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Chapter 8

REAL DELUSIONS

DURING MY SENIOR YEAR of high school, the youth group at Rose Drive started a new Bible study on Friday nights. Held at the Johnsons' house, it started at seven and often didn't end until around ten. Tony, who was in his early twenties and had just moved to Orange Country from Calexico, a town near the US-Mexico border, led the group. He was the high school assistant minister who worked part-time at the Rose Drive while attending the Calvary Chapel Bible College. Calvary Chapel, as a denomination, started from the "Jesus People" movement in Southern California during the sixties. In what must be one of the most extreme examples of the way 1960s counterculture morphed into sold-out 1980s conservatism, the Calvary Chapel movement that started as mostly guitar-playing hippies and religious vagabonds became a denomination of dogmatism, with buttoned-up conservative theology. Calvary Chapel has a special focus on the end times—much more than Rose Drive. So on Friday nights Tony—a short, compact guy with a wrestler's build and a black ponytail—would lead us through Revelation, the infamous apocalyptic text at the end of the New Testament. While most biblical scholars agree it is a kind of mystical political commentary on the Roman occupation

in Palestine, many evangelicals see it as the key to understanding when and how the apocalypse will happen.

The Friday night Bible study grew from a handful of kids to several dozen over the course of the school year. We packed the Johnsons' modest living room, squeezing in close to make sure everyone could find a place, and I'm sure it took most of the weekend to clear the house of the aroma of pizza and body spray. After half an hour or so of singing and prayer, Tony would hold us rapt for hours with his teachings about the end times. He would explain how the earthquakes, famines, and global tragedies happening all over the world were actually signs of the end times. The rapture—the event some Christians believe will lead to all the “saved” being instantly taken into heaven in the blink of an eye—was surely near. He took obscure passages from Revelation and shaped them into lucid blueprints of where the world was heading in the years to come, explaining that the antichrist would rise to power, most likely through a unified governmental structure such as the European Union.

Soon, Tony warned us, the mark of the beast would be introduced in some form of technology implanted into our bodies. That implant would act as a tracking device for the antichrist and his new world order. He mapped scriptural references to serpents and beasts and whores of Babylon onto the impeachment trial of Bill Clinton, the development of the new unified currency called the euro, and the push to study harvested stem cells through new technologies, a huge controversy on the West Coast at the time. All of these were indications that the end was near.

Tony wasn't the only person in my life making these types of proclamations. A few of my friends and I passed around books like Hal Lindsey's *Late Great Planet Earth* and the books of the *Left Behind* series by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins. We also listened to Calvary Chapel preachers like Chuck Smith and Greg Laurie on the radio, on our way to surfing trips and afterschool hangouts. My girlfriend, Alexis, and I would debate the meaning of passages in Revelation. In

the tit-for-tat arguments over hermeneutics unique to evangelicalism, we'd use commentaries and books to back up our interpretations.

Learning about the end times always made me, and others, feel like we were gaining special knowledge—an initiation into cosmic secrets and techniques for reading the signs of the times. It was a fellowship of those-who-know. We felt select, even among the church community—the chosen remnant within the chosen remnant. Whereas many adults in our midst had forgotten the immediacy of our age in favor of golf games and nice dinners, mortgage rates and 401Ks, we huddled together on Friday nights to be vigilant in the face of the extraordinary. Unlike them, we were ready to give everything we had to play a role in God's secret plan for the cosmos.

And because we met on a Friday, our gatherings felt like a reprieve from the day-to-day godlessness of our schools and daily lives. I was used to people thinking of me as an extremist. I was the guy who led a Bible study at lunch and walked around with Jesus tracts to hand out at any given moment, the zealot who refused a letterman's jacket in order to give the money to buy Bibles in Nepal, the freak who stood alone on Friday mornings praying at the flagpole. While I took pride in being different, it was also exhausting. On Friday nights, I didn't have to swim up current. At the end of each week, the Johnsons' living room felt like a cocoon of belonging. Everyone there accepted that the world didn't understand us, didn't know the truth, and would carry on in its blind, fallen state until Jesus returned. For a few hours we could bask in the shared knowledge that we were among the few in the world who knew what was *really* going on—and knew how it would all end. There was a significance in the fact that not only did we all believe the same thing; we believed it *together*.

