

Russell Muirhead* and Nancy L. Rosenblum

Will Reality Bite Back: Conspiratorial Fictions and the Assault on Democracy

<https://doi.org/10.1515/for-2020-2016>

Two years ago, we put the final revisions on our book about conspiratorial thinking in American politics: *A Lot of People are Saying: the New Conspiracism and the Assault on Democracy*. As we were about to click “send” and transmit the manuscript to our editor, we paused: “what if Rigged, QAnon, Pizzagate and the like go away by the time the book comes out?”

That was two years ago. Since then, none of our fears have been put to rest. Democratic institutions have been degraded by the conspiracist forces we identified, and these forces have been escalated by a conspiracy-minded president who has the capacity to impose his compromised sense of reality on the nation.

Two intertwined events have amplified the force and consequences of conspiracism. One is the way the 2020 presidential election has been threatened by conspiracy claims and rogue violence; the other is a deadly pandemic in which the counsel of specialists in public health has been eclipsed by conspiracy claims advanced by the president and submissive members of his party. We examine these up-to-the-moment charges below.

Can reality bite back? Can, for instance, the fact that the virus is, after all, real and deadly – as the President’s own infection and hospitalization testify – displace the conspiratorial fictions that say the virus is not a threat to everyone? Can the actual outcome of the 2020 election cut through the fog of suspicion that the president has created by charging at every turn that the process is rigged?

1 Classic Conspiracy Theory

It is difficult to use the word “conspiracy” without putting the word “theory” right next to it. That is because so many conspiratorial allegations are theories about

***Corresponding author: Russell Muirhead**, Robert Clements Professor of Democracy and Politics and Chair, Department of Government, Dartmouth College, Hanover, USA, E-mail: russell.muirhead@dartmouth.edu

Nancy L. Rosenblum, Emerita, Senator Joseph S. Clark Professor of Ethics in Politics and Government, Harvard University, Cambridge, USA, E-mail: Nrosenblum@gov.harvard.edu

how the political world actually works. Classic conspiracy theory tries to make power legible and accountable.

Conspiracy theory makes sense of the world by imposing intentionality on events. For the conspiracy theorist, significant events are not accidents, the outcome of random events or contingent unlikely causes. Things happen because the powerful *intend* them to happen. Coronavirus is not an accidental mutation that jumped species in China's "wet markets"; it is something the Chinese state intentionally loosed into the world, to weaken its rivals.

Conspiracy theorists also project proportionality onto events, so events of world-historical importance are balanced by causes that are equally powerful, which is often the government. It was not 19 people hiding in the sands of Afghanistan who attacked the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on 9/11—it was the U.S. government itself. And it was not a lone gunman who assassinated President Kennedy; again, the government was in on it. Cause is proportional to effect.

Classic conspiracy theorists mimic social science or investigative journalism – studiously gathering evidence, offering proofs, and publishing their results. The website Architects and Engineers for 9–11 Truth, for example, features calculations about the temperature of jet fuel to "prove" that planes could not have brought down the World Trade Center. Once all the facts – especially facts ominously withheld by reliable sources and omitted from official reports and bits of information that only *they* recognize as clues to the real story – are amassed, a pattern of machinations emerges. The dots are woven into a comprehensive narrative of events. Warranted or not, traditional conspiracism is conspiracy with a theory.

Conspiracy theories conclude in a call to action, even revolution. The *Declaration of Independence* itself is a conspiracy theory. The truth of human equality may have been self-evident, but the British plot to "enslave" America was not. The evidence had to be scrupulously assembled and laid out, and the authors of the Declaration included a list of actions taken by the King's ministers and colonial governors. These were the dots that, once connected, formed a pattern adding up to "a long train of abuses and usurpations all tending the same way" – to reduce the colonies to "absolute despotism."

The Declaration is a conspiracy *theory* – a coherent (and contestable) explanation of sinister events. And it contains a *political theory*. This is vital: the point of classic conspiracy theory in democracy is to reveal a sinister design for a purpose: empowering the people. To identify the danger we have to understand what is threatened – we need a conception of liberty, of law, of just institutions. The revolutionaries advocated a republic which is why – as Tom Paine argued in his great pamphlet *Common Sense* – the Declaration doesn't direct Americans to seek redress of grievances and reconciliation but to dissolve the political bonds that

connected them to Britain by armed resistance and declare themselves independent states.

Classic conspiracy theory starts with something *in the world* that needs to be explained—the British declaring martial law in Massachusetts, or a seemingly random attack on the Pentagon and the World Trade Center. It gathers evidence to uncover the cover-up, and hold power to account, with the aim of re-empowering the democracy. Many conspiracy theories are farfetched—so strained in their reasoning and fantastic in their assumptions, one wonders how anyone can believe them. But some are true. And they uncover real malfeasance and treachery. In its classic form, conspiracy theory can be a salutary force in democratic politics.

If “conspiracy” and “theory” go together so intuitively that we can hardly say one word without the other, what prevails now is something else. Conspiracy and theory are decoupled.

2 Conspiracy Without the Theory

Conspiracy without the theory insists that things are not as they seem, but it dispenses with the burden of explanation. There is no exhaustive amassing of evidence, no signs that reveal a pattern, no argument, no interpretation.

