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To cite this article: Jeffrey Kaplan (2021) A Conspiracy of Dunces: Good Americans vs. A Cabal of Satanic Pedophiles?, *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 33:5, 917-921, DOI: [10.1080/09546553.2021.1932342](https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2021.1932342)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2021.1932342>



Published online: 27 Jul 2021.



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A Conspiracy of Dunces: Good Americans vs. A Cabal of Satanic Pedophiles?

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ABSTRACT

While most observers classified the demonstrators called to Washington by President Trump as denizens of the far right, a closer examination of those arrested for entering the Capitol reveal a strikingly diverse group. Only a small percentage fit the description of members of the radical right. Rather, the most common thread was fealty to the President forged through adherence to QAnon and other conspiratorial beliefs.

KEYWORDS

Conspiracy; militia movement; Proud Boys; Oath Keepers; QAnon; Donald Trump

Even before the polls closed in the 2020 U.S. Presidential election, President Donald Trump complained on a daily basis that he was the victim of a terrible conspiracy to fraudulently award the election to Joe Biden. On 19 November, he met with his lawyers Rudolph W. Giuliani, Jenna Ellis and Sidney Powell to formulate a bizarre legal strategy that, in effect, would attempt to litigate conspiratorial suspicions as if they were facts that could be proved in a court of law. Others, most notably the Fox News panoply of commentators, joined in for a time, but when Sidney Powell's QAnon driven conspiracy theories became more untethered from reality, even Tucker Carlson jumped off the train. This left a weird array of wingnuts that were given access to the President because they told him what he wanted to hear.¹ At the end, Jenna Ellis was revealed to be a lightweight careerist, Powell a QAnon adherent, and Rudy Giuliani had become the darling of Saturday Night Live for his increasingly weird behavior, flatulence and poor choice of hair dye. At the last, with the election lost and over sixty legal cases laughed out of the courts,² MyPillow CEO Michael Lindell and soon to be pardoned felon General Michael Flynn suggested martial law to hold the presidency, but this had little traction in the military.³

All this would be the stuff of a reasonably good journal article had not many millions of people taken these conspiratorial fantasies seriously. Of these, perhaps 10,000 came to Washington to hear exhortations from the President, his son Donald Trump Jr., and Rudy Giuliani.⁴ A portion of the crowd, believing that Trump would lead them, descended on the Capital building. To date, 403 who entered the Capital have been arrested, and a remarkably diverse lot they are. Despite half-hearted claims from Republicans that the mob was in fact composed of leftist Antifa supporters in middle American drag—a claim fifty-eight percent of Trump supporters believed⁵—the insurrectionists were widely portrayed as far right wingers, militia members and associates of hate groups of various stripes.

A closer look at those arrested complicates the picture considerably. In a continually updated database, NPR finds that of the 403, 66 people or only 16 percent had demonstrable ties to right wing groups. Of these, 25 were associated with the Proud Boys, and 13 with the Oath Keepers.⁶ The remaining 84 percent are an interesting assortment of true believers representing a racial, ethnic and religious cross-section of America.

Thus far, the only academic analysis of the participants of the 6 January events is Robert A. Pape and Kevin Ruby from the University of Chicago. What they found concerning the group as a whole is

even more true when looking at the organized groups involved in the attack, namely, that the participants were as atypical a group of protestors as could be imagined. Their study focused on 193 people charged with entering the Capital.

First, in court documents filed to date, nearly all asserted that they were following Trump's orders to prevent congress from certifying Joe Biden as the winner of the election. Second, very few of those arrested had any previous ties to extremist organizations. Of the 193 people studied, only 20 were members or supporters of organized far-right groups or militias. Third, in sharp contrast to people arrested in right-wing violence in recent years, those arrested in the Capital were older—two-thirds were over 35 and the average age of arrestees was 40—and 40 percent are small business owners or have regular white-collar employment. Unlike members of the organized groups, those arrested in the Capital had little to gain and much to lose. Fourth and most surprisingly, few of those arrested are from heavily Republican areas. Most came from states and counties either comfortably won by Biden or from areas where the election was closely contested.⁷

It is important to note that, although a small minority of the insurrectionists, radical right groups like the Proud Boys and Oath Keepers clearly planned for the violence and sought to channel what was more a mob than an organized movement to the Capital.⁸

An examination of NPR's detailed database is even more revealing.⁹ Two themes predominate; loyalty to Donald Trump and a conspiratorial *zeitgeist* which made any story, however fanciful, spun by or for the President believable. They also show a radicalization trajectory that many of us have been writing about for years.

In virtually every case documented, the call from Donald Trump was the trigger, but the media that nurtured the faithful were saturated with QAnon and other conspiratorial fantasies. So pervasive is this influence that QAnon merits a closer look.