WHAT IS A CONSPIRACY THEORY ANYWAY?

The end-times theology that we learned and cultivated on those Friday nights resembles a conspiracy theory. According to anthropologist

Susannah Crockford in her work *Ripples of the Universe*, “what makes a ‘theory’ a ‘conspiracy theory’ is the surfeit of meaning and explanation, overextending the agency and intentionality behind complex socio-political situations.” In other words, if you examine current events as part of an intentional scheme planned by evil agents, rather than accepting the apparent and simple answers afforded by logic and evidence, you are wading into the waters of conspiracy. These events might include political developments, such as elections or coups, or scientific advancements that require we change our daily lives, like wearing masks during a pandemic. For Crockford, some religious beliefs and conspiracy theories are similar in that they both make nonfalsifiable claims about reality and “grant agency to causation in a way that challenges assumptions of rationality.” In other words, they make claims about what is real on the basis of divine authority with no regard for human rationality. Their stances are based on rumor and delusion rather than evidence, logic, or data. Not all religious beliefs fall under this category. Many religious communities make assumptions about the limits of rationality but are committed to using reason to its limits whenever possible.

When it comes to the true believers in fundamentalist religious communities and conspiracy theorists, however, both those inside and outside the religious movement or the conspiracy recognize the peculiarity of the belief system. Everyone knows what the conspiracy theorist or true believer adheres to is not part of the accepted normal. But the insiders, according to Crockford, “believe that in certain circumstances there are occulted dimensions to reality that only the initiated are aware of. Understanding is granted by initiation; the believer believes themselves to have access to knowledge that the unbeliever does not.”

This type of worldview has the same effect for both conspiracy theorists and true believers (like those of us at the Johnsons’ house on Friday nights). It teaches them never to trust what is front of their eyes. It instructs them to see invisible forces and hidden actors

working to control the levers of power and the narrative of events while ignoring any explanation based in logic or evidence.

“The overall effect is the suggestion that what appears is not what is,” Crockford writes. “There are invisible forces at work. Reality, especially as depicted in the mainstream media, is illusory because it is being consciously manipulated by those who hold power for their own gain.”

While many religious traditions adhere to things unseen, they do not all instruct their devotees to ignore the apparent and the obvious, or to posit that their realities are being consciously manipulated by the powerful. Religious fundamentalisms and conspiracy theories do make such prescriptions, and this is what sets them apart. This is what the scholar of conspiracy theories Giovanna Parimigiani calls *dissensus*, or seeing differently. Though they are part of “private networks of belonging,” the fellowship of those-who-know, members of conspiracy communities try to tear down the “partition” between their fringe worldview and what is held as acceptable forms of knowledge and authority in the public square. In other words, they want to take their fringe beliefs into the mainstream, turn the fantastical into the real and magic into science.

If you think you know the truth behind how the world functions, then you want to evangelize as many as will listen. There is a certain coherence to this impulse, which animates both current forms of White Christian nationalism in the United States and the White evangelical movement I was part of as a teenager. While part of the fun of those Friday night Bible studies was participating in a select group of initiates, the prevailing sentiment was the need to pull back the veil and enlighten as many people as possible to “what is really going on.” This means not only spreading the word about the near-end times but also working to legitimate your worldview in the public square. You become energized to change what is accepted as rational, true, and real. Unfortunately, conspiracy is now a mainstay in American politics.

The conspiracy theories driving MAGA Nation's war on America are multidimensional, and they have insinuated themselves into the everyday discourse of millions. The goal is to reshape what is real, rational, and true. Even if it has no basis in the facts.

WHITE CHRISTIANS AND QANON

It started with one post on October 28, 2017. A user on the online forum 4Chan, going by the handle "Q Clearance Patriot" and claiming to be a high-level official with access to top-secret information, posted that it was "the calm before the storm." Hillary Clinton would be arrested, the 4Chan user said, "between 7:45 and 8:30am EST on Monday morning, October 30th, 2017." From there, the web of theories spun out of control. Within months, followers of "Q" believed that then president Donald Trump was fighting a cabal of the global 1 percent who supposedly worshipped Satan, ran a global pedophile ring, and were working to topple the Trump administration before it could expose them. Scholar of QAnon Marc-André Argentino told me in 2020 that spin-off theories soon emerged: about space aliens, reptilian creatures masquerading as humans (Alex Jones famously said on his show "Infowars" that Hillary Clinton smelled like sulfur because she is a demon), underground military bases, and astral planes. The overriding frame of Q is the expectation that Trump will someday lead the "Storm," wherein the global network of elites, including his political opponents Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama, will be arrested and the shadow ring of conspirators will be brought to light.