“Rigged!” – just one word suffices to charge that the New Hampshire presidential primary was manipulated – without any evidence of irregularity—not one report of a fraudulent voter impersonating a registered voter. At the first presidential debate between Donald Trump and Joseph Biden, the president insisted that Democratic officials were throwing out absentee ballots marked for him and were sending Democratic voters multiple ballots. President Trump had cast the outcome of the 2018 mid-terms as a conspiracy as well: “There were a lot of close elections that were – they seem to, every single one of them went Democrat. If it was close, they say the Democrat – there’s something going on, fella ...”¹ And again: undocumented immigrants “vote many times, not just twice, not just three times. They vote—it’s like a circle. They come back; they put a new hat on. They come back; they put on a new shirt ... You know what’s going on. It’s a rigged deal.”²

1 Donald J. Trump, “Speech to the National Republican Congressional Committee Spring Dinner,” April 2, 2019, (video), quotation at 0:00–0:11, at https://www.washingtonpost.com/video/politics/trumps-wide-ranging-speech-wind-turbines-biden-and-immigrants/2019/04/02/1c44863b-a3e2-4c46-84e9-d94df4038183_video.html?itid=lk_inline_manual_2.

2 Katie Rogers, “In Remarks to Young Supporters, Trump Falsely Calls Elections A ‘Rigged Deal,’” *The New York Times*, June 23, 2020, at <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/07/23/us/politics/donald-trump-charlie-kirk-tsas.html>.

When we speak of “rigged” or the assertion that Ukraine and not Russia interfered in U.S. elections, or “fake news” or “the deep state” as conspiracy *theory*, we’re accepting that behind the unsupported accusation there really *are* recognizable elements of explanation. By calling this conspiracy theory we abet this sleight of hand. There is no theory—only bare assertion.

If not evidence and argument, what gives conspiracism its force and appeal? Thousands of the president’s lies come and go—fact checked or filed away or faded away – ephemera scattered by a fresh blast of lies – but the conspiracist claims he concocts and adopts have a long half-life. Why?

First, there is the matter of form. Sheer assertion without rudimentary evidence or argument is easy to communicate – even in 280 characters on Twitter. Unlike “hoax” or “migrant invasion,” a complex conspiracy theory cannot be compressed to a Tweet.

And brute assertion provides the immediate gratification of performative aggression, lashing out to harm or destroy. Indeed, the more unfathomable the accusation, the greater the distress and disorientation it provokes, the more satisfying it can be. Like the stomach-turning charge that the grieving parents of kindergarteners killed in the Sandy Hook school massacre are “crisis actors” hired to promote gun control. The regular rhythms of institutionalized democratic politics don’t offer this emotional release.

Today’s conspiracism also allows political players to level bizarre charges while evading responsibility when it takes the form “I’m just asking questions.” As in former Arkansas governor and 2012 Republican presidential candidate Mike Huckabee’s sly invocation of the birther conspiracy: “I would love to know more, what I know is troubling enough. And one thing that I do know is his having grown up in Kenya”³ Conspiracy without the theory travels in innuendo: certain people “have an agenda” – some unspecified purpose more nefarious than self-interest or partisan bias drives them.

Attorney General William Barr’s testimony at Senate hearings in April 2019 combined bare assertion and just asking questions. “I think *spying* did occur,” he pronounced, using the charged term ‘spying’ without offering reasons to question intelligence agencies’ assurance that national security concerns justified surveillance pursuant to an FISA warrant. He added emphasis to his confident assertion: “it’s a big deal, it’s a big deal.” He then shifted to the *I’m just asking questions* mode of innuendo: “I am not saying that improper surveillance occurred.

³ George F. Will, “2012: The GOP’s Wierdness Factor,” *The New York Post*, March 7, 2011, at <https://nypost.com/2011/03/07/2012-the-gops-weirdness-factor/>.

I am saying that I am concerned about it and I'm looking into it.”⁴ “It” being an attempted coup d'état.

What validates conspiracist claims if not evidence and argument? Repetition.

Asked whether George Soros was secretly funding the “caravan” of migrants trekking toward the U.S. border President Trump replied, “I wouldn't be surprised. A lot of people say yes.” At a New Hampshire campaign stop in September 2015, Trump was asked about Muslim communities operating military camps in the U.S. to prepare to conduct terrorist raids. Notwithstanding the absence of any evidence, he stoked the fear: “You know, a lot of people are saying that, and a lot of people are saying that bad things are happening out there.”⁵ And repetition by others affirms the president's compromised sense of reality. What matters is the number of re-tweets his post enjoys. Forwarding, re-posting, re-tweeting, and ‘liking’: these are how accusations are validated.

Validation through repetition lowers the bar. If a lot of people are saying it, it must be if not factually *true*, at least *true enough* to repeat, as in the charge by a Republican member of Congress that liberals staged the 2017 white nationalist rally in Charlottesville Virginia: “I'm not saying it's true, but I am suggesting that it is completely plausible.”⁶ The deeper truth of political animus against an enemy who will resort to anything justifies assenting to and spreading the unsupported conspiracy claim. The standard of “true enough” is permissive enough to let anything in, because anything attributed to a loathesome opposition can be plausible.

But what has done even more to allow everything in is the revolution in communication technology that allows anyone to say anything to the whole world instantly and for free. It has specific value for conspiracists because likes, shares, tweets and retweets are measurable. We can't verify the substantive claims, but (discounting bots and fraudulent accounts) we can claim that “a lot of people” are saying that “there's something going on here.”

