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### Behind the Smoke Screen: A History of Conspiracy Theories and Why They Are So Pervasive

Conspiracy theories are commonly defined as attempts to explain notable social and political events as the result of secret plots conducted by high-powered, sinister individuals or groups. They offer simple solutions to the often-complex question of why certain events occur by conferring blame upon hidden evil cabals that place their own malevolent interests above those of the rest of society. Conspiracy theories feature prominently in the current social climate in the United States, yet despite their prevalence, they continue to be shrouded with misconceptions. Many Americans misconstrue the sheer magnitude of conspiracy theories currently in circulation as evidence of a distinct and unprecedented phenomenon, an “age of conspiracism.” Conspiracy theorists have been falsely cast as members of a small minority characterized by delusion, irrationality, and extreme paranoia. These faulty assumptions have given the public a very distorted picture of what conspiracy theories are and how they function. American conspiracy theories are older than our country itself, and throughout our history they have been touted by masses of people that cross political, economic, social, and cultural lines. Rather than being characteristic of a delusional minority, conspiracy theories are normal manifestations of natural psychological processes and motivations, and modern media have only magnified their appeal and pervasiveness.

Conspiratorial beliefs have been a part of the American psyche dating back to the early colonial period of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The first conspiracy theories were directed against Native Americans, as early colonial stories suggested that the Indians that lurked in the wilderness were Satan's disciples. The Devil had set up an empire in the American wilderness to contest the Gospel's growing influence in the Old World, and had recruited the Native Americans to carry out his master plan against the English settlers.<sup>1</sup> Captivity narratives depicted helpless colonial women standing "passively under the strokes of evil, awaiting rescue by the grace of God... In the Indian's devilish clutches, the captive had to meet and reject the temptation of Indian marriage and/or the Indian's 'cannibal' Eucharist."<sup>2</sup> The Native Americans, then, were Satan's servants, seeking to exterminate Puritan values. With the Salem Witch Trials, these fears turned inward, as it was suspected that even those whom one least expected—friends, family, neighbors—were conspiring with the Devil. People of all ages, occupations, and social standings faced accusations of witchcraft, as colonial governments feared "an organized plot to subvert the Puritan mission had successfully infiltrated the core of the church."<sup>3</sup> Between 1692 and 1693, 144 people went on trial, six men and fourteen women were executed, and another man and three women died in jail, as did many infants.<sup>4</sup> Over time, fears of conspiracy began to be directed downward as well, as the American public grew increasingly skeptical of their slaves and their purported efforts to overturn the social effort in their favor. In the wake of a series of fires that swept Manhattan in early 1741, a conspiracy narrative formed which explained the fires as an attempted slave revolt. As suspicions mounted with each new fire, witnesses began

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<sup>1</sup> Jesse Walker, *The United States of Paranoia: A Conspiracy Theory* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2014), 23.

<sup>2</sup> Walker, 24.

<sup>3</sup> Walker, 53.

<sup>4</sup> Walker, 50.

coming forward with supposed evidence of slaves encouraging the fires and dumping buckets of water on the ground instead of using them to put out the flames. The government responded by executing at least thirty-four people, thirty of whom were black, and thirteen of whom were burned at the stake; another ninety-one individuals were exiled from Manhattan.<sup>5</sup> The American colonists, then, as settlers of new and unfamiliar territory, were incredibly skeptical of Native Americans, their African slaves, and even each other.

The revolutionary struggle brought with it its own host of conspiracy theories, as the American colonists sought to gain their independence from a tyrannical power which they believed was plotting to subvert them. American colonists drew heavily from the English Real Whigs, radical skeptics who believed that power inevitably corrupted those who possessed it and that liberty would be seized if the people did not practice constant vigilance.<sup>6</sup> These attitudes were adapted to suspicions of King George III and his seemingly endless barrage of tyrannous acts against the colonists. John Adams wrote, “There seems to be a direct and formal design on foot, to enslave all America.”<sup>7</sup> This sentiment was echoed by George Washington four years later. This suspicion of power persisted even after independence had been achieved. Newly independent Americans feared a “detestable and nefarious conspiracy” in which the Federalists sought to reverse the gains of the revolution and make the position of president virtually indistinguishable from that of the monarch they had just escaped.<sup>8</sup> The adoption of the U.S. Constitution itself was shrouded in conspiracy. The proceedings of the Constitutional Convention were kept entirely confidential, and delegates exceeded the intended purpose of the

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<sup>5</sup> Walker, 86.