Trump did nothing to discourage the conspiracies or downplay their delusory nature. In August 2020, when asked about QAnon conspiracists, the former president said, "These are people that love our country." When asked about the idea that he was saving the world from an elite cabal, Trump responded: "But is that supposed to be a bad thing or good thing? If I can help save the world from problems, I'm willing to do it. I'm willing to put myself out there."

He didn't stop there. In October 2020, Trump appeared at an NBC town hall. When asked about QAnon, he first claimed not to know anything about it but later added: "What I do hear about it is they are very strongly against pedophilia, and I agree with that. I mean I do agree with that, and I agree with it very strongly."

Before his Twitter account was suspended, Media Matters reports, Trump retweeted QAnon accounts 315 times. The conspiracy spread throughout the Republican Party. In 2020, forty-four candidates who espoused QAnon conspiracies ran for state or national office, and two won seats in the US Congress—Marjorie Taylor Greene and Lauren Boebert.

So how much overlap exists between QAnon conspiracies and the White Christian nationalist extremism at the center of our investigation? As we have seen in previous chapters, White Christian nationalists and the GOP are intimately entangled in contemporary American politics. So it's no surprise that many White Christians became ardent supporters of QAnon, supplementing their faith in Christ with their faith in Trump to rescue the world from a far-reaching satanic conspiracy. In a study by the sociologists Paul Djupe and Jacob Dennen, data shows that in 2020, 50.6 percent of nondenominational Christians believed in some aspects of the Q conspiracies.

"For most Evangelicals, there was some resonance," scholar of QAnon Marc-André Argentino told me in a 2020 interview. "It might bring them down into this path because these theories of QAnon—about satanic cults, the necessity of torture and killing of children for Satan, antivaccine and antiabortion narratives, baby farming for massive networks of satanic world leadership, spiritual warfare—a lot of these things echo what they've been told."

It might be tempting to try to separate QAnon Christians from Christian nationalism. After all, not all White Christians are Christian nationalists who believe the country was built for and by White Christians or that they should hold a privileged position in the country's political and cultural spheres. However, the data says otherwise.

“We found that Christian nationalism, support for QAnon, and anti-Semitism are linked,” Djupe and Dennen write. “Among the 25 percent of our respondents who most strongly believed in Christian nationalism, 73 percent agreed with the substance of the QAnon conspiracy.”

While the Christian dimensions of the QAnon conspiracy seemed surprising to some, deep historical precedents show the entanglement of White conservative Christians, conspiracy theorists, and GOP leadership since the 1960s. In every chapter of the New Religious Right’s history, there has been a corresponding conspiracy theory that explains why their opponents are not just wrong about certain political issues but are actually malicious actors who are trying to destroy the country and its people of faith. Like the authoritarian tendencies we examined in the previous chapter, conspiracy theories are a bridge between White Christian nationalists and groups with resonant interests and worldviews. They are connective tissue in a network of movements that are connected by their belief that an overthrow of the current state of things is necessary to return the country—and the cosmos—to its natural order.

A LITANY OF CONSPIRACIES

In 1966, my father arrived on the mainland from Maui. He is a Japanese American guy who was raised in majority Asian communities. When he was growing up, White kids at his schools were the exceptions. His first home in California was a two-bedroom apartment in Los Angeles. He was a first-year college student at Cal State LA, but rather than living in a dorm with other people his age, he lived with his grandmother, mother, sister, brother-in-law, and two nephews. Seven people, four generations, all trying to make a life in a new place.

A childhood friend of my father’s was attending Chapman University in Orange—the heart of Orange County, the overwhelmingly

White region where he would someday raise his family. Dad decided to visit her, making a thirty-mile drive from Los Angeles to the heart of Orange County. As he tells it, once he got off the freeway in Orange, he tensed up. After all, it was Orange County—not the kind of place you want to get pulled over if you’re a person of color. To stay calm and focused, he kept up an inner monologue: Drive the speed limit. Don’t swerve in the slightest. Keep your eyes forward.