It might have been that Obama's FBI tapped phones in Trump tower. Bare assertion suffices because what matters is that hostile intent and capacity to commit the subterfuge were there. Behind it is the logic: “Even if it's not totally true, there's something there.”

4 Eric Tuckler and Mary Joe Jalonik, “Barr Says ‘I Think Spying Did Occur against the Trump Campaign,’” *Associated Press*, April 10, 2019, at <https://apnews.com/article/eac9c8f45ed84fb9a3c1f5c486f5c09e>.

5 David Wiegel, “What the Media Gets Wrong about Donald Trump's Obama-Muslim Flap”, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2015/09/18/why-nobody-can-agree-on-what-donald-trump-said-about-muslims/?utm_term=.875f4796fef9.

6 Bryan Clark, “Rep Shares Article Saying Charlottesville Was ‘Set-Up,’” *Idaho Post Register*, August 18, 2017, at <http://www.spokesman.com/stories/2017/aug/18/idaho-state-rep-shares-article-saying-charlottesville/>.

The bar for assent is low: if something could have happened, even if there is no evidence for it at all, then it is true enough.⁷ Hostile intent and capacity to commit the subterfuge make it true enough. Consider the White House Press Secretary's response to questions about Trump's tweet of a video that falsely purported to show a Muslim migrant committing an assault: "Whether it's a real video, the threat is real."⁸

Political psychologists classify the types and conditions of susceptibility to conspiracism, and often use the language of belief. But belief is not the best way of looking at this. QAnon—the conspiratorial concoction that includes everything from Hillary Clinton trafficking in children to JFK Jr. rising from the dead—is not something its adherents "believe." It is something else: more like an expression of political identity than a theory or set of propositions. It is participatory and tribal.

Conspiracism makes sense of things, then, but not as conspiracy theory does by way of explanation. It makes sense to people for whom the charge of a malevolent scheme fits with the affinities and hostilities that comprise their political world-view. It is neither believing the fact of the matter nor of repeating it while believing that it is false. It is true enough because it fits a political mapping of friends and enemies.

Take Pizzagate, the narrative that surfaced in the 2016 campaign in which Hilary Clinton heads a child trafficking and pedophilia ring operating out of the basement of Comet Ping Pong pizza near Washington D.C. In one version Clinton and Huma Abedeen slice off children's faces and wear them as masks – a blood libel. We recognize the ghastly genealogy of this sort of smear in which the vile "other" is portrayed engaging in sexual perversion and is de-humanized.

Of course, the narrative about Clinton's sex-trafficking ring is total fabrication. There is no real-world event to be explained: no buses of children arriving at Comet Ping Pong, no screams, no coming and going of predators at night, there is not even a basement. Assent to Pizzagate affirms the view that Hillary Clinton does unthinkable bad things and lies about them. She is not a political opponent but as Alex Jones put it "a psychopathic demon from hell . . ." This is what makes the child-trafficking charge "true enough."

7 Some philosophers would argue that all beliefs rest on a kind of true-enoughness, or verisimilitude. In this view, we never validate our beliefs to the point of perfect certainty; we can only attempt to falsify them, and beliefs that have stood the test of falsification are corroborated. True-enoughness, by contrast, is not subject to any falsification test. If it seems possible, it satisfies the true-enough test.

8 Daniel A. Effron, "Why Trump Supporters Don't Mind His Lies," *The New York Times*, April 28, 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/28/opinion/sunday/why-trump-supporters-dont-mind-his-lies.html>.

To be sure, there are isolated literal believers. Armed with a loaded assault rifle, a revolver, and a knife, Edgar Welch arrived at Comet Ping Pong to “self-investigate” Pizzagate and even fired the assault rifle at a locked door, hoping to free the children trapped behind it. In an interview from jail, a few days later, he acknowledged, “The intel on this wasn’t a 100%.”⁹

Our point is that tweeting, posting, liking, and sharing signal identification with others. They take conspiracism out of the realm of individual psychology and situate it in politics. To supporters, the bottom-up repetition of a conspiracy charge is not only proof that a lot of people are saying it – but is the signature of a collective “we.” Assent is affirmation of identification with others who accept this compromised reality as true enough and who do not want to disassociate from the larger political narrative of covert cabals and elusive political enemies. When bare assertions of conspiracy come from the president, his violation of the rudiments of reasoning is taken as proof that he is a fearsome protector of the nation’s true interests.

And yet, conspiracism is unorganized and uncoordinated, lacking common political purpose and collective democratic agency. There’s a reason for this: conspiracism lacks not only theory as explanation but also political theory. It is without ideology or system or philosophy or positive program or plan of action. Traditional *conspiracy theory* often has an ounce of utopianism as the Declaration illustrates; expose the plot and save the country or the world, and for that we need a vision of what a saved or revolutionized or apocalyptically cleansed political world would look like.

We judge the conspiracism we have described to be potent but politically sterile—it can destroy, but it cannot create, rebuild, or reform. We’re witnessing something striking: it does not take an alternative political ideology—communism, authoritarianism, theism, fascism—to degrade and delegitimize democracy. Angry conspiracism does the work.

