

INTO THE STORM: QANON AND THE APPEAL OF CONSPIRACIST MILLENNIALISM IN FAR-RIGHT AND FASCIST POLITICAL MOVEMENTS

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Abstract: *Despite widespread criticism, condemnation, and the failure of many of its prophecies, QAnon remains one of the most successful conspiracist social movements of the 21st century, gaining millions of followers, propelling adherents to cultural and political success, and radically re-shaping the policies and rhetoric of the now ruling party of the most powerful nation on Earth. Despite this success, there has been limited academic research that has attempted to understand the role that conspiracist and millennialist social movements like QAnon have in the broader success that far-right parties have experienced across the globe. This paper will address this central question through a detailed case study of the QAnon movement. It will begin by providing a framework to understand the persistent relationship far-right and fascist parties have historically had with millennialist and conspiracist social movements, which have frequently functioned as important parts of their political coalitions. Moving to then provide a detailed overview of the QAnon movement, I will analyse how QAnon differs from early pre- and post-war fascist conspiracist movements, noting in particular how QAnon draws from a far more eclectic and improvisational millennialism than these older more nationally bounded movements, and how the movement's international appeal and decentralized structure highlights the digitally mediated and globalized nature of modern far-right parties that represent an important evolution from the fascist era of the 20th century. Through this analysis, this paper demonstrates the enduring but changing role that conspiracist and millennialist social movements play in supporting far-right and fascist parties, and confronting the global far right must involve a sustained assault on its apocalyptic vanguards.*

QAnon lives. As Donald Trump's new administration continues to defy norms and raise fears of a global far-right turn, the conspiracy social movement that viewed him as a messianic figure, QAnon, continues to persist in the background, clinging to life eight years after its initial emergence onto the American political landscape. Indeed, data continues to support the resilience of QAnon's social support base. Polling conducted by Public Religion Research Institute in 2024 found that nearly two in ten Americans supported core QAnon beliefs, with this number rising to 28% when only considering Republican voters.¹ Beyond mere social support, QAnon has remained an active organising force in American politics. In a 2021 study of QAnon aligned telegram groups, Wildon and Argentino identified that despite a modest decline in activity post

January 6th, the groups remained key organisational hubs for political mobilisation across numerous American swing states, even being involved in high profile political contests such as the recall election mounted against Californian Governor Gavin Newsom.² Moreover, in the early days of Trump's new administration there is evidence that QAnon aligned groups and personalities have been rewarded. For example, we can note the mass pardoning of individuals who participated in the January 6th riot, many of whom were directly aligned with QAnon.³ Even more clearly, some of Trump's new picks for key posts in his administration, such as FBI director Kash Patel, have past histories of acting as boosters and promoters of the QAnon movement.⁴ QAnon is thus not quite dead yet, and this resilience invites us to return to the original movement and ask why it came to enjoy such broad support and success.

QAnon has understandably already drawn attention from academics from a variety of different disciplines.⁵ However, less attention has been paid to the role that QAnon plays within the wider far-right turn we are experiencing in global politics. This leads us to ask what function do conspiratorial millennialist movements like QAnon play in both Trumpism and the global far-right in general? The relationship between QAnon and this type of apocalyptic thought is not entirely understudied in the wider literature.⁶ For example, long time QAnon researcher Marc-Andre Argentino has considered how QAnon relates to longstanding religious currents of American Protestant eschatology. His research found that many of these themes have been worked into the wider cosmology of the movement, particularly dominant pre-millennialist dispensational currents that await the coming of a cleansing millennial apocalypse.⁷

However, I wish to extend this consideration by examining QAnon in light of a variety of different secular millennialist and conspiracist movements of the far right that go beyond American Protestant traditions. The original fascist and proto-fascist parties of the 20th century "Fascist Era"⁸ also included conspiracist millennialist elements as part of their political coalitions, with members obsessed with uncovering international cabals of conspirators and seeking utopian visions of racial and national rebirth through apocalyptic war. The far right has thus always been haunted by what we might call an apocalyptic vanguard, yet, the exact relationship QAnon might have to these earlier movements remains under-theorised. How does QAnon differ from these earlier incarnations of the far right, and what do these differences tell us about the changing nature of the relationship between the far right, conspiracism, and millennialism? Through attempting to answer these questions, I wish to situate QAnon within the transnational history of the far right and in doing so begin to answer a broad sociological question of why a disparate collection of far-right movements find recourse to recurring narratives of millennium and conspiracy. In this way, this paper offers a unique contribution to the existing literature not just on QAnon, but the far right as a whole.

To begin, I will provide a more detailed definition of what I mean when I discuss concepts such as conspiracism and millennialism, showing how the two, though distinct, are frequently connected within apocalyptic social movements. Secondly, I will provide a framework with which to understand how conspiratorial millennialist social movements frequently interact with and function as part of wider far-right or

fascist political movements. Thirdly, I move on to a detailed case study of the QAnon movement itself, noting its conspiracist and millennialist components, and discussing how QAnon differs from earlier fascist or far-right conspiracist movements of the past. I will then conclude by discussing what lies in store for QAnon's future, and how the movement's diffusion into the wider Republican Party might suggest that conspiracist millennialism will continue to spread and grow within the wider global far right.