My father had heard about the John Birch Society (JBS) and how they felt about outsiders. In his mind, Orange County was the epicenter of the JBS. He remembers wondering whether, if he got out of the car, they might jump out of the bushes to ambush him. Although he was new to the Southland, word had reached as far as Maui that Orange County was an extremely conservative place, one not so welcoming to those who looked a little different from most of the residents. Having grown up in a predominantly Asian American community in Hawaii, he was, for the first time, in a White-majority space, and he was afraid. My father didn’t know the full history of the JBS as he drove that night. And even if he’d heard about their extreme politics, he surely didn’t know the extent of the conspiracy theories behind them. But he intuited that their worldview made little room for someone like him.

John Birch was a Christian missionary to China who was killed by Chinese communist soldiers in 1945. For many, Birch became the face of a martyr: a faithful believer killed by communism’s agenda to destroy both the United States and Christianity. A few years later, Robert Welch founded the John Birch Society as an anticommunist organization. From the beginning it was marked by a fierce libertarianism and vehement stance against taxes, government welfare programs, and civil rights reforms. It was also based on the idea that Christianity and American democracy go hand in hand.

“The John Birch Society is a group of Americans who have voluntarily joined together,” Welch says in a grainy black-and-white promotional video from the early 1960s. He speaks with a peculiar

cadence while sitting down and looking into the camera. He continues: “to restore with brighter luster and deeper conviction, the faith inspired morality, the spiritual sense of values and the ennobling aspirations on which our Western civilization has been built.”

Members of the John Birch Society hosted small groups in their homes and were encouraged to invite friends and family to learn about the society’s libertarian principles. In that sense, by using homegrown cells to cultivate and spread the movement, the society mimicked the growth strategies of the communists Welch despised so much.

Yet the John Birch Society went well beyond libertarian economics to dangerous conspiracy theories. Welch believed the Illuminati, a secret society, was founded in 1776 as a global puppet master, pulling strings behind the facade of national governments. This led him to conclude that communism and socialism were manifestations of the Illuminati’s efforts to control the lives of every individual on earth through a united government. The society published numerous reports that accused civil rights organizers of communist sympathies. The JBS also, as scholar Christopher Towler notes, accused civil rights leaders of communist subversion while alleging that people of color were plotting to divide the country and control the world. Welch even suggested that Dwight Eisenhower and Chief Justice Earl Warren were communist agents trying to take down the government.

EXTREMISTS ARE THE NEW NORMAL

When we consider the hallmarks of GOP politics and White Christian doctrine during the Trump years, and particularly during the COVID pandemic, certain themes come to mind: denying science, not trusting authorities, blaming marginalized religious and racial communities for the country’s problems, and decrying the “liberal agenda” in public school curricula. These political and cultural strains may have seemed to materialize out of nowhere, but they were planted in modern conservative politics half a century ago by the extremists

of the John Birch Society and their allies. In ways that portended the conservative demonization of Black Lives Matter, Welch told JBS supporters that the civil rights movement was a communist conspiracy. Society members argued against the peaceful protests in order to support law enforcement. The JBS's attempt to build a campaign to impeach Justice Earl Warren was in some ways a harbinger of QAnon conspiracists' belief that high-ranking government officials are plotting against America. Finally, in ways resonant with so many strains of conspiracy and propaganda in contemporary American conservative spaces, the John Birch Society railed against the United Nations as a globalist institution ready to overthrow the American way of life through a one-world government.

Despite the fantastical nature of many of these doctrines and beliefs, the JBS had a tremendous effect on American electoral politics, just as QAnon had in the 2020 election and beyond. Many historians suggest that the Birch Society pushed Barry Goldwater to the Republican nomination in California. Though Goldwater detested Welch, he knew he needed rank-and-file Birchers in order to win the nomination—just as the contemporary GOP knows it needs QAnon adherents and other conspiracists now. Then and now, the party was willing to look the other way at some of the stranger aspects of extremism. “They believe in the Constitution, they believe in God, they believe in freedom,” Goldwater said in early 1964. “I don’t consider the John Birch Society as a group to be extremist,” he added in April of that year.

