

**QAnon:
How a Conspiracy Theory can Impact a Country**

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Abstract

Background: Since 2017, QAnon has been a prominent conspiracy theory among majority-white Evangelical conservatives. The driving narrative behind QAnon is that our government is deeply corrupt and run by an evil Cabal. This network of elites places puppet leaders in power to distract from what's going on behind the scenes that include child trafficking and abuse and Satanic rituals. Some who follow QAnon take the call to fight for their country literally, with acts ranging from domestic terrorism, murder, and sedition.

Objective: This study aims to identify the ways in which the existence of QAnon has impacted the United States.

Design and Method: The research method is based on timely scholarly and popular literature, as well as podcasts and literature from within QAnon. These sources address topics such as the appeal of QAnon amongst evangelicals and conservatives, how conspiracy theories operate, and the ways in which the QAnon movement inspires acts of violence. Journal articles, reports, popular news, and podcasts are reviewed and reported in the Results section to follow later. The questions this research aims to address are: *How does QAnon work to appeal to a majority far-right, conservative, and evangelical base? In what ways does QAnon operate as a novel conspiracy theory? To what degree is QAnon responsible for inciting acts of domestic acts of violence and/or terror?*

Results: This study is significant because of how quickly QAnon has proliferated mainstream consciousness in the United States and attracting devotees through baseless evidence of widespread corruption by global elites. Infrastructural, educational reform is needed in the long term to address the gap in scientific literacy, and critical evaluation that is currently filled with unreliable and fake news exchanged online.

Conclusions: At this moment, however, Republican lawmakers must denounce QAnon publicly and attempt to restore their constituents' faith in our governmental system. Furthermore, individuals must be critical of the information they find online and take time to evaluate the validity of sources on which their knowledge is based, and educating peers on how to do the same.

Keywords: QAnon, conspiracy theory, fake news, domestic terror, scientific literacy, paranoid style theory, critical evaluation, social media,

Chapter 1: Introduction

Background and Overview

QAnon is a fringe conspiracy theory that was able to infiltrate the mainstream American consciousness tactically. Emerging October 28, 2017, on the "politically incorrect" forum of the imageboard website, 4chan, the eponymous "Q" (a reference to the alleged Q-level security clearance of the anonymous poster) left the first of thousands of posts known as "drops" (Amarasingam & Argentino, 2020; LaFrance, 2020; Zuckerman, 2019). Each drop contains "crumbs," or clues, which Q believers say are embedded within the cryptic text, which anonymous "bakers" interpret and then disseminated to the masses (LaFrance, 2020; Zuckerman, 2019). At its core, the QAnon conspiracy has to do with a web of global corruption, which include world leaders and other politicians, celebrities, the media, bankers, and private citizens, all of whom are part of a nefarious global cabal set on the destruction of democracy (Anons of the Board and Q, 2021; Amarasingam & Argentino, 2020; Chandler, 2020; Lavin, 2020; LaFrance, 2020; Zuckerman, 2019). The actions of the cabal range from satanic practices involving child abuse and ritualistic sacrifice (LaFrance, 2020), actively supporting the international drug trade (Duval, 2018), and the involvement of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) in acts of corruption, including election interference (Duval, 2018).

While to many, these claims may seem outlandish, QAnon is not a movement that should be disregarded. Q has a massive following among far-right conservatives and evangelicals, the latter being a significant bloc on the right, with 77% of white evangelicals identifying or affiliating with the Republican Party (Pew Research Center, 2018). Additionally, Congresswoman Marjorie Taylor Greene—a rising star amongst conservatives—expressed past

support for Q (Brewster, 2020), one of many conspiracies that Greene has publicly endorsed and perpetuated. Most notably, then-President Donald Trump tangentially aligned himself with the conspiracy. Although Trump avoided offering explicit public support, he was noted at having promoted QAnon-linked Twitter accounts over 250 times (Palmer, 2020) and refusing to denounce the movement when pressed by the media (CNN Business, 2020). The potential of QAnon to impact the American government and democracy came to a head on January 6, 2021, when a violent mob flooded the Capitol Building in Washington D.C. (Bump, 2021) marking the first time since the War of 1812 that the Capitol was pillaged (Sasse, 2021). The insurrection attempt was to take back an election that had been “stolen” from Trump; while not all of the attendees were Q supporters, it was evident from the masses of flags, shirts, and hats donned with Q’s and popular phrases from the movement, that its presence had a definitive stronghold over those present (Harwell et al., 2021). Because of the ideological grip and its potential to influence politics, QAnon needs to be explored and understood.

