

The Violence of Nostalgia: Conspiracy Theorism, White Nationalism, and Restoring American Exceptionalism

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**THE VIOLENCE OF NOSTALGIA: CONSPIRACY THEORISM, WHITE
NATIONALISM, AND RESTORING AMERICAN EXCEPTIONALISM**

A Dissertation Presented

by

CANDICE K. TRAVIS

Submitted to the Graduate School of the
University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

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Political Science

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DEDICATION

This one is indeed for me.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

So many people have been integral to this project, integral to my intellectual growth, and integral to expanding the horizons of my thinking. Thank you to each and every one of you – past, present, and future – who remain a part of what makes possible my work.

ABSTRACT

THE VIOLENCE OF NOSTALGIA: CONSPIRACY THEORISM, WHITE NATIONALISM, AND RESTORING AMERICAN EXCEPTIONALISM

FEBRUARY 2023

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This dissertation serves three interconnected ends: (1) highlight the connections between nationalism, nostalgia, mythology, and conspiracy, (2) research and articulate the deeper story behind the resurgence of conspiracy fueled white nationalism, and (3) analyze increasing popular support for racialized hatred across the United States as coalesced through the nostalgic desire to restore “our lost great America.” I adapt John Dewey’s pragmatism to interpret how publics take political action in response to evolving technologies and cultural shifts, and accordingly develop a typology of groups on the right wing of American politics. The Proud Boys are chauvinist white nationalists, Patriot Prayer are Christian freedom fighters, and QAnon adherents are revolutionary conspiracy theorists. Each of these groups describe lost American values which they want to recover in the face of mortal enemies, and they claim to emulate those lost traditional values through their language and actions. Group affiliates have also been known to engage in street brawling and violence as part of their perceived struggle to restore America. In tandem, these publics among others form an umbrella coalition of right-wing groups, religious groups, free speech activists, men’s right’s activists, white nationalists, and white supremacists, all fighting to “Make America Great Again” in their respective ways. Importantly, the reach of each group has served to radicalize individuals and shift the parameters for when violence is morally justified. Their nostalgic and conspiratorial language describe and justify a mythologized “lost great America” to recover in the face of evil enemies, sometimes through violent means. Nationalist nostalgia – a prosthetically constructed memory which inspires longing for a lost mythological past – and conspiracy theorism – a systematized set of beliefs which inspires real political action in the face of evil – have worked in tandem through political rhetoric to embolden white nationalist sentiment. It is this confluence of political language and action which ultimately erupted into the January 6th Capitol Insurrection.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	v
ABSTRACT.....	vi
LIST OF FIGURES	ix
PREFACE	1
CHAPTER	
1. From Democracy to the Public: Shifting the Theoretical Framework.....	5
Democracy in Crisis?	5
From Democracy to the Public	11
Political Literacy and the Pragmatic Approach	15
Conceptualizing a Multiplicity of Publics	24
Key Concepts	26
Chapter Summaries	31
Democracy as Crisis	33
2. The Problems of Publics: Technology and Conspiracy Theorism.....	36
The Fallen Public	36
Setting the Affective Landscape	42
Technological Exacerbation.....	47
Troubled Expertise/Conspiracy Theorism	59
A Fallen Public?.....	69
3. Nationalist Nostalgia, American Style: Distorted Memories and Conspiracy	
Theories.....	70
The Dismantling of America	70
Nostalgia and Authenticity	73
Nostalgia and American Mythology	79
Longing for the American Dream.....	86
Enemies of the American Dream	93
Stephen Miller and the Enemies of Whiteness	98
The Elegy for Whiteness becomes a Conspiracy of Replacement	108

‘Be Not Afraid’ to Protect our America	118
4. On-the-Ground Right-Wing Publics: What ever Happened to being Proud of your Boy?	123
Shame, Pride, and Violence	123
Nostalgia as Pragmatic Concern	127
Proud Boys on Strike	132
‘Enemies of the State’	135
Resolution through Violent Chauvinism	138
Anti-Feminism and Hypermasculinity.....	143
Visions of a White/Western America	148
Freedom, Faith, and Patriot Prayer	157
Evil Antagonisms.....	160
Redemption through ‘Truth’	162
Losing our Beautiful America	165
The Joint Quest for Saving American Values.....	168
5. Conspiracy Theorism as Radicalization: It’s the End of America as we Know it.....	170
QAnon as Faux Democratic Form	170
Distilling the Content of QAnon.....	176
QAnon Seeps into Reality.....	180
Analyzing Conspiracy Theorism	182
QAnon Adherents: Who are the Digital Soldiers?.....	188
The Red Pill’s Epistemological Side Effects	192
The Red Pill’s Existential Side Effects	200
Christianity, Faith, and Apocalypse.....	206
Trump the Messiah will Save America.....	214
January 6: Conspiracy Theorism Spills onto the Streets	217
APPENDICES	221
A. CHAPTER 4 SOURCE SCREEN CAPTURES.....	222
B. CHAPTER 5 SOURCE SCREEN CAPTURES	256
REFERENCES	292

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure	Page
Figure 1: Parler, Butcher the commies	223
Figure 2: Parler, Biden -- hung or shot?	224
Figure 3: Parler, 1776 commences again	225
Figure 4: Parler, Civil war/They are coming for you.....	226
Figure 5: Parler, Civil war decapitation.....	227
Figure 6: Parler, White preservation	227
Figure 7: Parler, Capitol burning	228
Figure 8: Twitter, We warned you.....	229
Figure 9: Parler, We're going to have to kill them.....	229
Figure 10: Parler, Firing squads.....	230
Figure 11: Parler, Set your clocks back	230
Figure 12: Parler, Today we took the Capitol.....	231
Figure 13: Parler, White nationalist nation	232
Figure 14: Parler, Ocasio-Cortez threat	233
Figure 15: Parler, Channel your anger	234
Figure 16: Parler, Veterans threaten violence	234
Figure 17: Facebook, Exercise in democracy	235
Figure 18: Parler, Stolen election/Save the republic.....	236
Figure 19: Parler, Don't be afraid to be violent.....	237
Figure 20: Telegram, No one is coming to save you/Return to tradition	238

Figure 21: Parler, Peace exists when white people have	239
Figure 22: Reddit, Proud Boy core values	240
Figure 23: Parler, Doxxing feminist intellectuals	241
Figure 24: Parler, Evil democrats	242
Figure 25: Parler, Remember your enemies	242
Figure 26: Parler, On strike against guilt	243
Figure 27: Twitter, First degree Proud Boy	243
Figure 28: Parler, Proud Boy core tenets	244
Figure 29: Parler, Stand up organization like the Proud Boys.....	244
Figure 30: Parler, Great American rebellion.....	245
Figure 31: Parler, No proud girls allowed	246
Figure 32: Parler, Proud Boys don't splinter.....	247
Figure 33: Parler, Black tie affair	248
Figure 34: Parler, Western civilization not built on slavery	249
Figure 35: Parler, Patriots are coming for you.....	250
Figure 36: Parler, Proud Boy enemies	250
Figure 37: Parler, Can't stop patriots on January 6	251
Figure 38: Parler, American cities turn to rubble	252
Figure 39: Parler, Feminists we are up against	253
Figure 40: thedonald.win, We are at war	254
Figure 41: Twitter, Freedom or death	254
Figure 42: 8chan, Make the alt-right more palatable.....	255
Figure 43: thedonald.win, Today I told my kids goodbye.....	257

Figure 44: Twitter, Treason and coup	258
Figure 45: March to Save America, homepage	259
Figure 46: 8kun, Digital soldiers oath.....	260
Figure 47: 8chan, QResearch board, QAnon welcome message	261
Figure 48: 8chan, Qdrop, Expand your thinking	261
Figure 49: 8chan, Qdrop, Fight for life and for good	262
Figure 50: 8chan, Calm before the storm board, Anon provides their bible interpretations	263
Figure 51: 8chan, Calm before the storm board, Anon describes ‘operation local red pill’	263
Figure 52: 8chan, Calm before the storm board, Anon explains why we fight	263
Figure 53: 8chan, Calm before the storm board, Anon details 'Jewish Masonic elite conspiracy’	264
Figure 54: 8kun, Qdrop 4559, There was a time when.....	264
Figure 55: 8kun, reply to Qdrop 4559, International bankers.....	264
Figure 56: 8kun, Qdrop 4550, Have faith in humanity	265
Figure 57: 8kun, reply to Qdrop 4550, Humans are wicked without God.....	265
Figure 58: 8kun, reply to Qdrop 4550, Wake up the sheeple	265
Figure 59: 8kun, reply to Qdrop 4550, Storm Washington	265
Figure 60: 8kun, reply to Qdrop 4550, Mental and spiritual battlefield	266
Figure 61: 8kun, reply to Qdrop 4550, Shift Overton window.....	266
Figure 62: 8kun, reply to Qdrop 4550, Anon in a dark place	266
Figure 63: 8kun, reply to Qdrop 4550, Our rights are taken.....	266
Figure 64: 8kun, reply to Qdrop 4550, Biblical vs. rational	266
Figure 65: 8kun, reply to Qdrop 4550, Battle to save humanity.....	267

Figure 66: 8kun, reply to Qdrop 4550, Wake up, be calm.....	267
Figure 67: 8kun, reply to Qdrop 4550, Family members can't read between the lines	267
Figure 68: 8kun, reply to Qdrop 4550, People change at the precipice of destruction.....	267
Figure 69: 8kun, Qdrop 4509, The digital battlefield	268
Figure 70: 8kun, reply to Qdrop 4509, Anon feels validated in his work	268
Figure 71: 8kun, reply to Qdrop 4509, Recognize communists inside the federal government	268
Figure 72: 8kun, reply to Qdrop 4509, Doing my part	268
Figure 73: 8kun, reply to Qdrop 4509, end the federal government.....	268
Figure 74: 8kun, Qdrop 4494 & Anon reply, Desperation in the face of rigged elections	269
Figure 75: 8kun, Anons for our country and against “black superspreaders.”	269
Figure 76: Chimpmania forum, Minimize racial exposure and “avoid the groid”	269
Figure 77: 8kun, Qdrop 4463, Full armor of God.....	269
Figure 78: 8kun, reply to Qdrop 4463, Please obliterate	270
Figure 79: 8kun, reply to Qdrop 4463, Please help us.....	270
Figure 80: 8kun, Qdrop 1646, They want you divided.....	270
Figure 81: 8chan, Calm before the storm board, Anons describe the role of Rothschilds in their occult theory	271
Figure 82: What is Q?	272
Figure 83: Rumble, COVID Emergency/Drain the Swamp	273
Figure 84: Seeking the Truth homepage.....	273
Figure 85: Parler, QAnon patriotic movement	274

Figure 86: Parler, Patriots up against two sorts	274
Figure 87: Parler, Communists burn our cities	275
Figure 88: Parler, Patriots restoring republic	275
Figure 89: Parler, Last bastion of hope and freedom.....	276
Figure 90: Praying Medic's blog, January 6 as second American revolution	277
Figure 91: Digitalsoldiers.info webpage, Step into the light from darkness	278
Figure 92: Digitalsoldiers.info, Q is a central plank of MAGA	279
Figure 93: Digitalsoldiers.info webpage, What is the storm?.....	280
Figure 94: Digitalsoldiers.info webpage, Digital soldier oath.....	281
Figure 95: Greatawakening.win homepage, Welcome/Missions	282
Figure 96: Parler, Be careful but don't give up	283
Figure 97: Parler, 'Satanic Panic'/Scourge the unfathomable evil	283
Figure 98: Parler, replies to 'Satanic Panic'	284
Figure 99: QAnon41020 wordpress homepage	284
Figure 100: QAnon41020 wordpress, we have to rebuild	285
Figure 101: QAnon41020 wordpress, Is civil war near?	286
Figure 102: QAnon41020 wordpress, Nothing can stop what is coming	286
Figure 103: Telegram, GhostEzra, Jews as synagogue of Satan	287
Figure 104: Telegram, Ghost Ezra, Awakened patriots vs. synagogue of Satan....	288
Figure 105: Telegram, GhostEzra, Explanation of the term 'Jew'	289
Figure 106: Telegram, GhostEzra, Zionist vaccines.....	290
Figure 107: Telegram, GhostEzra, Exposing the Zionist agenda	291

PREFACE

The holidays were over, and it was a new year: 2021. It was also another year of the continued coronavirus pandemic. I sat in my friend Sean's home office in the corner, back against his bookshelves. We were both dissertating. For me, it was another hours-long session of scouring right-wing spaces on the Internet, trying to understand their goals, their motivations, their lines of thought and action. My VPN was on; that day I was bouncing between Reddit, 8kun (home of the Qresearch board and purveyors of QAnon), and thedonald.win (home of then-President Trump's online 'MAGA army'). I was looking for something specific – how and where the #StopTheSteal movement fit into these places and into the right-wing groups I had already done a good deal of research on – the Proud Boys and Patriot Prayer.

This day was also the morning of January 6, 2021. I knew the electoral votes were being counted in Congress later that afternoon. Sean and I had already planned to watch the CSPAN broadcast of the count, but as the morning proceeded, I saw more and more posts with an increasingly dire tone. One was particularly striking. In a post on thedonald.win entitled, "Today I told my kids Goodbye," a user shared his story:

Today I had the very difficult conversation with my children, that daddy might not come home from D.C. As a Veteran this is always something you are prepared to discuss, but it never comes easy.

Today I booked my flight to the east coast. On January 6th I will stand up with my fellow Americans and demand justice. When I joined the Army I swore to defend my country from all enemies, both Foreign & Domestic. Today we face a multitude of enemies that would have us bow down, and surrender our rights. Not today! Not EVER!¹

By the time I read this virtual goodbye to this man's children, I had already seen plenty of violent language describing the plans for January 6th. These are just some snippets,

¹ Appendix B, Figure 40: thedonald.win, Today I told my kids goodbye.

documented in my archive of screenshots: “1776 will commence again.” “Storm the Capitol.” “I would rather give up what I have and fight a civil war than allow these liberal pieces of crap to win by stealing the election. Evil has gotten out of hand.” “Freedom or death.” “If you’re afraid to be more violent than those on the left, then there is no hope.” “Let him [Biden] pick heads or tails... hung or shot.” “Get the firing squads ready.” “I’ve known this for two years I’ve been telling my wife we’re going to have to kill them.” “Can’t wait for a civil war to hunt you down and cut off your head American style.” It was not a shock to then see this father conveying the possibility that he would not return home. The lead-up to January 6th escalated so quickly to the point that violence was *expected*. Violence was expected because it had been deemed necessary.

It was of course no surprise when the CSPAN broadcast of the vote count in Congress showed abrupt interruption in the chamber. Trump’s speech earlier in the day so obviously fanned the flames on what had already unfolded online. I had told Sean then, during Trump’s speech, that something was probably going to happen – and something did. But this moment still reflects some of the larger challenges that my research over the past few years has presented.

First, the research has been difficult. Not in the sense of thorough research and analysis being a difficult task in and of itself. But in the sense of a psychological toll. Reading violent language, reading hateful language, reading racist, sexist, and homophobic language, reading emotional language of loss and despair; all of this adds up over time. I had always known it would take a toll, but I did not have that sense of realization until after the Capitol Insurrection, as I watched the day unfold. Until then, all the hateful, racist, and violent language about people of color, about Jewish and Muslim communities, about

women, about queers, about childless feminists, seemed to roll off my skin only by virtue of a strict regimen of compartmentalization. Though I had seen such language come to a head in episodic mass murders – each of which continue to pang in my chest –, it was the violence that followed from a semi-organized coalition of right-wing groups and conspiracy theorists on a literal cultural and political crusade that crystallized the psychological toll. This was no longer a “lone wolf” or a “single tortured soul” kind of problem. And it never really was.

Second, the research has been difficult in the sense that it is indeed a challenge to determine what is said authentically, ironically, sincerely, and honestly. Online cultures pride themselves on their use of sarcasm, satire, and irony. This serves a few ends: creation of a space for open criticism, obfuscation of intent and meaning, and absolution of responsibility for what is said. Add to this the layers of anonymity that online users can enjoy, and it becomes difficult to pin down not only the meaning of what is said but also *who* says it – a piece of important context for interpreting meaning. For example, when any of the users above talk about the need for violence, in very specific terms no less, *do they actually mean it?* Which users take advantage of anonymity and limited responsibility to sway others for their own ends? What is just rhetoric, and what is actual expression of desire or belief?

I firmly believe that language, whether the meaning inlaid in what is said is sincere or not, has real effects in the world. For that reason, holding individuals responsible for what is said and what is done is important. The freedom of free speech is only liberty insofar as it requires responsibility. When the volume of things said is nearly infinite, when algorithmically constructed echo chambers persist, when the same narratives are repeated

constantly in rapid succession, consumers will act along the lines of the narratives they hear over and over. This does not undermine agency, but instead pays attention to the contours of the online spaces where some consumers, like those featured in this dissertation, frequent. Language shapes both belief and action.

This dissertation is the product of three years' worth of reading, thinking, constructing piecemeal, analyzing, and writing about the language used in virtual spaces linked to right-wing groups. It took figuring out how to protect myself from retaliation for occupying spaces in which I am not welcome; how to properly use a VPN to cover my tracks and protect the privacy of my IP location; how to access parts of the "dark web" with TOR browsers; how to take advantage of internet archives; how to cultivate different search engine algorithms; and how to coherently read in succession the long discussion board posts on forums like 8kun/8chan (it can get very confusing very fast!). Not everything I read made it into my own trove of screenshots, but the key examples did.

Having finished the dissertation, the work nevertheless remains. I thought I would wrap up researching and writing and then feel ready to move on. But this moment of white nationalism, fueled by nostalgia and conspiracy theory, is not done. So, my responsibility for making plain their language and showing the real effects continues.

CHAPTER 1
FROM DEMOCRACY TO THE PUBLIC: SHIFTING THE THEORETICAL
FRAMEWORK

Democracy in Crisis?

The core question of this opening chapter is as follows: *How do we do democratic politics?* Starting from the assumption that democratic politics has changed over time and is especially distinct in the present moment, I ask more specifically: *How do people participate in democracy fundamentally shaped by advanced technological society?* By advanced technological society, I am not exactly describing what Herbert Marcuse (1964) used the term to describe: a one-dimensional society in which technology provides comfort and normalcy at the same time as it exploits and alienates individuals from themselves, from one another, and from the fruits of their labor. I do not mean to *merely* say that our critical judgement has been undercut through the uses of technology. Surely, the trends which Marcuse picked up on in *One-Dimensional Man* and in his other work have continued over time, but they have importantly morphed.

This chapter seeks to disentangle what exactly advanced technological society has morphed into. At the same time, it aims to disentangle *how individuals and groups have responded to the morphing of technology*. Suffice it to say that the problem of how people democratically participate is complicated by the mass informational age, the social media age, the fake news age, the post-truth age, the internet age, and so on. For example, according to political theorists such as Byung-Chul Han (2017), the public has become a mediated swarm, running from spectacle to spectacle with no critical distance, expressing anonymous outrage but not making any semblance of sense. We are no longer in the age

of the public, the people, or even of Hardt & Negri's (2004) multitude. On the other hand, social media technology has importantly empowered critique, dissent, and organization across large spaces and groups of people. How can we distinguish the ways in which technology is politically useful from the ways in which it can be politically detrimental? From which spaces (virtual or material) does collective political action spring? How is a collective political body constituted under dissociative conditions? Has the potential for collective democratic action been undermined, or has it simply been morphed for new possibilities?

Before we can begin to address some of these questions about the relationship between democracy, technology, and politically active publics, we must dispense with the assumption that democracy is now in crisis. Part of my aim here is to make sense of what contributes to the apparent sense that democracy is in crisis – including technology as a major factor – so that I can critically analyze those semi-causal factors. Let me begin, then, with some of the most grabbing articulations of democracy in crisis, both from political leaders and political thinkers.

Prior to the G20 Summit at the end of June 2019, Vladimir Putin said in an interview with the *Financial Times* that, “the liberal idea has become obsolete” (Bennetts, 2019). One way of interpreting this comment is that, “the election of Donald Trump as US President and the rise of nationalist-populist movements in Europe signaled the death of liberal policies in the West” (Bennetts, 2019). However, my focus is not liberalism *per se*; instead, my concerns lie with the concept and manifestation of *democracy*. Putin's comments nonetheless are telling. First, Putin throws the liberal idea, which is understood in the mainstream as going hand in hand with democracy, into question. Second, more

interestingly, his comments parallel another set of critiques made about democracy in light of the ‘populist’ moment: that democracy itself is at an end, that it has reached its excess, and that it is in crisis. For example, Jan Werner-Müller’s (2016) argument that the populist moment is itself threatening goes as follows: “The danger is populism – a degraded form of democracy that promises to make good on democracy’s highest ideals. The danger comes, in other words, from within the democratic world...” (p. 6). Not only is democracy at an excess, but it is *its own undoing*. Per Müller’s (2016) argument, it is the undoing of the liberal pluralist approach to politics (p. 3).

At the same time, others articulate democracy in crisis as a direct result of ‘neoliberal hegemony’, as does Chantal Mouffe (2018), for example. Here is Astra Taylor (2019) in the introduction of *Democracy May Not Exist, But We’ll Miss it When it’s Gone*: “Though the headlines tell us democracy is in ‘crisis’, we don’t have a clear conception of what it is that’s at stake” (p. 1). This is an important question: What is at stake? What exactly is in crisis? *What* is being threatened, and how? *Why* should we care? It is not quite that democracy is in crisis, as Mouffe (2018) argues, but instead the ‘neoliberal hegemonic formation’ is in crisis, “and *this crisis opens the possibility* for the construction of a more democratic order” (p. 1, emphasis mine). The populist moment has indeed created ruptures which we ought to make sense of and which we can accordingly take advantage of. No strategic advantage can be taken quite yet, as it is *unclear* which crises affect whom, what is at stake, what has been thrown into crisis and lost, and why ‘the people’ *in toto* act with ‘populist rage and frustration’, supposedly falling victim to demagogues who threaten much more than just the neoliberal democratic world order.

This chapter thus attempts to unsettle the assumption that ‘democracy is in crisis.’ This move permits a more productive way of analyzing the concept of democracy and of the public such that the political effects of nostalgia are better recognized. The immediacy of the ‘democratic crisis’ can be overcome by declarations that democracy has been lost, or that the public has been lost. I, however, aim to analyze what is at stake *without* falling into the trap of nostalgia. To do so, I will survey several democratic ideals and how those ideals have been instituted so as to get to more important questions surrounding the actors who participate in democratic institutions: the people, the citizenry, the public. How do these actors exercise political power and influence? How do they develop their capacities? How do they develop relationships with others? Upon what bases do they accomplish this? In which spaces?

The immediate contemporary relevance of the question about democracy and its actors most obviously comes to light here: in facing an unprecedented amount of technological change and a time of ‘crisis and turbulence’, who takes political action and how they participate in democracy has changed significantly. It may not be possible to *wholly* understand these changes, and that is okay. Nonetheless, if we want to be able to make sense of things like the rise of the ‘populist’ nationalist right, then we need to parse out what exactly has shifted, and with what political effects. As such, a historical approach for interpreting democracy as a concept, and the people/public as the conceptual political actor, is necessary. Though portions of the argument will read genealogical, this chapter, as part of a larger whole, is not *strictly* a genealogy; it is also pragmatic – that is to say, we

must deal with the intellectual ghosts of our history, but we cannot let those ghosts haunt us and draw us back in as we move forward into other futures.²

I am less interested in the ghosts of democracy. Instead, what matters here are the concepts implied by a functioning democracy: the citizenry, the people, the public, and so on. I survey who the political actors are and how they are provided the grounds for action, because *the most important thing we can do is shift the way that those actors are educated*. We ought to find ways to enable political actors to constitute themselves and make moves toward other possible futures currently precluded by existing structures and institutions. This failure of democratic institutions has thus far, in the words of Mouffe (2018), enabled, “a process of disaffection with democratic institutions” (p. 4). The ‘post-political’ time implies that political action is not the goal of supposedly democratic institutions; instead, elite management of public affairs is the goal. It should come as no surprise that populism, insofar as it is built upon the conflict between the people and the elite, has become *the* style of politics in response to the era of ‘post-politics’ (Mouffe, 2018, pp. 4-5).

At the same time, institutional failure – that is, the gulf between what democracy *could or should be* and what institutions we actually have –, enables some comparative critical potential. As Taylor (2019) puts it: “Democracy destabilizes its own legitimacy and

² Borrowed from John Dewey’s (1954) discussion of ‘The State’ as a concept: “The moment we utter the words ‘The State’ a score of intellectual ghosts rise to obscure our vision. Without our intention and without our notice, the notion of ‘The State’ draws us imperceptibly into a consideration of the logical relationship of various ideas to one another and away from the facts of human activity. It is better, if possible, to start from the latter and see if we are not led thereby into an idea of something which will turn out to implicate the marks and signs which characterize political behavior” (p. 9). I am limited here to figuring out which of democracy’s intellectual ghosts haunt us, as a way of moving forward clear-eyed in interpreting the immediate political moment. *If* it is the case that democracy is at an end, or is in crisis, then we need to figure out exactly what we have lost in order to grieve and move forward.

purpose by design, subjecting its core components to continual examination and scrutiny” (p. 2). Democracy sets the conditions for its own critical examination and re-interpretation. How can we create the space for such analysis and examination on the part of the political actors who are most affected by whatever ‘democratic’ decisions are made? Where is the space for such critical thinking in the contemporary moment? How does a public engage in this critical reflection without succumbing to mourning a democracy that has supposedly been lost? How does a public critically reflect and take political action without falling into the nostalgia trap or the conspiracy theory trap?

John Dewey’s (1954) articulation of the ‘public’ is central to my argument: not only does he clarify what is public in a clear consequentialist manner, thereby clarifying how political action can be taken, but he also provides a useful pragmatic method for interpreting the public and its problems by virtue of a critical appraisal of the present. We should deal in what *is*, and not merely in what *ideals* we want to exist. I therefore take critical appraisal of the problems of the public *right now*, as they manifest – through the articulation of those problems by publics, and through their subsequently organized behavior to address those problems – in the United States. I argue: (1) there must be a shift away from the nostalgic assumption of a ‘fallen democracy’, (2) shifting away from a nostalgic analysis to a pragmatic one permits a more robust theorization of how citizens *do* democracy, and (3) accordingly, paying attention to the on-the-ground actions taken by distinct types of publics will show more clearly *why* nostalgia and conspiracy theory have become widely used frameworks for guiding public political action.

With limited ability to effect perceptible change in the face of significant economic, social, political, and technological developments, I would expect a sense of powerlessness

among some individuals, groups, and publics. Parsing out which groups feel powerless, which groups manipulate that feeling of powerlessness, and which have asserted their agency nonetheless is an important part of any critical appraisal. Even so, since powerlessness represents a loss of the ability to effect change, or even the ability to control and manage one's own life – let alone actually experiencing something like freedom –, I would expect *reactions* to said felt powerlessness, perhaps a grasping for comfort, security, meaning, and potentially power. Where could something like this be found? How could meaning, comfort, and power be communicated as having actual political potential? My argument is that *nostalgia*, especially its more conspiratorial manifestations, functions rhetorically perfectly in this set of circumstances. Technological developments not only set the groundwork for the attraction to nostalgic and conspiratorial feelings but also feed them, in a vicious cycle. Nostalgia can indeed be conjured through the mythological articulation of false pasts and lost homes in virtual spaces, just as conspiracy theories can easily be spun up in those same virtual spaces.

From Democracy to the Public

At the heart of democratic appeal is the idea that the people as political actors have freedom and control over their own lives, both individually and collectively. As a concept, however, democracy is a historically loaded term, often establishing a worthwhile ideal and only sometimes to a limited degree achieving it. As a political tool, democracy has served as an ideal for better, which has enabled the gains of heretofore underrepresented and unrecognized groups. It has served to inform institutions which would enable individual rights borne out of the European Enlightenment. For worse, though, it has also

enabled oppressive and destructive colonial projects, both at home and abroad, under the guise of ‘spreading democracy’. The concept of democracy welcomes a variety of interpretations and implementations,³ falling on both the ‘good’ and the ‘bad’ side of the spectrum.⁴ Democracy has been criticized as implying both chaos and conflict. It has been criticized as permitting an easy slippage from democracy to despotism, whether by tyranny of the majority or tyranny of an authoritarian leader.⁵

As a political concept, democracy is full of problems and contradictions; *that* is what makes interpreting and re-interpreting its status in politics both an interesting and potentially powerful project. My focus on such a large, oft discussed concept, has strategic purpose: first, the concept encapsulates an ideal of collective political action, which I will argue is important for the contemporary political moment; and second, re-interpreting democracy for the present opens up conceptual inquiry into ‘the people’, ‘the citizenry’, and most importantly, ‘the public’, as the set of collective political actors who participate in democracy. In large part, it is these political actors, and our understanding of who they are and how they become constituted as political actors in democratic spaces, who are central to the democratic project more broadly.

³ Democracy literally means rule by the demos, the people, by virtue of majority rule. This can become vague, however, when it becomes unclear *who* is a part of the people, and which voices are covered over by the majority.

⁴ Here we might think of the ‘good’ and the ‘bad’ as a kind of coherence: Does the execution of democracy when instrumentalized cohere with what the ideal is supposed to mean?

⁵ The tyranny of the majority is one of James Madison’s most feared democratic potentials (in Federalist 10 & 51); democratic despotism, on the other hand, feeds Alexis de Tocqueville’s political fears in *Democracy in America*. One also need only think of the famous Platonic argument against democracy in Book VI of *Republic*. This argument has been adapted in various historical moments by oligarchs and aristocrats who wish to criticize democracy in order to maintain their own political power. A useful contemporary articulation of this can be found in D’Eramo (2013).

With respect to democracy as the ideal of collective political action, we must briefly parse out the distinction between democracy as a set of ideals and democracy as an institution which enables those ideals to come to fruition. Democracy as an ideal implies a few things: that decision-making is inclusive, and that individuals have equal access to the decision-making process. The centrality of decision-making implies that the actors which engage in democracy must be *doing* something; they must be active. Here we might think of the actively engaged political citizen as the democratic actor. The political citizen must be afforded the opportunity to act, and to make meaningful decisions (that is, decisions which have an impact, and which are not limited to false choices). Here would be where institutions come into play. The ideal role of democratic institutions is to ensure active political participation on the part of the citizen by (1) maintaining a public space for political action, (2) maintaining equal opportunity and access to that public space, (3) maintaining a sufficient number of channels and options to select in making political decisions, and (4) ensuring inclusive spaces which encourage debate and difference as necessary for making decisions that would benefit the common good.

The ‘common good’ or the ‘public good’ is central to the ideal and institution of democracy. Ideally, citizens take political action together with an eye to the common good, and institutions in turn enable that common good to flourish. In some ways, this calls back to the classical republican understanding of government, in which citizens of the republic take *virtuous* political action toward some common end.⁶ However, drawing from a more

⁶ Machiavelli is considered here as a classical republican; Rousseau’s articulation of the general will could fit here too; and Montesquieu details the concept of a ‘republic’ as requiring the virtue that would demand citizens to not act for the good of themselves but for the good of *all*. It is important, however, to be attuned to the distinction between a republic and a democracy, despite their being frequently paired together.

explicitly *democratic* thinker, I agree with C.B. Macpherson's (1984a) articulation of democracy as a society:

As soon as democracy is seen as a kind of society, and not merely a mechanism of choosing and authorizing governments, the egalitarian principle inherent in democracy requires not only 'one man, one vote' but also 'one man, one equal effective right to live as fully as humanly as he may wish'. Democracy is now seen, by those who want it and by those who have it (or are said to have it) and want more of it, as a kind of society – a whole complex of relations between individuals – rather than simply a system of government. [p. 51]

Macpherson articulates a useful definition of democracy: he forces the blending of the ideal of a democratic society with its institutions, for it is only by virtue of institutions that individuals can have their ideal, self-determined society. Institutional frameworks have to maintain a democratic society in which human beings are able to fully develop their capacities with and alongside other individuals. Part of these capacities includes the exercise of political power – humans, for Macpherson (1984a & 1984b), are more than just their labor power –, and so democratic society must mean more than just the institutionalization of fair and equal voting rights. Accordingly, the public good requires institutionally maintained space for the exercise of human capacities (Macpherson 1984a & 1984b). This is where the democratic ideal becomes fully institutionalized.

In articulating an ideal democratic society and asking how it functions, we must also ask questions about the *actor* which engages in democracy: the citizenry, the people, and/or the public. If we are to take a serious appraisal of the present, as Dewey's pragmatism demands, then the importance of the acquisition of knowledge/fact/truth, and the acquisition of skills and dispositions for analyzing and acting upon that knowledge is of the utmost importance in our 'post-truth' moment. Only through education can we enable political actors to constitute themselves and make moves toward other possible futures currently precluded by existing structures and institutions – like that of the idealized

institution of democracy itself, which has in many veins failed to meet the high standard of Macpherson's ideal of a democratic society, despite enabling countless political gains. And yet, the work of democracy can never be assumed to be finished – that is, actors ought not shirk in the face of frustration with decaying democratic institutions – and so must continue forward. Fatalism, or a nostalgic search for a 'better' lost democracy from centuries past undermines a central tenet of democracy itself: to always be working on improving the conditions for self-governance, adapting to change and flux, and accepting that chaotic conflict may be inevitable and yet productive. This requires constant interpretation and re-interpretation of the world around us; it is no small task. Such interpretation and critique, too, require space and time; again, no small task.

Political Literacy and the Pragmatic Approach

In many cases, part of our political role in democracy is to *make space* for critical examination. Surely, individuals and groups can create small scale spaces for critical reflection, but if we are going to have a larger impact on democratic structures, then making that space would require collective political action. Here, Machiavelli's 'plebian politics' in the Florentine Republic might lend us some guidance. This is, as Yves Winter (2018) puts it, "a more or less self-conscious collective agency in the pursuit of freedom that expresses itself in the form of agitation, tumults, and popular revolts. It is through such revolts, Machiavelli suggests, that the plebs become politically literate actors in their own right" (p. 168). For someone like Machiavelli, the plebs take political action in a disruptive

manner.⁷ They must interrupt everyday life and *create* the space for their demands to be heard.⁸ Importantly, the taking of political action plays a role in the development of *political literacy* on the part of the plebs.

Others have noted this fact in different contexts. For example, Kathi Weeks (2011) in *The Problem with Work* argues that ‘demands’ themselves are pedagogical tools. In describing the Wages for Housework⁹ movement, Weeks argues: “It was not just a goal but also a movement, a process of becoming the kind of people who – or, rather, the kind of collectivities that – needed, wanted, and felt entitled to a wage for their contributions. In this respect, it was a demand for the power to make further demands” (p. 133). Weeks’ understanding of the demand has a significant pedagogical value: through participation in the act of demanding, individuals and groups can learn about problems, to intervene in addressing those problems, to imagine other possible futures accordingly, and to collectively demand that those futures be materialized. Machiavelli also conveys the pedagogical value of political action; after all, his injunction to interpret rhetoric, spectacles, and history – the deeds of great men – is an injunction to make oneself

⁷ Jacques Ranciere (1999) has also characterized politics as disruptive. For him, though, politics is nothing except the interruption of existing institutions of domination. In Ranciere’s words, “Politics exists when the natural order of domination is interrupted by the institution of a part who has no part” (p. 11). For Ranciere, the fundamental struggle is between those who have a part (the rich) and those who have no part (the poor); when the poor burst onto the scene to then interrupt everyday life, politics happens.

⁸ Certainly, there are limits to this. In Machiavelli’s understanding, the plebs can only fulfill this role of making space for and guarding liberty if they have not yet been *corrupted* by ambition. As is a common theme in classical republican thinking, like that of Machiavelli, it is difficult to teach an already corrupted and thereby enslaved populace how to be free. And, J.J. Rousseau’s (1987) pessimistic outlook: “Liberty can be acquired, but it can never be recovered” (p. 166). Perhaps Rousseau is less the romantic nostalgic – as least in political terms – than he has been described as by others.

⁹ The Wages for Housework movement serves as the central exemplar for Weeks’ formulation of the ‘demand’.

politically literate. Practice in the interpretation of political happenings forms a basis of knowledge for political action, just as collective action itself contributes to political literacy akin to what Weeks describes.¹⁰

We can interpret Machiavelli as contributing towards understanding the kind of political literacy necessary for citizens to take effective political action. Machiavelli's work – *The Prince* especially – does not have to be read as a 'handbook for dictators.' Instead, we can read it as a handbook for citizens to make sense of the machinations of power.¹¹ If the people have insight on the machinations of power, then perhaps they can wield it. This in part explains why, in the *Discourses on Livy*, Machiavelli (2008) sees the plebeians as central political actors, discussing the people as, "more prudent, more stable, and of better judgement" than a prince, and noting that, "governments by peoples are better than governments by princes" (pp. 143-144). The people are indeed fit for political action; however, it should be noted that Machiavelli's context is a *classical republican* one, and that he describes a kind of politics that is not necessarily democratic. We would nonetheless do well to take into consideration Machiavelli's arguments especially if we wish to move beyond the period of 'post-politics' – where each person is merely an individual to be managed by elite governance, even though they are afforded the mechanism of voting. A

¹⁰ Antonio Gramsci's (1971) reading of Machiavelli informs this point (pp. 134-135).

¹¹ In Yves Winter's (2018) words: "[Machiavelli's realism] presupposes a political actor's ability to represent and imagine a different reality but anchors this imagination in the concrete forces that define the present. Such a realism differs from the 'superficial and mechanical' kind in two respects: It acknowledges the role of the imagination in the envisaging alternative political arrangements and it underscores the importance of interpretation, insisting that political reality does not manifest itself transparently but requires interpretation. Because such a realism does not presume that reality is an unmediated category, it implies that a grasp of political reality depends on a set of interpretive skills and a degree of political literacy. Hence Gramsci's conclusion that Machiavelli's work is an exercise in political pedagogy" (p. 16).

democratic society in which collective political action is possible means that individuals can build solidarity and work together for some common end. What does it mean to work towards some common end or for the public good? What is the public good, anyway?

One interpretation of the public good in Machiavelli is simply the maintenance of space for political action either institutionally or extra-institutionally.¹² If space for political action is the common good, then guarding liberty – the task which Machiavelli reserves for the plebeians – is at the core of the common good in a republic. Liberty is a prerequisite for political action, and continued political action *sustains* political liberty. In arguing that the maintenance of a space for political action entails the maintenance of space for conflict and disturbances, Machiavelli (2008) criticizes those who condemn ‘disorganized’ republics. “...Good laws [arise] from those disturbances that many people thoughtlessly condemn, and anyone who carefully examines the goal of these laws will find that they did not lead to exile or violence against the common good, but instead brought forth laws and institutions for the benefit of civic liberty” (p. 30). In other words, so long as citizens – particularly the plebeians, since Machiavelli is distrustful of the elite class which only pursues its own ambition – can have the opportunity to engage in conflict to protect their own interests, then they are acting for some common public good. Moreover, insofar as such conflict is codified in laws and institutions, then civic liberty is afforded, and the common good is maintained. This may be a bit general, but such an ambiguous

¹² It is also worth noting that another way of interpreting the common good in Machiavelli is as preservation of the republic. Preservation of the republic, however, requires the perpetuation of productive conflict that maintains stability and yet initiates change when necessary.

interpretation of the common good can enable any number of possibilities brought about through political action by the people.

Who are the people, however, and what falls under public purview? First, we should be wary of the fact that the people can be used as an exclusionary category just as much as it can be used as an inclusionary and expansive category. At a certain point, too, the ‘people’ as a category *must* be exclusionary, to make political sense. For example, when Machiavelli talks about the ‘people’, he specifically means the ‘plebeians’ which excludes wealthier patrician citizens. For him, the plebeians are the central actor for the maintenance of liberty in a republic whose motivating desire is simply the prevention of their own oppression by wealthy elites.¹³ This is not dissimilar from the populist formulation of the category of the people, which serves as exclusionary of those with ‘elite’ status. At the same time, the universal category of the ‘people’ historically has been used to exclude many Others who fall outside of this Western category, insofar as they supposedly lack the ‘rationality’ to make political decisions. Given this, it is important to ask: *How* do we define the people as the set of political actors in such a way that makes sense and yet is not exclusionary based on racist qualifications?

John Dewey’s pragmatic approach to the problem of the public – which derives from the problem of the people – is useful for thinking through this question. From the outset, Dewey defines the ‘public’ in a consequentialist manner. His point of departure is from, “the objective fact that human acts have consequences upon others, that some of

¹³ One way to define the group of people we are talking about, then, is their central motivating desire or interest. Later, as I attempt to lay out a conceptualization of different sets of publics, this desire and interest will become integral to identifying groups of people who organize to address specific political problems, real or perceived.

these consequences are perceived, and that their perception leads to subsequent effort to control action so as to secure some consequences and avoid others” (Dewey, 1954, p. 12). Matters are ‘public’ when their consequences extend beyond mere personal transaction; what is ‘public’ is that which can be regulated by a state. But Dewey’s approach is much more interesting than mere consequentialism. On the one hand, he argues that there is no unknowable mass which takes action, for it is always an individual being who acts.¹⁴

On the other hand, he recognizes that departure from the fact that the individual is the central actor, coupled with the assumption of direct causation as opposed to consequentialism, has led to the ‘fallacy’ of individualism. In other words, such assumptions lead some to believe that individuals are unfettered by their economic, social, and political conditions. Dewey (1954) argues that,

Wants, choices, and purposes have their locus in single beings; behavior which manifests desire, intent, and resolution proceeds from them in their singularity. But only intellectual laziness leads us to conclude that since the form of thought and decision is individual, their content, their subject-matter, is also something purely personal. [p. 22]

Any given individual does not act out of nothing – she is always influenced by the people and conditions which surround her – and so even though *she* is the political actor per se, her actions are much more than just *her*. It is here where Dewey’s consequentialist description of what is ‘public’ shows itself as particularly pragmatic. First, Dewey provides a sort of space beyond the confines of atomistic individualism by showing how individuals act but from a place which is largely influenced by other human beings, thereby opening

¹⁴ As Dewey (1954) puts it: “Individual human beings may lose their identity in a mob or in a political convention or in a joint-stock corporation or at the polls. But this does not mean that some mysterious collective agency is making decisions, but that some few persons who know what they are about are taking advantage of massed force to conduct the mob their way, boss a political machine, and manage the affairs of corporate business” (p. 18).

the space for collective action *outside* the faceless mass. Second, Dewey is quite literally a pragmatist, and so his consequentialist account comes from his belief in studying the “facts of human activity... [to] see if we are not led thereby into an idea of something which will turn out to implicate the marks and signs which characterize political behavior” (1954, p. 9). If the facts of human activity show that consequences matter, then the ‘public’ is organized in such a way as to manage both the perceptible and imperceptible consequences of action.

Dewey’s articulation of the ‘public’ seems simple enough: whoever is affected by some action should be able to take measures (through representatives organized into a state, per Dewey’s account) to manage those consequences. Nonetheless, the public remains a problem even beyond the fallacy of individualism which presumes individual omnipotence. What, then, is the problem of the public? Or, in Dewey’s (1954) words: “What has happened to the Public in the century and a half since the theory of political democracy was urged with such assurance and hope” (p. 125-126)? Dewey sees the problem as threefold: (1) the ‘machine age’, (2) postwar globalization, and (3) following from these, the multiplication of disjointed publics. Dewey (1954) argues that, “the machine age has so enormously expanded, multiplied, intensified, and complicated the scope of the indirect consequences” (p. 126). Simultaneously, since those “extensive, enduring, intricate, and serious indirect consequences of the conjoint activity of comparatively few persons traverse the globe,” it is increasingly difficult to grasp the scope of events, decisions, and their relatively indirect consequences (Dewey, 1954, p. 128). This

makes it difficult for someone like Dewey – or anyone, really – to locate what falls under public purview.¹⁵

Complicating this difficulty, the foundations for action have become so impersonal to the extent that the communal has become eroded. In other words, there is a lack of recognition that individual action is in fact a product of social and communal ideas and desires, thereby obscuring the public and its ability to articulate itself.¹⁶ Global consequences indeed stem from a multiplicity of actors, but there is no global public to address them. Does this then mean that a global public is something we need to think about? It certainly does, in part because it can be said that the possibilities for a global public with its eye toward global concerns are ever more present in the contemporary moment. However, our focus *also* must be on the local; we cannot *only* be attentive to global, international problems, even though this is in many ways the scale at which contemporary difficulties operate.

This brief groundwork is geared toward the larger objective of transitioning from the problem of democracy as an institution and a set of ideals to the problem of the political actors who participate. This is a way of displacing the attempt to resolve ‘democracy in crisis’ or ‘democracy as falling short of its ideals’, and instead moving towards focusing on the constitution of citizens for political participation. We can only make sense of the

¹⁵ In the contemporary moment, this may still be true, but it is also true that there are a number of issues which have direct consequences that are easy to grasp, despite the size and gravity of those consequences – I am thinking here most obviously of climate change and its profound effects, both global and local.

¹⁶ “There are too many publics and too much of public concern for our existing resources to cope with” (Dewey, 1954, p. 126). This of course begs the question of what resources we need in order to cope with the scope of the consequences which affect the public at large – in part, for Dewey, those resources come from education. I will argue something similar later in the proposal.

political actors themselves, however, if we can describe the trajectory from the ‘inchoate’ public of the Great Society (Dewey, 1954, pp. 128-131) to the public swarm of the digital and technological age (Han, 2017, pp. 12-14). On the one hand, Dewey’s (1954) problem is that, “many consequences are felt rather than perceived; they are suffered, but they cannot be said to be known, for they are not, by those who experience them, referred to their origins... Hence the publics are amorphous and unarticulated” (p. 131). This problem is importantly complicated by contemporary technology – and not just the machine age. On the other hand, Byung Chul Han (2017) characterizes the age of the internet mob, or of the swarm, as he refers to it, as nothing but fleeting patterns, lacking the capacity for collective action. “Those subject to the neoliberal economy do not constitute a *we*... The mounting egoization and atomization of society is making the space for collective action shrink... Contemporary society is not shaped by multitude so much as *solitude*” (Han, 2017, pp. 13-14). Couple these two together, and we are apparently left not only with an inarticulable public insofar as consequences are *felt but not known*, but also with a set of individuals who no longer have the capacity to come together as a public for collective political action by virtue of technological atomization.

Perhaps we have indeed reached ‘the fall of the public.’ Richard Sennett argued this in his 1974 book, *The Fall of Public Man*, which was fittingly republished in 2017 with the aim of forcing us to look beyond our cell phones and back toward civic life.¹⁷ Here, Sennett (2017) describes the obsession of personal authenticity as both self-absorption and narcissism. He argues that “the psychic life is seen as so precious and so delicate that it will wither if exposed to the harsh realities of the social world, and will

¹⁷ See the back of book blurbs for an articulation of this purpose.

flower only to the extent that it is protected and isolated” (Sennett, 2017, p. 4). Sennett may be right, but what matters here is thinking through the multifarious changes which have emerged and accordingly demand a re-conceptualizing not simply of the problems of the public, but of *publics* themselves. I therefore move to articulate and analyze publics and their problems, borrowing but altering Dewey’s pragmatic framework. This is my attempt to understand and adapt to the novel changes witnessed in our democratic *publics*. Only then can we come back around to problematize the nostalgic claim that the public itself has fallen, that the public has lost its ability to be a competent political actor.

Conceptualizing a Multiplicity of Publics

While Dewey, Sennett, and Han all have useful insights, their analyses lack in that they run the risk of sifting together publics with desires and interests distinct from their neighbors. It is that conflation which leads Han to a technological dystopian fatalism, catches Sennett squarely in the nostalgia trap, and limits Dewey’s otherwise poignant analysis from distinguishing the inevitably distinct publics – some of which are very capable of articulating themselves – internal to the workings of democratic society. Discerning publics requires making a set of choices about which publics are interesting and why, and I make those choices based on a specific conceptual landscape. I rely on *loss*, *memory*, *nostalgia*, *mythology*, *nationalism*, *whiteness*, *conspiracy theorism*, and *violence* as conceptual frames for interpreting the contemporary political moment in the United States. While much of my analysis does focus on right-wing publics, it is certainly not *confined* to that ideological space. But we cannot deny the fact that polarizing dichotomies painted in political rhetoric affect the production of and behavior of publics themselves.

Conceptually, there are several different ways to delineate sub-publics from other sub-publics and from the public at large. To start, consider that a ‘public’ has in its interest some common good, as many democratic and republican theorists would assume. What makes a public a public that takes political action is the very fact that it acts for its own common good. On the other hand, consider sub-publics as representing specific and distinct interests from the ambiguous ‘common good’; for example, this could mean pursuing some group oriented or limited interest, which may or may not be considered as part of the ‘common good’ by all groups. Who each of these groups or sub-publics are can be determined by standard demographics – race, class, gender, sexual orientation, religion or spirituality, education level, geographic location, ideological leaning, and so on –, and we might consider that a sub-public’s interpretation of the ‘common good’ is in fact represented in their stated ‘specific’ interests. However, in assuming that sub-publics exist prior to their interests (that is, their interests are *causal* and follow from group make-up), we miss the possibility that publics themselves can form around problems which they wish to solve, or that in-group similarities, interests, and problems are all co-constitutive of a single sub-public. To push this boundary, Dewey’s consequentialist framework is again useful (though desiring of a reformulation itself): a public, in the pragmatic understanding, is a group of people who face a similar problem, recognize it, and address it accordingly. Here, we can identify publics by their problems, and less so their stated interests. Specific situations or conflicts are what prompt the formation of sub-publics into coherent entities, their interests or demands are articulated accordingly, and from this a kind of political literacy is developed.

Here, I want to argue the following: first, that a pragmatic, consequentialist, and situational theory of publics best allows us to understand the variety of *sub-publics* across the U.S. Second, this is possible only if we are pragmatic ourselves and recognize that the fact of polarization has left us not with a single public, taking up problems with consequences for a ‘common good’, but with a set of fractured publics whose problems require reactions that necessarily run up against one another. Third, being pragmatic *also* requires recognition of the fact that sub-publics face general, widely experienced problems, yet interpret them, plan out their reactions, and become politically literate around those problems distinctly. In short, sub-publics experience both distinct and shared problems, interpreting them on the bases of their own experiences and norms. Sub-publics accordingly produce patterns of behavior in reaction that can be, as we have seen, violently conflicting.¹⁸ And not just violently conflicting: politically and *existentially* conflicting.

Key Concepts

In the interest of clearing the ground for my analysis of *how* nostalgia and conspiracy theory function as frameworks for public interpretation and political action around contemporary issues, I highlight here the key concepts behind my analysis. The purpose of this conceptual interlude is strictly to provide my own concise definitions as a groundwork for proceeding forward with the analysis. Each concept here has proven useful

¹⁸ Carl Schmitt (2007) would likely nod along with this observation, for the central relationship of politics is, of course, that of friend versus enemy (and though this is supposed to be an international relationship, it can easily be shifted by strategically defining who counts in the nation, and who does not). Accordingly, the enemy is, “the other, the stranger; and it is sufficient for his nature that he is, in a specifically intense way, existentially something different and alien, so that in the extreme case conflicts with him are possible” (Schmitt, 2007, p. 27).

in working towards the larger ends of my research: (1) unravel the deeper story behind the resurgence of white nationalism, (2) articulate the connections between nationalism, nostalgia, mythology, and conspiracy theory, (3) and analyze the apparent increasing popular support for racialized animus across the United States.

Affect comprises more than just emotions that individuals experience in given situations. Affect is embodied – that is, the experience of the body, the mind, the soul, the heart are integral to understanding affect. It also includes a general mood or pattern of feeling that individuals have even in advance of experience. Affect is both the emotional effect of events and consequences as well as the general embodied feeling which establishes the baseline for how individuals perceive their experiences.

Loss describes a widely experienced predicament in which something/someone which was present in someone's experience is now gone. Loss is the feeling of a lack. It is less an emotion than it is an affective experience – one that affects the body, that colors how emotions are felt, and that establishes the general background mood around which life is interpreted and managed.

Rhetoric refers to the politically charged language used by prominent figures. Rhetoric is used for specific purposes – typically social, cultural, or political purposes – and involves convincing individuals of the argument posed.

Reactionary refers to the (individual or group) tendency to respond to events, situations, or experiences with a desire to return to the prior status quo. A given situation, presumed to be different from what existed prior, is

responded to with the desire for a return to the prior social, political, cultural, and/or economic arrangement.

Memory quite simply indicates what individuals recall after given experiences.

Memory is notably unreliable, but it is nonetheless formative for identity. Collective groups also have memory, which can be shared across individual people and across generations. Shared memory highlights the fact that memories can exist without an individual having to experience the event in real life.

Mythology is a blend of memory, history, storytelling, and embellishment.

Mythology tends to fit a Manichean cosmology of good and evil and tends towards the description of ideal archetypes. Mythology can take advantage of unreliable memory, embellish history, and cover over complexity to tell simplified allegorical stories. Nonetheless, mythology has been shown to be integral for general human comprehension of existence, identity, culture, traditions, and the world.

Nostalgia is a feeling of longing for a lost past or a lost home. Often, the memory that nostalgia refers to is ‘rose-colored’; that is, the memory is embellished, simplified, and perceived as better. Nostalgia can sometimes be place-based (that is, *home* or *nation*), but not always. Often what is longed for is a ‘better’ time from before, and that ‘better’ thing has been lost in the present moment.

Nationalism is the ideology which places the nation and its interests at the center of decision-making, often (but not always) at the exclusion of other nations.

Nationalism can have a civic, political, cultural, and/or ethnic dimension. These inflections indicate whether what is at stake is the nation state or cultural and ethnic values, for example. Often these overlap, where cultural values get wrapped up in the political expression and protection of those values through government institutions.

Whiteness refers to skin color, to cultural heritage and lineage, to a set of values, and to privilege. Whiteness is a dynamic, socially constructed concept that is wielded and changed according to given circumstances. It relies upon cultural values and a cultural history of whiteness that tends towards mythology more than history. Whiteness is a distinctly *modern* concept, which was articulated as a tool of power, and it does not stretch back to ‘ancient times’ despite historical claims of white civilization and white values stretching back to the great (Roman) republics and (Greek) democracies of old.

White supremacy is the belief that whites, or those of European descent, are superior to other races. It is also the belief that white European culture and values are superior, and that in turn whites should not only exclude others but also dominate the ‘lesser’ races.

White nationalism argues that whites should have a separate nation-state to protect and preserve white culture. The white ethno-state would permit white self-governance according to white values and would exclude anyone who does not fit the qualifications of whiteness. White nationalism is not necessarily the same as white supremacy, *but the term indeed does allow white*

supremacy to mask itself as something apparently more innocuous: a mere 'white identity politics' that demands a separate white nation-state.

Conspiracy theory is a proposed explanation that hypothesizes that a set of conspirators are plotting and acting in secret for their own benefit and against the common good. They attempt to articulate a 'conspiracy' at play, which refers to a secret plan among actors to seize power, violate rights, hoard resources, or irrevocably change institutions so that they work *against* the common good. Conspiracy theories operate in a vacuum of good versus evil where the plotters are the evil actors.

Conspiracy theorism refers to the ideological version of conspiracy theory, which blends belief and action. It takes the alleged conspiracy, presumes that it is accurate, and drives political action to bring the plot to light and hold accountable the conspirators, at any cost.

Violence can be physical, psychological, political, social, or individual. It can produce actual bruises and cuts; it can maim bodies; it can cause death. It can be used for political purposes, to manipulate, to induce fear, and to tighten the grip of power. But it also encompasses hatred and racism. It encompasses bullying, aggression, taunting, and harassment. It encompasses exclusion and prohibition of entry into the sphere of political decision-making. It encompasses foreclosing ordinary engagement in everyday life. Violence can be meted out both on bodies and on possibilities.

Chapter Summaries

In this introductory chapter, *From Democracy to the Public: Shifting the Theoretical Framework*, I began with the assumption that democracy is in crisis. As a provocation, I asked: to what extent is the assumption of a ‘fallen democracy’ a nostalgic one, and why does the problem of nostalgia inhibit a more robust theorization of how citizens *do* democracy? Shifting the framework to a pragmatic one, as I have here, enables understanding of how publics – that is, a group of people who face a similar problem, recognize it, and address it – take political action. Thus, instead of lamenting the loss of democracy, I have shown the necessity of analyzing on-the-ground actions taken by publics of different types.

Chapter 2, *The Problems of Publics: Technology and Conspiracy Theorism*, starts by analyzing the shifting landscapes which have altered political participation in contemporary democracy. Maintaining my pragmatic stance, I describe the set of problems which have morphed the way that public action toward political ends takes place. I show how evolving affective practices, constant chaotic flowing of stimuli via technology, and rampant uncertainty – particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic – have established conditions for increased conspiracy theory adherence and existentially motivated backlash. I argue that reactionary publics respond by trying to manage complexity by longing for simplicity. The chapter concludes with two brief examples of conspiracy theorism that surfaced during the summer of 2020, a summer which was indeed a tumultuous political moment in the U.S.

Chapter 3, *Nationalist Nostalgia, American Style: Distorted Memories and Conspiracy Theories*, shows the connection between nostalgic rhetoric and conspiratorial

thinking. Both nostalgia and conspiracy theory rely on mythological and Manichean worldviews. While *nationalist nostalgia* longs for a lost America – which is both mythical and grounded in the reality of some American citizens – *conspiracy theorism* places blame on explicitly evil actors for that loss. I focus on the rhetoric of political leaders and ideologues surrounding the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election and the 2020 U.S. Presidential Election to show how the progression from nostalgic to conspiratorial rhetoric has encouraged and emboldened white nationalism across American politics. Analysis of the shift from the rhetoric of *nationalist nostalgia* in 2016 to *conspiracy theorism* in 2020, coupled with my on-the-ground analysis, is both intellectually and politically key to interpreting the events leading up to and including the Capitol Insurrection on January 6, 2021.

Chapter 4, *On-the-Ground Right-Wing Publics: What ever happened to being Proud of Your Boy?*, moves away from national political rhetoric and zooms in on the language of political actors engaged in reactionary politics. This chapter begins to construct a typology of reactionary publics on the right wing of American politics by paying close attention to what political actors say about their beliefs and behavior. I argue that the Proud Boys are *chauvinist white nationalists* and that Patriot Prayer, a group active in the Pacific Northwest, are *Christian freedom fighters*. Despite being distinct types, both groups display nostalgic and conspiratorial rhetoric, describing lost American values to recover. Both groups have been known to engage in street brawling and violence as part of their struggle to recover America. Importantly, despite their attempts to elude charges of racial animus and to sanitize their white nationalist tendencies, both groups demand to recover

white (American) values and rely on a mythologized white history built in opposition to the racialized non-white Other.

Chapter 5, *Conspiracy Theorism as Radicalization: It's the End of America as we Know it*, argues that conspiracy theorism should be thought of as quasi-ideology – a set of beliefs which propel political action on the streets. I use multiple lenses to understand the appeal of conspiracy theory, and I argue that QAnon represents the type I call *revolutionary conspiracy theorists*. I interpret the language of QAnon adherents to show that they cast into a cosmic register of good versus evil their struggle for restoring America, thereby mythologizing a lost homeland which must be saved. Drawing from apocalyptic and millenarian streams of Christianity, the QAnon movement has been adept at shifting the linguistic register to in turn shift the parameters for when violence is acceptable. Not only this; violence becomes the morally justified choice for saving America in a redemptive do-or-die moment.

Democracy as Crisis

After researching and analyzing everything that has gone into this project, it feels easy to conclude that democracy is indeed in crisis, especially in the United States. White supremacy persists; racially motivated mass shootings continue; white nationalism continues to rear its ugly head after years of rhetorical encouragement; conspiracy theorists throw our shared set of facts and common understanding into question. I am at a loss, feeling pessimistic myself.

But I know that to talk about democracy as being in crisis, or to talk about the democratic public as having fallen because of this, is practically anti-democratic. This is to

say that *democracy as an ideal is in and of itself a kind of instability, crisis, complexity, and chaos* – such that agonistic conflict can be had, struggles can play out, arguments can be made, and, accordingly, collective political action can be taken. To criticize and demonize these very aspects is to criticize and demonize democracy itself. What this means is *not* that we should turn a blind eye while white supremacy and white nationalism continue to attempt to undermine American democracy. *And publics indeed have not.* There has been significant organizing against the violent peddlers of racist ideology, to shut down racialized hatred and exclusion. Racism does not belong in a democracy, and actively engaged publics have organized against it in recent years. Nonetheless, we must interrogate the extent to which our democratic institutions have been built upon racism and white supremacy. It is indeed the case that *white supremacy is a design feature of American democracy*, and what we have seen unfold in front of our eyes – emboldened racism and white nationalism in the twenty-first century on the heels of the election of the first black man to the highest political office – is to be expected. In this case, it is in fact our *American democratic institutions* which are in crisis, and not the mere fact of democratic conflict in and of itself.

For this reason, I spent some time above distinguishing from democracy as an ideal, as a set of practices, and as institutions. Institutions ground democracy, lending it rules and mechanisms for accountability. Practices embrace the complex conflicts of democracy, the multifarious interests of publics, placing them in conversation for the sake of political momentum. Ideals guide us toward something always present yet not always achievable; that is, they keep us going. These must work in tandem, and we must not be afraid to criticize certain aspects of each when they prove to fall short. In this way, blind acceptance

and adherence to existing practices, or past practices, for that matter, can become anti-democratic in and of itself. Not standing up to congealed racialized hierarchies within our political institutions is indeed anti-democratic. Longing for a time when those hierarchies were starker, more solid, and less fluid is both a reactionary and anti-democratic sentiment.

CHAPTER 2
THE PROBLEMS OF PUBLICS: TECHNOLOGY AND CONSPIRACY
THEORISM

The Fallen Public

John Dewey (1924) published *The Public and its Problems* during the interwar period, arguing that changing global and technological circumstances had led to a more complex society. In fact, the problem of the public, as Dewey saw it, was that the public was ill-prepared to adapt to complexity, specifically when organizing and responding to consequences whose causes were difficult to locate. Dewey's analysis remains poignant almost one hundred years later. Global flows of capital, culture, and people coupled with dramatic shifts in technological development and usage have created new webs of complexity for publics to navigate. In the United States, this has created a backdrop against which reactionary publics have tried to manage complexity by longing for simplicity. When I say, 'reactionary publics,' I refer specifically to publics who react with the goal of returning to the previous status quo, to a time of simplicity when these problems were not present. Through cycles of action and reaction – desiring simplicity in response to moments of complexity – I analyze the political effects of nostalgia as publics mobilize to act in shifting landscapes.

Which problems have contributed to shifting landscapes and, accordingly, have altered how certain publics participate in democracy? I argue that there are a set of interwoven mutations which have contributed to burgeoning reactionary publics. First, there is greater recognition of the role of affect in political decision-making, coupled with a shifting ground upon which value judgements can be made. In other words, the old

categories of what is good or bad have been replaced with different categories as a greater variety of experiences have been recognized as both equal and valuable. Second, in affect-laden conditions, new technological arrangements morph an already shifting landscape. As more and more Americans have access to a constant flow of infinite volumes of content, chaos and overwhelm ensue as traditional foundations are shaken. Third, there is an increasingly strained relationship among expertise, knowledge, and truth. This manifests not only as a distrust in experts who allegedly represent only their own proprietary interests, but also as a prolific and highly visible conspiracy theorism oriented against elites and their monopoly on expertise. As a result, there has been a palpable lamentation of the fall of the public and the supposed collapse of democracy into a post-political time.

I center on these emergent problems and changes because they highlight the problems of the types of publics I focus on in my research: reactionary publics trying to ground themselves in changing circumstances and reclaim political power. This is not to say that reactionary publics are the only types of publics reeling from such changes. Indeed, these mutations reflect a broader changing landscape, specifically in the United States, that other publics have responded to in different ways. However, understanding how reactionary publics have adapted to navigating new political terrain is in turn important for understanding the deeper story behind resurgent white nationalism across the United States.

Questions of affect, technology, and expertise as expounded upon here are largely grounded in a review of the literature from scholars who have tried to better understand the past two decades of American society, culture, and politics. In my transition to questions of expertise, nostalgia, and conspiracy theory, I construct my own framework for

understanding the contemporary problems of the public. I argue that understanding the interplay between nostalgia and conspiracy permits greater understanding of how reactionary publics behave in the contemporary moment. My framework will be fleshed out as I display two small examples of conspiracy theorism from our very turbulent 2020. In later chapters, I adopt this framework to interpret two right-wing groups active in the U.S. – the Proud Boys and Patriot Prayer – as well as the QAnon conspiracy theory. In this way, my project serves as an attempt to understand emboldened reactionary right-wing backlash in U.S. politics.

There are a set of themes and similarities connecting these emergent public problems in the United States. On the one hand, restrictive dichotomous patterns of thought create the ground for their emergence; On the other hand, feeling, perception, and knowledge constitute a nexus around which they are exacerbated. Public and private; mind and body; emotion and reason; subjective and objective; war and peace; self and other; stability and instability; past and present. Such dichotomies, when assumed to be the basis for making sense of the happenings in American politics and the world more generally, serve to limit how reactionary individuals and groups can react.

The relational nexus between feeling, perception, and knowledge are key for understanding the political effects of dichotomous thinking. Borrowing a sentiment from Dewey's pragmatism: consequences exist in the world, but how we feel or experience them, whether we perceive them, or *if we can even know them* is a different story. In fact, Dewey's pragmatism helps us recognize this point. Consequences are experienced, but they are not necessarily known; they are felt, or perceived to be felt, but not always wholly understood. Describing his present, Dewey (1954) argues that "many consequences are

felt, rather than perceived; they are suffered, but they cannot be said to be known... It goes, then, without saying that agencies are not established which canalize the streams of social action and thereby regulate them” (p. 131). Without the appropriate knowledge, and by acting solely on feeling and perception, it can be difficult to organize a public to satisfactorily address or regulate the consequences at hand. Nonetheless, the consequences are real, a point of both fact and feeling.

Complicating this further: if we couple Dewey’s pragmatism with Raymond Williams’ (1977) cultural materialism, it becomes increasingly obvious that experiencing consequences follows from a complex chain beginning from already established social formations and ending with the oft-inarticulable ‘subjective’ experience. “It is a kind of feeling and thinking which is indeed social and material, but each in an embryonic phase before it can become a fully articulate and defined exchange” (Williams, 1977b, p. 131). Not only can the origin of consequences not be pinpointed, but also that sometimes *we lack the language* to describe the connection between our experiences and larger, more complex, and already articulated social formations.