The JBS drew on its network of homegrown cells, grassroots mobilization tactics, and a wide web of fearmongering messages to push the Arizona senator to California victory. Without the Golden State, Goldwater would have never emerged at the top of the Republican presidential ticket.

As we saw in chapter 5, the ascendance of Ronald Reagan was not a repudiation of the extremism of Goldwater’s campaign. It was the outcome of the mainstreaming of the fringe in the GOP. Ronald

Reagan is now remembered in conservative circles as the modern standard of Republican politics: a class act whose legacy reverberates through the Bush dynasty and beyond, and the forefather presidential hopefuls mention as their hero. What's often forgotten is that Ronald Reagan, too, was profoundly influenced by the conspiracies of the John Birch Society. Rick Perlstein and Edward Miller report that Reagan claimed several fringe theories to be fact: that Gerald Ford faked assassination attempts to win votes and that the Soviet Union had moved twenty million people out of cities after nuclear fallout. One of his newsletters advocated for laetrile, a supposed wonder drug that Birchers claimed could cure cancer. And according to Perlstein and Miller, Reagan once told students at the White House that Lenin had espoused a grand plan to conquer America after rifling through the "hordes" of Asia—except Lenin never said it; Robert Welch did.

Reagan was not a conservative. He was an extremist who used his charm and carefully crafted rhetoric to convince the moderates in the GOP that when the time came, he would act like an adult rather than a rogue cowboy like Goldwater. Remember from chapter 5 that his presidency marked the crescendo of the New Religious Right's ascendance in American politics. They campaigned against the Southern Baptist Jimmy Carter in order to install the divorced Hollywood actor who used conspiracy theories to gain votes and win power, truth and reality be damned.

When Trump refused to denounce followers of Q, saying they "loved their country," he was taking a page from the Reagan playbook. When Trump regurgitated conspiracies about the Chinese government or millions of fraudulent votes, he was unwittingly mimicking the John Birch Society. And when, as the leader of the free world, he said at a White House press briefing that we should consider using bleach and ultraviolet rays "inside the body" to wipe out the coronavirus, he was echoing the quack advice not only of internet conspiracists but of the modern GOP's revered forefather: the Gipper himself.

SATANIC PANIC

The John Birch Society's network of conspiracies was not the only one prevalent in Reagan's America. In *Abusing Religion*, Megan Goodwin reminds us that in 1983, Reagan gave the infamous "evil empire" speech, in which he claimed the Soviet Union was diabolically trying to place the United States in a place of moral and military inferiority. Reagan, Goodwin observes, goes on to articulate the "crisis" facing the United States in a spiritual binary: "While America's military strength is important," the former president says, "let me add here that I've always maintained that the struggle now going on for the world will never be decided by bombs or rockets, by armies or military might. The real crisis we face today is a spiritual one; at root, it is a test of moral will and faith."

The speech was given to the National Association of Evangelicals, which explains the heavy use of religious imagery and references. While the Soviet Union is set up as the godless enemy threatening the country, Reagan's comments came in the context of what many took to be an internal spiritual struggle happening in small towns and suburbs all over the country. There was a heightened sensitivity among White evangelicals and other Americans to anything supposedly related to the occult, spiritual warfare, or New Age spirituality. It set the context for what became known as the "satanic panic."

In 1980, the same year Reagan ran against Jimmy Carter, *Michelle Remembers* became an instant best seller. It's a "memoir" by Michelle Smith, who supposedly worked with her therapist (and eventual husband) to recover memories of her captivity and abuse at the hand of satanists.

As I've chronicled in the foregoing chapters, those in the New Religious Right saw the 1960s as having ignited a set of revolutions in American politics and culture that had to be stopped. At the center of the culture wars were issues of sex and gender—the Equal Rights Amendment, women in the workforce, abortion, LGBTQ+ rights,

and the sexual revolution. Falwell, Weyrich, and their cohorts had primed their followers for battle. They saw external threats to the United States, evil forces in the forms of communist China and the Soviet Union. They saw opponents to their agenda as internal threats trying to destroy their way of life. Thus, when *Michelle Remembers* appeared, it encapsulated the “spiritual warfare” facing a nation, one that the New Religious Right perceived to be falling away from God and its religious founding. For many, it was not a large step from viewing those who disagreed with them as un-American to imagining them as sexual abusers determined to capture young women for Satan.