Waiting for the End: Conspiracism and Millennialism

Before we can properly begin our discussion, we must define what we mean when we discuss the concepts of conspiracism and millennialism. To begin with conspiracism, it is worth first defining the vital component of this worldview, that of the conspiracy theory. This can be problematic, as in defining conspiracy theories we must not risk tarring legitimate scholarship which aims to uncover real examples of government, corporate, or criminal malfeasance. With this in mind, I submit that one of the best attempts to draw a line between legitimate conspiratorial politics and unfounded conspiracy theories can be found in the work of Jeffrey Bale.

Bale argues that whilst conspiratorial plots do occur, most conspiracy theories presented by popular conspiracy theorists fail to accurately identify them.⁹ He suggests that the key distinction is to be found in how the plots themselves are described and understood by the theorist. Conspiratorial plots are time-bounded, small scale, and localised actions that can have significant impacts but are limited to specific geographical locations for specific time periods to achieve specific goals. In contrast, what he calls conspiracy theories instead advocate for the existence of an ever present historically resilient global conspiracy that is constantly working, with supernatural efficacy, secrecy, and power, towards the complete and total annihilation of the way of life of the conspiracy theorist.¹⁰ In this way, these "theories" cease to refer to specific events and instead become more akin to religious worldviews that explain all of reality itself. From this, I argue that it is not useful to talk of conspiracy theories in the singular. Instead, we can use Frank P. Mintz's concept of "conspiracism", which he identifies as an ideology or worldview that sees conspiracies as the motive and driving force of history itself.¹¹ Conspiracism, now properly defined, has much in common with another pseudo-religious worldview, that of millennialism.

Millennialism describes a worldview or belief system advocating for an approaching end of history where society will be destroyed and renewed in a perfect utopian form in which all human ills will be resolved.¹² Whilst the origin of millennialism lies in the study of Christianity,¹³ in the modern context of millennialist scholarship there is a recognition of the flexibility and inherent applicability of the concept of millennialism to a number of religious, spiritual, and, as we shall see below, secular movements. The flexibility of millennialist rhetoric might be said to come from the inherent utility the concept has for social movements as like conspiracism, millennialism provides a valuable tool during times of crisis. As the scholar Stephen O'Leary has argued, both millennialism and conspiracism perform a similar function in that they work to explain and manage the problems of human evil and suffering.¹⁴ For conspiracy theories, the problems impacting a society can be externalised as originating from an outside source,

a conspiratorial cabal that has infiltrated the otherwise healthy society and corrupted it from within.¹⁵ In contrast, millennialism explains that the problems the community faces are merely harbingers of the greater coming crisis which will inaugurate the end times that lead to the promised millennium, where all suffering and pain will finally end.¹⁶

This similar function means that it should not be surprising that both conspiracism and millennialism re-occur within the same social movements repeatedly across history. This might be explained in part because both forms of rhetoric can be, when used properly, mutually reinforcing and work to maintain the overall structure and success of a given social movement. As Michael Barkun notes, conspiracism allows millennialist groups to explain why the end of the world has not yet come, as it has been delayed by the nefarious conspiratorial cabal seeking to prevent the coming of heaven on earth.¹⁷

Simultaneously, millennialism allows conspiracy theorists to provide a roadmap for how the evil they identify will eventually be routed and defeated, inaugurating an earthly paradise where believers will finally be rewarded for their struggles. Both modes of thought thus provide a function that the other requires, and together they can thus provide a powerful integrated framework that is rhetorically very compelling. I argue that what we can observe here, is the fact that conspiracism and millennialism retain similar functions, namely, to explain social ills and suffering and provide frameworks for understanding an anxiety producing world. Each of their unique focuses allow both worldviews to complement each other, creating a richer conceptual framework that allow adherents to address social concerns and mobilise for potential political action. It is exactly this utility that has made conspiracism and millennialism such frequent rhetorical tools used by social movements, and we will now turn to examine their role in the type of social movement central to this paper, the far right.

Fascism and the Far Right

Given the nature of this special issue, it is worth directly addressing the question of whether the wider movement within which Q is embedded, that of Trumpism, is part of the fascist tradition. This is not in and of itself easy, as definitions of fascism have always been fraught enterprises and become more so when applied to parties without direct ties to the original crop of classic fascist movements in Europe. Indeed, many post-war groups labelled as fascist have significantly altered their rhetoric and political orientations away from the explicit violent paramilitarism of the original fascist parties. Moreover, they have been joined by numerous newer parties that lack any explicit ties to classical fascist movements, but which share numerous nationalist, chauvinist, and reactionary political positions that clearly place them on the far right.¹⁸ For some, these developments have led to the suggestion that fascism should be restricted to describe the specific populist ultra-nationalist movements of the inter-war period.¹⁹

The question then arises of how we should define post-war far-right movements that contain many similarities to the original fascist parties but exist in entirely distinct cultural, historical, and economic contexts? One of the most widely supported definitions is Roger Griffin's argument that there is a generic "true fascism" which can properly be

understood as a form of “palingenetic ultra-nationalism.”²⁰ That is, a form of obsessive and violent populist nationalist myth that advocates for the phoenix-like rebirth of the nation through popular mobilisation for revolutionary social revolt motivated by the promise of a bright and glorious future once the old regime is torn down.