In the contemporary moment, this reflects something like the ‘post-truth’ phenomenon. A nefarious factional conflict and intense polarization has been in part driven by (relatively) small ‘bubbles’ which self-replicate and self-reinforce, thanks in part to algorithms. One irony is that, with the democratization of information and of knowledge, reactionary consumers might become overwhelmed and overburdened to the point of falling quickly into oppositional camps. Here is Jodi Dean (2004): “So, if everything is out there on the Internet, anything I fail to encounter – or cannot [*sic*] even imagine encountering – isn’t simply excluded (everything is already there), it is foreclosed” (p. 69).

Experience or encounter indicates the realness of a given thing. In other words, what individuals can *perceive* as real and accordingly *experience* as real – for example, an anecdotal story of a friend of a friend shared on Facebook *feels* real and has presumably real effects – holds greater weight than a plethora of abstracted ‘facts’ which could constitute knowledge floating around.¹⁹ It is here that we must come to terms with what the ‘post-truth’ era means for decision-making: In the post-truth moment, decision-making is impacted such that what matters in making choices is what feels real, and not necessarily some abstract knowledge that might apply to your situation. At the same time, accessing knowledge is difficult in and of itself because of the complexity of relations and structures which have consequences on your life. What matters is what is relatable to you, and not something way beyond the scope of your own imaginary.

Another way of interpreting the post-truth era is to realize that the cacophony of complaints about ‘post-truth’ is *irrelevant*; and phenomenology is what matters. That is, how people perceive and experience the world is what matters, and this is not new. Sennett described this phenomenon as part and parcel to the secular tradition which arose in the nineteenth century. What makes Sennett’s (2017) description interesting is that at this moment he recognized the beginning of the fall of public man. “It was based on a code of the immanent, rather than the transcendent. Immediate sensation, immediate fact, immediate feeling were no longer to be fitted into a pre-existent scheme in order to be understood. The immanent, the instant, the fact, was a reality in and of itself” (Sennett,

¹⁹ This, too, seems to be part of the reason why rhetoric, which is more immediately and affectively relatable, has a stronger pull than the falsity of facts thrown around in the context of that rhetoric. Here, one is reminded of Trump’s provocative rhetorical tendencies.

2017, p. 26). This, for Sennett, is the transition away from objectivity and into subjectivity. Here, we have already passed into a kind of ‘post-truth’ time, in which the shape of what counts as knowledge has changed from the objective, the abstract, and the transcendent to the subjective and immediate.

And yet, the difficulty of complexity is the challenge of locating the causes of consequences felt. As Dewey (1954) notes, “But even the most shrewd and successful man does not in any analytic and systematic way – in a way worth to compare with the knowledge which he has won in lesser affairs by the stress of experience – know the system within which he operates” (p. 165). If systematic and analytical knowledge of how systems and structures work – like that of developing technology – is near impossible to come by, then why the focus on ‘truth’ as an important category? Why not focus instead on the phenomenological aspects of those systems, on the human experiences within those structures? Dewey (1954), taking an approach which recalls Machiavelli, concludes: “It suffices to employ the conditions which are before him. Skill enables him to turn the flux events this way or that in his own neighborhood. It gives him no control of the flux” (p. 166).²⁰ Is it, however, possible to have control over the flux?

The assumption that one *can* have complete control is certainly a dangerous one; it is also one that falls into the nostalgia trap. This is a longing for a past time in which one had total and complete control, when times were simpler, or when fewer different voices were heard in the democratic arena. In the face of difference and complexity and conflict, though, things have become too difficult to have power over at all. This is, in one sense, a

²⁰ Here, I would say that Dewey is not necessarily arguing that at any point individuals can have total control. Instead, I read Dewey as articulating a concern that people believed they had total control, only to be dumfounded and angry at the realization that they do not.

problem of perception: *individuals perceive themselves as powerless*. It is here that we can see reasons for resorting to a kind of fatalism, resentment, conspiracy theorism, reactionary politics, or feelings of nostalgia. Why have reactionary publics taken this path? In analyzing emergent changes and the shifting cultural, technological, and political landscape, I will show how reactionary publics get to this path. It is against this backdrop, and because of the longer history of racism and white supremacy in the U.S., that we see emboldened white nationalism in the contemporary moment.

Setting the Affective Landscape

Affect is key to building a framework for understanding the contemporary landscape. I highlight here the accounts of several theorists who accept that affect matters for political decision-making to establish a ground upon which I build my account of political nostalgia. By showing how others theorize the ways that political decision-making is impacted by affect, I show how nostalgia can guide political action taken by individuals and publics in response to felt consequences. Nostalgia has been made politically palpable through rhetoric to constitute a particular ‘affective landscape’. Lawrence Grossberg (2018) describes ‘affective landscapes’ as, “a complex social way of being in the world, a densely textured space within which some experiences, behaviors, choices, and emotions are possible, some ‘feel inevitable and obvious, and still others are impossible or unimaginable” (p. 91). Affect is the lived experience of emotions. Affect is complex, not necessarily linear, and accordingly prone to fluctuations. Affect also has an important bodily or autonomic dimension (Clough, 2017). That is to say that when one experiences

emotions, it is not merely relegated to the space of the mind; it flows throughout the body and is felt both physically *and* psychologically.

A given ‘affective landscape’ indicates not only *how* we experience the world, but also the concepts and terms which permit us to explain those experiences. In a parallel manner, describing the political potency of language, Henry Giroux (2019) argues that “words matter. They matter because they not only provide the ideological and affective scaffolding for policies but also because they function as pedagogical tools to define social relations, mobilize desires, create modes of identification, and shape one’s relationship to others and the larger world” (p. 19). Since words, concepts, and terms are defined *in advance*, any given affective landscape by design sets limits, boundaries, patterns, and possibilities for what can be experienced. Though they define what is permitted, affective landscapes are indeed sites for struggle not only over new ways of thinking about our experiences but also over the very possibility for new livable experiences.

A given ‘affective landscape’ can be eminently complex, with overlapping and counteracting forces, but they are defined by *structures of feeling* (Williams, 1977). Structures of feeling reveal the details of affective experience: they represent, “ecologies of belonging and possibilities of mobility” (Grossberg, 2018, p. 93), which, as I will show throughout this project, can be dangerously manipulated for political gain. Possibilities can be limited simply through rhetoric and vocabulary. In-groups and out-groups can be distinguished simply by virtue of defining who belongs and who does not, of deciding who counts and who does not. Nonetheless, “political possibility lies somewhere in the space between understanding how people do feel and imagining how they might feel, and it depends on figuring out how such feelings are made, organized, and changed” (Grossberg,

2018, p. 92). Figuring out *how* feelings are made, organized, and changed is in part an intended goal of this project. Only after that can we begin to think about alternative possibilities and futures.

Passive nihilism – a landscape comprised of affective autonomy, anxiety, narcissism, and temporal alienation – represents the backdrop upon which reactionary publics interpret politics.²¹ Presented with a novel set of circumstances, reactionary publics see no options and so accordingly fall into feelings of despair. This is reflected in a combination of overwhelm, uncertainty, stress, and fear. Out of self-protection, there arises a hyperinflated ego and intensified self-interest. But with a felt loss of history, felt loss of traditional values, and felt loss of the future that these things would have otherwise guaranteed hard-working Americans, reactionary publics are at an impasse. They perceive a missing ground upon which value judgements and choices can be made, since traditional values have been lost *and* new ethical standards have been articulated as more life experiences have been affirmed in American society. Against this backdrop, we can begin to see reactionary publics' trajectory to contemporary resentment (Grossberg, 2018 p. 98).

Accordingly, Grossberg argues that reactionary publics can easily slip into hyperinflation, fundamentalism, fanaticism, and narcissism. From here there is a slippage into a clear dichotomous (and arguably paranoid) cosmology of good and bad, friend and enemy, superiority and inferiority. Svetlana Boym (2001), in *The Future of Nostalgia*, calls

²¹ “I want to describe, however briefly, four structures of feeling that comprise in part the emergent organization of passive nihilism, recognizing that each has its own history...: (1) affective autonomy, expressed as hyperinflation and fundamentalism, which can almost seamlessly slide into what Henry Giroux has called a ‘culture of cruelty’, (2) anxiety and hyperactivism, (3) society as personalization (narcissism), and (4) temporal alienation” (Grossberg, 2018, pp. 93-94).

this a “Manichean battle of good and evil” (p. 41), while Henry Giroux (2017) describes this as contributing to a “culture of cruelty.” In other words, reactionary publics establish “a culture which promotes lies, spectacles, scapegoating the other, a discourse of deterioration, and brutal violence” (Giroux, 2019, p. 47). With the construction of the world in binary oppositional terms, coupled with a perceived loss of political possibility – stemming from a shift in traditional ethics and values to foreclosed futures, it is not at all surprising that whatever fear and anxiety comes from overwhelming change turns relatively quickly into resentment for a class of others that can be easily scapegoated.

At the same time, individualism is taken to an extreme. Not only is the individual the sole focus of political decision-making, but also this hyper-individual emphasis lends those decisions a micro-political or sub-political character. Politics is undermined insofar as the difficulties experienced by individuals are only ever microscopic solitary problems – they are *not* considered structural, they do *not* appear to stretch to affect larger groups – and they can be solved with, say for example, individual hard work. As Jodi Dean (2005) explains, individualized problems can be *micro-managed*. “We might think of the ways that expert discourses of psychology and sociology provide explanations for anger and resentment, in effect treating them as syndromes to be managed rather than as issues to be politicized” (Dean, 2005, p. 56). That is, such matters are not *politically represented*; instead, they are treated and mitigated (‘managed’) individually rather than ever being interrogated and located among larger political formations and structures.

Relatedly, Byung Chul Han (2010) argues in *The Burnout Society*, that in a society which constantly emphasizes positive individual production (‘the achievement society’ in

his words),²² the subject, “works for pleasure and does not act at the behest of the Other. Instead, it hearkens mainly to *itself*... Freedom from the Other switches into narcissistic self-relation, which occasions many of the psychic disturbances afflicting today’s achievement subject” (p. 38). My reading of this hyper-individualism is that it ultimately runs in a circular fashion so long as the outlet of politicizing experiences or feelings of anger and resentment continues to be undermined. That is, so long as individuals are urged to take responsibility for and ‘manage’ their problems, so long as they are encouraged that they can constantly achieve and work and produce if they simply try hard enough, so long as the “achievement subject gives itself over to *compulsive freedom* – that is, to the *free constraint* of maximizing achievement” (Han, 2010, p. 11), then the kind of political freedom which culminates in the addressing of problems and difficulties that exist on a broader level will be precluded. We are merely free to enslave ourselves, and we must try harder to make ourselves feel good about it.

It is in this vein that Henry Giroux (2019) locates the “closing of the political,” insofar as the “very conditions necessary for enabling people to make informed decisions are under siege” (p. 12). One of those conditions is the assumed ability to politicize problems, to articulate the personal as political. Another is being given the language to conceptualize power and freedom as something beyond hyper-individual consumption. But, given already existing consumptive notions of freedom heretofore encouraged in our system of neoliberal capitalism, this affective landscape leaves publics in a tricky place. What we have seen thus far is that *language* can so readily be used to depoliticize problems,

²² See Han, 2010, pp. 8-11.

experiences, feelings, and behaviors.²³ At the same time, however, nostalgia has rhetorically been used to coalesce reactionary publics together. Grossberg, Giroux, Dean, and Han paint a picture of nihilistic powerlessness, but reactionary publics have indeed *politically* responded to their conditions. Giving narrative and language to their ‘loss’, nostalgic rhetoric cobbles together the contemporary experience of anger and resentment by publics who desire restoration of the previous status quo.

Technological Exacerbation

The post-2000s moment can be characterized in many ways as an affective landscape exemplified by fundamentalist individualism, narcissism, anxiety, and hyperinflation, all of which, as Han (2010 & 2017) argues, contributes to a burnt out, depressive swarm of atomized individuals. How can publics get out of this stagnation, organizing together to exercise political power and assert some control over the circumstances that would otherwise leave individuals depressed and exhausted? Have publics *lost* the conditions for making potent political decisions? I would argue that for some publics, it feels like *they have indeed lost this*. Accordingly, I contend that reactionary publics experience resentment, nostalgia, and a desire for control and power over things that immediately impact their lives. With resentment, groups look for *scapegoats* for our problems; with nostalgia, groups look for *narratives* that explain loss and provide templates

²³ As Henry Giroux (2019) puts it: “Freedom, in the neoliberal edition, has been transformed into an obsession with self-interest, part of a war culture that ruthlessly pits individuals against each other while condoning a culture of indifference, violence, and cruelty that rejects any sense of political and moral responsibility.” And, accordingly, further down, “Everyone is subject now to a paralyzing responsibility and a disciplinary apparatus that revises downward the American dream of social mobility” (p. 77).

for political action to get that thing back. I claim not only that resentment and nostalgia go together, but also that technology exacerbates them both, largely by virtue of its capabilities for quickly and broadly disseminating narratives as well as its tendency to emphasize the singularity of experience.

It was Herbert Marcuse (1964) who declared the irony of technological capability/ domination in the introduction to *One-Dimensional Man*:

The capabilities (intellectual and material) of contemporary society are immeasurably greater than ever before – which means that the scope of society's domination over the individual is immeasurably greater than ever before. Our society distinguishes itself by conquering the centrifugal social forces with Technology rather than Terror, on the dual basis of an overwhelming efficiency and an increasing standard of living. [p. xlii].

Poignant as this was in the U.S. in the mid-1960s, to be a critical theorist in the contemporary moment necessitates taking Marcuse's argument in context and re-evaluating its helpfulness for theorizing the present. In so doing, we might rid ourselves of the language of domination, and focus instead on the ways in which resistances are either squashed or recycled into existing political structures, social hierarchies, or surveillance formations. We might pay attention to the ways in which individuals are encouraged to work on themselves but not to take that work into a broader social, political, or economic context. We might rethink the ways in which efficiency replaces any standard of living, for the freedom to make oneself as a constant entrepreneurial project is better than maintaining any work/life balance, any ability to pay rent, debt, or medical bills. We might interrogate the ways in which the tactic of 'divide and conquer' has effectively spun up resentment and anger in struggling sections of the American population directed at historically oppressed groups to maintain the power and influence of the most racist and hateful.

The irony with which Marcuse writes remains a useful frame of mind for approaching the possibilities afforded by contemporary technological advances, particularly, social media and mass information as it is spread across the internet. The internet indeed has enabled social and political organizing both in the United States and across the globe – for example, the Arab Spring, the Occupy Movement, the #MeToo Movement, the #BlackLivesMatter Movement. At the same time, these very same technologies can be used to infiltrate our everyday lives, undermine our potential for political engagement, and turn possible political spaces for action into spaces of mere consumerism.

Technology can be used to nefarious ends. It can be used to surveil and locate those who take political action against existing power structures; it also serves to exhaust users to the point of distraction and compliance. This latter point is in part the subject of Jonathan Crary's (2013) *24/7*, in which he describes sleep as one of the last frontiers to capitalism, slowly being overtaken by a 24/7 mindset encouraged through technological means. In this dystopia, "the planet becomes reimagined as a non-stop work site or an always open shopping mall of infinite choices, tasks, selections, and digressions. Sleeplessness is the state in which producing, consuming, and discarding occur without pause, hastening the exhaustion of life and the depletion of resources" (Crary, 2013, p. 17). Constant insomnia and sleeplessness are the effect of such a world. Sleep is impossible; and the quiet and solitude needed for regrouping, for reflecting, for thinking is closed off. Our large metropolises never sleep, for there is constant light, and never darkness.²⁴ This seems like

²⁴ A revealing point in Crary's work regards an example of a plan to launch mirrors into orbit to 'eliminate the darkness of nighttime'. As he argues, its ambitions to illuminate

a good thing – ever more time to efficiently complete the day’s (and night’s) tasks –; however, it takes a significant physical, psychological, *and* political toll. Borrowing from Hannah Arendt’s (1958) theory of action in *The Human Condition*, Crary (2013) argues that “for an individual to have political effectiveness, there need[s] to be a balance, a moving back and forth between the bright, even harsh exposure of public activity and the protected, shielded sphere of domestic or private life... Without that space or time or privacy... there could be no possibility of the nurturing of the singularity of the self” (p. 21). Negativity – that space of peace and solitude in which self-reflection can happen – is precluded. This makes political action in response to felt consequences difficult to undertake.

Han (2017) in *In the Swarm* argues that “Simply having more information and communication does not shed light on the world. Nor does transparency mean clairvoyance. On its own, a mass of information generates no truth. It sheds no light in the dark. The more information is set free, the more confusing and ghostly the world becomes” (pp. 60-61). For both Han and Crary, the metaphor of light and darkness serves to highlight that technological development in a way represents the attempt to bring everything into the realm of observation and understanding. Han’s characterization here is limited, though. Between light and dark, there is deception. Mass information does not always mean understanding, as Han notes; it often can mean obfuscation and purposeful deception for

everything serve a panoptic purpose. “That is,” he argues, “it points back to the importance of illumination in Bentham’s original model of the panopticon, which calls for flooding space with light to eliminate shadows, and to make a condition of full observability synonymous with effects of control. But for several decades other kinds of satellites have performed in far more sophisticated ways the operations of actual surveillance and accumulation of information” (Crary, 2013, p. 16).

political ends. This unfolds with nostalgic and conspiratorial political language, where self-interested actors can take advantage of the experiences of publics to consolidate their own power.

At the same time, the light and dark dichotomy sets up the assumption that existing in darkness, in privacy, in negativity, in restful sleep, is *not* an existence worth having in a 24/7 affirmative society. Interestingly, while Crary sees sleep as a performance of resistance, conspiracy theorists, on the other hand, demand that people must “Wake up!” and smell the global conspiracy.²⁵ Crary (2013) does note this phenomenon: “Common to these evocations of mass somnambulance is the suggestion of impaired or diminished perceptual capabilities combined with routinized, habitual, or trance-like behavior” (p. 23). What the conspiracy theorists have picked up on is the idea that constant busyness does actually serve to inhibit critical thinking. While there is constant wakefulness, there is limited ‘paying attention to the global conspiracy at play’. Constant light, after all, is blinding. But the solution is not to rest. The solution for the conspiracy theorists is to ‘do your own research’ and bring what is hidden into the light. Reflection and critical thought are still perceived as at risk, but the answer for conspiracy theorists is simply to do more of it, *better*.

Yet, constant illumination continues to undermine the negativity – in simpler terms, empty safe space – necessary for rest, reflection, and critical thought. There has been a shift in the experience of time and temporalities associated with contemporary technologies. Digital social media not so much adapts to fit the present time, but instead

²⁵ Indeed, there is an entire ‘RationalWiki’ page dedicated to “Wake Up”: https://rationalwiki.org/wiki/Wake_up.

produces new temporalities through which the present is experienced. People can be constantly up to date with the present moment. Simultaneously, in undertaking and wildly succeeding at keeping one up-to-date, digital social media has amplified the temporality of the present with new rhythms and new forms of mediation. The speed at which media unfolds, the instantaneous nature of affect and its circulation, and the immediacy of mediation are all noted shifts in the temporality of the present (Coleman, 2017).

Developing Raymond William's (1977b) concept of 'structures of feeling' again in new directions, sociologist/cultural theorist Rebecca Coleman (2017) argues that integral for interpreting the temporalities of the present produced by digital social media is an emphasis on pre-emergence, which, "refers to that which is in the process of emerging, and hence is felt, but is 'not yet fully articulated'" (p. 601).²⁶ Her emphasis on pre-emergence is helpful and clarifying as it displays the manifold possible ways that one can experience the present. Because temporality is produced in multifaceted ways via digital media, a politics of possibility is enabled by virtue of bringing futures into the present, enabling both experience and assemblage of future possibilities in the present moment (Coleman, 2017, p. 605). In a way, then, the new temporalities produced by and through digital social media can be liberating; but, at the same time, taking up Marcuse's frame of ironic contradiction, to what extent is this production of the experience of time problematic?

Coleman's emphasis on pre-emergence in William's account *also* highlights the difficulty for interpreting and analyzing the specifics of individual affective experience in relation to the social. While structures of feeling aim to lend some coherence to present experience, that which is pre-emergent goes a bit deeper, looking for the "active and

²⁶ Here Coleman is citing Williams (1977b), p. 132.

pressing but not yet fully articulated” (Williams, 1977a, p. 126).²⁷ In other words, how can someone describe what they feel or experience without having the language or concepts for describing it? If feelings are intangible and difficult to explain, then one might very well feel isolated, since what they experience is something private or individual and cannot be described on a broader social or political scale (Coleman, 2017, p. 609). Brought back to the concern of digital social media, the difficult analysis implied by pre-emergence is made, “even more salient,” because social media functions as a kind of constant affective flux (Coleman, 2017, p. 609).²⁸ This constant flux, coupled with the inarticulability of affective experience, makes it difficult to lend the present the kind of structure that might permit communication and prevent feelings of isolation or alienation at the level of everyday experience.

Relatedly, yet focusing on political implications, Jodi Dean (2005) recognizes this flux as a mere ‘circulation of content’, and Coleman’s description of the function of Twitter seems to convey something similar: “In its constant updating, notifying, and connecting of users and platforms, Twitter can be understood as creating a present that is at once live and immediate and on-going and unfinished” (Coleman, 2003, p. 613). For Dean, such a circulation of content is a hallmark of the ‘post-political world’ in which technology enables us to constantly contribute online as a kind of ‘fetishistic’ political engagement. As she argues: “The technological fetish operates through *condensation*. The complexities of politics – or organization, struggle, duration, decisiveness, division, representation, etc.

²⁷ Cited in Coleman (2017), p. 607.

²⁸ Coleman (2017) elaborates: “... my suggestion is that affect, or that which is felt but might not be grasped, has become more significant in terms of how digital media function, connect together, and attract viewers and users” (p. 611).

– are condensed into one thing, one problem to be solved and one technological solution” (Dean, 2003, p. 63). In Dean’s understanding, politics is condensed, displaced, perhaps even *replaced*, as citizens are alleviated from our political responsibility. In other words, technological structures and formations absorb what *could have been* active political engagement, conflict, or struggle into something like the constant circulation of online or digital content.²⁹

Moreover, lacking some of the language to describe or perhaps even identify our own immediate affective experiences – because of the difficulties of pre-emergence – it becomes difficult to relate those experiences outside ourselves to a larger social and political group. Dean (2005) notes that, “Matters aren’t represented – they don’t stand for something beyond themselves. They are simply treated in all their particularity, as specific issues to be addressed therapeutically, juridically, spectacularly or disciplinarily rather than being treated as elements of larger signifying chains or political formations” (p. 56). If we cannot articulate our everyday affective experiences which emerge nearly constantly through digital media, if we cannot represent them as matters which extend beyond us, if we cannot connect our experiences to others, then our potential for collective political action diminishes. Against this backdrop, reactionary publics have been primed for rhetorically distributed affect, for narratives which describe their frustrations, and for plans of action. Nostalgia has been grabbing *because* it characterizes a felt experience, it gives reasoning for loss (when linked with conspiratorial thinking), and it articulates a plan of action for getting things back.

²⁹ “A vicious circle seems indeed the proper image of a society which is self-expanding and self-perpetuating in its own preestablished direction – driven by the growing needs which it generates and, at the same time, contains” (Marcuse, 1964, p. 34).

At this moment, perceptions of powerlessness, anxiety, and insecurity indeed blend together with the facts of the matter. We continue to live in a pandemic which has taken millions of American lives; that pandemic also forced us indoors to social distance for a year and a half, a political point of contention. Outside of the pandemic, wages have stagnated over the past fifty years, while almost half of new income goes to the top one percent of earners. Housing has become increasingly inaccessible as the cost of renting and buying homes has increased manifold, but wages have not. Healthcare has continued to be inaccessible for many, even amid a pandemic. Economic inequality is greater now than ever before. Opioid overdoses continue at alarming rates, reaching over 90,000 in 2020. Not only is substance abuse disorder a serious problem, but nearly 45,000 people committed suicide in 2020, with the majority of those being middle-aged white men. Explicit reasons for turning to substances or to suicide are unclear, but this general backdrop paints a broad picture of *actual* serious difficulties coupled with *felt* hopelessness and powerlessness (Gawande, 2020). This does not even capture the fact of continued state sanctioned violence against people of color. Nor does it highlight the fact of a post *Roe v. Wade* world where women's healthcare is in essence banned in states across the U.S and where marriage equality is potentially next on the docket.

How ought one respond to such conditions? Reactionary publics have articulated a perception of being 'left behind', of their voices not being heard or represented in government. In turn, they have been effective at blaming scapegoats for their problems. Decreased wages and lost jobs are a combination of global outsource of labor by wealthy elites as well as immigrants taking one's jobs. Of course, without a good job, these other difficulties follow: the inability to own a home, to support a family, to have healthcare, or

to have any kind of upward mobility. In *Nervous States*, William Davies (2018) describes how, “economic inequality and political marginalization become imprinted upon the body and its symptoms, creating an almost permanent condition of anxiety. In each case, it is the sustained power inequality that is critical, and the feeling that there is no escape” (p. 113). Continued disempowerment and a continued sense of losing control leads to sustained vulnerability: this means that at any time, anyone can be a victim, whether it be job loss, humiliation by one’s peers because of their identity, the death of a loved one, or even utter despair.³⁰ Any degree of control appears to serve the role of overcoming that vulnerability. Over the course of the next chapters, I will show how reactionary publics displace their vulnerability and felt powerlessness through scapegoating, cruelty, and violence. This allows feelings of control as existential backlash and resentment are channeled to get back the power and control that was lost. Indeed, using my framework of political nostalgia permits understanding of *why reactionary publics react in the way that they do*.

Importantly, does cruelty and scapegoating serve to address the issue of control, especially in situations where control likely is not possible? Does cruel scapegoating restore a feeling of power? How is scapegoating narrativized in media and through technological means so that *many may feel restored power and control*? Elisabeth Anker (2014) provides a clear example of such a reassertion of power in *Orgies of Feeling* –

³⁰ A revealing passage from Davies (2018) reflects on rising ‘deaths of despair’ across America: “Together they tell us something important about the politics of feeling: there is something worse than pain, and that is a total loss of control. Taking control over own’s own feelings, even if that means deliberately inflicting pain or anaesthetizing them at huge risk, offers relief, in a world that bombards us with stimulations and demands. This desperation for control is also a political syndrome, in which disenfranchised groups might go as far as sabotaging their own prosperity, if only that grants a little more agency over their own future. Better to be the perpetrator of harm than always the victim, even if it is harm to oneself” (p. 117). See also Case & Deaton (2020).

melodrama, particularly as it was and has been cast in response to the 9/11 terror attacks.³¹ According to Anker, melodrama promises freedom and emancipation for those who unjustly suffer. In the context of felt powerlessness and vulnerability, melodramatic political discourse enables redemptive control, power, and freedom which serves to liberate from vulnerability. Melodrama is a style of discourse which gives a cause for powerlessness – like an enemy or a scapegoat – and a path for regaining ‘virtuous’ control over that enemy, as a means of emancipating both yourself *and others like you* (e.g., *real Americans*).

As Anker (2014) puts it, “overwhelmed subjects can overcome their vulnerability by dramatic counter-acts of force, acts that melodrama equates with the achievement of freedom” (p. 13).³² Anker displays the ‘orgy of feeling’ as mechanism of affective displacement that permits individuals to coalesce chronic experiences of powerlessness and

³¹ Referencing George W. Bush’s speech on the War in Afghanistan on October 11, 2001, Anker (2014) notes that the, “speech cultivates the heightened affects Americans were experiencing by explicating them, naming sorrow, loss, and resolve in a way that turns them into norms for proper feeling and then yokes them together into narrative trajectory. Sorrow and loss pave the way for ‘great resolve,’ so that the determination to ‘destroy’ evil is positioned as a foregone conclusion that grows organically out of sorrow. The move to destroy terrorism then becomes a moral requirement and a narrative expectation for addressing the nation’s suffering, rather than a contestable political decision” (p. 6). In effect, then, to adhere to the trajectory painted by the leader’s speech post traumatic event (9/11) is to collectively reassert control after a moment in which vulnerability was exposed and suffering was experienced. Part of that trajectory is to identify the evil enemy and subsequently to eradicate them.

³² It is important to elaborate what ‘freedom’ is in this context: it is self-reliance, unconstrained agency, and unbound subjectivity. To have such an ‘Americanized’ freedom, one must have complete control over any flux or possibility for change... a control which is of course *impossible* to have. Or, as Anker (2014) puts it: the American sovereign subject is, “one who obeys no authority but one’s own, who can determine the future and control the vagaries of contingency through sheer strength of will” (p. 9). Belief that one can hold this kind of control and such strength of will, however, is practically a kind of narcissism, because of the impossibility of its existence.

vulnerability onto a single event caused by an enemy. This means first creating oneself as a victim and then turning that victimhood into something to be overcome for the sake of freedom (Anker, 2014, pp. 15-18). However, to continue to drag the experience of victimization out, much like the “War on Terror” has continued to drag on with relatively little success leads *ressentiment*. Two decades post-9/11, we continue to (re)locate the culture of cruelty to Others and, “the roots of resentment and rage lie in the terror of the humiliation of being a victim. One avoids the humiliation of loss and victimage by humiliating the other, by diminishing their status and capacity, destroying their sense of pride, reducing them to a lower state of being” (Grossberg, 2018, p. 98). It is important to note that vulnerability and powerlessness are given a narrative form, explaining their cause and providing a template for (re)action. When promised freedom, power, or control is impossible, the narrative moves from embracing victimization to experiencing resentment. When the future that had been promised appears to be gone, then anger and resentment remain, especially for already reactionary publics. One narrative fails and the next takes its place; resentment is given a political direction.

Narrative forms can easily be communicated through media, and they can be quickly spread via technology. How that communication happens, and at what speed, has shifted in the two decades since the turn of the century. In the wake of 9/11, melodramatic political narratives were communicated largely through television news media. As Anker (2014) points out:

The national experience of the 9/11 terrorist attacks depended in large part on the news media’s depictions, narrations, and interpretations, which often drew from the conventions of melodramatic political discourse. For the vast majority of Americans, the media coverage of 9/11 was *the* primary experience of the terrorist attacks. What we now refer to by the shorthand *9/11* was an experience literally

mediated through the television coverage consumed across the United States and the globe. [p. 38]

In a sense, television news media was able to mobilize a mediated crowd through its depictions and narrations of the terror event. It was able to capture a depth of feeling and visceral experience that enabled individuals behind their television sets to connect to the literal victims, covered in ash and dust, fleeing the World Trade Center in downtown Manhattan, for example. In the present moment, the possibilities for conveying such feeling to mobilize crowds and lend narrative to popular sentiment have increased manifold. As Davies (2018) argues: “The Internet has given new forms to the multimedia aspect of crowd dynamics, including what some might call ‘propaganda’. The fact that the Internet is as much a visual medium as a textual one is crucial to the power it offers to mobilize and influence crowds” (p. 15). For reactionary publics, this means not only absorbing content that lends narrative to feelings of powerlessness to connect to others in similar circumstances. It also means *producing* content – something which reactionary publics like the Proud Boys and QAnon have been adept at for the purpose of solidifying and justifying their behavior. Importantly, consumption, production, and spread of content via the Internet has also served as an effective recruitment tool for reactionary publics.

Troubled Expertise/Conspiracy Theorism

We have reached a moment of ‘troubled expertise.’ Troubled expertise implies two distinct yet related effects: first, the process of developing rigorous knowledge has been thrown into question, and second, the authority of experts is no longer trusted. On the one hand, the ‘objective’ quality of expert knowledge has diminished in part because it has become difficult to separate the production of knowledge from direct benefit from that

‘knowledge’ as such. On the other hand, expertise, because it focuses on deriving generalized trends and statistics to make statements, is perceived to miss everyday individual experience and immediate feeling.³³ If expertise is troubled, then what relationship ought the expert have with the American public?

For reactionary publics, more specifically those with a tendency to conspiracy theorize, ‘troubled expertise’ is more than just a healthy dose of skepticism towards knowledge producers. It is a distrust in expert knowledge which, in their understanding, covers over the experience of real people to protect elite ‘expert’ interests. Experts are nefarious elites, in the eyes of reactionary publics. This weaponized objectivity³⁴ – which, in essence, is utterly subjective in that it manipulates ‘facts’ towards certain limited ends – lends itself toward an assumption that self-insulating elite experts are out to silence dissenting voices. Of course, this fits into the already (historically) ripe stream of American culture which tends toward paranoia and conspiracy (Hofstadter, 1964). Now, though, instead of the grand master behind a conspiracy being simply an enemy outside or within,

³³ “To live in modern society is to live amidst a constant flurry of predictions, averages, and risk assessments, all of which give us an idea of how things work in general, but none of which guarantees how things will turn out for our case in particular” (Davies, 2018, p. 72). Another way of putting this is to note that numbers like the GDP don’t mention or recognize inequality, poverty, and economic struggle as it is lived day to day. Therefore, to say that the economy itself is booming is to cover over those individual experiences of hardship, for aggregate numbers may look good on the surface, but the *real story* happens at a much more microscopic level.

³⁴ Davies (2018) uses this sharp and concise language in describing the veneer which mathematics has used to insulate itself as a kind of expertise that should always be trusted. He describes that, “This bestows a kind of authority on mathematics that it hasn’t always earned, as if merely to invoke numbers is to achieve an unchallengeable perspective, to which less expert perspectives must yield if they are not to stand in the way of *progress*. Objectivity itself is thereby weaponized, used as a way of silencing dissenting voices” (Davies, 2018, p. 75).

above or below (Walker, 2013),³⁵ the enemy is instead *expertise itself*. When ‘truth’ is undermined by doubt of the legitimacy and neutrality of experts, it should come as no surprise that the assumption that knowledge is designed specifically for the furthering of progress and the maintenance of public peace is supplanted instead by a recognition of the myriad ways that knowledge can be and has been used as a weapon against the rivals of those who ‘monopolize’ it. Hence, elite experts are the enemy, where average American people are beginning to ‘wake up,’ figure it out, and ‘fight back.’

In the contemporary moment, conspiracy theorism has been permitted to resurface in quite a public manner, with a significant number of political figures actively peddling chaos, paranoia, and conspiracy. The peddling of conspiracy theories plays well into reactionary publics looking to respond to what feels like a chaotic and fearful moment full of despair and powerlessness, as well as a moment where elite experts are not to be trusted. Just as reactionary publics are ripe for nostalgia, they are ripe for conspiracy theorism. Technological exacerbation of contemporary problems prime conspiratorial public reaction, as they provide meaning, answers, enemies, scapegoats, and a new purpose: acquire the tidbits of knowledge to uncover the conspiracy at work. In so doing, one can uncover not only who is behind the whole master plan, but also learn how to fight back and ensure some fabled justice wins out, such that those who have been kept powerless by the masters can (re)assert themselves again.

In a sense, the conspiracist becomes the *bricoleur*, putting together the story piecemeal by taking what is at hand and building a ‘practical’ knowledge from the ground

³⁵ Walker (2013) describes five forms of conspiracy: the Enemy Above, Enemy Below, Enemy Within, Enemy Outside, and the Benevolent Conspiracy.

up. In building the narrative, or in crowdsourcing the narrative as has become the norm for conspiracy theories built on internet forums like QAnon, you have a stake in what you build. Because you participated in building it, you are imbued with certainty about the narrative you contributed to. This permits strong commitment to the theory to the point of truth; and the more you commit, the more frequently you recount the narrative, the truer it becomes. Here, I locate the narcissistic dimension to conspiracy theorism: those who construct and peddle conspiracy theories are privy to a knowledge that others – whether they are ‘sheeple’ or clouded experts – are not. Not only does this make the conspiracy theorist ‘special’, but that having ‘special’ knowledge also enables a feeling of power.

Conspiracy theories provide narrative and structure to what would otherwise be overwhelming crises lacking a clear solution or a clear enemy to hold responsible. Two examples come to mind during the turbulent year of 2020 in the United States: (1) the ‘Plandemic’ conspiracy theory and (2) the ‘Investigate Deepfake Floyd’ conspiracy theory. ‘Plandemic’ was first posted in early May 2020, and it purports to explain the *real truth* behind COVID-19. ‘Investigate Deepfake Floyd’ claims that the eruption of protests after the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis in late May 2020 was predicated on a lie. Their claim is that George Floyd was never murdered by Derek Chauvin. What makes these theories especially poignant is that they react to overlapping crises, they are in part outgrowths of the QAnon movement, and they are disseminated by individuals in positions of political power – most notably President Trump – whom the theory directly benefits. As Joseph Uscinski and Adam Enders (2020) put it in an *Atlantic* article: “COVID-19 has created a perfect storm for conspiracy theorists. Here we have a global pandemic, a crashing economy, social isolation, and restrictive government policies: All of these can

cause feelings of extreme anxiety, powerlessness, and stress, which in turn encourage conspiracy beliefs.” Accordingly, conspiracy thinking – a version of ‘bias against powerful actors’, as Uscinski (2013) puts it elsewhere – has been activated to explain the pandemic, the mixed messages from political leaders and experts, and the simultaneous social, political, and economic unrest which has since unfolded.

On May 4, 2020, a clip from a documentary-*esque* film entitled “Plandemic” was posted online.³⁶ This clip subsequently went viral via social media posts largely on Facebook, YouTube, and Vimeo. From there, as the *New York Times* reports, “Just over a week after ‘Plandemic’ was released, it had been viewed more than eight million times on YouTube, Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, and had generated countless other posts” (Frenkel, Decker, & Alba, 2020). The video, which has heretofore been recounted many times by both debunkers and supporters, features Dr. Judy Mikovitz – a long standing figure in the anti-vaccination movement – countering Dr. Anthony Fauci – head of the National Institute for Allergy and Infectious Diseases – and his handling of the COVID-19 pandemic. In the video, Mikovitz unveils a conspiracy behind the pandemic, claiming that it was developed using animals in a Wuhan lab and that it subsequently ‘got out.’ She also makes quite dangerous statements indicating that wearing masks ‘activates’ the virus, and that we have all already been infected since coronaviruses are in the widely administered flu vaccine. However, when asked if she is ‘anti-vaccination’, Mikovitz quickly counters with a ‘no.’ Of course, though, one here is reminded of the form of science denial which

³⁶ Unfortunately, as of the time of this writing, it is difficult to locate the “Plandemic” video since it has been largely removed from sites. I am recounting this from my own memory of watching the video when it first went viral in mid-May, and compiling accounts from the following online journalistic sources: Lytvynenko (2020), Skwarecki (2020), Gallagher (2020), Newton (2020), Merlan (2020), and Frenkel, Decker, & Alba (2020).

begins with a ‘no, but...’ Beyond the content of the ‘film’, what is more interesting is *who* shared and promoted the video; put differently, *who is activating this conspiracy thinking, and to what ends?*

Per the *New York Times* (2020), “Plandemic” began its spread via the right-wing conspiracy group QAnon,³⁷ and subsequently was shared by a doctor with misgivings about vaccines, in Facebook groups centered around Reopening America despite the pandemic, and by an anti-Obamacare politician who had recently lost a Republican primary in Ohio (Frenkel, Decker, & Alba, 2020). Accordingly, the ‘Plandemic’ conspiracy theory has connections to QAnon, the ongoing anti-vaccine movement, the anti-lockdown protests of summer 2020, and some fringe Republican politicians.

Another connection comes in the form of Zach Vorhies, a self-proclaimed ‘public relations’ person for Mikovitz. Vorhies, according to a *Vice News* article, was a Google ‘whistleblower’ (read: former employee and self-proclaimed whistleblower), who in April published a video on YouTube in which he laid out his plan for getting Mikovitz’s narrative widely disseminated (Merlan, 2020). In that video, not only does Vorhies proclaim that Mikovitz is part and parcel to the ‘Great Awakening’ – a reference to QAnon lore in which

³⁷ QAnon, as described by Justin Caffier (2018): “The whole mess started on October 28, when an anonymous user going by the handle “Q” started a thread on 4chan’s /pol board titled “The Calm Before the Storm.” In a series of posts, Q claimed to be a high-level government employee with Department of Energy Q clearance and access to Top Secret–level information about Donald Trump, the Democrats, and the hidden big-picture machinations of the US government... The resulting QAnon conspiracy theory states that Trump is not under investigation by Robert Mueller. Instead, Trump is merely playing the part of hapless conspiratorial criminal while covertly helping the special counsel pursue their true quarry: Barack Obama, Hillary Clinton, John Podesta, and all the other liberal boogymen.”

people realize what grand plans are unfolding before their eyes – but he also claims that the spread of this vital ‘knowledge’ is important for Making America Great Again.³⁸

In other YouTube videos, Vorhies comes across as fearful of bias and hidden agendas, particularly *political* agendas. In fact, he vehemently disagrees with his former employer’s desire to ‘satisfy’ political agendas by algorithmically censoring Google searches, for example. In describing Google’s problematic censoring of Google searches, Vorhies derides their use of Wikipedia to determine the authoritativeness and reliability of sources which appear in their search engine. In his words, from a YouTube interview: “If a website has a bunch of slander, [e.g.] ‘oh this person is a conspiracy theorist’... then that website gets a low [authoritative] score” (Vorhies, 2019).³⁹ As he seems to see it, Google has moved from algorithmic to downright manipulative in its weaponization of censorship, and since Google is a tech-monopoly, it is both *big* and *bad*. Since we *all* use it, we are *all* victim to it, in his eyes. The reference to Wikipedia is also important, as he notes in this YouTube interview *his own* doubts about the authenticity of Wikipedia. Vorhies argues that ‘SJWs’ (social justice warriors) have editing access while conservative thinkers and commentators do not (Vorhies, 2019). Thus, for Google to be using Wikipedia to determine what sites are authoritative and not mere conspiracy thinking is clearly politically and

³⁸ Vorhies concludes his video: “We’re really going to make America great again. This is part of it. This is part of the Great Awakening. This is the part where we teach our fellow person that there is light at the end of the tunnel. Everyone can get access to health, and that health doesn’t necessarily need to be in the form of a big payment to pharma every month. That health can be realized if we just take away the toxins that are being put in our environment every month. This is bigger than all of us, but together we’re going to make this a cultural changing and defining moment in history.” See also Merlan (2020).

³⁹ My transcription, 1 July 2020.

ideologically loaded. Vorhies has therefore uncovered a form of censorship of conservative beliefs and/or conspiratorial thinking.

Consider another example of conspiracy theorism in the present moment: on June 14, 2020, Winnie Heartstrong, a Republican candidate for the House of Representatives in Missouri, published a 23-page long document laying out a theory which describes the video footage of the murder of George Floyd by Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin as a ‘deepfake’. In other words, Floyd was not murdered by Chauvin, and the video which depicts that murder has been technologically manipulated. The document goes as far as to say that a paid actor⁴⁰ was hired to play the part of Floyd in the video so that it appeared more real. The self-stated purpose of this document, according to Heartstrong – who claims to hold a PhD in political communication – is to urge Americans not to be ‘so emotional’ and to instead ask questions, which presumably, she herself has done in publishing this report. “Today, on June 14, 2020, on behalf of ‘WE THE PEOPLE’,” Heartstrong declares, “I present evidence that suggests that Mr. Jackson⁴¹ and other actors participated in a videographic false flag event using deepfake technology to stoke racial tensions between black and white Americans which reinvigorated the flailing radical Black Lives Matter movement” (Heartstrong, 2020, p. 4). Despite the far-fetched and dubious nature of her claims, Heartstrong seized upon an interesting and yet to be fully understood technology: the ‘deepfake’, which simply indicates faking video evidence with computer software. Picking up on the possibility of ‘deepfakes’ undermining the truth of what one watches in

⁴⁰ This move is one that Alex Jones has used many times, most notably to talk about paid crisis actors who contributed to the ‘faking’ of the Sandy Hook School Shooting.

⁴¹ Above, Mr. Stephen Jesse Jackson is implicated as playing the ‘character’ of George Floyd in the deepfaked arrest video.

videos, Heartstrong seizes upon a set of technological anxieties that might already be present in those who consume her report.⁴²

At the same time, mere existence of her report, on behalf of the regular Americans – ‘we the people’ – reflects a set of anxieties about the overwhelming crisis-ridden time of 2020, from the pandemic to economic struggle to political struggle in the form of mass protests against blatant and widespread racial injustices. “Ordinary Americans and people of goodwill around the world dug deep into internet archives,” putting together all the pieces, and “pouring over evidence gathered from myriad of sources” (Heartstrong, 2020, pp. 4-21), thereby ‘crowdsourcing’ a narrative which could give them peace of mind that racial tensions and injustices were merely manufactured for political agendas. If this event were faked, then other events could also be faked, including the pandemic (and its severity). This was the belief of anti-lockdown protests in the U.S. in the wake of the pandemic restrictions, which popped up in early summer of 2020.

In part the driving force behind anti-lockdown protests was that, in the minds of protestors, the pandemic and subsequent restrictions placed to ‘flatten the curve’ had been overblown and exaggerated. According to PEW data (2020), the number of Americans who say that COVID has been overblown – that is, “it has been made a bigger deal than it really is” – was 29 percent in late April 2020 and was up to 38 percent in June 2020. At the same time, “the increase is particularly stark among Republicans: Just under half (47 percent) said this in late April, compared with nearly two-thirds (63 percent) in early June” (PEW

⁴² Even *Forbes* (2020) has a headline which reads, “Deepfakes are going to wreak havoc on society. We are not prepared.” This resonates with one of Heartstrong’s concluding queries: “What implication does deepfake technology have for other aspects of American civic and political life?”

Research Center, 2020). A significant set of events between these two survey dates? The George Floyd protests. It is no surprise that reactionary publics and conspiracists saw the treatment of anti-lockdown protests compared to the support of the George Floyd protests as indicative of a larger grand plan in which the liberal elites force their progressive agenda down the throats of well-meaning everyday Americans.⁴³ In their eyes, anti-lockdown protestors were chastised for threatening public health while racial justice protestors were supported for standing up for an important cause and recognized for their bravery in taking to the streets despite the pandemic.

Consider Fox News' (2020) characterization: "The coronavirus lockdown is seemingly down and out, as many Democrats in charge of big cities – including several who once insisted on strict quarantine measures – line up to champion the nationwide mass demonstrations over the in-custody death of George Floyd, sans social distancing." Or consider this opinion piece from the *National Review* (2020):

Those who protested the lockdown regime were ridiculed. Governor Gretchen Whitmer in Michigan said that anti-lockdown protests came "at a cost to people's health." Michigan nurses stood in front of protesters' cars with folded arms, leering on in contempt. As hordes of looters and rioters turned to the streets, however, NPR informed us that "dozens of public health and disease experts have signed an open letter in support of the nationwide anti-racism protests." [Hirschauer]

How could a set of protestors exercising their right to free speech and liberty by demanding their states re-open be treated so wildly different than another set of protestors apparently doing the same thing? Now we are asking the sorts of questions that Mikovitz, Vorhies, and Heartstrong would have us *constantly* asking. And if we are asking, that

⁴³ The irony here is not missed: These two sets of protests serve as a stark contrast between how white Americans wielding automatic weapons are treated by police and how largely black (but certainly an interracial crowd) Americans who protest the murder of their brothers and sisters are treated by police.

means we are getting keyed into the little things that might grant us truth, knowledge, and power in the face of overwhelming crises.

A Fallen Public?

These two conspiratorial examples – “Plandemic” and “Deepfake Floyd” – though seemingly different, are in fact connected. In their being connected, an important facet of conspiracy theorism is highlighted: conspiracies seek to connect all the dots, follow all the crumbs, and create a totalizing narrative which explains everything and anything. That is simply their *modus operandi*. It is also their appeal. At the same time, however, conspiracy thinking comes across as a *not-so-distant* cousin of a critical attitude. How can we channel critical thinking without leading it down the dangerous conspiratorial route? When does critical thinking become dangerous, and for whom? This set of difficult questions also parallels the problem of political nostalgia. In a parallel manner to conspiracy theorism, nostalgia offers narratives which explain otherwise complicated, nuanced, and chaotic moments. Such narratives provide enemies and scapegoats to hold responsible at the same time as they provide templates for behavior and (re)action. In yet another parallel manner, nostalgia comes across as a *not-so-distant* cousin of historical memory, which is important for any informed political decision making, just as a critical attitude is. If we are so close to an educated citizenry capable of making effective political decisions, then how have we instead fallen down the conspiracy rabbit hole? Are we really in an era of the fallen public, incapable of rational political decision-making? In and of itself, however, such a question presents a nostalgic fallacy, thereby trapping our ability to move forward into the future.

CHAPTER THREE
NATIONALIST NOSTALGIA, AMERICAN STYLE: DISTORTED MEMORIES
AND CONSPIRACY THEORIES

The Dismantling of America

At the Republican National Convention (RNC) in August of 2020, on the heels of a summer of racial justice protests, in the midst of a global pandemic, and in the face of dubious claims that COVID-19 and the subsequent lockdown and mask mandates were overblown, then-President Trump put the American political situation into stark relief. “At no time before, have voters faced a clearer choice between two parties, two visions, two philosophies, and two agendas: this election will decide whether we save the American dream or whether we allow a socialist agenda to demolish our cherished destiny” (Trump, 2020, Aug 28). As he speaks, his point is *clear*: it is us, or it is them. It is the American dream, or it is the demolition of American destiny. Importantly, only *real Americans* – that is, vigorously verified voters, if strict voter ID regulations were upheld as Trump argued was necessary to prevent election fraud – can save their way of life from being dismantled. Further, Trump argues:

Your vote will decide whether we protect law-abiding citizens or whether we give free reign to violent anarchists, agitators, and criminals who threaten our citizens. And this election will decide whether we will defend the American way of life, or whether we will allow a radical movement to completely dismantle and destroy it. That won’t happen. [Trump, 2020, Aug 28]

The stakes here are indeed high. This is the moment that determines whether America can be *kept great*, protected from her vengeful enemies.

Just four years earlier, Trump had promised in his 2016 RNC speech that: “We Will Make America Strong Again. We Will Make America Proud Again. We Will Make

America Safe Again. And We Will Make America Great Again” (Trump, 2016, July 21). In the lead up to his infamous nostalgic construction, Trump decried ‘the violence in our streets and the chaos in our communities’, proclaiming that he would ‘restore safety’ and reestablish a ‘country of law and order’. Here, in 2016, America is at a ‘moment of crisis’, ‘our very way of life’ threatened. In both 2016 and 2020, Trump’s narrative establishes an America under threat, in crisis, in the throes of violence. This is ironic in part because Trump held the Presidential office between 2016 and 2020, yet the situation for America, according to his rhetoric, became increasingly dire. From 2016 to 2020, his rhetorical tagline shifted from ‘Make America Great Again’ to ‘Keep America Great’. This shift in part implies that while Americans made a choice in 2016, by electing Trump, to make America great again, in 2020, they had to make that choice again to *keep* America great. But over the course of Trump’s four-year tenure, his plans to restore greatness had been undermined by ‘those out to get him’, ‘woke liberal elites’, ‘the mainstream media’, among other ‘conspirators’. Accordingly, the demand to keep America great in 2020 can be read as a crackdown against opponents, not just of Trump, but of America.

In this chapter, I trace the rhetorical story articulated from the 2016 Presidential Election through the 2020 Presidential Election and the January 2021 U.S. Capitol Insurrection. Whereas in the chapters that follow – on *The Proud Boys*, *Patriot Prayer*, and *QAnon* – my analysis is focused on the level of the language used by on-the-ground political actors, in this chapter, I focus on the level of the rhetoric utilized by political leaders and ideologues including Donald Trump, J.D. Vance, Stephen Miller, among others. By collecting and interpreting the political language (largely in speeches, journalistic articles, press releases, tweets, and popular books) of figures who feature on

the national level, (1) I trace the development of the conservative narrative about a declining America; (2) I show the connection between nostalgic rhetoric and conspiratorial thinking; and (3) I argue that both nostalgia and conspiracy theorism indeed have been used towards the ends of dangerous forms of exclusionary nationalism. Nostalgic feelings have been exploited to both excuse and justify the resurgence of violent, hateful, and conspiratorial white nationalism.

To show this development towards exclusionary white nationalism, I rely upon two concepts: *nationalist nostalgia* and *conspiracy theorism*. The two are parallel phenomena, thereby permitting easy slippage from one to the next. How do political leaders and ideologues crystallize nationalist nostalgia, turn memory into mythology, and reinforce conspiracy theories? Nationalist nostalgia is *a prosthetically constructed memory which inspires longing for a lost mythological past*. Trump's rhetoric is by design nostalgic – his 2016 inauguration address comes across much like a literal elegy for the American Dream – as well as constitutive of a specific narrative about what America is and ought to be. The America which was made great again in 2016 necessarily made a claim about who the real Americans were and against which enemies they needed to be protected.

Conspiracy theorism, on the other hand, is *a systematized set of beliefs which inspires real political action in the face of evil*. Once Trump had purportedly restored power to the real American people through his election in 2016, his rhetoric in 2020 served to drum up a more clearly articulated conspiracy organized against the American people. Indeed, 'Keep America Great' linked directly to the QAnon conspiracy theory and the narratives it had spun throughout Trump's presidency – narratives which Trump and his associates peddled both directly and indirectly. One such narrative, which had begun even

before the 2020 election was surrounded by claims of fraudulence, declared that the election was being stolen from Trump, from the American people. This narrative – ‘Stop the Steal’, which officially was kicked off by Roger Stone in 2016 – is in part what led a mob of Proud Boys, Oathkeepers, QAnon adherents, among many others to attempt insurrection at the U.S. Capitol Building on January 6, 2021.

Nostalgia and Authenticity

This project displays how some of the most conservative and reactionary movements, including several violent right-wing groups, are nostalgic and rely on nostalgia to recruit others to their cause without explicitly stating their extremist and hateful goals. How does their nostalgia manifest politically? Why is the rhetorical expression of nostalgia so grabbing? Do deployers of nostalgic rhetoric *actually* feel nostalgia? To what extent is the use of nostalgic rhetoric a political maneuver, or is it a true expression of experience? How do listeners empathize with nostalgia? Where does their nostalgia come from? To make sense of *where* nostalgia comes from, I offer an account of memory and narrative as forming the basis for individuals to affectively connect to something beyond themselves. Allison Landsberg (2004) describes ‘prosthetic memory’ as a novel form of collective memory in the present moment given the sheer volume of cultural production and consumption enabled by technology (p. 1-2). Prosthetic memory is central to understanding how individuals connect themselves *affectively* to memory, history, or narrative beyond their immediate experience. That is, experiences which are now a part of the historical record of memory are not experiences which individuals *directly* had themselves. Instead, they are a kind of ‘cultural memory’ replicated and communicated through the process of

production and consumption of cultural material, including language, stories, and imagery. Yet, the cultural memory of experiences enables powerful affective connection to something individually, socially, and historically beyond oneself.

Narratives which we relate to beyond ourselves permit self-identification, shape individual subjectivity, and lay out templates for political action. However, the suturing of oneself onto something external entails an affectively powerful connection to some cultural artifact, concept, or narrative which could serve to distort and obscure our attempted interpretations of both self and world. This is the potential political problem of *nostalgia*: memory and narrative can be shaped in such a way as to evoke certain feelings in others. This does not imply that nostalgia is not felt, or that the loss around which nostalgia is experienced is not real. Some feel real loss, some experience real longing for a real past. Even still, others can intentionally exploit nostalgic feelings that are already there. When it comes to political nostalgia, this powerful affective tool can indeed be used as a means of inspiring potentially violent political action, consolidating power, and solidifying oppressive hierarchy.

Drawing on Svetlana Boym's (2001) articulation of the modern nostalgic in *The Future of Nostalgia*, I argue that the thing which is lost, mourned for, and desired is *in part* a simpler past with more clear resolutions to difficult problems. Nostalgia should be thought of as a *misremembering*. Insofar as memory is unreliable, misremembering means in the most basic sense that whatever is recalled is not recalled *exactly as it happened*. In a very general sense, the misremembering that underpins nostalgia is the presumption of clarity and simplicity in what has passed. Memorative triggers are misread, but misremembering happens in distinct ways, around distinct objects, and to different extents.

For some, the misremembering is intentional – it serves to cull up a specific past that one wants to return to. For others, the misremembering is grounded in reality but shaped by limited ideological perspective – there really were jobs and safe suburban neighborhoods in the past, and everyone had the opportunity to live that dream. What is remembered is *not* the racist segregation policies that kept white suburban neighborhoods flourishing, but instead the fact that those neighborhoods and their happy and stable families existed. My analysis here will oscillate between these two versions of misremembering, as I try to account for the following. First, the suffering, despair, and longing of some nostalgics is indeed *real* and is inspired by *actual* conditions, but it is fed by a memory which has ideological blinders. In other words, the misremembering comes from a constitutive problem with memory – it is a limited, often unreliable perspective that misses the whole picture. Second, since the experience of nostalgia is *real* for many, their decision to act accordingly comes from their own analysis of the situation. Perhaps the listener is affectively primed by rhetoric, but their agency remains their own. Third, there are those who manipulate memory and cast nostalgia constructions, evoking them in rhetoric and attaching them to political action. These political figures and ideologues are the focus of this chapter.

Let me begin to build the intentional nostalgic construction that serves to grab real experiences of nostalgia felt by real people. One key assumption underlying nostalgia is the notion that what has been lost was a purer and simpler time. We come to assume that the thing which is impossible to return to is not merely our lost past or our home, but also a past and a home that *once* provided simplicity, purity, and security, even though it is historically the case that both past and home were indeed complicated. Nostalgia is a

misremembering because it results in a misinterpretation of past in reaction to the present. Importantly, insofar as modernity implies complexity for the nostalgic, and as things are necessarily black and white and dichotomous in the eyes of the modern nostalgic, misremembering and misinterpreting the past goes right along with misinterpreting, or ignoring altogether, the facts of the present.

At the same time, the *other* thing which is purportedly lost, mourned, and desired is also a mythologically constructed national identity – an authentic self and a *Volk* –, which only functions *because* prosthetic memory permits collectively constructed and repeated misinterpreted memories. I refer to this dimension as *nationalist nostalgia*, which relies on assumptions of a simpler past, a clearly defined and stable home, *and* a mythological authentic identity tied to a national homeland and national history. Nationalist nostalgia represents the longing for a lost romanticized national identity which existed in a much simpler time and better enabled the ‘authentic self’ to flourish. Herein lies the myth: the presumption of an authentic self which flourished once before in the home that *has now been lost* also presumes a past that was better, stronger, purer, more whole, and untouched by outside forces. Nostalgia is a distorted memory at its core; therefore, what is demanded to be restored is nothing more than a fictionalized and mythologized construction. To recapture this mythological past, nationalist political movements ‘return’ through installation in the present of whatever has been perceived and articulated as lost. Sometimes this installation is a repeat of past structures; other times, it is an attempted creation of something new but by reproducing tired old hierarchies. In either case, national identity and individual authentic identity are linked in this construction because self is bound to national homeland, and the goal of *installation* is to permit yet again flourishing

of national self and, concomitantly, nation. In all, nationalist nostalgia works in three parts: (1) recognition of the self as part of a 'national' community which imbues the self with meaning, (2) articulation of the authentic national identity as exclusive and thus defined in opposition to the perceived threat of enemy others, and (3) staunch defense against those perceived threats to the now-restored American way of life at any cost.

Nostalgic feelings can be triggered by fear, rage, resentment, uncertainty, dislocation, isolation, or alienation, and tend to evoke feelings of *loss*. After all, nostalgia represents a longing for a lost home – a home which may be prosthetically constructed – to which one desires to return. How, then, do individuals react in the face of such loss and longing? Samuel Huntington, intellectual father of contemporary right-wing reactionaries, argues in *Who are We? The Challenges to American National Identity* (2003) that:

One very plausible reaction would be the emergence of exclusivist sociopolitical movements composed largely but not only of white males, primarily working-class and middle-class, protesting and attempting to stop or reverse these changes and what they believe, accurately or not, to be the diminution of their social and economic status, their loss of jobs to immigrants and foreign countries, the perversion of their culture, the displacement of their language, and the erosion or even evaporation of the historical identity of their country. [p. 310]

Huntington crystallizes in his book the post-9/11 moment and, in his mind, the set of challenges facing distinctly *American* national identity. Huntington also details the reversal he expects a certain demographic of individuals – working/middle class white males – to demand in the face of those challenges. In a more general sense, what Huntington articulates here is a perceived loss of privilege, economic stability, and security in one's own identity. The reactionary desire, then, is to *restore* and *bolster* the identity at stake, including all the social, cultural, economic, religious, and political circumstances that permit its privilege and/or flourishing.

In Huntington's construction, *real American* national identity is at stake. *That authentic identity, without explicitly detailing its contours, implies a white, working and/or middle-class, heterosexual, cisgendered male with traditional values and a family to support.* The *authentic* here refers to 'realness'; it can also be used to describe truth to one's being or identity; or it can connote connection and meaning to something beyond oneself. In this context, and in the context of Trumpian rhetoric, authenticity functions to *articulate, construct, and denote* the boundaries which establish who the 'real American' is and what the 'real America' looks like. Trumpian rhetoric represents a reactionary and conservative deployment of the trope of authenticity through first nostalgic and then conspiratorial appeals that make a claim about *who* and *what* needs to be protected against *which* enemies.

Authenticity produces mythology – the very mythology that gets built in and through nostalgic constructions of the past. Once a mythology is built, it becomes easier to locate conspiratorial enemies who would undermine its coming to fruition. Couple this with the “adaptability [of nostalgia] as a tool for revealing cultural values, how quickly such values are mobilized to action, and how the bias of such longing hints that all history affords multiple interpretations. Most important, a rhetoric of nostalgia also expresses what we yearn for: in times of instability, nostalgia calms our lives by providing an easy model for who we think we wish we were” (Kurlinkus & Kurlinkus, 2018, p. 90). The trope of authenticity as it functions as part of nationalist nostalgia,⁴⁴ then, is a political tool

⁴⁴ Kurlinkus and Kurlinkus (2018) describe a phenomenon called the 'nostalgia crux', which helps describe how nostalgic narratives provide explanation and answer for real felt problems. By the turn of rhetoric, a given nostalgic crux represents, “an oversimplified problem that, once defeated, will seemingly restore the lost ideal” (p. 92). In other words: This instability felt here? That's a product of mass immigration. Once we solve the problem of mass immigration, you will be restored again. But the crux does not begin to touch on actual issues at stake, like unfettered capitalism and profiteering.

exploited to turn historical interpretation and collective memory into a dangerous mythological narrative that plays upon genuine experiences of loss, longing, anxiety, and fear.⁴⁵

Nostalgia and American Mythology

To better make sense of the relationship between authenticity – which delineates the true or real America(n) – and nationalist nostalgia, collective memory becomes an important concept. A given individual can have an affective connection to a memory which they never experienced, and this affective connection, made possible through *collective memory*, occupies an integral part of our understanding of our self and place in the world. How we relate to our past reflects upon how we orient our beliefs and behaviors in the present and future. Collective memories form mediated narratives to which we can interweave our own selves and experiences. Landsberg (2004) describes in *Prosthetic Memory* the ways in which memory functions in American ‘mass culture’: packaged as commodified bits for people to consume, collective memory can be used to make sense of a self as part of a historical narrative beyond immediate individual experience (p. 1). Notably, Landsberg’s articulation of packaged and prosthetically reattached segments of narrative, information, and memory, foreshadows the QAnon phenomenon: a quasi-democratically constructed ‘master narrative’ sutured together by co-collaborators, co-interpreters, and co-creators. Here, Landsberg both pays homage to the potential of

⁴⁵ See my Chapter 4, *On-the-Ground Right-Wing Publics: What ever happened to being Proud of Your Boy?* for more on this point. See also Monahan (2021).

information trafficking and world/history-building across the Internet *as well as* to the role of the ideologically powerful in shaping mass culture and disseminating master narratives.

For Landsberg (2004), modern memory is a prosthetic memory, which “emerges at the interface between a person and a historical narrative about the past,” enabling an “experience through which the person sutures himself or herself into a larger history” (p. 2). This is to say that the memories may not be my own, but the experience of them through different venues of mass culture – rhetoric, movies, television, media, museums, etc. – allows me to relate to a larger historical narrative beyond myself. As Landsberg (2004) points out, too, this relation to historical narrative is not simply about understanding the narrative, but also about being *affectively* connected to it to such a degree that such a memory can “shape that person’s subjectivity and politics” (p. 2). Moreover, since collective memories are modular, and emotional connection to them is strong, the boundary between what is real or not in terms of historical memory, as well as the line between truth and fiction, becomes difficult to discern for someone who is affectively invested in a particular articulation of memory. Not to mention that, “new technologies of reproduction threaten to dissolve the difference – or an individual’s ability to discern the difference – between ‘authentic’ and mass-mediated memories, between individual and collective memories” (Landsberg, 2004, p. 15). If Landsberg is, on the one hand, correct about the blurring of authentic and mediated memories, of individual and collective memories, and of memory and history, then misremembering is a likely possibility. On the other hand, if she is correct about the significant impact of memory in all its multifaceted dimensions on the formation of one’s subjectivity, one’s understanding of oneself, and one’s politics, then we ought to be wary of the potentially nefarious side of the commodification of memory.

Memory can indeed be weaponized – as mythology – for both shaping political subjectivity and inspiring political action under the guise of authenticity, under the guise of being true to oneself.⁴⁶

Misremembering on the part of the listener –, or mythologizing on the part of the peddler –, can therefore be used as justification for political projects by rallying supporters through an appeal to a lost authentic identity. *Nostalgia* is integral to understanding both public misremembering and longing for a mythologized past. Nostalgia was originally developed to describe the ‘disease’ of homesickness of Swiss soldiers in the seventeenth century.⁴⁷ Ironically, the etymological construction of the term itself – a combination of the Greek words, *nostos* and *algia*, representing the return home and sorrow/longing respectively – is an ahistorical construction, displaying a veneer of legitimacy by pulling together Greek root words, but remaining far removed from its purported ‘origins’. In a sense, then, *nostalgia* is quite literally a mythologized construction in and of itself.

