

The Atlantic

The Prophecies of Q

American conspiracy theories are entering a dangerous new phase.

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SHADOWLAND

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This article is part of “Shadowland,” a project about conspiracy thinking in America.



If you were an adherent, no one would be able to tell. You would look like any other American. You could be a mother, picking leftovers off your toddler's plate. You could be the young man in headphones across the street. You could be a bookkeeper, a dentist, a grandmother icing cupcakes in her kitchen. You may well have an affiliation with an evangelical church. But you are hard to identify just

from the way you look—which is good, because someday soon dark forces may try to track you down. You understand this sounds crazy, but you don't care. You know that a small group of manipulators, operating in the shadows, pull the planet's strings. You know that they are powerful enough to abuse children without fear of retribution. You know that the mainstream media are their handmaidens, in partnership with Hillary Clinton and the secretive denizens of the deep state. You know that only Donald Trump stands between you and a damned and ravaged world. You see plague and pestilence sweeping the planet, and understand that they are part of the plan. You know that a clash between good and evil cannot be avoided, and you yearn for the Great Awakening that is coming. And so you must be on guard at all times. You must shield your ears from the scorn of the ignorant. You must find those who are like you. And you must be prepared to fight.

You know all this because you believe in Q.



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I. GENESIS

THE ORIGINS OF QAnon are recent, but even so, separating myth from reality can be hard. One place to begin is with Edgar Maddison Welch, a deeply

religious father of two, who until Sunday, December 4, 2016, had lived an unremarkable life in the small town of Salisbury, North Carolina. That morning, Welch grabbed his cellphone, a box of shotgun shells, and three loaded guns—a 9-mm AR-15 rifle, a six-shot .38-caliber Colt revolver, and a shotgun—and hopped into his Toyota Prius. He drove 360 miles to a well-to-do neighborhood in Northwest Washington, D.C.; parked his car; put the revolver in a holster at his hip; held the AR-15 rifle across his chest; and walked through the front door of a pizzeria called Comet Ping Pong.

Comet happens to be the place where, on a Sunday afternoon two years earlier, my then-baby daughter tried her first-ever sip of water. Kids gather there with their parents and teammates after soccer games on Saturdays, and local bands perform on the weekends. In the back, children challenge their grandparents to Ping-Pong matches as they wait for their pizzas to come out of the big clay oven in the middle of the restaurant. Comet Ping Pong is a beloved spot in Washington.

That day, people noticed Welch right away. An AR-15 rifle makes for a conspicuous sash in most social settings, but especially at a place like Comet. As parents, children, and employees rushed outside, many still chewing, Welch began to move through the restaurant, at one point attempting to use a butter knife to pry open a locked door, before giving up and firing several rounds from his rifle into the lock. Behind the door was a small computer-storage closet. This was not what he was expecting.

Welch had traveled to Washington because of a conspiracy theory known, now famously, as Pizzagate, which claimed that Hillary Clinton was running a child sex ring out of Comet Ping Pong. The idea originated in October 2016, when WikiLeaks made public a trove of emails stolen from the account of John Podesta, a former White House chief of staff and then the chair of Clinton's presidential campaign; Comet was mentioned repeatedly in

exchanges Podesta had with the restaurant's owner, James Alefantis, and others. The emails were mainly about fundraising events, but high-profile pro–Donald Trump figures such as Mike Cernovich and Alex Jones began advancing the claim—which originated in trollish corners of the internet (such as 4chan) and then spread to more accessible precincts (Twitter, YouTube)—that the emails were proof of ritualistic child abuse. Some conspiracy theorists asserted that it was taking place in the basement at Comet, where there is no basement. References in the emails to “pizza” and “pasta” were interpreted as code words for “girls” and “little boys.”