However, one possible alternative is to move away from the concept of fascism and instead focus on defining the far right as a broader category which can include both fascist and post-fascist parties. A good example of this approach comes from Richard Saull and his colleagues who outline a sociological and historical view of right-wing politics in their edited collection *The Longue Durée of the Far-Right*.²¹ In the work's introductory chapter,²² the authors argue that the core definitional attribute of the far right that binds together movements across time and space, is an appeal to: “‘the people’, understood as a racially defined demos, premised on a gendered social hierarchy and obscuring the class cleavages associated with capitalist development.”²³ This rhetorical focus on the people is shared with traditional conservative parties of the broader right, but what distinguishes the far right, and what they share with the original parties of the fascist era, is a willingness to embrace radical methods and solutions to protect the people from perceived outsiders.²⁴

This can include jettisoning the traditional conservative need to protect the existing status quo and social hierarchy in favour of more extreme measures that could go as far as reconfiguring social relations to better fit this nationalist vision of the people. Interestingly, the authors note that this radicalism often leads the far right to put forward a conspiracist view of politics, in which a cosmopolitan or liberal elite has worked to exploit and corrupt the people. This inevitably leads, so the authors argue, to calls for a political purge in order to “‘cleanse’ the body-politic of such alien and corrupting influences.”²⁵ This framework, I argue, provides a strong basis for understanding contemporary far-right movements by highlighting the core ideological and rhetorical aspects of their appeal and guiding our study of their political behaviour. It is also a framework that can be easily applied to Trumpism.

Trumpism is deeply pre-occupied with cultural understandings of American nationhood and citizenship, which presents a vision of the United States as a corrupted country weakened by foreign ideas and ideologies and beset by both internal and external enemies who seek its destruction.²⁶ Both of Trump's presidential campaigns displayed an obsession with demonising immigrants as a threat to American security, culture, and even health, alongside calls for dubious legal action to violently remove these dangerous elements.²⁷ Even beyond this foreign threat Trump has also attacked the enemy within, claiming society is filled with unpatriotic traitors seeking to destroy America from the inside.²⁸ Curiously, he identified many of these enemies as Marxist, communists, or anti-fascists, according with Saull's argument that the far right exalts symbols and ideas that cement national unity whilst attacking those that are seen to divide the people, as a Marxist or class-based analysis clearly would. These claims are frequently combined with Trump's attacks on so-called Globalists or The Deep State,²⁹ which speak to a clearly identified view of politics as conspiracy in which the country is beset by a nefarious cabal pulling the strings behind the scenes, and which requires radical actions beyond the boundaries of traditional conservatism to root out. From this,

I argue that it becomes clear that Trump and his movement can be accurately placed within Saull and his colleague's framework of the far right. With this set out, we can now turn to examine how our two conceptual frameworks fit together by asking; what is the relationship between fascism and conspiracist millennialism?

Searching for the Fascist Millenium

Conspiracism has long been recognised as a recurrent component in both fascist thought and rhetoric. Indeed, fascist regimes and leaders frequently constructed elaborate conspiracy theories that painted a picture of a nation under attack from a world spanning evil that wished to corrupt and destroy the people's way of life. The most obvious example of this kind of fascist rhetoric could be found in Nazi Germany, where the myth of a global Jewish conspiracy was an essential element in National Socialist ideology, rhetoric, and eventually, policy.³⁰ The party frequently promoted antisemitic propaganda at the highest level, including infamous texts such as the Protocols of the Elders of Zion.³¹ Though less prevalent in traditional scholarship on fascism, more recent research has highlighted the role of conspiratorial anti-communism in Fascist Italy, where conspiracy theories of communist infiltration and barbarism were used as part of government propaganda campaigns during the Italian intervention in the Spanish Civil war and later during World War Two.³² Less discussed than the reliance on conspiracism, however, is the role that millennialist thought played during the Fascist Epoch, this is even though, when we examine fascist rhetoric and ideology of this period, the spectre of both apocalypse and millennium are ever present.

Again, returning first to the Nazis, National Socialist ideology was frequently expressed in apocalyptic terms, describing a coming period of strife and war in which the old Germany would be destroyed, and a new society would be constructed in its ashes.³³ German fascist and proto-fascist ideologues spoke of the coming of a third and final Reich which would permanently secure Germany's status as the predominant world power.³⁴ David Redles has argued that millennialist themes and ideas extended far beyond Hitler's rhetorical flourishes, and that millennialism was a core aspect of National Socialism which was critical to its appeal and eventual success with large swathes of the German people.³⁵ What is of further note here is the way in which the Nazi's conspiracism and their millennialism were deeply intertwined with each other. The salvation of the German people in the Final Reich could only be achieved through the destruction of the global Jewish conspiracy. History would only end when the eternal parasitic enemy of the Aryan race was finally defeated.³⁶

Whilst the Nazi's remain the most obvious examples of conspiracist millennialist themes and ideas within the broader Fascist Epoch, they are not the only ones. Contemporary with the Nazi's themselves, though less pronounced than their German counterparts, Italian Fascism still produced its own genre of millennialist thought. This was particularly prominent in its colonial policy where fascist ideologues argued the Italian wars of conquest provided the means to create a new utopian society.³⁷ Millennialist thought can also be observed in other less successful fascist movements or ideologues of the period, such as William Dudley Pelley's American Silver Shirt Legion.³⁸ Even after the war, conspiracist millennialism thrived among the radical sects and fringe political

movements that composed the global far right, such as in the American Christian Identity movement.³⁹ In more recent times, the connection between conspiracist millennialism and the far right has merely solidified, where some of the loudest proponents of the modern global far right are explicit proponents of millennialist worldviews. Take for example the prominent conspiracist Alex Jones, who for years on his popular InfoWars online broadcast merged conspiracy theories about a coming New World Order with a Christian inspired eschatology that promised an apocalyptic confrontation with this satanic conspiracy that would either result in global destruction or eternal salvation.⁴⁰ It therefore seems that within each instantiation of the far right, we also observe an apocalyptic vanguard seeking out conspiracies, warning of the end times, and prophesying a millennium to come. Yet, why is this the case? What is it about these movements that attract these two integrated forms of ideological thought?