Research Questions

This study will explore the following questions:

RQ#1: *How does QAnon work to appeal to a majority far-right, conservative, and evangelical base?*

RQ#2: *In what ways does QAnon operate as a novel conspiracy theory?*

RQ#3: *To what degree is QAnon responsible for inciting domestic acts of violence and/or terror?*

Definition of Key Terms

Anon(s): *Anonymous user(s) of online message boards for means of communication.*

Bakers: *Highly informed Q-believers tasked with interpreting posts for anons.*

Crumb: *Decipherable clues within the drop.*

Drop: *A online post made by QAnon.*

Q/QAnon: *Anonymous online poster(s) with alleged affiliations with the Trump Administration, who reveal classified information through cryptic messages.*

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Emerging online in 2017 and growing in popularity since its inception, QAnon is a conspiracy theory that, in a short time, has moved from the obscurity of online image boards into the mainstream. This shift has contributed to a growing number of individuals who ascribe to QAnon and its beliefs, aligning itself with a majority conservative ideological base. The online presence of QAnon, its decentralized leadership and participatory nature are parts of what make it a novel conspiracy, distinguishing itself from past conspiratorial beliefs. While the lasting consequences are yet to be fully understood, there is a growing number of acts of violence connected to the movement, making QAnon and its impact on the United States impossible to ignore.

When considering QAnon, it is imperative to consider how it has utilized conservative and evangelical ideology to attract and convert individuals by appealing to those underlying core values. Dan Duval (2018), whose podcast *Discovering Truth with Dan Duval* is funded by an evangelical Christian ministry, interviewed a prominent figure within the QAnon movement David Hayes, who goes by the online moniker PrayingMedic on YouTube (Duval, 2018), and throughout the interview, Hayes not only breaks down the tenants of QAnon and attempts to validate claims made online by Q, but also says that God brought him to Q through one of what would be several prophetic dreams. This connection of QAnon to spirituality, specifically Christianity, connects Q to forces beyond our physical senses and understandings. As well as Hayes, QAnon was propelled into the mainstream by another evangelical YouTuber Tracy Diaz, known online as TracyBeanz, and is credited by LaFrance (2020) as well as Amarasingam & Argentino (2020), with bringing QAnon from the obscurity of imageboard forums to the broader and more accessible platform that is YouTube. Further, the appeal to conservative ideology is

overtly present through one of the main tenants of QAnon, which purports that former Republican President Donald Trump—whose ideological base is conservative driven—is the one who will bring about the day of reckoning for those involved and associated with the Deep State, many of whom are members of the Democratic Party (Anons of The Board and Q, 2021). Devout followers of QAnon believe that the liberal media, politicians, and those powerful individuals who work at their behest, are all corrupt and almost inhuman, creating the overlap of religiosity and politics that has, in part, lent to its strengthening and growing number of converts to the QAnon belief system. Also, important to note in regards to the appeal of QAnon to conservatism is highlighted by Amarasingam & Argentino (2020), who note that at the time of their publication, 60 candidates were running in the 2020 election who expressed varying degrees of support for QAnon. At least one sitting member of Congress—Marjorie Taylor Greene of Georgia, has expressed support for Q in the past, though since taking office has tried to distance herself from the movement.

The QAnon conspiracy theory is in many ways unique in its functioning and proliferation of information. Zuckerman (2019), states that QAnon is a result of the Unreal, "...an approach to politics that forsakes interpretation of common set of factors in favor of creating closed universes of mutually reinforcing facts and interpretations" (Zuckerman, 2019, p. 4). QAnon loosely connects existing conspiracies and encapsulates them into what Zuckerman (2019) refers to as a "big tent conspiracy" (Zuckerman, 2019, p. 4), one that fit into and ultimately works to create the larger narrative that QAnon embodies (Chandler, 2020). While the big tent aspect of the QAnon conspiracy is not specific to the particular movement, it does lend itself to an aspect of QAnon that is distinct from existing conspiracies, which is the expansive presence of Q online (Chandler, 2020), and the participatory nature among QAnon adherents, that the movement itself