Shortly after Trump's election, as Pizzagate roared across the internet, Welch started binge-watching conspiracy-theory videos on YouTube. He tried to recruit help from at least two people to carry out a vigilante raid, texting them about his desire to sacrifice “the lives of a few for the lives of many” and to fight “a corrupt system that kidnaps, tortures and rapes babies and children in our own backyard.” When Welch finally found himself inside the restaurant and understood that Comet Ping Pong was just a pizza shop, he set down his firearms, walked out the door, and surrendered to police, who had by then secured the perimeter. “The intel on this wasn't 100 percent,” Welch told *The New York Times* after his arrest.

Welch seems to have sincerely believed that children were being held at Comet Ping Pong. His family and friends wrote letters to the judge on his behalf, describing him as a dedicated father, a devout Christian, and a man who went out of his way to care for others. Welch had trained as a volunteer firefighter. He had gone on an earthquake-response mission to Haiti with the local Baptist Men's Association. A friend from his church wrote, “He exhibits the actions of a person who strives to learn biblical truth and apply it.” Welch himself expressed what seemed like genuine remorse, saying in a handwritten note submitted to the judge by his lawyers: “It was never my intention to harm or frighten innocent lives, but I realize now just how foolish and

reckless my decision was.” He was sentenced to four years in prison.

Pizzagate seemed to fade. Some of its most visible proponents, such as Jack Posobiec, a conspiracy theorist who is now a correspondent for the pro-Trump cable-news channel One America News Network, backed away. Facing the specter of legal action by Alefantis, Alex Jones, who runs the conspiracy-theory website Infowars and hosts an affiliated radio show, apologized for promoting Pizzagate.

[Read: The lasting trauma of Alex Jones's lies]

While Welch may have expressed regret, he gave no indication that he had stopped believing the underlying Pizzagate message: that a cabal of powerful elites was abusing children and getting away with it. Judging from a surge of activity on the internet, many others had found ways to move beyond the Comet Ping Pong episode and remain focused on what they saw as the larger truth. If you paid attention to the right voices on the right websites, you could see in real time how the core premises of Pizzagate were being recycled, revised, and reinterpreted. The millions of people paying attention to sites like 4chan and Reddit could continue to learn about that secretive and untouchable cabal; about its malign actions and intentions; about its ties to the left wing and specifically to Democrats and especially to Clinton; about its bloodlust and its moral degeneracy. You could also—and this would prove essential—read about a small but swelling band of underground American patriots fighting back.

All of this, taken together, defined a worldview that would soon have a name: QAnon, derived from a mysterious figure, “Q,” posting anonymously on 4chan. QAnon does not possess a physical location, but it has an infrastructure, a literature, a growing body of adherents, and a great deal of merchandising. It also displays other key qualities that Pizzagate lacked. In the face of inconvenient facts, it has the ambiguity and adaptability to sustain

a movement of this kind over time. For QAnon, every contradiction can be explained away; no form of argument can prevail against it.

CONSPIRACY THEORIES ARE a constant in American history, and it is tempting to dismiss them as inconsequential. But as the 21st century has progressed, such a dismissal has begun to require willful blindness. I was a city-hall reporter for a local investigative-news site called *Honolulu Civil Beat* in 2011 when Donald Trump was laying the groundwork for a presidential run by publicly questioning whether Barack Obama had been born in Hawaii, as all facts and documents showed. Trump maintained that Obama had really been born in Africa, and therefore wasn't a natural-born American—making him ineligible for the highest office. I remember the debate in our Honolulu newsroom: Should we even cover this “birther” madness? As it turned out, the allegations, based entirely on lies, captivated enough people to give Trump a launching pad.

Nine years later, as reports of a fearsome new virus suddenly emerged, and with Trump now president, a series of ideas began burbling in the QAnon community: that the coronavirus might not be real; that if it was, it had been created by the “deep state,” the star chamber of government officials and other elite figures who secretly run the world; that the hysteria surrounding the pandemic was part of a plot to hurt Trump's reelection chances; and that media elites were cheering the death toll. Some of these ideas would make their way onto Fox News and into the president's public utterances. As of late last year, according to *The New York Times*, Trump had retweeted accounts often focused on conspiracy theories, including those of QAnon, on at least 145 occasions.