3 Consequences for Democracy: Disorientation

Conspiracism does distinct damage. It has two malignant effects. It disorients citizens. And conspiracists strike at the legitimacy of two institutions that make democracy work: knowledge-producing institutions and political parties. Because

⁹ Faiz Siddiqui and Susan Svrluga, “N.C. Man Told DC Police He Went to DC Pizzeria with Gun To Investigate Conspiracy Theory,” *The Washington Post*, December 6, 2016, at <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/local/wp/2016/12/04/d-c-police-respond-to-report-of-a-man-with-a-gun-at-comet-ping-pong-restaurant/>.

these institutions bring pluralism into political life, they must be delegitimated by conspiracists who claim to own reality, who brook no contradiction, and who seek to impose their reality in ways we will describe.

Disorientation comes first. After insisting that his inaugural crowd was the biggest in history, photographs showed it to be of modest size. Trump charged that the photographs were deliberately doctored by the National Park Service. The first claim – the biggest in history – was a lie; the charge of doctoring was a conspiracy charge. This brute assertion of benign civil servants conspiring to alter photographs produced incredulity. It insulted our common sense. It assaulted our understanding of reality. We're disoriented not only because conspiracists are wildly misinformed, or indifferent to facts, or lack the capacity for correction – all true. We're disoriented more profoundly, as George Will observed, because they reject shared notions of *what it means to know something*. What it means to know that the inaugural crowd was the biggest in history.

For conspiracists, factual accounts of events from reliable sources are taken as evidence of the mainstream media's participation in the conspiracy, just as documents released by government agencies or congressional committees are evidence of cover-ups. Transparency, the upside-down conspiracist argument goes, is itself a deception.

Conspiracism is absurd, and a forced diet of absurdity is disorienting. Disorientation is distressing personally and individually. And disorientation spreads as conspiracism spreads, so that a kind of polarization takes hold. Call it "epistemic polarization" – meaning polarization over how we know what we know.

Conspiracists do not reveal how they know what they know. They award themselves the status of *cognoscenti*. They know that things are not as they seem. They see the nefarious course of things left unchecked. They understand that "accidents are planned, democracy is a sham, all faces are masks, all flags are false."¹⁰

This divide over what it means to know something cuts more deeply than familiar partisan and ideological polarization. It is a chasm no translation can bridge. It makes it impossible to analyze, argue, persuade, negotiate, and even to disagree. Government don't come to a full stop. But democratic politics – the mundane politics of negotiating and deliberating and bargaining and persuading and legislating that are the ground of governing – is endangered.

¹⁰ Rob Brotherton, *Suspicious Minds: Why We Believe Conspiracy Theories*, (London: Bloomsbury Sigma, 2015), 78.

4 Delegitimation of Knowledge-Producing Institutions

The assault on knowledge-producing institutions is plain enough. Fake news manufactured by enemies of the people is a conspiracy charge, after all. “These people [i.e. the press] back here are ... absolute scum,” the President shouted, “Remember that. Scum. Scum.”¹¹ What is going on here is not planting seeds of doubt or the perennial charge of partisan bias. The aim is to destroy the legitimacy of the “MSM” by casting reporters as an enemy cabal.

Fake news is just part of a wholesale attack on knowledge-producing institutions that includes analysts in the intelligence services, scientists at the Environmental Protection Agency and the Centers for Disease Control, or economists at the Bureau of Labor Statistics. Conspiracism converts reasonable democratic skepticism about the privileged authority of experts into a crude wholesale claim that they are not just an elite but a malignant political force.

We are now experiencing the deadly effects of willful rejection of knowledge. Conspiracism was Trump’s first impulse as the threat of the virus became plain: COVID-19 is the Democrats’ “new hoax,” he said at a February 2020 rally, repeating the sort of bare assertion we’ve heard from him often. Charges of conspiracy set the combatants in motion. On cue, the infectious disease expert Dr. Anthony S. Fauci – the chief spokesman for public health who stood on the platform where the President gave his daily briefing – is attacked as a “Hillary lover” out to thwart Trump’s “total” authority.

A third of Americans accept a conspiracist account of the origins of the disease. Some charge China with releasing a weaponized biological agent to weaken the West. Some think Bill Gates released the virus to profit from a vaccine that he plans to market. And others promote pseudo-scientific accounts connecting the spread of coronavirus with 5G cell towers. And a common charge is that Trump’s opponents exaggerate the contagion to justify stay-at-home measures that will devastate the economy right before the election.

But deadly consequences follow from the Administration’s rejection of science and substitution of the president’s determination to own reality. They follow too from the complicity of the Republican Party and some of those recruited to the Coronavirus Task Force, which the president bends to his will. Here we have conspiracism in the service of what amounts to government killing. Trump discourages compliance with elementary public health requirements. Epidemiologists are

¹¹ Jonathan Easley, “Trump: Media Is Scum,” *The Hill*, December 7, 2015, at <https://thehill.com/blogs/ballot-box/presidential-races/262400-trump-media-is-scum>.

charged with using what is really just a seasonal flu to justify regulations that extinguish personal freedom. We recognize that virus conspiracists are echoing climate change deniers who say that scientists “want to take your pickup truck, they want to rebuild your home, they want to take away your hamburgers. This is what Stalin dreamed about but never achieved.”¹² Now, public health measures are attacked for restricting our liberty to move around and associate with whomever we please. Public officials scoff at stay-at-home rules and keep the bars and churches open. Rallies spring up at state capitals, with protesters brandishing “don’t tread on me” flags and reviving the defiant slogan “live free or die.” The administration’s claim that public health measures are dispensable – and thus that the men and women struck down by the disease are dispensable – altered the political landscape and infected public opinion.