I remember the church staff meetings in which the children’s pastor presented her findings that the Harry Potter books became darker and darker as the series developed, eventually approaching the line of promoting the occult. I recall parents prohibiting their children from playing Dungeons and Dragons and debating whether or not they should be allowed to listen to Christian rock music because even that could be deemed a weapon in Satan’s attacks.

But as Goodwin reports, the hysteria wasn’t limited to evangelical church staff meetings. The panic reached beyond the walls of evangelical churches. “Nightly news programs warned parents about the dangers of hard rock and heavy metal music,” Goodwin writes, “thought to contain ‘backmasked’ messages that, when played in reverse, would encourage listeners to hail Satan.” And throughout the eighties and early nineties, the FBI, TV hosts, and members of Congress all investigated the claim that a ring of satanic actors were trying to corrupt American children and in extreme cases hold them prisoner as sexual slaves.

“The criminal investigation lasted almost a decade and was at its height, the longest and most expensive criminal trial in US history,” Goodwin told me in a 2021 interview. “The FBI spent almost a million dollars trying to prove that some sort of global satanic conspiracy was attacking mostly white women and children. And millions were donated to organizations like Believe the Children.”

The problem? There were no findings of widespread satanic abuse across the United States. The investigations were almost completely in vain. Despite hundreds of cases, dozens of book tours, and extensive Senate deliberation, it turned out that the satanic panic was built on a delusion. There was no Satan behind the panic.

FROM BIRTH CERTIFICATES TO PIZZA PARLORS

Andy Martin went to law school but never became a lawyer. His admission to the bar, according to the *New York Times*, was blocked because of a psychiatric report that described him as having a “moderately severe character defect manifested by well-documented ideation with a paranoid flavor and a grandiose character.” By 2004, Martin had gotten involved in politics. After Obama’s famous speech at the Democratic convention—the speech that vaulted him to the national stage and into widespread conversation as a potential presidential candidate—Martin wrote a press release at Free Republic. In the document, Martin states that “Obama is a Muslim who has concealed his religion.” Martin also claimed falsely that when Obama swore in for office, he did so on the “Kuran,” rather than the Bible. In his book *Obama: The Man behind the Mask*, Martin speculates about the former president’s birth certificate. Martin wanted Obama’s senate seat in Illinois and was trying to gain traction in the campaign—one of many failed campaigns for senate and president Martin has run in his adult life.

Martin’s campaign for the Illinois senate seat went nowhere, and legitimate media outlets ignored his claims. But right-wing blogs and outlets picked them up. Soon the “Obama is a Muslim” falsehood became an underground chain-email sent around among family members, coworkers, and friends—the type of email that provides no real evidence but seems, to certain eyes, to be legitimate and based on real research. One person posted it on FreeRepublic.com and

commented: “Don’t know who the original author is, but this e-mail should be sent out to family and friends.”

By the time Obama ran for president in 2008, Martin’s insinuations about Obama’s religion, birth certificate, and desire to overthrow the American government became a common talking point among the Illinois senator’s opponents. In the years after 9/11, Islamophobia was dominating right-wing media. But when Obama ran for the highest office in the land, conservative conspiracy theorists set their sights on a new internal enemy. The son of a White woman from Kansas and a Kenyan-born immigrant, Obama was the perfect target for the xenophobia and racism that anchor White Christian nationalism.

In September 2008, Fox News aired “Obama & Friends: The History of Radicalism,” a program that “investigated” the claims of the “birthers,” who asserted—falsely—that Obama was not born in the United States and that therefore an Obama presidency would be unconstitutional. These were people who took Martin’s questioning of Obama’s birth certificate to a new level by questioning whether he was born in the United States. With Sean Hannity as host, the show featured a conversation with Andy Martin, in which he repeats the lie that he first propagated in 2004. He adds that Obama’s community organizing work on the South Side of Chicago—during which Obama lobbied for the development of an employment center, demanded asbestos be cleaned up in public housing facilities, and worked to expand healthcare to low-income residents—was “training for a radical overthrow of the government.” Neither Hannity nor anyone else on the program challenge Martin’s claims. It was watched by nearly three million people.