One argument is that the relationship exists as a result of a correlation in the social conditions that produce both far-right thought and conspiracist millenarism, namely, periods of social, economic, and political crisis. Traditional historians of the far right have noted that radical counter-revolutionary movements seem to gain prominence during periods of intense collapse,⁴¹ highlighting, for example, the fact that it was the economic shocks and political instability of the post-war Weimar period that seemed to prime many in the German population to accept Hitler.⁴² In a similar vein, conspiracy theories, millennialism, and movements which join them together have been found to arise in similar conditions of political instability and societal crisis. This has been observed both through historical analysis of conspiracist and millennialist movements which arose during periods of acute social collapse,⁴³ and through social psychological research which stresses that conspiracist and teleological worldviews (a key characteristic of millennialist thought)⁴⁴ become more likely when individuals experience intense feelings of anxiety, fear, and powerlessness, all of which are clearly associated with periods of crisis.⁴⁵

As compelling as this argument is, it risks simplifying both the appeal and the function of these modes of thought for the far right specifically. After all, fascism was not the only ideology to benefit from the crisis of the inter-war period, as the preponderance of large-scale Communist parties shows.⁴⁶ I argue that to understand the appeal of conspiracist millennialism purely as a response to crisis then risks missing a key nuance in how fascist and far-right movements use these ideas as part of their worldviews. To understand this, we need to turn to examine what function conspiracist millennialism plays within wider far-right ideology.

This function, I argue, is that both modes of thought allow the far right to resolve contradictions and flaws in their overarching worldview, particularly when it comes to their responses to failures in capitalist development. The far right has often adopted critiques of prevailing social and economic structures which at times includes nominal critiques of certain aspects of the capitalist system. This should not be mistaken for a full-blown anti-capitalism however, as these critiques are often adopted tactically and used as a means of bolstering other more reactionary aspects of their ideology. This includes, for example, bemoaning the destabilising impact capitalism has on the traditional family through encouraging women to enter the workforce rather

than keeping in their “natural” roles as mothers and homemakers.⁴⁷ This occasional system critical stance is however also qualified by another strain of far-right thought that exalts markets and seeks a further expansion of the capitalist logic to all aspects of society.⁴⁸ This seeming contradiction between critique and embrace of prevailing economic orthodoxy has led Owen Worth to argue that the international far right has failed to construct a new hegemonic economic common sense in the face of a still powerful Neo-Liberal economic consensus.⁴⁹ Indeed, this “contradictory embrace” of Neo-Liberalism, as Saull and Davidson put it,⁵⁰ I argue can be better explained by deeper contradictions within the ideology of the far right. Nominal critiques of certain aspects of existing capitalism can be useful for far-right parties seeking power, both to distinguish themselves from liberal capitalist parties and to draw social support away from the traditional left. However, any sustained critique of the capitalist world order would potentially unravel the shared homogeneous notion of the people that sits at the core of the far-right worldview, through exposing irreconcilable differences in class and economic position within the national body. The far right thus needs a means to critique the system whilst fundamentally not challenging its core assumptions. Conspiracism, therefore, functions to resolve a fundamental contradiction within far-right thought, that is, if the nation is a pure, organic, and natural body that exists in harmonious hierarchy, then what is the cause of social strife and conflict within the people?⁵¹ Why do, for example, women rebel against their husbands, children against their fathers, and racial minorities against their racial superiors? These contradictions, I argue, prime the far right to seek a scapegoat which allows them to critique current systems of economic and social power without exposing the underlying systems which produce them. Conspiracy theories are a perfect means to achieve these goals, as they function to both externalise and personalise systemic problems arising from the corruption of society by an outside evil rather than existing as a consequence of a system's pre-existing contradictions and structural logics.⁵² Conspiracy theories thus allow the far right to continue to obscure divisions in the national body and blame hardship and misfortune on an external foreign force that once defeated will allow the nation to return to an organic state of peace. The historian Moishe Postone similarly argued that conspiratorial antisemitism was an integral part of Nazi economic policy, noting that by externalising all of capitalism's problems to a cabal of nefarious Jews, the Nazi could critique the artificial system of what they called “finance capital” whilst presenting “industrial capitalism” as a purely organic productive process that, once the conspirators were eliminated, would flourish.⁵³ It is thus arguable that conspiracism plays an important function within the ideological toolkit of the far right, a functional explanation to resolve contradictions and paradoxes in their worldview whilst re-directing the anger of their constituents towards those considered outside of the national body.

