

Trump Is High on His Own Supply

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Donald Trump has long used conspiracy theories for his political advantage, but the impeachment saga raises the possibility that Trump isn't just a purveyor of paranoia but a true believer.

In his now-infamous July 25th telephone conversation with the President of Ukraine, Trump raised the issue of Hillary Clinton's email server and the cybersecurity company CrowdStrike. "I would like you to find out what happened with this whole situation with Ukraine, they say CrowdStrike," Trump said. "I guess you have one of your wealthy people ... The server, they say Ukraine has it. There are a lot of things that went on, the whole situation." Trump's words, as so often, are muddled, and the transcript has some frustrating ellipses. But the thrust of his comments clearly refer to a debunked conspiracy theory that CrowdStrike was owned by a Ukrainian (which is not true) and that the company, which did the forensic examination of the DNC's servers after the 2016 hacking, was hiding a server holding missing Hillary Clinton emails. These are ideas that are most charitably described as debunked.

It's not unusual for Trump to bring up conspiracy theories about the Clinton email server during his rallies or on his tweets. "When will the Fake Media ask about the Dems dealings with Russia & why the DNC wouldn't allow the FBI to check their server or investigate?" Trump asked in a typical tweet on May 7, 2017.

We're used to thinking of this sort of conspiracy chatter as red meat that Trump throws to his base but doesn't necessarily believe himself. But in speaking to Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky in a private phone call, Trump wasn't trying to convince any potential voter or hold his coalition together. He seemed to be talking from genuine conviction, asking a fellow leader for a favor in proving that the conspiracy theory about CrowdStrike was true.

In Brian De Palma's 1982 movie *Scarface*, an aspiring gangster is told that "lesson number two" of drug dealing is "don't get high on your own supply." The anti-hero of the film fails to abide by those rules and comes to an unpleasant end.

Is it possible that Trump and his inner circle have fallen into the same trap as *Scarface*, that they have become intoxicated by the very fantasies that they have been selling the GOP base? It's hard to explain Trump's behavior in any other terms.

In an interview with *The Washington Post*, University of Miami political scientist Joseph Uscinski said, "Powerful people can't use conspiracy theories very well. They're tools of the weak to attack the powerful." But he added that "Trump has built his entire machine on

conspiracy theories.” These words “use” and “built” suggest that conspiracy theories are something Trump consciously creates but doesn’t himself believe.

The idea that conspiracy theories are almost exclusive to marginalized groups (“the weak”) has a venerable academic tradition. In American history, the classic formulation was found in Richard Hofstadter’s influential 1964 essay “The Paranoid Style in American Politics.” The essay was animated by Hofstadter’s characteristic hostility towards populism and imbued with his conviction that wisdom resided in the consensus built by centrist elites.

Even in Hofstadter’s own lifetime, there was ample reason to doubt the view that conspiracy theories were the property of the fringes. After all, conspiracy theories had flourished in high politics, with Joseph McCarthy dominating the Republican Party in the early 1950s and shaping figures like Richard Nixon, who made red-baiting a staple of political discourse. On the Democratic side, Lyndon Johnson was hardly a marginal figure, yet he also believed in conspiracy theories, holding to the absurd view that the anti-war movement of the 1960s was directed by foreign powers.

The elite-conspiracy theories of the Cold War era had drastic consequences—leading to not just McCarthyism, but also American military invention in Vietnam (which was in part motivated in the nonsensical idea that the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese were mere puppets of Moscow and Beijing). The domestic spying of the era, notably the COINTELPRO program which targeted domestic radicals from 1956 to 1971, was also fueled by elite paranoia. Contra Hofstadter, the paranoid style is a vice of the elite as well as the masses. And it’s much more dangerous when held by the powerful.

With Trump, we have the biggest conspiracy theorist in the White House since Lyndon Johnson and Nixon. Like those earlier presidents, Trump is using the power of his office to vindicate his fears and smear his enemies.

Nor is Trump alone in his administration in believing in conspiracy theories—or, at the very least, acting as if does. One of the revelations of the unfolding impeachment saga is that Trump has corralled leading members of his administration, most notably Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and Attorney General William Barr, in his global quest to prove that the American intelligence community and its allies entrapped Trump in the Russiagate scandal.

As with many conspiracy theories, there’s a smidgen of truth to Trump’s fantastical scenario. It’s true that members of the intelligence community and the permanent security bureaucracy don’t like Trump’s heterodox foreign policy views—and have been trying to hamstring him. Bob Woodward’s *Fear* documents this clash, which he describes as an “administrative coup.”

But this “administrative coup” is a far cry from Trump’s “Deep State” fantasies, which rest on many provably false claims (such as the idea that CrowdStrike is a Ukrainian company). It is plausible enough that many White House officials and civil servants routinely try to undermine Trump’s personal orders. What isn’t plausible is the idea that the entire narrative created in the Mueller Report is a fabrication designed by spies to destroy Trump.

Even the announcement of impeachment proceedings hasn't stopped Trump from wanting to use his position to prove the "Deep State" conspiracy is true. The Daily Beast reports that last week William Barr and U.S. Attorney John Durham of Connecticut traveled to Italy to track down one of the threads of this conspiracy. According to the news site, "Barr and Durham were especially interested in what the Italian secret service knew about Joseph Mifsud, the erstwhile professor from Malta who had allegedly promised then candidate Donald Trump's campaign aide George Papadopoulos he could deliver Russian 'dirt' on Hillary Clinton."

Barr's behavior is extremely odd. As Julian Sanchez of the Cato Institute tweeted, "I don't want to jump to conclusions, but a lot of weird aspects of this seem consistent with Barr having gone full tinfoil hat. As in: The AG personally globetrotting to play Nancy Drew would make more sense if he's decided his own subordinates are Deep State agents." Sanchez added, "It's stuff you'd look at if you suspect the [intelligence community's] entire analysis of Russian intervention is an elaborate fabrication. Or at any rate, it's stuff you'd look at if you're dutifully trying to build a case for an audience that believes that."

In some ways, it's immaterial whether Barr believes in what he's doing or not. His actions are what counts, and he's acting as if the conspiracy theories are true.

Trump and his inner circle have fallen into quicksand: the more they try to prove that "the Deep State" has framed Trump, the more they are violating rules and norms that makes impeachment necessary. This is the dynamic that is now swallowing the Trump White House.