The assault on knowledge-producing institutions is deadly. Pandemic aside, it is devastating to every aspect of governing, from Social Security to national security. Political judgment and decision depend on adherence to evidence and argument, on willingness to entertain new information and interpretation as they emerge, and on a capacity for self-correction. Facts and their meaning are never beyond controversy. Still, public policy and administration need chemists, engineers, diplomats, and (yes) economists and (even) moral philosophers. In thinking about democracy it is easy to overlook the fact that its essentials include not only political participation and civil liberties but also the administrative state. The point is simple: when sources of knowledge are closed down and thrust outside the orbit of consideration, the essential framework for questioning, correction, and assurance is undone. That is conspiracism’s work.

Skepticism and knowledge go hand in hand. A Millian orthodoxy has it that even when we are persuaded that, all things considered, the available evidence and argument point in a certain direction, we should be alive to the possibility that in spite of our best effort to get it right, we got it wrong. Our assurance of being right relies on doubt and an iterative process of self-correction. Assessing conspiracist claims, like everything else, requires willingness to entertain new information as it emerges from a plurality of sources. It entails a capacity to recognize that certainty is provisional. It requires, again, a capacity for self-correction.¹³ It is inseparable

¹² Sebastian Gorka cited in Naomi Klein, “Care and Repair: Left Politics in the Age of Climate Change”, *Dissent: Democracy and Barbarism*, Winter, 2020: pp. 97–108 at 97.

¹³ For example the rumor that as a result of the Trump administration’s “zero-tolerance” policy and the forcible separation of migrant children from their families, the government had “lost” 1500 children. The data was from 2014 under different circumstances; though the claim was repeated widely it was quickly corrected and those who had repeated it, like Senator Ed Markey from Massachusetts, retracted the charge. <https://www.cnn.com/2018/05/29/us/immigration-refugee-child-missing-hhs-obama-photo-trnd/index.html>.

from the virtue – both intellectual and political – of skepticism. In democracy it requires not only personal openness but a degree of public respect for knowledge and for reasonable doubt.

A plurality of knowledge-producing sources is the necessary resource for both knowledge and skepticism. The wealth of specialized knowledge, of science and social science, and of ethical perspectives provide the terrain from which we consider not only when our best understanding of facts and theories and explanations is limited or flawed but also when experts are wrong, when science is incomplete, and when reasons match or don't match the values we bring to politics (and everything else).

The conspiracist assault on knowledge-producing institutions follows on decades of charges of partisan bias and the creation of ideologically warring research centers, publications, and media. But conspiracists take things further. “Fake news” is more than a label applied to coverage that is deceptive or biased. It is an accusation of conspiracy, conveying that the mainstream media is “scum,” colluding to disempower Trump and weaken the nation: “They have their reasons, and you understand that.”¹⁴ As one penitent conservative lamented, the price of rejecting mainstream reporting “turned out to be far higher than I imagined. The cumulative effect of the attacks was to delegitimize these outlets and essentially destroy much of the right’s immunity to false information. We thought we were creating a savvier, more skeptical audience. Instead, we opened the door for President Trump, who found an audience that could be easily misled.”¹⁵

So it is striking that conspiracists turn the tables and embrace the notion that *they* are the real critical thinkers. For some time literary scholars have offered up a romanticized characterization of conspiracism as a welcome, destabilizing disposition. Conspiracism, the argument goes, “disrupt[s] complacent, consensual, transparent theories of politics” and involves us “in a reiterative back-and-forth that mobilizes doubt and reassurance ... The narrative pivot ... involves the step away from belief and into skepticism”¹⁶ Conspiracists adopt this characterization, insisting that their radio shows and Internet sites and videos are teaching information consumers to be questioners, to be “citizen journalists,” to

¹⁴ Aaron Blake, “Infowars is behind President Trump’s Idea that the Media is Covering Up Terrorist Attacks”, *Washington Post*, February 6, 2017: [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2017/02/06/trups-suggestio-that-the-media-is-ignoring-terrorist-attacks-has-a-familiar-source-infowars.e](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2017/02/06/trumps-suggestio-that-the-media-is-ignoring-terrorist-attacks-has-a-familiar-source-infowars.e).

¹⁵ Charles Sykes, “Why Nobody Cares the President is Lying,” *The New York Times*, Feb. 4, 2017. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/04/opinion/sunday/why-nobody-cares-the-president-is-lying.html>.

¹⁶ Jodi Dean, “Theorizing Conspiracy Theory,” *Theory and Event*, 4, no. 3 (2000), p. 2, 6; at <https://muse-jhu-ed-ezp-prod1.hul.harvard.edu/article/32599>.

get all the facts and make up their own minds. Advancing his fabrication that the murder of children at Sandy Hook elementary school was staged, Alex Jones says, “So, if children were lost at Sandy Hook, my heart goes out to each and every one of those parents. And the people who say they’re parents that I see on the news. The only problem is, I’ve watched a lot of soap operas. And I’ve seen actors before. And I know when I’m watching a movie and when I’m watching something real.”¹⁷ Jones casts himself as the skeptic. He wanted to “open a dialogue” with the families because government and the mainstream media were misrepresenting things: “The idea they’re pushing is that you can’t ever question anything ... I don’t think you can establish that anything is 100% fact.”¹⁸

The conspiracist claim to skepticism is fraudulent. Conspiracists see challenges from mainstream media and official sources as an occasion for reaffirming their certitude. Here is a subscriber to the QAnon conspiracy talking to a fellow Q about family and friends who dismiss them as demented or simply bizarre: “You have to remember it’s brainwashing. Think of it as an illness. I know it’s hard not to get angry in the moment, but don’t stay angry. You’ve woken up, you have to be patient and willing to ... help them wake up.”¹⁹ They have esoteric knowledge of how things really are. They ask, “who do you trust?” Consider the significance of this question: when we decide what community is worthy of epistemic trust, we are implicitly also deciding what it means to know something.