The birther conspiracy only grew when Obama took office. In 2009, figures like Liz Cheney, Rush Limbaugh, and Lou Dobbs discussed in serious terms and in public whether the claims of the birthers might indeed be credible. One soldier even challenged his deployment overseas because he asserted that he couldn’t take orders

from a man born outside the United States claiming to be commander in chief.

Not to be outdone by politicians, soldiers, and pundits, Franklin Graham—son of Billy Graham and a prominent figure in White evangelical culture—said this about Obama in August 2009: “He was born a Muslim. His father was a Muslim; the seed of Muslim is passed through the father like the seed of Judaism is passed through the mother. He was born a Muslim; his father gave him an Islamic name.”

Before long, the birther conspiracy and the claim that Obama is a Muslim had spread far beyond its origins in Martin’s brain. By 2010, according to a CBS/*New York Times* poll, only 58 percent of Americans believed Obama was born in this country. One out of five believed he was born elsewhere.

Soon the real estate mogul and reality star Donald Trump joined the birther fray. In 2011, Trump revived the birther conspiracy by talking about it endlessly wherever and whenever possible. He gave interviews to Fox and other television outlets, called into radio shows to talk about it, and gave quotes to print journalists. Trump claimed that he had his people looking into the president’s birth certificate, and in typical Trumpian fashion, he hinted—but never demonstrated—that there were shocking secrets to be revealed. When Obama released his long-form birth certificate in 2011, Trump claimed victory. “I’ve accomplished something that nobody else has been able to accomplish,” he said. “He should have done it a long time ago.”

Trump then quickly dismissed the form as potentially falsified and in need of more investigation.

THERE IS NO ANSWER

There was never going to be a satisfactory answer for Trump, of course, or for the conspiracy-believing public who rallied behind him. The goal of the birthers was not to discover the facts of the

matter. Their mission was always, as journalist Michael Scherer says, to provide an “emotionally satisfying” explanation for White people as to how a Black man with a Black wife and a name like “Barack Hussein Obama” could become leader of the free world. As my podcast cohost Dan Miller says, Trump became the id of a White, and largely Christian, American populace that wanted someone to express their frustration about the country’s “decline.” They longed for a mouthpiece unafraid to point the finger at immigrants, people of color, and religious minorities. Obama became the canvas for this vitriol, a symbol that could hold all the vectors of rage in one focused target: the son of an immigrant and Muslim; a Black man; and a biracial child raised in Hawaii, that island state that, in the minds of many Americans, is barely part of the country, a kind of foreign entity somehow included in the Union.

When it came to faith, many White Americans doubted Obama’s Christianity on the basis that his father was an immigrant and a Muslim and that he is a biracial person, a supposed socialist, and thus a traitor to the United States. His professions of Christian faith, church attendance, and hymn-singing did nothing to dissuade his opponents from calling Obama a seditious actor and a mole sent to destroy America.

Ultimately, the birther conspiracy was never about whether the forty-fourth president of the United States was born in this country. It was, as journalist Adam Serwer says, a “statement of values” and an expression of “allegiance” to a certain vision of the United States. It represented the desire of White Americans to return to a time when their power and authority were unquestioned—a time before the revolutions of the sixties transformed American culture by expanding civil rights and legal protections to religious, racial, sexual, and gender minorities.

Viewed through this long history of conspiratorial delusions, Trump wasn’t something out of nowhere. He was *the* thing that many White Americans—and especially White Christian nationalists—had

been looking for since Goldwater's defeat in 1964. The story of Trump's unlikely road to the presidency is well known by now. His ascendancy was made up of many moving parts: from the attacks on Hillary Clinton, to the Russian disinformation campaigns, to the failure of GOP leadership to disavow him like they did George Wallace in the sixties, and so on. But there is a key element that shouldn't be missed: His whole campaign was built on a conspiracy designed to enable White Americans, and particularly White Christian nationalists, to regain the privilege of determining the real, the true, and the factual in the American political and cultural systems. The story of birtherism became the basis for a movement based on grievance and malice. Birtherism, and the presidential campaign built on it, was a revenge tale not unlike a horror movie, where an aggrieved man takes out his rage on anyone in his path—especially the women and people of color who dare to challenge him.