Millennialism, I argue, serves a similar function, particularly as a means of dealing with hardship and misfortune. In the millennialist worldview, all pain and suffering can be taken not as signs of political defeat and setback, but instead as a sign of the imminent coming of the apocalypse that heralds the beginning of heaven on earth.⁵⁴ For far-right parties, millennialist thought provides a powerful ideological resource to draw on in motivating followers to keep faith and hold the line for future confrontations with the enemies of the people. Moreover, millennialist thought often shares similar

structural similarities to far-right and fascist doctrines. Millennialist thought often divides the world between the ignorant masses and the chosen elect who are specially ordained to receive the kingdom to come, in a similar way, far-right thought divides the world between a racially or culturally constructed people, and outsiders who are seen as unworthy of protection and support within the new regime.⁵⁵ In addition, millennialist thought often bases its imagined heaven on earth as a return to a previous golden age or pre-corrupted utopia once lost to sin, which accords with the reactionary counter-revolutionary impulses of many fascist and far-right movements.⁵⁶ In this way millennialism embodies the narrative of rebirth and renewal that Griffin identified as the minimum generic palingenetic core of fascist thought.⁵⁷

Thus, I argue, we should not be surprised that in times of great social and economic crisis when far-right and fascist parties surge, that these movements attract and encourage an apocalyptic vanguard. Conspiracist millennialism merely represents the integration of two worldviews that fit neatly within the ideological tendencies of the far right, and which provide crucial functions for nascent and empowered reactionary political forces. With this demonstrated, I now wish to turn to the second question within my research, how should we understand QAnon within this far-right conspiracist millennialist tradition.

What is QAnon

QAnon is a conspiracist millennialist social movement which is part of the broader Trumpist political tendency in the United States. A full comprehensive overview of the entire QAnon movement is beyond the scope of this paper.⁵⁸ But two important moments in online culture were instrumental in its eventual form and content.

The first was the long-standing tradition on online image posting boards such as 4-Chan for users to impersonate high ranking government or security service officials and then present “insider” information to people on the board. These users, who were within the culture of the boards understood to be trolls and frauds, would be dubbed with titles such as “FBI Anon”, “Clinton Anon”, or “CIA Anon.”⁵⁹ In addition to this insider tradition, these image boards helped to produce the clearest forerunner to QAnon, that of Pizza-Gate. This was an online conspiracist panic that, to simplify, involved accusations that Hilary Clinton and other democratic or liberal elites participated in satanic, cannibalistic, paedophilia as part of a broader plot to control the politics of the United States.⁶⁰ Both Pizza-Gate and the insider tradition would shape the context in which QAnon would eventually emerge in 2017. That year, on the boards of 4-Chan, an anonymous user began to post cryptic messages in a code-like speech suggesting that Hilary Clinton would soon be arrested and tried for crimes against humanity on October 30th.⁶¹ This prediction, like many more to come, would eventually prove to be false, but Q developed a sizable audience. In its early days Q resembled the earlier incarnations of the insider Anons, but a crucial step in its development occurred when online pro-Trump activists took the posts and began amplifying them on other more mainstream social media platforms. This publicity led to the movement’s growth as Q began to spread, first in the wider pro-trump media sphere and eventually throughout the entire internet.⁶² By 2018 the movement began to get mainstream publicity due to adherents

appearing at Trump rallies carrying QAnon t-shirts and other conspiracist apparel.⁶³ By 2019, movement members had begun to conduct a string of crimes including the assassination of a New York mob boss,⁶⁴ an armed standoff on the Hoover Dam,⁶⁵ and a series of incidents of property damage, assaults, and threats of violence.⁶⁶ By 2020 the movement had begun to organise even more effectively during the Covid-19 pandemic, as QAnon affiliated protests swept the country and members of the movement began to run for both state and federal offices.⁶⁷ When Trump eventually lost the 2020 presidential election the movement began to act as a sort of an informal research arm of the GOP, working to whip up conspiracies surrounding voter fraud,⁶⁸ and when Trump's attempt to push "the big lie" culminated in the January 6th riot at the Capitol Building, numerous QAnon flags could be seen in the crowd of supporters storming the building.⁶⁹

Q-Anon and the Millenium

The ideology put forth by QAnon combines both conspiracism and millennialism into a vision of a country in crisis and the visionary messianic leader who has come to save it. According to Q, the United States, and the rest of the world, is ruled by a cabal of satanic paedophilic cannibals, who use their power to secretly sacrifice millions of children each year as part of blood magic rituals to sustain their power.⁷⁰ This cabal is responsible for all the world's problems and deliberately immiserates the population through war, poverty, and disease to maintain their control. However, decades ago a group of patriotic generals decided to act against the cabal, and asked Donald Trump to lead a counter coup against the conspirators. So, for years Trump and a group of "white hats" have been waging a secret war against the satanists to restore the republic and thus the world. We are being made aware of this war by Q, a group of military intelligence operatives posting clandestine information to patriots through 4-Chan and then later the spin off site 8-Chan.⁷¹ This war culminated in Trump's election victory and he was now in the process of laying the groundwork for a purge of the US government and society which would reveal the existence of the conspiracy and lead to the public executions of the conspirators. This apocalyptic event, known as "The storm" within the movement, would herald the beginning of "the great awakening", a utopian golden age where Trump would bring peace and prosperity to the world through dispensing hidden technology and debt free money.⁷²