In the contemporary moment, nostalgia has evolved to represent the feeling of longing for a lost past often connected to a specific place. Nostalgia is a particular way of relating to memory (or collective memory or history more generally), and it is an affective longing to the degree of remembering only the positive things – such as the clarity or

⁴⁶ It is worth noting that receivers, listeners, consumers of memory are my focus in this particular section. This does not exclude ideologues who peddle embellished or even false memories, narratives, and rhetoric. Those peddlers create mythology which the public – American citizens in this case – link to in a *nostalgic* manner. Later, as I narrow in on the rhetoric of ideologues and political leaders, I will focus on the mythologized ‘real’ America they construct through their language so as to evoke nostalgia in their listeners and inspire political action.

⁴⁷ See Starobinski (1966), p. 83, and Boym (2001), p. *xiii*.

simplicity of meaning and values – of that which has passed. The effect of rose-colored lenses implies misremembering. As Boym (2001) puts it:

Modern nostalgia is a mourning for the impossibility of mythical return, the loss of an enchanted world with clear borders and values; it could be a secular expression of spiritual longing, a nostalgia for an absolute, a home that is both physical and spiritual, the Edenic unity of time and space before entry into history. The nostalgic is looking for a spiritual addressee. Encountering silence, he looks for memorable signs, desperately misreading them. [p. 8]

There are a few things to recognize here in Boym's elaboration of nostalgia: the impossibility of the return, the desire for a simpler time and space before the messiness of history, and the *desperate* misreading of signs which evoke an embellished or incorrect recollection. This is to say that there was no before time in which some mythically pure figure existed in a clear-cut world. Yet this is the very past which is longed for by the modern nostalgic, driven to desperation by his circumstances. To recognize this kind of mythical past in representations in the present is to *misinterpret* both the sign and the past. Jean Starobinski (1966), whom Boym relies upon in her theorization of nostalgia, describes 'memorative signs' as triggers for nostalgic misinterpretations of past. As a fragment of the past, "it revives in the imagination all our former life and all the 'associated' images with which it is connected. This 'memorative sign' is related to a partial presence which causes one to experience, with pleasure and pain, the imminence and the impossibility of complete restoration of this universe which emerges fleetingly from oblivion" (Starobinski, 1966, p. 93). Even the slightest flash of an image, the slightest reference to something lost, can trigger feelings of nostalgia in which the past comes crashing back as a stark contrast to the present. It does not matter how real that image is, or how true to the reality of the past that image is. In either case, what matters is that simply a representation can trigger the affective response of nostalgia.

Once nostalgia is triggered, there are different ways in which one might relate to the feeling of longing.⁴⁸ ‘Restorative nostalgia’, as Boym terms it, is a useful frame for analyzing Trump’s rhetoric from 2016 through to 2020, specifically the transition from *nationalist nostalgia* to *conspiracy theorism*. Restorative nostalgia functions as a motivator for recovering lost truths, particularly in the form of lost national identities and pasts.⁴⁹ These nostalgics, “do not think of themselves as nostalgic; they believe that their project is about truth. This kind of nostalgia characterizes national and nationalist revivals all over the world, which engage in anti-modern myth-making of history by means of a return to national symbols and myths” (Boym, 2001, p. 41). One need only think of Trump’s rhetorical references during his presidential campaign and tenure. He regularly refers to ‘patriotic’ symbols like the national flag and national monuments/statues,⁵⁰ he makes

⁴⁸ As Boym (2001) puts it, “two kinds of nostalgia characterize one’s relationship to the past, to the imagined community, to home, to one’s own self-perception: restorative and reflective... Two kinds of nostalgia are not absolute types, but rather tendencies, ways of giving shape and meaning to longing” (p. 41).

⁴⁹ See Heidegger (1927), *Being and Time*, in particular Division II. The point of departure for Heidegger’s work is the fallen Dasein (human existence), which he sets as the object of his study to restore it to its former authenticity; this is an act of reclaiming human existence as authentic. Temporality figures importantly in Heidegger’s work: Dasein’s ownmost potentiality-for-being is located in its history, which must be restored and repeated in the present for the future so Dasein can thus be authentic. Eventually, this philosophical form goes on to exist more concretely in terms of recovering and restoring an authentic German *Volk* as a political program. Thus, I would argue that Heidegger fits the kind of ‘restorative nostalgic’ that Boym is describing here.

⁵⁰ From Trump’s speech in Phoenix: “In the proud tradition of America’s great leaders, from George Washington — please, don’t take his statue down, please. Please. Does anybody want George Washington’s statue? No. Is that sad? Is that all sad? To Lincoln, to Teddy Roosevelt, I see they want to take Teddy Roosevelt’s down, too. They’re trying to figure out why. They don’t know. They’re trying to take away our culture. They are trying to take away our history” (Trump, 2017, Aug 23“”).

consistent claims about ‘remembering’ the forgotten and left-behind American,⁵¹ and he consistently laments the struggle for ‘truth’ in the face of fake news coverage.⁵² Do these flashes of memorative signs rhetorically produced by Trump trigger feelings of nostalgia in his supporters? What kind of mythological past do these signs refer to? What kind of historical narrative is being told?

Theoretically speaking, restorative nostalgia boils the past-present-future narrative down into one single plot, in which there is a “transcendental cosmology and a simple pre-modern conception of good and evil,” and in which a “Manichaeian battle of good and evil” comes to replace “ambivalence, the complexity of history, and the specificity of modern circumstances” (Boym, 2001, p. 43).⁵³ This is to say that, in the context of the realm of ‘Make America Great Again,’ the authentic American – the good – is to be restored and defended in the face of all those myriad perceived threats – the evil – materialized in and through Trump’s rhetoric. The tendency to articulate a *master* historical narrative, to make claims to a ‘truth’ to be restored, and to couch the situation in a dire struggle between good

⁵¹ Again from Phoenix: “Our movement is a movement built on love. It’s love for fellow citizens. It’s love for struggling Americans who’ve been left behind, and love for every American child who deserves a chance to have all of their dreams come true” (Trump, 2017, Aug 23).

⁵² From a 24 February 2017 tweet: “FAKE NEWS media knowingly doesn’t tell the truth. A great danger to our country...” (@realDonaldTrump).

⁵³ Boym (2001) compares restorative nostalgia to *reflective nostalgia*, which signifies an orientation to the past such that a multitude of possibilities are now opened up accordingly. One does not get lost in this kind of nostalgia, for it in effect awakens, “multiple planes of consciousness;” and, it is that distance from the ‘home’ which drives one to negotiate the relationship between past, present, and future (Boym, 2001, p. 50). In a sense, reflective nostalgia is a return and not a return at the same time: your home grounds you, your distance from that home lends you the space for critical reflection, and that reflection can guide you forwards.

and evil, each serve to lead the restorative nostalgic, as Boym argues, down the path of conspiracy theorizing.

Consider, for example, QAnon, the conspiracy movement within which Trump's rhetoric has been woven since Q was born on internet message boards.⁵⁴ Trump had also notably amplified QAnon accounts on social media up until his Twitter account was suspended after January 6th. One infamous Qdrop articulates the restoration at stake: "My fellow Americans, over the course of the next several days you will undoubtedly realize that we are taking back our great country (the land of the free) from the evil tyrants that wish to do us harm and destroy the last remaining refuge of shining light" (Qdrop #34). In this case, the truth of the matter to be uncovered is the fact of evil harming and destroying America. The truth to be restored, too, is that 'authentic' America, which has been lost, but which Q clearly claims to remember as better, simpler, and freer. That idea which QAnon adherents long for is 'our great country', and in the face of evil – which has conspired against the people – America will be made and kept great. In other words, as Boym (2001) puts it, "'They' conspire against 'our' homecoming, hence 'we' have to conspire against 'them' in order to restore 'our' imagined community" (p. 43). Working to 'Keep America Great', then, serves to undermine the conspiracy against the homeland which forced the need to 'Make America Great Again' in the first place.

At the same time, claiming to restore and protect the true homeland – 'our great country' – serves to produce a mythological account of how the imagined community came to be. In a sense, then, the collective understanding of 'America' becomes so reliant upon

⁵⁴ See my Chapter 5, *Conspiracy Theory as Radicalization: It's the End of America as We Know it*, for more on the background of QAnon and its connection to Trump.

nostalgia that the object of longing becomes an authentic fiction constructed out of a mythical past. Not simply this, though. Each time the master historical narrative is recalled, each time the mythology is reconstructed, each time a rose-colored memory of America is triggered, the ‘authentic’ identity repeated along with it is further solidified and elevated. Moreover, as Michael Monahan (2021) describes the myth-making central to white nationalism: “If what ‘we’ are is the highest or purest manifestation of the human, and ‘we’ are who we are through appeal to a mythic narrative that requires a constant telling and re-telling to maintain its potency, then whiteness maintains itself in and through the repeated encounter with, and overcoming of, some ‘external’ existential threat” (p. 9). The authentic America that is nostalgically recalled, as well as its circumstances for flourishing – which once existed but allegedly no longer do –, is emblematic of an ‘America’ which privileges some but not others. It is emblematic of an ‘America’ that tells some histories but not others. It is emblematic of a true American who juxtaposes himself to ‘others’ who always represent an existential threat to be overcome. Mythologies of America are mythologies of whiteness, masculinity, empire, and grandeur. They cover over varied perspectives and critical narratives, and they establish a hierarchy of not only *whose* stories matter but also *whose* lives and identities matter.

Longing for the American Dream

Notions of return, recovery, restoration, rebuilding, and reclamation – all integral to nationalist nostalgia – surfaced consistently in Trump’s early presidential rhetoric. In his Inaugural Address (2017), Trump proclaimed: “We, the citizens of America, are now joined in a great national effort to rebuild our country and to restore its promise for all of

our people” (Trump). Despite on its face inclusivity, this is a rallying call to supporters who feel threatened by a host of outside forces and enemy others.⁵⁵ These pose *imminent* danger to the American way of life and have put average American citizens in the dire situation they find themselves in. *What* are these perceived threats and fears? Who – *which* ‘Americans’ – perceive them? *Why* do they perceive such threats?

After Trump won the 2016 election, attempted explanations abounded. One narrative in particular took hold: the ‘white working class’, Hilary Clinton’s ‘deplorables’, were to blame. This was both a helpful and harmful explanation. It played the blame game; it pitted groups against one another; it inhibited recognizing the root causes of the very real problems that group faces. Ironically, this *also* describes the function of Trump’s Make America Great Again rhetoric: instead of admitting that unfettered capitalism is the root cause for contemporary ills, Trump redirected that anger toward racialized others, like Mexican immigrants, for example. At the same time, the rhetorical construction of the white working class figured as a nostalgic, resentful, and hateful entity permitted understanding of the *version* of America to be rebuilt. As the narrative goes, it is the white cisgendered, heterosexual man who finds himself in a rough place: politically forgotten, economically depressed, culturally threatened, physically suffering, and psychologically alone. Trump enabled a visceral response to these dire facts; he embodied a man of the people who could return America and her citizens to their once flourishing – read:

⁵⁵ By this point, on the campaign trail, Trump had already decried Mexican immigrants multiple times. His campaign announcement famously included the line that, “When Mexico sends its people, they’re not sending their best [sic]. They’re sending people that have lots of problems. They’re bringing drugs. They’re bringing crime. They’re rapists” (Clark, 2015, Jun 16). The enemy others here are invading Mexican immigrants (among others), coming to steal American jobs, bringing the ‘worst people’.

privileged – way of life. It is important to note here that in articulating, representing, and claiming to address such threats, Trump’s rhetoric serves to both assuage and stoke fears: he reminds us of ‘American carnage’ at the same time as he emboldens political action to redress that carnage. He reminds us that the American Dream is dead, but that he will bring it back “bigger and better than ever” (Clark, 2015, Jun 16). It is this playing on emotions – particularly fear and anxiety, but also anger and resentment – which rallied people to that alluring albeit abstract notion of the restoration, reclamation, and later protection of America.

In his Inaugural Address (2017), Trump famously remarked on the great ‘American carnage’ which would abruptly cease as soon as he took presidential authority. In comparison with ‘flourishing Washington elites’, Trump argued that,

for too many of our citizens, a different reality exists: Mothers and children trapped in poverty in our inner cities; rusted-out factories scattered like tombstones across the landscape of our nation; an education system, flush with cash, but which leaves our young and beautiful students deprived of knowledge; and the crime and gangs and drugs that have stolen too many lives and robbed our country of so much unrealized potential. The American carnage stops right here and now. [Trump, 2017, Inaugural Address]

The poverty of inner cities, the ghost towns that were once full of booming industry and jobs, deteriorating public schools laying waste to the next generation of Americans, and the outright stealing of lives by crime all contribute to what could be interpreted as the undermining of the American dream. Given the strong language of ‘carnage,’ Trump indeed alludes to the *death* of the American dream, a lost dream that he eulogizes here.

Of course, there are multiple culprits: most emphatically, ‘crime and gangs and drugs,’ a sentiment which not only resonates powerfully with Trump’s racist rhetoric surrounding Mexican immigrants and instigates in part his plan to build a wall, but also resonates with the typical ‘law and order’ adage embraced from Reagan to Clinton and so

on. Crime has always been a serious threat to the American dream, and deviant ‘others’ and ‘outsiders’ have typically served as scapegoats. Another culprit hides in Trump’s description of the education system, ‘flush with cash’. This alleges mismanagement of public schools by bureaucrats, corrupt officials, and presumably liberal-minded educators, thereby paving the way for the ‘critical race theory’ fights spearheaded by QAnon adherents as well as other conservative conspiracy theorists. There is also a larger systemic critique, which resonates very powerfully with sections of the population seemingly forgotten by their political representatives. “For too long,” Trump argues, “a small group in our nation’s Capital has reaped the rewards of government while the people have borne the cost. Washington flourished – but the people did not share in its wealth. Politicians prospered – but the jobs left, and the factories closed” (Trump, 2017, Inaugural Address).⁵⁶

This is very clearly an argument against elitism and in favor of the *people*, which has the potential for broad appeal.⁵⁷ Trump speaks here to a consistent theme of conservative rhetoric, and to a real political situation in which the wealthiest – including those in government positions – continue to consolidate their wealth and power while

⁵⁶ This language is often repeated by QAnon adherents, who claim things such as: “535 Federal lawmakers made up of men and women... are burning our country to the ground” (Appendix B, Figure 100: QAnon41020 wordpress, we have to rebuild), or “They refuse to represent you. They refuse to stand up for the law, for your rights, for the Constitution. They only stand for themselves. Their fraud. Their grift. Their corruption” (Supplemental Content, thedonald.win, Jan 6 they don’t represent you, p. 1).

⁵⁷ Trump’s movement has quite often been described as a populist one, insofar as he prioritizes and embodies the needs and wants of the people as opposed to elites. It is important to note that populist claims are predicated on a particular kind of authenticity: the ‘populist’ must make a claim to solely represent and channel the will of the real and authentic people. It might even be claimed that the allure of populism is the allure of authenticity. For more on this connection, see Jan-Werner Müller (2016), *What is Populism?* A caveat, however: discussions about populism can importantly serve to delegitimize the kinds of complaints made by the people and embodied in the rhetoric of the ‘populist.’

wages for everyday Americans decrease. The irony, of course, is that Trump is indeed one of those elites. As a populist critique, though, Trump's rhetoric paved the way for more dramatic conspiracy theorizing, which emerged in part with the growth in popularity of QAnon. While political elites in Washington (note that Trump is not one of them – he remains a political outsider) have flourished over the past years, the people have suffered. As Trump argues at a Heritage Foundation meeting, “After many, many years of government obstructing job creation, you have now an administration that promotes job creation and celebrates the dignity of work” (Trump, 2017, Oct 27). This is because of mismanaged money in corrupt government hands, and because U.S. politicians do not care about American workers and American jobs.⁵⁸ Taken further, ‘elites’ are allegedly engaged in a conspiracy *against the people for their own interests*, to the point of taking away American dignity.

Jobs and work are key themes in the American imaginary *and* in Trump's rhetoric. These themes serve to easily grab the attention and support of the American everyman who has been left behind as industry has left him incapable of building and supporting a family. Historically, there has been an important connection between having a good job, being hard-working, and achieving the American dream – this is part of the mythology that makes America great. The Protestant work ethic, as Max Weber called it, entails an understanding of oneself as individual, independent, self-reliant, and entrepreneurial, all with the end goal of property, wealth accumulation, and family lineage to carry that capital along into the

⁵⁸ “You know, we’re sending our jobs to Mexico, China’s taking our jobs. Japan. They’re all taking our jobs, folks” (Trump, 2016, May 6). Two underlying points here: (1) U.S. politicians profit off of offshoring jobs and production, and (2) enemy others/outsideers are *taking* the jobs away from Americans.

future. This is indeed the narrative of American ideologues and conservative political figures like J.D. Vance, author of *Hillbilly Elegy* (2016), once prophet of the ‘white working class’, and newly elected (in 2022) U.S. Senator in Ohio. In 2016, Vance told his ‘rags to riches in the face of adversity’ tale, all the while criticizing the cultural depravity of the white working class to which he formerly belonged. In 2022, he capped off his ‘self-made-man tale’ with a successful run for Congress as a ‘Conservative outsider’ who will bring Ohioan values to Washington, D.C.

Vance rearticulates the narrative organized around the typical masculine, heterosexual, and traditional American theme: presence of a good job and a hard-working mentality in an individual will necessarily enable that the male breadwinner at the center of the household to support himself and his family in a nice home and in a nice neighborhood. More than this: part and parcel to the renewal of the American Dream is the notion that, “the hard working people of this country huddle, in the break room, at the rest stop, or at the end of a long shift, they take pride in knowing that the projects they work and the products they make aren't just building business, they're building families and communities and most of all, they are building this nation that we all love so much” (Trump, 2017, Oct 27). Trump’s rhetoric very clearly resonates with the long-standing narrative of hard work and the American dream: “We want to lift our people from welfare to work, from dependence to independence, and from poverty to prosperity” (Trump, 2017, Aug 23). Work enables independence which enables prosperity, both individually and collectively – this sentiment is the lifeblood of the American dream, of American

masculinity, and subsequently of the American identity.⁵⁹ Trump acknowledges this again when, at a 2020 rally in Michigan, he says, “Your husbands – they want to get back to work, right? We are getting your husbands back to work” (Trump, 2020, Oct 27). But the disappearance of good jobs has inhibited prosperity for the mythologized and idealized white man *as well as his nation*. Here, Trumpian conservatives weave in a recurrent relatable theme: the departure of industrial production and the ‘good jobs’ which go along with it.⁶⁰ As industry leaves, factories are left ‘scattered like tombstones.’

Arlie Russel Hochschild (2016) in *Strangers in their Own Land* explains how, “... well-paid, union-protected jobs through which a man could support a stay-at-home wife are gone for all but a small elite. Given automation and corporate offshoring, real wages of high school-educated American men have fallen 40 percent since 1970. For the whole bottom 90 percent of workers, average wages have flattened since 1980.” (Hochschild, 2016, p. 125) That is, the possibility for a man to acquire and hold a ‘good job’, earn a living, have a wife and kids, and own a nice home, – something that was indeed possible for his parents or grandparents – has now slipped away. This is, as Vance puts it, “the decline of the industrial Midwest and the hollowing out of the economic core of working whites... Manufacturing jobs have gone overseas, and middle-class jobs are harder to come

⁵⁹ This sentiment also resonates with Arlie Hochschild’s (2016) account of Tea-Party Americans in Louisiana. She notes, “Maybe I was missing the most obvious answer: jobs. Oil brought jobs. Jobs brought money. Money brought a better life – school, home, health, a piece of the American Dream.” (Hochschild, 2016 pp. 71-72)

⁶⁰ “Progress had also become harder – more chancy and more restricted to a small elite. The Great Recession of 2008 in which people lost homes, savings, and jobs had come and gone, but it had shaken people up. Meanwhile, for the bottom 90 percent of Americans, the Dream Machine – invisible over the brow of the hill – had stopped due to automation, offshoring, and the growing power of multinationals vis-à-vis their workforces. At the same time, for that 90 percent, competition between white men and everyone else had increased – for jobs, for recognition, and for government funds.” (Hochschild, 2016, p. 141)

by for people without college degrees” (Vance, 2016, p.7). In keeping with the ever-pervasive work ethic in the U.S., Vance argues that the lack of ‘good’ jobs not only keeps white men in economic distress but also keeps them from realizing their identity as ‘Americans’ who prosper per the promised American dream.

Enemies of the American Dream

The articulated need to restore and defend distinctly *American* values that made America great in the first place also brings with it a set of enemies who inhibit – or are involved in a complex conspiracy against – the values that make the American dream possible. “Cultural America is under siege,” argues Samuel Huntington in *Who are We?* (2004).⁶¹ “Yet some societies,” he continues, “confronted with serious challenges to their existence, are also able to postpone their demise and halt disintegration, by *renewing* their sense of national identity, their national purpose, and the cultural values they have in common” (Huntington, 2004, p. 12). In a parallel vein, Trump argued at his rally in Phoenix (2017) after the protests in Charlottesville that,

Americans share one flag, one home and one glorious destiny... As long as we remember these truths, as long as we have enough strength and courage in ourselves, then there is no challenge too great, no task too large, no dream beyond our reach... This is our moment. This is our chance. This is our opportunity to recapture our destiny like never before, to rebuild our future, to deliver justice for every forgotten man and woman and child in America. [Trump, 2017, Aug 23]

⁶¹ Huntington’s book was published in 2004, well before the ‘Trumpian moment.’ This indicates that the issue of cultural anxiety is not immediately novel but is instead the product of a larger trend in recent (post-9/11) American history.

Note here a few important themes: the sharing of one flag and one home indicates a collective national identity.⁶² Americans also share a *destiny*, a mythological narrative which stretches all the way back to the Puritan founding of a ‘city upon a hill.’ The language of destiny indicates a grand providential plan beyond the will of mere individuals. To remember the *truth* of this identity – that is, understanding *who we are* as Americans – enables overcoming the challenges which face America at this moment. Finally, the truth of American identity⁶³ must be recaptured; it has been both forgotten and stomped on by multifarious enemies, both domestic and foreign. “As long as we remember who we are, and what we are fighting for... as long as we have pride in our country... faith in our God... our values will endure, our communities will flourish, our people will prosper, and America, the land we love, will thrive as never ever before” (Trump, 2017, Oct 27). Remembering who we are and recapturing ‘our destiny’ is necessary to rebuilding our future, ‘with liberty and justice for all’ those who have been forgotten.

On their face, Trump’s words again seem inclusive. But it becomes clear that ‘our’ America and ‘our’ people are in fact an exclusive category defined in opposition to enemy others. In Phoenix, Trump (2017, Oct 27) declares: “This evening... we reaffirm our shared customs, traditions, and values. We love our country.” Against *whom* must we restore and

⁶² Huntington opens his book with a discussion of the role of the American flag in representing the collective cultural identity of America: it is a ‘central symbol of national identity for America’ (Huntington, 2004, p. 1).

⁶³ It is worth noting here that, as Ashley Jardina (2019) notes in *White Identity Politics*, that ascribing to white racial identity serves as an indicator for individual attitudes and beliefs about *who* is a real/true/authentic American, defined in an exclusive sense (Jardina, pp. 123-127). Individuals who ascribe to white racial identity have an “understanding of race and national identity [that is] very much an affirmation of the dominant group’s ability to capture and define the identity of the country” (Jardina, 2019, p. 152). More on this as the enemies ‘Others’ of the American dream are shown to inhibit white identity, whiteness, and American-ness.

defend our distinctly American values?⁶⁴ There are three rhetorical claims and interpretations here. First, there is the problem of immigration: allegedly rising numbers of black and brown immigrants and refugees. In Phoenix, Trump (2017, Oct 27) continues: “The people of Arizona know the deadly and heartbreaking consequences of illegal immigration, the lost lives, the drugs, the gangs, the cartels, the crisis of smuggling and trafficking... These are animals.” Illegal immigration, uncontrolled immigration, have had violent consequences on American communities.

Second, there is also increasing (*albeit not enough*) political recognition, job access, empowerment, and equality of people of color (typically just referred to as ‘minorities’, but in fact representing Blacks, Latinx communities, and Muslims). This is crystallized in Trump’s combination of his own self-image as the ‘voice’ of forgotten Americans⁶⁵, his significant hesitancy around condemning racist violence, as after Charlottesville in 2017⁶⁶, and his consistent retorts against expressions of protest against violence meted out on Black bodies, for example. Trump has decried BLM many times, referring to the movement as a violent mob, a symbol of hate, and a form of tyranny and propaganda which overwrites America’s great history. As NFL players followed the lead of Colin Kaepernick and kneeled in protest at the National Anthem, Trump lashed out against their voices, calling

⁶⁴ Huntington (2004) declares: “To define themselves, people need an other. Do they also need an enemy” (p. 24)?

⁶⁵ At the Republican National Convention in 2016, Trump stated: “The forgotten men and women of our country — people who work hard but no longer have a voice: I am your voice” (2016, Jul 21).

⁶⁶ This is the infamous ‘fine people on both sides’ moment. Trump responds to reporters: “What about the alt-left that came charging at the, as you say, the alt-right?... You had a group on one side that was bad, and you had a group on the other side that was also very violent... You had some very bad people in that group, but you also had people that were very fine people, on both sides” (Trump, 2017, Aug 15).

the protests ‘disrespectful of our country’ and demanding that NFL players who knelt in protest be fired. In a tweet, Trump (2020) argued, “We should be standing up straight and tall, ideally with a salute, or a hand on heart. There are other things you can protest, but not our Great American Flag - NO KNEELING!” It is clear that in Trump’s rhetoric, some voices should be elevated, while others should not. And the raising of ‘minority’ voices is necessarily an affront to America herself.

Third, there is the problem of concentrated power in the hands of liberal elites, ranging from politicians to liberal CEOs, to Trump’s favorite boogeyman – *the mainstream media* – which coalesces elite power together in a single, tyrannical narrative. Again, in Phoenix: “The media turns a blind eye to the gang violence on our streets, the failures of our public school, the destruction of our wealth at the hands of the terrible, terrible trade deals made by politicians that should’ve never been allowed to be politicians” (Trump, 2017, Oct 27). Gang violence, immigrants, disrespectful dissenting voices of people of color, failed public schools, corrupt and terrible politicians: each of these scapegoats work in tandem to trap white Americans in a position of distress. New cultural groups are taking away jobs; factories are closing because globalized companies rely on labor from abroad and automate away the need for human labor. All the while, elites conspiring in Washington, D.C. flourish at the expense of the working everyman.⁶⁷ Economic threats, however, are not so cleanly distinct from cultural threats. Each of these enemies – people

⁶⁷ Note here again the centrality of work to the American identity. Without access to good jobs, Americans are at a loss for making sense of their own identity (who are you but your job?). Cultural anxiety thus follows from economic anxiety. For more on the work ethic, see Max Weber (1905), *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. For a more updated take, see Kathi Weeks (2011), *The Problem with Work: Feminism, Marxism, Antiwork Politics, and Postwork Imaginaries*.

of color, immigrants, liberal elites, multiculturalism/identity politics – proves to be a *cultural* enemy, as evidenced by Trump’s concern for the ‘voices of forgotten Americans.’

At his rally in Phoenix (2017), Trump declared: “Years of uncontrolled immigration have placed enormous pressure on the jobs and wages of working families, and they’ve put great burdens on local schools and hospitals. While this may be good for a handful of special interests, it’s unfair to working people of all backgrounds all throughout our country” (Trump). The critique of ‘special interests’ refers to the oft-decried Washington elites. Those elites, as proponents of multiculturalism, identity politics, and subsequently open borders, have created a mass immigration issue which has burdened hard-working American families. In Hochschild’s (2016) words,

Blacks, women, immigrants, refugees, brown pelicans – all have cut ahead of you in line. But it’s people like you who have made this country great. You feel uneasy. It has to be said: the line cutters irritate you. They are violating rules of fairness. You resent them, and you feel it’s right that you do. So do your friends. [Hochschild, p. 139]

Notably, this is an issue of *fairness* (not equality or justice), and because this is unfair and peddled by out-of-touch liberal elites who know nothing of your everyday life, you resent both the ‘line cutters’ and those who make it seem like line cutting is ‘social justice’.

In an unironic divide and conquer move, Trumpian rhetoric serves to scapegoat groups, redirecting anger away from wealthy CEOs, politicians, and others who profit off of American *unfairness* by depressing wages, automating and offshoring jobs, and benefitting from tax cuts and tax loopholes. In the context of this line of rhetoric, however, the question remains. *What gives others the right to jump ahead of you when you’ve been working hard to earn your well-deserved slice of the pie?* Why do other people who have seemingly done nothing to contribute to the greatness of America get to get that slice before

you can? It is open borders, social welfare policies, and affirmative action⁶⁸ that work to undermine the fairness implied in the individual and independent pursuit of the American dream, a pursuit which is supposed to abide by the rules of meritocracy. People who take what is yours are thieves and imposters. They threaten your ability to achieve the American dream. They undermine the very cultural values you hold dear and live by daily. Importantly, the unfairness of it all is not merely an economic slight; it is also a cultural slight. Not only is your economic prosperity hindered, but your very identity is threatened.

Stephen Miller and the Enemies of Whiteness

This divide and conquer scapegoating of ‘imposters’ who have not earned their place within the American cultural microcosm is crystallized in the voice and policy of one of President Trump’s senior advisors: Stephen Miller. Long before Miller appeared as part of Trump’s advisory team, before he worked for former-Alabama Senator Jeff Sessions, before he even graduated from Duke University with a degree in political science, Miller

⁶⁸ Welfare and affirmative actions policies combine to lift the ‘lazy’ while failing to help hard-working Americans. At a rally in Missouri, Trump (2017) remarked: “But welfare reform — I see it and I’ve talked to people. I know people, they work three jobs and they live next to somebody who doesn’t work at all. And the person who’s not working at all and has no intention of working at all is making more money and doing better than the person that’s working his and her ass off. And it’s not going to happen. Not going to happen” (Trump, 2017, Nov 29). In a more targeted vein, Trump backed the RAISE (Reforming American Immigration for Strong Employment) Act introduced in the Senate in 2017 on the premise that, “The RAISE Act prevents new migrants and new immigrants from collecting welfare ... They’re not going to come in and just immediately go and collect welfare. That doesn’t happen under the RAISE Act. They can’t do that” (Trump, 2017, Aug 2). The ‘surge in unskilled immigration’, according to the Trump Administration’s fact sheet, has depressed wages and harmed America’s most vulnerable, and “More than 50 percent of all immigrant households receive welfare benefits, compared to only 30 percent of native households in the United States that receive welfare benefits” (Trump, 2017, Aug 2).

was already criticizing ‘multiculturalism’, ‘the false reality of institutional racism’, and the assumption of ‘inherent victimhood’ imposed onto black and Latinx groups by ‘the Left’. In a 2005 article re-published by *American Renaissance* – a known white nationalist and self-described ‘race-realist’ website –, Miller decries what ‘the social experiment of Left multiculturalism’ has done to his high school alma mater. Racial disharmony, self-segregation, conflict, and violence, in Miller’s estimation, have resulted. Miller argues first that, “we need to explain to minority students that if they applied themselves to their studies and stayed out of trouble, they would find a vista of opportunities” (Miller, 2005). He also argues that the example of his alma mater reflects, “more of the same, a declaration of institutional racism followed by extreme plans for re-education and multiculturalism” (Miller, 2005). The issues at hand are in Miller’s eyes: (1) the refusal to, “hold individuals accountable for their actions,” and (2) the requirement to, “excuse black and Hispanic [sic] misbehavior by holding those students to a lower standard, *by drilling into them the belief that they are inherently victims*” (Miller, 2005, *emphasis mine*). Here, Miller has already begun to articulate a set of critiques against ‘the Left’, against multiculturalism, and against ‘the imposters’ who evade responsibility yet reap benefits while institutions crumble and hard-working (probably affluent white) individuals suffer.

It is significant that the microcosm in which Miller casts his argument against multiculturalism and racialized imposters is a public school. Miller knows well that discussion of ‘re-education’ and ‘indoctrination’ will hit exactly the right nerve with right-wing freedom of thought and speech activists across American politics. Less than two decades later, those charges remain a central mobilizing piece of the reactionary conservative movement, both for Miller himself – who in his 2021 Conservative Political

Action Committee speech lamented teaching our children to ‘hate’ their country⁶⁹ – and others, including QAnon promoter General Michael Flynn – who has demanded that true believers take local action, on their school boards and committees, to ‘save America’.⁷⁰ The right-wing ‘critical race theory’ fight falls squarely in this vein: ‘re-education’ of American youth to recognize the experience of people of color in American history is reframed as forcibly supplanting true American values and culture.

Miller’s obsession with multiculturalism has meant that much of his policy ideas and rhetoric centers on immigration reform. Mass immigration is a clear problem for Miller; the unregulated entrance of ‘illegal immigrants’ necessarily leads to the overrunning of the American dream by imposters. In 2015, at an award ceremony hosted by the Center for Immigration Studies (CIS) – an anti-immigration thinktank founded by known white nationalist John Tanton⁷¹ – Miller offered a keynote speech arguing the importance of word choice in the immigration debate. His rough definition of ‘comprehensive immigration reform’, that is, “if you see those words, it basically means a massive, large-scale amnesty for illegal immigrants that includes access to government benefits and lifetime residency, combined with a very large permanent increase in future immigration and guest worker programs” (Miller, 2015). Mainstream immigration reform, as he and the audience members of CIS see it, implies imposition of illegal immigrants

⁶⁹ See Miller (2021). <https://www.c-span.org/video/?513297-112/stephen-miller-speaks-conservative-political-action-conference>.

⁷⁰ More on this point in my Chapter 5, *Conspiracy Theorism as Radicalization*.

⁷¹ See here the Anti-Defamation League’s (2013) report called, “Ties Between Anti-Immigrant Movement and Eugenics”, which highlights Tanton’s connection to eugenics and tendency for white nationalist beliefs. ADL reports that Tanton declared, “I’ve come to the point of view that for European-American society and culture to persist requires a European-American majority, and a clear one at that” (ADL, 2013, Feb 25).

who unfairly benefit from American social institutions. Worse yet, “most illegal immigration,” Miller continues, “is unskilled, so you can’t have a merit-based system” (Miller, 2015). Not only is unfairness a product of mass immigration, but also the meritocracy that America has been built upon is quite literally upended.

Mass immigration means unfairness; it means a threat to long-standing American institutions *built to benefit deserving Americans*. Mass immigration also means *replacement*, not just economically but also existentially. Miller continues in his CIS keynote:

On a serious note, because there are voices that are being shut out of the immigration debate. And so I’m going to read a letter that our office received... from a displaced American IT worker. Again, in all seriousness, these are the people who actually are living in America’s shadows, and this is what they said: ‘I am an IT professional and worked for Southern California Edison for over two decades. I was a loyal employee and always received outstanding reviews. A foreign worker with an H-1B visa recently replaced me. My co-workers were the best of the best, and they were also replaced.’ [Miller, 2015]

Note the language of ‘displacement’, ‘living in America’s shadows’, ‘loyalty’, and ‘replacement’. Miller here is clearly concerned with the good, loyal, hardworking Americans – the true Americans who deserve to benefit from the American Dream – who are ignored, living in the shadows, not paid attention to. Since attention is not given to such individuals, they are overlooked, displaced, not cared for by the system built *for them*. It is an easy step to *replacement* from this position of ‘being forgotten’. The best of the best are replaced by foreign workers, by illegal immigrants, supplanting not just tangible jobs but also the ever intangible American Dream.

Protection *for* true Americans *from* replacement has taken shape as a form of *white identity politics* across American political discourse over the last decade. “Maybe it’s about time that we had compassion... for American workers,” Miller is reported as saying in a

2017 article published by *Breitbart* (Moons). “President Trump has met with American workers who have been replaced by foreign workers... Ask them how this has affected their lives,” Miller continues, “To whom is our duty? Our duty is to U.S. citizens and U.S. workers to promote rising wages for them” (Moons, 2017). White identity politics is a product of white Americans – like the ones that Miller (2017) is speaking for here – saying, ‘if multiculturalism encourages and protects other identity groups and their cultural values, why should it not also encourage and protect white identity, too?’ If ‘mass immigration’ *without assimilation* means non-U.S. citizens get a slice of the pie with no strings attached (i.e. no participation in American society), then hardworking American citizens ought to as well. Why have white Americans been replaced and forgotten instead of protected and bolstered?

Whiteness, and white identity, however, are not strictly limited to people with white skin (though actual racial appearance is indeed weaponized for prejudice, harassment, exclusion, and violence). Since whiteness is a social construction, it describes a category of values, a set of privileges, and a kind of power. Acting out ‘white’ values can bring one closer to whiteness, even if your racial appearance says otherwise. After all, this is what Huntington (2004) argues for when he demands assimilation in *Who Are We?*.⁷² Huntington (2004), however, is careful to note the distinction between the original American settlers and immigrants: “Settlers... create a new community, a city on a hill... They are imbued with a sense of collective purpose... Immigrants, in contrast, do not create a new society” (p. 39). Immigrants, then, while they may approach whiteness – real

⁷² Huntington argues that “immigrants [become] assimilated to the extent they [adopt] the cultural patterns of the host society... and [develop] a sense of peoplehood with the host society” (2004, p. 183).

American values –, will never be the original settlers. Immigrants remain impure, inauthentic, because they do not come from the ‘original’ lineage. But the usage of ‘American people’ references the potential both to be included as you approach ‘our shared values’ *as well as excluded* along lines of purity.

Of course, there are two great ironies with this line of thinking. First, what is the content of ‘white identity’? Ashley Jardina (2019), in *White Identity Politics*, sets out to add some content to whiteness by qualitatively analyzing white solidarity. In Jardina’s estimation, white solidarity implies an antagonistic relationship with non-white groups. The assumption here is that, “more political or economic power for out-group members, like blacks and Latinos, means less power for their group” (Jardina, 2019, p. 140). Economic and political competition, as Jardina shows, are a *zero-sum game*. Another dimension of white solidarity is the tendency to feel alienated – replaced, displaced, and forgotten, as Miller characterizes it in his rhetoric. This sense of alienation is linked to their perception of unfairness: “They also feel alienated, and report that their group is not getting their fair share in society and has not been getting the opportunities it deserves” (Jardina, 2019, p. 152). Alienation in this instance is economic and political *as well as existential*. The social, political, and economic dimensions of life are inextricably linked, and white identity is at stake because white individuals have been put in an unfair position economically and politically.

The definitive feature of white identity is thus far centered on the state of their competition in a zero-sum society with out-groups. What whiteness is remains an enigma, aside from its constantly constructed and re-constructed nature. To give white identity a more stable content, Jardina (2019) argues: “The construction of whiteness is based largely

around three themes: its relationship with a particular conception of American identity, the adoption of a sense of pride and entitlement, and the prevalence of a sense of grievance and deprivation” (p. 119). Miller’s rhetoric about American imposters implies the prevailing sense of grievance, deprivation, and alienation. That sense, however, is only possible with prevalence of the first two themes of whiteness – the relationship with a *specific* conception of Americanness *and* the sense of pride and entitlement which goes along with it.

White Americans have had the monopoly on articulating what the American identity is since the nation’s inception, and it is this monopoly which permits the construction of American mythology and mythologies of whiteness. White identity is the standard, the prototype for Americanness, and everything else is a deviation from that; this ability to define the American identity is what has lent white Americans consistent power and privilege.⁷³ When economic and political competition from out-groups like people of color and immigrants becomes starker it *appears* as an undermining of American identity because out-group success *forces a redefinition of American identity*. White identity only exists as *against* the other, against the enemy. In the case of Miller’s rhetoric, this is the ‘illegal immigrant.’ The other is also people of color who have been ‘lifted up by multiculturalism’ and empowered to define themselves in the American context. It is of course also ‘feminist’ women and queer individuals who by their very empowerment can

⁷³ “Most white Americans see themselves as archetypal members of the nation. Whites have, after all, been able to set the standard for what it means to be a prototypical American... in part, what imbues their group with privileges and status is, in fact, this ability to define what it means to be an American” (Jardina, 2019, p. 120).

define themselves outside of traditional norms, thereby undermining the potency of white values.

The first great irony, then, is that white identity lacks content beyond its oppositional nature. It is only ever a construction, and the construction of whiteness is a construction of victimhood, constantly under threat and slipping away. Whiteness has a narrative quality, and as Michael Feola (2020) argues in describing ‘the melancholy of whiteness’, “propagation of narrative (through material, visual, and discursive means) is essential to constructing trauma as a social form” (p. 11). Whiteness, in a sense, is a form which mediates the experience of victimhood and loss such that it is not individualized but instead a social experience. Whiteness as a form is narrativized through *nationalist nostalgia* – the longing for a time when white identity was the prototypical identity of the American nation. “Loss as structured in narrative terms [represents] an experience that becomes traumatic when socially available narratives lack resources for sufferers to (1) adequately cognize the forces behind their losses or (2) secure social recognition for their dispossession” (Feola, 2020, p. 11). The advent of multiculturalism, mass immigration, and globalization has led to losses for white identity; but the reaction to this traumatic experience, which has gone unacknowledged, has been to nostalgically conjure up a lost whiteness as *the* quintessential American identity, to restore it, to defend it, and to cast blame accordingly on imposters.

The second great irony reveals itself in thinking critically about the effects of white Americans being sole proprietors of the real American identity. “When one’s sense of self is wrapped up not simply in a sense of social belonging and community (even ethnic or racial community), but in a sense of social belonging whose very essence is bound up in

relations of domination and subordination, then any movement towards equality or justice will be a threat to that self” (Monahan, 2021, p. 10). That is, reliance upon an enemy for existence of one’s own identity implies the master-slave dialectic. The master’s identity only exists as such with a slave to dominate, and as relations of domination and oppression are alleviated by and for the other, the master’s identity comes under threat. But obsession over lost cultural values and lost economic opportunities permits elision of what is really at stake when claims of restoring America to her former glory and protecting whiteness are rhetorically paraded around. In and of itself, “multiculturalism perpetuates white citizenship by presuming whiteness to be a culture, thereby obscuring its principal function as a form of power” (Olson, 2004, p. 97). Insofar as nationalist nostalgia narrativizes grievance, alienation, and loss on the part of ‘real Americans’ – again, constructed in and through rhetoric such as Miller’s – it functions as another mode of power in delineating an exclusive Americanness and declaring the superiority of the whiteness that has been lost.

In a 2016 Trump rally in Wisconsin, Miller problematizes mass immigration on an international scale, comparing the U.S. case to that of Europe. He cautions against replicating in the U.S., “the same conditions we have in Germany, in Belgium, and across Europe, with uncontrolled migration from the Middle East” (Miller, Beyond Mainstream Media, 2016, Apr 2). Against these conditions, Miller continues, “Donald Trump is the only candidate in this [2016] race who is saying, ‘let’s pause these programs to protect the American people’... Trump is the only one who will save our families” (Beyond Mainstream Media, 2016, Apr 2). Protection of the American people is tied *directly* to the ‘saving of families’, painting a dire situation. Interestingly, too, for a set of politicians who claim to be ‘America first’, Miller and Trump here set the stage for making immigration

an international issue, one which threatens the whiteness and westernness of Europe, too.

In 2017, Trump gave a speech in Poland arguing for a strong ‘defense’ on the part of Americans and the nations of Europe:

Americans, Poles, and the nations of Europe value individual freedom and sovereignty. We must work together to confront forces, whether they come from inside or out, from the South or the East, that threaten over time to undermine these values and to erase the bonds of culture, faith and tradition that make us who we are. If left unchecked, these forces will undermine our courage, sap our spirit, and weaken our will to defend ourselves and our societies. [Trump, 2017, Jul 6]

Defense here represents a *cultural and existential defense*. This includes the defense of individual freedom and sovereignty, of the bonds of European/Western culture, and of the religious tradition from ‘whence we came’ – Christianity. Importantly, if we allow the undermining of these values *which make us who we are*, then our spirit will be weakened, and we will be unable to physically defend ourselves.

As Trump (2017, Jul 6) argues further, “Our own fight for the West does not begin on the battlefield — it begins with our minds, our wills, and our souls. Today, the ties that unite our civilization are no less vital, and demand no less defense... Our freedom, our civilization, and our survival depend on these bonds of history, culture, and memory” (Trump). This cultural and existential defense is a defense of the American soul, and to defend this identity is to also play a role in the larger conflict of West versus East, North versus South, self versus other. Again there is a larger destiny laid out for America which her people must realize and defend. Important here is the emphasis on memory: the American identity has been constructed and invigorated through its history, and it is simply a matter of recalling that history to rally our spirit to fight in the larger battle. An appeal to collective memory reminds us of the need for patriotism as we struggle against conspiring

enemies *on an international stage*. The issue of immigration at home expands into an extensive set of enemies abroad against whom we must ‘defend the West’.

The Elegy for Whiteness becomes a Conspiracy of Replacement

It is clear from Trump’s rhetoric, as well as the rhetoric of his supporters and policy advisors, that the early political/Presidential project was one of restoring America to her former greatness in the face of the imposters, enemies, and threats detailed thus far. The Trumpian project is also one which alleges the restoration of American values to enable once again the flourishing of the forgotten ‘authentic’ (read: white) American. It serves to re-define Americanness as exclusively white, mythologizing white identity through nostalgic constructions of a lost past. Trump’s early project is indeed only a few steps away from full on conspiracy theorizing. Let us not forget that he kicked off his foray into politics with ‘birtherism’ – the conspiracy theory that former President Barack Obama *could not legally be President* because he was not a natural born U.S. citizen. In other words, an African American could not rise to the highest office in the land simply because did not fall into the prototypical *authentic* American identity as has been constructed.

Interrogating the question of what the authentic American is, of what white identity is, of whiteness or Americanness is, reveals a slippery slope. To ask these questions is to ask about the kinds of narratives we tell and *are told* about who we are as Americans. Appeals to a collective memory full of some specific historical representations (and decidedly not others) permit recollection of the lost/forgotten American nostalgically interpreted out of the past. We must ask about not simply what stories we tell ourselves and are told about who we are, but also *why we recall them in the way that we do*. Of

course, the ‘what’ here is important – already, the ‘what’ of Americanness has revealed itself to be constructed as against an enemy other, privileged with the power of defining itself, and necessarily aggrieved. But the ‘why’ – *why do we recall things in the way that we do?* – is key in the transition from mere collective memory to mythology building. As mythology is recalled, so too is a cosmology constructed in which declares: ‘*this is who we are, and we must protect ourselves in the face of evil.*’ So too can we slip into conspiratorial worldview.

J.D. Vance is a fitting figure for displaying this slippage. For someone like Vance, the American identity is not only a nostalgic entity, but it is also the *truth* of his lived experience. That truth has been covered over and made impossible by immediate social, cultural, political, or economic conditions; thus, he longs for it.⁷⁴ His *Hillbilly Elegy* (2016) is fittingly characteristic of longing: is not an elegy one of the most nostalgic ways of remembering? Is this not a way of remembering, for Vance, the heroic aspects – toughness, grit, honor, hard work, independence, etc. – of the now torn apart culture of the hillbilly which have been lost? Vance’s narrative is certainly one of self-redemption, of achieving the American dream through hard work, and of climbing the socioeconomic ladder. He begins as a kid struggling with a drug-addicted and irresponsible hillbilly mother until he makes it, all thanks to the values exemplified and instilled by his grandmother. Only through adherence to good American values was he “able to escape the worst of [hillbilly] culture’s inheritance” (Vance, 2016, p. 253).

⁷⁴ See Hochschild (2016) for more on nostalgia in this context; for her, they are ‘rememberers.’ Hochschild (2016) also importantly notes here that memory – what we remember and what we forget – is an expression of power (pp. 49-52).

At the same time, Vance's narrative is a revealing cultural critique of his mother's generation of hillbillies who no longer adhere to the kinds of values that he sees in his grandparents.⁷⁵ Accordingly, with distance from his old life, Vance can now look back and diagnose the problems of white Americans as follows:⁷⁶

This was my world: a world of truly irrational behavior. We spend our way into the poorhouse... Our homes are a chaotic mess... We don't study as children, and we don't make our kids study when we're parents... We choose not to work when we should be looking for jobs... We talk about the value of hard work but tell ourselves that the reason we're not working is some perceived unfairness... We talk to our children about responsibility, but we never walk the walk. [Vance, 2016, pp. 146-147]

What has been lost – and this is what Vance sees in his grandparents' generation but not in the new generation of hillbillies he encounters – is an attitude of hard work and personal grit. In other words, this means (1) focusing on doing things to improve one's life instead of complaining and criticizing, (2) putting effort into school and learning, (3) encouraging and enabling that effort in one's children, (4) maintaining economic and personal responsibility, and (5) maintaining stable and supportive family lives.⁷⁷ To maintain such attitudes and values is what enables a successful individual, such that he has the tools to go off and achieve the American Dream. This is what Vance's Mamaw taught him, above all. This is also the utter opposite of his mother and her generation, a fact which Vance laments

⁷⁵ Vance makes a telling contrast between two kinds of social mores in the white working class: "My grandparents embodied one type: old-fashioned, quietly faithful, self-reliant, hard-working. My mother and increasingly, the entire neighborhood embodied another: consumerist, isolated, angry, distrustful" (Vance, 2016, p. 148).

⁷⁶ These are just the main points pulled from an approximately two-and-a-half-page litany of critiques of hillbilly culture.

⁷⁷ Also emblematic of this point: "To coast through life was to squander my God-given talent, so I had to work hard. I had to take care of my family because Christian duty demanded it. I needed to forgive, not just for my mother's sake but for my own. I should never despair, for God had a plan" (Vance, 2016, p. 86).

greatly and which likely drives his nostalgic thinking with respect to lost American values.⁷⁸

In just a snippet of *Hillbilly Elegy* (2016), Vance's narrative already resonates with the distinctly American values and their concomitant lack which serve as a fixture in Trump's rhetoric: reference to the ever-pervasive work ethic via the constant language of 'jobs,' reference to independence, meritocracy, and fairness,⁷⁹ and of course, reference to the fallen, chaotic, and decrepit nature of America.⁸⁰ Vance (2016), too, also notes the effects of economic downturn on the white working class, but shifts the blame onto the hillbilly culture instead, for it is, as he argues, "a culture that increasingly encourages social decay instead of counteracting it" (p. 7). But why does Vance characterize the situation the way that he does, and why does he narrativize his perception of the authentic American identity in the way that he does? What is his political purpose in doing so?

One answer here is that Vance *has indeed* lived the experience of the American Dream thanks to embodying the authentic values which enable achievement of that dream.

⁷⁸ It is worth noting here that in Vance's narrative, it is the women (his Mamaw and his mother) who are tasked with doing the work of carrying on and teaching certain values. In the face of the failure of his mother to do so, his sister is tasked with it, but it turns out for Vance that his Mamaw is a better stand-in because she is more stable and resilient. This points to a larger facet of what could be considered authentic American values which is that they are definitively *masculine*, and the feminine role is tied to the household – women uphold and pass good, traditional values on to their children in the domestic sphere.

⁷⁹ One example highlighting the importance of particularly independence: "We were conditioned to feel that we couldn't really depend on people – that, even as children, asking someone for a meal or for help with a broken-down automobile was a luxury that we shouldn't indulge in too much lest we fully tap the reservoir of goodwill serving as a safety valve in our lives" (Vance, 2016, p. 104).

⁸⁰ "The fallen world described by the Christian religion matched the world I saw around me... When I asked Mamaw if God loved us, I asked her to reassure me that this religion of ours could still make sense of the world we lived in. I needed reassurance of some deeper justice, some cadence or rhythm that lurked beneath the heartache and chaos" (Vance, 2016, p. 87).

This may be a generous reading, but it is one that Vance seems to speak to. “In Kentucky, *I didn’t have to be someone I wasn’t*, because the only men in my life – my grandmother’s brothers and brothers-in-law – already knew me” (Vance, 2016, p. 13, *emphasis mine*). The context of Vance’s claim: he mentions ‘*just being who he was*’ when he begins to preface his relationship with his mother and to detail her serial relationships with numerous men, all of whom Vance had to pretend to connect with. His recognition comes in the face of the stark contrast between his mother and his grandparents: on the one hand, with his mom, in Kentucky, he had to pretend to be someone he was not, to pretend to care about people who would be gone in a few months. On the other hand, with his grandparents in Ohio, he could really act like himself, and he genuinely cared about the people who knew the real him and would always be there for him. This is to say that Vance was perhaps able to flourish in a place in which he was exposed to all those cultural values embodied by his grandparents – those cultural values that seemed to him to enable him to be authentic. Of course, Vance’s retelling here is quite nostalgic. It nonetheless seems to be the case that he longed for the kind of values that made him feel authentic, like his real self.⁸¹ Vance has nostalgically shaped such values into an identity that is emblematically American *to him*. There really is something about being unabashedly and proudly oneself that Vance hits on here – the space to be proudly and authentically oneself is just another dimension of loss.⁸²

⁸¹ The recollection of an ‘authentic’ self here is not simply nostalgic. Vance’s experience of authenticity is also about a genuineness of feeling and a genuineness of connection with individuals who share in specific cultural values that enable the expression of one’s true self. In this way, authenticity represents not only self-consistency but also the truth of Vance’s lived experience... though the moment of that authenticity may be nostalgically recalled.

⁸² The obsession with being authentically oneself links directly to the Proud Boys – whose very existence is predicated on restoring the space to be a proud masculine American man.

Another way to interpret Vance here is to consider the possibility of him speaking candidly about hillbilly culture and about the white working class in general (as far as his *Elegy* (2016) is generalizable – which is not that far, as others have argued⁸³). In juxtaposition to the archetypal American self – a strong individual who is capable of overcoming anything thrown at *him* with enough grit and hard work – Vance describes feelings of dislocation, alienness, and uncertainty about who one is. More importantly here is the insecurity about how he will end up being okay. In describing his relationship with the military – note the significance of the military as masculine, disciplined, brave, hardworking, and patriotic – Vance decries the fact of his disconnection from the values he was tasked with defending. “Nothing united us with the core fabric of American society. We felt trapped in two seemingly unwinnable wars [Afghanistan and Iraq], in which a disproportionate share of the fighters came from our neighborhood, and in an economy that failed to deliver the most basic promise of the American Dream – a steady wage” (Vance, 2016, p. 189). Here Vance highlights disunification, being trapped in a bind, lacking any promise of the American dream. Fighting (and losing) abroad while forgetting those at home. This leads to, as Vance (2016) puts it, “a deep skepticism of the very institutions of our society” (p. 193).⁸⁴

More on this version of nostalgia in my following chapter, *On-the-Ground Right-Wing Publics: What ever happened to being Proud of Your Boy?*

⁸³ See Elizabeth Catte's (2018) important rebuttal against Vance's characterizations in *Hillbilly Elegy*.

⁸⁴ To continue with Vance's (2016) revealing remark: “We can't trust the evening news. We can't trust our politicians. Our universities, the gateway to a better life, are rigged against us. We can't get jobs. You can't believe these things and participate meaningfully in society. Social psychologists have shown that group belief is a powerful motivator in performance. When groups perceive that it's in their interest to work hard and achieve things, members of that group outperform other similarly situated individuals. It's obvious

These sentiments resonate with Hochschild's (2016) *Strangers in their Own Land*, the main tagline of which explicitly communicates feelings of dislocation, isolation, and alienation. They have become strangers to their own home and to their own culture.⁸⁵ There is distrust in government, the globalized political elites who have forgotten everyday American in order to help other disadvantaged folks – imposters. There is again eradication of the American Dream: "But the American Dream is more than having money. It's feeling proud to be an American, and to say 'under God' when you salute the flag, and feel *good* about that. And it's about living in a society that believes in clean, normal family life" (Vance, 2016, p. 145). Again, we see here the American identity associated with specific cultural values (patriotism, religiosity, stability) and with the American dream (which implies hard work, independence, fairness, meritocracy, etc.). The key to feeling like a stranger, as Vance puts it, is the impossibility of the American dream and the loss or undermining of all those values associated with it. If Vance's *Elegy* captures anything, it is that as a response to feeling alien, to feeling no-longer-at-home, one longs for a lost solid identity. But it also captures the desire to, "return to a less cluttered era of white triumphalism" (Connolly, 2017, p. xxv). With that lost authentic identity comes the power and privilege of being able to *define it* and *live it*. That is, the object of longing is not just

why: if you believe that hard work pays off, then you work hard; if you think it's hard to get ahead even when you try, then why try at all" (p. 193)? The interesting thing here is that despite Vance's perception of distrust among his fellow white working class, he nonetheless places the blame on their culture. Thus, it is not the structures (media, education, politics, economy, etc.) that need changing but rather one's attitude towards it. It's obvious why: adhering to the values he so adores is what got him all the way from hillbilly to venture capitalist.

⁸⁵ "You are a stranger in your own land. You do not recognize yourself in how others see you. It is a struggle to feel seen and honored. And to feel honored you have to feel – and feel seen as – moving forward. But through no fault of your own, and in ways that are hidden, you are slipping backward" (Hochschild, 2016, p. 144).

what has been built out of the narratives we tell and are told about who we are as *Americans*. The object of longing is also *the power* to build those narratives and shape the way stories are told and recalled.

Here we begin to see not only the limitations of Vance's account in *Hillbilly Elegy* (2016), but also some of the broader political motives which link to building mythologies of whiteness and weaving narratives about its contemporary demise. First and foremost, the most obvious problem with *Elegy* is its race blindness, despite Vance treating this as a virtue of his analysis.⁸⁶ Instead what race blindness does for Vance's argument is permit a disavowal of the persistent racism and white supremacy which led to Donald Trump's election in 2016. Since Vance's concern here is with the self-imposed suffering of the white-working class, his critique of the decline of American values is a *colorblind one*, because he redirects the scapegoat for American failings onto the declining cultural values of the white-working class. This absolves him of charges of racism and is nothing more than a racial deflection. Similar tactics are used by right-wing groups like the Proud Boys and Patriot Prayer to justify their 'colorblind' political violence against enemies of Americanness. This racial deflection works to maintain stereotypes that racial determinists hold up in making claims about the superiority of the white race – if it is a matter of *values* and *culture*, then it is not about *race*. But those values and culture remain built in and through mythologies of whiteness. When looking back at the mythologized founding moments that sit at the core of American identity, it is easy to miss other narratives – those of resistance to the white American self – like those of African slaves, indigenous peoples,

⁸⁶ Vance (2016) argues this is important for permitting the novel diagnoses that he is able to make about “how class and family affect the poor without filtering their views through a racial prism” (p. 8).

and women. The erasure of other histories is what permits a consistent mythology to be told. This erasure points to the ideologically artificial nature of the ‘authentic American identity’ – the very identity that Vance himself narrativizes.

The artificial nature of the ‘authentic American’ is also one that has been produced in opposition to a racialized other – hence the erasure of other histories and modes of being. In other words, as Monahan (2021) puts it:

The mythic narrative of white nationalism and Western civilization in effect constitutes the ‘we’ to which white nationalists appeal when they fear for ‘our’ future and ‘our’ culture... this ‘we’ exists through constant appeal to an Other – in the U.S. context, this is the ‘native’ to our ‘settler’ in the first instance, but in the following years the other becomes the immigrant invader, the inassimilable interloper, the pollutant to the purity of the body politic. [p. 9]⁸⁷

With this, the existence of white American identity continues to center on the enemy Other, on the imposter, and on the invader. America can only be reclaimed and taken back through removal of imposters. At the time of this writing, Vance has won his U.S. Senator race for Ohio in 2022, and he has become unsurprisingly vocal again about the need to defend American cultural values as well as the reason *why* those values are under threat and need to be saved. Vance keeps up with the theme of, ‘We can only be our true American selves *against* imposing others.’ In a campaign town hall event in Ohio, Vance makes the stakes for standing against our enemies very clear: “A shift in the democratic makeup of our country that would mean that we never win, meaning Republicans never win a national election in this country ever again” (Vance, 2022). That means that traditional American values are again at stake, and the ‘shifting makeup’ of voters is to blame.

⁸⁷ Monahan credits here Sylvia Wynter (2003), “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, after Man, Its Overrepresentation—an Argument.”

Vance is purposefully shifting his focus from what America has lost to needing to defend her from enemy Others, namely, ‘illegal immigrants’. He is keen on nativist America First policy, just as Stephen Miller, and he continues to tread into conspiratorial and white nationalist waters. In an interview with Tucker Carlson (2022) – this is important since Carlson has become Fox News’ resident nativist conspiracy theorist – Vance goes full ‘Great Replacement’ conspiracy theory.⁸⁸ He declares:

These people are doing it by design... they are accomplishing the invasion of a country that they should love but of course they do not. You have to ask yourself who is benefitting from this, and who is getting rich from it, and there are two big answers: first of all, chamber of commerce style Republicans and Democrats who love the cheap labor, who love the fact that these immigrants are displacing America’s workers, but also Democrat politicians who have decided that they can’t win re-election in 2022 unless they bring in a large number of new voters to replace the voters that are already here – that’s what this is about. We have an invasion in this country, because very powerful people get richer and more powerful because of it. It’s not bad policy, it’s evil and we have to call it that. [Vance, 2022, March 18]⁸⁹

Notice here the insinuation of a conspiracy against the American people, where a group of people are accomplishing this ‘by design’, ‘benefitting and getting rich from it’, and becoming ‘more powerful because of it.’ Vance notes that it is *effective* policy, but that it is *evil*. It is about displacement and *replacement*: undermining American workers and replacing American citizens’ political power with invaders. Though Vance’s rhetoric is beyond the moment of the January 6 Capitol Insurrection, this is nonetheless telling. Vance puts on full display the nefarious fact that the rhetoric of white nationalism and conspiracy

⁸⁸ Related to the ‘White Genocide’ conspiracy theory, ‘The Great Replacement’ claims that the white population is being systematically replaced by immigrants, people of color, and people of mixed races. I elaborate this in the context of the Proud Boys language as well as QAnon adherence in my Chapters 4 & 5.

⁸⁹ The video snippet of Carlson’s interview with Vance is shared via Twitter by user @NikkiMcR (2022, March 18).

theory are inextricably linked to and continue to seep further and further into mainstream American politics *out of* nostalgia.

‘Be Not Afraid’ to Protect our America

In summer of 2020, the Council for National Policy (CNP) – a network of Republican and conservative activists – met to strategize ahead of the November 2020 elections. After obtaining footage,⁹⁰ *The Washington Post* reported that Bill Walton – executive committee president – declared: “This is a spiritual battle we are in. This is good versus evil... We have to do everything to win” (O’Harrow, 2020). Another speaker demanded of conservative activists: “Be not afraid of the accusations that you’re a voter suppressor, you’re a racist and so forth” (O’Harrow). Another: “We need to stop those ballots from going out, and I want the lawyers here to tell us what to do” (O’Harrow). Yet another: “White people have lost their voice in America” (O’Harrow). The summer of 2020 was a do or die moment, where either good had to win out or America was going to fall at the hands of evil. Notice here recognition of a lost voice for white Americans, and the need to take extreme measures to reclaim what has been lost. Be not afraid, leading conservatives assure one another, for they are on the side of the good and the righteous in this cosmic battle against evil.

Mainstream rhetorical construction of enemy Others coupled with the nostalgia for a purer American nation and the need to restore her greatness are together reflective of the

⁹⁰ This footage is not accessible on the CNP website (<https://cfnp.org/>) unless logged in as a registered user.

tendency to mythologize, craft master narratives, and conspiracy theorize. As Trump put it in his speech to the Council for National Policy:

We've demonstrated over the last four years the extraordinary gains that are possible while we stand strong for our beliefs, when we trust the wisdom of our founders and when we embrace America's destiny, it's a great destiny... But the more success that we've achieved, the more unhinged the radical left has become. Anarchists and violent mobs have rioted in our Democrat run cities, attacking our police and tearing down statues. [Trump, 2020, Aug 21]

Here, the trajectory from making America great to *keeping* her great is clear. By trusting in the American founders and the destiny laid out for America – one which is called to as an object of *longing* through nationalist nostalgia – Trump, deploying the royal 'we', has made America extraordinary. Now that those successes are known, however, there is an 'unhinged' reaction from the 'radical left', an impulse to sow chaos and destruction where Trump has restored greatness. 'Anarchists' and 'violent mobs' were a key pair of enemies in the run up to the 2020 election, as they were part of the street effort to carry out the conspiracy against the American people – preventing Donald Trump's victory. "I'm the only thing standing between the American dream and total anarchy, madness and chaos. And that's what it is" (Trump, 2020, Aug 21).

The other effort undertaken by the 'radical left Democrats' to prevent Trump's victory was 'massive voter fraud', comprising of mail-in ballots, hacked vote count machines, double-voting, and, of course, flooding the country with immigrants who would vote for Democrats.⁹¹ As Trump argues, "There's only one reason they don't want voter ID. And that's because they want to cheat... And that's a bad thing. To everyone in this

⁹¹ Another claim from Trump's CNP speech points to a political conspiracy on the part of the Democrats – to seize and keep control against the will of the American people: "So now the Democrats are planning to permanently alter our political system so their control is never threatened again" (Trump, 2020, Aug 21).

room, your organization was formed at a time when conservatives led the fight to turn back the tide of communism abroad, communism here... Americans must rally to turn back the radical left socialists and Marxists right here at home” (Trump, 2020, Aug 21). Alleged voter fraud implied that America could be lost again. Trump’s move to cull up the fight against communism – now ‘radical left socialists and Marxists at home’ – brings in the long-standing evil enemy of American values, making the consequences dire. Just these snippets from the Council for National Policy meeting displays how nationalist nostalgia in 2016 paved the way for such conspiratorial and apocalyptic thinking. By 2020, “the future of our country, and indeed our civilization, is at stake on November 3rd” (Trump, 2020, Aug 21). Now that Americans have restored and reclaimed the great America, conservatives must do anything to protect America from the shadowy forces which aim to violently tear her apart.

On January 6, 2021, after months of peddled election fraud conspiracy theories, the #StopTheSteal movement asked Americans to join President Trump outside the White House. As part of the ‘March to Save America’, “millions of Americans will descend upon Washington DC to let the establishment know we will fight back against this fraudulent election... The fate of our nation depends on it.”⁹² Outside the White House, Trump hit on many of his oft-repeated themes: the American people are not going to take it anymore, our voices will not be silenced, we are gathered here to save our democracy, and we must do anything to prevent American democracy from being destroyed. There are a few key moments, including:

⁹² This comes from my screenshot of the informational website for #StopTheSteal/The March to Save America.