5 Delegitimation of Political Parties

Just as important as the delegitimation of knowledge-producing institutions is the delegitimation of the defining institution of democracy: the regular rivalry of political parties where each acknowledges the legitimacy of the opposition. Today, conspiracists attack Democrats as “traitors” and instigators of coups, allied with “anarchists, agitators, rioters, looters, and flag-burners.” They are not to be opposed but eliminated – “locked up,” or something more ominous still.

In representative democracy the messy array of interests, opinions, values, and identities is organized for the purposes of politics by parties. Pluralism is built into the terms ‘party’ and ‘partisanship’. Although partisans want a winning

¹⁷ District Court of Travis County, Texas, 345th District Court. Cause no. D-1-GN-18-001842. Also Quoted in Williamson, *op.cit.* One of the parents in the lawsuit, Wheeler, was once an actor.

¹⁸ Williamson and Steel. Also cited in plaintiffs pleadings: [21/22/23].

¹⁹ David Atkins, “The Q-Anon Conspiracy is Still Destroying Lives and Families”, *Washington Monthly*, December 9, 2018. <https://washingtonmonthly.com/2018/12/09/the-q-anon-conspiracy-theory-is-still-destroying-lives-and-families>.

majority they do not imagine that they represent the whole nation, or all “real” Americans. It takes humility and acceptance of political pluralism to acknowledge that their party is just a part. Parties rest on a commitment to acknowledging legitimate opposition, and they bring opposition into the frame of government. Party rivalry with its idea of the loyal opposition is the defining institution of representative democracy.

Historically and today, the delegitimation of democracy springs from antipathy to political pluralism and insists that the opposition is not a loyal opposition but a conspiracy to subvert the nation. We witness this happening. The conspiracist attack starts by delegitimizing opposition candidates and party leaders – birtherism or the chant “lock her up.”

Then comes delegitimation of the entire opposition. Not because partisans propound a flawed understanding of the public interest but because they conspire to use the electoral process to create an alien nation. Their covert goal is to deny America as a Christian nation, or dilute America as a white nation, or empower “takers and suckers,” or cede sovereignty to the “new world order.” Political tactics of self-entrenchment – like disenfranchising opposition voters – are aggravated and doubly justified when they are cast not just as staving off a loss of legislative seats but as saving the nation from the party of treason.

Even intense partisan polarization failed to prepare us for this. When Democrats in Congress did not applaud his first State of the Union address, Trump said “Can we call that treason? Why not? I mean, they certainly didn’t seem to love our country very much.”²⁰ In a speech before the Conservative Political Action Committee, he offered to name the members of Congress who hate their country. The President calls the whistleblower whose complaint set off the Congressional impeachment inquiry a traitor appropriately punished by execution. In April 2019, he told reporters “Democrats know the Mueller probe was all a big scam” and what they were doing was “actually treason.”²¹ At one of his rallies before the 2018 midterm elections, Trump said, “The Democrat Party is held hostage by far-left activists, by angry mobs, antifa, by deep-state radicals ... I would never suggest this, but I will tell you, they’re so lucky that we’re peaceful.”²² Conspiracism carries

20 Chris Cillizza, “Donald Trump Thinks Not Clapping for Him Is ‘Treasonous,’” *CNN On Point*, February 5, 2018, at <https://www.cnn.com/2018/02/05/politics/trump-speech-treason/index.html>.

21 Annie Karni and Maggie Haberman, “Enboldened by his Attorney General, Trump Confronts Mueller Report Head-On”, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/14/us/politics/trump-mueller-report>.

22 Brian Reis, “President Trump Holds Missouri Rally,” *CNN*, September 24, 2018, at https://edition.cnn.com/politics/live-news/trump-rally-missouri-sept-2018/h_d1a6df631bf60ee51972018c885b83de.

the invitation to rogue violence: as in Trump’s September 2020 call for the white-nationalist militia known as the Proud Boys to “stand back and stand by.”²³

While party polarization may account for the 45% of Democrats and 35% of Republicans who said they would be “displeased” if their child married someone of the other party, it takes delegitimation to account for the growing numbers who see the other party as a “threat.”²⁴

Conspiracism returns us to the age before modern representative democracy, when opposition was by definition seditious and partisans risked being killed, jailed, and exiled. Today, again, it is linked to the threat of violence and to actual violence.

Stepping back, we see that the blizzard of conspiracist assertions, though focused on knowledge-producing institutions and political opposition, leaves no institution untouched. There is nowhere it can’t go.

