injustices. Conspiracy theories which encourage isolation from others inevitably weaken a person's ability to respond to the problems that consume their mind, a perfect feedback loop. On the other hand, conspiracy theories that encourage connection and commiseration at least leave open the possibility for people to reframe a distorted perspective by working through their anxieties with others, addressing contributing factors and grounding themselves in the real, what can actually be affected, rather than fantasy.

Chapter Four:

Conclusions and Further Questions

The inherent danger in conspiratorial thinking is that to conceive of a conspiracy, to attempt to fill in those unknowable gaps in our knowledge, we must necessarily project some of ourselves, some sliver of our interiority and beliefs and perceptions, into those blank spaces. This process will inevitably cloud our conclusions. Yet, as we have seen time and time again in these case studies, especially when it comes to conspiracy theories, anything that can be believed can be "real in their consequences,"[212] and in a state essentially defined by secrecy, almost anything can be believed. Conspiracy theories are a political issue, despite their grounds in the subconscious, because they must be addressed with political answers. Far from an aberration of politics, they are a natural and persistent feature of political structures which concentrate power in the hands of the few, leaving the masses to imagine what guides their fates. When people lack control, they seek it out. When they feel buffeted by powers beyond their understanding, they seek a narrative that will comfort and assuage their fears. It is not enough to simply release an article debunking the latest conspiracy theory and move on to the next story, we have to try to address the underlying concerns and conditions which generate conspiratorial thinking.

The first pair of conspiracy theories in this project show the ways conspiracy theories can amplify existing fears which may lie dormant and undefined, into a fever pitch. While there were, and always are, certain people with existing anxieties about dangerous foreigners and the threats they could pose, it is hard to say that either of these cases would have reached such

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[212] Thomas, *Behavior Problems and Programs*. pp. 572.

consequential and destructive levels if not strategically encouraged by authorities who were ostensibly there to provide stability and structure. It was exactly this trust and responsibility that made their embrace of conspiracy theories so effective, leveraging influence larger than any single political actor or media platform to bring conspiracy theories to new heights, all while cloaked in legitimacy. The consequences of these fears were no less devastating just because their claims turned out to be exaggerated or baseless. This raises questions about how well we can identify an objective truth if even the normal arbiters are willing to engage in conspiracy theories when politically convenient. At what point does a conspiracy theory, imbued with that level of authority become indistinguishable from truth? In the same vein, what is the recourse left to the people when authority is employed to dismiss concerns about a real conspiracy?

While Pizzagate has largely faded from the popular consciousness, the seeds of its narrative have germinated and affected the political conversation in a multitude of ways. For one, the connections it drew between political elites, namely the Clinton family and now President Donald Trump, to the financier and serial rapist Jeffrey Epstein, genuinely raised public awareness about the latter's crimes. Conspiracy theories took him from a philanderer, unknown outside of high society, to one of the most infamous figures in the country. When his conduct was finally investigated in an exposee from the *Miami Herald*, Epstein was arrested in the summer of 2019 and placed in federal custody. Here the conspiracists saw smoke, and there actually did turn out to be fire behind it. Were their conclusions characteristically exaggerated and fantastical? Of course, but it also became clear as authorities became involved that Epstein was indeed operating a sex trafficking ring for decades, without any real scrutiny, despite hundreds of coroborating witnesses and victims. Worse, it appeared he was actually shielded

from consequences in 2008 by federal prosecutors, with whom he signed an infamous plea deal

granting immunity for himself and any co-conspirators, while only serving 18 months in prison.

Nevertheless, even delayed, it appeared justice would be served; that perhaps this could have

been the end of it. This case could have served as a footnote displaying a potentially positive

consequence of conspiratorial thinking reaching out into the political world, and having the

material roots of their anxiety addressed. Unfortunately, that is not what happened. Only a month

and four days after his arrest and in the early hours of August 10th, Epstein was found dead in

his cell, quickly ruled by the New York City Medical examiner a suicide by hanging. Those

already inclined to conspiracy theories latched onto certain details about the death; his guards fell

asleep and falsified records of checking on him, two cameras by his cell malfunctioned, a third's

footage was unusable. Whatever one thinks about his death and the public disputation of the

circumstances, what can't be denied is that the case marked a watershed moment in conspiracy

theories crossing over into politics. The idea that #EpsteinDidn'tKillHimself was quickly

integrated into mass meme culture online, and before long, public officials from Congress to