<sup>6</sup> Nathan Jessen, “Populism and Conspiracy: A Historical Synthesis of American Countersubversive Narratives,” *The American Journal of Economics and Sociology* 78, no. 3 (May 1, 2019): 683.

<sup>7</sup> Jessen, 685.

<sup>8</sup> Walker, *The United States of Paranoia*, 113.

convention, which was merely to reform the Articles of Confederation. There also existed no legal basis for the implementation of the Constitution with its ratification by only nine states.<sup>9</sup> The Federalists, it was believed, were trying to create another king, and Americans feared for further usurpation of their rights as free individuals.

Throughout the 1800s, as the United States began to undergo industrialization, big companies and corporations became the targets of conspiracy theories, as well. During the Bank War of the 1830's, President Jackson vetoed a bill to recharter the Second Bank of the United States, denouncing it as a shadow state, "a Government which has gradually increased in strength from the day of its establishment."<sup>10</sup> Companies such as Union Pacific and Standard Oil were depicted with the metaphor of an octopus, reaching its eight tentacles into every aspect of society and manipulating it in their favor. The influx of immigrants during this period also contributed to the formation of new conspiracy theories, including that which was formed against Irish immigrant laborers in the Pennsylvania coal country. Various cases of mine owners, foremen, and superintendents turning up dead in the 1860's and 1870's were blamed on the Molly Maguires, a secret society of Irish workers.<sup>11</sup> These Molly men supposedly donned blackface and killed men in the night. This conspiracy theory sparked a considerable amount of violence against mine workers, including vigilante killings of supposed Molly Maguires.

The international conflicts of the early twentieth century bred their own conspiracy theories as Americans grew fearful of foreign enemies. In the midst of World War I, President Woodrow Wilson weaponized the Committee on Public Information against Germans and German sympathizers. He encouraged a hypervigilant, skeptical attitude in the American people,

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<sup>9</sup> Walker, 116.

<sup>10</sup> Walker, 123.

<sup>11</sup> Walker, 102.

warning that German spies were everywhere, plotting against America—the result was the persecution of all who seemed to be potentially undermining the war effort, whether they were German sympathizers or not.<sup>12</sup> Germans continued to be portrayed as potential enemies throughout World War II as well, as exemplified by the Brown Scare of the 1930's and 1940's fed by Americans' growing fears of Nazis. The FBI conducted surveillance of individuals on the far Right regardless of whether or not they were truly Nazi sympathizers, and the result was an indefensible series of restrictions on the far Right's freedoms of speech and assembly.<sup>13</sup> This set a clear precedent for the Red Scare of the late 1940's and 1950's, as suspicions turned from the far Right to the far Left in response to growing Cold War fear of Communism. The House Committee on Un-American Activities, re-chartered in 1938, and Senator Joseph McCarthy led a crusade against supposedly subversive elements within the American government and the Hollywood film industry.<sup>14</sup> Another lesser-known example of this fear and hysteria was the Lavender Scare which gained considerable ground in the aftermath of World War II as homosexuals were cast as a threat to American morality and national security. Laws intended to protect children from sexual assault were wielded against homosexual individuals, who were increasingly portrayed as belonging to a secret lodge that sought to create an agency of perverts. This led to the firing of one thousand employees of the State Department, far surpassing the number of supposed Reds fired during the previous decades.<sup>15</sup> Wartime enemies were then accused of infiltrating America and attempting to neutralize the American threat from the inside-out.

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<sup>12</sup> Walker, 40-41.

<sup>13</sup> Walker, 76.

<sup>14</sup> Walker, 76.

<sup>15</sup> Walker, 80-81.