- *Institutions are derailed*: the military is diverted from its operations and training to the southern border to “deter” an “invasion” of M13 gangs and migrants carrying diseases and votes.
- *Institutions are invented*: when National Security Director Daniel Coats’ annual threat assessment identified climate change as a security threat, a commission is formed to ‘reexamine’ this finding headed by a physicist who likens the demonization of carbon dioxide to Hitler’s demonization of the Jews.
- *Institutions are hijacked*: the Justice Department under Attorney General William Barr is enlisted to prove (after earlier investigations failed to show) that FBI surveillance of associates of the Trump campaign was part of a plot by Obama, and that the Mueller investigation was an attempted coup against the President. Barr appointed a federal prosecutor to investigate the investigators. In the process institutions at the heart of the executive branch—the Department of Justice and the Federal Bureau of Investigation—are further degraded.
- *Institutions are circumvented*, most ominously in foreign affairs. Trump assaults intelligence and national security experts and career diplomats as disloyal elements of the ‘deep state’. Official channels are abandoned, Congressional oversight is thwarted. Foreign relations go rogue, shaped by conspiracist claims.

²³ Trump-Biden First Debate, full transcript, at 1:06:04; *C-Span*, September 29, 2020 at <https://www.c-span.org/video/?475793-1/trump-biden-debate&live>.

²⁴ Maxine Najle, Robert P. Jones, “American Democracy in Crisis: The Fate of Pluralism in a Divided Nation,” *PRRI*, February 19, 2019, at <https://www.prii.org/research/american-democracy-in-crisis-the-fate-of-pluralism-in-a-divided-nation/>.

Institutions derailed, invented, hijacked and circumvented – this wreckage of normal order under the aegis of a compromised sense of reality – makes government illegitimate to more and more people.

We underscore *delegitimation* of foundational institutions. The word clarifies the damage done. Delegitimation is not the equivalent of opposing or discrediting or sowing doubt and mistrust. After all, government often fails to maintain order or to keep promises or to enforce laws fairly or to make just laws or to fight corruption; it squanders trust and the result is mistrust. But mistrust is not the whole story. To delegitimize a democratic institution is this: to drain it of meaning, value, and authority so that it no longer has a claim to consent or even compliance. That is conspiracism's work.

6 As We Write: Delegitimizing 2020 Elections

"This is going to be fraud like you've never seen" Trump said in his September 28 debate with Joseph Biden.²⁵ This is the culmination of the conspiracism Trump first spread in the 2016 campaign. At that time he had the distinction of delegitimizing an election he won, because he could not accept the reality that he lost the popular vote. So he invented three million fraudulent voters organized by Democrats or George Soros. "Rigged!" returned after losses in the 2018 midterms.

And today, he and his enablers in the Republican party deliver charges of a rigged election in anticipation of the vote. On opening day of the Republican Convention Trump was adamant: "the only way they can take this election away from us is if this is a rigged election."²⁶ The core of his conspiracy charge is that Democratic officials will manipulate the increase in mailed ballots amid the pandemic. "RIGGED ELECTION," Trump tweeted in June 2020. "Millions of mail-in ballots will be printed by foreign countries, and others. It will be the scandal of our times!"²⁷ That a president of the United States was preparing his followers to refuse to peacefully accept defeat is unthinkable—and yet obvious.

²⁵ "Full transcript of the presidential debate between Joe Biden and Donald trump," *USA Today*, September 30, 2020, at <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/elections/2020/09/30/presidential-debate-read-full-transcript-first-debate/3587462001/>.

²⁶ "Republicans Nominate Trump for Reelection on First Day of Convention," *The Guardian*, August 24, 2020, at <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/aug/24/trump-rnc-republican-national-convention-nomination-pence>.

²⁷ Zack Budryk, "Trump: Foreign countries will print 'millions of mail-in ballots' in 'scandal of our times!'"

The Hill, June 22, 2020, <https://thehill.com/blogs/blog-briefing-room/news/503837-trump-foreign-countries-will-print-millions-of-mail-in-ballots>.

Yet 2020 is not just a repeat performance of 2016. After more than three years as president, Trump's grip on government institutions and loyalists he has put in place make his capacity to fix or reject outcomes greater than ever. He is using his authority to insulate himself from electoral accountability.

First he tells the country that mail-in voting is so vulnerable to fraud and manipulation, it is bound to produce compromised election results. Next, he intervenes in the Postal Service to undermine its capacity to handle these ballots. He has "his" Postmaster General fire knowledgeable managers and destroy equipment and cut over-time pay to insure that mail will be snail mail: slowing down delivery of mail-in ballots to voters and slowing down return mail so that the ballots will be returned too late to be counted.

He is also able to call up and militarize federal agents from Immigration and Customs Enforcement or Homeland Security to disrupt and intimidate, injure and arrest citizens who protest real-time efforts to suppress their votes. Trump can provoke and escalate the violence that grounds his apocalyptic prophecy of chaos in suburbia.

At the close of our book, we followed the logic of conspiracism to its conclusion. We imagined a "worst-case scenario": a president who, after losing a close election, refuses to concede. His supporters give him the benefit of their doubts, since they have been taught to reject election results that they have been told are "rigged." The president's supporters in Congress sit on their hands. The chief justice of the Supreme Court says that "irregularities much be investigated" before he is willing to administer the oath of office to Trump's opponent.

Trump is just a few steps away from following the logic of his conspiracism to the same conclusion. Asked whether he will step down if voters reject him, he answers "we'll see." He set the stage by a years-long attack on mail-in ballots. The Democratic victor, if there is one, would be a pretender. Trump has delegitimated the election in advance and warned that any attempt at a transition will be violent: "Get rid of the [mail-in] ballots and you'll have a very peaceful—there won't be a transfer, frankly. There will be a continuation." He asserts that with his forthcoming Supreme Court appointment, his legal challenges to ballots will be resolved in his favor.

