

# A Nation Addled by Conspiracy Theories

It's become familiar to the point of routine. After a shooting, a bombing, a national crisis of any sort, partisans on both sides fling fact-free, post-truth conspiracy narratives at each other. Within minutes of any tragedy, there's talk of setups, crisis actors, government patsies, and alternative plot lines so outrageous they would make a fiction writer blush. Launching broadsides against logic and reason, the theorists lob conspiracy "explanations" and alternative "facts" to the delight of their followers on social media. Before we even know how many people have been killed, the identity of the suspect, or the nature of the event, everyone is off to the races riding their personal political hobby horses.

Upon learning about the massacre at the Tree of Life synagogue on Saturday morning in Pittsburgh, President Donald Trump claimed that armed guards might have prevented the tragedy. He did so even though we didn't yet know how many casualties there were or that four (presumably armed) police officers had been wounded in responding to the attack. Many commented that Trump's remarks appeared to be a form of victim blaming. [Few](#) news reports mentioned that his ham-handed remarks were made in response to questions from reporters about whether it was time to reexamine gun laws. The hot takes on whether guns were the cause—or the solution—to the violence began while the blood of the victims was still warm.

Just days earlier, when an arsenal of pipe bombs was mailed to Democratic politicians, prominent figures on the right responded to the possibility that the would-be bomber was a Trump supporter by [suggesting](#) that the bombs were a "false flag" operation "carefully planned for the midterms." Conservative media personalities Ann Coulter, Michael Savage,

and former Reagan administration official Frank Gaffney all endorsed theories that suggested an alt-narrative: the left was sending bombs to its own in order to make the right look like violent loons for political advantage. A photo shared on social media showed one of the supposed bomb packages with a number of unmarked stamps, which, according to the false flag crowd, was proof that the package hadn't really been sent. Fox Business host Lou Dobbs [wrote](#) Thursday morning in a later-deleted tweet: "Fake bombs. Who could possibly benefit by so much fakery?" Radio talk show host Rush Limbaugh grumbled ominously, "It's happening in October. There's a reason for this." Trump piled on, [tweeting](#), "now this 'Bomb' stuff happens and the momentum greatly slows" for the midterms. Note the scare quotes around "Bomb."

All this was said to preempt the inevitable news that the pipe bomber was, in fact, a Trump supporter named Cesar Sayoc whose van was covered with right-wing bumper stickers. But there was even an alt-explanation for that. Some suggested that the "perfectly placed" and prominent MAGA bumper stickers were another sign of the hoax. In their topsy-turvy world, evidence that their theory was wrong became more evidence that it was right.

Asking "who benefits from this" and suggesting that there are sinister "reasons" for tragic events has become a problem on both the left and the right. On the left, we hear this sort of thinking when a Washington, D.C. Democratic lawmaker suggests that a prominent Jewish family [controls the climate and orchestrates national disasters](#), when the Russian "collusion" scandal evolves into its next iteration, when some promote [the notion](#) that the Pittsburgh attacks were motivated by the U.S. embassy move from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, and in the claim that Republican donor Sheldon Adelson [manufactured](#) the October 2017 Las Vegas strip shooting in order to enrich himself (a theory that also found adherents on the anti-Semitic right).

We have become a "strongly conspiratorial society," according

to Christopher Bader, lead author of a 2016 [study](#) that found that a majority of Americans [believed](#) the government was concealing what it knew about the 9/11 attacks. Nearly half of us believe that about the JFK assassination, alien encounters, and global warming, too. Almost a quarter think the moon landing was faked. Back in 1999, just 6 percent of Americans [thought](#) that.

Commentators have blamed this cultural change on everything from evolving media standards (or lack thereof) to the accessibility and openness of social media to the decay of presidential dialogue to the ease with which stories can be shared on the internet. In a piece titled "[Riling up the Crazyies](#)," Maureen Dowd of *The New York Times* faulted former Fox News kingpin Roger Ailes and "his relentless talent for pouring gas on a fire, for stoking the paranoia and fear that would keep viewers on the hook."

But this does not explain why so many Americans choose to watch Fox News and why we have become so fearful and paranoid as a nation. What has changed culturally that has caused so many to prefer conspiracy theories?

It's hard to say. Conspiratorial thinking isn't really thinking at all. It's laziness that jumps to conclusions before examining the facts. It accepts that somehow dozens of people could orchestrate a deception that fools millions—and then keep it secret for decades. Its adherents reject Occam's Razor, the scientific and philosophical device dictating that, if there are two explanations for an occurrence, the simpler one is more likely to be true, and the more things you assume, the less likely your theory is to hold water.

Reacting to loss, tragedy, or defeat by indulging conspiracy theories sidesteps difficult questions and uncomfortable feelings. This laziness and acceptance of an alt-reality manifests itself in other ways within our culture. When was the last time a political candidate reacted to his or her loss

by taking responsibility for the defeat? Instead we are inundated with talk of how the other candidate “stole” the election. Some are already promulgating these excuses even [before the midterm elections](#) have happened.

The most egregious example of this was when presidential candidate Trump questioned whether he’d lose the 2016 election because it was “rigged.” It was October 2016, and Hillary Clinton, confident of her impending coronation, [pounced](#): “Donald Trump refused to say that he’d respect the results of this election. That’s a direct threat to our democracy.” Except, when Hillary lost, she did the [exact same thing](#). Conspiracy theories have infiltrated even the highest echelons of our politics—but where will they stop?

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