[Read: The coronavirus conspiracy boom]

The power of the internet was understood early on, but the full nature of that power—its ability to shatter any semblance of shared reality, undermining

civil society and democratic governance in the process—was not. The internet also enabled unknown individuals to reach masses of people, at a scale Marshall McLuhan never dreamed of. The warping of shared reality leads a man with an AR-15 rifle to invade a pizza shop. It brings online forums into being where people colorfully imagine the assassination of a former secretary of state. It offers the promise of a Great Awakening, in which the elites will be routed and the truth will be revealed. It causes chat sites to come alive with commentary speculating that the coronavirus pandemic may be the moment QAnon has been waiting for. None of this could have been imagined as recently as the turn of the century.

QAnon is emblematic of modern America's susceptibility to conspiracy theories, and its enthusiasm for them. But it is also already much more than a loose collection of conspiracy-minded chat-room inhabitants. It is a movement united in mass rejection of reason, objectivity, and other Enlightenment values. And we are likely closer to the beginning of its story than the end. The group harnesses paranoia to fervent hope and a deep sense of belonging. The way it breathes life into an ancient preoccupation with end-times is also radically new. To look at QAnon is to see not just a conspiracy theory but the birth of a new religion.

Many people were reluctant to speak with me about QAnon as I reported this story. The movement's adherents have sometimes proved willing to take matters into their own hands. Last year, the FBI classified QAnon as a domestic-terror threat in an internal memo. The memo took note of a California man arrested in 2018 with bomb-making materials. According to the FBI, he had planned to attack the Illinois capitol to "make Americans aware of 'Pizzagate' and the New World Order (NWO) who were dismantling society." The memo also took note of a QAnon follower in Nevada who was arrested in 2018 after blocking traffic on the Hoover Dam in an armored truck. The man, heavily armed, was demanding the release of the inspector

general's report on Hillary Clinton's emails. The FBI memo warned that conspiracy theories stoke the threat of extremist violence, especially when individuals "claiming to act as 'researchers' or 'investigators' single out people, businesses, or groups which they falsely accuse of being involved in the imagined scheme."

[Read: Instagram is full of conspiracy theories and extremism]

QAnon adherents are feared for ferociously attacking skeptics online and for inciting physical violence. On a now-defunct Reddit board dedicated to QAnon, commenters took delight in describing Clinton's potential fate. One person wrote: "I'm surprised no one has assassinated her yet honestly." Another: "The buzzards rip her rotting corpse to shreds." A third: "I want to see her blood pouring down the gutters!"

Illustration: Arsh Raziuddin; animation: Vishakha Darbha

When I spoke with Clinton recently about QAnon, she said, “I just get under their skin unlike *anybody else* ... If I didn’t have Secret Service protection going through my mail, finding weird stuff, tracking the threats against me—which are still very high—I would be worried.” She has come to realize that the invented reality in which conspiracy theorists place her is not some bizarre parallel universe but actually one that shapes our own. Referring to internet trolling operations, Clinton said, “I don’t think until relatively recently most people understood how well organized they were, and how many different components of their strategy they have put in place.”

II. REVELATION

ON OCTOBER 28, 2017, the anonymous user now widely referred to as “Q” appeared for the first time on 4chan, a so-called image board that is known for its grotesque memes, sickening photographs, and brutal teardown culture. Q predicted the imminent arrest of Hillary Clinton and a violent uprising nationwide, posting this:

HRC extradition already in motion effective yesterday with several countries in case of cross border run. Passport approved to be flagged effective 10/30 @ 12:01am. Expect massive riots organized in defiance and others fleeing the US to occur. US M’s will conduct the operation while NG activated. Proof check: Locate a NG member and ask if activated for duty 10/30 across most major cities.