During the Cold War era, several true conspiracies devised by those in power came to light which encouraged a greater degree of skepticism among Americans, especially towards government. On June 17, 1972, five burglars were arrested at Watergate Hotel in Washington, D.C., and were later connected to President Nixon's Committee for the Re-election of the President. The president's staffers had assembled a list of his opponents in order to, in the words of White House Counsel John Dean, "use the available federal machinery to screw our political enemies."<sup>16</sup> As more and more of the scandal came to light, and Nixon eventually stepped down under the weight of the accusations in 1974, the public grew increasingly wary of the government. At the same time, government investigations were unearthing sinister operations spearheaded by the FBI and the CIA. Under a program known as COINTELPRO launched in 1956, FBI agents infiltrated political groups they suspected of Soviet sympathies and encouraged members to be suspicious of each other, ultimately collapsing groups from the inside-out.<sup>17</sup> A program known as MKULTRA conducted by the CIA in response to the North Koreans' apparent success in brainwashing prisoners of war led to government employees non-consensually dosing people with LSD in order to understand how the process worked.<sup>18</sup> As these allegations came to light and were gradually confirmed, skepticism of government seemed to have been confirmed.

The late twentieth century witnessed a sharp rise in conspiracy theories pertaining to the threat of the Illuminati and Satanism. The actual Illuminati was founded in Bavaria on May 1, 1776 by a professor named Adam Weishaupt in an attempt to undermine the growing influence of the Jesuits. By the mid-1780's, the duke of Bavaria issued a declaration that anyone found

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<sup>16</sup> Walker, 163.

<sup>17</sup> Walker, 161.

<sup>18</sup> Walker, 165.

recruiting new members into the Illuminati would face execution, yet rumors continued to circulate claiming that the higher ranks were still active, and the order was even blamed for sparking the French Revolution and for perpetrating the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. Illuminati conspiracy theories experienced a considerable uptick in the 1960's and 1970's with figures like John Todd, a man who claimed that he had escaped from the Illuminati and was committed to exposing their eight-year plan to take control of the world. He sought to show the world the Illuminati's hidden messages in rock music and various companies, claiming that "the eightfold path of what a witch must master to be a powerful witch—that's the symbol of Denny's."<sup>19</sup> A similar hypersensitivity and suspicion of symbols in popular culture was characteristic of fears of Satanism. Particularly in the 1980's, rumors began to circulate about Satanic symbols in company logos like that of Proctor & Gamble, references to Satan in popular rock songs when played backwards, and even the presence of Satanic messages in the game Dungeons & Dragons that supposedly led to numerous suicides.<sup>20</sup> Tipper Gore, the wife of Al Gore, found these arguments quite persuasive and in 1985 launched her own campaign against "the dangers of the occult" present in American culture.<sup>21</sup> By the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, the search for symbols of Satan and the Illuminati had become an obsession for many.

In the first two decades of the twenty-first century, media has been saturated with theories ranging from 9/11 being an inside job conducted by the Bush administration to justify war in the Middle East, to President Barack Obama being born in Kenya and forging a U.S. birth certificate, to Hillary Clinton running a sex trafficking ring out of a pizza shop, to the QAnon

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<sup>19</sup> Walker, 190.

<sup>20</sup> Walker, 203-206.

<sup>21</sup> Walker, 206.

conspiracy that Donald Trump is a hero battling Satanist Democrats involved in sex trafficking and extracting adrenochrome from children. While some of these theories may carry a degree of probability, regardless of how minute that degree may be, far more lack any semblance of legitimacy. Why, then, do people still adhere to them? As previously discussed, conspiracy theories have traditionally been seen as the product of disordered thinking, their believers cast as delusional, irrational, and paranoid. However, recent research has suggested that conspiracy theories and belief in them instead arise out of cognitive processes that are indicative of standard human psychology.

One of these cognitive processes is pattern perception. Social psychologists have proven that human beings are inherently averse to randomness, and in turn cognitively impose meaning upon randomness by perceiving patterns that may or may not actually exist.<sup>22</sup> Specifically, conspiracy belief is predicted by illusory pattern perception, the perception of patterns in truly random or chaotic stimuli that lack any definitive meaning or pattern. In a study among 214 Americans, one group of participants was asked to view paintings by Viktor Vasarely and another to view paintings by Jackson Pollock. Vasarely's paintings contain clear and definitive patterns, whereas Pollock's paint splatters are arbitrary and haphazard. The detection of patterns in Pollock's artwork was found to predict belief in conspiracy theories and supernatural phenomena, while the detection of patterns in Vasarely's artwork was not.<sup>23</sup> Thus, belief in conspiracy theories is partly the result of illusory pattern perception as individuals attempt to make sense of the otherwise nonsensical.