depends on (Zuckerman, 2019). According to Zuckerman (2019), “QAnon may be the first conspiracy to have fully embraced the participatory nature of the contemporary internet” (Zuckerman, 2019, p. 6). The central texts of QAnon are a set of over 3,000 messages initially posted on imageboard sites like 4chan and 8chan (Zuckerman, 2019). While the chaotic, cryptic, and obscurity of those posts would seemingly discredit the movement and buffer its spread, Zuckerman (2019), argues that both anonymity and "...the process of deciphering and interpreting these vague clues is a hell of a lot more interesting than reading the rantings of a paranoid mind" (Zuckerman, 2019, p. 6) both bolster the movement. This process of interpretation of Q's "drops" or "crumbs" differentiates QAnon from existing theories. Rather than explicitly state what nefarious activities are going on, it is the job of the "bakers" to assemble these incoherent ramblings into an understandable and decipherable narrative. The prophecies of Q are not mentioned directly in the posts made but rather interpreted by followers who then disseminate those interpretations on larger and more mainstream online platforms, where they are ingested by the mass of followers (Zuckerman, 2019). In the QAnon movement, there is no true centralized organization; the followers are just as involved and important for interpolating the posts as Q is for making them.

These vague and cryptic postings by Q also lead some followers to decipher some posts—or drops—in a way that is individual and particular to them. This is a dangerous element of the movement which has incited numerous acts of violence and attempted violence.

Amarasingam & Argentino (2020), as well as Mohammed et al. (2020), both cited several individuals whose criminal acts can all be tied back to QAnon, including one which while technically preceding Q's first post, though it is considered as part of the QAnon inspired violence given that the conspiracy which motivated the act has since been co-opted by the

QAnon belief system. The conspiracy known as Pizzagate was the belief that children were being held in the basement of the Comet Ping Pong pizzeria in D.C. (which had no basement), where children were sexually abused and trafficked by prominent democrats, including Hillary Clinton (LaFrance, 2020). Pizzagate began to circulate after emails between former White House chief of staff John Podesta and Hillary Clinton in which the pizzeria was mentioned a handful of times, leading some to speculate that the Comet Ping Pong was a nexus for child abuse and that words like "pizza" and "pasta" actually coded for "girls" and "little boys" (LaFrance, 2020). Prompted by these online accusations, Edgar Maddison Welch of North Carolina traveled to Comet Ping Pong with two loaded weapons, entered the premises, and attempted to find where the children he believed were being abused were hidden (Amarasingam & Argentino, 2020). He surrendered to police after finding no evidence of kidnapped children and was sentenced to prison, where he still remains, and Welch continues to maintain that aspects of the conspiracy are true (Amarasingam & Argentino, 2020).

Other notable acts were those of Matthew Philip Wright, Anthony Comello, Eduardo Moreno, Jessica Prim (Amarasingam & Argentino, 2020; Mohammed et al., 2020), and Alpalus Slyman (Mohammed et al., 2020). Matthew Philip Wright drove an armored truck filled with weapons to a bridge near the Hoover Dam, blocking traffic and demanding information be released about Hillary Clinton, has since pled guilty to making a terrorist threat, aggravated assault, and fleeing law enforcement (Amarasingam & Argentino, 2020). He later wrote letters to several government officials, including then-President Donald Trump, where he used QAnon rhetoric, including the "Great Awakening" and "...Where We Go One, We Go All" (Amarasingam & Argentino, 2020, p. 40) Anthony Comello allegedly murdered a senior member of the Gambino crime family, Frank Cali, outside of his home in March 2019, believing Cali to

be a member of the Deep State (Amarasingam & Argentino, 2020), and in his first appearance in court wrote a large “Q” on his hand along with several pro-Trump phrases including “MAGA Forever” (Amarasingam & Argentino, 2020, p. 40). Eduardo Moreno, in March 2020, allegedly derailed a train in California to draw attention to a nearby Naval ship assisting with COVID relief. Moreno believed the QAnon purported idea that the coronavirus was manufactured to try and disrupt Trump's reelection (Mohammed et al., 2020). The next month, Jessica Prim drove her car filled with knives to get close to a U.S. Navy ship she believed to be part of the child sex-trafficking ring and threatening to kill Joe Biden for his involvement in it (Mohammed et al., 2020). Finally, Alpalus Slyman drove with his children in the backseat at speeds of an excess of 100 miles per hour, convinced the government was trying to kidnap his children (Mohammed et al., 2020), and telling them that “...Hillary Clinton and other democrats were eating children’s brains” (Mohammed et al., 2020, p. 12).