And then this:

Mockingbird HRC detained, not arrested (yet). Where is Huma? Follow Huma. This has nothing to do w/ Russia (yet). Why does Potus surround himself w/ generals? What is military intelligence? Why go around the 3 letter agencies? What Supreme Court case allows for the use of MI v Congressional assembled and approved agencies? Who has ultimate authority over our branches of military w/o approval conditions unless 90+ in wartime conditions? What is the military code? Where is AW being held? Why? POTUS will not go on tv to address nation. POTUS must isolate himself to prevent negative optics. POTUS knew removing criminal rogue elements as a first step was essential to free and pass legislation. Who has access to everything classified? Do you believe HRC, Soros, Obama etc have more power than Trump? Fantasy. Whoever controls the office of the Presidency controls this great land. They never believed for a moment they (Democrats and Republicans) would lose control. This is not a R v D battle. Why did Soros donate all his money recently? Why would he place all his funds in a RC? Mockingbird 10.30.17 God bless fellow Patriots.

Clinton was not arrested on October 30, but that didn't deter Q, who continued posting ominous predictions and cryptic riddles—with prompts like “Find the reflection inside the castle”—often written in the form of tantalizing fragments and rhetorical questions. Q made it clear that he wanted people to believe he was an intelligence officer or military official with Q clearance, a level of access to classified information that includes nuclear-weapons design and other highly sensitive material. (I'm using *he* because many Q followers do, though Q remains anonymous—hence “QAnon.”) Q's tone is conspiratorial to the point of cliché: “I've said too much,” and “Follow the money,” and “Some things must remain classified to the very end.”

The destruction of the global cabal is imminent, Q prophesies. One of his favorite rallying cries is “Enjoy the show”—a reference to a coming apocalypse.

What might have languished as a lonely screed on a single image board instead incited fervor. Its profile was enhanced, according to Brandy Zadrozny and Ben Collins of NBC News, by several conspiracy theorists whose promotion of Q in turn helped build up their own online profiles. By now, nearly three years since Q’s original messages appeared, there have been thousands of what his followers call “Q drops”—messages posted to image boards by Q. He uses a password-protected “tripcode,” a series of letters and numbers visible to other image-board users to signal the continuity of his identity over time. (Q’s tripcode has changed on occasion, prompting flurries of speculation.) As Q has moved from one image board to the next—from 4chan to 8chan to 8kun, seeking a safe harbor—QAnon adherents have only become more devoted. If the internet is one big rabbit hole containing infinitely recursive rabbit holes, QAnon has somehow found its way down all of them, gulping up lesser conspiracy theories as it goes.

[From the September 2017 issue: How America lost its mind]

In its broadest contours, the QAnon belief system looks something like this: Q is an intelligence or military insider with proof that corrupt world leaders are secretly torturing children all over the world; the malefactors are

embedded in the deep state; Donald Trump is working tirelessly to thwart them. (“These people need to ALL be ELIMINATED,” Q wrote in one post.) The eventual destruction of the global cabal is imminent, Q prophesies, but can be accomplished only with the support of patriots who search for meaning in Q’s clues. To believe Q requires rejecting mainstream institutions, ignoring government officials, battling apostates, and despising the press. One of Q’s favorite rallying cries is “You are the news now.” Another is “Enjoy the show,” a phrase that his disciples regard as a reference to a coming apocalypse: When the world as we know it comes to an end, everyone’s a spectator.

People who have taken Q to heart like to say they’ve been paying attention from the very beginning, the way someone might brag about having listened to Radiohead before *The Bends*. A promise of foreknowledge is part of Q’s appeal, as is the feeling of being part of a secret community, which is reinforced through the use of acronyms and ritual phrases such as “Nothing can stop what is coming” and “Trust the plan.”