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<sup>22</sup> Karen M. Douglas and Robbie M. Sutton, "Why Conspiracy Theories Matter: A Social Psychological Analysis," *European Review of Social Psychology* 29, no. 1 (December 2018): 261.

<sup>23</sup> Douglas and Sutton, 263.

Further, conspiracy thinking has also been proven to be predicted by a cognitive process known as agency detection. Beyond merely perceiving patterns amongst seemingly random social events, this refers to the imposition of anthropomorphic qualities on social forces. In terms of conspiracy theories, this most commonly manifests itself in the belief that social events are the intended outcomes of malevolent plots by secret and evil cabals. The human brain is evolutionarily designed to detect agency in the environment, and as a result, individuals are prone to seeing “weather events, machines’ behaviour and even the movements of basic two-dimensional geometric shapes as intentional and agentic.”<sup>24</sup> A study was conducted among 202 Americans in which participants were asked to view animations of three shapes moving in and out of a rectangular shape. Description of the shapes as purposeful and conscious and their actions as intentional predicted a belief in well-known conspiracy theories.<sup>25</sup> These findings suggest that conspiracy theories may result from an exaggeration of the degree of agency and intentionality behind social phenomena.

Conspiracy theories are also incredibly psychologically appealing to individuals because they take the form of narratives. The human brain has an innate disposition towards storytelling, and thus is more receptive to information that is presented in the form of a story containing meaningful characters and motivations. Conspiracy theories are particularly based upon the narrative of “The Hero’s Journey,” an archetype articulated by Joseph Campbell in 1949. According to this archetype, a hero decides to leave what is known and comfortable in order to fulfill a call to adventure. Throughout his/her journey, the hero receives guidance from a mentor, faces various obstacles and temptations, and ultimately finds what he/she was searching for and

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<sup>24</sup> Douglas and Sutton, 260.

<sup>25</sup> Douglas and Sutton, 260.

is transformed by his/her discovery.<sup>26</sup> This archetype is so appealing because it is so subconsciously familiar; *Harry Potter*, *The Odyssey*, *Star Wars* and countless other stories follow this very same framework. Conspiracy organizations use language that portrays the believer as the hero while the organization takes on the role of the knowledgeable mentor in the fight against the forces of evil in society. This narrative language is incredibly attractive to the human subconscious, and thus conspiracy organizations are able to manipulate individuals into believing them.

Conspiracy belief has been proven to be prompted in part by existential motives such as the need to feel safe and secure and the need to feel in control of one's environment. Human beings experience a strong desire for autonomy and free will and are thus averse to feeling as though they are helpless pawns subject to the will of higher powers which may intend to cause them harm. Conspiracy theories offer the promise of safety in that they clearly identify untrustworthy and dangerous individuals, thereby reducing and even neutralizing the threat they pose.<sup>27</sup> Studies have definitively linked conspiracy belief to anxious attachment, a specific attachment style characterized by "a preoccupation with security, negative views of outgroups, sensitivity to threats, and a tendency to exaggerate the seriousness of such threats."<sup>28</sup> Thus, individuals may turn to conspiracy theories in attempt to ease feelings of anxiousness and powerlessness, of feeling as though they do not have the capacity to exert control over outcomes in their own lives.

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<sup>26</sup> Rachel Runnels, "Conspiracy Theories and the Quest for Truth," TEDx Talks, April 14, 2020, video, 9:48, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LZoXb1WDpls>.

<sup>27</sup> Karen M. Douglas, Robbie M. Sutton, and Aleksandra Cichocka, "The Psychology of Conspiracy Theories," *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 26, no. 6 (December 2017): 539.

<sup>28</sup> Douglas and Sutton, "Why Conspiracy Theories Matter," 276.

