

Trump and the global reach of right-wing conspiracy theories

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Conspiracy theories are nothing new to President Trump. He launched his political career by stoking a particularly shameless one — the lie that former president Barack Obama was not U.S.-born and therefore ineligible to hold office. Trump suffered no meaningful political repercussions for peddling that falsehood, which tapped into swirling racist grievance over the country's first non-White president.

Many times since, he has avoided facts and evidence or twisted them to fit his purposes, waving away the advice of scientists on the novel coronavirus while spreading misinformation about the credibility of the country's own electoral processes.

As Trump battles for reelection, it's fitting that a potent, emerging constituency within his movement is the product of a far-right conspiracy theory. You've probably heard of QAnon by now, and seen images of Trump supporters with QAnon signs and T-shirts.

It began in the fever swamps of the Internet message boards, anchored around the identity of "Q," a mysterious supposed government insider, primed to expose the sins and perfidy of the country's political and economic elites. Ardent followers of various anonymous posts on the fringes of the Internet, Q's adherents now believe in a wild, cascading series of hidden truths about the status quo — that the ruling clique is in reality a satanic cabal of pedophiles and cannibals who have inserted themselves into the machinery of power in Washington and control the culture from lofty perches in Hollywood and the corporate media.

"Trump himself occupies a central role in QAnon's mythos, cast as the unlikely savior who will finally, any day now, shatter this dastardly cabal in a vaguely eschatological grand offensive reverently dubbed 'The Storm,' " wrote Julian Sanchez, a senior fellow at the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank.

It's not just an online oddity. There's a growing number of criminal incidents involving believers in QAnon, from kidnapping to a notorious raid on a Washington pizza parlor that a gunman — a believer in Pizzagate, the conspiracy theory that preceded QAnon — thought was being used as front for child sex trafficking. Rather than distance himself from the delusions, Trump refused to condemn QAnon at a news conference last month and even welcomed its adherents' support, much to the horror of figures within the diminished Republican establishment.

Trumpism has come to define the United States' ruling party, and QAnon is an expression of its more extreme instincts. QAnon-aligned or sympathetic Republican candidates are

running for state-level and federal office, with one almost certainly set to enter Congress next year.

“The apparent endorsement of aspects of the QAnon worldview by Trump and his associates has alarmed scholars of extremism and digital communications, some of whom characterize the theory’s adherents as a cult,” my colleagues reported. “Experts have also observed a striking overlap between key tenets of the conspiracy movement and the central themes of the president’s reelection campaign. Among these are the valorization of Trump as a quasi-messianic figure battling the so-called deep state, the vilification of both Democrats and Republicans who cross him and the depiction of his rivals as criminal and illegitimate.”

And it’s no longer just in the United States. The conspiracy has spread to Europe, where tens of thousands of QAnon accounts have proliferated in social media in Germany and France. At the end of last month in Berlin, a handful of far-right protesters, inflamed by QAnon-adjacent conspiracy theories about the deep state and globalist elites manufacturing the coronavirus pandemic, even attempted to storm the country’s parliament.

In the United States and abroad, experts link the rise of such extreme conspiratorial thinking to a broader atmosphere of political polarization, the insulating algorithms of social media and the relative success of demagogic, nationalist politicians.

“What we’re seeing is that it’s adapting to local circumstances in Europe and tweaking the narratives around conspiracies about local elites,” Chine Labbe, a managing editor at NewsGuard, a media monitoring group that has tracked the spread of QAnon in Europe, told Slate. “The reasons why it’s working is that it’s a meta-conspiracy. It revolves around very large concepts about a deep state and a cabal of elites. And then there are pedophile crime stories in every country, as well. So, it’s very easy to translate into the local context in every country.”

It’s an increasing trend in many countries captured by hard-line nationalist politics and where trust in institutions has frayed. “Conspiracy theories have become far more important in the past five years, because popular distrust in the political system has opened the door to extremists, crazies, and, above all, opportunists who resort to fake news to get elected into office,” Matias Spektor, an international relations professor at Brazil’s Getulio Vargas Foundation, told the Atlantic.

“Many people are perplexed at how any rational person could fall for such an irrational conspiracy theory,” wrote Gregory Stanton, founding president of Genocide Watch, which seeks to prevent crimes against humanity. “But modern social science shows that people in groups don’t always think rationally. They respond to fear and terror. They blame their misfortunes on scapegoats. They support narcissistic demagogues they hope will rescue them.”

Stanton likened the apocalyptic zeal of QAnon to that of the proponents of Protocols of the Elders of Zion, a virulently anti-Semitic pamphlet written in 1902 that got incorporated into the curriculum of the Nazi regime. QAnon, he argued, is simply a “Nazi cult, rebranded.”