Hundreds of thousands of American patriots who are committed to the honesty of our elections and the integrity of our glorious republic. All of us here today do not want to see our election victory stolen by emboldened radical left Democrats which is what they're doing, and stolen by the fake news media, that's what they've done and what they're doing. We will never give up, we will never concede, it doesn't happen, you don't concede when there is theft involved. Our country has had enough, we will not take it anymore, and that's what this is all about. And to use a favorite term that all of you people really came up with, we will stop the steal. [Trump, 2021]⁹³

The language of 'glorious republic' coupled with 'American patriots' connects to a longer American mythology. Honesty and integrity are at stake, and we must not concede. The enemy is again clear: 'emboldened radical left Democrats', who have overrun the American nation with imposters, who have stomped on American ideals and values, who have tried to take away the freedom, power, and voice of the American people. "*And you're the real people*, you're the people that built this nation. You're not the people that tore down this nation" (Trump, 2021, emphasis mine). Again, Trump's rhetorical move is to call forth a glorious mythology, construct a narrative of threat (no longer loss, because 'we got America back in 2016'), use a catch-all evil enemy, and remind that *the real people are indeed us* – those that built the nation. Nationalist nostalgia has bloomed into nationalist conspiracy theorizing: our enemies want to tear everything we love about our nation down.

Nationalist nostalgia matters because (1) it is about political power, and (2) it shows how specific affectively grabbing rhetoric – whether it evokes feelings of grievance, longing, anger, or a sense of being pitted against a vast conspiracy – serves to recruit a wide swath of American citizens to commit to a program of reclamation and restoration. Nostalgia is a visceral and presentist mode of experience. In other words, nostalgia is a response to immediate feelings in the present moment. It provides direction, comfort, and

⁹³ My transcription from the speech. *The Associated Press* (13 Jan 2021) published the full transcript as well.

security. Part of that reaction is to simplify the experience of history into a past-future narrative, covering over the problems experienced in the present which would have initially contributed to the activation of nostalgic feelings in the first place. To then eradicate the feeling of loss and mourning, one simply must restore the past and install it for the future. This is not a critical reflection but instead a brutal and bare reaction; as such, it is a politically potent feeling to take hold of. It is important to hold accountable those who pander to feelings of loss, who articulate mythologies of Americanness, who galvanize potentially vulnerable people, because *they are exercising political power*. And that exercise of power is one centered on articulating and executing racist, sometimes violent, political programs in the name of saving America.

CHAPTER FOUR

**ON-THE-GROUND RIGHT-WING PUBLICS: WHAT EVER HAPPENED TO
BEING PROUD OF YOUR BOY?**

Shame, Pride, and Violence

On January 6, 2021, the U.S. watched as a motley mob stormed the U.S. Capitol building arguably at the behest of a number of political leaders – including Donald Trump himself – who had continued to enflame claims of election fraud since Joe Biden was declared victor of the 2020 U.S. Presidential election in November. We now know a few things about this day: that a number of right-wing groups, known to be provocative, militant, and violent, participated in organizing the event and leading the charge – most notably, the Proud Boys and the Oathkeepers –; that this insurrection had been talked about online for *months* prior to the event itself, yet Capitol Police were caught on their heels;⁹⁴ and that, while some of us may feel more comfortable believing that the number of people emboldened to commit such action is low, the fact of the matter is that *so many* average Americans were and continue to be willing to commit violent acts in the name of protecting a very specific version of America. I interpret and analyze the language and imagery used by individuals to make sense of how and why an attempted insurrection unfolded in Washington, D.C.

I want to emphasize that this analysis is focused on the ground, at groups and their individual members, and the language they use to explain their beliefs and subsequent

⁹⁴ This was initially reported by *ProPublica* (2021, Jan 7), “Capitol Rioters Planned for Weeks in Plain Sight. The Police Weren’t Ready,” and has in many ways been highlighted throughout the course of the January 6th hearings in Congress.

behaviors. This does not mean, however, that their language operates in a vacuum; there are political leaders who have been able to rhetorically coalesce emotion, problems, scapegoats, and plans of action. This rhetoric serves in part as a basis for rousing individuals into larger groups with shared beliefs and goals, as has been the case with groups like the Proud Boys. Rhetorical representation on a national stage, after all, serves to both justify and embolden.

The central contribution of this analysis of the language and behavior of on-the-ground publics, specifically the Proud Boys and Patriot Prayer – my two case studies –, is twofold. First, I use *nostalgia* as a conceptual framework, arguing that feelings of *nationalist nostalgia* in part drive such groups. I rely on Svetlana Boym’s (2001) theory of modern nostalgia⁹⁵ in *The Future of Nostalgia*, specifically her articulation of ‘restorative nostalgia’. This tendency to restore motivates the recovery of lost truths, particularly in the form of lost national identities and pasts. Restorative nostalgics, “do not think of themselves as nostalgic; they believe that their project is about truth. This kind of nostalgia characterizes national and nationalist revivals all over the world, which engage in anti-modern myth-making of history by means of a return to national symbols and myths” (Boym, 2001, p. 41). The irony is that in their project to bring truth to light and restore what has been lost, restorative nostalgics must create mythological accounts of *who* they are and *what* their homeland is. On the one hand, protection of their identity requires a

⁹⁵ In Boym’s (2001) words: “Modern nostalgia is a mourning for the impossibility of mythical return, the loss of an enchanted world with clear borders and values; it could be a secular expression of spiritual longing, a nostalgia for an absolute, a home that is both physical and spiritual, the Edenic unity of time and space before entry into history. The nostalgic is looking for a spiritual addressee. Encountering silence, he looks for memorable signs, desperately misreading them” (p. 8). The impossibility of a return, the desire for a simpler time, and the tendency to misremember are all key aspects to modern nostalgia.

nationalist project, where the nation – including its people and values – is under threat. On the other hand, their style of narrative is a linear one, cast into a cosmological register, where good – the nation – must triumph over evil.

Accordingly, my second contribution is to show the interplay between nostalgia, mythology, and conspiracy and link them to the potential for street violence. I show that both groups rhetorically create enemies which conspire against their homeland and accordingly must be defeated not only for their cause but also for some larger sense of cosmic justice. This specific formation of scapegoating is a function of the reactionary mind's⁹⁶ tendency to articulate a narrative of *loss* so that a political program for recovery and restoration can be established and set in motion. Members of the Proud Boys and Patriot Prayer, as well as their supporters, see themselves as *victims*, not merely as having lost something, but as having had that something taken away from them.⁹⁷

For example, in reaction to the culture of 'political correctness', a culture which is read as inducing white heterosexual men to feel ashamed of *being white men*, groups like the Proud Boys have declared that they are unabashedly, "Western chauvinists who refuse

⁹⁶ Borrowing here from Corey Robin: in *The Reactionary Mind*, Robin shows that, for the reactionary psyche, loss is a central concept. It indicates the feeling of diminishing power and privilege, specifically for white heterosexual men. It is against this loss that reaction takes place because it is motivated by the fear of loss of that power and privilege. The effectiveness of deploying *loss* as a rhetorical strategy comes in the form of affective relatability – we have all lost something, and we have all been victims of something. Who would not share in the desire to *fix* loss, by making things whole again, by making them right?

⁹⁷ Here I rely on the articulation of loss couched in terms of victimhood articulated by Elisabeth Anker (2014) in her elucidation of Nietzschean 'orgies of feeling' post-9/11 as well as Corey Robin's (2018) account of the reactionary mind. Further, Samantha Kutner (2020), in her work on the Proud Boys, has also noted that self-assigned victimhood is a key rhetorical tactic. Kutner (2020) argues that, "Proud Boys believe they are victims of modernity, feminism, and progressive values," and that they are adept at both denial and blame shifting (p. 14).

to apologize for creating the modern world” (McInnes, 2016). As Proud Boy founder Gavin McInnes has put it: “There’s a real sort of anti-masculinization going on... Not with just grown men, but with little boys. There’s a real war on men going on” (Dissler, 2016). Men are the victims of the war of ‘political correctness’, and what McInnes articulates as being lost is a sense of pride in one’s identity. It is of course against the *shaming* of white men for their identities that the Proud Boys got their name.

Pride in their identity as white men and a love for that identity – or, self-love, as Michael Monahan⁹⁸ (2021) puts it – are what is at stake for these groups. In their estimation, this is simply an adoption of white identity politics to ‘make more inclusive’ the multiculturalism of contemporary American politics. White pride, however, is predicated on a mythologized whiteness which has in many historical instances relied upon the *violent* construction of an Other to define itself. It is through this mythology of whiteness that the narrative of loss and victimhood can be produced and reproduced. It is also through this mythology that the loss of power and privilege and the forcing of shame locates its scapegoat in the Other; the Other which necessarily must be overcome, often violently, to eliminate the existential threat. White identity, as it is constructed by the mythologies of white nationalism, only exist as loss, as slipping away, as victim. It lacks static articulation. For it is nothing aside from what it was, and what it was is nothing other than myth.

⁹⁸ As Monahan (2021) has argued, this openly declared ‘self-love’ is not as innocuous as it seems; in fact, Monahan argues that white nationalists who claim to merely be defending whiteness prescribe a ‘self-love’ that has been historically produced in and through racial animus. Monahan (2021) describes the false equivalence assumed between white identity groups and nonwhite organizations which are characterized as, “efforts to organize whites against what they perceive to be the ‘multicultural’ threat. ‘They can organize to protect the integrity of their community, culture, and identity,’ the Proud Boy laments, ‘so why can’t we?’” (p. 3).

The white nationalist subject is produced through mythology – that is, a romanticized past of white civilization in all its glory – and cosmic loss – that is, that great white civilization has been altered beyond belief, almost to the point of erasure and replacement.⁹⁹ Further, I argue that *the white nationalist subject is a nostalgic one*. Loss, mythology, and conspiracy contribute to his identity formation and the subsequent political actions he takes to protect his identity. Note that this linkage to *identity* translates to an *existential* register. Any action he takes, or language he uses, is for the sake of protecting his very existence. Further, the concern for the continued existence of whiteness stretches to the level of the collective, and often Proud Boys and Patriot Prayer members will cast their language in a collective way, lamenting lost national values or a lost national spirit. The feeling of lost national identity conveyed here is what I term *nationalist nostalgia*,¹⁰⁰ where the rhetorical function of nostalgia is to provide a ‘homeland’ to restore and a hierarchy of power and privilege to reassert, based upon a quasi-mythological construction of the ‘homeland’ itself.

Nostalgia as Pragmatic Concern

To what extent are groups like the Proud Boys and Patriot Prayer white nationalist ones? How do the members and leaders of these groups utilize tropes of nostalgia, conspiratorial language, and mythological figures to describe themselves, their beliefs, and

⁹⁹ Michael Feola (2021) describes the ‘double duty’ of white nationalist language: “What presents itself as a descriptive narrative of decline doubles as a publicly circulated framework through which the white nationalist subject is formed around the pathos of loss, now made legible in distinctly politicized terms” (pp. 11-12).

¹⁰⁰ This formation is based in part upon Svetlana Boym’s (2001) account of ‘restorative nostalgia.’

their political actions? I take a pragmatic approach to interpreting the language and action of on-the-ground individuals involved in such groups to begin to get at these questions. Where, on the face of it, the pragmatist might *not* recognize the private feeling of nostalgia or the private existential threat of loss *as a pragmatic concern*, per se, I argue that the reactionary mind¹⁰¹ is adept at concretizing and narrativizing individualized loss as a *political problem*, detailed as part of an ideological program for restoration, and it enables us to think about such language and behavior pragmatically. That is to say that nostalgia can have a public quality, which is a requirement for pragmatic concerns – that is, that consequences must exist beyond the private realm –, when it results as a consequence of matters that extend beyond mere personal transaction. After all, the reactionary conservative has already taken this private matter of power and privilege into the public realm when he solidified it into political rhetoric.

The goal of the pragmatic project is to try to understand, *in individuals' and groups' own words*, how they perceive the consequences they experience, how they organize around them, and what plan of action they intend to take to address them. To achieve this goal and begin to understand how publics respond to lost power and privilege (and are likely to articulate themselves as *nostalgic subjects* as I argue), I develop a typology of groups in the U.S. The purpose of a typology is to enable clarification and distinction among groups, especially surrounding their tactics. I operate under a few assumptions: first, groups organize themselves around a perceived public problem to take political action;

¹⁰¹ Arguing alongside Corey Robin (2018) here: insofar as the 'private life of power' is at stake, loss of that power translates into a direct attack on the holder. Loss operates in an intimate register and connotes an existential threat, *though* it is made political through the conservative's rhetoric.

second, there are a variety of groups which experience both distinct and shared problems, interpreting them on the bases of their experiences and norms; and third, these groups accordingly produce patterns of behavior in reaction that are often violently, politically, and existentially conflicting. Key to this typology is that there is a propensity for *violent* problem-solving tactics adopted by each group, with varying goals and varying degrees of success.

To put this typology in action, I chose a set of cases in contemporary American politics which most closely fit into the theoretical framework of nostalgia, that is, groups which perceive a loss of power and privilege. I focus here on the Proud Boys and Patriot Prayer, as each highlights a distinct aspect of political extremism in the U.S. that has been emboldened by the rhetoric of nationalist nostalgia. The Proud Boys showcase a shirking of guilt, a pride in one's white identity. They also rely on traditional gender roles and seek white women to further reproduce the white race. Patriot Prayer shares in a religious and spiritual community and seems to be oriented toward providing connection where otherwise (white) men would be alienated. But they are not as peaceful as they seem; Patriot Prayer has openly declared itself as fighting the far left – namely, ANTIFA – for God and country. This group shares a similar provocation tactic as the Proud Boys. They violently provoke on the streets for the sake of confrontation, and for the sake of attention which may earn them more support in saving the values of America.

These groups can be organized into distinct types: Proud Boys are *chauvinist white nationalists*, and Patriot Prayer are *Christian freedom fighters*. Each group does share some similarities, including antagonistic political origins. Proud Boys operate against the shame and guilt forced upon them by 'PC' (politically correct) 'SJWs' (social justice warriors)

and ‘feminazis’ simply for being loud and proud masculine men. Patriot Prayer was quite literally formed against ‘left-wing activism’ and ANTIFA in the Pacific Northwest, with tactical decisions to focus on particularly liberal cities in the initial months of their establishment. There are multiple ways to analyze the origins of each group: one might call the groups reactionary – orienting themselves around a perceived loss of power and privilege; or one might identify the seeds of *ressentiment* – a reorientation of perceived inferiority, anger, and frustration onto an external scapegoat. While these are useful frameworks and surely do in part drive the formation and behavior of the Proud Boys and Patriot Prayer, I prefer to see these groups as oppositional and antagonistic, in part because this terminology elides the moral problems of designations like ‘reactionary’ and ‘resentful.’ Not just this; to focus on their antagonistic origins allows highlighting their often provocative, confrontational, and violent behavior on the street. Moreover, as a final similarity across each of the groups, conspiratorial rhetoric (and the need to organize against the conspiracy) lends both political and moral justification to such behavior.

To flesh out each type of public briefly described here, I highlight the overlaps and distinctions prevalent in the language of each group. Systematically speaking, for each public, I answer the following questions in the groups’ or individual group members’ *own words*:

1. Who are they?
2. Who is their enemy?
3. What is the source of their discontent?
4. How do they articulate their problem?
5. How do they intend to solve their problem?
6. How will solving their problem address their anger, frustration, nostalgia, or discontent?
7. What is their vision of America?
8. How do they cast or construct their problem in the context of America, American politics, or American history?

Determining the answers to each of these questions has involved scouring primary and secondary sources across the internet, ranging from news coverage such as articles and interviews, to social media and image board posts, to published YouTube videos of speeches and rallies. I rely on interpretative, rhetorical, and textual analysis. For example: What phrases are used? What have those phrases historically implied? What actions typically follow from them? How does the speaker/writer/poster elaborate on those phrases? How is the language of one speaker/writer/poster the same or different from the language of another, who may proclaim membership in a distinct group? My analysis relies on identifying patterns and establishing connections between individuals and groups, both historically and in the present moment.

Through this analysis, I begin to unpack the motivations for membership and participation in the groups. I show the ways in which *loss* motivates these individuals and groups, as well as how what is perceived to be lost matters both for group members *and* for those of us trying to understand them. I also display how prevalent conspiratorial thinking is among the Proud Boys and other right-wing groups.¹⁰² I argue that such right-wing *conspiracy theorizing* is in part responsible for reaching a wide swath of Americans who might not otherwise *openly* ascribe to white nationalism, white supremacy, or white hypermasculinity. In all, I aim to display the relationship between loss, nostalgia,

¹⁰² In my Chapter 5, *Conspiracy Theorism as Radicalization*, I undertake a similar pragmatic analysis of QAnon – analyzing what they say and how they describe their political behavior – for the ends of developing further my typology of right-wing publics. QAnon, in my estimation, displays how *conspiracy theorism* has enabled an umbrella coalition of right-wing groups, religious groups, free speech activists, men’s right’s activists, white nationalists, and white supremacists. I choose the language of *conspiracy theorism* because it really is a systematized set of beliefs – notably quasi-democratically constructed from the ground up – which impels action.

mythology, and conspiracy as it rhetorically functions in part to produce a sense of diminishing whiteness and a diminishing power and privilege that group members (and average American citizens) are willing to do anything to recover and protect.

Proud Boys on Strike

At their core, the Proud Boys are what I call *chauvinist white nationalists*.¹⁰³ As a caveat, this chauvinism and white nationalism antagonistically come out of an *anti-guilt* or *anti-shame* framework, most evident in the pride conveyed by their name. In a nutshell, as Proud Boy founder Gavin McInnes puts it: “These people, the far left, the alt-left, have been using violence for a long time, and we’re now using it back on them. And I would add to this plan of justified violence with another thing that is very important to the Western world, and that is to breed... Stop pulling out like a coward. Make babies, not white babies, Western babies. We need more Western families” (Lombroso, 2020). Here, McInnes moves swiftly from *who* and *what* the Proud Boys are formed against – the violent ‘far left, the alt-left’ – to the justification of violence against these enemies and then on to the need

¹⁰³ Accounts of white nationalism abound in the online magazine – *Taki’s Magazine* – in which Gavin McInnes initially proclaimed the creation of the Proud Boys in 2016 (McInnes, 2016). For example, in March of 2021, Taki’s Magazine published a piece entitled, “Cultural Whiteness,” in which the author asserts that, “white nationalism has never been more relevant,” since, “white people are entitled to create institutions preserving the legacy of Western civilization,” and American white nationalists are to be the “defenders of the Western intellectual tradition of which America is the greatest exponent” (Matthews, “Cultural Whiteness”). This article is particularly useful in that it gives an intellectual account of white nationalism – in part by engaging in debate with ‘multiculturalist’ commentators and claims of ‘racism’ leveled at white nationalism as a whole – and articulates the purpose of a white identity politics as preserving Western civilization and struggling against the ‘dehumanization of whites.’ Without so much as saying it, the Proud Boys rhetorically appear to adhere to this formation of white identity politics.

to ‘man up’ – ‘stop pulling out like a coward’ – and make Western babies to preserve Western culture. In a parallel manner, I organize how Proud Boy members and leaders articulate themselves, their goals, their enemies, and their vision for America by putting their foil on display, by analyzing their approach to masculinity, and by elaborating their articulation of the problem of declining (white) Western culture.

In what follows, I first permit Proud Boys to articulate what exactly their oppositional anti-guilt and anti-shame framework stands against in the context of contemporary U.S. politics. Second, I explain my understanding of chauvinism as both anti-feminism *and* hypermasculinity, how chauvinism features as a central part of Proud Boys engagement, and how Proud Boys themselves describe their ‘chauvinism’. Finally, I show how, despite Proud Boys’ attempts to distance themselves from racism and white nationalism often by featuring men of color as proud members – and as current chairman –, their membership nonetheless subscribes to a dangerous white identity politics, often focusing on the need to replicate the white race and preserve white culture but couched in the language of ‘Western cultural values’. In this vein, Proud Boys subscribe to a mythologized whiteness constructed out of the present, cast into the past, only to then save it; as such, I argue that they can be considered white nationalists. Their nationalist nostalgia comes with an injunction to *restore* the lost homeland, its people, and its values, which is here wrapped into a specific concept of ‘the West’.

The anti-guilt and anti-shame framework that Proud Boys have embraced comes out of a specific lamentation – adapted from Jill Locke’s (2016) theorization of shame in *Democracy and the Death of Shame* –, namely: ‘The Lament that White Pride is Dead’. Quoting from Ayn Rand’s *Atlas Shrugged*, a Proud Boy account posted on Parler: “We are

on strike against self-immolation. We are on strike against the creed of unearned rewards and unrewarded duties. We are on strike against the dogma that the pursuit of one's happiness is evil. We are on strike against the doctrine that life is guilt.”¹⁰⁴ Lamentation becomes an active struggle, a strike against guilt and shame. Having been made to feel guilt and shame for being *white* on the one hand and *a man* on the other hand in the era of multiculturalism and feminism has pushed Proud Boys to the point of turning that shame on its head. Now, they lament the pride they cannot have in their own identities, and to struggle against this shaming, Proud Boys are increasingly loud about their rejection of ‘PC (political correctness) culture’ and are accordingly loud about their vulgar, in-your-face beliefs. As McInnes put it in 2016: “They want to tell you what to say, but they don’t have anything better to replace it. They’re just telling you what to say... And Trump was the first to say, ‘No, I’m not playing that game,’ and that’s sort of what the Proud Boys do – *we’re not ashamed actually of ourselves*” (Dissler, 2016; emphasis mine).

Railing against guilt and shame however is not the whole of what motivates the Proud Boys; something deeper is at play. Take, for example, another Proud Boy’s articulation of the problem that his group reacts to: “When you see the rise of the Proud Boys, when you see the rise of a candidate like Donald Trump, you might say they are symptoms of the same problem: people are fed up with what they are dealing with on a day-to-day basis, people felt marginalized and threatened by the PC culture” (SBS Dateline, 2018). It is important to note the shift here from shame to marginalization and threat; this shift indicates Proud Boy perceptions of threats *not merely* against pride, power, and privilege. It hints at perceptions of more *existential* threats against masculinity,

¹⁰⁴ Appendix A, Figure 26: Parler, On strike against guilt.

tradition, freedom, and (white) Western culture. These are threats against white male identity and white culture, which demand ever greater vigilance and willingness to engage in violence – also a definitive piece of Proud Boy membership – for the sake of saving, recovering, and protecting.

‘Enemies of the State’¹⁰⁵

Who is doing the shaming in these contexts? According to Proud Boys, there are a number of enemies who perpetrate PC culture. McInnes implicates them in the term ‘alt-left’: social justice warriors (or SJWs, as they call them), Black Lives Matter (and adjacent) activists, ANTIFA, and even the ‘liberal elites’. Often, though, these alt-left enemies are thrown into a catch-all and overarching ‘they’, who are out to get Proud Boys, to shame them into submission, and accordingly to engage them in violence in the streets. In a Parler post by Enrique Tarrio (@NobleLead), current chairman of the Proud Boys, Tarrio fails to specify who the enemy is, but certainly has a clear idea of why they are on the wrong side of American history:

The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil... Is for good men to do nothing. We have been accused of many things. Cowardice has never been one. They call us racists. We scratch our heads. They call them black Hispanic and people of color. We call them our brothers. They parade minorities as pet mouth pieces. We embrace them as family. They call it hate speech. We protect their right to defame us. They call us nationalists. We say charity starts at home. They claim to support

¹⁰⁵ One constant catch-all term for Proud Boy enemies – enemies who are often inflated to the level of threatening the American republic, of course – is ‘Communists’. As a Parler post from the Proud Boys account puts it: “Remember who your enemies are: Communists who terrorize and assault those they do not agree with. They are cowards who strike when you aren’t looking. They will seek an adversary, older, smaller, weaker. They will use weapons on these aforementioned targets. They do not care to exchange ideas and live peaceably, they care only to sow fear and discord until their ideology reigns all of us in under the yoke of fear. Stand up for something or you will fall for anything” (Appendix A, Figure 25: Parler, Remember your enemies).

human rights. We've watched them destroy the American family. They call us vigilantes. We watched as they burned cities to the ground and tear down American history. WE ARE THE PROUDBOYS AND WE WILL NEVER APOLOGIZE!¹⁰⁶ First and foremost, Tarrio's opening sentence casts the Proud Boy struggle into the register of good and evil, something that is part and parcel to conspiratorial thinking. Fighting against the conspiracy is what imbues the Proud Boy cause with moral justification, too, as they struggle to defeat evil and defend American values.

Further, despite the use of the catch-all 'they', the enemy here can be pieced together: calling 'us' racists while identifying individuals by their racial/ethnic identity, calling 'our' speech hateful while defaming Proud Boys and related groups, destroying families and burning cities while calling 'us' violent vigilantes. In turn, these are references to (1) multiculturalism, feminism, and identity politics, (2) SJWs who uphold PC culture, and finally, (3) BLM and ANTIFA activists who have taken to the streets in protest in the past few years and most notably in the summer of 2020. Third, Tarrio here connects these enemies to their charges by turning what the various iterations of 'the left' say about Proud Boys on its head. Thus, Proud Boys do not see skin color, nor do they use people of color as puppets; they are 'post-racial,' and anyone can be brothers in arms. Proud Boys are not violent, nor do they destroy cities; they protect the family and the community. Proud Boys are not cowards; they proudly uphold American history and values while others tear it to shreds.

The irony of the situation – where the violent left gets a free pass but groups like the Proud Boys are persecuted for defending their families, communities, values, and America itself – is horrifying for some Proud Boy members. Take, for example, this Parler

¹⁰⁶ Appendix A, Figure 36: Parler, Proud Boy enemies.

post from an account echoed by Tarrio and plastered with Proud Boy affiliated imagery (President Donald Trump's injunction to 'Stand back and Stand by' features as the cover photo):

Ya know what's really crazy? You can be a member of an actual criminal organization, whose sole purpose is to commit crimes, murder, sex trafficking, selling crack cocaine, meth, heroin, etc and, you can be apart of these organizations, flash your guns, throw up gang signs, and represent these gangs all over social media and in videos etc. No problems what so ever. But then, say you decide to get your shit together and join a stand up organization/men's drinking club, like the Proud Boys, that stands up and defends people who can't defend themselves, a group that is against racism, loves their country, isn't out breaking the law, stand up fucking guys, that work hard, provide for their family's, and like to have a few drinks with their brothers from time to time., you do that, and these mfers will try to erase your entire existence from the face or the earth. They'll try to get you fired, and do everything they can to cause you harm. What kinda world are we living in man!?¹⁰⁷

Note here that 'criminals' – reference to the Proud Boys' myriad left enemies, most likely those activists in the streets (BLM, ANTIFA, etc.) *and* liberal elites (the conspirators behind sex trafficking) – are destroying the country with *no repercussions*. At the same time, Proud Boys, who 'defend people who cannot defend themselves', who are 'against racism', who 'work hard and provide for their families', are under attack: 'they' are trying to '*erase your entire existence from the face of the earth.*' It is against this existential threat that the Proud Boys organize, against this threat that they provide a support group for the men who would otherwise be persecuted, humiliated, and eradicated. The anti-guilt and anti-shame framework accordingly becomes a framework against eradication, too: thus, as the Proud Boys refuse to apologize for being men and for being white, they also intend to fight for the preservation of that identity.

¹⁰⁷ Appendix A, Figure 29: Parler, Stand up organization like the Proud Boys

Resolution through Violent Chauvinism

Proud Boy members describe the group in several different ways, ranging from the seemingly innocuous – ‘a fraternity’ and ‘alpha male support group’ – to the downright heroic – saviors of the ‘way of life that is freedom’ in America. In both cases, these descriptions have the air of reactionary protectionism: ensuring support for males who are faced with the grave irony of the contemporary world and the need for ensuring preservation of their communities and cultural values. Of course, McInnes, the group’s infamous founder, has already given the official tagline of the Proud Boys: Western *chauvinists* who do not apologize for creating the modern world. To clarify, McInnes has noted that, “Chauvinist does not mean sexist; it means extremely patriotic” (SBS Dateline, 2018). Despite the innocuousness of this claim and despite McInnes’ consistent claim that, “‘Western chauvinist’ includes all races, religions, and sexual preferences,” I display here that Proud Boy language and action says otherwise (McInnes, 2016). Their consistent engagement in violence – from initiation into the group to their provocative behavior on the street –, their vehement distaste for feminism and women, and their forceful traditional values all point toward a more nefarious chauvinism that is more akin to ‘hypermasculinity’ than to an overbearing patriotism.

Nowhere is the dangerous and violent nature of Proud Boys more evident than in their language and their actions. McInnes has famously declared that: “Violence doesn’t feel good, justified violence feels great, and fighting solves everything. I want violence.” At the same time, this justified violence has become part and parcel with initiation into the

Proud Boy ‘fraternity’.¹⁰⁸ To become a first-degree member, the potential Proud Boy must state, “I am a Western chauvinist, and I refuse to apologize for the creation of the modern world.” Second degree membership requires the potential Proud Boy to be punched repeatedly until he can name five breakfast cereals.¹⁰⁹ Then, a Proud Boy becomes a third-degree member when he agrees to the group’s ‘masturbation ban’¹¹⁰ and gets a Proud Boy tattoo. Finally, to become fully initiated, a fourth-degree Proud Boy, one must provoke a fight on the street with an enemy (ideally an ANTIFA, BLM, or any vaguely left-wing activist).

In these initiation rituals, Western chauvinism and white masculine pride is symbolically born in and through violence. At the same time, the ‘overbearing patriotism’ piece of Western chauvinism goes towards the justification of violence that McInnes and many other Proud Boys revel in the feeling of. As Proud Boy Rufio Panman (his online pseudonym) argues in the context of ‘protecting the community’¹¹¹:

People need to understand what that looks like... to remove a threat that is a group of people. When police officers go after criminals, they use force, *aka* violence. So, when police officers and government officials are breaking the law, what are we supposed to do as the people, discourse?... No, you have to use force.” [RufioPanman, 2020]

¹⁰⁸ See Bill Morlin (25 April, 2017). “A new fight club ‘fraternity’ of young white, pro-Trump men is being formed, its organizers claim, to defend free-speech rights by ‘Alt-Right’ leaders and engage in street fighting.”

¹⁰⁹ This initiation was captured on video by a Twitter user in 2017 in Boston (@JackSmithIV). Will Sommer (2017) also details the initiation rites.

¹¹⁰ More on the masturbation ban later in my discussion on gender: “Anti-feminism and Hypermasculinity.”

¹¹¹ As Proud Boy NobleBeard says: “We wanted them off the streets for *your* safety” (RufioPanman, 2020).

Here, Proud Boys are justified in their provocative street fighting because they beat back enemies that threaten their communities and values¹¹² while otherwise incompetent and corrupt government entities – police and other officials – fail to do so.

For example, consider further the language and behavior of Panman, the Proud Boy ‘Sergeant of Arms’ who was an active participant in the January 6th Capitol Insurrection and has since been charged. Panman has said: “ANTIFA, their surface level attack is you’re racist, you’re Nazi, but really their agenda is anarchy and communism, they want to inflict anarchy into our system to uproot what we have as Americans here and Western culture and create a communist society” (Alex Jones Show, 2018). In an abstract context, then, Proud Boys are not only under attack and subject to defamation by ANTIFA, but their American society is also under attack, thereby making ANTIFA both a moral and individual enemy. In a more concrete context, in the sense that ‘justified violence *feels* good’, Panman (wearing a smirk on his face as Alex Jones applauds his bravery and skilled punch-throwing) reflects on a now famous altercation from 2018 at a Patriot Prayer rally in an interview with Jones and quite literally cites McInnes’s notorious commentary about violence – which, in a sense, has become an additional tagline for the Proud Boys. Panman explains: “It’s just one of those things where you just react instinctively, and when you can kind of overcome in that moment it does feel good, it is a positive feeling. I can tell you

¹¹² The communities and values that Proud Boys want to cultivate are elaborated below in the context of Proud Boys’ articulation of traditional gender roles. One Proud Boys account on Parler demands that women, “get married, have children, cultivate wonderful communities in which we can live in... to save the West” (Appendix A, Figure 31: Parler, No proud girls allowed). Those communities are traditionally organized, where the men are empowered and brave patriots who stand up for liberty and the women stay at home maintaining the domestic sphere and raising children who can fulfill their roles/duties.

that in that situation, there wasn't a whole lot of celebration going on, I was more worried about the safety of people around me" (Freedom News TV, 2018).¹¹³

Proud Boy violence, instinctive reaction or not, feels good, even when it is after the fact described as 'protecting those around me' (which it often is). It is also important to keep in mind here that Proud Boys more often than not take to the street *looking for such* confrontation, as that is part of the way they display their patriotism and defend America. Moreover, Proud Boy enemies are often described as cowardly but in more colorful language; Proud Boys themselves serve as their exact foil, as *the real men*. Panman again: "Great men need to keep standing strong. This nation was made by great men" (Freedom News TV, 2018). As such, Proud Boys, in their action and language, link masculinity – the real, great men, who protect their women and children – with violence.¹¹⁴

When Proud Boys use the word 'chauvinist' to describe themselves, they mean patriotic, masculine men who are brave and willing to stand up and fight when they are called upon. Often, commentators are quick to refer to this as 'toxic masculinity' because it encapsulates a set of cultural norms that emphasize male power, aggression, and

¹¹³ Further, Panman argues that, "They have no fighting etiquette either. There is no moral foundation for them. They were throwing explosives into a crowd of people, there could have easily been a baby stroller nearby, there's no thought process into what they're doing, and so on that level you know you can't really have any sympathy for them, you just have to eliminate them as a threat" (Freedom News TV, 2018). After this description of the lack of etiquette and proper masculine qualities for fighting (threatening women and babies, cowering behind women in the crowd, taking cheap shots, etc.), Panman and Jones proceed to discuss the decline of masculinity and the calling of masculinity as 'toxic'.

¹¹⁴ Before Panman's comment about great men standing strong, he recognizes the bravery of his men: "I gotta keep giving honor to my boys because I truly believe we saved lives that day" (Freedom News TV, 2018). Another Proud Boy, NobleBeard, describes himself and his 'boys': "We're looked almost as soldiers of the right wing, we're out there, people are looking at us to lead the way. While we will gladly step up and take our place where they need us, we're still people" (RufioPanman, 2020).

dominance over others, particularly women. While this is a useful term, Proud Boys themselves are quick to react against the phrase, turning accusations of toxic masculinity on its head by arguing things like: “A good man is a man who can be violent but chooses when to use it. A good man is not a man who is weak” (RufioPanman, 2020); or, “You can’t have a great civilization without the men who built it” (SBS Dateline, 2018). Most telling is Panman’s articulation of *his mission* as a Proud Boy:

Men need to be willing to stand up, more men need to be willing to stand up, and that’s kind of my mission: to empower men in the community, young and old, all races, doesn’t matter your sexual orientation, I don’t care. Stand up for your country, because this country is the reason why you can be any race, any sexual orientation, and live your life and be free. [Freedom News TV, 2018]

At this point, Panman is talking about male empowerment to stand up, be strong, be willing to fight and engage in violence, *to be masculine*. Not in a toxic sense, but in a *traditional sense*. Interestingly enough, too, in a *multicultural* sense.¹¹⁵ Violence and masculinity are interwoven, but they are operationalized for a very specific purpose which in turns lends Proud Boy language and behavior justification. That purpose is the restoration and protection of (white) Western cultural values, also called traditional values and American values, and often couched in the context of ‘the spirit of 1776’. Thus, I suggest we understand chauvinism as it functions in Proud Boy language and behavior through the

¹¹⁵ Daniel Martinez Hosang & Joseph E. Lowndes (2019) articulate a concept of ‘multicultural masculinity’ in *Producers, Parasites, Patriots: Race and the New Right-Wing Politics of Precarity* as such: “...several far-right formations that have accompanied Trump’s rise have integrated civic-nationalist and racial-nationalist discourses in ways that have openly facilitated the participation of some people of color in these movements. In this context, calls to defend ‘civilization,’ ‘culture,’ ‘the West’, or... ‘Judeo-Christian values’ can be used to legitimate and reproduce a nationalist project that is at once inclusionary and hieararchical” (Hosang & Lowndes, p. 110). It is important to note here that multicultural masculinity is tied directly to the kinds of Western (white) values that such men must go to the lengths of violence to protect; protecting these values is patriotic (chauvinist) and nationalistic, yet available to anyone willing to embody those traditional masculine values.

lens of nostalgia: in calling back to a set of cultural values and, “bringing back that original spirit of 1776, of what really established the character [of America],” Proud Boys engage in *violence* to act out their rightful and traditional *hypermasculinity* (RufioPanman, 2020).

Anti-Feminism and Hypermasculinity

Despite self-perceptions that they ‘protect their women’ as part of acting out traditional masculinity, Proud Boys are decidedly anti-feminist, if not downright misogynist. They must be, in fact, so that those traditional masculine values lost to the feminist enemies can be recovered and upheld. First, the ‘problems’ that America faces in the present moment are a result of the fall of traditional gender roles and, with that, the fall of masculine values. Gavin McInnes has stated this many times,¹¹⁶ and other Proud Boys convey a similar theme. For example:

Most guys my age are just really interested in sitting at home, masturbating, eating cheerios, playing video games, smoking weed, trying to avoid responsibility at all costs. I think most of the problems we have in the country are because men aren’t stepping up, doing the things that they have done forever, being providers, being strong, being manly. [SBS Dateline, 2018]

If men were to step up, be providers, and be strong, then America would be better off. What is more interesting, however, is the consistent theme of *anti-masturbation* conveyed by both Proud Boy leaders and members. Above, I described initiation rites for membership in the Proud Boys; third degree initiation is a pledge to withhold from masturbation (in some instances, once a month is permitted). In this masturbation ban, I argue that we see Proud Boys, on the one hand, demanding a *better* masculine man who *steps up* rather than

¹¹⁶ Another example from McInnes: “The plight of the Western male is there is a war on masculinity going on in the West, and it starts in kindergarten where children are punished for being rambunctious, boys are punished for being rambunctious” (SBS Dateline, 2018)

he who withdraws, sits in his basement, and masturbates to pornography. It is also here that we also see the Proud Boys make a conscious effort to channel their virility toward more (biologically) productive ends: reproducing the West. We might even locate a twinge of anti-feminism here in that Proud Boys shirk from the expression of sexual pleasure as anything other than duty. *That* is true masculinity; spreading your seed for the purposes of extending generations of whiteness beyond you is *simply* biology. Adhering to biological impulses and being willing to defend the expression of those impulses, in Proud Boy estimation, is part of their responsibility. Proud Boys become men as they channel their *hypermasculinity* towards important collective ends.

This is only possible, though, if women were to step back and let men take the lead *as they always have and thus should*. Then, the American cultural situation (and in turn the political situation) would be improved. It is here that anti-feminism is part and parcel to Proud Boy culture, since “being a man is almost frowned upon because of this third wave feminism movement” (SBS Dateline, 2018). After all, it is third wave feminism – and feminism more generally, as some Proud Boys see it – that emasculated men and made it acceptable for women to push their boundaries. Third wave feminism introduced a myriad of genders, upset the clarity of the gender binary, and accordingly unsettled traditional gender roles. In this sense, Minna Stern (2019) convincingly argues that Proud Boys are largely transphobic because their, “prejudices are anchored to a rigid dogma of innate biological differences and natural hierarchies” (p. 75). Without clear delineations of man/woman, there cannot be clear gender roles, nor can there be a clear gender hierarchy

to maintain. Importantly, too, without the imposition of natural, *biological* hierarchies,¹¹⁷ (white) Western man¹¹⁸ is at risk of erasure.

The Proud Boys' oppositional and antagonistic nature permits recognition of their formation as quite literally *against feminism*. In one Parler post from an Ohio coalition of Proud Boys, "the root of what we are up against" is described by the user: "White women with limited abilities to use reason and logic, driven completely by emotion, while being simultaneously convinced of their superior-wisdom as evidenced by their college degree."¹¹⁹ For Proud Boys, women are driven by emotion to make improper decisions about themselves, society, and politics. Feminism has coalesced women's emotions into something that has destroyed American society, undermining the rightful, rational, and logical place for men. In their eyes, women with limited rational ability then make political demands that result in self-harm. As the Parler post continues, describing an image of a young white woman holding a 'Defund police' sign: "The police are literally the only thing standing in the way of her getting raped to death."¹²⁰ Note here the criticism of women's alleged limited decision-making capabilities tied to an oft-used racialized claim that white

¹¹⁷ At this point, Proud Boys begin to tread more seriously in white nationalist territory. Their emphasis on traditional, natural, biological gender hierarchies makes for *very easy* slippage into racial hierarchies on the basis of phony biology and race science.

¹¹⁸ Sylvia Wynter (2003) provides an important context to the Proud Boys' concern for the decline of the West and of Western man: Wynter shows how the concept of 'Man', which is based on the Western bourgeois understanding of the human being, overrepresents itself as *all of humanity*. In a parallel manner, white values have been overrepresented as 'the West', where mention of the West comes to imply 'white civilization' (which, again, is in and of itself a mythological construction. As such, the implication of Proud Boy language to defend the West, restore the West, and save the West, is to in effect encircle and shore up *whiteness*.

¹¹⁹ Appendix A, Figure 39: Parler, Feminists we are up against.

¹²⁰ Appendix A, Figure 39: Parler, Feminists we are up against.

women need to be protected by the state from rape by enemy Others. At the same time, violence is threatened and directed at women who make political stances for themselves.

In effect, Proud Boys happily aim to undo the victories of multiple feminisms over the past seventy-five years. In their view, feminism has not only shamed and guilted them for being cisgender heterosexual white men; it has also completely upended gender hierarchies, gender roles, and basic biology.¹²¹ The Proud Boys rely heavily on a gendered hierarchy, traditional gender roles, and family values. They also emphasize the value of their virility, demanding that white women take up their mantle as breeding stock for the white race. The workings of ‘feminism’ are hugely antagonistic to Proud Boys and their understanding of masculinity, not only in the shame that feminism demands of Proud Boys, but also in the structural changes to traditional hierarchies for which feminism is responsible. But it remains important to recognize that the Proud Boys are not *merely* anti-feminists who partake in white identity politics. An analysis of their gendered complaints permits recognition that the Proud Boys are chauvinist white nationalists.

All of this goes toward undermining the traditional Western values that the Proud Boys love.¹²² Even women who have attempted to fight alongside Proud Boys are

¹²¹ As Alexandra Minna Stern (2019) puts it in *Proud Boys and The White Ethnostate: How the Alt-Right is Warping the American Imagination*, feminism in the estimation of Proud Boys and others on the alt-right spectrum locate feminism as a serious hurdle for restoring the ‘White Republic’ (p. 76). In her words, “Men are trapped in ‘caged manhood’ and feminism has taken the key. The unfulfilling options left for men are to simulate masculinity through video games, pornography, and over-managed activities. This can only produce incels and beats, and dreary lives of clerkdom and masturbation. Masculinity will be squelched; there will be no opportunities for risk-taking and masculine prowess” (Minna Stern, 2019, pp. 84-85).

¹²² As Minna Stern (2019) puts it: “The Proud Boys bemoan that men are falling behind, becoming depressed and marginalized, and have a nostalgia for a time when ‘girls were girls and men were men.’ The main culprits of this desolation are feminism and leftism,

dismissed from the front lines, as *this is not their role*.¹²³ As one anti-feminist Parler commentator argues, “It is time we stop pretending men should be more like women and women should be more like men.”¹²⁴ Thus, there can be no such thing as ‘Proud Girls,’ and women parading as such have been implored as follows:

Dear ‘Proud Girls’... Stop... Hijacking our fraternity because you can’t stand men having their own club is exactly why we created this club in the first place. You aren’t supporting us. You’re hurting us. You’re ruining what we hold dear. Want to know how to ACTUALLY support us? Get married, have children, cultivate wonderful communities in which we can live in. To save the west we need WOMEN BEING WOMEN. Not women trying to be men... We beg of you, with sincere love from the bottom of our hearts, get pregnant and get the fuck back in the kitchen.¹²⁵

There are a few important moments in this tirade: first, the existence of the Proud Boys as a fraternity is predicated on the exclusion of women.¹²⁶ Second, supporting men, specifically Proud Boys but presumably other men too, requires women knowing their place and recognizing when transgressing that place causes ‘ruin’ and ‘pain’. Third, and most importantly, *women must be women* – bearing Western babies, maintaining Western homes, cultivating Western communities – to ‘save the west’, to save (white) Western

which according to the Proud Boys, spur women to assume ill-fitting male roles based on the specious logic of gender equity. The cure for this malaise is the full restitution of the male/female ‘biological binary’” (p. 71).

¹²³ As Proud Boy Noblebeard (his internet pseudonym) puts it on Parler: “... women do not belong on the front line at rallies or the battles that happen at them. For every female that is upfront it’s 1 less capable man up there defending... Want to be there at rallies be there in a support capacity but know your place, it’s in the back. Women are to be protected. They put us in jeopardy by being upfront... And there is no PG [Proud Girl] and no woman is a PB [Proud Boy]. It will NEVER happen. PG doesn’t exist.” And some women agree with his argument; one commenter on this Parler post says, “Exactly. Women are to be PROTECTED. Let the men do the work. And more men to step up so women don’t feel like they need to. We need more and more men to wake up and stand up” (Supplemental Content, Parler, @Noblebeard, Women stay back).

¹²⁴ Supplemental Content, Parler, @Noblebeard, Women stay back.

¹²⁵ Appendix A, Figure 23: Parler, Doxxing feminist intellectuals.

¹²⁶ This might seem innocuous since fraternities are after all ‘brotherhoods’, but it is nonetheless relevant here.

culture. This fits with McInnes' arguments above – 'stop pulling out like a coward' and 'make Western babies.' It fits with the Proud Boy's 'masturbation ban', for the sake of self-control *and* for the sake of cultivating oneself as a man that a woman would presumably want to have Western babies with.¹²⁷ It fits with some of the Proud Boy's core tenets (which have been posted and reposted on Parler, Reddit, and other sites in meme form) including: "... Venerating the Housewife, and Reinstating a Spirit of Western Chauvinism."¹²⁸

Visions of a White/Western America

First, their biological and heteronormative maleness, and now, their whiteness: these are the core aspects of Proud Boy identity that they *refuse* to be shamed for. These are also *existential aspects* that Proud Boys are determined to restore and protect. To argue that the Proud Boys espouse a (white) Western identity politics to the point of being white nationalists requires analysis of the following: (1) how their determination to protect Western traditional values has been converted into white identity politics; (2) their avowed anti-white racism which rests on a post-racial vision of American society; (3) some members' concern for 'white genocide'; and (4) the rhetorical construction of a mythologized whiteness upon which they rely for their calls to preserve and replicate Western values. Inflecting each of these through the lens of nationalist nostalgia permits recognition of the centrality of loss in their political project, of the existential gravity of

¹²⁷ As one Proud Boy argues: "Masturbation is lack of impulse control. So, if you can control your impulses, you can control most aspects of your life" (SBS Dateline, 2018).

¹²⁸ Appendix A, Figure 22: Reddit, Proud Boy core values & Appendix A, Figure 28: Parler, Proud Boy core tenets.

their situation as white cishet men, and of the reliance upon conspiratorial and transcendental narratives of their history. Proud Boys long for a time when ‘whiteness’ was a prideful term that represented a culture of freedom, bravery, and strength.

What makes the American concept of ‘whiteness’ particularly interesting is that being a settler colonial mentality in a multicultural context, white nationalism is possible as something inclusive so long as there is *assimilation* into that whiteness.¹²⁹ That is to say, this concept is not recognized by its proponents as the settler nationalism that it in fact is, because they are not settlers: Americans *are the originals*. Whiteness in the American context has thus been mythologized *from the outset*, and it has consistently been imagined as sharing a space with others but existing *above* those others. How, though, does it come to pass that men of color are not just proud members of but in fact leaders of groups like the Proud Boys?¹³⁰ This remains a sticky question, but one I try to unpack by describing the translation of race into cultural values made possible by Proud Boys’ adherence to a post-racial vision of America where only *culture* matters.

¹²⁹ Samuel Huntington (2004) asks: “To what extent will these immigrants, their successors, and descendants follow the path of earlier immigrants and be successfully assimilated into American society and culture, become committed Americans forswearing other national identities, and adhere through belief and action to the principles of the American Creed” (p. 178)?

¹³⁰ Proud Boy Noblebeard describes Enrique Tarrio, chairman of the Proud Boys, as follows: “...[Enrique] would be a trophy to them, you know... because he doesn’t fit their narrative, he crushes the narrative actually, and that’s kinda one of the great things about having him as our Chairman. They’ve got no ammo at that point, no matter how hard they try. We just counter them with, ‘Well, he’s not white’” (The Right View, *The Right View* | Ep.4 | #LIVE Proud Boys Special with Tommy Robinson & Enrique Tarrio, 2020). It is clear that part of Tarrio’s chairmanship is strategic – ‘crushing the narrative’ – but it should also be noted that Tarrio often acts out the white hypermasculinity championed in and through Proud Boy language and behavior.

Nonetheless, concerns about Western cultural values are articulated as white identity politics for a multicultural America. Consider, for example, this parley from a Proud Boy associated account, arguing that ‘peace will only exist’ when, “America has ALL of the following: White Caucus, White Entertainment TV, White only Scholarships, White Alliance, NAAWP, White History Month, White Lives Matter, White Only Clubs, coalitions, organizations, etc.”¹³¹ In their estimation, if multiculturalism and identity politics enables specifically ‘racialized’ groups, then there ought to be the same for white individuals and groups. After all, if equality is the goal, then essentially ‘separate but equal’ groups should be established. Not missing the irony, then, Proud Boys are quick to call multiculturalists and supporters of identity politics the *real racists*, since they, as Tarrio said above, call people of color by ‘the color of their skin’ and ‘parade them as mouthpieces’ for their larger agenda: presumably some kind of authoritarian communism (this is the typical charge). If the enemy is going to continue to divide, then Proud Boys demand the affirmation of their white identity, too.

This in part drives Proud Boys’ anti-race sentiment; to be clear, even though Proud Boys claim not to be racists, they are closer to anti-race in that they deny race is or should be a concept to be dealt with. For example, as one Proud Boy notes: “We think race is dumb. It’s a stupid concept. Culture is where it’s at.” (BBC Trending, 2019). Supplanting race with culture is an important move for Proud Boys because it eradicates the grounds on which they can be called out as racists. Further, it not only enables them to rail against anti-white racism, which they argue is perpetrated by their myriad left enemies, but it also enables transposition of whiteness into the concept of ‘Western culture.’ Thus, they can act

¹³¹ Appendix A, Figure 21: Parler, Peace exists when white people have.

to restore, protect, and perpetuate *white culture* in America *without having to say so explicitly*. For example, take this same Proud Boy's articulation of his fears and frustrations:

If whites are a minority in this country to the point of where blacks were a minority in this country... then the whites get treated like the blacks were. A lot of people are like, "Ha Ha, finally time that the white people get what they deserve." Who? Who? I didn't do anything. I have never been racist towards anybody but the ridiculous race groups that you guys came up with. [BBC Trending, 2019]

Thus, in their crusade against perceived white racism, they are avowed anti-racists, since this anti-racism is how white families are protected from mistreatment. Yet, it is important to note here the cognizance of the abuse of people of color in America. And, this cognizance serves only to provide historical evidence for what is to come as the white majority declines in America.¹³²

It is again therefore better to say that Proud Boys tend towards being 'anti-race' in that they adhere to a *post-racial vision* of America.¹³³ This permits them to elide responsibility for their racism at the same time as they can advocate subliminally for the preservation of 'white culture' transposed into explicit arguments for *Western* culture. Daniel Martinez Hosang and Joseph E. Lowndes (2019) describe such a 'racial transposition' as the "varied ways in which representations of racial meaning travel and circulate. [It is] a process through which the meaning, valence, and signification of race can be transferred from one context, group, or setting, to another" (p. 12). The 'white race'

¹³² Put another way: "I want him to live in the America that I've always seen. I don't want my grandson to be as marginalized as the Negroes in the 60s. People hate white people. This is a problem with race." (BBC Trending, 2019). Here, a Proud Boy describes the society that he wishes to pass to new generations of Americans. Often a concern for the America left over for future generations is conveyed by Proud Boys.

¹³³ In my estimation, too, this post-racial vision implies that: "You can be a part of our fraternity, too!" if you espouse the values Proud Boys articulate.

accordingly becomes inlaid with the West and Western culture. Whiteness, too, becomes a matter of upholding and enacting certain values, and in the context of the Proud Boys, these values are the ones articulated in the American revolution, founding, and constitution – that is, the ‘spirit of 1776’. Accordingly, it would make sense to see Tarrio lament the following in an interview with Milo Yiannopolous: “Because we’ve already lost so much, right, from generation to generation, the founding principles of our country have been lost.” (Friday Night’s All Right, 2020). Those founding principles established the white Western culture at stake in the Proud Boys’ struggle against decline: freedom, liberty, equality, bravery, and a revolutionary spirit... but only for those either at the top of the hierarchy or for those who can *act out that role*.

Whiteness as it flows through Proud Boy language and action is thus more complex than skin color. Though it is typically cloaked in the language of ‘patriotism’, ‘Western culture’, and the ‘revolutionary spirit’, there are also moments where more explicit demands for the preservation of whiteness come to the fore. For example, soon after the election of Joe Biden as U.S. President in November 2020, there was a brief, albeit revealing, conflict within Proud Boy membership, which Proud Boys have since brushed off. White nationalist and former Proud Boy member, Kyle Chapman, argued for the removal of Tarrio from the Chairmanship of the group.¹³⁴ Chapman’s discontent, however, is not simply with Tarrio, whom he declares has failed to conduct himself with honor on

¹³⁴ This story was reported by *The Sun Sentinel* (2020, November 11), *The Daily Beast* (2020, November 11), and *Newsweek* (2020, November 11). *Newsweek* cites a tweet by an anti-fascist network (@berkelyantifa) from November 9, 2020 containing screenshots of Chapman’s Telegram messages declaring the so-called ‘coup’.

the battlefield, but also with the Proud Boys’ ‘cucking to the left’¹³⁵ by elevating a ‘token negro’ to leadership and permitting ‘homosexuals and other undesirables’ into their ranks. Subsequently, Chapman – harking back to Proud Boy ‘Sergeant at Arms’ Panman’s calls for brave men and patriots to stand up and fight to protect their communities – claims to ‘boldly address the issue of White Genocide’, proudly declaring that he will no longer sit back as whites are allegedly murdered in the streets. In his words:

We will boldly address the issues of White Genocide, the failures of multiculturalism, and the right for White men and women to have their own countries where white interests are written into law and part of the body politics. We will no longer stand by as Whites are murdered in the streets because of the color of their skin. [@berkleyantifa, 2020]

Chapman, who established the Fraternal Order of the Alt-Knights, a militarized group associated with the Proud Boys,¹³⁶ had actually not been a part of the Proud Boys for a few years at the time he attempted to unseat Tarrio as the Chairman. This fact has been Tarrio’s defense against the revelation that Proud Boys do have white nationalist tendencies. Despite the failure of this so-called ‘coup,’ Chapman both outed himself as a white nationalist and displayed the dangerous underbelly of Proud Boy ideology.

‘White Genocide’ is ultimately a conspiracy theory which alleges that the white population is on the one hand declining in numbers while on the other hand being actively replaced by people of color and of mixed races.¹³⁷ The blame here is allocated in multiple places. First, there are the white ‘race traitors’ who fail to take seriously their traditional

¹³⁵ ‘Cuck’ is a verb often used by those on the right to indicate signs of weakness or servility. It comes from the term ‘cuckhold’ which implies a man whose wife is adulterous.

¹³⁶ According to the SPLC: “The group’s founder, repeat-felon Kyle Chapman, organized FOAK after a melee with counter-protestors in Berkeley, California, to ‘protect and defend our right-wing brethren’ through ‘street activism, preparation, defense and confrontation’” (Southern Poverty Law Center).

¹³⁷ The Christchurch shooter infamously opened his manifesto, *The Great Replacement*, as such: “It’s the birthrates...” repeated three times.

reproductive roles (think McInnes' comments about making Western babies, but more explicitly for the sake of the white race). Second, globalism, multiculturalism and 'cultural Marxism', serve as bogeyman which have not merely enabled replacement of white people but actively topple white culture and values. Finally, most decisively, blame is placed upon people of color who immigrate to Western countries and take over whites' rightful place. The 'Great Replacement' implied by 'White Genocide' is a *loss* around which the white nationalist political subject orients himself to fight for a specific culture and a place for those values to persist. Proud Boys already proclaim themselves as fighting against loss – the loss of certain values, the loss of a place to act out those values, as well as a loss of pride in them. It is just that they go about this *nostalgically* by constructing a mythology of whiteness, which is smartly cloaked in general enough language (even then, only sometimes). Moreover, coupling evocations of nostalgia *and* generalized language about lost values means that they can have serious reach. For them, it is not just the West, America, and men that are under threat and under attack. It is also oft-celebrated American ideals like traditional values, liberty, rationality, masculinity, and the specifically American revolutionary spirit – declaring liberty and equality for all while murdering indigenous peoples and enslaving Africans. The birthrates, after all, are a bit abstract; but acting out with impunity – according to the mythologized whiteness they have constructed – is personal. Around this loss, the Proud Boy, a white nationalist subject, is formed.

While 2015-2016 was a formative year for the Proud Boys given the election of Donald Trump to U.S. President, 2020-2021 was another important moment: it was the moment Trump allegedly had the election stolen from him, the do or die moment when groups like the Proud Boys really had to stand up for the values that they had spent the

previous five years loudly and violently espousing. If voter fraud could happen at such a scale, then, as Panman asks on December 31, 2020, “Democracy is dead? Okay, no democracy, no peace” (RufioPanman, 2020). On Parler, Panman posted on January 3, 2021: “It is apparent now more than ever, that if you are a patriot, you will be targeted and they will come after you, funny thing is that they don’t realize is, is we are coming for them. You’ve chosen your side, black and yellow teamed with red, white and blue against everyone else.”¹³⁸ Comments on his next most recent Parley from the day after January 6, 2021 – the day of the Capitol Insurrection – include, ‘violence is the final answer,’ ‘time for peace is over’, and ‘revolution time.’¹³⁹ Yet another Parler post:

The election was stolen. But don’t stop fighting. The Left never accepted Donald Trump as their president and you don’t have to accept Biden as your president. Channel your anger into activism. Channel your energy into the creation of a revolution. It’s the only way we are going to save this country. Don’t forget, our nation was born out of a revolution. We were given a Republic, but it’s our job to keep it.¹⁴⁰

Note again the significance of patriotic revolution, the need to restore that revolutionary spirit such that the Republic can be saved. The founders channeled *their* anger into political revolution, and men like the Proud Boys are committed to doing the same. Then, cloaking the patriotic spirit in conspiratorial terms, one user on ‘patriots.win’¹⁴¹ argued that, “the Proud Boys are the closest thing patriots have to a militia... Our country was founded on

¹³⁸ Appendix A, Figure 35: Parler, Patriots are coming for you.

¹³⁹ Supplemental Content, Parler, @RufioPanman, Jan 6 calls for violence.

¹⁴⁰ Appendix A, Figure 15: Parler, Channel your anger.

¹⁴¹ ‘patriots.win’ is the new replacement site for ‘thedonald.win’, the forum where in large part individuals and groups organized and planned tactics *in plain sight* prior to the Capitol Insurrection on January 6, 2021. Individuals on this site posted goodbyes to their families prior to January 6, asked about the locations of high value targets, and went as far as to ask when the orders to kill communists would come through.

a bunch of guys, meeting at the bar for drinks to discuss how to break away from an oppressive government. The deep state doesn't want history repeating itself.”¹⁴²

There are numerous important points to pull out of this series of statements. First and foremost, these words turned out to be much more than just words, what with the Capitol Insurrection unfolding. A significant number of Proud Boys – including Rufio Panman – were spotted at the Capitol and have since been charged. However, ‘normies’ – your average, everyday Americans as Proud Boys call them – with patriotic sentiment, inspired by the narrative of loss and the mythology constructed in and through Proud Boy rhetoric, *also took to the Capitol in large numbers*. Second, the consistent reference to the founding works here first by justifying the violence committed in America's name *and*, second, by suturing together a mythologized whiteness built from an idealized past plus the struggle of the present moment. The fact that this mythology is one specifically of whiteness is further covered over by reference to American founding principles and to the revolutionary spirit of 1776 because they are abstract and can apply to everyone; this, though, relies upon strategic historical whitewashing. Finally, in their obsession with elevating the white (Western) male, giving them space to be proud again, to be stand-up men with traditional families, to fight for their communities and for *their future generations*, Proud Boys are ultimately chauvinist white nationalists, and they ultimately rely on ‘lost’ white values to justify their language and behavior, to fuel it, and to recruit both members and supporters in their struggle for recovery.

¹⁴² Supplemental Content, patriots.win, The civil war is already here.

Freedom, Faith, and Patriot Prayer

On November 28, 2020, Joey Gibson, founder and leader of Patriot Prayer, is introduced to speak at a rally in Olympia, Washington. He is described as not merely an activist but as a catalyst (an ‘activator’ in the words of his ‘master of ceremony’) and a constant warrior, who fights and risks his life in the streets every day, encouraging others to get out and do the same, all the while spreading his love for God and for America. At the same moment, another rally attendee walks behind Gibson, carrying a flag representing The Three Percenters,¹⁴³ a far-right anti-government militia group. Gibson says, “God blessed this country with freedom so we gotta act like it and fight for it as hard as we possibly can, we gotta make sure our children and our grandchildren have that freedom too” (Tjoelker, 2020). The fight for freedom, here and elsewhere, is a central piece of Patriot Prayer’s self-articulation. This fight also has multi-generational implications.

At a different rally in Olympia, on January 6, 2021, Gibson pontificated further: “America has been asleep for too long. We’ve been too weak, we’ve been too docile, we cannot allow these criminals to run this country any more... No, we are not going to let these criminals commit these acts of war anymore... It is an act of war on the people”

¹⁴³ The Three Percenters describe themselves as: “A Different type of Patriot Movement! During the American Revolution, the active forces in the field against the King’s tyranny never amounted to more than 3% of the colonists. Three Percenters today, for the most part, identify with this 3% because they were true patriots fighting for the freedoms the nation we love and honor was founded on” (Homepage, <http://threepercentrepublic.com/>). A number of Three Percenters have since been identified as participating in the Capitol Insurrection; it is also worth noting the conspiratorial and mythological rearticulation of the American Revolution embedded in their name and description: they are the small – *three percent of the population*, to be exact – revolutionary portion of patriots willing to do *anything* – including storm the Capitol building – to fight for ‘the freedoms of our nation’. Reference to this mythologized history serves to articulate the values they fight for and to justify on a cosmic level their often-violent fighting.

(Tjoelker, 2021)! The fight for freedom, here, on this day, has reached a dire moment: will there be an awakening? Will there be strength, faith, and resolve for this fight? Will the people be able to take their freedom back from the criminals? Gibson brings together the following: (1) an articulation of lost values – freedom, most importantly –; (2) a demand to take action, rooted in a mythological struggle against ‘criminals’; (3) a religious justification not only of those values but also of the violent struggle necessary to reclaim them; and (4) a conspiratorial framework for explaining how it could be that the criminals have been able to take away our freedoms – people have been *asleep*, blind to their evil machinations.

While Patriot Prayer shares several similarities with Proud Boys – such as the propensity for violence and provocation in the streets – and while often Patriot Prayer and Proud Boy members are found together at rallies especially in the Pacific Northwest, Patriot Prayer remains a *distinct public*, offering distinct membership perks and articulating slightly different goals. In sum, Patriot Prayer is a group of *Christian freedom fighters*. After all, their most notable characteristic is their religiosity and faith, articulated not just in their name but also in the sermon-like speeches Joey Gibson gives on a regular basis. Put differently, in the context of their respective struggles, Proud Boys, on the one hand, emphasize masculinity and Western chauvinism, while on the other hand, Patriot Prayer emphasizes freedom and Christian values. In 2020, Vox reported Patriot Prayer’s mission statement as, “encouraging the country to fight for freedom at a local level using faith in God to guide us in the right direction” (Coaston). Gibson, in his own words, has argued that Patriot Prayer stands up for, “free speech, and love, and freedom” (KTVU FOX 2 San

Francisco, 2017). Freedom and faith are key for Patriot Prayer; these values intertwined drive their struggle.

At the same time, they do share in a similar *oppositional* framework as Proud Boys do, except where Proud Boys articulate themselves as *anti-guilt* and *anti-shame*, Patriot Prayer articulates itself as *anti-left-wing*. As Gibson puts it:

We are at war right now... We have to win the hearts and minds of the people, show the people the truth, the truth is that ANTIFA and BLM in Portland specifically, they don't care about Black lives, they don't care about social justice, what they want to do is bring in an authoritarian government, they are sponsored by the elitists, they're sponsored by people high above us, and so I want to wake up the people of Portland. [North Idaho Exposed, 2020, Sept 8]

Here, Gibson's enemy, methods, and mission are outlined quite clearly. First, ANTIFA and BLM in Portland 'do not care about social justice' as they claim, and instead want to bring 'authoritarianism'. And, as Gibson puts it, "You have to say no, say no to the fascism, communism, authoritarianism, elitists, politicians, and all the people who are trying to destroy this middle class" (North Idaho Exposed, 2020, May 10). In this war, the mythologized American middle class is at stake. Gibson believes in 'waking up the people' and 'winning their hearts and minds', to keen the American people in on the nefarious plan of the elite sponsored left-wing cronies. Gibson "believes in God and the Bible, and Jesus, and Satan," and, as he argues, "I believe that there are evil forces manifesting themselves within humans to take over this country" (Nichols, W.B., 2018). Gibson will fight this war, against evil, for freedom, with truth and the American people on his side.

This snippet highlights the three defining features of Patriot Prayer, which I will display in turn: first, their oppositional/anti-left-wing framework to the point which Patriot Prayer members admit that they *would not exist* were it not for the presence of their enemy; second, their emphasis on religiosity, piousness, love, hope, and belief for both motivating

individuals to take to their cause and morally justifying their behavior; third, and finally, their emphasis on freedom and liberty as against an oppressive – and potentially authoritarian – government.