QAnon is certainly not a fringe conspiracy that can be simply be ignored or one that will quickly die out. It continues to grow in popularity, using appeals to conservatism and religion as a means of attracting followers. There are individuals who hold public office in government that have expressed support for Q. The determination to get the word of QAnon out to as many people is evident in the way that the movement has moved between platforms, some niche, and some mainstream (Zuckerman, 2019). There are continued acts of violence motivated by QAnon, including the attempted insurrection of the United States Capitol on January 6, 2021, resulting in the death of a Capitol police officer and others. This movement, this deluded conspiracy, is not a delusion or a conspiracy to those who believe in it. And until the eventual Storm is brought about (Zuckerman, 2019), there is no real reason for these believers to stop because, in their mind, it's our liberties being threatened and our children being harmed. In the minds of QAnon supporters,

they are doing the work of true American Patriots, and with that sense of duty, there is no incentive to stop until the Deep State is exposed, and The Storm is upon not just the United States but the world.

Chapter 3: Methods

This research is qualitative and descriptive in its design. I examined timely, specific events and background information associated with the QAnon conspiracy theory. The basis of my study of the QAnon movement and its content focuses on three areas of context: the appeals of QAnon to a majority conservative and evangelical base, how it operates as a novel conspiracy, and the ability of the movement to incite violence. This study is based on a recently emerging topic, spanning the years of 2017 to the time of this writing. As more information on QAnon and its followers is constantly emerging, there will likely be sources that coincide with the timeline of this paper's writing. This research design is based on scholarly journal articles, popular news sources, QAnon affiliated websites, and a book on the movement written by a collective of QAnon followers. Most of the research was acquired through Google and Google Scholar, with some information coming from the Purchase College online database, specifically EBSCOhost and Academic Search Complete. I also used the Purchase College Library's interlibrary loan system (ILLIAD) to acquire a book on QAnon, podcasts found through Spotify, and an HBO docuseries on the QAnon conspiracy as supplementary material to the scholarly sources used.

I selected the following questions to guide my research:

RQ#1: *How does the QAnon conspiracy work to appeal to a majority conservative and evangelical base?*

RQ#2: *In what ways does QAnon operate as a novel conspiracy theory?*

RQ#3: *To what extent does the influence of QAnon over its membership motivate acts of violence?*

I used specific terms to gather information from academic as well as popular articles, podcasts, and books. Search keywords included: QAnon, *QAnon Conspiracy Theory*, *QAnon Impact on Government*, *QAnon Impact on Politics*, *QAnon: An Introduction to the Great Awakening*, *QAnon Incitement of Violence*, *QAnon and Marjorie Taylor Greene*, *Conspiracy*

Theories and Attachment Style, Conservatism and QAnon, QAnon Security Threat, Psychology of Conspiracy Theories, Anxious Attachment and Conspiracy, Belief in Conspiracy Theories, Conservative Theory Motivation to Violence, Conservative Ideology and QAnon, QAnon Impact on Democracy, QAnon Domestic Threat, Evangelicals and QAnon, QAnon.pub, QAnon.map, QAnon and Government, History of Conspiracy Theories, and QAnon Novel Conspiracy. After finding the articles, I combined them into a digital folder specific to my research, as well as printing physical copies and subdividing them based on the following: the psychology of conspiracy theories, acts of violence, appeal to conservatism, and sources from within QAnon. For the podcasts, I saved them to my Spotify account so that I could return to them again when needed, and the HBO series I accessed through the streaming service, HBO Max.

I chose this topic as a point of research because its growth and development is one that is starting to dominate mainstream ideology, and being able to write alongside that growth in some cases days or weeks after events was one that could not be ignored. Furthermore, there has not been much academic writing done on the topic of QAnon specifically, and I hope to contribute in whatever minimal way to the information available. There is potential for QAnon to have a lasting impact on the shape of our government domestically and globally in an unprecedented way, and that alone makes it important to understand. QAnon cannot simply be disregarded as a run-of-the-mill conspiracy, and attempts to discredit it are used as fodder for the movement to become more isolated and self-sealing, which can become dangerous if its online activity becomes more difficult to track.