RUNNING ON ALTERNATIVE FACTS

Nothing has stopped the conservative conspiracy engine that has been chugging since the 1960s and that Trump set into overdrive. The grievance and rage have been channeled into other conspiracies. When Russian hackers broke into John Podesta's emails in 2016, no one expected that they would be the basis for "Pizzagate." Podesta was then the head of Hillary Clinton's presidential campaign, and when his emails went public, conspiracists noted his communication with the owner of a Washington, DC, pizzeria called Comet Ping Pong. In one email Podesta proposes a fundraiser for Clinton at the restaurant. Soon some Trump supporters latched onto the idea that the owners of the pizzeria were working with Podesta, Clinton, and others to traffic children as sex slaves. Supposedly dozens of children were locked in Comet Ping Pong's basement.

The pizzeria doesn't have a basement, and even when the owner, James Alefantis, invited some protesters to come inside to see, they

still didn't believe him. Within a year, a man had showed up at Comet Ping Pong, armed with a gun and ready to take down the ring of sex traffickers he believed were hiding children in the nonexistent cellar. One family's business was subjected to months of angry protesters and an armed invader because of a fantasy created from an email.

Things only got worse during the 2020 election. Like Goldwater had done in his treatment of the Birchers, Trump did nothing to thwart the QAnon conspiracy and welcomed the adulation of its adherents. This encouraged QAnon believers to make their voices heard by running for office. Dozens of QAnon candidates ran for local, state, and national positions. By December 2020, one poll showed that nearly one-third of Americans believed in some aspect of the Q conspiracy. Three of the candidates in California's 2021 gubernatorial recall election expressed support for Q in some fashion.

All of this means that Americans are living in separate realities. Many believe there is a global cabal of sex-trafficking, Satan-worshipping elites who run the world. Some still believe Obama was born in another country. Some adhere to the idea that the Illuminati are operating out of a pizzeria in an upper-class neighborhood in the District of Columbia.

But the most damaging falsehood is Trump's Big Lie: his claim that he won the 2020 election and that it was stolen from him through voter fraud and other tricks by Joe Biden and the Democratic party. In some ways the Big Lie is the progeny of all the previous conspiracy theories that envisioned some nefarious network secretly running the government. In other ways it gives legitimacy to the QAnon conspiracy and others, because the Big Lie gives ballast to the claim that a group of elites is running the government fraudulently behind the country's back.

THE PRAGMATIC FUNCTION OF CONSPIRACIES

Conspiracy theories are ways for groups at the margins—or who feel as if they are at the margins—to gain power and authority by changing

the narrative surrounding truth and reality in the political realm. For some within end-times conspiracy communities, the theories about the end of the world and “what’s really going on” are explanations for their sense of suffering and helplessness in a world that doesn’t accept or understand them. Others take it a step further: If they can legitimate their claims about grand schemes by global elites and new world orders, they can flip the board, topple the system, and gain power.

Taken together, these components of conspiracy theories explain why so many White Christian nationalists have been prone to participating in them over the last half century. It makes sense that religious groups who believe that the media is “too liberal,” that the government is out to get them, and that the antichrist is already walking among us are prone to conspiracies about election fraud, birth certificates, and pizza parlors.

But there’s a special ingredient to White Christian nationalists’ proclivity for conspiracy. This is the group who believes America was founded as a “Christian nation,” and who thus believes it has the right to maintain the top spots of American politics and culture. When they feel their influence and power dwindling, conspiracies become a tool for reasserting their worldview as legitimate. In these instances, they are a group used to privilege, and they are trying to hold on to it by changing the standards of the real and true. They believe they have a God-given right to hold power in the United States. That belief extends beyond winning elections and making policy. It goes all the way to deciding what is real and what isn’t. The details of the QAnon and Pizzagate conspiracies may seem comical, but they are insidious in nature. For those on the outside looking in, one of the hardest parts to grasp is comprehending that many people actually believe their core tenets. They are not playacting. They are not pretending.

When I listened to Tony exegete the book of Revelation as a high school senior, I didn’t think we were just doing story time. His teachings about the antichrist shaped my worldview. They gave me the foundation to go out into my community and do what seemed

like strange and awkward things—like walk up to strangers at public places and ask them if they knew where they would spend eternity.

Since 2020, the Big Lie has shaped the worldview of tens of millions of Americans. It is propagated by a man, Donald Trump, who many of them believe was anointed by God to rescue America. His words and actions give them the basis to do radical and extreme things—like overrun the US Capitol in order to stop an election.