One phrase that serves as a special touchstone among QAnon adherents is “the calm before the storm.” Q first used it a few days after his initial post, and it arrived with a specific history. On the evening of October 5, 2017—not long before Q first made himself known on 4chan—President Trump stood beside the first lady in a loose semicircle with 20 or so senior military leaders and their spouses for a photo in the State Dining Room at the White House. Reporters had been invited to watch as Trump’s guests posed and smiled. Trump couldn’t seem to stop talking. “You guys know what this represents?” he asked at one point, tracing an incomplete circle in the air with his right index finger. “Tell us, sir,” one onlooker replied. The president’s response was self-satisfied, bordering on a drawl: “Maybe it’s the calm before the storm.”

“What’s the storm?” one of the journalists asked.

“Could be the calm—the calm before the storm,” Trump said again. His repetition seemed to be for dramatic effect. The whirl of camera shutters grew louder.

The reporters became insistent: “What storm, Mr. President?”

A curt response from Trump: “You’ll find out.”

Those 37 seconds of presidential ambiguity made headlines right away—relations with Iran had been tense in recent days—but they would also become foundational lore for eventual followers of Q. The president’s circular hand gesture is of particular interest to them. You may think he was motioning to the semicircle gathered around him, they say, but he was really drawing the letter Q in the air. Was Trump playing the role of John the Baptist, proclaiming what was to come? Was he himself the anointed one?

[Read: Covfefe and the real meaning of a Trump typo turned meme]

It’s impossible to know the number of QAnon adherents with any precision, but the ranks are growing. At least 35 current or former congressional candidates have embraced Q, according to an online tally by the progressive nonprofit Media Matters for America. Those candidates have either directly praised QAnon in public or approvingly referenced QAnon slogans. (One Republican candidate for Congress, Matthew Lusk of Florida, includes QAnon under the “issues” section of his campaign website, posing the question: “Who is Q?”) QAnon has by now made its way onto every major social and commercial platform and any number of fringe sites. Tracy Diaz, a QAnon evangelist, known online by the name TracyBeanz, has 185,000 followers on Twitter and more than 100,000 YouTube subscribers. She helped lift QAnon from obscurity, facilitating its transition to mainstream social media. (A publicist described Diaz as “really private” and declined requests for an interview.) On TikTok, videos with the hashtag #QAnon have garnered

millions of views. There are too many QAnon Facebook groups, plenty of them ghost towns, to do a proper count, but the most active ones publish thousands of items each day. (In 2018, Reddit banned QAnon groups from its platform for inciting violence.)

Adherents are ever looking out for signs from on high, plumbing for portents when guidance from Q himself is absent. The coronavirus, for instance—what does it signify? In several of the big Facebook groups, people erupted in a frenzy of speculation, circulating a theory that Trump’s decision to wear a yellow tie to a White House briefing about the virus was a sign that the outbreak wasn’t real: “He is telling us there is no virus threat because it is the exact same color as the maritime flag that represents the vessel has no infected people on board,” someone wrote in a post that was widely shared and remixed across social media. Three days before the World Health Organization officially declared the coronavirus a pandemic, Trump was retweeting a QAnon-themed meme. “Who knows what this means, but it sounds good to me!” the president wrote on March 8, sharing a Photoshopped image of himself playing a violin overlaid with the words “Nothing can stop what is coming.”

[From the March 2020 issue: The billion-dollar disinformation campaign to reelect the president]

On March 9, Q himself issued a triptych of ominous posts that seemed definitive: The coronavirus is real, but welcome, and followers should not be afraid. The first post shared Trump’s tweet from the night before and repeated, “Nothing Can Stop What Is Coming.” The second said: “The Great Awakening is Worldwide.” The third was simple: “GOD WINS.”

A month later, on April 8, Q went on a posting spree, dropping nine posts over the span of six hours and touching on several of his favorite topics—God, Pizzagate, and the wickedness of the elites. “They will stop at nothing to

regain power,” he wrote in one scathing post that alleged a coordinated propaganda effort by Democrats, Hollywood, and the media. Another accused Democrats of promoting “mass hysteria” about the coronavirus for political gain: “What is the primary benefit to keep public in mass-hysteria re: COVID-19? Think voting. Are you awake yet? Q.” And he shared these verses from Ephesians: “Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of His might. Put on the full armor of God so that you will be able to stand firm against the schemes of the devil.”