Another significant motivation behind belief in conspiracy theories is the desire to maintain a positive image of the self and the in-group to which one belongs. A critical function of conspiracy theories is scapegoating, the attribution of blame for various negative social phenomenon to others in an attempt to expunge the self and the in-group of culpability. Thus, conspiracy theories “may help to uphold the image of the self and the in-group as competent and moral but as sabotaged by powerful and unscrupulous others.”<sup>29</sup> It follows, then, that those who feel like the authority and legitimacy of the self and the in-group are threatened may turn to conspiracy theories. This includes those with objectively low social status as a result of race, ethnicity, or income, and even those who may feel as though they are on the losing side of political processes.<sup>30</sup> This may explain in part why many of former-President Donald Trump’s support base turned to conspiracies such as QAnon when public opinion increasingly turned against the president and he was ultimately unsuccessful in securing a second term. In accordance with this, conspiracy belief has also been found to be positively associated with narcissism and collective narcissism, an inflated perception of the significance of the self and in-group, respectively, compounded by a persistent need for external validation.<sup>31</sup> Hence, those who experience a heightened degree of ostracism and victimization from the larger society and feel as though they are not receiving the recognition they deserve may turn to conspiracy theories that defame out-groups.

Belief in conspiracy theories has also been found to be motivated by a need to be unique. Many researchers have regarded the desire to stand out and to be special as so critical to human

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<sup>29</sup> Douglas, Sutton, and Cichocka, “The Psychology of Conspiracy Theories,” 540.

<sup>30</sup> Douglas, Sutton, and Cichocka, 540.

<sup>31</sup> Douglas, Sutton, and Cichocka, 540.

existence to be conceived of as one of the fundamental human motives.<sup>32</sup> Individuals generally tend to align themselves with the views and opinions of the majority and to comply with societal norms for beliefs, but for those who possess an enhanced need for uniqueness, this complicity is unsatisfactory. Conspiracy theories not only present themselves as unpopular, minority opinions, but they give their believers a false sense of possessing a knowledge that is kept hidden from the rest of the docile world.<sup>33</sup> They exalt themselves as enlightened individuals who alone are able to see past the smoke screen and learn the secret hidden truth that “they” do not want the world to know. A survey was conducted in which 290 workers were presented with a fictitious conspiracy theory about smoke detectors in Germany, yet between participants it was manipulated whether the conspiracy theory was held by a majority or minority of respondents. The headline of the article read: “Debate over smoke detectors further polarized by poll results: More than 81 percent of Germans [doubt/believe] official statement that smoke detectors produce no hypersound.”<sup>34</sup> Those participants who generally endorsed conspiracy theories overwhelmingly believed the fictitious conspiracy theory, and this tendency was even more pronounced when the conspiracy was presented as a minority opinion.<sup>35</sup> This suggests that the strongly influential desire amongst individuals to be unique plays a role in their likelihood to adopt conspiracy theories as part of their belief system.

All of these previously mentioned psychological processes and motivations are exacerbated during societal crisis situations. Douglas and van Prooijen define a societal crisis as “impactful and rapid societal change that calls existing power structures, norms of conduct, or

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<sup>32</sup> Roland Imhoff and Pia Karoline Lamberty, “Too Special to Be Duped: Need for Uniqueness Motivates Conspiracy Beliefs,” *European Journal of Social Psychology* 47, no. 6 (October 1, 2017): 725.

<sup>33</sup> Imhoff and Lamberty, 725.

<sup>34</sup> Imhoff and Lamberty, 729.

<sup>35</sup> Imhoff and Lamberty, 731.

even the existence of specific people or groups into question.”<sup>36</sup> In times of negative or unexpected events like terrorist attacks, assassinations, natural disasters, or war, people experience a heightened need to explain the world around them, and increasingly turn to conspiracy theories in order to do so. Accordingly, the two major spikes in conspiracy theories in American history occurred shortly before the year 1900 at the time of the second industrial revolution and during the late 1940s and early 1950s at the onset of the Cold War.<sup>37</sup> This may explain in part why conspiracy theories appear to be so prevalent today, as we live in a global climate characterized by economic and financial crises, climate change, political instability, and the War on Terror, among other various crises. The recent coronavirus pandemic has brought with it its own host of related conspiracy theories as individuals’ feel their psychological needs being ignored entirely. Those subjected to social isolation, faced with contradictory information, fearful for their own wellbeing and that of their loved ones, and surrounded by uncertainty in the past year have turned overwhelmingly to conspiratorial explanations for the pandemic.<sup>38</sup> Some of the most widely believed COVID-19 conspiracy theories claim that the virus was engineered intentionally in a Chinese laboratory, that coronavirus is no worse than the standard flu and thus protectionary measures are unnecessary and ridiculous, that coronavirus vaccines are unsafe and may contain microchips, and even that 5G phone masts are responsible for the spread of COVID. Such conspiracy theories may inhibit our ability to overcome the pandemic and restore the order characteristic of society prior to the crisis.