The focus of my research was impacted by the lack of scholarly articles written on QAnon specifically and conspiracy theories generally. While there are a number of popular articles written about QAnon, finding ones that were peer-reviewed and were to the standards of

academic writing were far more difficult to come by, with articles I did find often citing one another and recycling the same information. Though, once I was able to find information, I found that a compounding factor was what aspects of the QAnon conspiracy was relevant to my specific research questions. While there is a sense of homogeneity in regard to the tenants of QAnon, there is a subset especially amongst evangelical Q supporters who integrate religiosity into their beliefs—the prime example being that of the Cabal practicing Satanic rituals. While the impact of religion is something that does hold relevancy to the questions I intend to address, I had to make a concerted effort to not let the salaciousness of unfounded claims of Satanic sacrificial rituals take away from the very founded cases of QAnon’s influence of violence on the Right.

Additionally, I was limited in the availability of research from the opposing view—of those from within the QAnon community—because of restrictions placed by tech corporations and mainstream websites which have by and large collectively banned any keyword or phrase that can be connected to QAnon. Despite these limits, I was able to find a sufficient amount of literature and other mediums that pertain to my scope of writing. With more time I would dedicate to a Phase 2 of this research and seek out active participants of QAnon. However, because of time restrictions and the innate aversion that these followers have towards speaking to those who are critical of Q, more time would likely be needed to cultivate a sense of trust, which is not plausible given the constraints of the timeline that this research is dependent on.

I intend to use this research to consider and evaluate the impacts that QAnon has on our United States democracy through the Republican Party, as well as on citizens’ motivation to commit acts of violence. In the following chapter, I will describe the findings of my study.

Chapter 4: Results

QAnon has undoubtedly made an impact on not just the United States political system but globally. From the acts of violence inspired by Q to politicians overtly or covertly perpetuating the movement's tenants, QAnon has embedded itself into our cultural zeitgeist. This section aims to elaborate upon the research findings conducted by addressing the proposed research questions, with supporting information from the information gathered while exploring this topic.

RQ#1: How does QAnon work to appeal to a majority far-right, conservative, and evangelical base?

QAnon exploits tenants of far-right conservative ideologies, which often intersect with religious—specifically evangelical—beliefs. In the current political climate, tensions between parties are boiling. Those on either end of the political spectrum believe there is a lack of effort to preserve traditional American values on the Right or extend rights to those historically excluded or neglected on the Left. QAnon works by recognizing the inherent anxieties of a faction of the ideological Right that is primarily white, conservative, and religious.

According to the Pew Research Center (2018), 77% of white Evangelicals identify with or lean towards Republicans, making it the largest bloc within the party. With this statistic in mind, along with the religious undertones that exist within sects of Q supporters, including claims that the Cabal engages in Satanic practices, torturing and sacrificing children for blood rituals (Lavin, 2020), it begins to paint a more detailed picture of how QAnon appeals to the evangelical sect within Q believers. It is also widely accepted that evangelical YouTuber Tracy Diaz, who goes by the online moniker of TracyBeanz, helped propel Q out of the obscurity of online imageboard sites by creating and sharing Q-related content on her page, where she has over 130,000 subscribers (TracyBeanz, n.d.). Those same Evangelicals are already predisposed

to beliefs like Satan corrupting people and turning them away from God can find that in QAnon. The Great Awakening is to some, like prominent evangelical podcaster and Q follower Dan Duval (2018), very much a battle between good and evil, with the Left demonized and seen as corrupt and wicked, while the Right—especially conservatives—are patriots who are trying to prevent the United States from becoming a modern-day Sodom and Gomorrah.

Finally, QAnon found political legitimacy in former President Donald Trump, who promoted QAnon-linked Twitter accounts on over 250 occasions (Palmer, 2020), and Congresswoman Marjorie Taylor Greene of Georgia, who referred to Q in the past as a patriot (Brewster, 2020). Though as a sitting member of Congress, Greene has attempted to distance herself from Q, her initial platform when running for office was to appeal to those supporters, a strategy which proved to be successful given she beat out her opponents and gained a seat in the House, and praise from Donald J. Trump. The latter touted her as being a "future Republican star" (Brewster, 2020). Most troubling, however, is that with QAnon beginning to take a hold on the base of the Republican Party, more politicians on the Right are staying silent on pressing issues like the January 6 insurrection or the idea that the election had been stolen from Donald Trump (Sasse, 2021). While the Stop the Steal rally and the attempted coup that followed were not promoted by QAnon specifically, it had deep ties to the movement, with many donning outfits or waving flags adorned with Q's.