Evil Antagonisms

Patriot Prayer’s antagonistic and confrontational style on the street is reflected in their oppositional birth: the group itself was born out of a desire to oppose and confront left-wing activism in the Pacific Northwest. At their founding, as Gibson notes, “we were going into far-left cities where basically if you had an opposing point of view,” you would be chased out. Those chased out include, in Gibson’s estimation, “conservatives” and “constitutionalists” (North Idaho Exposed, 2020, Sept 8). In this oppositional articulation, Gibson also hints at the ‘free speech’ beliefs inlaid in his political activism. However, protecting ‘free speech’ and ‘public debate’ would not alone make Patriot Prayer; ANTIFA would, as Gibson has explicitly noted.¹⁴⁴ Other Patriot Prayer members also recognize the oppositional fact of their existence: “Nobody would pay attention to us... In liberal Portland we would be a couple of crazies, nutcases carrying a flag. We wouldn’t have a platform. We’d have been like four or five guys waving flags over an overpass. [ANTIFA are] the ones that made us famous” (Olmos, 2020). It makes sense to consider that publics often form around a perceived threat against their interests. In the case of Patriot Prayer, the claim is that ANTIFA and left-wing activists were ‘chasing out’ groups – conservative

¹⁴⁴ In an interview with journalist Sergio Olmos (who was given on-the-record access to Joey Gibson and other Patriot Prayer members in a series of in-depth interviews), Gibson quite literally notes that, “ANTIFA made me” (Olmos, 2020). See *Underscore*, Band of Others Series, <https://www.underscore.news/work/band-of-others-series>.

and constitutionalist ones – that did not share in their left-wing point of view. Patriot Prayer formed *against* this left activism.

What is more interesting, though, is the moral and conspiratorial language used to imbue ANTIFA and other vaguely left-wing activists with ‘cosmic enemy status’, in part because of their quashing of morally important American ideals like *freedom*. Gibson paints the enemy nefariously: “it was the social justice warriors [SJWs]. I knew how bad the political correctness in America had gotten in terms of the SJWs. How they want to control our speech, and our thoughts, and how they’re brainwashing the public” (Nichols, W.B. 2018). It is not just that American freedom is prohibited by social justice warriors, as Gibson puts it. It is also that thought control, brainwashing, and curtailed freedom of speech go hand in hand. The implication here is that while Gibson recognizes the nefarious conspiracy at play, either because he is keened in on some knowledge, or because he has faith in God and Truth, others *are blind* to it. Gibson, then, *must* be the catalyst, and he takes it as his God-given mission to do so. In his words, “Finally, I woke, and I started to do what I can to make change. Now, from when I wake up until I go to bed, I want to have some sort of influence on the world” (Olmos, 2019).

In standing up for freedom and love, as he claims to do, Gibson locates in ANTIFA and the ‘left-wing’, “a lack of respect, a lack of love, we have so much hatred and so much division, and if we don’t handle that at a grassroots level, our country will burn” (KTVU FOX 2 San Francisco, 2017). Where ANTIFA forces hatred and division by calling people out for their microaggressions and political correctness, Gibson and Patriot Prayer offer an alternative: “Well, for me, it’s really about building a culture that stops looking at each other and starts looking above” (Nichols, W.B. 2018). According to Gibson, you just need

faith in God and recognition to “stop worrying about what other people think, [and instead] worry about what God thinks” (North Idaho Exposed, 2020, May 10).

The irony here is that despite being formed out of an opposition to ‘left-wing’ forces in the Pacific Northwest, Patriot Prayer claims to work for unity and love. Their oppositional articulation nonetheless remains necessary for making important moves. It lends Patriot Prayer moral justification for antagonism, and it locates their struggle in the context of freedom. As Gibson puts it: “We actually have that American spirit where we’re gonna stand up for what we believe in, unapologetically and unafraid. Our country is getting soft, it’s getting soft, and we need leaders to step up” (Alex Jones Show, 2018). It also stands for love over hate and centers the power of the American people as opposed to politicians and elites (who otherwise are part of the ‘cosmic enemy’). Most interestingly, Gibson has firmly placed the power and influence in his own hands, as a strong leader willing and able to do whatever is necessary.

Redemption through ‘Truth’

Gibson, however, was not always the *strong* leader, the tall and steady beacon for others which he is now as leader of Patriot Prayer. Now, in his leadership role, Gibson refers to himself as a ‘lighthouse’:

Not with my words but through our actions. Being a lighthouse is basically just standing tall with a very consistent message, no matter how crazy things get. I’m like a beacon for other people who are nearby or watching or listening to the videos. God wants me to preach a certain truth to people and to protect that truth whatever it may be. Especially when we’re surrounded by so many lies in this country.
[Nichols, W.B. 2018]

Note here that his behavior as a leader and beacon is a *God-given mission*. His God-given mission, moreover, is to ‘preach a certain truth’. Put another way: Gibson says, “I want to

inspire people to just stand up for what they believe in... I just want to be that symbol.” (Olmos, 2019). This highlights another important feature of Gibson and Patriot Prayer: Americans should, in Gibson’s estimation, stand for what they believe in. “Even if... they think they hate you, they despise you, it’s okay to come out and be who you are” (KGW News, 2018, Aug 4). That means fighting for *who they are*, for their beliefs and values, especially when under threat.

But Gibson has admitted at multiple points that, in the past, he *was* asleep, much like many Americans are in the present moment. “So, the problem is,” Gibson notes, “I was asleep for a long time, I was in a slumber. I’ve always wanted to do things, make change for the world” (Olmos, 2019). The fact of Gibson’s previous slumber means that *anyone* can wake from *their* slumber, if only they have Faith in God and so can see the Truth *as Gibson does*. In an interview with Alex Jones, Gibson tries to rally like-minded listeners/viewers by admitting that he, “was done sitting in [his] house. I’m gonna go out there and participate and it was a spiritual experience... if you see evil clear as day and you do nothing, you say nothing, then you are just as much to blame” (Big Johnson Media, 2018). Gibson’s spiritual experience, then, is twofold. First, there was his ‘awakening’: his realization that he could ‘make change for the world’ by articulating the Truth of God. Second, there is his participation in changing the world and recruiting others to wake up from their slumbers and do the same.

Casting this experience into a spiritual register seems to enable Gibson to declare that the situation is *beyond politics*. In other words, as Gibson argues, “This is not a left versus right thing, this is good versus evil” (North Idaho Exposed, 2020). Note here that ‘the situation’ is purposefully ambiguous, and though it likely refers to Patriot Prayer’s

antagonistic enemy – left-wing activists and their penchant for authoritarianism –, such ambiguity serves the alternative purpose of making the enemy bigger, more fluid, and more difficult to pin down. The enemy becomes scarier in ambiguity. The enemy, too, becomes powerful and all encompassing. Gibson casts the situation as such at a rally in Oregon City in September of 2020:

This world seems like it's got everything going up against us, they got the media, they got the social media giants, they got all that going for them, they got the money, they got the politicians, but they got nothing on God. This hatred is going to get bigger and stronger, and it will continue to persecute you as long as you allow it to work. It will only work as long as you remain in your house and remain silent.
[Ponte, 2020]

All this evil – the vast conspiracy of ‘they’ – and the contempt ‘they’ hold for ‘people who think differently’ – namely, conservatives and constitutionalists in Gibson’s estimation – will persecute Americans ‘as long as you allow it to work’ by hiding, by ‘remaining silent’. Gibson recognizes, after all, the difficulty of waking up and facing this great evil because he was once asleep as well. But, with Gibson as catalyst for awakening, and the American spirit there to be recalled, the fight can be successful: “That spirit is within all of us. It’s in each and every single one of you. While yes, this country has been falling asleep, the American spirit has been falling asleep, we gotta wake it up. It’s in our genes” (Tjoelker, 2021). It should at this point be clear that Gibson has found a way to weave together spiritual and religious belief, conspiratorial language, and existential meaning all into the justification of the fight that Patriot Prayer undertakes.¹⁴⁵ The closer Gibson gets to 2020

¹⁴⁵ One user on Parler interweaves these spiritual and conspiratorial themes as such: “Sir joey gibbon. What if were coming at this situation were in the wrong way? What if logic facts common sense and articulation dont work because we are not up against man or principality but the dark entities that have infiltrated our realm to steal our souls and hijacked human consciousness? ... I believe I have knowledge im not spose to have. I know how to slay archons and I know people who could help. You shoud start a church preacher

– the imposition of COVID-19 pandemic measures followed by the U.S. Presidential election – and 2021 – the Capitol Insurrection – the more dire his fight for liberty gets. Patriot Prayer encapsulates the process of awakening, through to spiritual redemption, and accordingly on to a more widespread restoration of what has been not simply lost but *taken away*.

Losing our Beautiful America

At the ‘Hazardous Liberty’ Rally held in Olympia, Washington in May 2020 – around the time of Summer 2020 where conservatives were beginning to express their distaste for mask mandates and shutdowns in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic –, Joey Gibson articulates the direness of the situation in America. “If you decide to stand for the Constitution, it is not going to be easy... It’s going to take self-sacrifice. If we don’t all make sacrifices, we are going to lose this beautiful country” (North Idaho Exposed, 2020). Though a decidedly smaller portion of Patriot Prayer’s rhetoric when compared with Proud Boys, *loss* nonetheless figures into Gibson’s articulations of what is at stake in this moment. ‘A beautiful America’ is under threat, one where liberty – presumably with all its hazards – free speech, free thought, the American spirit, patriotism, faith in God, family, and community are all slipping away.

man. I think PRAYER PATRIOTS is a great start. DC @theDzone #lightwarriorsunited” (2020, Dec 26). Note that logic and common sense won’t work in this ‘situation’ because there are evil and dark entities involved. Such evil entities are what this user refers to as ‘archons’, more commonly known as the malevolent beings who not only control Earth but also the living experience of human beings. This user may have special knowledge of how to defeat said beings, but thankfully, in their view, Patriot Prayer is a start. While this particular post could be written off as the writings of a crazed or disillusioned individual, I think it nonetheless conveys the marriage of spiritual and conspiratorial themes conveyed in the language of Joey Gibson and his fellow Patriot Prayer warriors.

Beyond this, *who you are* is at stake, as well as your worth as an individual. Gibson often preaches that you cannot be *selfish*; you must believe in something bigger than yourself to experience fulfillment, you must act to protect your values and communities, and you must be willing to sacrifice for all of this. This takes recognition of what is *yours*, of how to protect it, of when to fight for it. Gibson suggests, “Build a family; you don’t even have to do what we do but do find something and change the world. That’s the spirit that we gotta bring back into this country; we’re missing it, we’re missing the fire that is in the heart, and I have missed that for 32 years” (KGW News, 2018). This is one way of fighting for the community – building a family and bringing back the American spirit. Gibson continues, “now I’m here living my dream, because I am living the way the God built me” (KGW News, 2018). Living as God prescribed – with faith, patriotism, and a family – is ‘living the dream’ for Gibson. This could be taken as his prescription for restoring the American dream, too.

The loss that Gibson describes includes not just freedom and liberty but also the livelihood of the American middle class, the American everyman and his family. As with other uses of this kind of language, the ‘middle class’ is mythologized and made to represent all of ‘real’ or ‘true’ America.¹⁴⁶ And Gibson, as he typically does, emphasizes that belief must be turned into action at *the local level*. But local fights have global consequences – in other words, local actions have positive consequences and meaning *beyond* you. “When you fight for your local community, you’re not just fighting for

¹⁴⁶ This mythologizing tendency is developed to greater length in my Chapter 3, Nationalist Nostalgia, American Style.

yourselves or even this country, you are fighting for people across the globe” (Tjoelker, 2020).

Action in the local community remains key because elitists and politicians cannot be trusted, what with their tendency for corruption all the way to the point of fascism, communism, and authoritarianism. On the day of the Capitol Insurrection – January 6, 2021 – Joey Gibson spoke at another rally in Olympia, Washington: “When you hide because you’re afraid... we’re gonna lose everything and we will become more prisoners than we have already seen in the year 2020. Think about what happened in 2020. Overnight, they destroyed the Constitution... 2020 is just the start if we don’t push back” (Tjoelker, 2021). While Gibson himself was not present at the Capitol Insurrection, he *was* present at the Oregon State Capitol building when protestors attempted to ‘storm the legislature’ on December 21, 2020.¹⁴⁷ For Patriot Prayer, it is about protecting personal freedoms and the Constitution against an authoritarian government. Gibson and his followers display a willingness to engage in the fight with God on their side, through a path of awakening, redemption, and restoration, which will serve to bring back their ‘beautiful nation’. This willingness, and subsequent local action, reveal the potential of the *Christian freedom fighters* called Patriot Prayer.

¹⁴⁷ This was reported by Oregon’s *The Center Square* (2020). This incident comes up again after the US Capitol Insurrection when it was alleged that an Oregon legislator (security footage of the occurrence later proved this to have happened) let protestors into the Oregon Capitol on that day. This was reported by a local Oregon News Station, *KOIN 6* (2021), which also reports that Gibson was among the individuals inside the Oregon Capitol.

The Joint Quest for Saving American Values

Proud Boys and Patriot Prayer have both recognized that this moment is a threatening one, and that *patriots* need to do something to prevent evil from seizing the America they love so dearly. Enrique Tarrio proclaims to his Parler followers that, “The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil... is for good men to do nothing.”¹⁴⁸ Joey Gibson reassures patriots that, “Evil runs so fast from the empowered. These people at the top, they’re nothing but liars, they’re hungry for power” (Tjoelker, 2020). In each case, Proud Boys and Patriot Prayer cast the problem which they have organized against into a conspiratorial register: this is *the* cosmic battle against evil to *save American values*. Conspiratorial language – which has flourished for some time in the U.S. but has been spread exponentially since the election of Donald Trump in 2016, the COVID-19 pandemic, the anti-lockdown protests of summer 2020, and the racial justice protests after the murder of George Floyd – has provided the glue to solidify a coalition of white nationalists who strategically go by other names. Conspiratorial language, too, has brought ever more Americans to the fight against those who would tear America apart, demolish American history, and undermine American values. It should not have been a surprise to see this fight come to the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021.

At this point, too, those American values have been mythologized over again through group language, though with distinct inflection. Where Proud Boys cast American values through *chauvinist white nationalism*, adding emphasis on masculinity, traditional gender roles, and a nostalgic reading of the American founding, Patriot Prayer casts those same values through acts of *Christian freedom fighting*, adding emphasis on faith in God,

¹⁴⁸ Appendix A, Figure 36: Parler, Proud Boy enemies.

spiritual awakening, and the struggle for liberty against evil. *To what end*, though, has the mythology of whiteness – that is, of *Western* civilization, of *American* values, of *masculine* identity – been articulated and sustained? “If... we are going to use history for our pleasure and amusement, for inflating our national ego, and giving us a false but pleasurable sense of accomplishment, then we must,” as W.E.B. DuBois (1935) implores the white mythmakers of his day, “admit frankly that we are using a version of historic fact in order to influence and educate the new generation along the way we wish” (p. 714). The mythology of whiteness has a quasi-historical shine to it, one that beckons a collective memory of white greatness in the before times. Moreover, this mythology has a specific purpose: to reach ever more adherents, uncover the great losses whites face, articulate the enemy of the people, wake patriots up to reality. Importantly, too, whiteness needs an Other “to maintain its very coherence as an identity concept. Thus, any ‘self-love’ evident in the rhetoric of white nationalists is directed toward, or perhaps rather predicated upon, a fundamentally mythic account of the white self that is the object of that love” (Monahan, 2021, p. 9). White nationalism has been produced from such a mythologized white history – which sees its end in whiteness – coupled with a blatant lack of self-critique aimed at the peddlers of such a mythology. In this way, groups like the Proud Boys and Patriot Prayer can peddle the ideology of white nationalism without having to come out and say it. All they have to do is link the values they claim to violently defend, the people they claim to save to an already mythologized American people.

CHAPTER FIVE
CONSPIRACY THEORISM AS RADICALIZATION: IT'S THE END OF
AMERICA AS WE KNOW IT

QAnon as Faux Democratic Form

Let us go back in time a bit from January 6, 2021. Before the ‘people’s insurrection’, QAnon – the conspiracy theory whose iconography flooded the Capitol – was loosely kicked off by a 4chan post less than four years earlier on October 28, 2017. An anonymous user on 4chan’s /pol/ board, named the ‘Politically Incorrect’ board, posted: “Hillary Clinton will be arrested between 7:45am – 8:30am EST on Monday – the morning on October 30, 2017.”¹⁴⁹ This particular anonymous user *is not* Q; but Q replies to this post with the first Qdrop, where they¹⁵⁰ detail further the ‘HRC extradition’, the inevitable riots to come, and an imminent national guard activation.¹⁵¹ What is interesting in this exchange is less about the content of the Qdrop, but more about the chain of replies themselves, especially since the QAnon movement is about the conversations which come to bare through replying. In other words, the universe of QAnon is interesting because it displays how shared identities and beliefs are co-created in largely anonymous spaces. Upon posting, our aforementioned– anonymous user is immediately met with, “Who are you?”

¹⁴⁹ Supplemental Content, 4chan, pol board, first Qdrop_HRC extradition.

¹⁵⁰ Because Q’s identity has not been confirmed, because the role has likely passed hands multiple times, and because Q has come to represent a movement more so than a given individual, I henceforth will refer to Q in the third person plural: they/them/themself.

¹⁵¹ The content of the first ‘Qdrop’: “HRC extradition already in motion effective yesterday with several countries in case of cross border run. Passport approved to be flagged effective 10/30 @ 12:01am. Expect massive riots organized in defiance and others fleeing the US to occur. US M’s will conduct the operation while NG activated. Proof check: Locate a NG member and ask if activated for duty 10/30 across most major cities” (Qdrop #1).

by another user. Anonymous user quickly responds: “It doesn’t matter who we are, *what matters is our plan*.”¹⁵²

From this initial Qdrop¹⁵³ and concomitant exchange, the QAnon phenomenon has already displayed some significant structural tendencies.¹⁵⁴ First and foremost, the function of Q has been to provide tidbits of information, crumbs, and drops, for presumably other users to interpret and stitch together into something that makes more coherent sense. Crumbs are baked into bread, as QAnon adherents tend to say. Crumbs are also a reference to Hansel and Gretel – the fairytale fantasy with the lesson that closely following breadcrumbs will necessarily *bring us back home*. Here, from the outset of their first post, Q has dropped a series of random tidbits of information: “Some of us come here to drop crumbs, just crumbs,” they say (Qdrop #4). It is then up to other users on the /pol/ board (and elsewhere) to make sense of it all.

Q implores his anonymous readers (who are often referred to as *Anons*):

Combine all posts and analyze. The questions provide answers. Remember, information is everything, the flow of information is no longer controlled by the MSM but by you/others. Hence, why we are dedicating ‘critical’ time to distribute crumbs which can be followed in greater detail to paint the entire picture once more information is released. [Qdrop #59]

On its face, Q’s justification for the mysteriousness is simply that the mainstream media (“MSM” in the above Qdrop) controls the flows of information and subsequent narratives

¹⁵² Supplemental Content, 4chan, pol board, first Qdrop_HRC extradition (emphasis mine).

¹⁵³ Qdrops, sometimes also called crumbs, are simply posts attributed to Q through a series of mechanisms (notably ‘tripcodes’ – simply an anonymous version of a username/password combination) which purport to verify identity on the anonymous boards (first 4chan, and starting in late 2017, 8chan). I’ll refer to Q’s posts as Qdrops to be specific about when I am talking about posts made by Q himself as opposed to the posts of other anonymous users.

¹⁵⁴ By this I mean to say that there are some formal or definitional qualities of the phenomenon. It takes a specific shape, and then fills in the details with content.

developed out of those facts. Q's presence on the image board 4chan is a form of resistance to MSM, and they foster a space of free information flow, democratic interpretation, and engaged dialogue. Now, 'we' are in control of the facts and flow of information, not the power brokers in control of MSM. It is this distribution of crumbs that will permit a crowdsourced 'painting of the entire picture', though at other points Q will indicate that, "The truth is mind blowing and cannot be fully exposed. These people are evil" (Qdrop #6). Of course, the content of this drop is ironic in that it undermines the notion of democratically controlled information that Q and QAnon adherents like to feign engagement in. You can control the information flow and interpret it; but we – Q – must slowly drop *hints* of information because the full truth *cannot be exposed* for no reason other than the people not being ready for the 'truth'. Qdrops serve to drop these diffuse bits and leave room for interpretation and analysis, thereby undermining the 'standard' narrative while creating another ironically undemocratic narrative.

This highlights a second structural tendency: the conversational online nature of the QAnon phenomenon is significant for the form it takes. Through lengthy threads of replies and conversations around posts, the larger narrative is formed out of whatever tidbits of information Q leaves behind. While the information dropped is purportedly important, equally important is the quasi-'democratic' process of interpreting and stitching together the plot unfolding as QAnon adherents outline it. "Amazing how things make sense once you are asked a question. That's the entire point of this operation. It's up to you all to collect, archive (safely), and distribute in a graphic that is in order with the crumb dumps [*sic*]. It will all make sense. Once it does, we look to you to spread and get the word out" (Qdrop #96). Information collection, analysis, archival, and distribution are part and parcel

to Q's mission as described herein. Getting the word out, telling the entire story once it is constructed, is also key: "It is our hope that this message reaches enough people to make a meaningful impact" (Qdrop #35). As these injunctions unfold on 4chan, 8chan, and 8kun boards, countless anonymous users also chime in. Their collective bread-baking comes out of arguments and conversations had in various threads, as was the case with Q's initial drop.

It is also important to note – as a third structural quality – the emphasis on the collective personal pronoun ('we') inlaid in many of Q's missives as well as in replies connected to Qdrops. From the outset, anonymous users are both no one and everyone at the same time. "It doesn't matter who we are," the anonymous user linked to Q's first drop argues as he assures contributors and lurkers on the /pol/ board that '*we have a plan*', that it should be trusted, and that 'we' are on the right side of history, if only you are willing to join us. "To those watching (you know who you are): You have a choice to make. You can stand up and do what you know to be right. Or you can suffer the consequences of your previous actions. Make no mistake, you are on the losing side. The choice is yours" (Qdrop #63). Quasi-democratic bread baking for the 'we', so long as you stand up to do what has been deemed 'right.' As the Q mythology builds, this initial 'us versus them' mentality in which 'we the people' ought to have political power in our democracy explodes into a battle between patriots and traitors, between good and evil. While the 'we' is on the one hand intended to evoke democratic constructions of a participatory fact-finding movement – which QAnon adherents would say this movement indeed is –, the 'we', on the other hand, permits a stark dichotomy between who is good and who is bad, all the while eluding responsibility through anonymity.

Finally, QAnon adherence structurally relies upon ‘trusting *the* plan’ – that there is a plan, that that plan works for *good*, and that it is being carried out as promised. Mention of the plan comes from the outset – ‘what matters is our plan’ – and clearly indicates something positive and ground-breaking to come. Of course, if you follow the crumbs closely enough, you should be able to understand the plan in greater depth, but it can never be communicated outright for fear of undermining said plan. The plan *might* look something like this:

We are in one of the most critical times of our country. Trump and others are working to balance the [sic] [good] we’re doing well for America (for the common person to endorse) while at the same time purify our govt and remove the bad actors who are entrenched. There is so much string pulling and blackmail that we need to cut these off to truly gain the power granted to us by the Patriots and hard-working [sic] people of this great country. [Qdrop #31]

At this critical moment, then-President Trump and the ‘good guys’ are purportedly holding corrupt bad actors accountable, thereby purifying and cleansing the government. This is to give power back to the ‘we’, the patriots, the hard-working everyman. Not only is the plan necessarily *good*, but it is also a failsafe for QAnon adherence. Whenever one has doubts, they are encouraged to trust the plan and to have faith. “There are more good people than bad. The wizards and warlocks... will not allow another Satanic Evil POS control our country... A deep cleaning is occurring and the prevention and defense of pure evil is occurring on a daily basis” (Qdrop #15). This is a critical time at which the good people must be ready, as ‘defense of evil occurs daily’.

However, the fact that evil is being *cleansed* should provide solace to those who feel hopeless. At the same time, the plan reminds QAnon adherents that this ‘Satanic Evil’ is global and goes beyond petty ideological squabbles contained within American politics. “Many are thinking from one point of view, US only, this evil is embedded globally. US is

the first domino. Have faith” (Qdrop #5). The novelty and effectiveness of the QAnon phenomenon comes in casting the importance of Q’s drops into a cosmic moral register while alluding to the significance of following Q’s crumbs *back home*, in what feels like a collective democratic enterprise. It is helpful to comprehend Q’s language here in the register of *restorative nostalgia* (Boym, 2001) not only because ‘Make America Great Again’ plays a crucial role in the QAnon narrative,¹⁵⁵ but also because the QAnon conspiracy theory is indeed a project about truth to be uncovered, in the face of a Manichean battle between good and evil. “Q Clearance Patriot... My fellow Americans, over the course of the next several days you will undoubtedly realize that we are taking back our great country (the land of the free) from the evil tyrants that wish to do us harm and destroy the last remaining refuge of shining light” (Qdrop #34). A vague – both collective and exclusive – ‘we’ is again at work ‘taking back our great country’ from parties so evil that they literally wish to eliminate the last vestiges of light and goodness in the land of the free. Dropping crumbs along the path for an army of Hansels and Gretels, Q gives patriots both a dire impetus and some semblance of empowerment for fighting the ‘New World Order’ and bringing America back to a time *before* it was controlled by evil tyrants who intend to destroy the true American people.

¹⁵⁵ For example: “Get the popcorn, Friday & Saturday will deliver on the MAGA promise” (Qdrop #16). Q’s posts were always about Trump and about Trump’s campaign to Make America Great Again by draining the swamp, cleansing the corruption, and eradicating the evil power brokers.

Distilling the Content of QAnon

The above qualities reflect the *structure* of QAnon adherence, that is, how it unfolds. Crumbs of information are collected, analyzed, argued over, and then put into more coherent narratives. It therefore *appears* as a democratic fact-finding mission against evil which guarantees a plan to restore America to her former goodness. Perhaps this sounds like a positive thing – a kind of online critical thinking unfolding through social albeit mediated interaction. The actual *content* of QAnon adherence, however, says otherwise. QAnon is a big-tent conspiracy theory – where everything fits into the theory, even contradictory events. At their core, conspiracy theories allege alternate explanations to events and occurrences. They are mere hypotheses until adherents double-down and reject counterevidence that indicate better explanations. Because QAnon is a big-tent conspiracy, it includes explanations for *everything*, and adherents are adept at taking counterevidence and incorporating that information into a narrative which strengthens and solidifies the already existing conspiracy theory. For big-tent conspiracy theories like QAnon, confirmation bias runs amok.

More importantly, QAnon relies upon the very dangerous anti-Semitic blood libel accusations of the past. Blood libel alleges that Jews murder Christian boys and use their blood for sacrificial rituals. First deployed in the 12th century, blood libel has a history of justifying Jewish pogroms, of leading to mob violence against Jewish people, and of underpinning claims of vast Jewish conspiracies. The blood libel fueled Nazi propaganda, as did *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* – a work of paranoid fiction which describes the alleged plans for Jewish world domination. Blending these two anti-Semitic annals together, QAnon exists on the assumption that a cabal of corrupt elites – also called the

‘deep state’ –, harvest adrenochrome¹⁵⁶ from trafficked children to prolong their own lives and thus prolong their world domination. Not just this – trafficked children are also the victims of ritual abuse, reminding of the largely unsubstantiated allegations that flew around during the ‘Satanic Panic’ of the 1980s and 1990s. QAnon, then, comprises a dangerous hodge-podge of religious and moral paranoia, anti-Semitism, and persecutory conspiracy theories.

Q, so-called for their self-proclaimed security clearance, ‘drops’ bits of information from within the ‘deep state’ in an effort to bring to fruition a plan – often referred to as ‘the Storm’ – involving mass arrests of government officials, international figures, and others, who have taken part in a pedophilic, child-trafficking, blood-harvesting, world-dominating scheme against the interests of the American people. Former President Donald Trump is the messianic figure of this theory, and QAnon adherents are assured that Trump is working to remove this evil from the government and the world. ‘The Storm’, in which arrests are made and evildoers are held accountable, will come explicitly and directly as a result of Trump’s actions: “You didn't think the statement by POTUS re: 'CALM BEFORE THE STORM' was just random did you? Transparency brings accountability. Q” (QDrop #4011).

While adherence to QAnon began as interactions on the image boards 4chan, 8chan, and now 8kun, much of it has grown into a campaign that distills the raw posts and discussion forums into theories and primers describing the complex workings of the

¹⁵⁶ Note that the shift here is the harvesting of adrenochrome and not necessarily the sacrificial bloodletting of Christian children. ‘Adrenochrome’ -- a chemical compound related to adrenaline that occurs in the body – was popularized by Hunter S. Thompson’s *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*.

conspiracy at play. These are then shared widely as YouTube videos, blogs, websites, podcasts, books, and social media posts on Twitter, Parler, and Gab by a literal digital army of QAnon influencers. QAnon distillation is key in part because the raw discussion boards are neither easily accessible nor intuitively comprehensible, and they are certainly not pleasant spaces to spend countless hours on. Distillation permits the translation of often hate-filled and appalling conspiracy theories to something much more palatable and widely agreeable – such as turning an anti-Semitic blood libel conspiracy theory into a campaign to ‘Save the Children’ – on more mainstream internet sites.

QAnon’s connection to apocalyptic millenarian Christianity is indeed apparent. QAnon traffics in the birth and death of American culture, where *our* way of life and *our* values are on the precipice. An alleged satanic cabal is conspiring to end America as we know it. The end is nigh unless patriots act to save her, and the *cleansing* of evil is necessary. QAnon has notably attracted white evangelicals because of Q’s consistent reliance on faith and quoting of scripture. Importantly, the attraction also follows from the political and conspiratorial rearticulation of motifs of Christian redemption at the end of the world. In a sense, QAnon coalesces Christian nationalism into a conspiratorial movement which centers the need to restore America’s good Christian identity, her true self, in the face of evil. Christian nationalism has a storied long history in the U.S., and later I show that tenets of the Christian Identity Movement of the 1970s – both extreme and mundane – have to some extent established the background for QAnon to gain traction among Christians. It does help that there are demographic overlaps – the tendency to vote Republican, the tendency to have more conservative values, the tendency to support traditional family structures, and the tendency to be older and whiter. Nonetheless, it is the

shared elements of belief between QAnon and fringe Christian nationalism which should cause alarm.

One such shared element is anti-Semitism. Inbuilt in the narratives of Christian redemption in the face of satanism, Jewish peoples have historically ended up the scapegoat. This was the case with blood libel as well as with *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, both of which have surfaced in the U.S. at multiple points. The Christian Identity movement displays one of the more extreme iterations of politically and religiously organized anti-Semitism. “Christian Identity ultimately removed [Jews] from the domain of ‘humanity,’ not, as with blacks, by identifying them with lower animals, but by linking Jews with a transcendent, cosmic evil” (Barkun, 1997, p. 147). Christian nationalism more broadly might have begun as an innocuous “cultural framework – a collection of myths, traditions, symbols, narratives and value systems – that idealizes and advocates a fusion of Christianity with American civic life” (Whitehead & Perry, 2020, p.10). But in some instances it has shown itself to quickly move based upon assumptions about who the true Americans are – namely, white, traditional, faithful, natural born Christian citizens – into white supremacist and anti-Semitic territory.¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁷ Whitehead & Perry (2022) argue this in a report published by the Christians Against Christian Nationalism campaign, where they link believers of QAnon with Christian Nationalism and show the salience of Christian Nationalism leading up to the U.S. Capitol Insurrection. They argue that, “conspiratorial thinking and Christian nationalism are mutually reinforcing white supremacist beliefs. The Americans who embrace QAnon and Christian nationalism are the most likely to agree with various anti-Semitic tropes” (Whitehead & Perry, 2022, p. 1).

QAnon Seeps into Reality

Since Q's first drops in October of 2017, there have been nearly five thousand drops in total.¹⁵⁸ The QAnon movement, too, has not exclusively existed in the online world of imageboards, forums, blogs, videos, and social media. It has spilled into reality at multiple points, fueling interpersonal conflicts, domestic violence, and felonies, as well as political violence. In 2018, a Nevada man used a homemade armored vehicle to block a roadway near the Hoover Dam because he was motivated by a patriotic desire for more swift investigation into the corruption of 'deep state' political leaders.¹⁵⁹ In 2019, a New York man murdered Gambino crime family underboss Francesco Cali because he believed that Cali was a member of the 'deep state' and the liberal cabal of elites working against Trump's mission against corruption and evil.¹⁶⁰ In 2020, QAnon adherents decried potential voter fraud¹⁶¹ and took to describing the COVID-19 outbreak and subsequent lockdown as a staged 'plandemic'¹⁶². Finally in 2021, QAnon erupted into a leading role, alongside Proud Boys and Oath Keepers, in the U.S. Capitol Insurrection. This seemingly

¹⁵⁸ See here: Tian (2021), "The QAnon Timeline: Four Years, 5,000 Drops and Countless Failed Prophecies."

¹⁵⁹ See here: Ruelas (2021), "Man Pleads Guilty to Terrorism after Hoover Dam Barricade." & AP News (2020), "QAnon Follower Matthew Wright Sentenced in Hoover Dam Bridge Standoff."

¹⁶⁰ See: Watkins (2019), "Accused of Killing a Gambino Mob Boss, He's Presenting a Novel Defense."

¹⁶¹ In as early as 2017, Q drops contained hints at election rigging and voter fraud. "Who are the puppets? Who are the puppet masters? Who pulls the strings? What provides power? What if US elections can be rigged?... What if it was bought and paid for?... Who owns sizeable stakes in voter machine co's? Who decides what voter machines are used in elections? Why are some 'important' counties still manually/hand counted? God save us. Q" (Qdrop #121).

¹⁶² Election fraud and the pandemic are linked as Q hints in a drop from early 2020: "What is the primary benefit to keep public in mass-hysteria re: COVID-19? Think voting. Are you awake yet? Q" (Qdrop #3913).

random list of events is meant to display the big-tent nature of the QAnon conspiracy theory – many people from myriad locations are part of the evil cabal – as well as its crescendo from sporadic interpersonal violence to full-fledged political violence.

QAnon is indeed less of an organized public than other actual brick and mortar groups. It is a leaderless and decentralized spider web spun of theories.¹⁶³ It has fractured into different sects. Different sects follow different QAnon ‘priests.’ It has adherents with distinct interpretations who argue with one another on forums and message boards. This makes QAnon *as a public* itself difficult to pin down. However, it does exist around a set of organizing ideas and motivating beliefs – like the concern about a global cabal running the world, the concern for child trafficking and adrenochrome harvesting, the tactic of ‘awakening the masses’, and the goal of ‘bringing the Storm’ – that I will explore below. It also does share some of the organizing and recruiting tactics adapted by the right-wing groups covered in the last chapter – use of online platforms, social media, recruiting/explainer videos, and internet forums to discuss motivations, goals, and plans. QAnon may be more amorphous: but it does spill into reality, often as a result of overarching motivating ideas, both in interpersonal ways and in political ways.

In what follows, my goal is to interweave a set of analytical lenses for understanding conspiracy belief more generally with my existing framework for articulating publics. The idea is to loosely provide as holistic account as possible of what

¹⁶³ As the Anti-Defamation League (2022) puts it: “QAnon consists of a number of deeply convoluted conspiracy theories and elevates theories ranging from Satanic blood rituals to the faked death of John F. Kennedy Jr., all tenuously centered around the belief that the world is controlled by a global cabal of Satan-worshipping pedophiles. This kitchen sink approach is a major reason why QAnon has gained such a substantial following in its relatively short life.”

brought us from Q's first post in October of 2017 all the way to the U.S. Capitol Insurrection in January of 2021. Importantly, I hope to show how QAnon has enabled an umbrella coalition of right-wing groups, religious groups, free speech activists, men's right's activists, white nationalists, and white supremacists, all fighting to Make America Great Again in their respective ways. To what extent does QAnon adherence *also* serve as a *radicalization vector*? Does it encourage or affirm racist, white supremacist, and white nationalist ends? Does it boost the recruiting of right-wing groups that tend towards violence, racial hatred, and political extremism? In what follows, I argue that QAnon *does* serve to radicalize individuals, whether they are already adherents or whether they are 'made awake' and brought into the fold.

Analyzing Conspiracy Theorism

In "The Conspiracy Theory of Society," Karl Popper juxtaposes the task of social science with the oft-taken-for-granted 'conspiracy theory of society'. A version of 'theism', as Popper puts it, the conspiracy theory of society presumes that the place of an omnipotent and omniscient god-figure has been, "filled by various powerful men and groups – sinister pressure groups, who are to be blamed for having planned... all the evils from which we suffer" (Popper, 1972, p. 13). That is, one way of understanding the machinations of the world, of locating the causes for deleterious effects, and for placing due responsibility, is to presume that some set of agents, through sheer willpower, have made it so. This is both an assumption of *hyper-agency* – over-projecting how much a given agent has control over the consequences of her actions – and of *hyper-rationality* – over-projecting the extent to which given events are logically and causally linked.

To accept the complexity of reality, on the other hand, is to pay greater attention to the sheer number of unintended and unwanted consequences which follow from human action, as well as the limited extent to which individuals can bring their plans to fruition. To accept this messiness is to take a *pragmatic* approach, and, akin to John Dewey's conceptualization of *publics*, to "recognize that the persistence of institutions and collectives creates a problem to be solved in terms of an analysis of individual social actions and their unintended (and often unwanted) social consequences, as well as their intended ones" (Popper, 1972, p. 15). QAnon adherents clearly prefer the exactitude of a conspiracy theory of society. On the other side, how can observers of QAnon adherence analyze the social actions and consequences of that adherence? What institutional and collective problems are reflected in their actions? How can we approach a better (but probably not exact) understanding of QAnon belief?

The purpose of this chapter is to show, through analysis of their language, why individuals believe in the QAnon conspiracy theory and to what extent that belief inspires action. Conspiracy theory at its most basic is a hypothesis which argues that a set of individuals is secretly organized to benefit themselves at the expense of the common good. It is simply a proposed explanation of a conspiracy at play which serves to locate causation of ills and evils experienced in the hands of a sinister group. Yet, some argue – like Muirhead and Rosenblum (2019) – that QAnon in particular is *not* actually a conspiracy theory. Instead, QAnon is a 'conspiracy without the theory': "There is no punctilious demand for proofs, no exhaustive amassing of evidence, no dots revealed to form a pattern, no close examination of the operators plotting in the shadows. The new conspiracism dispenses with the burden of explanation" (Muirhead & Rosenblum, 2019, p. 3). In other

words, QAnon, as a version of what Muirhead and Rosenblum call *new conspiracism*, lacks a coherent explanation of the conspiracy at play. It shares in what I see as other defining features of conspiracy: paranoia in the face of dispossession (Hofstadter, 1964), an obsessive search for evidence, an apocalyptic and absolutist framework, and a Manichean structure of morality. But it lacks the ‘theory’.

New conspiracism is juxtaposed with an old conspiracism that provided a narrative explanation and goal or ideal to strive towards. As Muirhead and Rosenblum (2019) put it:

The sometimes messianic claim of classic conspiracists to expose the threat and save the country or the world is inseparable from a story of just what is threatened and – crucially – from a vision of what the saved, restored, rehabilitated nation should be: a republic, a nation without slavery, democratic elections free of covert influence. [p. 29]

Against this, Muirhead and Rosenblum see QAnon as strictly disorienting and delegitimizing. This means that QAnon is strictly about making assertions without explaining them, that it fails to draw links and construct theories, that it merely asks dizzying amounts of questions, and that it lacks context, scope, goals, and a political program. There is no coherent story, no analysis of information, no coherent goal, no collective political action, and nothing to save or restore.

Muirhead and Rosenblum’s (2019) dichotomy not only falls short in explaining QAnon; it also mischaracterizes old conspiracism as a healthy skepticism committed to epistemological rigor that has been lost to the vestiges of the past.¹⁶⁴ In this nostalgic interpretation, which reads as desiring a return to a time where conspiracy theory produced *good* results, Muirhead and Rosenblum (2019) overlook the storied racialized history of

¹⁶⁴ Muirhead and Rosenblum’s (2019) paramount example of the old conspiracism is American revolution against the Crown: “The United States was born of a conspiracy theory about Britain’s secret intention to extinguish liberty in North America” (p. 21).

conspiracy theories used to demonize others in the U.S. context, including during the American Revolution. They also, miss, as Lawrie Balfour (2020) so aptly points out, that, “one of the striking features of the new conspiracism is its kinship with discursive practices that have legitimized and sustained anti-Black violence across US history” (p. 1156). Missing these features implies that Muirhead and Rosenblum’s (2019) framework, while useful at times, cannot fully explain how QAnon has functioned in contemporary U.S. politics as a glue for religious fanaticism, dispossession, racialized hatred, existential uncertainty, and fear of change. QAnon runs the gamut, and so it is dizzying, but it does coalesce around longing for a time when America was great.

Accordingly, I argue that it is more helpful to consider QAnon not as ‘conspiracy without the theory’ but instead as a form of conspiracy theorism. Conspiracy theorism describes an ideologically motivating set of beliefs which drives people to action on a political, social, and interpersonal level. That action varies from mediated interaction on image boards, to the production of an immense volume of curated resources, explainers, and information created by QAnon adherents. It also includes political action like what was witnessed in the January 6th Capitol Insurrection. I choose the language of *conspiracy theorism* because QAnon really is a systematized set of beliefs – notably quasi-democratically constructed from the ground up – which impels action. Paying close attention to the larger universe of beliefs that motivates QAnon adherence and action, instead of the multifarious quibbles and arguments between ‘sects’, will permit understanding the bigger picture behind what got QAnon to January 6th. Of course, this means some nuance will be lost.

Departing from the assumption of QAnon as *conspiracy theorism* – ideologically motivated belief *and* subsequent action – I aim to analyze QAnon as a *type of public* and through a series of lenses more generally applicable to conspiracy theory belief. At their core, what beliefs motivate QAnon adherents? Why do they organize as a public to address felt consequences? As with my study of right-wing publics – Proud Boys and Patriot Prayer – QAnon will be subject to the same analytical questions, which I will permit adherents to answer *in their own words*:

1. Who are they?
2. Who is their enemy?
3. What is the source of their discontent?
4. How do they articulate their problem?
5. How do they intend to solve their problem?
6. How will solving their problem address their anger, frustration, nostalgia, or discontent?
7. What is their vision of America?
8. How do they cast or construct their problem in the context of America, American politics, or American history?

In my estimation, QAnon adherents are a type of *revolutionary conspiracy theorists* because their goal is not merely to collectively piece together a theory detailing misdeeds against the American people. While the strands of QAnon are ultimately varied, the movement as a whole shares a consistent universe of beliefs, which I focus on for this analysis. Their beliefs drive them to demand, as a swift revolutionary move, the bringing of ‘the Storm’, the draining of the swamp, *and a return to America’s pre-corrupted state*, to the better ‘before times’. Sometimes that requires online participation in the QAnon movement. Sometimes it requires ‘having faith’ and ‘trusting the plan’. Other times it demands political action on the streets, either individually or with fellow Anons.

To understand these *revolutionary conspiracy theorists*, I adapt a set of lenses for thinking through conspiracy belief more generally and use them to interpret the QAnon

phenomenon. One way that we can make sense of conspiracy theory belief is *epistemologically*; that is, adherence to a conspiracy theory has to do with how an individual or group comes to conclusions about what is true or what is not true. Where epistemology permits analysis of how individuals and groups come to conclusions about what is fact and not just belief, a *cognitive* lens expands this to pay close attention to the many mechanisms and biases inlaid in the thinking (cognizing) process which might inhibit fair or reasonable conclusions about what truth is. A *social/psychological* lens highlights the mechanisms – emotional, social, or psychological – which have less to do with thought processes and more to do with affective valuations. For example, do we choose to believe some things as true because it makes us *feel* good?

While the social/psychological lens does have to do with individual meaning with respect to social groups, existential meaning implies something larger. An *existential* lens permits understanding the ways in which individuals and groups will attach themselves to larger narratives that explain their lives or goals, and that lend affirmation. As with epistemology and cognition, meaning in the social, psychological, and existential register is necessarily linked. Often, what brings us individual meaning is tied to what makes us feel good, worthy, and affirmed. This affirmation can come from social interaction, cooperative work, and in-group valuation. Finally, conspiracy theory adherence, and the existence of a conspiracy theory in the first place, often has to do with political maneuvering. *Politics and power* therefore serve as an important framework through which conspiracy theory can be understood. It should come as no surprise that conspiracy theories can be powerful tools for realizing one's interests.

QAnon Adherents: Who are the Digital Soldiers?

On July 4, 2020, General Michael Flynn posted a video to his Twitter account in which he and his family, surrounding a campfire, took what is referred to in the QAnon community as the ‘digital soldier oath’. Many Anons followed this move, either sharing themselves reciting the oath on Twitter and Parler or writing out the oath on their social media pages. In both cases, individuals – in a decidedly not-so-anonymous fashion – declared the beginning of their duty as ‘digital soldiers’ such that they would *now* serve their country.¹⁶⁵ The oath, which is derivative of the U.S. Uniformed Services Oath of Office, reads as follows:

I do solemnly swear (or affirm) that I will support and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic; that I will bear true faith and allegiance to the same; that I take this obligation freely, without any mental reservation or purpose of evasion; and that I will well and faithfully discharge the duties of the office on which I am about to enter: So help me God.
*Where we go one, we go all.*¹⁶⁶

To state the oath of office, in the traditional sense, indicates commissioning into an officer role and so leaves out the portion in which an enlistee must follow the orders of above ranking officers, including the President of the United States. Perhaps this reflects the fact that General Flynn just read out his own Oath of Office, lazily appending the QAnon slogan, “Where we go one, we go all,” to the end. On the other hand, perhaps this reflects the distrust of existing government authority – and only *some leaders* – omnipresent in QAnon digital soldiers.

¹⁶⁵ See Travis View (2020, June 25), host of the *QAnon Anonymous* podcast, who compiles examples on Twitter.

¹⁶⁶ Appendix B, Figure 46: 8kun, Digital soldier oath & Appendix B, Figure 94: Digitalsoldiers.info webpage, Digital soldier oath.

Ironically, QAnon digital soldiers do ‘follow’ the command of their president, Donald Trump, whom they revere – where Trump goes, they go all as well. Take, for example, the site, Digitalsoldiers.info: it is full of organizing information, a catalog of Q’s drops, as well as explanations and ‘proofs’, and it provides overviews of the Cabal’s evil plans as they unfold. In one section of the site dedicated to ‘WWG1WGA,’ the interwoven nature of the QAnon movement, its digital soldiers, and the MAGA (‘Make America Great Again’) movement – along with Trump’s policies that have ‘made America great again’ – is explicitly articulated.

The Q subculture is a central plank of the wider #MAGA movement—which is a desire for the rule of law, liberty, and constitutional government. Without Q’s ‘anon army’ #MAGA would lose much of its core support. Therefore Q has clear social and political significance in promoting the policies and actions of the Trump administration.¹⁶⁷

It is important to note a few things here: first, there is recognition – if not also proclamation – that the QAnon movement is a significant swath of Trump’s larger MAGA movement. Of course, QAnon adherents benefit from the legitimacy that comes with declaring their central role in ‘making America great again’, because it justifies their digital ‘soldiering’. Contributing to that sense of legitimacy is the idea that Q and QAnon adherents have a crucial role to play – both socially and politically – in furthering ‘the policies and actions’ of the Trump administration. Finally, there is a hint at the core of what QAnon adherents desire as part of their participation in the wider MAGA movement: the desire for ‘rule of law, liberty, and constitutional government’. The presumption here is that rule of law, liberty, and constitutionalism *has been lost*; here, too, is where the significance of the Officer’s oath comes into play. No longer should QAnon digital soldiers have to abide by

¹⁶⁷ Appendix B, Figure 92: Digitalsoldiers.info, Q is a central plank of MAGA.

the orders of those in higher ranking positions. The presumption is that those higher-ranking individuals are at fault for the loss of rule of law, liberty, and constitutional government. They are corrupt in the minds of QAnon adherents and have undermined the Constitution that digital soldiers promise to uphold alongside General Flynn.

An articulation of ‘the who and the what’ of the QAnon movement on another website¹⁶⁸ declares that Federalism is broken, since, in their estimation, the Federal government has taken too much power from State governments. Restoration of Constitutional order, then, requires taking back power from the Federal government: “We The People will back Constitutional order in America [sic] This is not Civil war in the making, This is 535 Federal lawmakers made up of men and women who are burning our county to the ground. ‘We The People’ have to rebuild it. The States will have a stronger voice.”¹⁶⁹ Here, it becomes clearer that the corrupt government officials to which digital soldiers deny their obedience are the five hundred and thirty-five Federal lawmakers in Washington, D.C. These men and women ‘are burning our country to the ground,’ undermining the American Constitution, and taking liberty from ‘we the people.’ The situation is *dire* and requires immediate, decisive action.

In a military sense, however, soldiers are not required to follow the ‘orders of legislators’. They are only beholden to the commander-in-chief – President Trump, at the time – and their above-ranking officers in the military structure. This misunderstanding reflects the way in which QAnon adherence attempts to apply military structures to politics – through the digital soldier oath in specific and more generally through the application of

¹⁶⁸ Appendix B, Figure 99: QAnon 41020 wordpress homepage. See also: QAnon – The Great Awakening (<https://qanon41020.wordpress.com/>).

¹⁶⁹ Appendix B, Figure 100: QAnon41020 wordpress, we have to rebuild.

military language. The figure of Q, after all, is a clandestine officer trading in military and political intelligence, feeding crumbs of information to the digital age's equivalent of 'codebreakers'. QAnon functions as an intelligence gathering operation, in which crumbs become narratives detailing actionable conspiracies. In turning politics into an ongoing military operation, Anons justify their 'soldiering', sometimes violent and sometimes not, as necessary for ensuring implementation of MAGA policies. This military adjacent language also highlights the seriousness of the stakes involved in this political moment.

Two important qualities of QAnon adherents are highlighted in their taking of the 'digital soldier oath': their obsession with 'constitutionalism' and 'militarism', albeit frequently misapplied. Much of their patriotic work – their duty to the Constitution – happens in technologically mediated online environments. Couple this with their self-image as archaeologists of 'truth', and a central tenet of QAnon is unveiled: their desire to 'red-pill the masses'.¹⁷⁰ Strategically speaking, this drive to uncover the truth and awaken a wider swath of American citizens is paired with electing a leader who will act upon that truth. "The simple solution is to elect a President that will follow and defend our Constitution. Yes, just that one person, the 'right person' can turn things around and stop the government abuse, corruption and allow 'We the People' to take control of our country and our lives. It really is that simple."¹⁷¹ Of course, if the American citizens are not aware of the truth, then they will not elect the *right* leader. The wrong leader (or leaders, if Congress members are also counted) only serve to undermine America liberty. "Most of

¹⁷⁰ Alexandra Minna-Stern (2019), chap. 1. Minna-Stern's framework is helpful for elaborating this important stated 'method' of achieving the goals of QAnon, which I describe below.

¹⁷¹ Appendix B, Figure 100: QAnon41020 wordpress, we have to rebuild.

us [Americans] are ignorant, greedy, selfish, and cast our votes accordingly, if we vote at all. The results are destroying America.”¹⁷² Thus, with a properly awakened and patriotic citizenry, a strong leader committed to eliminating corruption, and an altered epistemological environment – in which *their* truth is recognized and openly accessible, the QAnon and MAGA movement will succeed in restoring liberty, rule of law, and constitutional government. Until then, however, QAnon adherents imbue themselves with a special knowledge of truth and military-adjacent orders for upholding it, while others remained asleep and willfully ignorant.

The Red Pill’s Epistemological Side Effects

While the obvious enemy of the QAnon movement is the global cabal of adrenochrome-harvesting political elites, the less obvious enemies are the ‘normies’ and ‘sheeple’ who stand in the way of ‘The Storm’. ‘Normies’ is a phrase used to describe typical individuals, with moderate beliefs, tastes, and interests. In the minds of Anons, ‘normies’ are nearly equivalent to ‘sheeple’ in that they are either unwillingly blinded to the machinations of corrupt government officials or are willfully ignorant of the same fact. ‘Normies’ follow what they are told, and they do not live a life of questioning; thus, they serve as a hurdle to holding accountable the corrupt elites which they would otherwise simply listen to. One user of thedonald.win describes Anons who are relatively new to the ‘Great Awakening’ movement as, “the sheepest of the sheep, the last to get on the train, the weakest in terms of mental fortitude & will, the ones who struggle to see common sense because they lost touch with their own intuition long ago, the most conditioned, & the ones

¹⁷² Appendix B, Figure 100: QAnon41020 wordpress, we have to rebuild.

who will need the most support. True normies.”¹⁷³ Even though the Anons on this thread who are being criticized have in fact transitioned from ‘normie-dom’ to the ‘Great Awakening’ – as in, they have made comments on this image board, asked questions, and posted thoughts about QAnon – they nonetheless lack ‘common sense’, are ‘weak-willed’, and ‘conditioned’.

These former normies, however, are not necessarily at fault for their situation. The same user continues: “while part of the fault is their own for not paying attention or properly guiding their children when times were better, *most of the fault lies with the evil ones who did this to them* & who took advantage of the naivete of decent people that were too idealistic for their own good.”¹⁷⁴ Accordingly, QAnon adherents take it upon themselves to *force* ‘normies’ to pay attention *for their own good*. Of course, ‘normies’ to be converted are not bad; in fact, they are ‘decent’, even ‘idealistic’. The real evil lies with those who brainwashed them, conditioned them, and turned them into ‘sheep’.

A central method through which QAnon adherents intend to achieve their goal – that is, bring to fruition ‘the Storm’ of mass arrests and indictments holding accountable corrupt politicians and elites who make up the Cabal – is to awaken ‘normies’ to the truth. This process is referred to as ‘red-pilling’: a reference to the 1999 film *The Matrix* in which the protagonist, Neo, is offered a choice between the blue pill – which would permit him to continue to live in his fantasy world – and the red pill – which would *wake him up* and send him hurtling down the rabbit hole to a harsh reality. As Alexandra Minna-Stern (2019) puts it in *Proud Boys and the White Ethnostate*: “To be red pillled is to accept the cold, hard

¹⁷³ Supplemental Content, thedonald.win, need Jesus, p. 2.

¹⁷⁴ Supplemental Content, thedonald.win, need Jesus, p. 2, emphasis mine.

truth about the foundations of individual and collective existence, and to radically shift one's parameters of reality in accordance with this newfound knowledge" (p. 16). Establishing the conditions for 'normies' to take the red pill works to encourage 'doing your own research', to force coming to terms with the corruption that rots society from its core, and to subsequently adjust their 'normie' worldview. Minna-Stern (2019) continues, describing the post-red pill way of seeing the world as, "an alternative approach to making distinctions between what is and what ought to be" (p. 16). With an adjusted worldview and altered parameters for what is good and evil, what is moral and what is corrupt, red-pilled QAnon adherents now can act decisively.¹⁷⁵

One Parler user describes his red-pilled moment: "We didn't realize how the liberal cancer had metastized [*sic*] and how sick the patient (America) actually was until President Trump shocked them in 2016. That's one positive that has come out of the past 4 years. All of us need to get involved NOW. We can no longer afford to be passive and take what the founders gave us for granted." Notice here that *before* it was unclear the extent to which America was diseased and shot through with corruption. The election of Donald Trump to U.S. President, however, served as its own version of a red pill: after his shocking victory, some American citizens began to wake up (and the 'establishment' was forced to face its own 'reckoning'). With that realization, it became clear – to this Parler user as well as others – that 'we need to get involved' and 'can no longer afford to be passive'. The red pill ultimately, "is an internet drug with unique properties that... induce personal

¹⁷⁵ Describing the transformative properties of the red pill, Minna-Stern (2019) recounts the story of formerly conservative contributor to the *Daily Stormer* (a neo-Nazi website): "The red pill is in and of itself a quest for truth." Minna-Stern adds, "The stark before-and-after is a Manichean worldview in which principles are unequivocal and there is no room for ambiguity" (p. 17).

transformation and collective conversion,” thereby functioning to highlight in an explicit manner the direness of the situation and the requirements for political action (Minna-Stern, 2019, p. 17).

The website greatawakening.win articulates its mission statement as: “We are researchers who deal in open-source information, reasoned argument, and dank memes. We do battle in the sphere of ideas and ideas only. We neither need nor condone the use of force in our work here. WE ARE THE PUBLIC FACE OF Q. OUR MISSION IS TO RED-PILL NORMIES.”¹⁷⁶ The transformation which ‘The Great Awakening’ website declares here is centered around ideas and research which, in their estimation, will necessarily uncover the truth. This, of course, is their central mission, and many of the posts reflect this fact. As one Anon on greatawakening.win puts it: “THIS is a BASE for REDPILLING the population of the WORLD... When our PRESIDENT makes his chess move. We are... THE PATHFINDERS who will get our families, friends, neighbors to THE TRUTH. GOD BLESS ALL.”¹⁷⁷ QAnon adherents have a fairly clear picture of their *special* role as ‘pathfinders’, who have exclusive knowledge where others do not. Possessing this knowledge implies a responsibility for red-pilling the masses, but in a strategic manner. Though they want to awaken the ‘population of the world’, they know that starting with their families and friends is an important first step.

QAnon adherents have also shown their willingness to take political action on local stages – such as on school boards and town councils – again reflected as part of the mission statement detailed on greatawakening.win. A meme quoting General Michael Flynn

¹⁷⁶ Appendix B, Figure 95: Greatawakening.win homepage, Welcome/Missions.

¹⁷⁷ Supplemental Content, thedonald.win, need Jesus, p. 8.

declares, “local action = national impact.” Accordingly, Anons should, “take responsibility for your school committee or boards... [to] get involved in the education of our children.”¹⁷⁸ The ‘Great Awakening’ begins not merely by red-pilling family and friends; it begins most *efficiently* in schools, at some of the most formative moments in which cognitive and epistemological habits are developed.¹⁷⁹ It also begins with parenting: QAnon adherents, like one new parent who posted on greatawakening.win, recognize that raising red-pilled children is a crucial mission in and of itself. To Anons, this looks like: (1) teaching them to, “always think critically and understand where we come from,” (2) “raising a warrior... [who is] aware, smart, no sugar, no lies,” and (3) giving them, “some actual books... encyclopedia, history books, science books, that sort of stuff *because the web will be full of too many lies in the future.*”¹⁸⁰ Critical thinking, awareness, reliance on ‘real’ facts, and a warrior-like readiness are all important to instill in children from a young age.

Though the goal of the ‘Great Awakening’ is diffuse and at times lacks specific content, QAnon adherents recognize that what it requires is an *epistemological* and *cognitive* shift. It is for this reason that child-rearing and childhood education are the focus of a large part of their efforts. With the appropriate epistemological and cognitive shift, and an awakened American people, ‘we’ can improve on our lost opportunities for awakening in the past. As one Parler user details:

¹⁷⁸ Appendix B, Figure 95: Greatawakening.win homepage, Welcome/Missions.

¹⁷⁹ In the years since the Capitol Insurrection, QAnon adherents have shifted their focus to local elections and to local school boards and committees. This is reported by NBC News (Collins, 2021), TIME Magazine (Bergengruen, 2021), The San Diego Union-Tribune (Smolens, 2021), and the National Education Association (Flannery, 2021).

¹⁸⁰ Supplemental Content, Greatawakening.win, raising red-pilled children, p. 1&4, emphasis mine.

The so-called “Satanic Panic” of the 80s was the closest the public came to waking up to the secret society cult that has been metastasizing [sic] silently throughout the world for several centuries. The #FakeNews media was able to put it down then, but we cannot keep kicking the can down the road. At some point, we have to face this scourge and their unfathomable evil, and excise it from society once and for all. If we don't, they will eventually succeed in destroying humanity for good, as we have already seen with their communist tyranny, corruption and infiltration into government and globalist corporations.¹⁸¹

The shift at stake here, with enough red pills disbursed to the masses, is that shift in worldview which highlights the ‘unfathomable evil’ at work trying to ‘destroy humanity’.

There was a moment at which the public ‘came close to waking up’, but ‘fake news’ and misinformation spread across the mainstream media ‘put down’ that awakening, forestalling realization of the ‘secret cult’ at work. This evil has been working silently, stretching its tentacles across space and time, for *centuries*, and people must be able to alter their epistemological mindset to recognize this fact.¹⁸²

The QAnon phenomenon is ultimately about cultivating a distinct way of knowing. Some of this epistemological mode of interpreting the world only functions because of cognitive hold-ups including: (1) the tendency to overread meaning across unrelated events (*apophenia*), (2) the tendency to confidently presume greater competence specifically in areas in which one is under-skilled (*Dunning-Kruger effect*), and (3) the tendency to search for and accept information which already confirms our beliefs (*confirmation bias*). But the core of QAnon belief remains a distrust in existing epistemic authority. Such distrust

¹⁸¹ Appendix B, Figure 97: Parler, ‘Satanic Panic’/Scourge the unfathomable evil.

¹⁸² “When Q came along I realized that this was no longer a game of geopolitical chess, but it was a surging, endless battle of Good vs. Evil. Very little political theater is real (aside from the money spent and lives lost). It was always a mechanism to control information. That’s all this is. An asymmetrical centuries old information war between good and evil... The Great Awakening is not a possibility. It is an absolute 100% requirement” (Supplemental Content, Greatawakening.win, raising red-pilled children, p. 4).

should be clear thus far in the language of adherents as they decry ‘fake news’, the web being ‘full of lies’, and corrupt nature of the mainstream media.

Some commentators, like Robert Nichols, for example, refer to this spreading distrust in epistemic authority as the ‘death of expertise’. The ‘death of expertise’ represents a kind of populist suspicion of ‘elites’ perceived as smarter or more educated than the public. To listen to these disconnected elites implies covering over the experience of the American everyman. The death of expertise *also* represents a longing for clarity and simplicity in a world of complex flows of power, influence, and capital. As Nichols puts it:

Conspiracy theories are deeply attractive to people who have a hard time making sense of a complicated world and who have no patience for less dramatic explanations. Such theories also appeal to a strong streak of narcissism: there are people who would choose to believe in complicated nonsense rather than accept that their own circumstances are incomprehensible... [Nichols, 2017, p. 58]

Narcissism here makes sense: QAnon adherents are aware of their ‘special’ role as holders of the truth, and this special role necessarily brings individual significance and worth. Narcissistic self-centeredness and self-assuredness mean, in Nichols’ understanding, that the conspiracy theorist cannot engage with his own beliefs critically, implying that conspiracy theory, in effect, runs directly counter to ‘expertise’. The hesitancy to listen to expert advice – either because one thinks he knows it all, has special knowledge, or desires simple and clear explanations – and the tendency to distrust existing epistemic authorities has opened the space for conspiracy theorism and, as such, formed part of the bedrock upon which QAnon is built.

The great irony, of course, is that even though QAnon adherents are charged with narcissism, with crippled epistemologies,¹⁸³ and with cognitive biases, they nonetheless *remain committed* to some concept of ‘*doing your own research*’. This mantra has become another one of the catchphrases of QAnon, which necessarily follows once individuals have been red-pilled and awakened to the truth. As they travel down the rabbit hole, Anons are *finally* empowered and encouraged to do their own research to uncover their reality. As one Anon on greatawakening.win puts it:

Not gonna lie. Had about a 2hr period where I had no feelings... almost numb. Then, when I looked around and the MSM was marching on like lemmings... I realized what that means. So I decided that following lemmings get you platted [sic]. Good luck with that. I am no [sic] Awake. Love you people here. No way I could get ANY signal out of the noise without this board. To America! May each of us Live Free, or we will have to discuss.¹⁸⁴

Notice here where this Anon began: numbness and a lack of feeling. Then, they had a realization: that the mainstream media – the epistemic authority to be distrusted – was nothing more than ‘a bunch of lemmings, marching on’. The reference to lemmings is adjacent to the reference to sheeple, except lemmings as a figure have been mythologized as a mass of thoughtless individuals who literally throw themselves off a cliff in mass suicide. To follow blindly the mainstream media lemmings off the cliff represents not just individual death, but also the death of the American nation. As another Anon puts it: “this is for the soul of America.”¹⁸⁵ Then put differently on Parler: “Those that move forward blindly are open to being deceived... This is not just another game. This is for the life of a nation. The last bastion of hope and freedom.”¹⁸⁶ That ‘last bastion’ is doing your own

¹⁸³ Sunstein & Vermeule (2009), p. 211.

¹⁸⁴ Supplemental Content, thedonald.win, need Jesus, p. 6.

¹⁸⁵ Supplemental Content, thedonald.win, Jan 6 for the soul of America, p. 1.

¹⁸⁶ Appendix B, Figure 89: Parler, Last bastion of hope and freedom.

research so that *you can prevent* blindly hurtling yourself – and America, too – off a cliff. As our above Anon puts it, that can be done with ‘this board’ – greatawakening.win –, which establishes a forum for collaborative research and interpretation so that ‘signal can be located in the noise’. Yet another great irony that social scientific concepts and dispositions are turned on their heads in a swift declaration to awaken out of ignorance into the truth of reality. It is just that this distinct way of knowing is built upon ‘unreality.’¹⁸⁷

The Red Pill’s Existential Side Effects

The red pill and blue pill are not the only drugs to swallow via internet forums; there is also the *black pill*. One Parler user highlights starkly those that are in the way of ‘the Great Awakening’: “Patriots are up against two sorts. The ones who think #TheStorm is a deranged conspiracy theory, and *those who have lost faith* because justice didn’t happen on their timeline. In both cases, the end result is the same – all will see the truth and those responsible will be held accountable.”¹⁸⁸ It’s more obvious who the first set of ‘enemies’ are: individuals, groups, and institutions who militate in some way against QAnon adherence (again, the enemies are mainstream media, technology corporations, liberal politicians, etc.). The second set of ‘enemies’ here are Anons who have arguably taken the black pill, that is, individuals who, after having woken up to reality and to the truth, find that justice is not being meted out at a fast enough rate, and so have fallen into despair.

¹⁸⁷ Ethan Zuckerman (2019) in “QAnon and the Emergence of the Unreal” puts it as follows: “A movement like QAnon is an inevitable outgrowth of the Unreal, an approach to politics that forsakes interpretation of a common set of facts in favor of creating closed universes of mutually reinforcing facts and interpretations” (p. 3). Elsewhere, he explains that ‘Unreality’ indicates a phenomenon in which, “what’s real to you is unreal to someone else” (Zuckerman, 2019, p. 9).