QAnon & company

Conspiracy theories that take root in a society, like crops, require fertile soil and just the right amount of light and shade. The QAnon fueled world of conspiratorial alternate reality is based on an Ur narrative that reaches back into the 1980s and the era of the Satanism Scare.¹⁰ This was a transition period in American history where cold hard economics, feminism, and the conservatism of the Reagan Administration collided. By the 1980s, the era of one-salary families was done, and women were brought into the job market in numbers. This left many families torn between traditional models of the mother as a stay-at-home caregiver versus as a working mother in need of child care. What followed were bizarre stories of daycare centers run by Satan worshippers who used the children for sex and sacrifice. So devilishly clever were these Satanists that no physical evidence of their crimes was ever found, either in the bodies and memories of the children nor in remains of those allegedly sacrificed to the Devil.¹¹

The satanism scare burned hot for a few years and faded soon after. But in the cultic milieu of lost and proscribed ideas, nothing ever dies. Instead, it is combined with other ideas and adapted to new times and circumstances.¹² This brings us to the 2016 election and the singular figures of Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump. Many said in 2016 that absolutely anyone not named Hillary Clinton could defeat Donald Trump. But Clinton was the Democratic Party nominee. She brought with her not only an incredibly negative public image—a remarkable nineteen percent favourability rating two months before the election—but the legacy of Bill Clinton, aka Slick Willie, and the Clinton Administration's corruption scandals.¹³

From this mélange of ill-will, the internet, and right-wing and conspiracist talk shows, most notably Alex Jones and *Infowars*, came the conspiracy that came to be known as Pizzagate.¹⁴ Pizzagate took the child abuse motifs of the Satanism Scare and mixed them with suspicions of Hilary Clinton's proclivities toward witchcraft, lesbianism, and in some versions, cannibalism,¹⁵ to create a conspiracy theory that, like a good television variety program, had something for everyone. In this story, Clinton and a cabal of Democratic Party members held orgies with the sexual abuse and eventual

sacrifice of children. Blood-drinking and other elements were also prominent features. Lest we find this too much to believe, Alex Jones and the other purveyors of the theory claimed to have police informants who shared with them videotapes of the events which we were assured took place in, of all places, the “underground catacombs” beneath the Comet Ping Pong Pizzeria in Washington, DC.

Like the Satanism Scare, Pizzagate soon faded from the headlines, helped along by the arrest of Edgar Welch, a North Carolina resident who, armed with an assault rifle, took it upon himself to investigate the Comet Ping Pong Pizzeria. He found no child sex slaves or underground caverns, but following his arrest, the lawsuits fell like rain, and Alex Jones and company were forced to recant their claims.

Donald Trump was not yet part of the story, but that would soon come with the rise of QAnon. QAnon, said to be an individual rather than a composite, in all likelihood 8kun administrator Ron Watkins,¹⁶ took the Pizzagate scenario and wedded it to an Alt-Right belief in the existence of a “deep state” composed of elites in the upper reaches of American government who rule in their own interests.¹⁷

QAnon, claiming to be a deep state insider who wishes to serve the people rather than the elites, adds Trump to the story as the hero who, almost alone, fights the evil machinations of the Democrat pedophiles and Satan worshippers. In QAnon’s world, as in conspiracy theory generally, there is no accidental causation. There is a hidden hand behind every event. QAnon’s writings are crafted to be oracular, that is in the form of puzzles and hints, that the audience is challenged to interpret. QAnon thus emerges as a self-proclaimed prophet whose audience follows his or her every word with religious zeal. Indeed, conversion to the QAnon universe in many ways mirrors the conversion to a cult or high-pressure religious group which constitutes a sect whose congregations gather in internet bulletin boards and chat rooms.¹⁸

What distinguishes QAnon from the earlier conspiracy theories is the ubiquitous presence of the internet and social media combined with both media personalities giving it air time and the presence in the White House of a conspiracy aficionado and social media addict in Donald Trump. With this impetus, QAnon went mainstream and found particularly fertile ground in Trumpist sectors of the Republican Party. QAnon posits Trump as an imperial, almost eschatological figure, who will be brought to permanent power by “the storm,” a revolutionary event of apocalyptic proportions.

QAnon’s collected writings are widely available. One begins:

A DETAILED REPORT ON THE “STORM” THAT IS ABOUT TO DESTROY THE DEEP STATE THAT CONSPIRES AGAINST THE UNITED STATES AND ON THE “GREAT AWAKENING” THAT WILL MAKE AMERICA GREAT AGAIN!¹⁹

And another warns presciently:

Q doesn’t make it easy and the stakes are high.
People have died.
People will go to jail.
This isn’t a game.
We serve at the pleasure of the President.²⁰

Conclusion

The events of 6 January 2021 brought together a remarkably diverse group of actors who defy easy categorization. Only a small minority were identified with the radical right or the militia movement. Most but not all were white and Christian, but there was a remarkable mix of peoples—Muslims and Jews, racial and ethnic minorities, and many more. What tied them together and brought them to Washington was overwhelmingly the call of Donald Trump and the conspiracy beliefs that he both espoused and in which in turn he was lionized. While the Biden Administration and the law

enforcement agencies gear up for an onslaught against the American far right, the deeper problem of the spread and viability of conspiratorial beliefs remains unchecked and, seemingly untouchable. Without addressing these deeper strands that are entering the American mainstream, future violence on the order of 6 January is almost inevitable.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributor

Dr. Jeffrey Kaplan has published some twenty books and anthologies and over 80 journal articles and anthology chapters since his graduation from the University of Chicago in 1993. His most recent books include *The 21st Century Cold War: A New World Order?*, *Apocalypse, Revolution and Terrorism: From the Sicari to the American Revolt against the Modern World*, and the first volume in the Routledge distinguished author series, *Radical Religion and Violence: Theory and Case Studies*. He has researched and taught in many countries, most recently China, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and Hungary. He is currently a visiting Professor at Öbuda University and a visiting Fellow at Danube Institute, both in Budapest.

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