QAnon is reminiscent of other far-right movements in that it centres on a national re-birth through redemptive violence overseen by a messianic "national chieftain".⁷³ Moreover, its notion of the people is, if not always explicitly racialised, culturally in line with Christian nationalist notions of America as a nation under god which is under siege by demonic forces.⁷⁴ Indeed, QAnon's notion of the storm is structurally similar to Christian concepts of Tribulation and Armageddon found in the eschatological Book of Revelation, and Christian ideas, themes, and iconography suffuse the wider cultural scene of the QAnon movement.⁷⁵ Furthermore, some scholars, such as Argentino, have argued that the millennialist and conspiracist culture, found in American protestant Premillennialist churches, primed many evangelical Christians to embrace the structurally similar mythology of destruction and salvation found in QAnon.⁷⁶

Beyond drawing from religious tradition, QAnon's twin concerns of conspiracy and millennialism echo earlier secular far-right ideologies. The belief in a conspiratorial

cabal seeking to steal or murder the children of the nation has a long history in fascist and far-right propaganda, particularly in explicitly antisemitic formations.⁷⁷ Indeed, there are many parallels with QAnon's rhetorical structure and earlier National Socialist or neo-Nazi conspiracist millennialism. Some scholars have drawn parallels between the calls for the punishment of public officials in the storm with neo-Nazi millennialist call for a "day of the rope" where race-traitors and communists would be hanged en masse.⁷⁸ On a more functional level, QAnon displays the same mystification of social problems that I argued was a core part of the function of conspiracist millennialism in far-right thought. Within QAnon all, of America's, and the world's, problems arise from the machinations of this cabal, and it is only through the defeat of the conspiracy (the storm) and the coming of the millennium (the great awakening) that true peace and progress will reign. However, despite these core similarities there are many differences that make QAnon distinct from earlier far-right conspiracist millennialist movements.

The Changing Nature of Far-Right Conspiracist Millennialism

First, QAnon is significantly more eclectic and diverse than far-right conspiracist millennialist movements of the past. Many of these movements drew heavily on specific religious or rhetorical traditions such as Christian Pre-Millennialism, anti-masonic conspiracism, or European antisemitism, but remained contained within these traditional explanatory paradigms. Michael Barkun's⁷⁹ distinction between religious and secular millennialism is helpful here, as he notes that prior to the latter half of the 20th century, most millennialist or conspiracist belief systems could be safely segregated into religious or secular types. The former drew from specific religious traditions, such as Christianity, whilst the later took millennialist impulses from secular political sources such as Marxist doctrine. We can thus say that earlier forms of far-right conspiracist millennialism typically bound themselves within specific traditions of explanations that drew from religious or secular thought, be it the religious millennialism of American Christian Identity churches, or the secular millennialism of National Socialist thought. However, these two forms of millennialism are joined by a third, what Barkun calls improvisational millennialism.⁸⁰

Improvisational millennialism is a type of millennialist thought that draws liberally from a range of different ideological, spiritual, or esoteric traditions to create entirely unique end times theories that cannot be easily placed in a religious or secular frame.⁸¹ QAnon, I argue fits into this type of millennialism as it incorporates elements from a staggering range of traditions. Whilst, as already shown, QAnon draws from Christianity, it also equally takes from the New Age, wellness, and spiritual healing communities, which draw their ideas from a range of sources such as occultism, fringe-science, and eastern religions.⁸² Furthermore, QAnon has infiltrated UFO and alien disclosure communities, many of whom have come to view the Great Awakening as including revelations about benevolent extraterrestrials waiting to uplift humanity with wondrous off-world technology.⁸³ Both New Age and UFO communities not only intersected before the rise of QAnon, but also both had their own independent traditions of conspiracism and millennialism,⁸⁴ and movement members were able to draw on these traditions when entering the Q scene. These more esoteric strains of thought are no less prominent in

QAnon than their Christian counterparts. Consider the now infamous poster boy for the January 6th riot, Jake Angeli, the so-called “Q-Shaman” who was deeply involved in New Age spiritual circles prior to identifying with QAnon.⁸⁵ He even went as far to self-publish a book detailing his encounters with spiritual extraterrestrials who warned him of dark cabals controlling earth from the stars.⁸⁶

Moreover, QAnon's improvisational nature has allowed it to incorporate other conspiracist and millennialist traditions into itself. QAnon is thus what is often referred to as what Barkun calls a “super conspiracy”;⁸⁷ that is, a conspiracist framework in which numerous different individual conspiracy theories and conspiracists traditions can co-exist. For example, QAnon has been able to incorporate older millennialist theories into its own ideological worldview. A prime example of this is the Nesara and Gesara movements, which claim an imminent financial reset will soon occur, freeing believers of their debts and making them millionaires in the process.⁸⁸ This belief has existed for decades, with its own large scale online following and influencers, but was easily incorporated into QAnon's existing belief system, and Gesara soon became a core part of the utopia to come after the Storm clears away the corrupt financial elite and begins the Great Awakening.⁸⁹ This is further complemented by the fact that once a new theory is incorporated into the movement, QAnon's elaborate and expansive narrative makes falsification of its core claims almost impossible. The absence of evidence or even direct refutation of predictions can be transformed into confirmation of either the duplicitous power of the cabal, or through the thought terminating cliché that “disinformation is necessary” for the storm to occur.⁹⁰ The resistance of conspiracist and millennialist beliefs to falsification has long been a recognised phenomenon within the study of apocalyptic social movements.⁹¹ Indeed, within the study of QAnon itself Amarasingam and Argentino have applied Leon Festinger's famous framework of cognitive dissonance management to demonstrate that Q believers similarly deploy these psychological techniques to manage potential doubts when predictions made by Q or other members of the movement failed to occur.⁹²