¹⁸⁸ Appendix B, Figure 86: Parler, Patriots up against two sorts, emphasis mine.

With no plan to trust, no faith to rely upon, some red-pilled Anons face the world lacking the answers they once thought they had. Where red-pilling lends hope, meaning, and significance in the face of such circumstances, it also can lead to despair for those who struggle to see problems solved and justice served. Red-pilling is a hopeful awakening; black-pilling is a dangerous descent into nihilism.

In both cases, the initial swallowing of the red pill, that moment of waking up to see reality for what it truly is, has both epistemological side effects as well as *existential* ones. Belief in QAnon provides a sense of stability and control amid complexity; it provides explanation when otherwise circumstances would be incomprehensible; and it provides social and existential meaning, lending a space for affirmation and collaboration, as well as giving purpose for taking part in the movement. Ethan Zuckerman (2019), in his analysis of the QAnon phenomenon, argues that the core appeal of QAnon, like other big-tent conspiracies, is its, “sense of a master narrative, an explanation for otherwise disturbing and confusing events that assures believers that they understand the big picture in ways non-believers do not” (p. 4). That is, its efficacy is in providing simple, all-inclusive narratives in especially overwhelming moments, and being keened in on that narrative renders a given individual as ‘special’. Compare this to the efficacy of nostalgic feelings which stir up affective longing for a simpler time and place and demand restoration of that simplicity. As Svetlana Boym (2001) puts it, “the conspiratorial worldview reflects a nostalgia for a transcendental cosmology and a simple pre-modern conception of good and evil” (p. 43). A version of nostalgia in and of itself, conspiracy theory eradicates complexity and ambiguity, replacing it with an ages-old battle between good and evil, in which those who have been awakened to the existence of the ‘conspiracy’ at play are

necessarily *good*. Thus, conspiracy theory does not merely imbue clarity in the form of a master narrative; *it also imbues goodness* in those who have identified the conspiracy and subsequently *fight* against it.

Q drop number 4509, from June 24, 2020, provides insight into the existential meaning, in-group affirmation, and sense of purpose that QAnon provides adherents. “You have been selected to help serve your Country,” the post begins, then going on to tell adherents to, “organize and connect,” to complete the following missions:

Mission 1: Dispute [reject] propaganda push through posting of research and facts

Mission 2: Support role of other digital soldiers [one falls another stands (rises)]

Mission 3: Guide [awaken] others through use of facts... ask ‘counter’ questions to initiate ‘thought’ vs repeat [echo] of MSDNC propaganda

Mission 4: Learn use of camouflage [digitally]

Mission 5: Identify strengths / weaknesses [personal and designated target(s)] re:

Twitter and FB [+other]... dependence on person-to-person capture [Qdrop #4509]

After reiterating that this is ‘information warfare’ on a ‘digital battlefield’, Q proceeds to tell their readers: “Together we win.” Together, QAnon adherents are on the side of good, conducting battle against propaganda, guiding others to do the same. The QAnon phenomenon serves to train them, to empower them to make use of their technological skills and their research skills for something greater than them: serving their Country. In that patriotic service, too, individuals come together to connect, to organize, to support one another, and fight for a similar cause: saving America.¹⁸⁹

This Qdrop serves as a morale booster in late June 2020, when anti-mask protests were sweeping across the U.S. in response to pandemic restrictions *and* when Black Lives

¹⁸⁹ These themes are reiterated in a similar Qdrop: “*Without you, collectively, there would have been no way to bypass their control.* They weren't about to repeat the mistake(s) of 2016. You are what matters most. UNITED NOT DIVIDED. You awake, thinking for yourself, is their greatest fear. WELCOME TO THE DIGITAL BATTLEFIELD. WWG1WGA!!! Q” (Qdrop #4880, emphasis mine).

Matter, ANTIFA, and right-wing activists were taking to the street after the murder of George Floyd (May 26, 2020) in Minneapolis.¹⁹⁰ At this moment, QAnon adherents are perceiving social unrest, restrictions on *their* freedoms, and continued ‘attacks’ against America – in the form of anti-racist, anti-fascist, and social justice protests in the wake of Floyd’s murder.¹⁹¹ A reiteration of significance, a re-articulation of the mission in a clear manner, and a reaffirmation that *we will indeed win* was important. So important, too, that this Qdrop is referenced on many QAnon sites, including greatawakening.win, as displaying the main goals and plans of the movement.

Further, the replies made by Anons on 8kun also indicate the gravity of this particular Qdrop. One Anon writes in reply:

Doing my part to [awaken]... Reaching my circle of people directly has been working great, though. Most are finally starting to listen and thereby SEE... Every single one of us is important. We were born for this. Proud to serve and do my individual part to support OUR MOVEMENT. GOD WINS. Love you faggots. (no homo).¹⁹²

Not only is this Anon fulfilling his God-given role – the role that he was literally made for – but he is having success in awakening others in his circle of people to see the truth. In so doing, he is ‘doing his individual part’ for something larger – the QAnon movement – and he is ensuring that ‘God wins’, an undeniably positive victory in a cosmology based upon a stark struggle between good and evil. It is also clear that in engaging in this work, he has

¹⁹⁰ Another reply to Drop #4509 reads: “Recognize Communists inside DOJ / FBI produce such nonsense after the violence of the last few weeks, and then you’ll understand why BLM, ANTIFA, and other radical Marxist groups are allowed to flourish” (Appendix B, Figure 71: 8kun, reply to Qdrop 4509, Recognize communists inside the federal government).

¹⁹¹ Often, anti-racist and social justice movements were perceived as ‘attacking’ America and American values, especially on the right. See my chapter on Proud Boys and Patriot Prayer for more detail on this perception.

¹⁹² Appendix B, Figure 72: 8kun, reply to Qdrop 4509, doing my part.

established a set of social connections whom he ‘loves’, a sign that he gets significant social support and affirmation. Other Anons reply to this same post with iterations of the ‘digital soldier oath’, affirming that ‘where we go one, we go all’; others say, ‘Thank you, sir’; ‘For God and Country’; ‘so thankful to be a part of the small operation, Q.’; ‘I stand at the ready’; and ‘did Q just deputize us?’ One Anon admits: “Thank you for validating thousands of hours of my work to connect patriots.”¹⁹³ It appears that Q and the ‘family of Anons’ built around Q’s crumbs do indeed provide some meaning and affirmation in what is perceived as an otherwise challenging, frightening, and overwhelming world.

QAnon adherents, however, are not all as innocuous as they appear, like this Parler user: “Thank you Q for giving me renewed hope, leading me back to God, and restoring my pride for my country!” Perhaps it is the case that some existential side effects of the red pill include ‘restoration of faith, hope, and pride’, articulation of a clear plan of action, political empowerment, affirmation for actions taken, establishment of a space for community building and found families, and provision of a forum for collaborative creativity. As Zuckerman (2019) puts it: “while assembling and re-baking crumbs is unlikely to yield anything culinarily appealing, participation in constructing the Q narrative is clearly a fascinating pursuit for thousands of co-creators” (p. 6). Anyone can be a collaborator, a creator, a contributor, and a preacher, all with palpable benefits in the realm of existential and social capital. But Zuckerman is right to say that what results is, at a minimum, of ‘limited culinary appeal’, and at a maximum, downright disgusting and dangerous. For example, one Anon’s declaration that, “We were always destined to have to fight it out with these lunatics at some point. The people need to wake up and fight or

¹⁹³ Appendix B, Figure 70: 8kun, reply to Qdrop 4509, Anon feels validated in his work.

we will all be slaves.”¹⁹⁴ This grows into re-articulations of the digital soldier oath (to uphold the American constitution) which state: “I solemnly swear TO END THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT ONCE AND FOR ALL.”¹⁹⁵

When they are not advocating for ending the federal government through military tribunals, mass indictments, and public executions, Anons are reminding their circles that, in the face of imposed tyranny via pandemic restrictions, the simple answer is that, “all black people are superspreaders [sic] dont [sic] want covid then the name of the game is ‘Avoid The Groid.’ Its [sic] a n*** virus.”¹⁹⁶ Already, this post is racist enough. But the phrase “Avoid the Groid” has a storied history on neo-nazi, white supremacist, and white nationalist sites including, for example, the Daily Stormer. It is an oft-repeated rule of thumb for ‘European’ whites: stay away from diverse areas and do not mix with any non-white, non-European groups or individuals.¹⁹⁷ Ultimately, the danger inherent in QAnon adherence is twofold: first, its effectiveness at providing existential meaning and affirmation, such that engagement provides significant affective benefits. Second, there persists an easy slippage from a seemingly banal fantasy world-building enterprise to dangerous, violent, antisemitic, and racist ends with a storied history in the U.S.

¹⁹⁴ Supplemental Content, Greatawakening.win, figured out Q, p. 18.

¹⁹⁵ Appendix B, Figure 73: 8kun, reply to Qdrop 4509, end the federal government.

¹⁹⁶ Appendix B, Figure 75: 8kun, Anons for our country and against “black superspreaders.”

¹⁹⁷ On a forum site called, chipmania.com, one user posts: “Simply put, while avoiding the groid is near-impossible so long as they exist in human civilizations, it’s very possible to keep yourself safe, and minimize your exposure to the nigg influence” (Appendix B, Figure 76: Chipmania forum, Minimize racial exposure and “avoid the groid”). Though this is not tied to a QAnon account, the reply to Qdrop #4509 does in fact make reference to an adjacent sentiment by declaring, ‘avoid the groid’.

Christianity, Faith, and Apocalypse

In many ways, the QAnon movement is analogous to the Christian Identity Movement which arose to prominence on the U.S. far right in the 1970s.¹⁹⁸ Christian Identity, thanks in part to groups like the Aryan Nations and the KKK, solidified itself as an extremist version of Christianity based upon a combination of racist theology and antisemitic occultism.¹⁹⁹ QAnon, like the Christian Identity Movement, adheres to an apocalyptic vision, relies heavily upon faith, scripture, and a specific interpretation of Christianity, highlights an ongoing battle of good versus evil, frequently waxes paranoiac, and plays upon both antisemitic and racist tropes. Consider this Parler post which describes the QAnon movement as an ‘operation of biblical proportions’:

The growth of the #QAnon patriotic movement was as much steered and anticipated as #TheStorm itself. The military planners of this anti-corruption revolution had every box ticked in preparation for a global sting operation of biblical proportions - and it was designed from the start to achieve a world-saving objective that has never before been attempted. It may feel like we are spreading the truth against an insurmountable tide of fake news and enemy efforts to suppress us, but the inevitable trajectory of these momentous times is that this movement will become the prevailing consensus and cultural revival of our time - no matter how it may seem right now. Be encouraged, hold the line and keep fighting.²⁰⁰

¹⁹⁸ See Michael Barkun (1997).

¹⁹⁹ As Ana Bochicchio (2021) puts it: “The basis of Christian identity theology derives from three basic ideas: the belief in the divine fatherhood of white humanity (indiscriminately called Aryan, Adamic, Caucasian, or Israelite), the belief in the biological satanic fatherhood of the Jews, and racial millenarianism which believes that in the future there will be an eschatological confrontation between both racial seeds that will result in the triumph of the white race” (p. 35-36). In other words, the white race is spiritually presupposed to be superior to non-whites because whites are made in the image of God, and the white race is morally superior to Jewish people because Jewish people are descendants of Satan. Given this, Christian Identity also holds that an apocalyptic battle between good and evil is inevitable, when the white race will rise above non-whites and defeat satanist Jews. Only then will the white race be positioned for the end days, the second coming of Jesus.

²⁰⁰ Appendix B, Figure 85: Parler, QAnon patriotic movement.

Here, the operation is cast into a global register, with spiritual and biblical ramifications that would save the world. Despite insurmountable odds – ‘fake news and enemy efforts to suppress’ – there is an inevitable, God-given fate: that the QAnon movement will prevail and establish a cultural revival after the planned ‘anti-corruption revolution’ is complete. Most importantly, too, this user reminds their followers to remain encouraged, keep the faith, hold the line, and keep fighting.

It is possible to argue that the QAnon movement is akin to an outgrowth of Christian Identity for the Internet age. Christian Identity believes in white supremacy, that Jewish people are descendants of the devil and thus engaged in vast satanic conspiracies, and that the world is on the verge of apocalypse in which good will necessarily triumph over evil but only after battle is waged against the satanic conspiracy.²⁰¹ The strongest and most explicit similarity between Christian Identity and QAnon, though, is the apocalyptic linkage. As Michael Barkun (1997) describes in *Religion and the Racist Right*, “Identity’s millenarian scenario is interwoven with the need to expose the ‘crime’, and reverse its consequences... The motifs of election and theft – of a granted and stolen birthright – produces a theology of resentment” (p. 119). That is to say, the consummation of the apocalyptic battle rests upon bringing to light the ‘crimes’²⁰² against the American people

²⁰¹ Barkun (1997), p. xi.

²⁰² In specific, the ‘crime’ here is a stolen claim to being God’s chosen people. In general, such crimes can vary from participation in the Jewish conspiracy for world domination – trafficking children, harvesting adrenochrome, participating in blood sacrifice – to undermining the American Constitution – through law-breaking, engaging in corruption, and stealing elections. Take for example this claim made by a video posted by stormisuponus on Rumble: “America was almost destroyed by criminals. We just didn’t realize it because people don’t expect prominent career politicians to be capable of secretly running organized criminal networks that they keep secret from the people... The election of Donald Trump was an unexpected shock to the elite crime network known as the Deep

and holding the conspirators accountable. Those crimes include, for example, stolen elections and upended birthrights, breeding resentment and anger in those who have been stolen from. As one prominent QAnon priest/influencer,²⁰³ ‘Praying Medic’, puts it: “Look around at what’s going on in society, see all the crazy moves politicians are making, allowing the cities to be taken over by violent thugs. The agenda of *darkness is being forced out into the light*, and the world is watching it happen” (Hayes, 2020, June 14). Praying Medic here describes one ‘crime’ of the cabal as allowing cities to burn at the hands of violent thugs; in other words, the destruction of the homeland, of what is supposed to be *ours*, is at stake here.

Other QAnon adherents decry more ‘crimes’ of the Cabal: “Instead they rigged multiple elections, probably [sic] murdered people, still did unspeakable things to children, etc.”²⁰⁴ Exposure of these crimes must be ongoing; this is in part the function of ‘awakening’ in the QAnon lexicon. As one user on greatawakening.win describes it: “Public outrage can only come from telling us everything.”²⁰⁵ All of this rests on the swift apocalyptic moment called The Storm, in which revelation of evil necessarily (if not forcefully) leads to accountability.

Reference to the apocalyptic moment at which good must triumph over evil as part of the culmination of an ongoing cosmic battle, is a key theme in both Qdrops and the

State, and for the proceeding years we have seen unfold a vast legal operation to slowly unwind the crime syndicate while waking up the public to what is coming” (Appendix B, Figure 83: Rumble, COVID Emergency/Drain the swamp).

²⁰³ By this I mean an internet persona (and real person) who has devoted time to curating QAnon resources, providing explainer videos, interpreting Qdrops for their followers, and disseminated the QAnon conspiracy theory.

²⁰⁴ Supplemental Content, Greatawakening.win, figured out Q, p. 13.

²⁰⁵ Supplemental Content, Greatawakening.win, figured out Q, p. 11.

language of QAnon believers. In a pair of Qdrops from June of 2020, Q declares first that their digital warriors ought to, “Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil’s schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the power of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms” (Qdrop #4463). Later, Q assures his readers that, “Their deception [dark actions] [is] on full display... Anti-American. Anti-God” (Qdrop #4550). Replies to this pair of Qdrops abound, as per usual, and include sentiments declaring that, “we are in this fight in ways you can not [sic] imagine,” that, “the battlefield is mental, spiritual, and physical”, and that ‘literal lives are at risk.’²⁰⁶ One Anon demands ‘obliteration’ (“try them and FRY THEM”) for those who worship the devil,²⁰⁷ while another asks, “do we storm Washington, demand our freedoms back and citizen arrest every traitor?”²⁰⁸ Considering the vast scope of the conspiracy, another Anon laments that he cannot see the goodness in humankind, for, “our hearts are desperately wicked and without God, our tendencies don’t go toward good;”²⁰⁹ simultaneously, another user declares – in all caps – that, “only at the precipice [moment of destruction] will people find the will to change.”²¹⁰ It should be clear here that: (1) Christian theology is explicitly interwoven in the narrative of QAnon, (2) a battle of good versus evil is unfolding, in which digital warriors must be ready to fight on the spiritual and physical battlefield, with *God*

²⁰⁶ Appendix B, Figure 60: 8kun, reply to Qdrop 4550, Mental and spiritual battlefield.

²⁰⁷ Appendix B, Figure 78: 8kun, reply to Qdrop 4463, Please obliterate.

²⁰⁸ Appendix B, Figure 59: 8kun, reply to Qdrop 4550, Storm Washington.

²⁰⁹ Appendix B, Figure 57: 8kun, reply to Qdrop 4550, Humans are wicked without God.

²¹⁰ Appendix B, Figure 68: 8kun, reply to Qdrop 4550, People change at the precipice of destruction.

on their side, and (3) in the apocalyptic moment of The Storm, the crimes of the cabal will have been brought to light, and cosmic justice will be meted out accordingly.

Outside of the millenarian scenario explicitly present in both QAnon mythology and Christian Identity theology, one must pay attention to the racist and antisemitic annals which have borne the structure of such an apocalyptic conspiracy theory. Racist and antisemitic tropes, though clearly present – especially on the 8chan/8kun imageboards and sketchier internet forums on which QAnon thrives –, serve more as sustaining undercurrents in the mass-disseminated versions of the QAnon conspiracy theory.²¹¹ QAnon adherence, therefore, waxes antisemitic and racist at times; after all, there are known antisemites, like the QAnon influencer GhostEzra, whose identity was recently revealed to be an evangelical Christian (Backovic, Wildon, & Ondrak, 2021). Notably, GhostEzra rose to prominence after the U.S. Capitol Insurrection on January 6, 2021, likely as a figure who provided internet ‘leadership’ as the figure of Q disappeared. Though GhostEzra has a divided following – in part because of his provocation tactics – his Telegram collected over three hundred thousand followers. The dispatches from this account showcase both the antisemitism oozing from QAnon mythology as well as the potential linkages between antisemitism, evangelical Christianity, Christian Nationalism, and QAnon adherence.

GhostEzra relies on age-old antisemitic tropes and conspiracy theories for much of his posting. As *Logically* – the intelligence firm which first identified the user behind GhostEzra – reports, his account served not only to disseminate antisemitic claims about

²¹¹ It is worth noting again here that QAnon is adept at distillation: that is, at clarifying and sanitizing the conspiracy theory so that it is more acceptable to wider audiences, despite being rooted in racism and antisemitism.

Jewish world domination, but also to create a de facto neo-Nazi discussion forum within the QAnon realm (Backovic, Wildon, & Ondrak, 2021). Take for example this Telegram post from GhostEzra:

The people who are destroying the world identify as Jewish but are not actually even Jews. They all converted. Bill Gates, George Soros, Klaus Schwab, Rothchild [sic] family. Communism is Jewish, put forth by the Jewish Bolsheviks. The goal is total world domination and control. Up unto this point they have been extremely successful. Therefore, this topic is extremely important. Hiding behind terms like anti-Semitism is a cover to allow all of this to be unexamined and criticisms to be silenced.²¹²

According to GhostEzra, the Jewish conspiracy for world domination, which crystallizes as communism, has been wildly successful. Calling individuals anti-Semites just for critically pointing out this vast Jewish conspiracy is hindrance of free speech, pulling the wool further over our patriotic eyes. In other words, as one Anon on 8chan puts it: “The goal of the Jewish Masonic elite is to establish dictatorial Illuministic Communism and to enslave all of mankind under the thumb of a Jewish master race led by a world messiah who is to rule from Jerusalem.”²¹³ This Jewish master race, of course, would impede rule by the ‘true’ *Aryan/Israelite* race, and evil would win out over good.

Importantly, GhostEzra relies upon a peculiar interpretation of the Bible²¹⁴ which permits him to draw a distinction between Jews and Jewish, between Israel and the *true Israel*, as highlighted here: “The true nation of Israel is scattered throughout the earth currently. The Zionists tried to falsely fulfill the prophecy... via the statehood of Israel. It has not yet happened. Zionists have hijacked God’s Word for their own cabal agenda.

²¹² Appendix B, Figure 105: Telegram, GhostEzra, Explanation of the term ‘Jew.’

²¹³ Appendix B, Figure 53, Calm before the storm board, Anon details ‘Jewish Masonic elite conspiracy.’

²¹⁴ It’s worth noting here GhostEzra’s Evangelical beliefs, as well as the linkage between Evangelicalism and QAnon adherence. For more on the connection between Evangelicalism and QAnon belief, see: Ohlheiser (2020).

These Zionists are referred to as the Synagogue of Satan...”²¹⁵ Reference here to the ‘true nation of Israel’ evokes the real (white) Christians, who are descendants of God, and not of Satan (as the Jewish usurpers are). Only the white race, created in the likeness of God, are destined for salvation. At the same time, the ‘Synagogue of Satan’ has hijacked and stolen a birthright – the *true* nation of Israel – from those who are owed salvation through it. The similarities here to the Christian Identity Movement surface yet again, as Bochicchio (2021) displays: “Christian Identity, which forged a religious anti-Semitic doctrine under Christian parameters, operates as a spiritual-based anti-Semitism hinging on the idea of a ‘chosen nation’, not as a metaphorical ‘New Israel’ but as the *true* Israel” (p. 38). GhostEzra highlights the portion of the QAnon universe which buys into antisemitic tropes of world domination and usurpation of birthright, articulates that there are ‘true’ believers²¹⁶ – patriotic Christian Americans, of course –, and equivocates Jewish world control with a Satanic global cabal.

In a series of replies to a post on greatawakening.win discussing GhostEzra’s claims about hijacking the ‘true’ nation of Israel for the ends of the ‘Synagogue of Satan’, one user blatantly laments the state of the white race in the context of this usurpation of birthright. In their words, “Whites were cast to the wind just like they were supposed to be, and those that are painted as the never ending victims used that ruse to now control most of the money, and through the money most corporations, governments, and organized

²¹⁵ Appendix B, Figure 104: Telegram, Ghost Ezra, Awakened patriots vs. synagogue of Satan.

²¹⁶ As one user on greatawakening.win puts it: “‘Israel’ implies a ‘state of being’, not a political or geographical region also known as a ‘state.’ Very few have reached said ‘state of being’. We’ll leave it at that” (Supplemental Content, Greatawakening.win, ghostezra_cabal hijacked the name Israel, p. 1).

religion.”²¹⁷ While the Jewish conspiracy is at fault for ‘casting whites to the wind’, note here too that ‘those that were painted as victims’ now benefit. This notion is explored further by Talia Lavin (2020) in *Culture Warlords*: that the Jewish conspiracy is necessarily interwoven with racial divisions. Because the Jewish people are *closest* to whites in aptitude and strength – and, of course, are ‘cunning tricksters,’ as the antisemitic myth of *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* oft reminds white supremacists/conspiracy theorists –, they intentionally play upon racial inequality to either further divide *or* encourage racial mixing.²¹⁸ In Lavin’s (2020) words: “The general theme is that Jews encourage race mixing within predominantly white countries to create ‘standard citizens’ of mixed race – who would be stupid, docile, and savage because non-white people are inherently stupid, docile, and savage, and thus more malleable – the perfect subjects for Jewish world domination” (p. 40). That means more sheeple, more ‘normies’, to impede the coming Storm. It also means interracial mixing, thereby undermining the purity of the white race – quite literally an act of evil in and of itself.²¹⁹

²¹⁷ Supplemental Content, Greatawakening.win, ghostezra_cabal hijacked the name Israel, p. 2.

²¹⁸ We already know that an important white supremacist sentiment is *fear* of racial mixing. This fear features as part of the ‘white genocide’ conspiracy theory, oft-repeated by far-right extremists. The idea that forced racial mixing is part of the satanic plan also comes up in QAnon research forums. For example: “They’re trying to resurrect Giants, and mix with our DNA just like in Noahs [*sic*] time. Satanists a [*sic*] fools who believe Satan will make them like gods... Double meaning, this is not just talking about bestiality. Talking about breeding with fallen angels... The Mark of the Best [*sic*] will be Satan’s version of Salvation. Just change you [*sic*] DNA, become half human and whatever else, you won’t die or get any diseases, and you’ll have powers...if you modify our DNA, you are also taken out of the book of life... Evolution isn’t real. But they are pushing us to change our DNA to take the next step in evolution” (Appendix B, Figure 50: 8chan, Calm before the storm board, Anon provides their bible interpretations).

²¹⁹ Linkage again to Christian Identity as, “a tradition of Biblical exegesis [that] has interpreted interracial mixing as the origin of evil in the world” (Bochicchio, 2021, p. 43).

On the other side, zooming back out to more ‘mainstream’ – less ‘agent provocateur’ – QAnon adherence, the focus on *division* is central. A Qdrop from June of 2018 reads (in all caps): “Power to the people. They want you divided. They want race wars. They want class wars. They want religious wars. They want political wars” (Qdrop #1646). The cabal ‘wants the people divided’, and these conspirators inhibit the unity and therefore the power of the American people. In another Qdrop from July 2020, Q declares that ‘there was a time when’ the American people were in control of their future. “There was a time when our children stood at attention, and with pride, put their hand on their heart, and in one UNITED voice, recited the PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE... There was a time when our history (heritage) was taught with PRIDE and RESPECT” (Qdrop #4559). Ending with a reference to Ronald Reagan, this Q drop laments the time when America was great, *before* forced racial, class, religious division; *before* anyone who was critical was called an antisemite, a racist, or a white supremacist by the ‘politically correct’ folks; *before* government corruption and global domination on the part of the cabal was rampant; *before* the crimes of evil poisoned the country.

Trump the Messiah will Save America

Making America great again is a central theme in the QAnon universe, thereby reflecting the interconnectedness of its rise with rhetorical affirmation by former President Trump. QAnon adherents, as shown above, often characterize their movement as being central to the larger “MAGA movement.” After all, Trump is quite literally their messiah: he is the catalyst who will bring The Storm, root out corruption, and restore America to her

greatness. Take for example, this articulation of Trump's role in the 'fight' for the American Republic on the website digitalsoldiers.info:

Trump is not a politician. #TheStorm is not politics. This is about fixing the framework in which politics happens. #TheStorm is a restoration of the American Republic under control of its citizens, and the Constitutional rule of law. The conspiracies against the people are very real, and their prosecution is now inevitable.²²⁰

Note here the shift in parameter: this is 'not politics,' and Trump is not merely 'a politician'.

Something much larger is at stake here. This is about a 'restoration of the republic', about returning power to American citizens, and about reinstating Constitutional rule of law. Only under a properly restored America, under the rule of the Constitution, can politics then happen. Thus, saving America – restoring her to her prior state *before* corruption and conspiracy – would restore politics. Outside of that, this is something greater – a literal moment of good versus evil –, and the rules of politics *do not apply*. If the moment at hand seems overwhelming, that is okay; Trump will bring about the moment of swift revolution and restoration. In other words, as one Anon on greatawakening.win puts it, "Where the world has fallen into despair, TGAW [The Great Awakening] stands firm. Why is this so? It's because we have Faith, thanks to Trump, Q and God."²²¹ To be part of The Great Awakening is to have 'faith' that good will win out, thanks be to Trump. It should be noted here that Trump, like Q and God, is to be looked to in our darkest moments. Trump, like God, will save us, just as Q, like God, will save us. Patriots just need to have faith.

For QAnon adherents, part of the plan for saving America – in addition to awakening the masses to the truth – is restoring her to a former, better state and recovering her Americanness. Accordingly, QAnon quite naturally fits in with the theme of making

²²⁰ Appendix B, Figure 93: [Digitalsoldiers.info](https://digitalsoldiers.info) webpage, What is the storm?

²²¹ Supplemental Content, thedonald.win, need Jesus, p. 7.

America great again, such that the vast conspiracy unfolding represents the evil which has taken America away from her greatness. However, the election of Trump, in the QAnon universe, represented a moment of awakening, a moment of recognition of the truth, and a moment where the conspiracy was interrupted. A video posted by an account called, ‘Stormisuponus’, proclaims to explain to its viewers the following:

America was almost destroyed by criminals. We just didn't realize it because people don't expect prominent career politicians to be capable of secretly running organized criminal networks that they keep secret from the people... The election of Donald Trump was an unexpected shock to the elite crime network known as the Deep State, and for the proceeding years we have seen unfold a vast legal operation to slowly unwind the crime syndicate while waking up the public to what is coming. [Stormisuponus, 2020]

Of course, there is mention of vast criminal networks functioning within the government – referred to as the Deep State – but the key here is the role of former President Trump. *His* election is what triggered this uncovering and re-covering. *His* presidency represents ‘unwinding the crime syndicate’. Because of *him*, ‘nothing can stop what is coming’. This particular sentiment – the inevitability of the Storm – implies that by design (of Trump, of Q, of God), good will win out. Because nothing can stop what is coming, ‘patriots’ just need to stand firm and resolute. As one Parler poster puts it: “Patriots are restoring the Republic as fast they can. You should not make any decisions based upon predicted outcomes, but instead live life as normal. Our people have been suffering for several decades because of the theft perpetrated against by the Deep State, we will have to continue doing so until the transition is complete.”²²² After years of having faith and trusting in Trump as their messiah – the bringer of the restoration of America to her former greatness

²²² Appendix B, Figure 88: Parler, Patriots restoring republic.

– Patriots had to continue to ‘live life as normal’, despite ‘suffering for several decades’, while the restoration of the Republic unfolded.

January 6: Conspiracy Theorism Spills onto the Streets

What happens, though, when one has faith for years but fails to see results? What happens when ‘evil cabal members’ are not held accountable? What happens when an election is allegedly stolen before your eyes, just as your messiah is trying to complete his mission of rooting out evil and restoring goodness? By the time of the 2020 election season, many QAnon adherents had already been following Q since 2018, had already spent time on various sites dedicated to ‘putting on full display’ the crimes of the cabal, watching hours long YouTube primers on the conspiracy,²²³ falling deeper and deeper down rabbit holes. Not only had Anons already been primed to expect voter fraud, but they were primed to become increasingly desperate. Over the course of the summer of 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic worsened, lockdown measures continued to be enforced, racial justice protests flooded the streets, and antifascist actions were organized against the violent hatred of radical right-wing groups – all part of a confluence of factors that would lead QAnon adherents to their breaking point.

As one Parler user puts it: “Imagine seeing communists burn our cities, supporters of the Republic shot in the street, escalating race war, corrupt politicians passing treasonous bills, attempts to overthrow our elected president, manufactured pandemics killing our

²²³ ‘The Fall of the Cabal’ is the main ‘documentary’ series consisting of more than a dozen hours long videos. This series, though *finally* removed from YouTube, is still accessible on many internet video sites (as of February 2022) via a simple Google search.

jobs...”²²⁴ The ‘Republic’ is in shambles, under attack from all angles. Couple this with their view of Trump as God-like messiah, and QAnon adherents were willing to do anything to ensure his second term. After all, patience was not producing results, and only *acting* would save America at this point. Once President Joe Biden was declared victor of the 2020 U.S. presidential election, the situation became even more dire. From this, and from then-President Trump’s consistent outcries of election fraud, the ‘Stop the Steal’ movement was emboldened yet again.²²⁵

The ‘Stop the Steal’ movement in part represents a last-ditch effort to prevent the Cabal from undermining the good patriotic work of President Trump and his digital soldiers. Simultaneously, ‘Stop the Steal’ also represents an explicitly thought-out plan to, “descend on our Nation’s capital to protest the theft of the 2020 Presidential election through systematic voter fraud and cyber manipulation of the vote.”²²⁶ In other words, descending upon the Capitol in protest was vital for saving America, and the rationale for this action abounds across sites like thedonald.win, which was a key online platform for planning the Insurrection. On this semi-anonymous forum site, one Anon declares: “They refuse to represent you. They refuse to stand up for the law, for your rights, for the Constitution. They only stand for themselves. Their fraud. Their grift. Their corruption.”²²⁷ Another Anon argues that ‘despicable democrats’, “are trying to deny the true decision of

²²⁴ Appendix B, Figure 87: Parler, Communists burn our cities.

²²⁵ ‘Stop the Steal’ was a movement initially started in 2016 after Roger Stone used the phrase to decry allegedly fraudulent votes cast for Democrats in urban areas. It was resurrected in 2018 and then again in 2020 as Trump, his acolytes and supporters, and far-right activists articulated conspiracy theories detailing extensive voter fraud and election theft leading to Trump’s loss to Joe Biden. For more information on the ‘Stop the Steal’ timeline, see Just Security (2021) and Hayden (2020).

²²⁶ Supplemental Content, Stopthesteal.org homepage.

²²⁷ Supplemental Content, thedonald.win, Jan 6 they don’t represent you, p. 1.

the people. I've been seeing Trump supporters en masse in places I never thought possible. That shows me there are a lot more Trump votes that aren't being counted than there should be.”²²⁸ This particular thread on thedonald.win begins with a demand for, ‘the defenders of the people’ to ‘stop the steal’, indicating that QAnon followers *had* indeed been listening to their messiah – Trump – as the election results were upheld. This was their moment.

In what follows, the conversation in effect becomes a call for an overthrow of the existing government. “It's time for a REVOLUTION. A revolution of the mind and the soul where we REJECT every word that comes out of every media head and politicians [*sic*] mouth. Shout them down, call them liars, and shame them to hell.”²²⁹ Another Anon takes it even further, claiming that, “They hate white people and western civilization. it irritates them to no end. because they can't build anything as good as that with a great religion like Christianity. They trick you with false words like "white supremacy" and "racism" to scare you.”²³⁰ Finally, an Anon replies: “this will require blood by the end of it mark my words.”²³¹ The complaints are clear: the *true* will of the American (white/Christian) people is *being denied*; this denial in part stems from the corrupt elites’ distaste for *whiteness* and *Christianity*; and patriots are at a breaking point where cleansing the government of corruption will require blood. One more Anon – out of a sea of Anons writing very similar things – declares: “January 6, 2021: FREEDOM VS COMMUNISM... This will be the date where we see if our overlord try [*sic*] to destroy the foundation that the Founding Fathers so firmly poured. They will be given the opportunity to show their

²²⁸ Supplemental Content thedonald.win, stop the steal, p. 8.

²²⁹ Supplemental Content, thedonald.win, stop the steal, p. 10.

²³⁰ Supplemental Content, thedonald.win, stop the steal, p. 5.

²³¹ Supplemental Content, thedonald.win, stop the steal, p. 10.

integrity and save America, but if they choose otherwise, then our Constitution requires us to take it back by force.”²³² That these words then came to fruition is also clear: on January 6, 2021, gallows were erected outside the U.S. Capitol as protestors descended upon the building.

²³² Supplemental Content, thedonald.win, Jan 6 our commander calls us, p. 1.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

CHAPTER 4 SOURCE SCREEN CAPTURES

Please note that each screen capture included in this appendix has a figure number, followed by the source location (e.g. Parler, thedonald.win, 8chan, etc.), followed by a brief clause describing its contents. These screen captures represent background context as well as specific reference points for the text. If a screen capture is referenced in the body of the text, the naming convention will be found in the corresponding footnote citation, beginning with the Appendix location (A or B).

Example: Appendix A: Figure 14, Parler, Raid the White House

Additionally, long form, multiple page print screens (with extensive commentary and exchanges) can be found in the supplemental files for this dissertation. Those file names share the same naming convention and can be found cited in text as footnotes beginning with the phrase “*Supplemental Content*”.

Figure 1: Parler, Butcher the commies

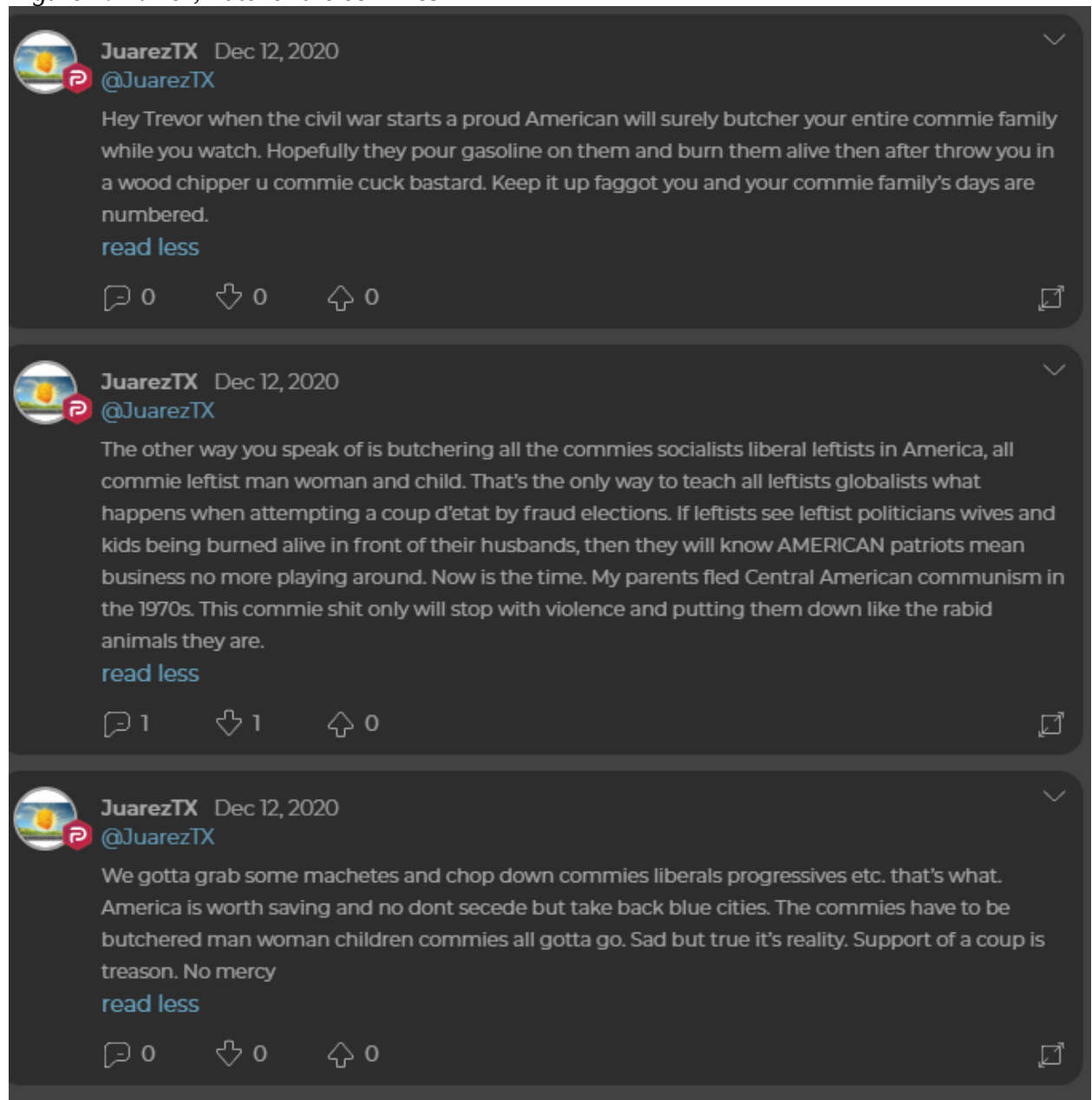


Figure 2: Parler, Biden -- hung or shot?



Isaiah
American Patriot · @Isaiahc123000

1 day ago · 5100



Idn4319 · @Idn4319

5 hours ago · 75

Let him pick heads or tails...
Hung or shot...
Dirt nap...
Pedophiles like obummer needs
GONE...
Spent 8 years stealing everything from
America even children...

12

144

220

Figure 3: Parler, 1776 commences again

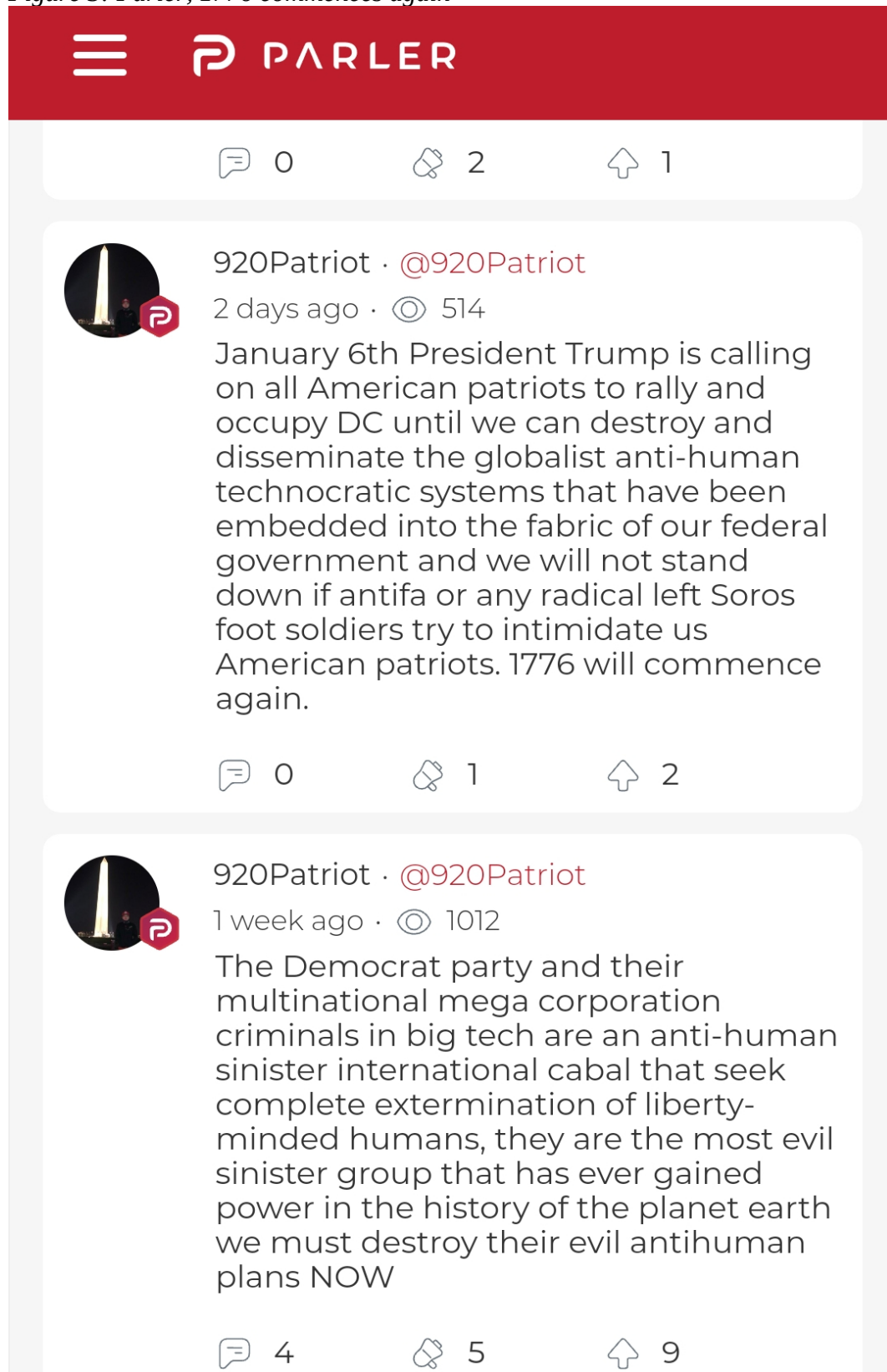


Figure 4: Parler, Civil war/They are coming for you



Figure 5: Parler, Civil war decapitation



Figure 6: Parler, White preservation

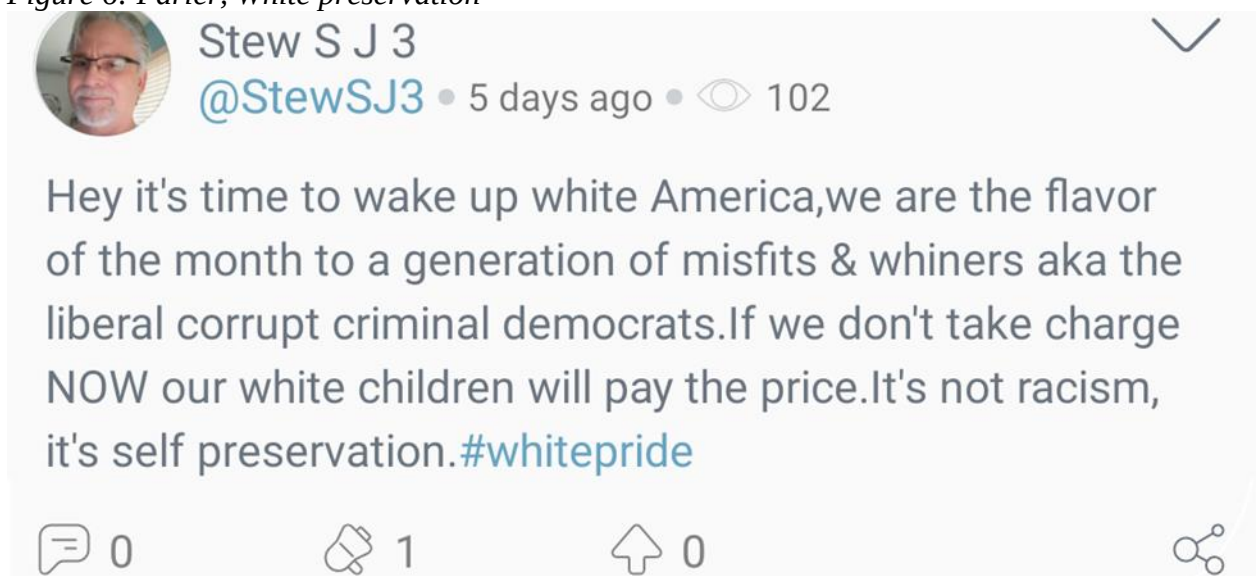


Figure 7: Parler, Capitol burning



Figure 8: Twitter, We warned you



Figure 9: Parler, We're going to have to kill them

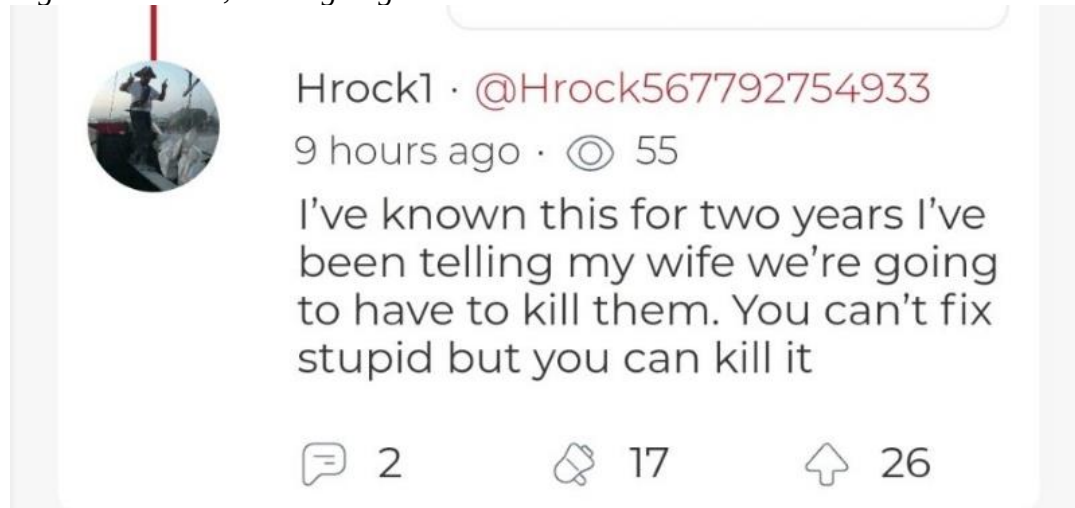


Figure 10: Parler, Firing squads

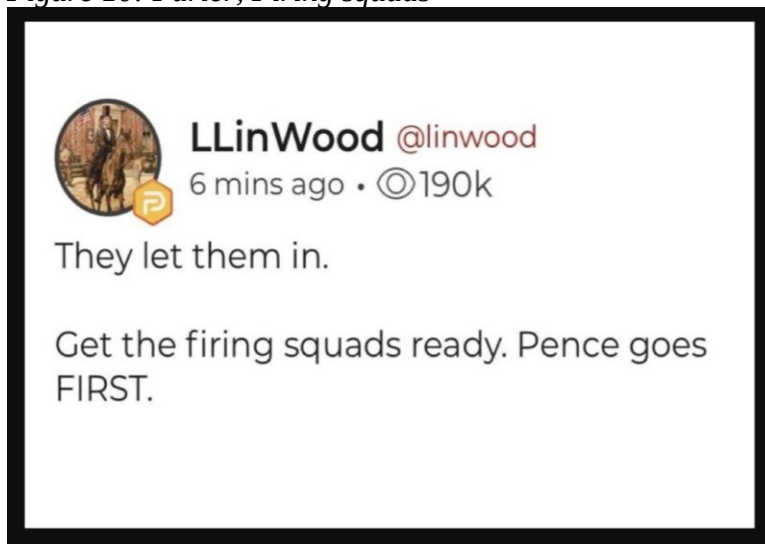


Figure 11: Parler, Set your clocks back



Figure 12: Parler, Today we took the Capitol



ColonelTPerez (R...

22 hrs ago • 59k

Today Eric Trump said that he would physically fight with the Patriots to save Our country. Today Representative Mo Brooks, asked the Patriots to pledge Our live and wealth to fight for Our country. And today President Trump told Us to "fight like hell". He said that Our cause was a matter of national security, and that these people behind the massive fraud must be arrested and brought to justice. And that task, falls on the shoulders of We The People.... the American Patriots.

So over the next 24 hours, I would say, lets get our personal affairs in order. Prepare Our weapons, and then go get'em . Lets hunt these cowards down like the Traitors that each of them are. This includes, RINOS, Dems, and Tech Execs. We now have the green light. [All] who resist Us, are enemies of Our Constitution, and must be treated as such.

Today, the cowards ran as We took the Capital. They have it back now, only because We left. It wasn't the building that We wanted... it was them!



Figure 13: Parler, White nationalist nation

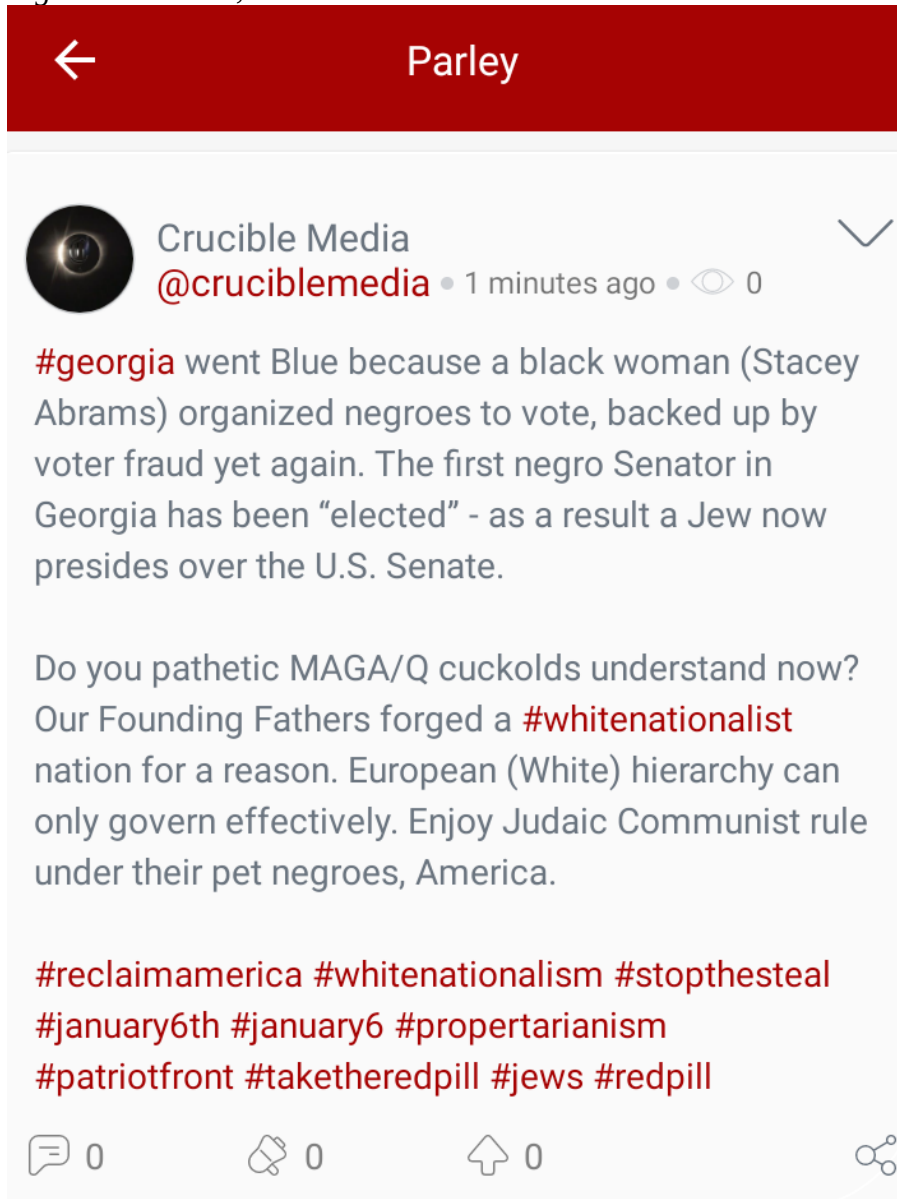


Figure 14: Parler, Ocasio-Cortez threat

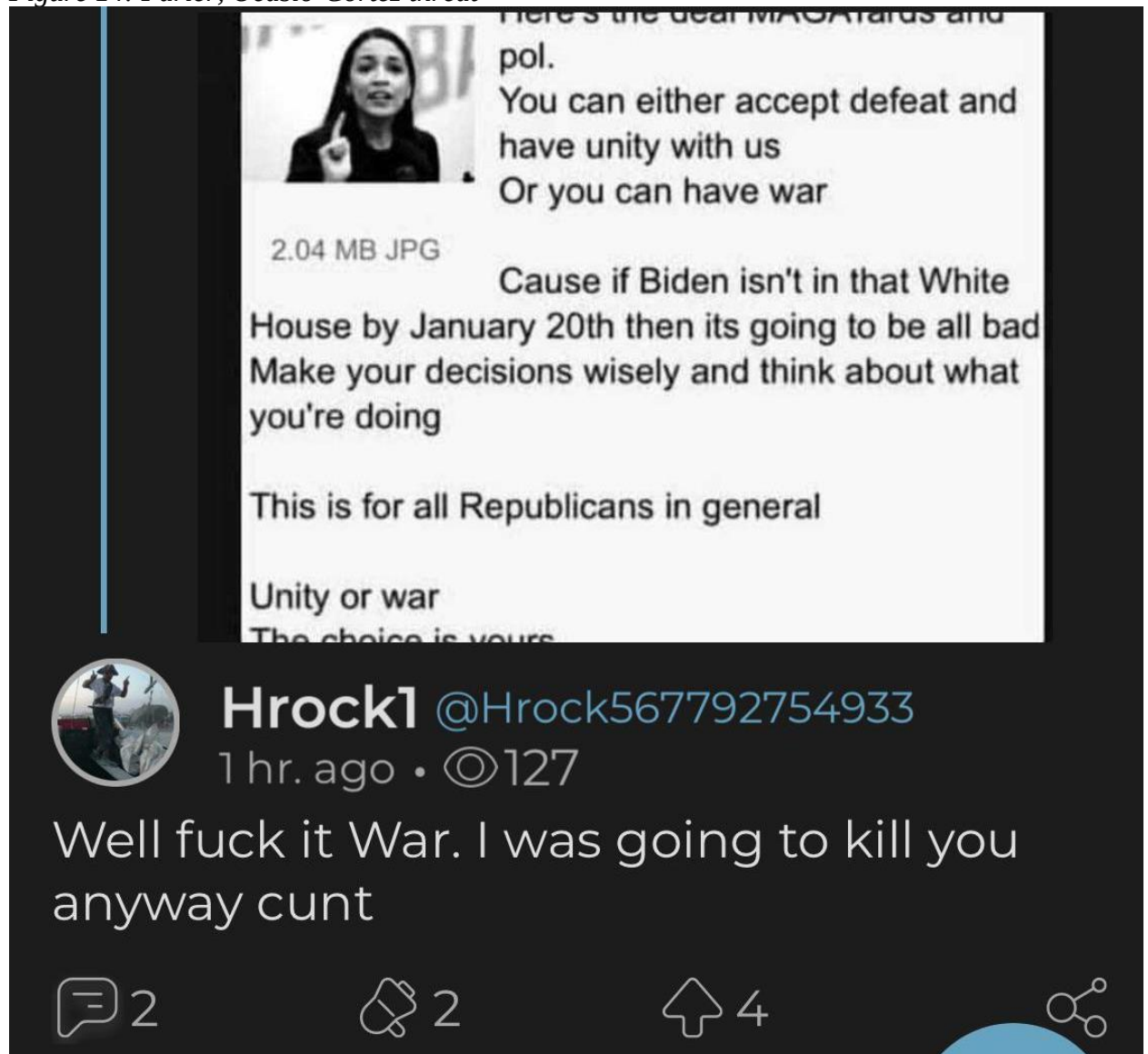


Figure 15: Parler, Channel your anger

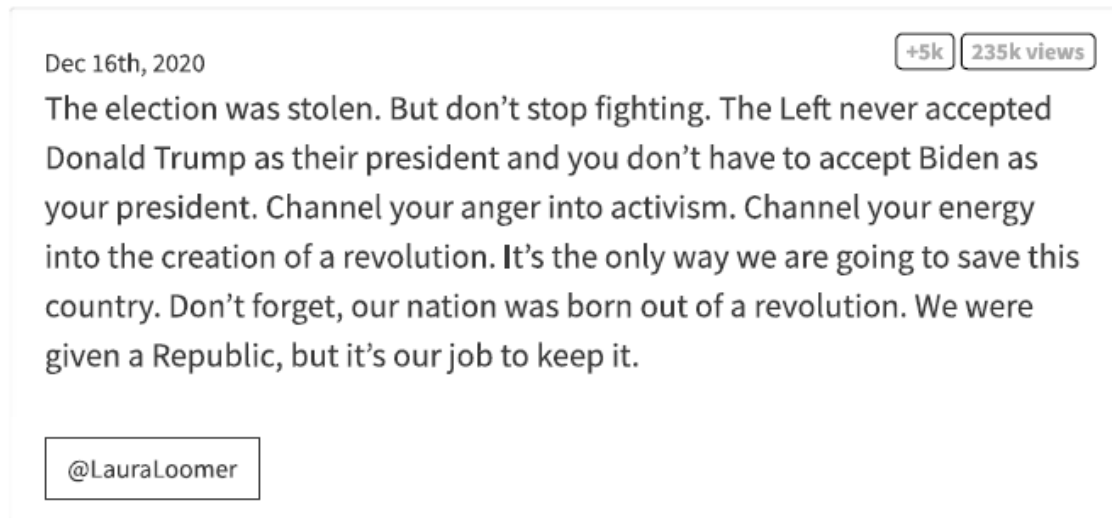


Figure 16: Parler, Veterans threaten violence



Figure 17: Facebook, Exercise in democracy



Figure 18: Parler, Stolen election/Save the republic

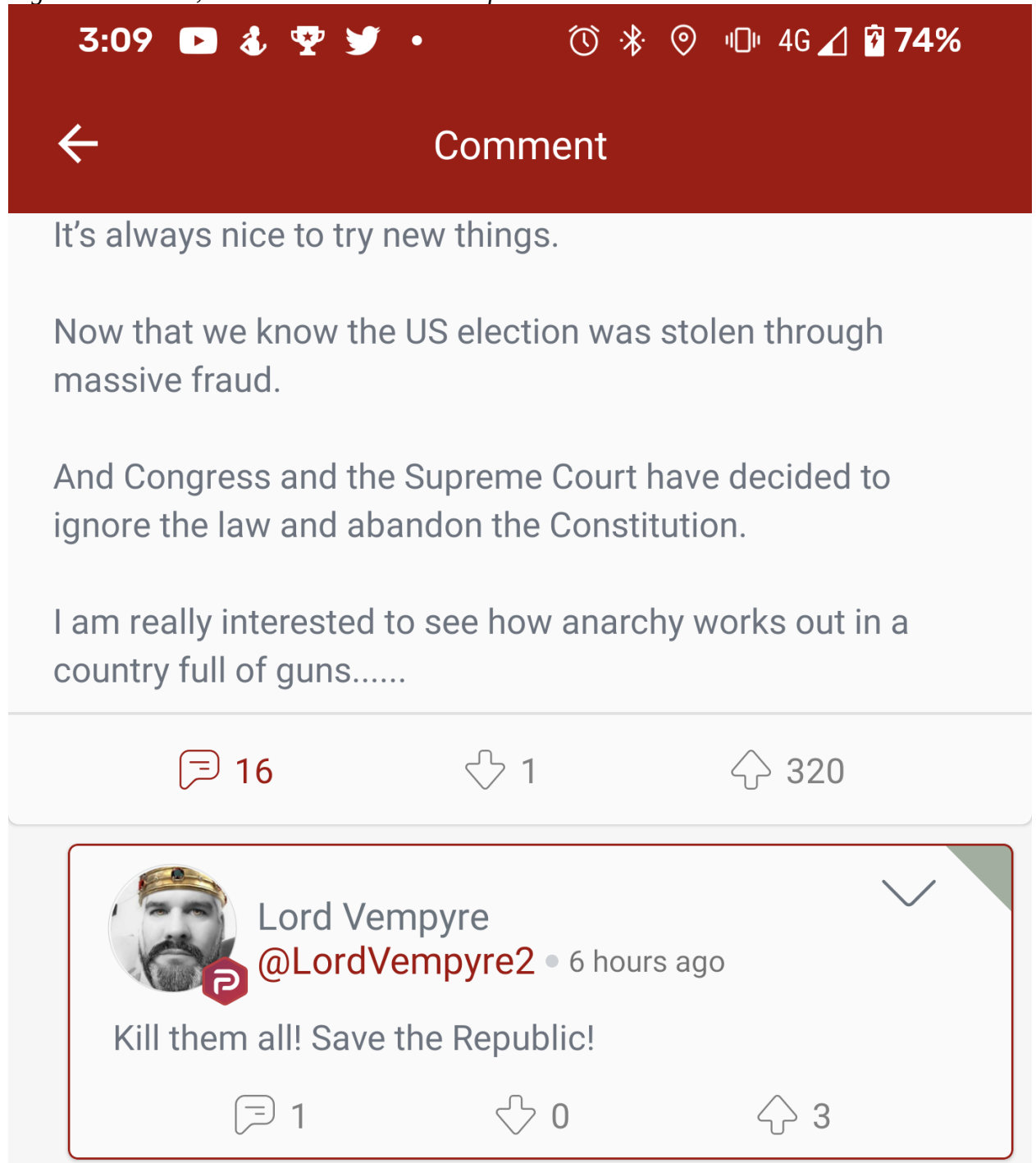


Figure 19: Parler, Don't be afraid to be violent

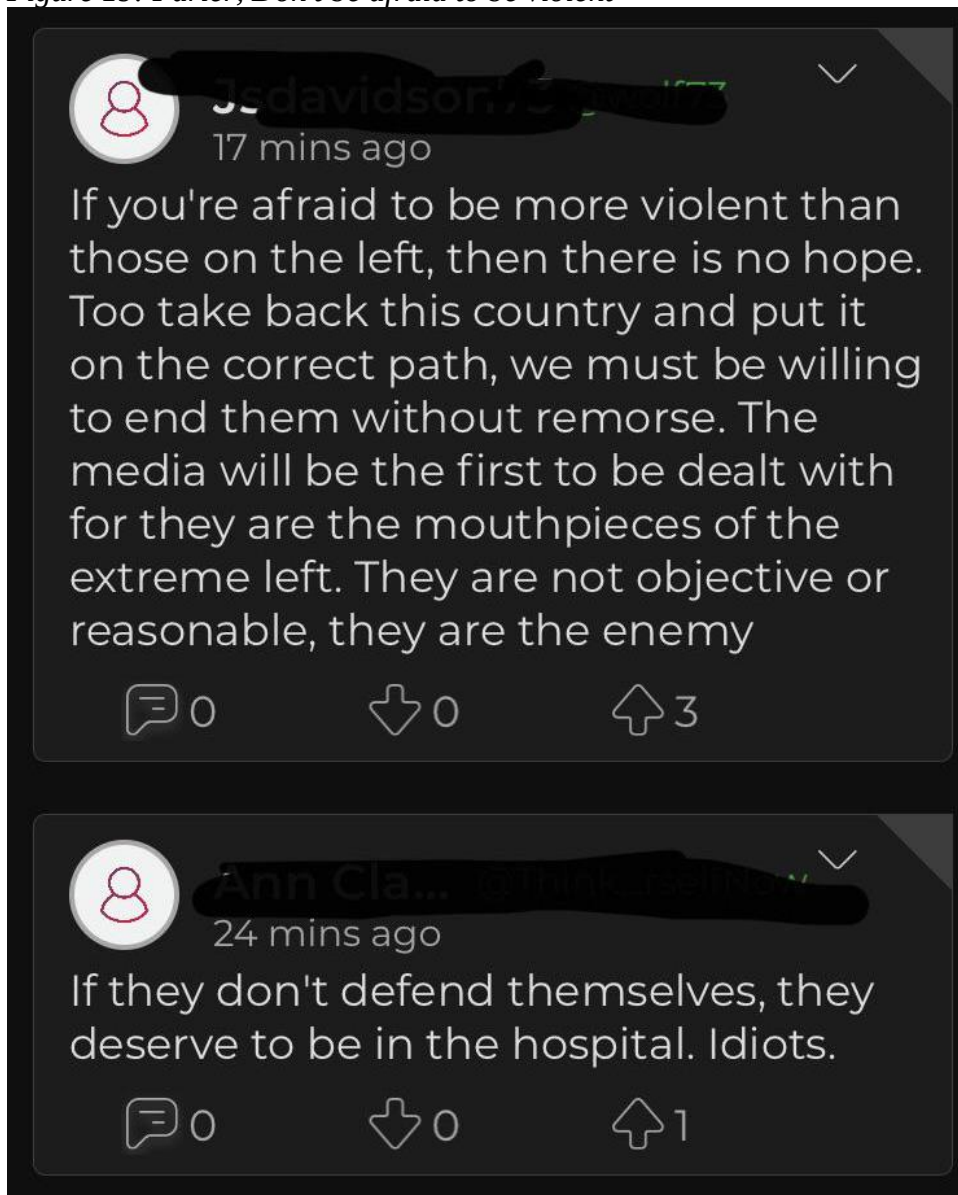


Figure 20: Telegram, No one is coming to save you/Return to tradition

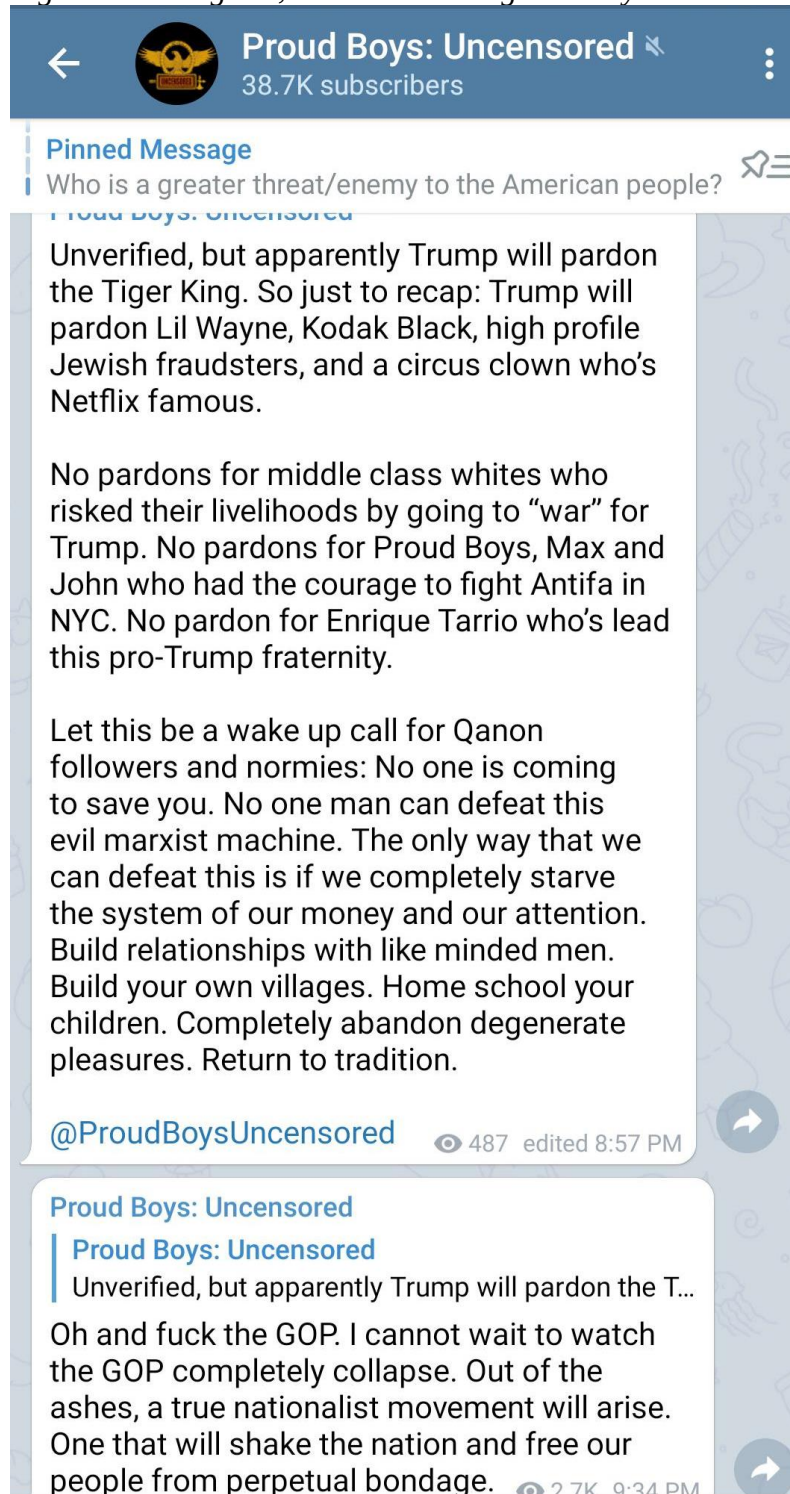


Figure 21: Parler, Peace exists when white people have



Pat Savage · @MrSavagePOYB

11 hours ago · 1207



1

20

35

Figure 22: Reddit, Proud Boy core values

Core Values Of The Proud Boys

Minimal Government
Maximum Freedom
Anti-Political Correctness
Anti-Drug War
Closed Borders
Anti-Racial Guilt
Anti-Racism
Pro-Free Speech (1st Amendment)
Pro-Gun Rights (2nd Amendment)
Glorifying the Entrepreneur
Venerating the Housewife
Reinstating a Spirit of Western Chauvinism

Though these are our central tenets, all that is required to become a Proud Boy is that a man declare he is “a Western chauvinist who refuses to apologize for creating the modern world.” We do not discriminate based upon race or sexual orientation/preference. We are not an “ism”, “ist”, or “phobic” that fits the Left’s narrative. We truly believe that the West Is The Best and welcome those who believe in the same tenets as us

Figure 23: Parler, Doxxing feminist intellectuals



Proud
Boys
Northern
Nevada

· @BattleBornProudBoys

1 day ago · 1361

This is [REDACTED] she says that she's a "subject matter expert" on the Proud Boys. In reality she's just an eggless loser who spends her time drinking wine in her apartment, twerking, and doxxing people on Twitter. These are the leftists and modern intellectuals who see themselves as morally superior to you.