RQ#2: In what ways does QAnon operate as a novel conspiracy theory?

QAnon shares qualities with existing conspiracy theories. It presents an alternative reality to the one in which one lives and demonizes a group and blames them for societal ills rather than accepts the randomness of events in the world (Chandler, 2020). However, QAnon diverts from contemporary conspiracy theories than it does align with them. Specifically, QAnon showcases

three elements that make it unique in its functioning as a method of conspiratorial thinking: the way the internet facilitated rapid and exponential growth of the conspiracy theory, the participatory nature of the conspiracy, and the leading player of the conspiracy not aligning with traditional characteristics of those who typically perpetuate and align with conspiratorial thinking (Chandler, 2020).

The first element of the QAnon conspiracy that delineates it from those that came before it is the internet's role in the proliferation of the conspiracy itself (Chandler, 2020). QAnon is a trailblazer in utilizing the imageboard website 4chan and the video site YouTube to disseminate its information to the masses, making the jump from the former to the latter to reach a larger platform and enter the mainstream (Zuckerman, 2019).

The participatory nature of the conspiracy inherently interlinks with the medium utilized, with bakers interpreting the cryptic messages and drawing their conclusions (Zuckerman, 2019) before then sharing that "decrypted" code to the laypeople who would then reshare the information on more mainstream platforms such as Reddit and Facebook, where the content would grow in prominence with each group or personal page that clicked "share." With individuals tasked with "doing their own research" (LaFrance, 2020 p. 10), the interpretive nature of QAnon could change from person to person and group to group depending on their ideological or religious agenda, creating factions within the QAnon conspiracy, with some more radical aligning with accusations of Satanism. Others simply see corruption as purely politically motivated (LaFrance, 2020).

Finally, QAnon sets itself apart from preexisting conspiracies in that, unlike those which predate QAnon, the leading proponent of the conspiracy was not of the typical disenfranchised demographic (Chandler, 2020). Many conspiracy theories are driven by what's known as the

"paranoid style theory" (Stempel et al., 2007 as cited in Chandler, 2020 p. 5), where marginalized individuals fixate on finding connections between past and present events and leads to an "us versus them" (Stempel et al., 2007 as cited in Chandler, 2020) mentality where the perceived nemesis is one of an elite, upper echelon. In the case of QAnon, however, the conspiracy centered around Donald J. Trump, a man who is objectively neither of the marginalized subsets of society nor politically disengaged as many conspiracists are (Zuckerman, 2019). Despite his wealth, celebrity, and political power, Trump perfectly played into the part of a disaffected victim to a powerful system while simultaneously being part of it. While not explicitly supporting Q publicly, Trump did not shy away from association with the movement—he retweeted over 100 Q-affiliated accounts over 250 times— (Palmer, 2020), nor did he take any actions to disavow it.

Regardless of Trump's intentions in choosing to keep close to QAnon, the implications of a President refusing to denounce an unfounded and dangerous conspiracy theory became glaringly evident on January 6, 2021, when a mass of Trump supporters, many of whom donned Q's on clothing, flags, and even in face paint, stormed the Capitol, in a deadly attempted insurrection fueled by the unfounded belief that a corrupt system intentionally rigged the election resulting in Trump's loss (Harwell et al., 2021). When lies run rampant, lives can be lost, and QAnon is emblematic of that notion.

RQ#3: To what degree is QAnon responsible for inciting domestic acts of violence or terror?