This improvisational adaptability of QAnon also leads to another important aspect of the movement which distinguishes it from older far-right conspiracist or millennialist projects, that of its transnational nature. Traditional far-right movements have often based themselves on national traditions in an effort to present a pure nation state ready to be gloriously reborn.⁹³ In many ways QAnon follows this trend, embodying aspects of the traditional American far right such as Christian Nationalism, and Americanist iconography, all the while exalting Trump, an American President, as the central messianic figure in their eschatology.⁹⁴ Yet, despite being incredibly America focused, the movement has spread rapidly to numerous different countries and found solid success in gaining a large transnational following.⁹⁵ This appears to be in part due to non-American activists taking the theory and adapting it to meet local conditions and to speak to specific national concerns and traditions. In Japan, QAnon activists merged the movements pre-existing millennialist motifs with traditional Japanese national and religious currents to argue the Great Awakening would involve the exaltation of the Indigenous Japanese people over their enemies.⁹⁶ Whilst in Germany, many within the pseudo-legal and neo-Nazi Reichberger movement adopted QAnon as part of their general belief that the post war German state was an illegitimate foreign entity, and that

the Storm would see its destruction and the return to the pure German Reich of the past.⁹⁷

I argue that two factors help explain the flexible and adaptable nature of QAnon as compared to other far-right conspiracist movements. First, QAnon's central ideological framework is remarkably simple: the world is ruled by evil forces but a messianic-like figure will soon return to purge the conspirators and inaugurate a heaven on earth. All that is thus required for a theory to be part of the movement is to recognise Trump's leading role in the coming millennium, and to highlight that Q is an important source of information. Everything else is remarkably adaptable and flexible. Indeed, even who the cabal is can change due to local conditions, with European activists adding local politicians and EU bureaucrats into the global conspiracy to appeal to national far-right talking points.⁹⁸ Thus, local concerns and even entirely different conspiracy theories can be imported into QAnon's lore with ease and not risk disrupting the movement's pre-existing ideological frameworks.

This is helped by the fact that there is no one central ideological text within the movement; the closest to this is Q's post themselves (referred to as Q-Drops within the community). However, these are deliberately vague and obtusely written in a pseudo-cryptographic style. This has bred a culture of "de-coding" amongst adherents, where the followers attempt to divine the meaning of Q's words and apply his prophecies to existing events. This do it yourself approach to conspiracy theorising may have a strong impact on Q adherents which can be explained by the so-called "Ikea effect" identified within social psychology. Put simply, researchers observed that individuals who construct objects themselves have a higher tendency to view them more positively when compared to objects that they purchase or are given to them, even when their objective quality differs.⁹⁹ Applying this to QAnon, we can observe that its decentralised structure leads followers to build and assemble their own theories out of pre-existing beliefs and ideas and come to view these independent narrative constructs as more valid and real than opposing narratives by experts.

Extending this metaphor, we might suggest that QAnon operates on an Ikea like model for conspiracy construction. In QAnon, members take blueprints or instructions derived both from Q himself and the wider movement and then construct their own conspiracy theories from the surrounding material available to them. This is analogous to how the furniture giant Ikea provides customers with the material and plans for their items but leaves the construction up to them. QAnon adherents around the world are thus empowered to construct their own theories in a DIY format. This not only provides a strong psychological attachment to the constructed ideas and theories but also allows for multiple competing ideas or explanations to exist simultaneously as individual theorists or communities develop diverging narratives to explain contemporary events.

Indeed, the movement has shown itself to be remarkably open to hosting disagreement over the nature of the conspiracy even if it goes against Q's own words. A good, if absurd, example of this, can be seen in the controversy over the existence of JFK Jr. Many in the movement have come to believe that President John F. Kennedy's son, JFK Jr., is in fact secretly alive and working behind the scenes with Trump to destroy the cabal. This

belief in JFK Jr. is not universally supported by the movement, and indeed in a Q-drop, Q himself appeared to state that JFK Jr. was in fact dead.¹⁰⁰ Despite this fact, belief in JFK Jr. remains powerful within certain currents of the movement, even up to the point of inspiring splinter groups to form cult-like sects built around anticipating his return to public life, which they believe will be the signal that inaugurates the storm.¹⁰¹

The plurality and flexibility in belief within QAnon highlights the second important aspect that has allowed it to spread so successfully; its de-centralised and diffused nature. Unlike other older conspiracist millennialist far-right movements, there is no central ideological structure or party in which to hold Q to account. Q does not appear to emanate from the Trump administration or the GOP itself and any attempt to directly control the movement by officials has failed.¹⁰² Thus, rather than being a project of party politics, QAnon arose as a de-centralised communally authored conspiracist millennialist movement. In this way, the internet has been indispensable as a mechanism for QAnon to spread and develop. Whilst scholars remain divided on whether the internet has increased the propensity for conspiracy theorising in the wider population, it is undeniable that digital technology has enabled conspiracist communities like QAnon to develop, spread, and network across a vast geographical distance at incredible speeds.¹⁰³