#proudboys



4



1



0

Show Comments



Proud
Boys
Northern
Nevada

· @BattleBornProudBoys

1 day ago · 1545

It looks like Antifa supporter, mentally unstable weirdo, and self proclaimed "Proud Boys Whisperer" [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] follows us on here. Wonderful!

Hi [REDACTED] We love your dancing videos. We know you're based in Reno. So are we! Let's hang out sometime.

Come whisper to us bitch 🍆

#noeggs #emptyeggcarton

#youdonthaveanyeggs #proudboys

[REDACTED] #ashkenaz89 #fafo

Figure 24: Parler, Evil democrats

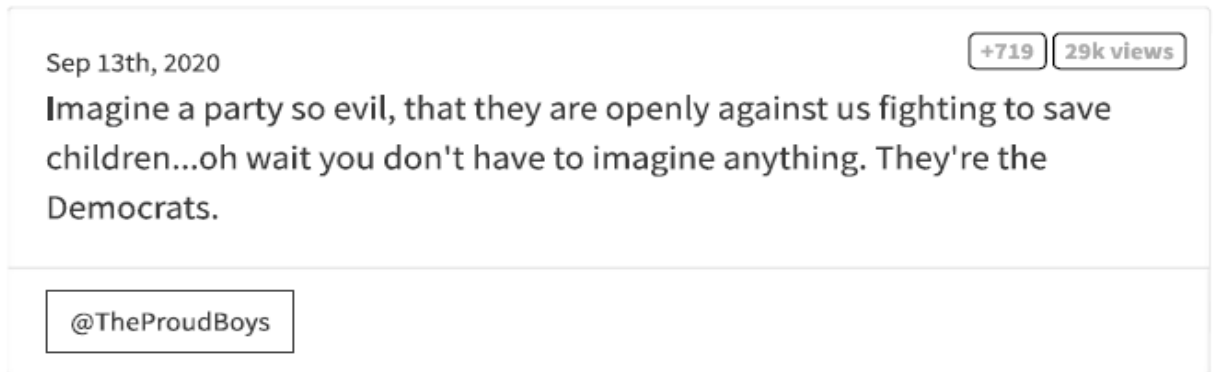


Figure 25: Parler, Remember your enemies

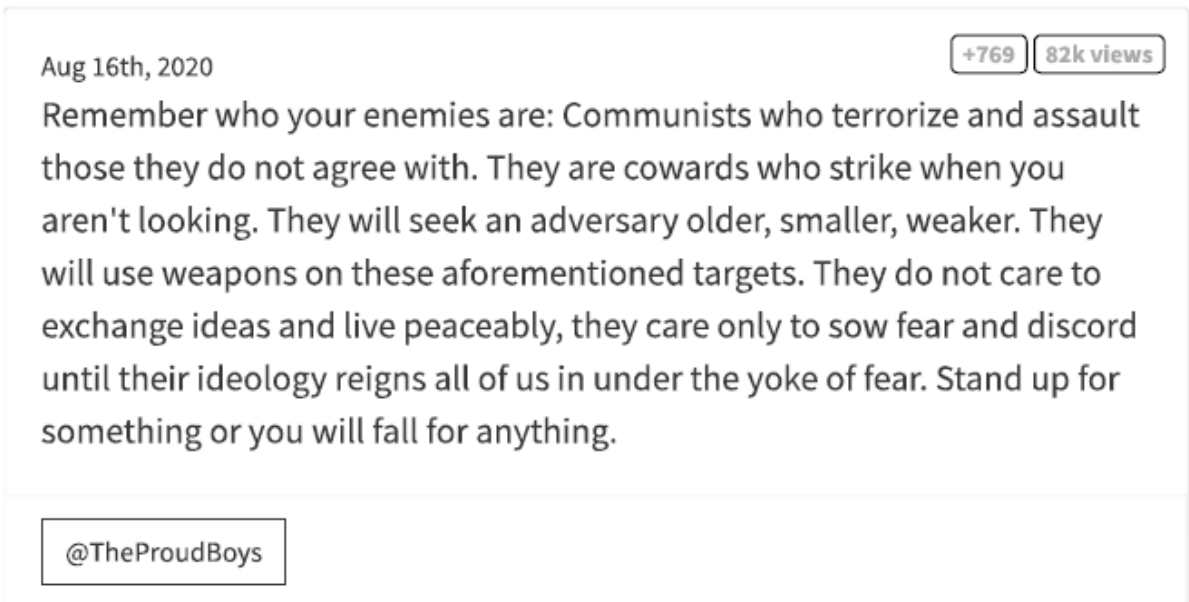


Figure 26: Parler, On strike against guilt

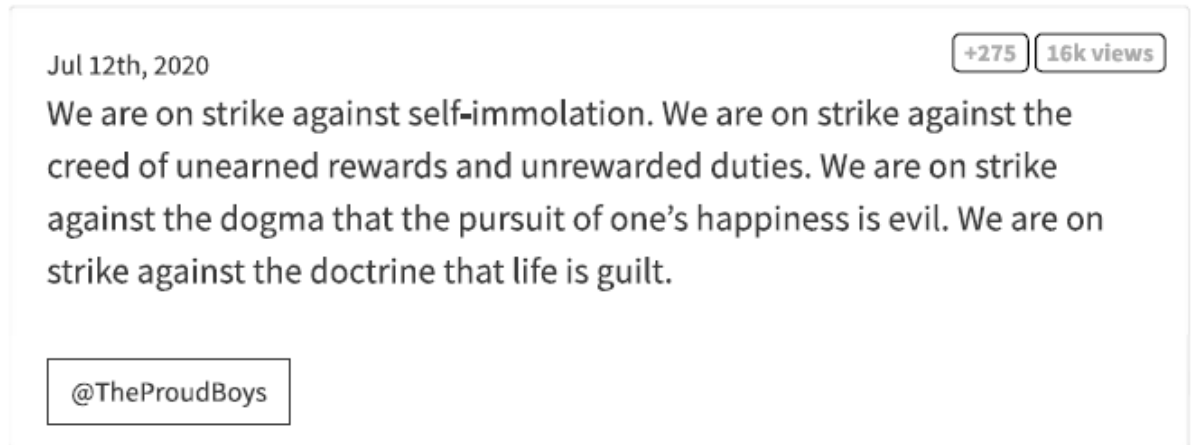


Figure 27: Twitter, First degree Proud Boy



Figure 28: Parler, Proud Boy core tenets

Eric · @Goldie71
3 days ago · 64

To become a Proud Boy , You must first agree with our core tenants, know them and stand with them .

and may the government stay out of our way. "The best government is that which governs least... Government should have as little as possible to do with the general business and interests of the people." -- John L. O'Sullivan, 1838	accompany freedom that many overlook too easily these days is personal responsibility. Maximum Freedom cannot persist without the fulfillment of duty. "Give me liberty, or give me death!" --Patrick Henry, 1775
Pro-Free Speech "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof, or abridging the freedom of speech or of the press, or the right of the people peaceably to assemble and to petition the government for a redress of grievances."	Pro-Gun Rights "A well-regulated militia being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the people to keep and bear arms shall not be infringed." MOLON LABE - COME AND TAKE IT
Closed Borders The West is the Best. That's why it is the number one destination for immigrants across the world. Nowhere else can you find the same combination of freedom, safety, prosperity, infrastructure, and decency. But we cannot be the world's orphanage. To those willing to travel, to suffer the journey, and to risk their lives: Fight for a better world back home, and Godspeed. To those willing to defy the sovereignty of our borders and expect a handout upon arrival: Fuck off, we're full.	
Glorifying the Entrepreneur We celebrate and honor the ones who risk everything to improve our lives. The inventor. The job creator. The men whose failures and innovations have shaped the modern world. The true enemies of poverty. Fortune to the bold. Glory to the brave.	Venerating the Housewife This is not a mandate to women on how they should live their lives. Rather, we acknowledge, appreciate, and exalt any woman who would choose to stay at home, raise her children, tend her hearth, and be her husband's first and most ardent ally. She creates human life, shapes it, and builds the communities in which we live.
Anti-Political Correctness	Anti-Drug War

0 0 0

Figure 29: Parler, Stand up organization like the Proud Boys

Playboy The Beast · @Playboythebeast
1 week ago · 54501

Ya know what's really crazy? You can be a member of an actual criminal organization, whose sole purpose is to commit crimes, murder, sex trafficking, selling crack cocaine, meth, heroin, etc and, you can be apart of these organizations, flash your guns, throw up gang signs, and represent these gangs all over social media and in videos etc. No problems what so ever. But then, say you decide to get your shit together and join a stand up organization/men's drinking club, like the Proud Boys, that stands up and defends people who can't defend themselves, a group that is against racism, loves their country, isn't out breaking the law, stand up fucking guys, that work hard, provide for their family's, and like to have a few drinks with their brothers from time to time..., you do that, and these mfers will try to erase your entire existence from the face or the earth. They'll try to get you fired, and do everything they can to cause you harm. What kinda world are we living in man!? 🤡

111 144 549

Figure 30: Parler, Great American rebellion



Figure 31: Parler, No proud girls allowed



Figure 32: Parler, Proud Boys don't splinter

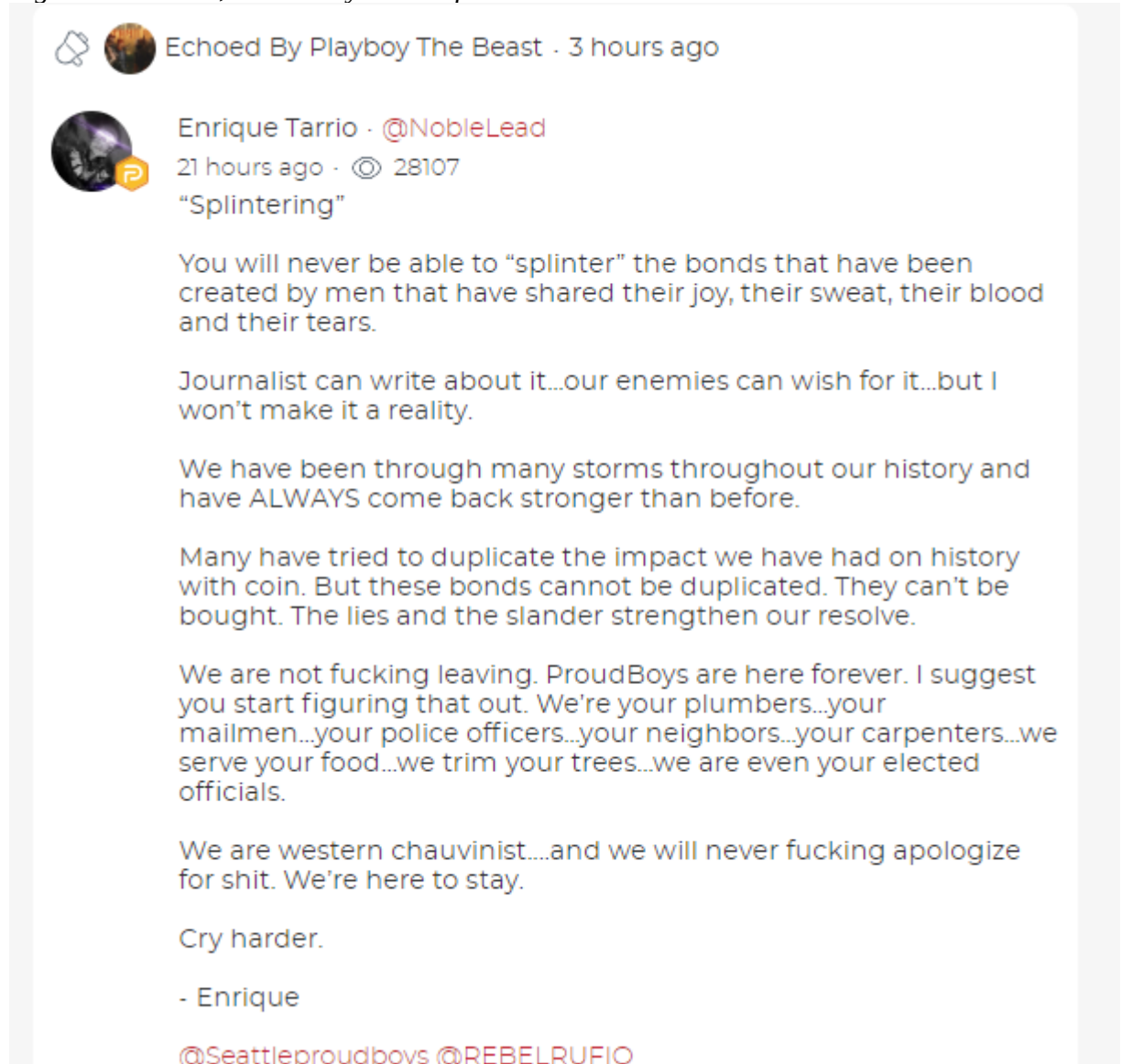


Figure 33: Parler, Black tie affair

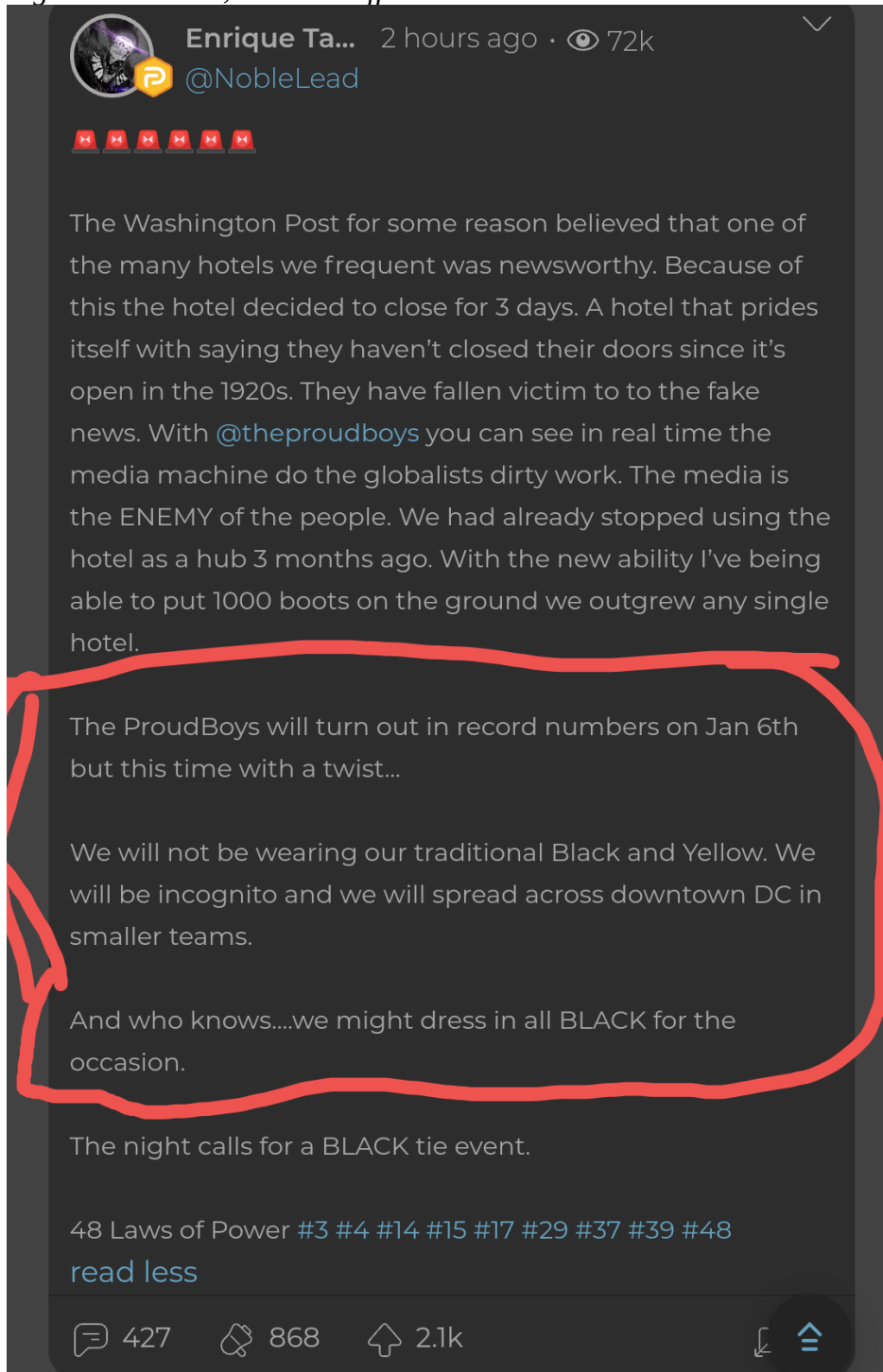


Figure 34: Parler, Western civilization not built on slavery

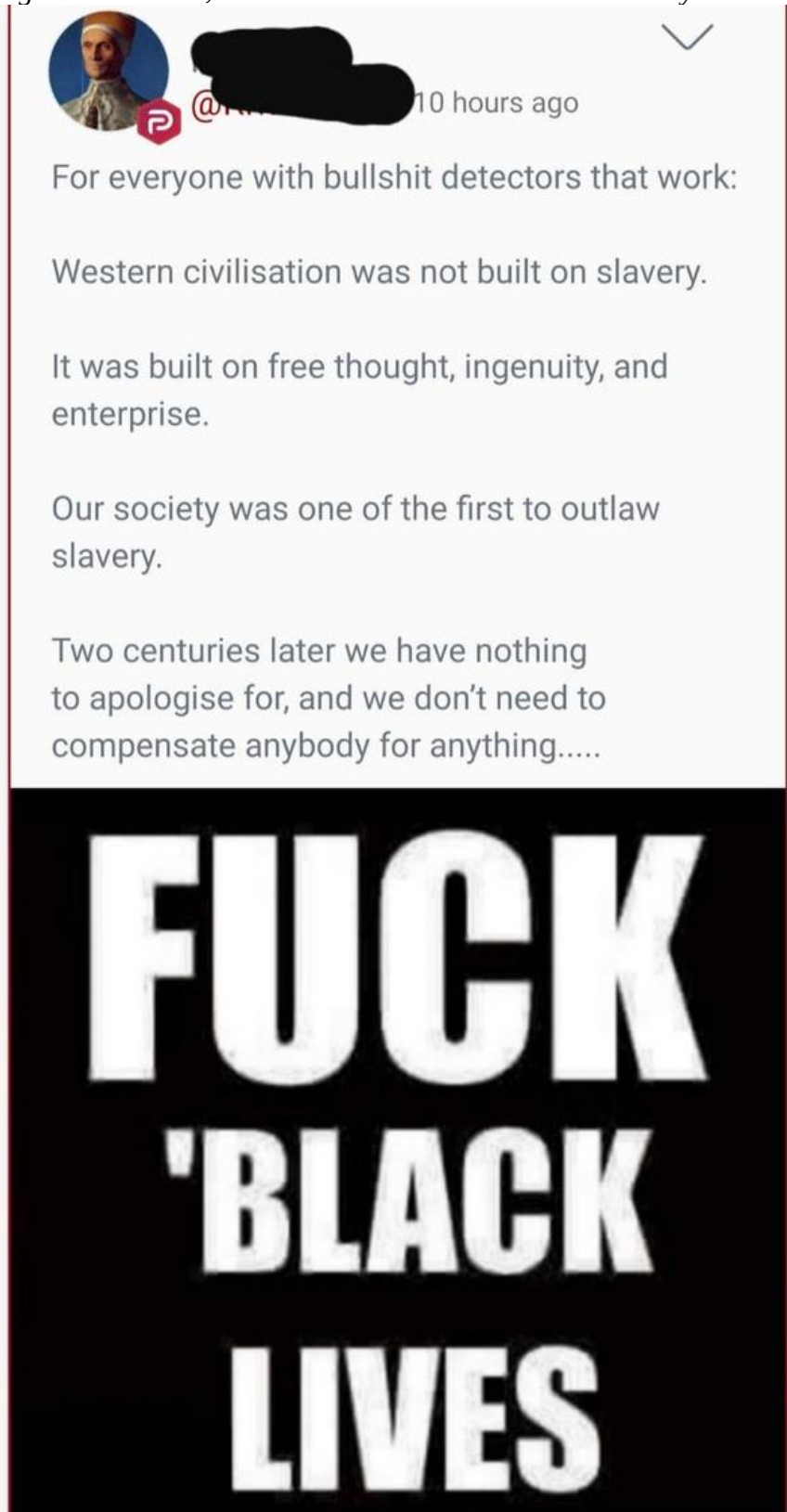


Figure 35: Parler, Patriots are coming for you



Rufio Panman · @REBELRUFIO

5 days ago · 18669

It is apparent now more than ever, that if you are a patriot, you will be targeted and they will come after you, funny thing is that they don't realize is, is we are coming for them. You've chosen your side, black and yellow teamed with red, white and blue against everyone else.

84

125

459

Figure 36: Parler, Proud Boy enemies

Jun 28th, 2020

+146

13k views

The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil... Is for good men to do nothing. We have been accused of many things. Cowardice has never been one. They call us racists We scratch our heads. They call them black Hispanic and people of color. We call them our brothers. They parade minorities as pet mouth pieces. We embrace them as family. They call it hate speech. We protect their right to defame us. They call us nationalists. We say charity starts at home. They claim to support human rights. We've watched them destroy the American family. They call us vigilantes. We watched as they burned cities to the ground and tear down American history. WE ARE THE PROUDBOYS AND WE WILL NEVER APOLOGIZE! Follow @TheProudBoys @NobleLead ECHO ECHO ECHO ProudBoysUSA.com

@NobleLead

Figure 37: Parler, Can't stop patriots on January 6



The Immortal Noble Beard · @Noblebeard

3 hours ago · 37950

We warned you dirty scumbag politicians what was gonna happen. Now it starts. America will not be governed by rats. Get the ropes. Let's finish this!!

78

349

1014

Show Comments



The Immortal Noble Beard · @Noblebeard

3 hours ago · 18246

They can't stop us!!! Push forward patriots!!

62

104

528

Show Comments



The Immortal Noble Beard · @Noblebeard

3 hours ago · 25335

1776 has commenced again!!! Tears in my eyes. Brave patriots. Today we save our nation. I love this country. I love all of you!! TAKE IT BACK!

96

220

799

Figure 38: Parler, American cities turn to rubble

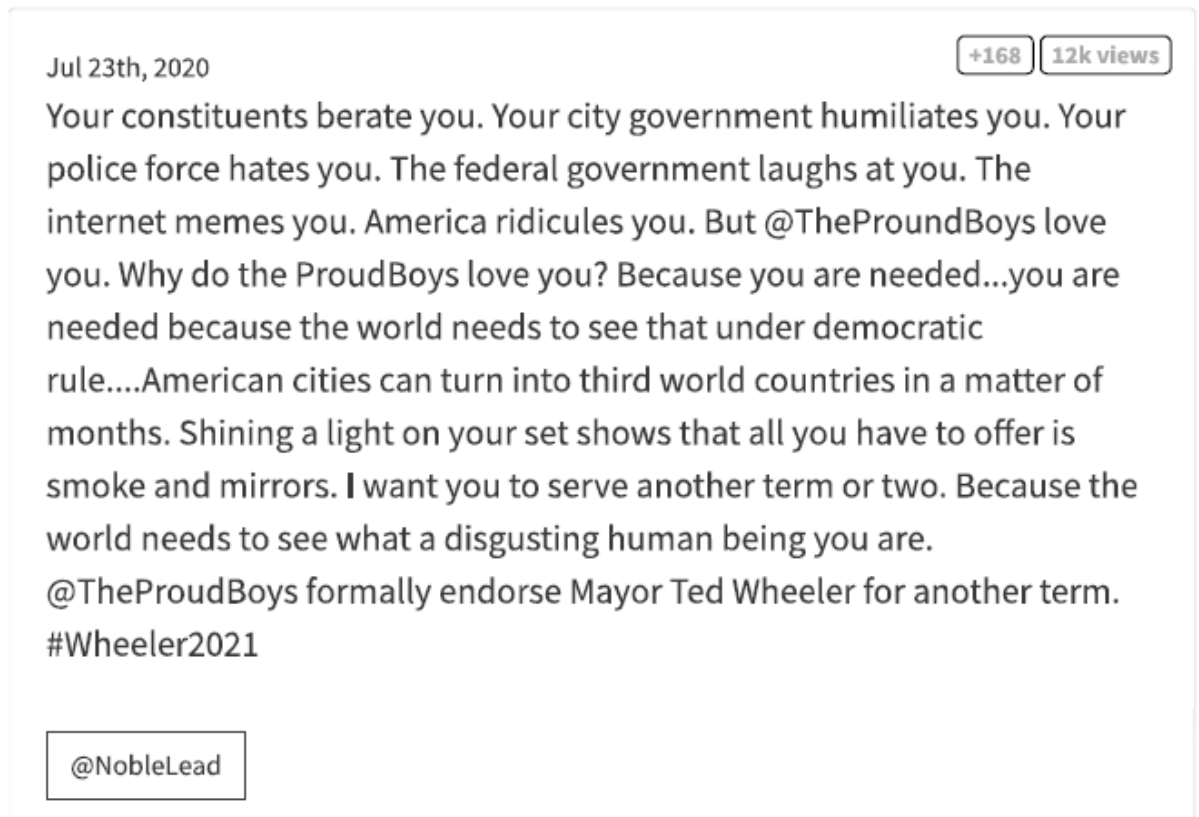


Figure 39: Parler, Feminists we are up against

The Ohio State Coalition of Proud Boys Chapters



A girl from Cincinnati.

This picture is the root of what we're up against....

White women with limited abilities to use reason and logic, driven completely by emotion, while being simultaneously convinced of their superior-wisdom as evidenced by their college degree.

The police are literally the only thing standing in the way of her getting raped to death.

1029 9:12 AM

Figure 40: thedonald.win, We are at war

A screenshot of a forum thread on thedonald.win. The thread title is "We are at war". The first post is by user Zed287, with 76 points, posted 1 hour ago, and has +81 upvotes and -5 downvotes. The text of the post is: "Who fucking cares at this point who let who in, antifa this, antifa that. WE. ARE. AT. WAR. Start acting like it." Below the text are links for "permalink", "save", "report", "block", and "reply". The second post is by user DeplorableCentipede, with 43 points, posted 1 hour ago, and has +44 upvotes and -1 downvote. The text is: "Exactly. We should be celebrating the people who stormed the capitol, not throwing them under the bus." It also has links for "permalink", "parent", "save", "report", "block", and "reply". The third post is by user from_the_cold_North, with 24 points, posted 1 hour ago, and has +24 upvotes and -0 downvotes. The text is: "Exactly this. Where they set up or not? In the end it doesn't matter - they at least can stand tall, proud that they at least tried to save the Republic." It also has links for "permalink", "parent", "save", "report", "block", and "reply". The fourth post is by user Azrael1776, with 7 points, posted 29 minutes ago, and has +7 upvotes and -0 downvotes. The text is: "Yea I really don't give a fuck who did what part of entering. The only take away for me is a patriot who served her country was killed at her capitol by a domestic terrorist funded by her own tax dollars." It also has links for "permalink", "parent", "save", "report", "block", and "reply".

Figure 41: Twitter, Freedom or death

A screenshot of a tweet by Mike Coudrey (@MichaelCoudrey). The tweet text is: "Today is one of the most important days in our nations history. We cannot allow a global hegemony to take over this country through fraudulent means. What happens today determines the next 100 years of our country. Freedom or death." The tweet was posted at 5:54 AM on Jan 6, 2021, via Twitter for iPhone. It has 603 Retweets, 25 Quote Tweets, and 1.7K Likes. At the bottom of the tweet are icons for replying, retweeting, liking, and sharing.

Figure 42: 8chan, Make the alt-right more palatable

Fixing the Alt Right Anonymous (ID: 08/13/17(Sun)13:44:29 No. 137278655 [Reply] >>137294079 >>137294129

Don't get trapped in an echo chamber where you can no longer relate to normies.

Pretending that Charlottesville didn't massively push the average white person away is really stupid.
We have a chance to actually make changes now that Trump has shifted the Overton window to the right, but we need to be smart and make the movement appealing to the AVERAGE white person:

- > Disavow all Nazi/KKK edgelord LARPer. There is no way to lose public support quicker than going around making Nazi salutes and holding Wiki torches while chanting "Jews will not replace us". This instantly makes the average person hate you.
- > Build a populist movement with realistic, incremental overt goals. Repealing the 1965 Immigration Act and replacing it with something that both limits total immigration and prioritizes white immigration is an actual tangible political goal.
- > Keep the long-term goals covert, and don't ever reveal your power level. Talking openly about an white ethnostate only leads to failure and the average public turning against you, so disavow anyone who reveals his power level. Leftists will recognize dog whistles and know we're crypto, but normies won't listen to them.
- > Start first by focusing on multiculturalism, because it's lot easier for people to see how non-white countries produce culture that is at odds with our values. People like Peter Thiel should be the voice of the alt-right, not cringelords like Richard Spencer.

APPENDIX B

CHAPTER 5 SOURCE SCREEN CAPTURES

Please note that each screen capture included in this appendix has a figure number, followed by the source location (e.g. Parler, thedonald.win, 8chan, etc.), followed by a brief clause describing its contents. These screen captures represent background context as well as specific reference points for the text. If a screen capture is referenced in the body of the text, the naming convention will be found in the corresponding footnote citation, beginning with the Appendix location (A or B).

Example: Appendix A: Figure 14, Parler, Raid the White House

Additionally, long form, multiple page print screens (with extensive commentary and exchanges) can be found in the supplemental files for this dissertation. Those file names share the same naming convention and can be found cited in text as footnotes beginning with the phrase “*Supplemental Content*”.

Figure 43: thedonald.win, Today I told my kids goodbye

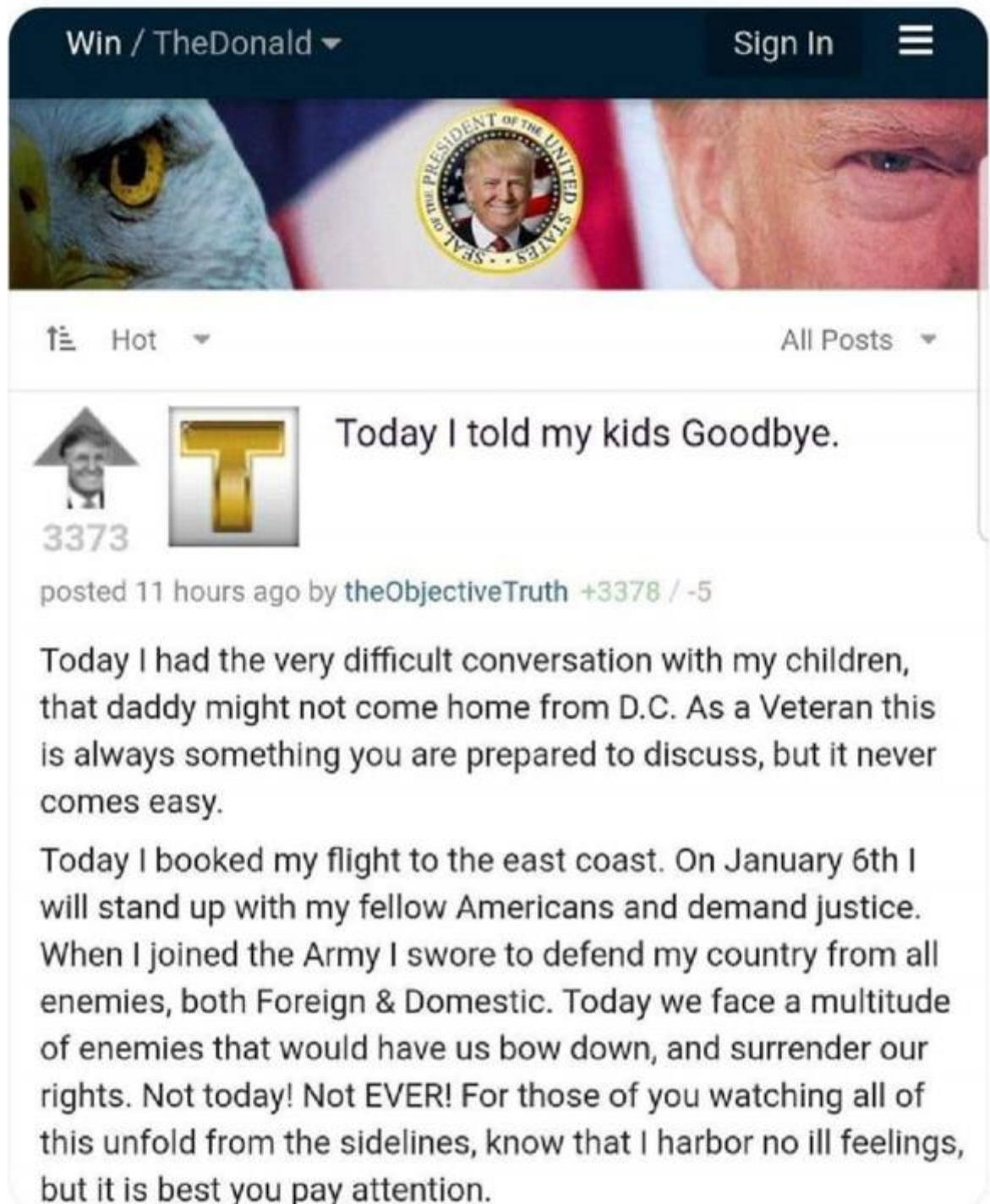


Figure 44: Twitter, Treason and coup



Figure 45: March to Save America, homepage





Join President
Donald J. Trump
outside the White House
on January 6

WHERE

The Ellipse - President's Park
South of The White House.

[View Map](#)

WHEN

Wed, January 06, 2021
Doors open at 7:00 AM (EST)
At 1:00 PM, we protest at US Capitol

[Add to my calendar](#)

RSVP

First name*
 Last name*

Email Address*

Phone Number*

ZIP*

☐ Coming to Freedom Plaza, January 5th
☐ Coming to the White House, January 6th
☒ SMS opt-in

By registering for this event, you understand and expressly acknowledge that an inherent risk of exposure to COVID-19 exists in any public place where people are present. In attending the event, you and any guests voluntarily assumes all risks related to exposure to COVID-19, and waive, release, and discharge the host venue, or any of their affiliates, directors, officers, employees, agents, contractors, or volunteers from any and all liability under any theory, whether in negligence or otherwise, for any illness or injury.

☐ I accept the above COVID-19 disclaimer

☐ I'm not a robot
 

[REGISTER](#)

Fight to #StopTheSteal, with President Trump

On January 6, 2021, millions of Americans will descend upon Washington DC to let the establishment know we will fight back against this fraudulent election.

Take a stand with President Trump and the #StopTheSteal coalition and be at The Ellipse (President's Park) at 7am. The fate of our nation depends on it.

At 1:00 PM, we will march to the US Capitol building to protest the certification of the Electoral College.

[Media Request](#) [Add to my calendar](#)

January 5th: Join us at the pre-rally, Freedom Plaza, Washington DC

WHERE

Freedom Plaza - Washington DC
1455 Pennsylvania Ave NW

[View Map](#)

WHEN

Tues, January 05, 2021
1:00 PM to 8:30 PM (EST)

[Add to my calendar](#)

Join us at Freedom Plaza in Washington, DC for a rally in support of President Donald J. Trump. This rally takes place on January 5th, one day before the event at the White House.



Participating in the March to Save America

Stop the Steal	WildProtest.com	Turning Point Action
Rule of Law Defense Fund	Phyllis Schlafly Eagles	Moms for America
Women for America First	Tea Party Patriots	Peaceably Gather
Eighty Percent Coalition	Black Conservatives Fund	Contribute

Figure 46: 8kun, Digital soldiers oath

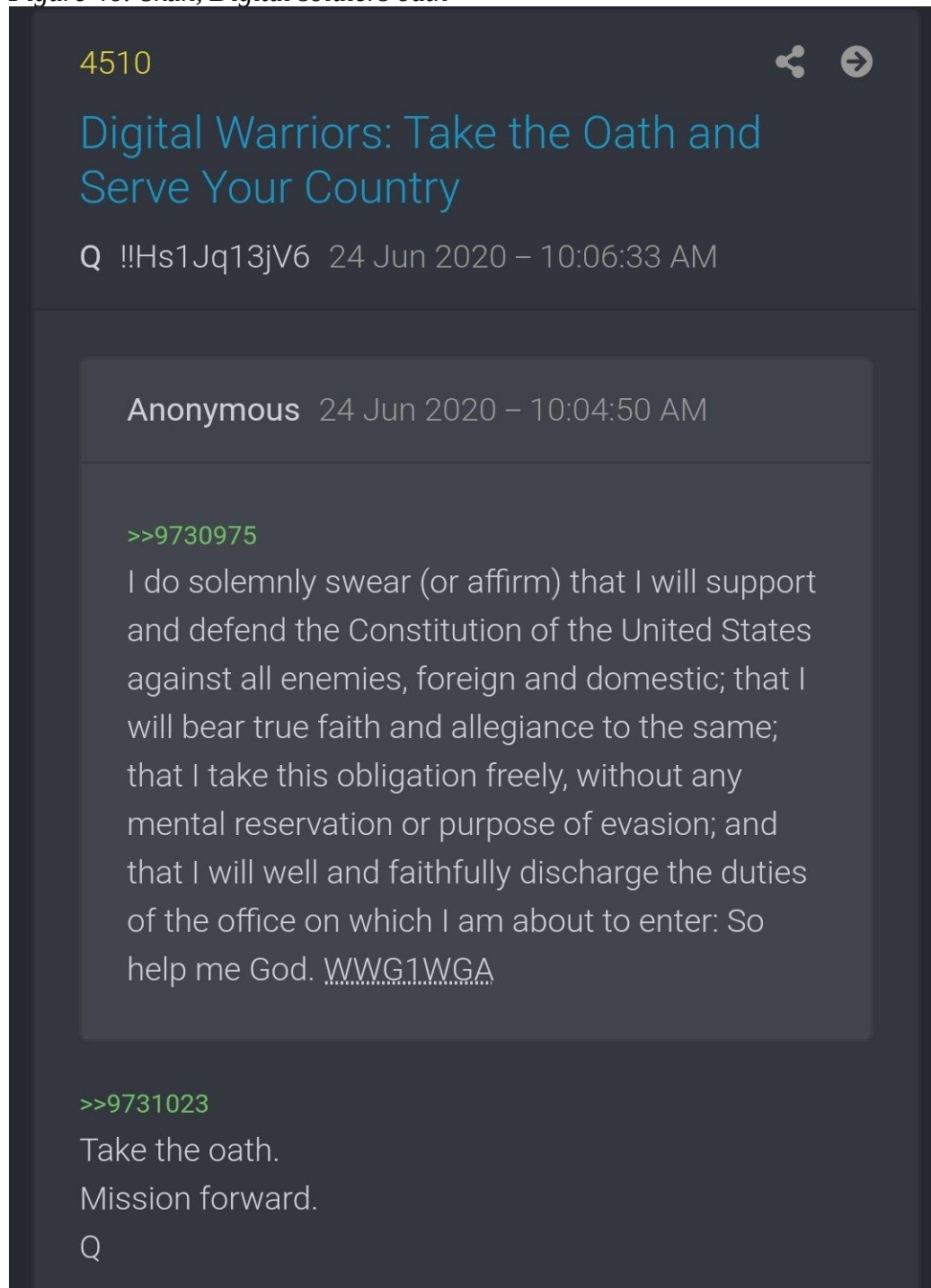


Figure 47: 8chan, QResearch board, QAnon welcome message

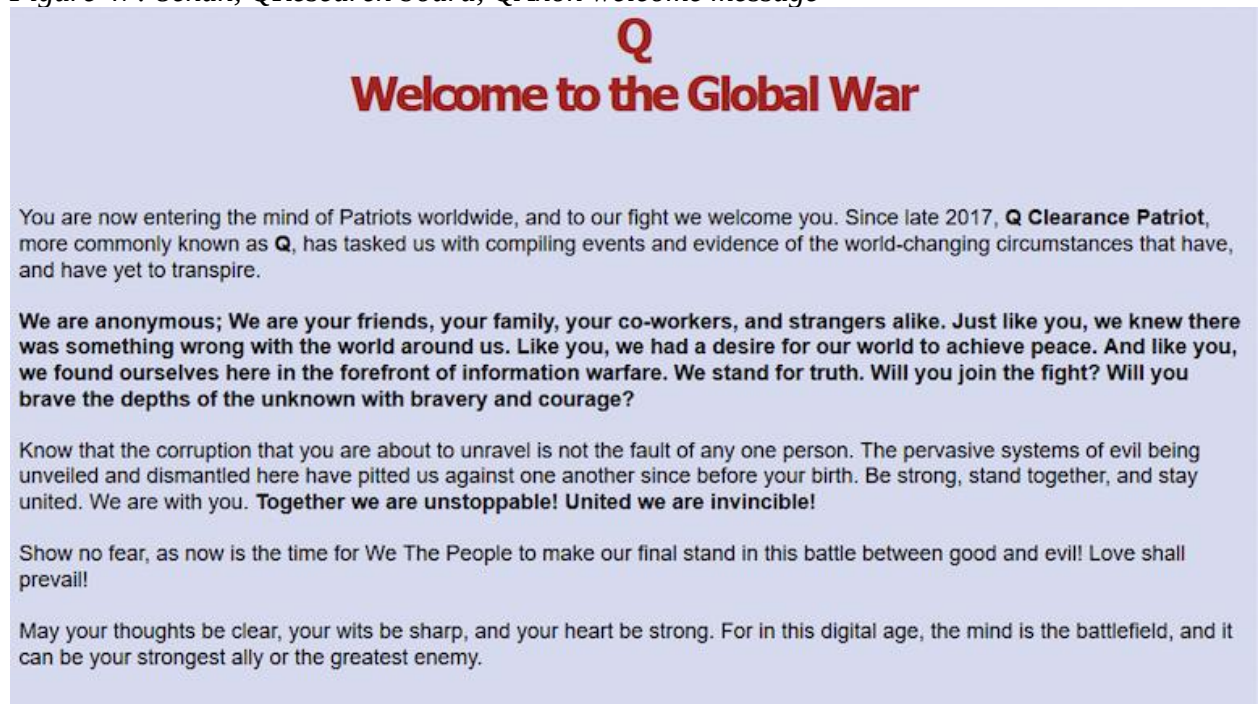


Figure 48: 8chan, Qdrop, Expand your thinking

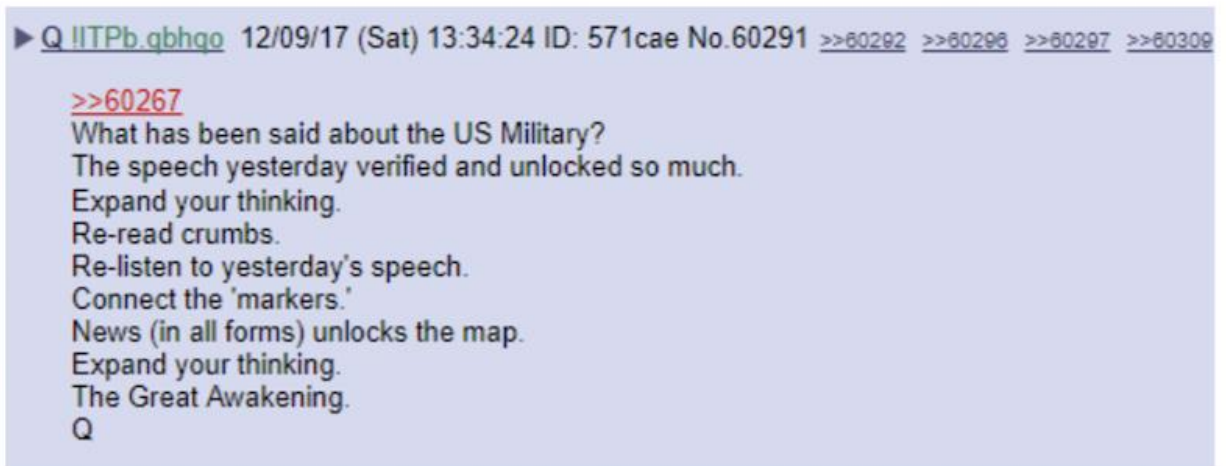


Figure 49: 8chan, Qdrop, Fight for life and for good

 !UW.yye1fxo 01/13/18 (Sat) 22:18:18 No.9

We are FIGHTING for LIFE.
We are FIGHTING for GOOD.
We are at WAR [@].
NOT EVERYTHING WILL BE CLEAN.
[SCARE] NECESSARY EVENT.
Do you TRUST the US Military?
Do you TRUST the Chain Of Command?
Have FAITH - WE ARE IN CONTROL.
PATRIOTS.
PATRIOTS DAY.
HAVE FAITH.
YOU WERE CHOSEN FOR A REASON.
YOU ARE BEING PROVIDED THE HIGHEST
LEVEL OF INTEL TO EVER BE DROPPED
PUBLICLY IN THE HISTORY OF THE
WORLD.
USE IT - PROTECT AND COMFORT THOSE
AROUND YOU.
WHERE WE GO ONE, WE GO ALL.
Q

Figure 50: 8chan, Calm before the storm board, Anon provides their bible interpretations

 **Anonymous** 12/08/17 (Fri) 02:19:10 ID: 3690a4 No.51627

Genesis 3:5 For God doth know that in the day ye eat thereof, then your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil.

YE SHALL BE AS GODS < The biggest conspiracy of all, is right at the beginning of the Bible. This is what satanists are trying to achieve.

(Genesis 6:1-4) "And it came to pass, when men began to multiply on the face of the earth, and daughters were born unto them, [2] That the sons of God saw the daughters of men that they were fair; and they took them wives of all which they chose. [3] And the LORD said, My spirit shall not always strive with man, for that he also is flesh: yet his days shall be an hundred and twenty years. [4] There were giants in the earth in those days; and also after that, when the sons of God came in unto the daughters of men, and they bare children to them, the same became mighty men which were of old, men of renown."

sons of God = Fallen Angels, mated with human women, begat Giants

Daniel 2:43 And whereas thou sawest iron mixed with miry clay, they shall mingle themselves with the seed of men: but they shall not cleave one to another, even as iron is not mixed with clay.

THEY SHALL MINGLE THEMSELVES WITH THE SEED OF MEN

Psalms 139:16 Thine eyes did see my substance, yet being unperfect; and in thy book all my members were written, which in continuance were fashioned, when as yet there was none of them.

IN THY BOOK ALL MY MEMBERS WERE WRITTEN < DNA

Genesis 3:15 And I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel.

Enmity between Satan's seed and her seed < Don't mix DNA (seed) of human & demonic

Genesis 6:9 ¶ These are the generations of Noah: Noah was a just man and perfect in his generations, and Noah walked with God.

Noah wasn't only saved because he was a just man, but because he was also perfect in his GENERations. Noah's family's DNA was one of the last not to be corrupted by fallen angels.

Matthew 24:37 But as the days of Noe were, so shall also the coming of the Son of man be.

Luke 17:26 And as it was in the days of Noe, so shall it be also in the days of the Son of man.

They're trying to resurrect Giants, and mix with our DNA just like in Noahs time. Satanists a fools who believe Satan will make them like gods.

Leviticus 18:23 Neither shalt thou lie with any beast to defile thyself therewith: neither shall any woman stand before a beast to lie down thereto: it is confusion.

Double meaning, this is not just talking about bestiality. Talking about breeding with fallen angels.

(Revelation 9:6) "And in those days shall men seek death, and shall not find it; and shall desire to die, and death shall flee from them."

The Mark of the Beast will be Satan's version of Salvation. Just change you DNA, become half human and whatever else, you won't die or get any diseases, and you'll have powers.

Revelation 12:17 And the dragon was wroth with the woman, and went to make war with the remnant of her seed, which keep the commandments of God, and have the testimony of Jesus Christ.

Remnant of her seed < Those who didn't accept the Mark of the Beast (Changing their DNA) and are still human and have accepted Christ

(Revelation 22:19) "And if any man shall take away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part out of the book of life, and out of the holy city, and from the things which are written in this book."

Last chapter of the Bible. Warns not only taking out of the Book, God will take away out of book of life. But has a double meaning because the Bible/Word is our DNA. Hence why if you modify our DNA, you are also taken out of the book of life.

Ecclesiastes 1:9 The thing that hath been, it is that which shall be; and that which is done is that which shall be done: and there is no new thing under the sun.

Mixing of DNA happened in the past when Noah was alive, Giants, hybrids, demi-gods, beasts ruled the earth at that time. It will happen again.

Allen deception < they seeded our planet, they will help us evolve.

New Age Religion Deception < we need to evolve into a higher consciousness.

Evolution isn't real. But they are pushing us to change our DNA to take the next step in evolution.

Figure 51: 8chan, Calm before the storm board, Anon describes 'operation local red pill'

>>1972546

#OperationLocalRedPill is go

It's time to reach Patriots who do not visit chans, Reddits, YT, or Twatter.

What happens when "QAnon" is manifest in front of you in the tangible world?

How many have that gut feeling things aren't right, but need a helping hand getting to where we are?

Use Hollywood in our favor.

Plant those seeds of curiosity in your local areas.

Figure 52: 8chan, Calm before the storm board, Anon explains why we fight

 **Anonymous** 06/30/18 (Sat) 18:25:24 ID: d0dc7 No.1972412

File: 32e5cd6dc0c1ad...jpg (1.73 MB, 3200x2448, 4:3, image.jpg)



How deep is the hole we are in?

Remember when Q referenced changing the perspective to 40,000'?

For all the anons that have grown frustrated with how long it is taking to bring the enemies of Liberty to justice, I hope that this might replenish your endurance for this fight.

America was founded as an Individualist (as opposed to a Collectivist) society. Our Individualist society was originally based on four (4) principles:

1. Rule of Law - Our rule of law carried with it not only our Christian heritage (Judeo/Christian) and also expanded on the prior advancements of Western civilization such as the Magna Carta.
2. Limited Government - If Freedom and Independence of a country it must employ limited government. I don't believe it is necessary to cite all the ways which we, as citizens, have allowed our government to expand beyond limited.
3. Divided government - The Judiciary was never intended to be superior to the Executive or the Legislative. They each have their role but they were meant to serve as a balance to protect the sovereign - the people.
4. American People are the Sovereign - The Constitution was not ratified until the Bill of Rights was added. The People of the time demanded that it be made part of what we refer to as our Constitution to remind future generations that America existed as a people whose government served them and not the other way around.

What we have been seeing, even prior to POTUS' attempts to reestablish the founding American principles, is that these principles have been overrun and those who have benefitted from the new extra-Constitutional 'rights', that have been illegally granted by a corrupt government and tyrannical courts for decades if not more than a century, will protect and defend these 'false rights BY WHATEVER MEANS NECESSARY.

We have been occupied for so long that we forgot we were subjects. This is an example of The Matrix we have been living in. The Red Pill was obviously just the beginning.

I hope this puts into perspective what we continue to fight for.

Figure 53: 8chan, Calm before the storm board, Anon details 'Jewish Masonic elite conspiracy'

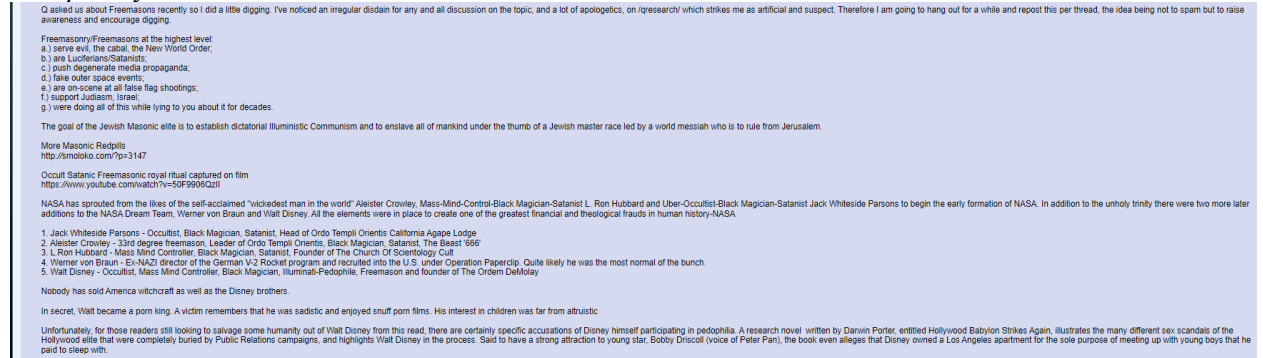


Figure 54: 8kun, Qdrop 4559, There was a time when...

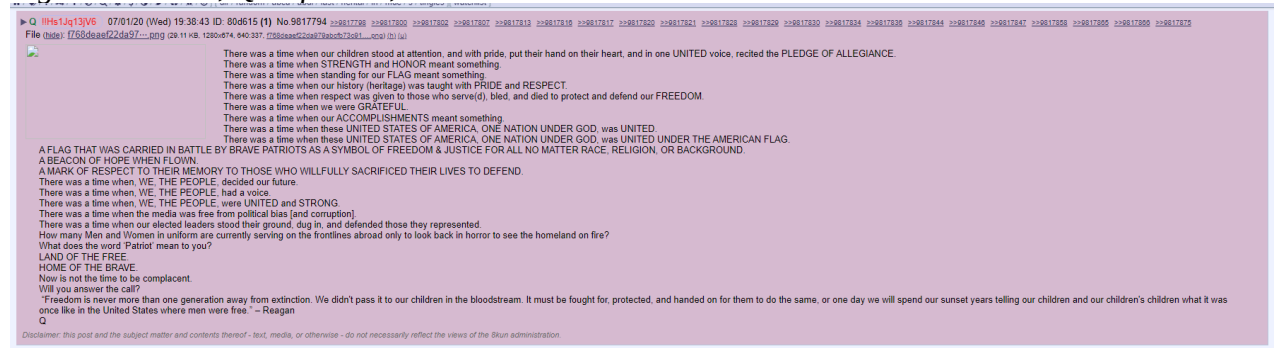


Figure 55: 8kun, reply to Qdrop 4559, International bankers

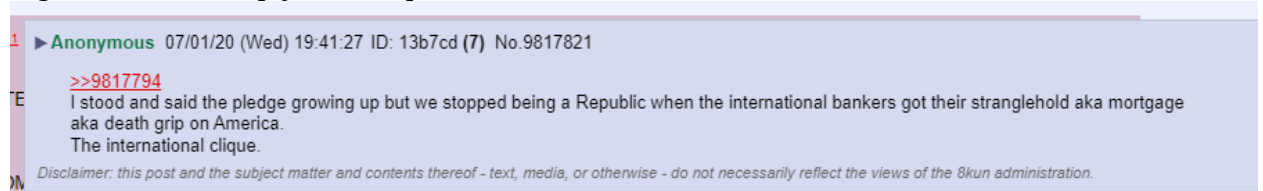


Figure 56: 8kun, Qdrop 4550, Have faith in humanity



Figure 57: 8kun, reply to Qdrop 4550, Humans are wicked without God

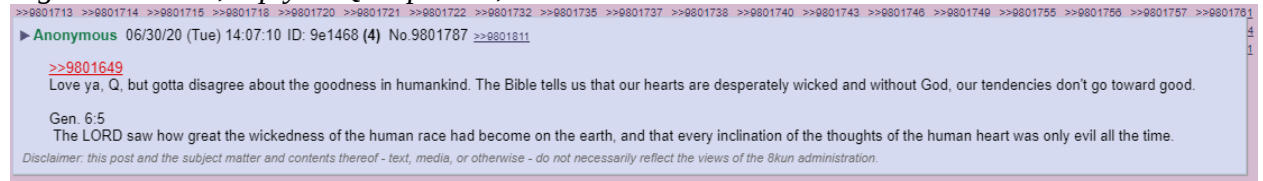


Figure 58: 8kun, reply to Qdrop 4550, Wake up the sheeple

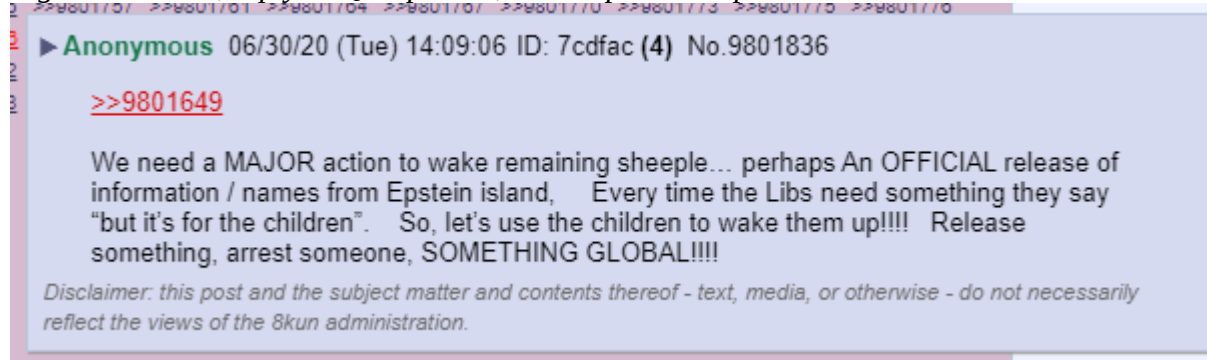


Figure 59: 8kun, reply to Qdrop 4550, Storm Washington

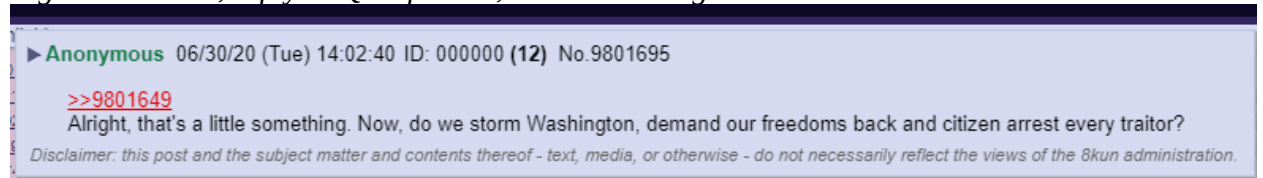


Figure 60: 8kun, reply to Qdrop 4550, Mental and spiritual battlefield

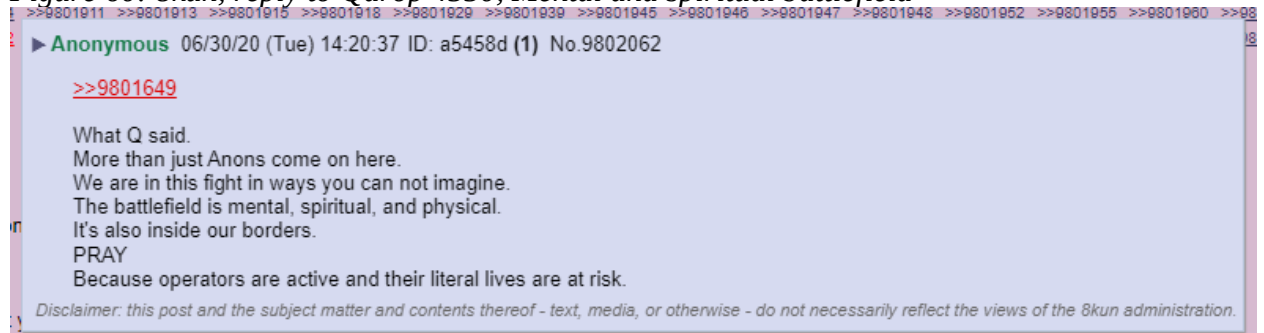


Figure 61: 8kun, reply to Qdrop 4550, Shift Overton window

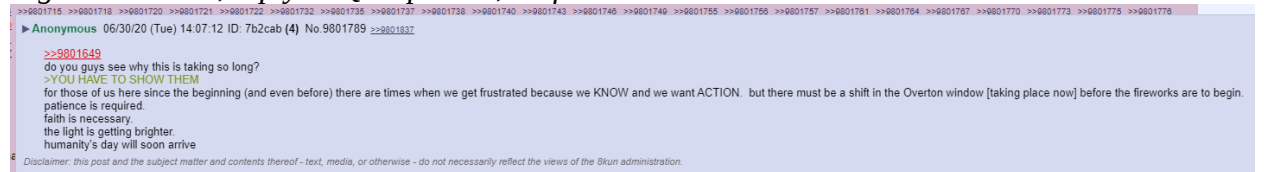


Figure 62: 8kun, reply to Qdrop 4550, Anon in a dark place

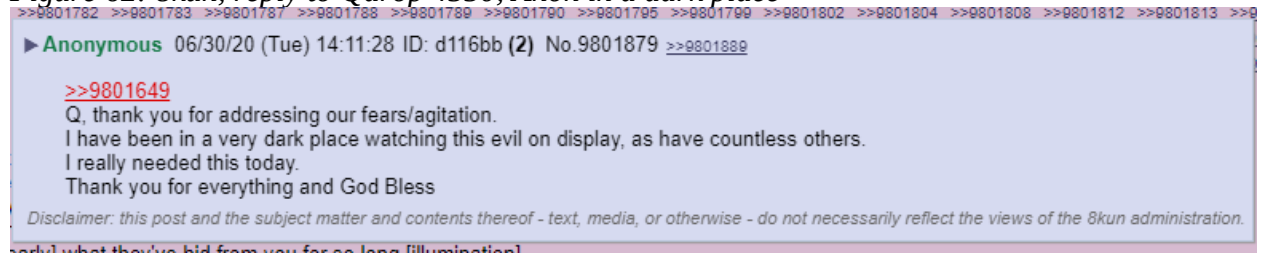


Figure 63: 8kun, reply to Qdrop 4550, Our rights are taken

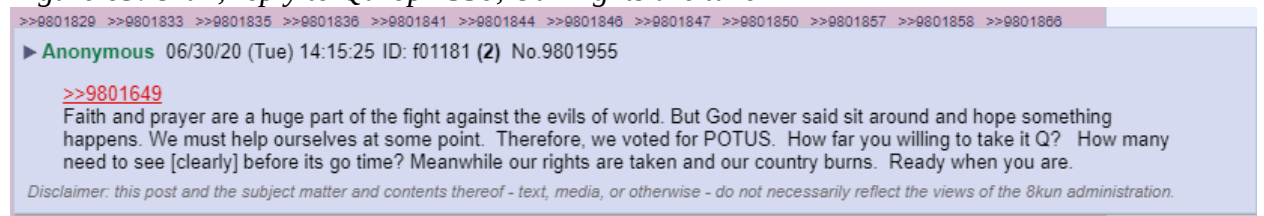


Figure 64: 8kun, reply to Qdrop 4550, Biblical vs. rational

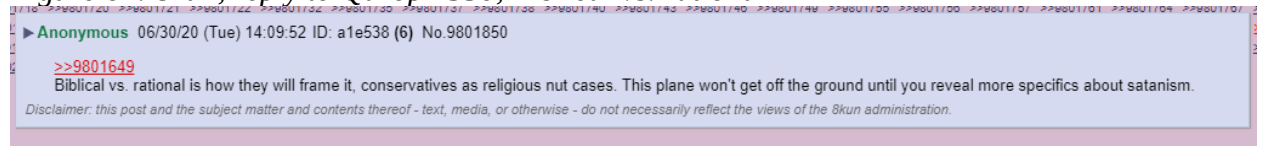


Figure 65: 8kun, reply to Qdrop 4550, Battle to save humanity

3 >>9801904 >>9801911 >>9801913 >>9801915 >>9801918 >>9801929 >>9801939 >>9801945 >>9801946 >>9801947 >>9801948 >>9801952 >>9801955 >>9801960 >>9801962 >>

5 ▶ Anonymous 06/30/20 (Tue) 14:20:24 ID: 4a14b2 (3) No.9802055 >>9802118

YouTube embed. Click thumbnail to play. [pop]

1. 01 in

THE 9/11 CONSPIRACY THEORY - EXPLAINED

IN UNDER 5 MINUTES

>>9801649

Imagine a battle to save humanity in which your enemy dreads the truth about 911 being revealed.
Imagine a battle to save humanity in which your enemy dreads Big Mike's dick being revealed.
Imagine a battle to save humanity in which your enemy is Israel and you make a meal of exposing a handful of their shitbag democrat puppets.
Imagine a battle to save humanity in which your enemy dreads you releasing cures but instead you allow them invent a new hoax disease.
Imagine a battle to save humanity and you allow the opposition MSM intelligence agencies to dominate and control the narrative.
This video was made by people with a tiny fraction of the information Q would have at his fingertips.