New York City's own Mayor and Governor began expressing disbelief in the 'official' narrative

of Epstein's demise. This story was not contained to the fringes nor the minority, and it made

many people Hofstadter's "double sufferer [...] afflicted not only by the real world, with the rest

of us, but by his fantasies as well,"[213] becoming increasingly difficult for anyone to parse the

fantasy from the reality. The speculation was also happening on the nightly news, legacy

productions like *60 Minutes*, and on the bench during congressional hearings. At the risk of

belabouring the point, the sitting President of the United States retweeted a video accusing

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[213] Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style.* pp. 40.

former President Clinton of orchestrating Epstein's death within hours of the crime.[214] Conspiracy theories were now unquestionably shaping the narrative, official or otherwise, and Hofstadter's fantasy world became intractable from the real world. There was no practical way to dissociate this many people from the political process, so instead our institutions scrambled to answer the unanswerable.

Returning to *The Twilight Zone's* Maple Street for a moment, there's one more detail in the ending which I believe is relevant to the discussion of these cases. The episode pulls a bait and switch at the very end, revealing that while the alien infiltrator amongst them was a paranoid fantasy, there *were* aliens turning off their electricity and cars, for the purpose of observing the ensuing predicted breakdown. I believe our analysis of conspiracy theories must account for, in a non-dismissive way, the existence of real conditions and malicious actors which afflict people. Time and time again we've seen a major problem with conspiratorial thinking is that it personalizes structural problems. Lacking institutional answers, conspiracy grounds our responses in the familiar and easily understood, until it cannot be disentangled from one's personal woes. This only isolates the believer, alienating them from their family and society, while the problems afflicting the world continue unabated. By cutting them off entirely, we foreclose ourselves from identifying the underlying conditions or actors who are driving so many people towards conspiracy theories to explain their suffering.

We've also seen that the underlying energy which people access through conspiracy theories can be turned outward, wielded as a tool not for demoralization, but for collective action. If the problem with conspiracy theories is that they derive the wrong causes and solutions

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[214] Forgey, Quint. "Trump Defends Sharing Clinton-Epstein Conspiracy Theory." POLITICO, August 13, 2019.

for societal ills, why couldn't that energy be redirected towards productive ends? Perhaps that

would be futile, as real politics are never as neat and satisfying as they appear in a conspiracy

theory. But is the alternative working? We have tried to shut the Paranoid Style and conspiracy

theories out of our politics, but we never really succeeded. They are always present, sometimes

wielded by the powerful, sometimes taken up by the powerless. Perhaps it's simply a matter of

who is willing to encourage and engage in conspiracy if it means their goals will be

accomplished in the process. The people who initially formed the anti-Masonic movement did

not set out to create America's first third party, or introduce the democratic convention to our

electoral politics, these were simply the byproducts of their attempt to address a perceived

societal ill. Colonial Americans were genuinely convinced by their leaders that they were under

threat from a powerful and hostile power, and as such acted accordingly.

　　If that seems too extreme, it's only because our current prescription towards conspiracy

theories has proven woefully inadequate. Hofstadter said, to close his piece, that "one of the most

valuable things about history is that it teaches us how things do not happen,"[215] and that this is

the "kind of awareness that the paranoid fails to develop."[216] If this is true, why are more and

more people distrusting of the official narrative? How have we not moved past this kind of

thinking? For that matter, how *are* we supposed to process the shocking disclosures that we are

made aware of with increased regularity? Save a total democratization of how power operates in

this country, there must be a way for more people to feel like they have a say in their lives. We

live in a country where many people feel power operates behind a completely opaque curtain,

and as a result they conclude that nothing they do can affect the outcome. They feel less agency

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[215] Hofstadter, pp. 40.
[216] Hofstadter, pp. 40.

in their futures, less control over their present, and less certainty about the past. These are the conditions under which conspiracy theories flourish, as people try to reach and grip at anything they can find to explain their conditions, and are met with ostracism and alienation. If we are not to answer their questions with conspiracy theories, then we must be prepared with political answers, evaluation of material conditions, explanations of conflict in society. The longer we avoid addressing those questions, the more people will opt for conspiratorial answers. If all you know is that authorities are misleading you, and you have no operant understanding of why, you are left with nothing but your own imagination. If you feel like nothing will change, regardless of what you do, why wouldn't you retreat into the imaginative realm of conspiracy theories? It's more satisfying from a narrative perspective, and for a time transforms a feeling of helplessness into a personal mission of uncovering truth, a sense of purpose, even if it inevitably reinforces the original sense of helplessness.