What makes the QAnon movement so insidious is the fervency with which its devotees submit to its beliefs and the lengths to which they will go to try and expose the corruption they feel so many are willfully ignorant towards. While Q has not explicitly incited or provoked violence, it tangentially links to several criminal acts, ranging from murder to domestic terrorism

(Mohammed, Garry, Mohamed, & Andary, 2020). The preeminent incident predates the emergence of QAnon but has since been linked to the conspiracy because of the shared ideological narrative that underlies both (Mohammed et al., 2020). In the 2016 incident now known as Pizzagate, Edgar Welch of North Carolina entered Comet Ping Pong pizzeria and opened fire on a locked door in an attempt to rescue children he believed were being held as sex slaves in the basement (Mohammed et al., 2020). Welch procured the intel that drove him to enter a restaurant that had neither a basement nor children being held captive from several YouTube videos that claimed to expose a sex trafficking scandal (Mohammed et al., 2020) of which top Democrats, including Hillary Clinton, were supposedly involved (Amarasingam & Argentino, 2020).

Although Pizagate failed to reveal any deep-seated political or humanitarian scandal, it did not fall out of public consciousness. Instead, it persisted on sites like 4chan, "...a so-called imageboard that is known for its grotesque memes, sickening photographs, and brutal teardown culture" (LaFrance, 2020 p. 5). From the vacuum left behind by Pizzagate, QAnon emerged in 2017, maintaining the central belief that a Cabal made of up powerful elites secretly control the world, using their positions to—among other nefarious acts—secretly abuse and traffic children (Amarasingam & Argentino, 2020). QAnon took the failings of its predecessor and refined them. It was more credible than the leaked emails that spurned Pizzagate (LaFrance, 2020); this was direct intel from someone on the inside, someone with Q-level security clearance who knew the corruption first-hand and wanted to expose it (Amarasingam & Argentino, 2020).

The perceived legitimacy of Q contributes to its ability to exert influence over followers—fellow patriots—in a call to arms to reclaim and defend what the Cabal has deprived them of for far too long. When someone privy to the secrecies of corruption assumes the risk

associated with exposing said corruption calls for help, how can one refuse to answer, especially when their freedom is at risk? QAnon triggers the paranoid style theory of thinking within its devotees, and if Donald Trump—the harbinger of the Great Awakening that will finally expose the Cabal—does not denounce the movement and instead promotes QAnon affiliated Twitter accounts (Palmer, 2020), that call to action is even more vital.

Anthony Comello heard that call and on March 13, 2019, acting as "Trump's chosen vigilante" (Amarasingam & Argentino, 2020 p. 40), went to the House of Frank Cali, a senior member of the Gambino crime family whom Comello believed was part of the Cabal, to perform a citizen's arrest which ended in Cali being shot multiple times and killed (Amarasingam & Argentino, 2020). In his first court appearance, Comello held up his hand on which he'd drawn a large "Q," along with several pro-Trump phrases, including "MAGA Forever" (Amarasingam & Argentino, 2020 p. 40). In addition to engaging with QAnon accounts and sharing far-right conspiracy theories online, Comello admitted to NYPD officers that he "...believed the mafia had been infiltrated by the CIA and that the government was spying on him" (Amarasingam & Argentino, 2020, p. 40). It is almost incomprehensible that this lone-wolf act that ended in the death of one individual would be eclipsed by a much more significant loss of life less than two years later in the seditious storming of the Capitol; a failed insurrection that exposed just how far Trump's supporters, and especially the Q followers within those supporters, would go (Harwell et al., 2021). January 6, 2021, is a day that will live on in infamy. The day began as a Trump rally to protest the certification of the results that declared Joe Biden the presidential election winner. This upset, Trump claimed, was solely the result of a rigged election, an act that, if true, would not only undermine the legitimacy of United States democracy but also validate the existence of the deep-state Cabal Q was committed to exposing (Bump, 2021). Fueled by anger

and goading from Trump, who seemingly implied he would partake in the planned march to the Capitol, the march quickly turned into a mob that overwhelmed Capitol Police and stormed into the Capitol, wreaking chaos that ended in five dead and many more injured (Bump, 2021).

QAnon has intrinsically tied to these and other acts of violence even if Q never explicitly incited or called for them because the purpose of the movement is for individuals to take it upon themselves to do what needs to be done for the good of America. QAnon is reliant on the individual; whether to interpret Q's coded messages, do their research, or take direct action against the Cabal, the individual is the actor who holds the most power in Making America Great Again. The hallmark phrase of QAnon, "where we go one, we go all" (WWG1WGA) exemplifies the importance of the singular person in enacting change and consequently puts the burden on the singular person rather than on the movement. QAnon is effective in contributing to violence and is equally effective at not being held culpable. Q inspires something within those who ascribe to them, and the ability to inspire but not incite is what makes QAnon so insidious.