This is the decisive delegitimation of democratic institutions: the erosion of the defining feature that democracy cannot exist without, the willingness of office holders who lose elections to peacefully walk away, and hand the keys over to the winners.

We might hope this will all go away when Trump leaves the White House and someone without a conspiracist mindset and with commitment to democratic order fills the office. Yet even so, conspiracism is unlikely to be beaten back to the fringes. Conspiracism offers a path to those who want power: it allows them to

create advantageous political divisions and harness the loyalties of those with grievances. Most of all, it allows them to remake reality. The question is, can reality bite back?

Pushing Back:

The two malignant conspiracies we've focused on here – democracy is rigged and COVID is purposefully exaggerated by Democrats – don't go unanswered. Reality bites back. And because of this, there is hope for the possibility that common sense can generate an immune response that protects people from the disorientation of conspiracism. It may even provide a bulwark that protects democracy from delegitimation.

Threats to the 2020 election are recognized, and defenders of this defining element of democracy are vocal and organized.

- “Speaking truth to conspiracy”, including charges that the election is rigged, has become the preoccupation of journalists and commentators and, in a small but significant shift, at least some elected representatives of the President's own party working to defang conspiracism.
- Despite years of disenfranchising millions of “fraudulent” voters and delegitimizing regular party rivalry, a majority of the people affirm the nation's capacity for fair democracy, and rally to protect it.
- Black Lives Matter is the largest mass movement in American history. It is multiracial and multigenerational. Importantly, protestors recognize that grievances about injustice and protest politics are inseparable from popular mobilization for voting.
- Civil society, the beating heart of democracy in America, has been given new life. Advocacy groups educate; organizers use face-to-face mobilizing and new technology to encourage voting; specialists in election law are litigating electoral obstruction and are preparing briefs for the legal challenges to come. Myriad groups provide assistance to voters related to the coronavirus pandemic and organize to meet anticipated disruption at polling places.

With COVID we see that reality bites even more deeply, and in two ways. First, with the brutally elementary data that common sense cannot deny. COVID conspiracism is plausible when no one you know has been infected, but it runs out of fuel when the president is transported to Walter Reed Hospital for treatment. Conspiracism promised the power to erase unwanted facts and remake reality as we please: *the virus is a hoax*. That promise crashes against the reality of a president with a fever, in a hospital, facing grave and uncertain prospects. It crashes against visceral awareness. When it comes to the decision to wear a mask, reality bites ... hard.

Reality bites back against COVID madness in a second and more profound way: in the inability of conspiracism to make sense of the world. Conspiracism

orients people in a political fight. It creates a fictional world in which one's political opponents are the concentration of pure evil—witches who need to be burned instead of adversaries who need to be argued with. The price of such fabulation is that conspiracism cannot interpret the world as it actually is, and cannot orient us to our real predicament. Making sense of things is sometimes about illuminating the real causes of events. But it is also, ultimately, about creating and discovering the meaning that frames events and experiences. Especially the experience of suffering. As widespread as conspiracism is, it has a signal weakness: the virus “hoax” cannot make sense of the world, it cannot make sense of what those who are stricken suffer, and what everyone fears.

Two hundred thousand (and rising) Americans dead and the depletion of those who survive are sobering facts. The felt reality of our altered everyday life motivates attention to local and state public health experts. Most citizens reject the politicization of disease and conspiracist interpretations of its mortal danger. COVID has been the target of conspiracist delegitimation of science and at the same time it has restored a sense of rational self-protection, the reality of shared danger, and common sense. Death anxiety is with us and this reality bites.

Conspiracist accounts of elections and COVID-19 (and so much else in public life today) are not going to disappear. No strategy for combatting conspiracism promises a return to public health or political health.

7 And Yet

And yet, even if reality bites back and the scope of conspiracism is contained, the damage it has already done will linger. Millions of Americans have been taught to treat every unwelcome fact as a ruse advanced by an evil cabal—crisis actors, the deep state, the globalists, those who hate America, those who threaten white genocide. The tendency to view one's opponents as enemies is now a malignant normal. Even routine election-year rituals like presidential debates, meant to enact the idea of respectful engagement with the opposition, now exhibit the impossibility of such engagement against a president who willfully destroys the event. The delegitimation of democracy is not a threat located off in the future; it is already well underway. The attempted coup is happening now, and coming from conspiracists themselves.

Our uncertainty is warranted. We know a great deal about the historical struggles that produced democratic legitimacy, and a lot about the forces and processes of delegitimation. But we know little about re-legitimation.

Re-legitimation will not happen from piecemeal reforms like factchecking or even the election of a new president who rejects the conspiracist mindset and a

slate of representatives committed to governing. That may stem the damage, but it cannot by itself restore democratic legitimacy. Delegitimation denies the meaning and value and authority of democratic institutions, and it has devalued institutions across the board.

Relegitimation must be similarly comprehensive. Perhaps the best example is the period at the beginning of the twentieth century bracketed by the 1901 election of Theodore Roosevelt and the 1920 constitutional amendment granting women the right to vote. This, the Progressive Era, remade American democracy and as a consequence, saved it. We will need a similarly ambitious agenda to renovate democratic institutions for the extraordinary challenges government must address in the 21st century. It will also demand from all of us patience and political creativity.