Conspiracy theories are our reality and there is no real indication that they will subside if we ignore them. Our current methods of addressing them have proved counterproductive because conspiracy theories are more coherent and enduring than any one detail. In a very practical sense they are greater than the sum of their parts, holding deeper meaning to the people they persuade, and flexible enough to integrate almost any rhetorical pushback into their narrative without missing a beat. They have power, they have utility, and yet that utility has been ceded entirely to reactionary movements. It may be myopic, or be proved shortsighted in due time, but at this moment conspiracy theories also appear to be effective when used purposefully. One could feasibly argue that authorities *were* addressing peoples fears about terrorism or conflict with Native peoples in the first pair of case studies, it's just that they addressed these fears with more

conspiracy theories and paranoia, leading frightened people to the authorities desired

conclusions. It's inescapable that in both those cases the strategy seemed to be effective, the

people got on board and the subjects of the conspiracies were summarily destroyed. Likewise,

the movements around anti-Masonry and Pizzagate saw at least short-term electoral success, and

though they began to fall apart, in organizing politics around a single issue sometimes a single

electoral victory can be enough. Even if they are only to be used sparingly, conspiracy theories

appear to be a viable option when looking to boost political engagement around a certain cause.

      This presents a few options to the liberal democratic set who traditionally eschew and

abhor Conspiracy Theories, those who find themselves on the backfoot in our current climate.

They could familiarize themselves with conspiracy theories, become fluent in the style to the

point where they could convincingly adopt it as a tactic for their own political objectives. This

option feels unlikely, and on its face presents a multitude of potential conflicts. It's hard to fight

on unfamiliar ground, whereas reactionary movements have decades more experience in this

realm. Even that is without accounting for the complications inherent in organizing around a

single issue, which came out in even best case scenarios like the anti-Masonic Party. Another

option is to proceed as usual, take solace in fact-checks that satisfy themselves and keep tuning

out the people who will never be moved by these approaches. Leave them out of polite society

and hope they'll resolve themselves, or become so alienated that they willingly disassociate from

political conversation and action. Perhaps the climate of conspiracism which we are currently

gripped in will burn itself out like the Masonic movement. I hope at this point to have displayed

why this tactic is unlikely to be fruitful.

So we are left with a third path, to accept that conspiracy theories will never be dismantled by rhetorical exercises from the same media institutions they are designed to undermine, and to turn instead towards addressing the underlying causes creating a culture of conspiracism. By no means am I suggesting I know the path to curing societal ills, or that there is anything resembling a consensus on what actions are needed to alleviate widespread suffering and alienation. While I may have some ideas; increasing democratization of power, increased transparency at all levels of government, more political and ideological education, a move away from mass-consolidation of wealth as a societal principle, none of these resemble a sure thing. Rather, I am suggesting that by shutting the many people convinced by conspiracy theories out of political conversation, that by carrying on as though there are not structural issues generating these beliefs, we will end up with a political perspective that is just as distorted and blinkered as theirs. Furthermore, we are better equipped to deal with and respond to crises when we work collectively, so the more people we listen to and bring into our broader conception of problem's to be dealt with, the better chance we have of succeeding and creating a truly just society. Rejecting an ever-growing bloc of potential voters and engaged citizens because we are repelled by the style with which they express their fears is counter-productive in the extreme. Conspiracy theories reflect the societies they are born in, and carry within themselves insight as well as distractions. We would do well to identify which is which, rather than throwing it all out with the bathwater.

As conspiracy theorists are fond of saying, they aren't going away, so the sooner we begin to understand them and their concerns, the sooner we can integrate them within a more productive political dialectic.

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