Chapter 5: Discussion

This research aimed to explore how QAnon conspiracy theory has impacted the functioning of the United States. Despite only having existed for barely four years at the time of this writing, QAnon has amassed a large following of people dedicated to deciphering, disseminating, and defending the unfounded claims that the eponymous Q makes. The rapid proliferation of this conspiracy into the political sphere and societal consciousness of the United States is noteworthy. It should make one take pause and deeply consider the implications of treating QAnon as merely another fringe conspiracy theory not worth taking seriously.

Following the wake of the January 6, 2021 storming of the Capitol in an attempted insurrection that left five deceased and many more injured, it is of the utmost importance to examine the influence that QAnon holds over individuals and as a collective. It would be a great disservice to the continued prosperity of our democratic system to not sit with the discomfort of knowing that misinformation and blatant fake news can pose a genuine and present danger. Continuous turning of a blind eye by Republican politicians who fear losing individual voter support more than they fear the threat to the integrity of our entire political structure speaks volumes. The sound of their silence is deafening. It is disheartening to know that there is a missed opportunity on the part of our representatives to educate their constituents. Rather than address the fundamental gap in knowledge or understanding that leads one towards conspiratorial in place of critical thinking, they allow the gap to widen.

Long-term infrastructural changes to our educational system are necessary to combat those gaps in scientific literacy and critical evaluation that are currently filled by fake news in the form of online clickbait. Education is also the immediate solution, although that burden falls on the individual to evaluate their sources, search to see if there is evidence of falsification of

information, identify the bias in the source as well as internally, and engage with others to spread awareness. Conscious, concerted efforts to fact check and putting equal effort into first determining what the truth is and then defending it.

So What?

Throughout this study, the most stand-out research was how many violent and sometimes deadly acts have been associated with and inspired by QAnon. The violence is easily the most pressing and immediate consequence of the conspiracy that needs to be addressed. While private companies have taken steps towards limiting the spread of Q-affiliated information online, it kind of falls flat when they are the same private companies that Q-supporters believe are trying to suppress them. Government officials need to put aside their selfish motivations for not actively denouncing QAnon or calling the individuals who commit violent acts to further its agenda are not just frustrated citizens—they are domestic terrorists. Their agenda is a political one, and trying and contorting that reality is opting to live in a factually baseless reality, not unlike the one in which Q followers exist.

Now What?

Through this research, I became increasingly aware of how easily individuals process anxieties and fears differently. For future researchers to continue to understand the ways in which QAnon impacts society, it is crucial to understand the why. In my experience, when people feel out of control in a situation, there is comfort in finding the easy solution that wraps it up neatly and places a bow on top—all the while forgetting that if what's inside the box is not confronted, the outward appearance is all aesthetic and not substantive. QAnon offers the pretty package that makes sense to those who want to operate on the superficial. With the United States undergoing changes to confront the sordid of racial inequality, wealth inequality, gender

inequality, it's uncomfortable to think about the ways in which we uphold the infrastructures of oppression. Those who have always benefited from the way the system always was now feel threatened at the thought of change. One could put in the hard work to understand that it is a natural process that is needed to move towards a more equitable society, but why do that when it's easier to see it as a curated, cultivated, and calculated way to take something away from you for acts in which you played no part because it happened hundreds of years ago. It is easy to fall into conspiratorial thinking if you are of the mindset that something is being done to you rather than for others—and therein lies the now what.

QAnon is the result of mostly white, primarily right-leaning people feeling out of control in a society that has always given them the driver's seat. I think that's important to realize, not because it's legitimate or because it's valid, but because identifying what's in the box makes it easier to know what to do with it. That is not to say that these same people deserve a pass because they are scared. It does not mean that it is then the duty of those who have undergone the generational traumas of marginalization and dehumanization to be kind, soft, and willing to teach. Of course, they can, but it is not their cross to bear. Instead, white allies need to step up and take accountability, and when possible, try to be objective and not emotional, because if the person you are trying to educate is feeling threatened, attacking them will only further their belief that they are, in fact being attacked in the first place. Studies should look into the psychology of individuals who ascribe to conspiracy theories to figure out what education is needed. I do not see a world without QAnon now that it has been established; however, curtailment of its spread may be possible.

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