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<sup>36</sup> Jan-Willem van Prooijen and Karen M. Douglas, “Conspiracy Theories as Part of History: The Role of Societal Crisis Situations,” *Memory Studies* 10, no. 3 (July 2017): 324.

<sup>37</sup> van Prooijen and Douglas, 325.

<sup>38</sup> Karen M. Douglas, “COVID-19 Conspiracy Theories,” *Group Processes & Intergroup Relations* 24, no. 2 (February 2021): 271.

The recent boom in social media use has also proven to be a significant contributing factor to the continued prevalence of conspiracy theories. A study conducted among 476 public European university students found that the vast majority believe that mainstream media lie, and that mainstream media is as reliable or less reliable than alternative news sources.<sup>39</sup> This suggests a worrying trend in which social media has come to be seen as a more trustworthy and reliable source of news than mainstream media, as it provides fertile ground for the development and spread of alternative narratives. Social media has enabled the vast majority of people to gain easy access to an extensive database of information right at their fingertips, a database that is largely unregulated. Conspiracy theories depend upon information that may not necessarily be credible, but is presented in such a manner that it appears trustworthy.<sup>40</sup> Thus, in the absence of effective fact-checking measures, conspiracy theories are able to gain incredibly large audiences of believers online. They spread by means of a process commonly referred to as agenda melding theory, as individuals are driven “to seek and adopt group or community agendas in order to belong, and that not to do so is highly uncomfortable.”<sup>41</sup> In virtual settings, individuals seek out support and validation for their pre-existing beliefs. When they come in contact with groups of like-minded individuals, their individual agendas merge with those of the group. Individuals on social media are in turn able to create for themselves insulated bubbles of confirming accounts as they interact with other conspiracy theorists.

Conspiracy theories, then, possess a number of legitimate psychological causes and motivations that serve to rationalize their belief. The psychology of such conspiracy theories

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<sup>39</sup> Philemon Bantimaroudis, Maria Sideri, Dimitris Ballas, Theodore Panagiotidis, and Thanasis Ziogas, “Conspiracism on Social Media: An Agenda Melding of Group-Mediated Deceptions,” *International Journal of Media & Cultural Politics* 16, no. 2 (June 2020): 124.

<sup>40</sup> Rachel Runnels, 9:48, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LZoXb1WDpls>.

<sup>41</sup> Bantimaroudis, Sideri, Ballas, Panagiotidis, and Ziogas, “Conspiracism on Social Media,” 122.

thus explains in part why they have continued to penetrate the American psyche since long before our country declared its dependence from our own conspiring puppeteer. The advent of modern social media has served to make these conspiracy theories much more widely accessible and persuasive. With all of these factors considered, the prospect of ever truly quelling conspiracy theory belief may seem quite dim and dismal. Indeed, it is incredibly difficult to disprove conspiracy theories due to the fact that those in the unique position to debunk such theories are precisely those indicted for conspiring against the American people, and thus may have an ulterior motive for suppressing the skepticism of the public. Individuals will always feel a need to explain the unexplainable and to establish an “us” versus “them” mentality to obtain a greater degree of subjective control, and conspiracy theories will necessarily be a manifestation of this. However, as growing evidence emerges concerning the negative implications of conspiracy theory belief, such as targeting of and violence against perceived conspirators, decreased willingness to participate in the political process, and greater withdrawal and isolation from society, the need to act on this problem is readily apparent. More effective measures must be put in place in order to restore trust in the government specifically, and to strengthen individuals’ ability to differentiate between fact and fiction.

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