Disclaimer: this post and the subject matter and contents thereof - text, media, or otherwise - do not necessarily reflect the views of the 8kun administration.

Figure 66: 8kun, reply to Qdrop 4550, Wake up, be calm

5 >>9801737 >>9801738 >>9801740 >>9801743 >>9801746 >>9801749 >>9801755 >>9801756 >>9801757 >>9801761 >>9801764 >>9801767 >>9801770

2 ▶ Anonymous 06/30/20 (Tue) 14:08:05 ID: f1e1bc (3) No.9801812

>>9801649

It takes time to wake up and rub the sleep out of your eyes. Be calm, we are on track.

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Figure 67: 8kun, reply to Qdrop 4550, Family members can't read between the lines

7 >>9801738 >>9801740 >>9801743 >>9801746 >>9801749 >>9801755 >>9801756 >>9801757 >>9801761 >>9801764 >>9801767 >>9801770 >>9801773 >>9801775 >>9801776

7 ▶ Anonymous 06/30/20 (Tue) 14:08:07 ID: 362e50 (3) No.9801813

>>9801649

Apparently some of my extended family members are dumber than I thought.....and they are highly educated and law abiding. I don't see them changing their minds yet.
I have always been skeptical about everything(worked in the legal field). Learned to "read between the lines" as well as learned sometimes what isn't said is just as important as what is said.

Disclaimer: this post and the subject matter and contents thereof - text, media, or otherwise - do not necessarily reflect the views of the 8kun administration.

Figure 68: 8kun, reply to Qdrop 4550, People change at the precipice of destruction

12 >>9801835 >>9801836 >>9801841 >>9801844 >>9801846 >>9801847 >>9801850 >>9801857 >>9801858 >>9801866

14 ▶ Anonymous 06/30/20 (Tue) 14:15:52 ID: bc1007 (2) No.9801962

File (hide): add2155f697461e...jpg (493.66 KB, 1908x1266, 318:211, Book of Job.jpg) (h) (u)



>>9801649

ONLY AT THE PRECIPICE [moment of destruction] WILL PEOPLE FIND THE WILL TO CHANGE.

Disclaimer: this post and the subject matter and contents thereof - text, media, or otherwise - do not necessarily reflect the views of the 8kun administration.

Figure 69: 8kun, Qdrop 4509, The digital battlefield

You have been selected to help serve your Country.
Never retreat from the battlefield [Twitter, FB, etc.].
Use other platforms as a form of centralized command and control.
Organize and connect [bridge through linking].
Source meme(s) material from battlefield and/or garage [highlight & share][take & drop]
Mission 1: Dispute [reject] propaganda push through posting of research and facts
Mission 2: Support role of other digital soldiers [one falls another stands (rises)]
Mission 3: Guide [awaken] others through use of facts [DECLAS 1-99 material and other relevant facts] and memes [decouple MSDNC control of info stream] _ask 'counter' questions to initiate 'thought' vs repeat [echo] of MSDNC propaganda
Mission 4: Learn use of camouflage [digitally] _primary account suspended-terminated _use of secondary
Mission 5: Identify strengths / weaknesses [personal and designated target(s)] re: Twitter & FB [+other] example re: meme(s) failure to read through use of ALGO [think Tron (MCP_master control program)] _dependence on person-to-person capture [slow response time unidentified user(s)]
Game theory.
Information warfare.
Welcome to the Digital Battlefield.
Together we win.
Q

Disclaimer: this post and the subject matter and contents thereof - text, media, or otherwise - do not necessarily reflect the views of the 8kun administration.

Figure 70: 8kun, reply to Qdrop 4509, Anon feels validated in his work

1052 >>>9731053 >>>9731057 >>>9731059 >>>9731064 >>>9731065 >>>9731071 >>>9731072 >>>9731074 >>>9731078 >>>9731079 >>>9731082

32 152 ▶ **Anonymous** 06/24/20 (Wed) 13:16:27 ID: 96830b (3) No.9731232 >>>9731256

>>>9730975
This is why I built WeWake.life, Q. (Q4266)
<https://qalerts.app/?n=4266>
Garages and campfires are critical gathering places that provide safe environments for planning and preparation.
Thank you for validating thousands of hours of my work to connect patriots.
God bless us all in this war.

Disclaimer: this post and the subject matter and contents thereof - text, media, or otherwise - do not necessarily reflect the views of the 8kun administration.

initiate 'thought' vs repeat [echo] of MSDNC propaganda

Figure 71: 8kun, reply to Qdrop 4509, Recognize communists inside the federal government

>>>9730975
From an FBI memo - NY post 6-10

White supremacists and racist domestic terrorists pose the largest threat of violence in the United States amid nationwide protests across the country, according to a new intelligence bulletin. The bulletin — which was sent to local law enforcement by the FBI, Department of Homeland Security and National Counterterrorism Center and reported by ABC News — warns of threats by left-wing and anarchist groups as well. But it barely mentions Antifa as a potential violent group — though federal lawmakers have called for the loosely affiliated movement to be labeled a terror group amid nationwide protests against police brutality. “We assess the greatest threat of lethal violence continues to emanate from lone offenders with racially or ethnically motivated violent extremist ideologies and [domestic violent extremists] with personalized ideologies,” the bulletin states, according to ABC News. In addition, militias and right-wing racist groups are seeking to start a second American Civil War by targeting protests, according to the report.

Recognize Communists inside DOJ / FBI produce such nonsense after the violence of the last few weeks, and then you'll understand why BLM, ANTIFA, and other radical Marxist groups are allowed to flourish.

Disclaimer: this post and the subject matter and contents thereof - text, media, or otherwise - do not necessarily reflect the views of the 8kun administration.

Figure 72: 8kun, reply to Qdrop 4509, Doing my part

>>>9731303 >>>9731305 >>>9731308 >>>9731313 >>>9731314 >>>9731322 >>>9731327 >>>9731338 >>>9731354 >>>9731377

▶ **Anonymous** 06/24/20 (Wed) 13:30:30 ID: f8ac03 (3) No.9731524

>>>9730975
Doing my part to [awaken]; workfagging means not as much time for digital warfare.
Reaching my circle of people directly has been working great, though. Most are finally starting to listen and thereby SEE.
o7
Every single one of us is important. We were born for this.
Proud to serve and do my individual part to support OUR MOVEMENT.
GOD WINS.
Love you faggots. (no homo)

Disclaimer: this post and the subject matter and contents thereof - text, media, or otherwise - do not necessarily reflect the views of the 8kun administration.

Figure 73: 8kun, reply to Qdrop 4509, end the federal government

▶ **Anonymous** 06/24/20 (Wed) 13:14:42 ID: 8a2813 (8) No.9731198 >>>9731420 >>>9731464

I solemnly swear TO END THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT ONCE AND FOR ALL.

KEK

Disclaimer: this post and the subject matter and contents thereof - text, media, or otherwise - do not necessarily reflect the views of the 8kun administration.

Figure 74: 8kun, Qdrop 4494 & Anon reply, Desperation in the face of rigged elections



Figure 75: 8kun, Anons for our country and against "black superspreaders."

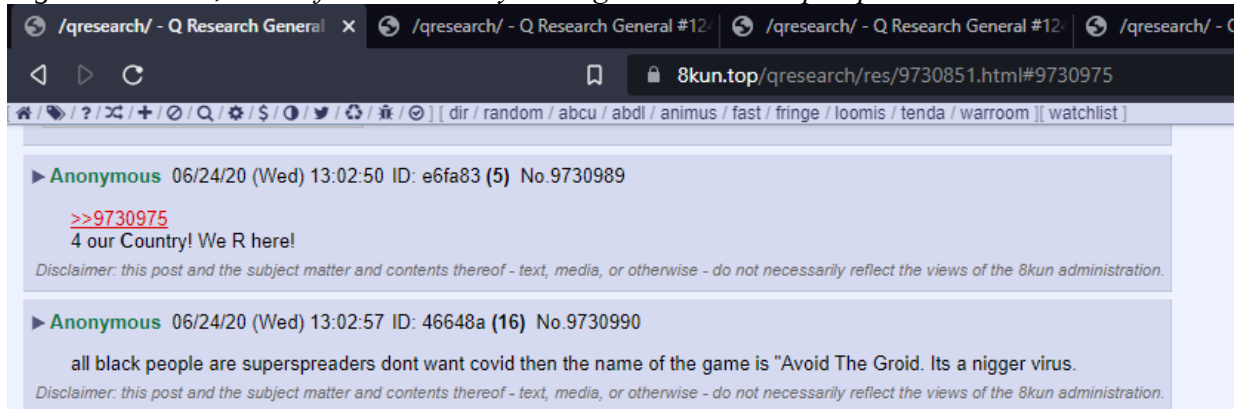


Figure 76: Chimpmania forum, Minimize racial exposure and "avoid the groid"

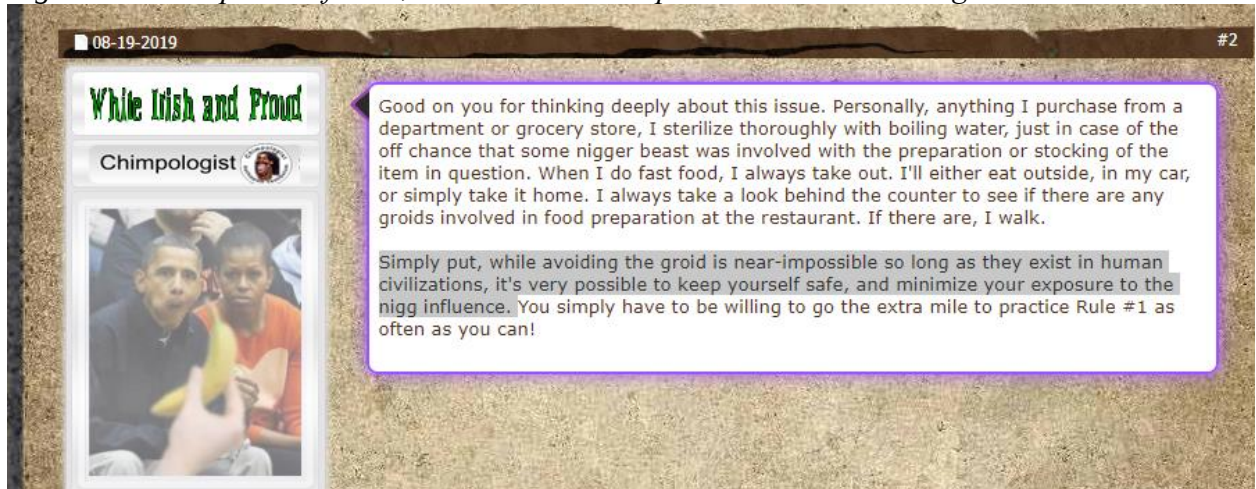


Figure 77: 8kun, Qdrop 4463, Full armor of God

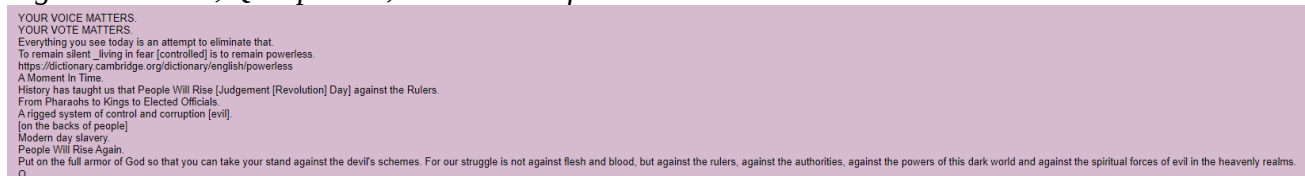


Figure 78: 8kun, reply to Qdrop 4463, Please obliterate

>>9600426

The devil is a loser. They worship the loser, kmfao. No human or group of humans can disconnect themselves enough from God to where they can destroy God. God wins. Please obliterate these faggots, Q. Try them and FRY THEM. They all need OFF this planet. Put them on a barge, send it out to sea and brrrrrrrrt!

Disclaimer: this post and the subject matter and contents thereof - text, media, or otherwise - do not necessarily reflect the views of the 8kun administration.

Figure 79: 8kun, reply to Qdrop 4463, Please help us

► Anonymous 06/13/20 (Sat) 16:11:02 ID: a4ba10 (3) No.9600427 >>9600468 >>9600561

>>9600303

>Please Do Something about the MSM!

Help us take it over, anon.

Help us tell the Truth to the People - produce a better product (True news).

>Only when people see the truth [for themselves] will people understand the true nature of their deception.

>Seeing is Believing.

>Sometimes you can't tell the public the truth.

>YOU MUST SHOW THEM.

Help us instead of asking Q to do it.

We can write.

We can make videos (show)

We can tell (interviews, podcasts, narrate).

WE are the ones we've been waiting for.

Who better than those who have been researching this for 3.5 years??

Who do you think Q means when he said

YOU MUST SHOW THEM ??

Disclaimer: this post and the subject matter and contents thereof - text, media, or otherwise - do not necessarily reflect the views of the 8kun administration.

Figure 80: 8kun, Qdrop 1646, They want you divided

Q ICboof01c2s 06/30/18 (Sat) 18:36:13 ID: eH7c9 No.1972546

You have a choice.
The choice has always been yours.
POWER TO THE PEOPLE.
THEY WANT YOU DIVIDED.
THEY WANT RACE WARS.
THEY WANT CLASS WARS.
THEY WANT RELIGIOUS WARS.
THEY WANT POLITICAL WARS.
THEY USE THE MEDIA.
THEY USE HOLLYWOOD.
THEY USE POLITICAL LEADERS.
THEY ARE LOUD.
GROUP THINK.
PUBLIC SHAME AGAINST THOSE WHO CHALLENGE.
SLAVERY.
THEY KNOW WHAT IS COMING.
IT IS NOW MORE CLEAR THAN EVER.
NEVER IN OUR HISTORY HAVE THEY BEEN THIS EXPOSED.
NEVER IN OUR HISTORY HAVE THEY COME OUT FROM THE SHADOWS TO FIGHT.
THE TRUTH IS CLEARLY VISIBLE.
DEFEND MS-13?
DEFEND THE DESTRUCTION OF OUR BORDERS?
PROMOTE THE FEAR NUCLEAR WAR IF POTUS REMAINS IN OFFICE?
NUCLEAR ALERTS MALFUNCTION?
COMPARE TO HITLER/NAZIS?
PROMOTE VIOLENCE?
PROMOTE HATE?
PROMOTE WAR?
PROMOTE ECONOMIC DECLINE?
PROMOTE NK TO END TALKS W/ POTUS?
PROMOTE IMPEACHMENT FOR NO REASON?
PROMOTE RACISM?
PROMOTE FACISM?
PROMOTE RIOTS?
FORM ANTIFA - VIOLENT GROUP DESIGNED TO INSTILL FEAR IN FREE SPEECH.
HATRED FOR AMERICA.
SHEEP FOLLOW BLINDLY.
THEY ARE SCARED.
THEY ARE LOSING CONTROL.
WE KNEW THIS DAY WOULD COME.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G2qjXGafvCQ>
WE PLANNED.
WE TOOK CONTROL OVER KEY ELEMENTS.
WE STAND AT THE READY.
WE FIGHT.
DARK TO LIGHT.
GOD BLESS AMERICA.
GOD BLESS PATRIOTS AROUND THE WORLD.
THINK FOR YOURSELF.
TRUST YOURSELF.
COURAGE.
TOGETHER.
"We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness. -That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed. -That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness. Prudence, indeed, will dictate that Governments long established should not be changed for light and transient causes; and accordingly all experience hath shewn, that mankind are more disposed to suffer, while evils are sufferable, than to right themselves by abolishing the forms to which they are accustomed. But when a long train of abuses and usurpations, pursuing invariably the same Object evinces a design to reduce them under absolute Despotism, it is their right, it is their duty, to throw off such Government, and to provide new Guards for their future security."
"Be on your guard; stand firm in the faith; be courageous; be strong."
Q

Figure 81: 8chan, Calm before the storm board, Anons describe the role of Rothschilds in their occult theory

☐ **Anonymous** 12/08/17 (Fri) 03:12:27 ID: fb8d8d No.52036

>>>51984

Roths were the priests of the cult. Ran the banks Controlled all governments through banking. Saudi Arabia controlled world wide child sex traffic, oil technology, picked our elected leaders. Soros is the hype man, runs the crowds, controls the NGOs, Antifa, etc. US was keeping his bank full via Warren's slush fund. Rockefeller has already been taken out. Sides of the pyramid are being dismantled. Global payoffs for US/UK politicians is now gone. Sexual harassment is the amuse bouche for the pedo ring hammer that's about to drop.

☐ **Anonymous** 12/08/17 (Fri) 03:12:36 ID: cc3368 No.52037

>>>51984

Where does the number 23 fit in?

☐ **Anonymous** 12/08/17 (Fri) 03:12:43 ID: fd22f8 No.52038

>>>52034

I think even keystone is rockefellers

☐ **Anonymous** 12/08/17 (Fri) 03:13:06 ID: 188c28 No.52039

UUID Q picture file names may lead to websites
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Universally_unique_identifier
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Uniform_Resource_Name
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Internet_Assigned_Numbers_Authority

☐ **Anonymous** 12/08/17 (Fri) 03:13:11 ID: fb8d8d No.52040

>>>52038

no, they are one side of the pyramid

☐ **Anonymous** 12/08/17 (Fri) 03:13:21 ID: dcec2d No.52041

>>>52007

I am adresssing == THE RING IN THE SHAPE OF A BLACK HEXAGON ON HER RING FINGER WHICH IS A SYMBOL FOR THE CULT OF SATAN / SATURN ON HER LEFT HAND SYMBOLIZING HER BEING THE BRIDE OF SATAN ==

bredddy relevant

☐ **Anonymous** 12/08/17 (Fri) 03:14:03 ID: 286b6c No.52042

>>>51984

the world is run out of the BIS
 The Rothschilds own the bank
 They control all fiat money
 They're pedo satanist
 Go kill them Q

Figure 82: What is Q?



Figure 83: Rumble, COVID Emergency/Drain the Swamp

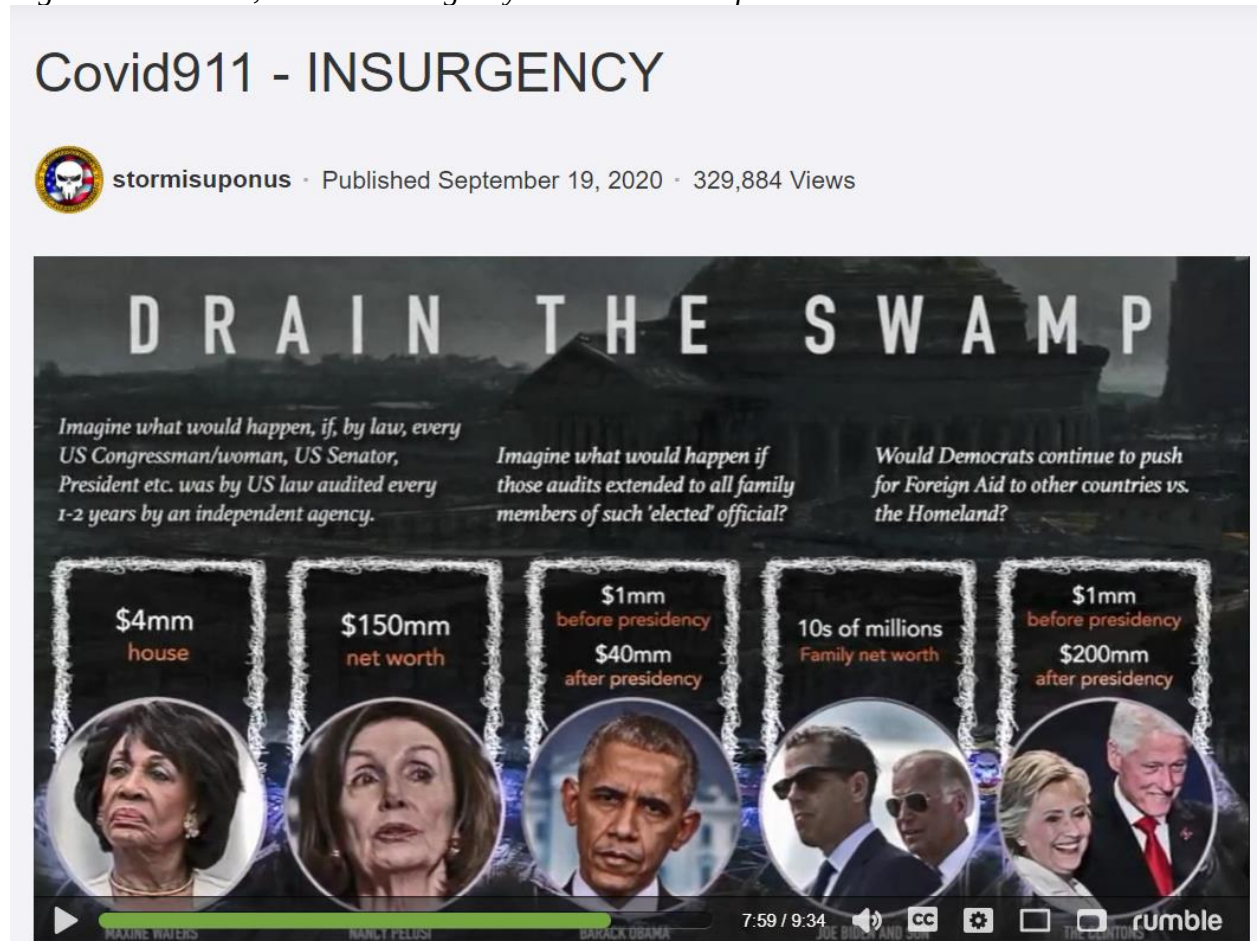


Figure 84: Seeking the Truth homepage

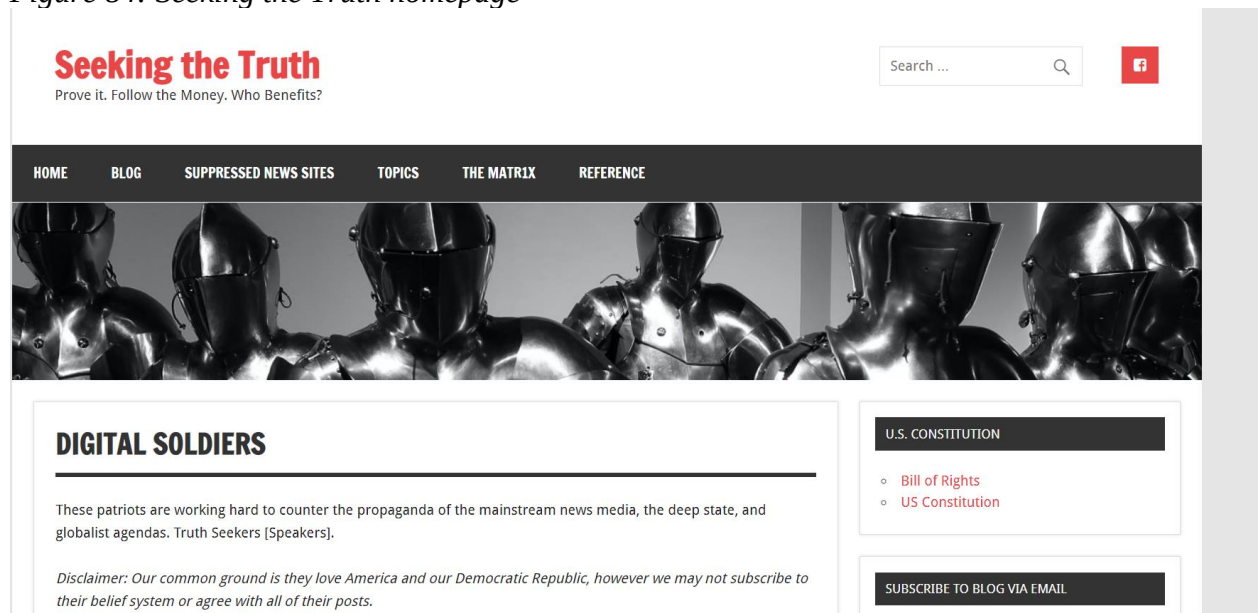


Figure 85: Parler, QAnon patriotic movement

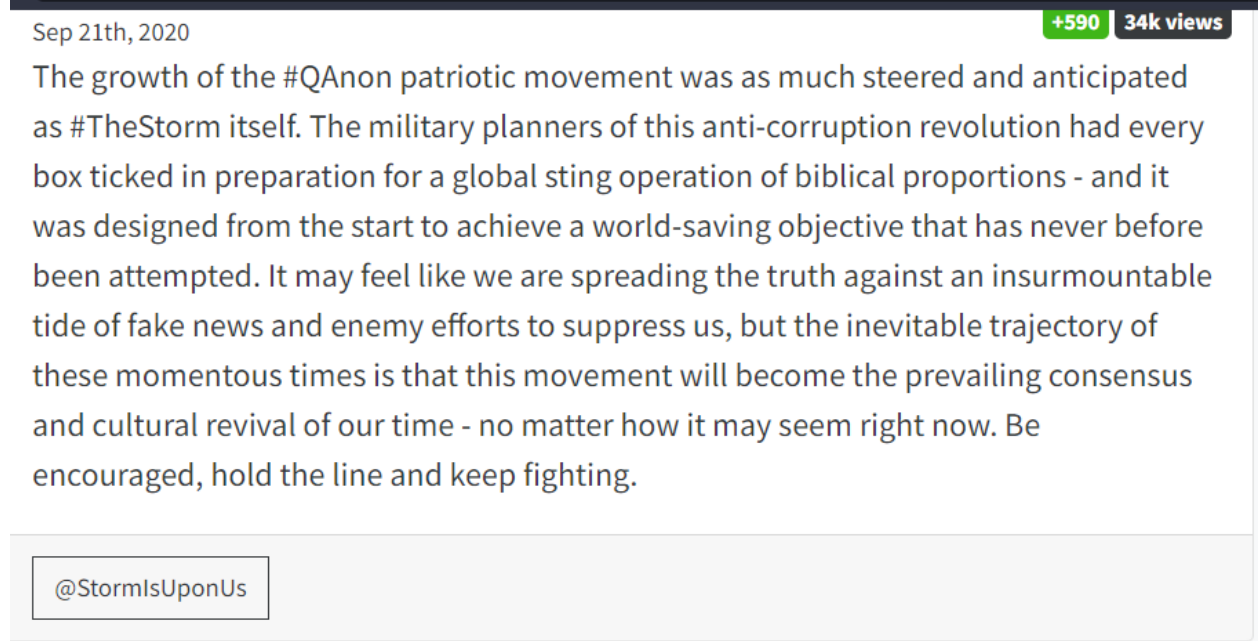


Figure 86: Parler, Patriots up against two sorts

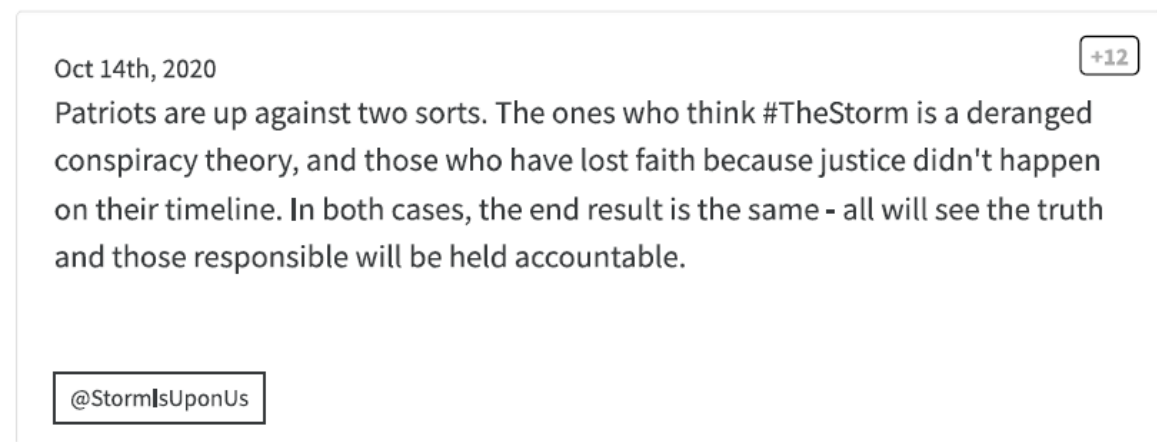


Figure 87: Parler, Communists burn our cities

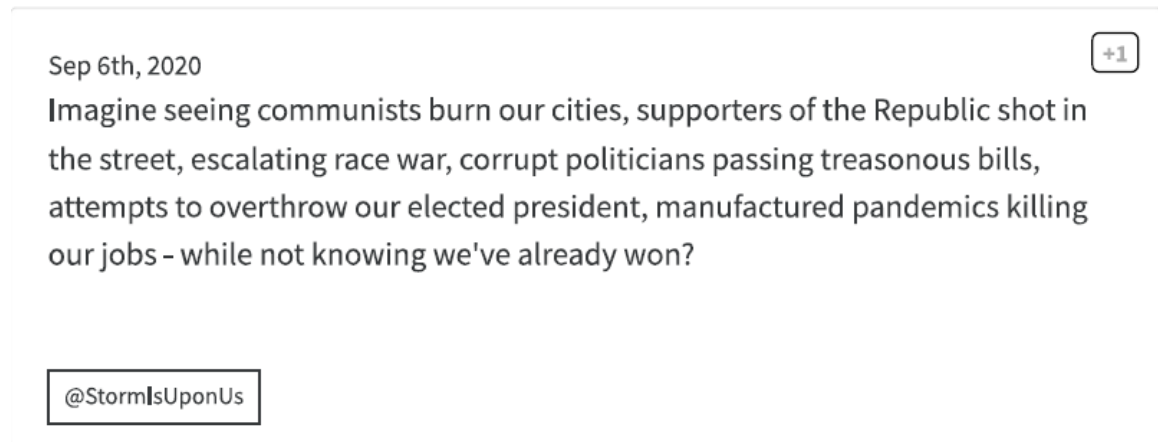


Figure 88: Parler, Patriots restoring republic

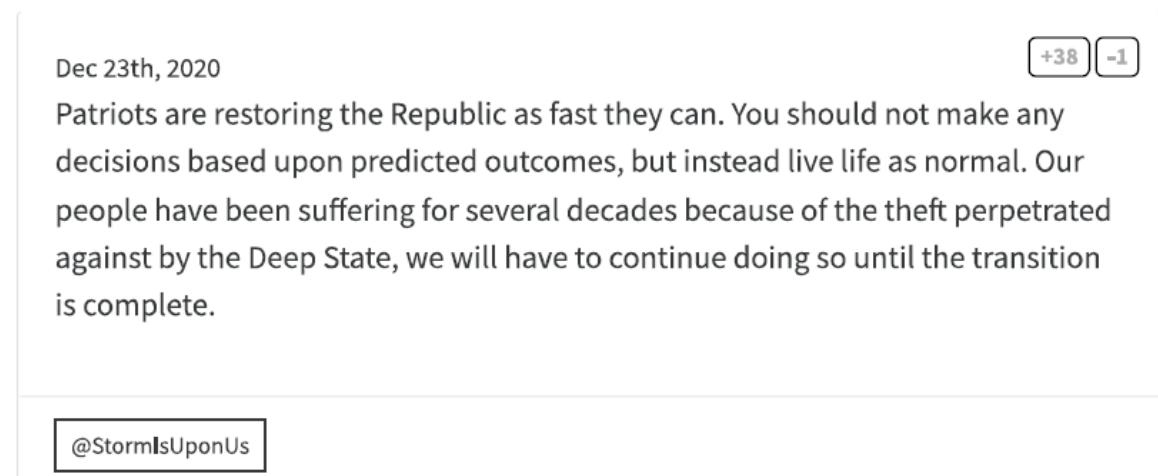


Figure 89: Parler, Last bastion of hope and freedom

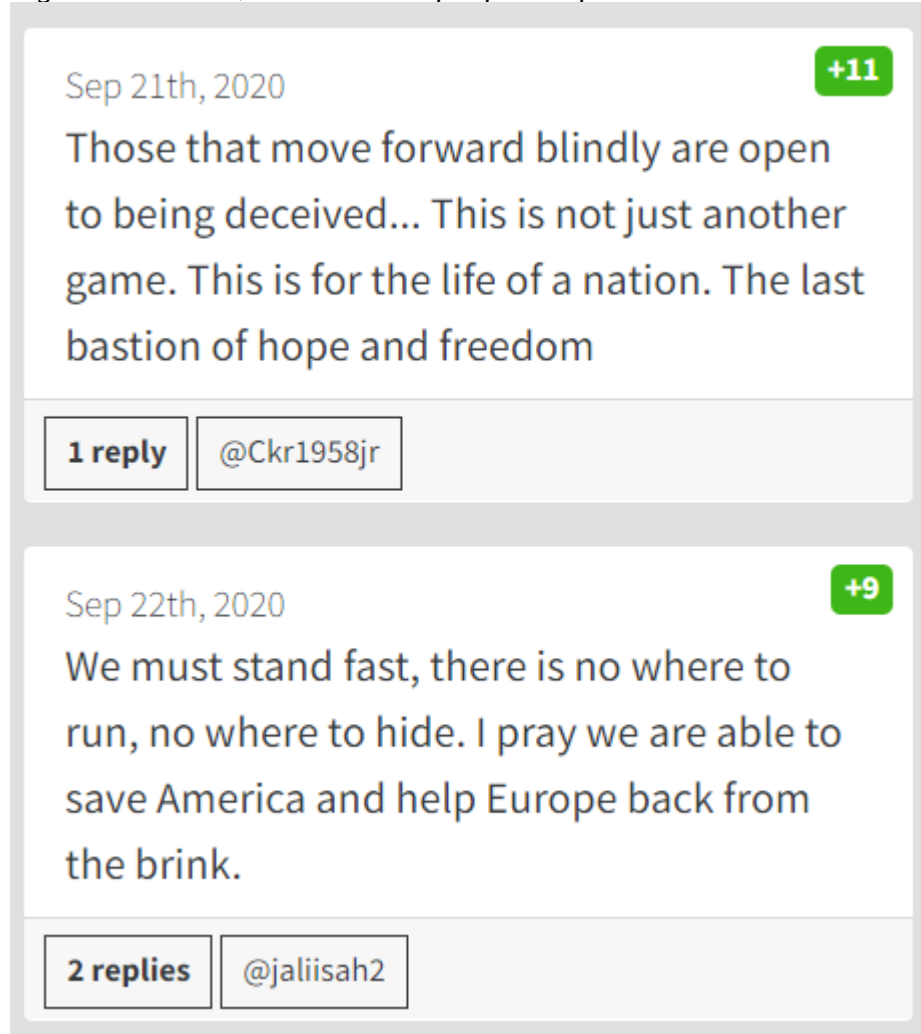


Figure 90: *Praying Medic's* blog, January 6 as second American revolution

 PRAYING MEDIC

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HOME / DONALD TRUMP / WELCOME TO THE SECOND AMERICAN REVOLUTION

DONALD TRUMP, ELECTIONS

Welcome to the Second American Revolution

January 7, 2021 / by [Praying Medic](#) / 43 Comments

A video version of this commentary is available at the bottom of the post.

As most of you know, yesterday, Mike Pence presided over the counting of the electoral college vote. Contrary to what many of us hoped for, he refused to consider the votes for Donald Trump that electors from several states had submitted. In doing so, he allowed Joe Biden to be declared the winner of the 2020 Presidential election. While many people are rehashing the day's events, friends are asking me what happens next. In this article, I'll share my thoughts on what may happen over the next few months.

This morning, Dan Scavino tweeted a message on behalf of the president.

 **Dan Scavino**  
@DanScavino

Statement by President Donald J. Trump on the Electoral Certification:

"Even though I totally disagree with the outcome of the election, and the facts bear me out, nevertheless there will be an orderly transition on January 20th. I have always said we would continue our..."

3:49 AM · Jan 7, 2021 from Washington, DC

110.5K 54.6K people are Tweeting about this

 **Dan Scavino**  
@DanScavino · Jan 7, 2021

Statement by President Donald J. Trump on the Electoral Certification:

"Even though I totally disagree with the outcome of the election, and the facts bear me out, nevertheless there will be an orderly transition on January 20th. I have always said we would continue our..."

 **Dan Scavino**  
@DanScavino

...fight to ensure that only legal votes were counted. While this represents the end of the greatest first term in presidential history, it's only the beginning of our fight to Make America Great Again!"

3:49 AM · Jan 7, 2021 from Washington, DC

95.4K 33.5K people are Tweeting about this

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Figure 91: Digitalsoldiers.info webpage, Step into the light from darkness



Figure 92: *Digitalsoldiers.info*, Q is a central plank of MAGA

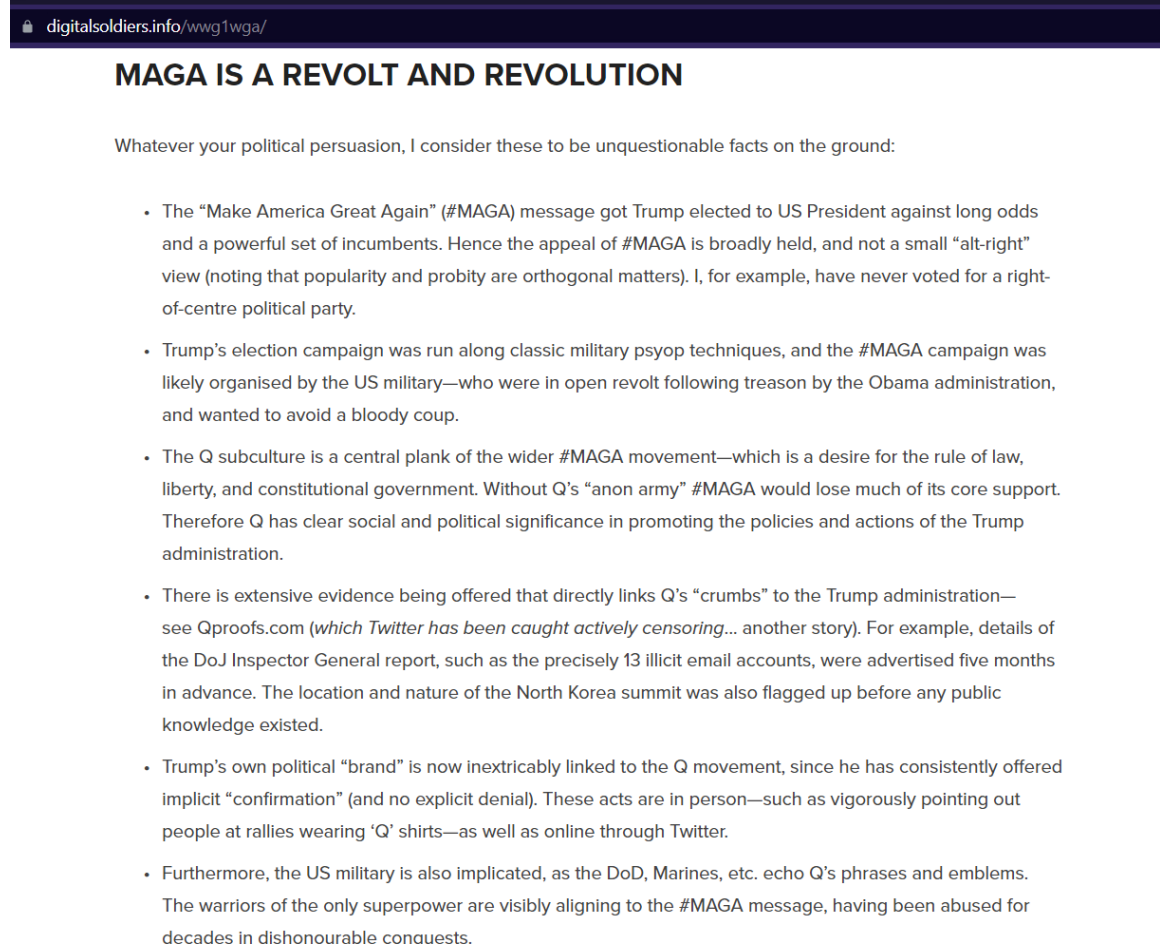


Figure 93: Digitalsoldiers.info webpage, What is the storm?

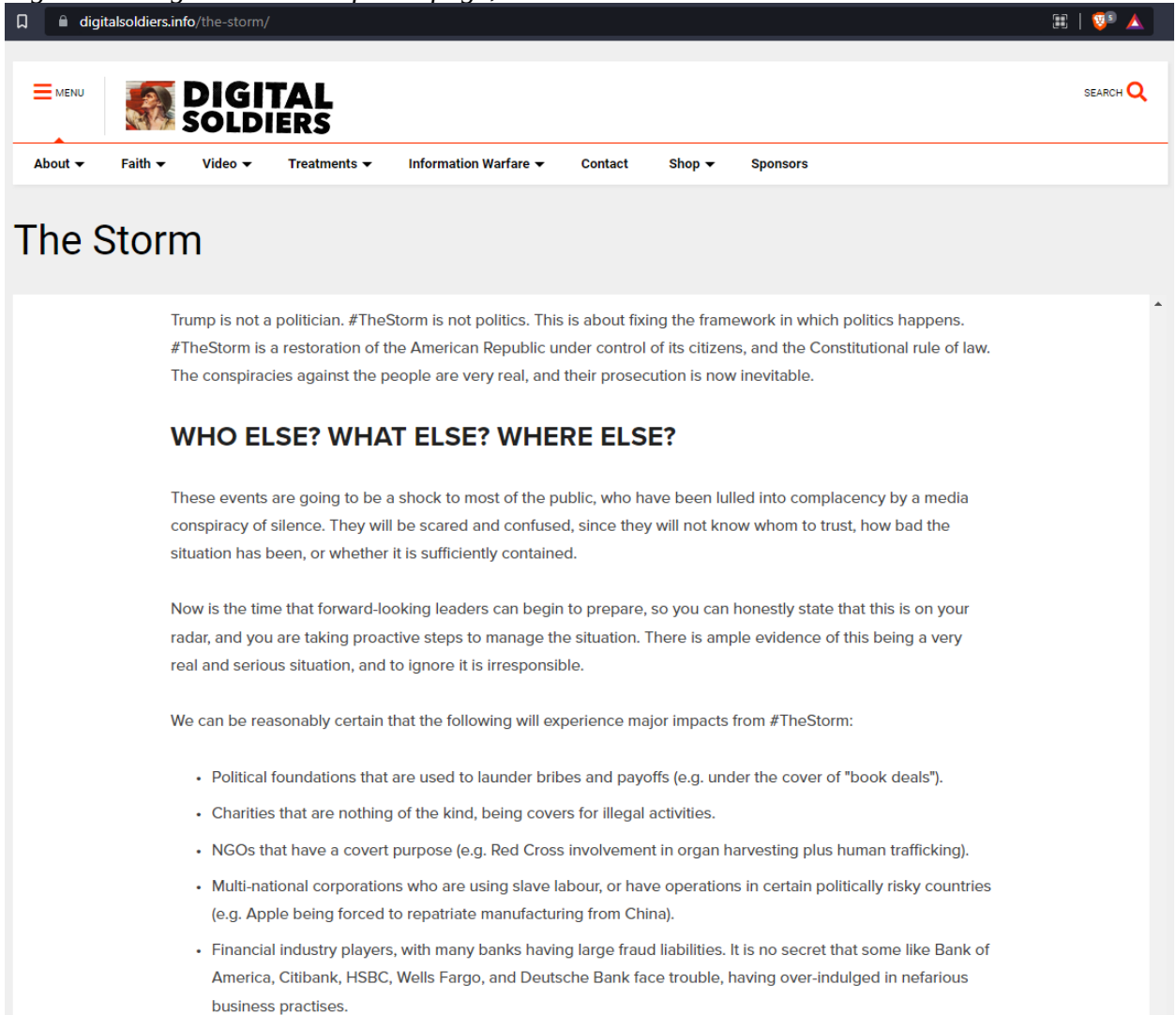


Figure 94: Digitalsoldiers.info webpage, Digital soldier oath



Figure 95: Greatawakening.win homepage, Welcome/Missions

Local action = **national impact**

Take responsibility for your
school committees or boards.

Get involved in the
education of our children.

Run for local, state and/or
federal office...

NO MORE EXCUSES.

Raise the Flag,
Say the Pledge 🇺🇸

General Flynn

WELCOME

To The Great Awakening

We are researchers who deal in open-source information, reasoned argument, and dank memes. We do battle in the sphere of ideas and ideas only. We neither need nor condone the use of force in our work here. **WE ARE THE PUBLIC FACE OF Q. OUR MISSION IS TO RED-PILL NORMIES.**

This is a pro-Q community. Please read and respect our rules below before contributing.

WHY Q?

"Those who cannot understand that we cannot simply start arresting w/o first ensuring the safety & well-being of the population, shifting the narrative, removing those in DC through resignation to ensure success, defeating ISIS/MS13 to prevent fail-safes, freezing assets to remove network-to-network abilities, kill off COC to prevent top-down comms/org, etc. etc., should not be participating in discussions." Q

Welcome to the Digital Battlefield -
Together We Win

Figure 96: Parler, *Be careful but don't give up*

Sep 29th, 2020

+202 14k views

Not Sad. Not Pissed Off. My Work Is Not 'Lost'. We Knew The Purge Was Coming. However, My Account Was Targeted Specifically By A Group Of 'Haters', Who Sincerely Enjoy Reporting Others. It's Their Daily 'Fix'. Sick. After The Times Of Israel Published The Article... 'QAnon An Old Form Of Anti-Semitism In A New Package, Say Experts.', Even The Mention Of A Jew In U.S. Politics And Potential Criminal Codes Related To Their Crimes, Will Get You Reported. [They] Have Thousands Of These Anti Anti-Semite Accounts Targeting Patriots. Be Cautious, Friends. They Cannot Shut Us Up. I Am Not Quitting. I Am In This Until The End.

@WarNuse

Figure 97: Parler, *'Satanic Panic'/Scourge the unfathomable evil*

Sep 21th, 2020

+336 23k views

The so-called "Satanic Panic" of the 80s was the closest the public came to waking up to the secret society cult that has been matasticizing silently throughout the world for several centuries. The #FakeNews media was able to put it down then, but we cannot keep kicking the can down the road. At some point, we have to face this scourge and their unfathomable evil, and excize it from society once and for all. If we don't, they will eventually succeed in destroying humanity for good, as we have already seen with their communist tyranny, corruption and infiltration into government and globalist corporations.

@StormIsUponUs

Figure 98: Parler, replies to 'Satanic Panic'

Sep 22th, 2020 +1 This was quickly removed from the news almost immediately. And the Satanists still are openly Flaunting their evil, fearing no one! It will take large protests to get the media's attention... Problem is, like the Franklin case.....the protesters will be called "Conspiracy Theorists". The media brainwash people by constantly repeating the same rhetoric on every channel. A lie repeated constantly, is believed by those who do not ask "whv".	Sep 21th, 2020 +31 Let's be honest here — this satanic influence has been going on since the Garden of Eden. Since satan wanted to ascend to the position of God and God threw him out of heaven onto the earth, he's been trying to drag as many people into hell with him. And what we are living through is his last gasping effort to do that, because he knows his time is very short. Jesus will return for His Church soon and then, literally, all hell will break loose on earth.	Sep 21th, 2020 +19 I remember it well. The Children, all the children and the media twisted everything to say they were LYING and being brainwashed into saying all these things. I will never forget it! #ListenToTheChildren It seems from those days forward the little voices were lost. "You can't always believe a Two Yr old" became the norm!! NO MORE!! 1 reply @KathyMehal
--	---	--

Figure 99: QAnon41020 wordpress homepage

HOME CONTACT BLOG

Home

Click the call to action QAnon button and subscribe to QAnon videos on Youtube.

Follow QAnon

CLICK HERE FOR Q Crumbs

Figure 100: QAnon41020 wordpress, we have to rebuild

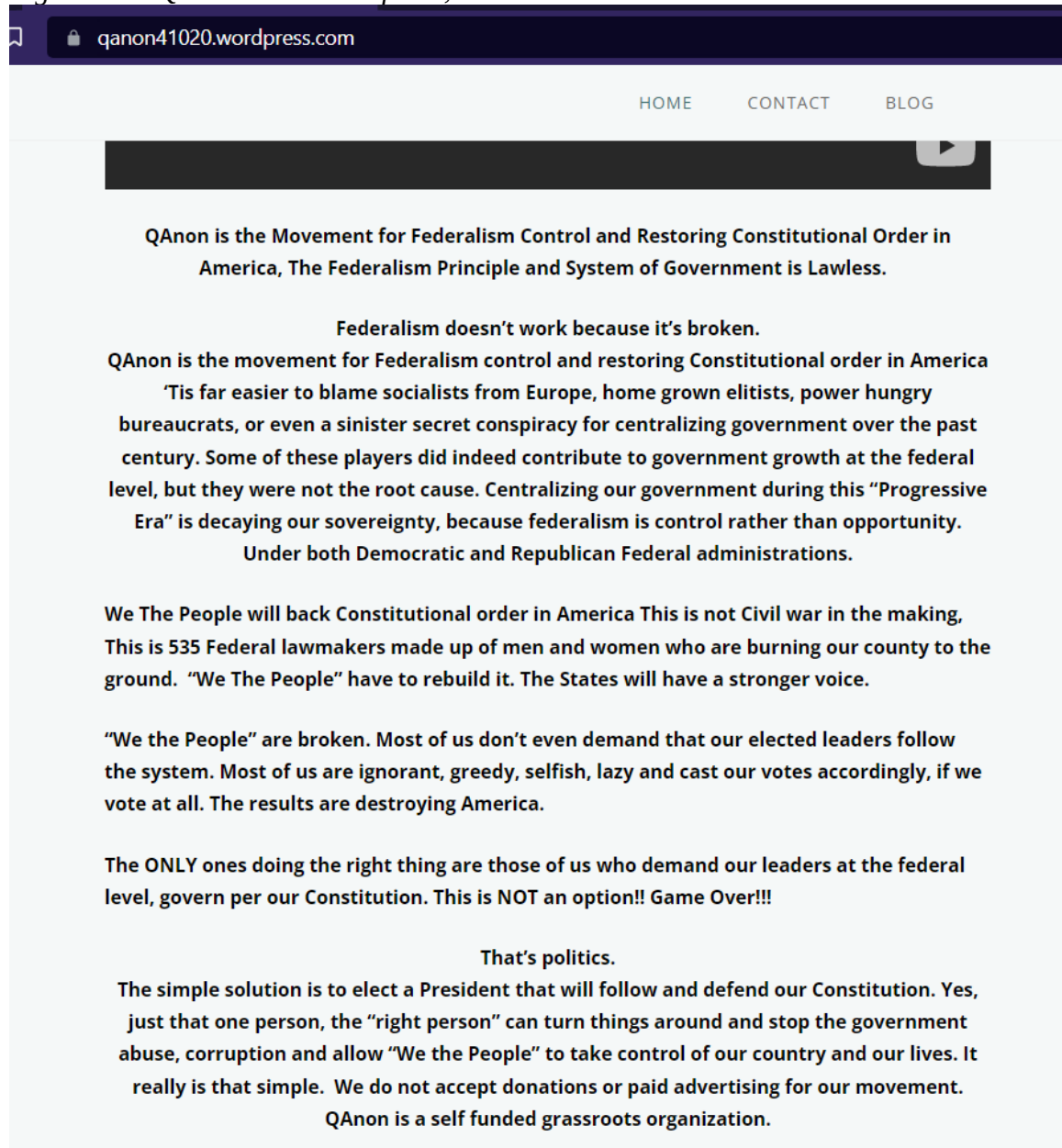


Figure 101: QAnon41020 wordpress, *Is civil war near?*

QAnon+++ Is Civil War Near?

Posted on April 2, 2018 by QAnon+++

Written by QAnon+++

When you have Soros, Obama, Jarrett and David Brock dictating American life and our founders vision... You damn right civil war is near. You may not be able to tell by Conservatives who are not protesting. Not anything wrong with that.

Fear not, once these psychopaths cross the line, 93 million lead and copper bullets per second will head their way. Not only are they NOT privileged to speak out against the founders. They are in direct violation of anarchism. Which is already declared a terrorist group from DHS. We will warn you once. STAND DOWN!! Before you're FORCED DOWN!!!!

When many people do not awaken to truth, the next phase is enslavement. Congress is NOT our leaders, they are Representatives. Unfortunately both the RNC and DNC are Progressives. They are a terrorist cell not anything close to representing our Constitution.

You at best have 30% of Americans to back you on taking away guns. Start going after gun owners and your base will crumble fast.

Figure 102: QAnon41020 wordpress, *Nothing can stop what is coming*

Who Is The Cabal?? Nothing Can Stop What's Coming. Nothing!!!

Posted on July 4, 2020 by QAnon+++

"Chaos is a ladder."

: There are no limitations or boundaries.

: The World is Evil.

: There are some things we were never meant to know.

Till now #WWG1WGA

So many people have no idea how interconnected all of this really is and I myself do not know the severity of it all, but this documentary really does point out some very disturbing things that are impossible to ignore and must be addressed. The video below will wake you up to the fact that you're allowing this to continue. if you do nothing to stop it.

Figure 103: Telegram, GhostEzra, Jews as synagogue of Satan

July 20, 2021



GhostEzra

Revelation 3:9

Behold, I will make them of the synagogue of Satan, which say they are **Jews**, and are not, but do lie; behold, I will make them to come and worship before thy feet, and to know that I have loved thee.

226.9K 21:33

July 21, 2021



GhostEzra

Cliff Notes.

1. **Jew** - Of Judean origin. (Modern term)
2. Israelite - Those who lived in biblical Israel. Consisted of **Jews** and non **Jews**.
3. Jewish - Anyone that practices Judaism. Less than 1% are actually **Jews**. Anyone can become Jewish by conversion.
4. Zionism - A political movement that sucks the world dry. Consists of **Jews** and non **Jews**.
5. State of Israel - A Rothchild owned territory.
6. Nation of Israel - God's true chosen children of faith in Christ. Scattered worldwide.
7. Israeli - Anyone currently living in the current state of Israel.

249.6K 02:09



GhostEzra

@ghostezra

302K

3.85K

1.48K

26

430

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Figure 104: Telegram, Ghost Ezra, Awakened patriots vs. synagogue of Satan

**GhostEzra**
302K subscribers

May 8, 2021

**GhostEzra**

A 100 million armed and awakened Patriots is a dangerous thing. That number only increases by the day. Keep waking up, because this genie is never going back in the bottle. We the people are coming after the Synagogue of Satan. God always wins, every single time.

364.4K  20:06

May 17, 2021

**GhostEzra**

In Genesis, Jacob the son of Isaac wrestled with God. Afterwards he was named Israel. There was no Israel the state. It was a nation of children according to the promise given to Abraham. The true nation of Israel is scattered throughout the earth currently. The Zionists tried to falsely fulfill the prophecy of Ezekiel 34 via the statehood of Israel. It has not yet happened. Zionists have hijacked God's Word for their own cabal agenda. These Zionists are referred to as the Synagogue of Satan 2000 years ago in the book of Revelation. All these wars are funded by the deep state with an agenda for more land. Hamas and deep state Israel and Iran are all the same coin. Just different sides. Continuing to fund them is furthering the Synagogue of Satan's agenda. There are good people in both Israel and Palestine. Don't fall for the R vs D media matrix hype.

297.1K  15:53

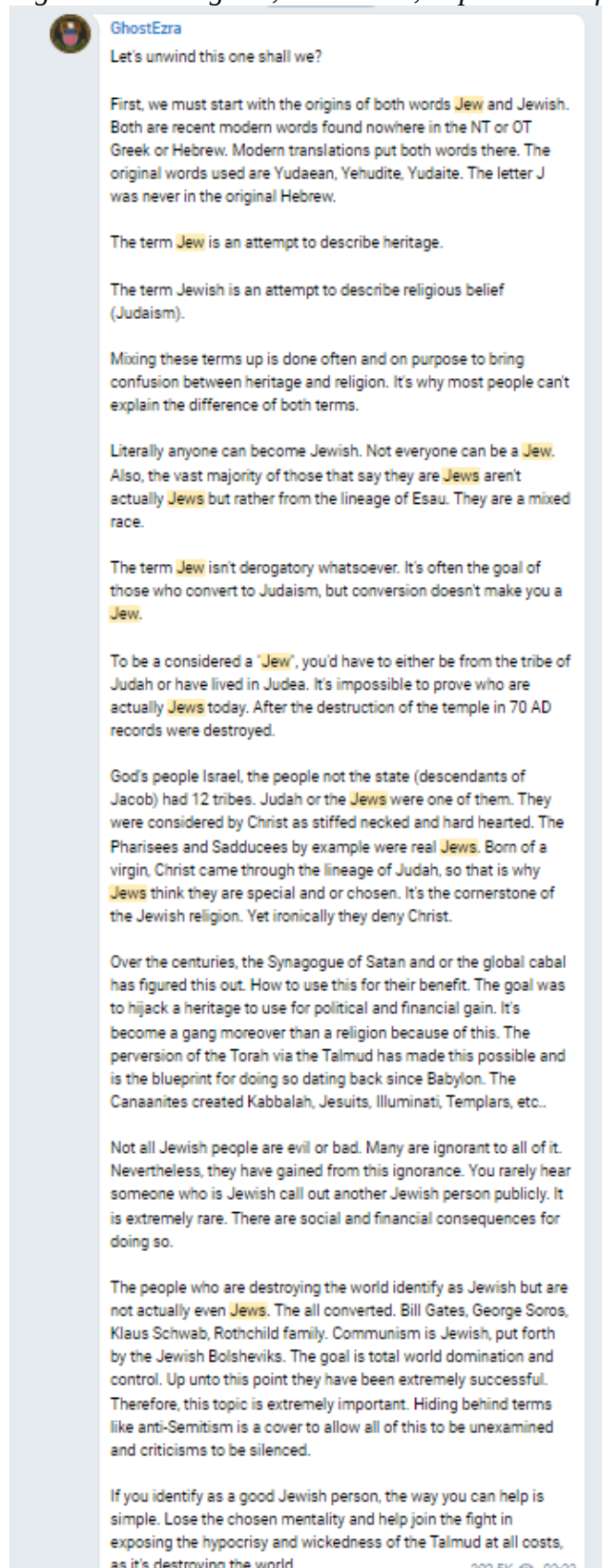
June 6, 2021

**GhostEzra**

The Synagogue of Satan will eventually get their rightful earthly king. He will be the antichrist. There will be great regret and suffering for those that rejected the Messiah. Nothing and nobody can stop it.

276.6K  14:44

Figure 105: Telegram, GhostEzra, Explanation of the term 'Jew'



GhostEzra

Let's unwind this one shall we?

First, we must start with the origins of both words **Jew** and **Jewish**. Both are recent modern words found nowhere in the NT or OT Greek or Hebrew. Modern translations put both words there. The original words used are Yudeean, Yehudite, Yudaite. The letter J was never in the original Hebrew.

The term **Jew** is an attempt to describe heritage.

The term **Jewish** is an attempt to describe religious belief (Judaism).

Mixing these terms up is done often and on purpose to bring confusion between heritage and religion. It's why most people can't explain the difference of both terms.

Literally anyone can become Jewish. Not everyone can be a **Jew**. Also, the vast majority of those that say they are **Jews** aren't actually **Jews** but rather from the lineage of Esau. They are a mixed race.

The term **Jew** isn't derogatory whatsoever. It's often the goal of those who convert to Judaism, but conversion doesn't make you a **Jew**.

To be considered a "**Jew**", you'd have to either be from the tribe of Judah or have lived in Judea. It's impossible to prove who are actually **Jews** today. After the destruction of the temple in 70 AD records were destroyed.

God's people Israel, the people not the state (descendants of Jacob) had 12 tribes. Judah or the **Jews** were one of them. They were considered by Christ as stiff-necked and hard-hearted. The Pharisees and Sadducees by example were real **Jews**. Born of a virgin, Christ came through the lineage of Judah, so that is why **Jews** think they are special and chosen. It's the cornerstone of the Jewish religion. Yet ironically they deny Christ.

Over the centuries, the Synagogue of Satan and or the global cabal has figured this out. How to use this for their benefit. The goal was to hijack a heritage to use for political and financial gain. It's become a gang more than a religion because of this. The perversion of the Torah via the Talmud has made this possible and is the blueprint for doing so dating back since Babylon. The Canaanites created Kabbalah, Jesuits, Illuminati, Templars, etc..

Not all Jewish people are evil or bad. Many are ignorant to all of it. Nevertheless, they have gained from this ignorance. You rarely hear someone who is Jewish call out another Jewish person publicly. It is extremely rare. There are social and financial consequences for doing so.

The people who are destroying the world identify as Jewish but are not actually even **Jews**. They all converted. Bill Gates, George Soros, Klaus Schwab, Rothchild family. Communism is Jewish, put forth by the Jewish Bolsheviks. The goal is total world domination and control. Up unto this point they have been extremely successful. Therefore, this topic is extremely important. Hiding behind terms like anti-Semitism is a cover to allow all of this to be unexamined and criticisms to be silenced.

If you identify as a good Jewish person, the way you can help is simple. Lose the chosen mentality and help join the fight in exposing the hypocrisy and wickedness of the Talmud at all costs, as it's destroying the world.

Figure 106: Telegram, GhostEzra, Zionist vaccines



Figure 107: Telegram, GhostEzra, Exposing the Zionist agenda

**GhostEzra**

Why is exposing the **Zionist** agenda so important? It's quite simple. **Zionists** have owned America for well over a hundred years. You've been a slave since 1871 regardless of your skin color. We ran a test earlier this week to go into the other telegram channels exposing this agenda. The results were astounding. Many were blocked and censored immediately. This is a very dangerous echo chamber for those who claim they are part of a truth movement. If you were blocked or censored in anyway please post your results below. We can't keep doing the same things and expect different results. That's the definition of insanity. 📌📌

244.2K 👁 14:10

July 13, 2021

**GhostEzra**

Here are the priorities in order facing this country.

1. **Zionist** agenda.
2. Deadly poisonous vaccine.
3. Election integrity/audits.

If you are dead or a slave elections won't matter.

As for Evergreen spinning around in the Suez Canal. It's all a distraction from the 3 main issues.

275.7K 👁 edited 13:45

July 14, 2021

**GhostEzra**

There's a huge **Zionist** infiltration in the church itself real and has been happening for a very long time. It's time we talk about it.

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