Furthermore, the internet has allowed for the intensive marketisation of QAnon, with Q followers developing their own independent online marketplaces to sell merchandise and services, and for influencers in the movement to monetise their followers and in some cases work on the movement as their full-time occupations.¹⁰⁴ The internet's e-commerce functions thus fosters increased social bonds within the movement and helps it develop momentum and culture separate from any centralised party control. Online platforms thus facilitate the creation of what some scholars have called "echo-chambers", self-reinforcing communities where ideological narratives are hardened and alternative explanations are systematically de-legitimised and marginalised.¹⁰⁵ For many QAnon members therefore, these digital communities can become large or even primary sites for social interaction and economic exchange, even up to the point of replacing important outside social relationships with family and friends.¹⁰⁶ In this way, the internet facilitates the movement's growth, a process that was only increased during the Covid-19 pandemic where in-person social interaction became impossible for most and thus digital communities, like QAnon, were able to step in to provide needed avenues for socialisation.¹⁰⁷ QAnon's elaborate online network differs substantially from earlier forms of far-right mobilisation where conspiracist or millennialist propaganda was produced as part of centrally organised campaigns directed from within the party.¹⁰⁸ In contrast, large sections of QAnon's belief system were generated entirely improvisationally by movement members themselves in these online spaces, even if these beliefs clashed with the specific instructions given out by Q. This type of decentralised conspiracist millennialist thought is not entirely new for the far right. Roger Griffin¹⁰⁹ and Nicholas Godrick Clarke¹¹⁰ have both noted that in the post-war era, the far-right often operated as a diffused underground network of groupuscules that passed ideas across clandestine or fringe networks. Yet, none of these movements ever achieved the size, influence, or international scale of QAnon.

Conclusion: The Coming Storm

From the above discussion, I argue that both conspiracist and millennialist traditions have been consistent components of fascist and far-right ideologies in numerous mutations both during the pre- and post-war eras. This form of ideological tradition performs an important function within far-right thought through providing a means of explaining contradictions in their worldview and the movement's misfortunes through a framework that identifies enemies, defines an in-group, and motivates followers to fight towards a utopian future that will be released when the conspiracy is finally defeated. From reviewing QAnon's history and belief system, I argue that it clearly fits within this broader tradition of far-right conspiracist millennialist thought, with a focus on national renewal, a cultural understanding of the people that obscures class cleavages, a vision of an all-encompassing globe-spanning evil conspiracy, and the promise of an apocalyptic confrontation with the enemy that will result in a utopian future. However, whilst a part of this tradition, QAnon innovates in a number of critical areas. Firstly, it draws from a rich well of improvisational millennialism, taking aspects from various often contradictory traditions to construct a unique form of conspiracist millennialism. Secondly, QAnon's ideological flexibility has allowed it to spread internationally, adapting to local conditions and integrating pre-existing conspiracist and millennialist traditions into its worldview and thus creating a large scale and global coalition. Thirdly, its diffuse and digitally decentralised nature allows it to operate outside the boundaries of traditional party-political structures and to produce a range of distinctive and at times contradictory tendencies that can co-exist as part of a larger conspiracist coalition.

As we bring this discussion to a close, the question arises as to what the future holds for both QAnon and the wider reactionary right moment that it was a part of. First, it is worth noting that though QAnon has receded in popularity and power in the wider Trumpist coalition, the movement very much still exists, and one can find numerous online forums where believers wait feverishly for the storm to finally arrive.¹¹¹ Moreover, regardless of the fate of the movement's true believers, the ideology and general worldview of QAnon has indeed proven to be immensely influential on the wider American far right. Many of QAnon's core ideas and rhetoric have become dominant Republican talking points,¹¹² whilst many former QAnon followers or individuals that flirted with the movement have gone on to become elected politicians or prominent appointments of the new Trump administration.¹¹³ Thus, perhaps QAnon's most lasting impact does not come from the movement itself but rather in the ideological and rhetorical toolkit it has handed to the Republican party and the global far right in general. QAnon could thus be seen to have functioned as an ideological laboratory where new tactics and rhetoric for the far right were crowdsourced, tested, and then deployed, with the most politically useful finding their way out of the movement and into the hands of more mainstream far-right and even conservative activists. This might further lead us to speculate that this could be the model for future developments in the relationship between the far-right and their conspiracist millennialist vanguards. In the past, fascist movements produced apocalyptic rhetoric within their own party organisations and later promoted these narratives from government offices to prime their populations for war. However, in the modern day, far-right parties and their elected representatives only have to dip their toes into largely independent and de-centralised networks of conspiracy theorists and

apocalypse seekers to find the narratives that are most effective.

In this way, QAnon is arguably the model of conspiracist millennialism for the 21st century, a decentralised diffused network of apocalyptic reaction self-generating narratives and ideas to be used by more organised actors for their own purposes. This is all the more frightening given the global nature of the modern far right, which frequently seeks to build large scale supra-national coalitions as part of a “reactionary international.”¹¹⁴ Unfortunately, it is highly likely we will see many more of these movements in the coming years. As global instability increases and the world continues to suffer from economic collapse, geo-political conflict, and our ever-changing climate, many more individuals may find themselves pulled into the allure of conspiracist millennialist worldviews, particularly if influential politicians continue to find it in their interests to draw from these networks. A great awakening that brings about heaven on earth may not be on our horizon, but it seems that in our near future, a storm is still coming.

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