Anthony Fauci, the longtime director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, has become an object of scorn among QAnon supporters who don’t like the bad news he delivers or the way he has contradicted Trump publicly. In one March press conference, Trump referred to the State Department as the “Deep State Department,” and Fauci could be seen over the president’s shoulder, suppressing a laugh and covering his face. By then, QAnon had already declared Fauci irredeemably compromised, because WikiLeaks had unearthed a pair of emails he sent praising Hillary Clinton in 2012 and 2013. Sentiment about Fauci among QAnon supporters on social-media platforms ranges from “Fauci is a Deep State puppet” to “FAUCI is a BLACKHAT!!!”—the term QAnon uses for people who support the evil cabal that Q warns about. One person, using the hashtags #DeepStateCabal and #Qanon, tweeted this: “Watch Fauci’s hand signals and body language at the press conferences. What is he communicating?” Another shared an image of Fauci standing in a lab with Barack Obama, with the caption “Obama and ‘Dr.’ Fauci in the lab creating coronovirus [*sic*]. #DeepstateDoctor.” The Justice Department recently approved heightened security measures for Fauci because of the mounting volume of threats against him.

[Read: If someone shares the ‘Plandemic’ video, how should you respond?]

In the final days before Congress passed a \$2 trillion economic-relief package

in late March, Democrats insisted on provisions that would make it easier for people to vote by mail, prompting Q himself to weigh in with dismay: “These people are sick! Nothing can stop what is coming. Nothing.”

Illustration: Arsh Raziuddin; Ira Wyman / Getty; Evan El-Amin / Shutterstock; animation: Vishakha Darbha

III. BELIEVERS

ON A BONE-COLD THURSDAY in early January, a crowd was swelling in downtown Toledo, Ohio. By lunchtime, seven hours before the start of Trump's first campaign rally of the new year, the line to get into the Huntington Center had already snaked around two city blocks. The air was electric with possibility, and the whole scene possessed a Jimmy Buffett-meets-Michigan Militia atmosphere: lots of white people, a good deal of vaping, red-white-and-blue everything. Down the street, someone had affixed a two-story banner across the top of a burned-out brick building. It read: PRESIDENT TRUMP, WELCOME TO TOLEDO, OHIO: WHO IS Q ... MILITARY INTELLIGENCE? Q+? ("Q+" is QAnon shorthand for Trump himself.) Vendors at the event were selling Q buttons and T-shirts. QAnon merchandise comes in a great variety; online, you can buy Great Awakening coffee (\$14.99) and QAnon bracelets with tiny silver pizza charms (\$20.17).

I worked my way toward the back of the line, making small talk and asking who, if anyone, knew anything about QAnon. One woman's eyes lit up, and in a single fluid motion she unzipped and removed her jacket, then did a little

jump so that her back was to me. I could see a Q made out of duct tape, which she'd pressed onto her red T-shirt. Her name was Lorrie Shock, and the first thing she wanted me to know was this: "We're not a domestic-terror group."

Shock was born in Ohio and never left, "a lifer," as she put it. She had worked at a Bridgestone factory, making car parts, for most of her adult life. "Real hot and dirty work, but good money," she told me. "I got three kids through school." Today, in what she calls her preretirement job, she cares for adults with special needs, spending her days in a tender routine of playing games with them and helping them in and out of a swimming pool. Shock came to the Trump rally with her friend Pat Harger, who had retired after 32 years at Whirlpool. Harger's wife runs a catering business, which is what had kept her from attending the rally that day. Harger and Shock are old friends. "Since the fourth grade," Harger told me, "and we're 57 years old."

Now that Shock's girls are grown and she's not working a factory job, she has more time for herself. That used to mean reading novels in the evening—she doesn't own a television—but now it means researching Q, who first came to her notice when someone she knew mentioned him on Facebook in 2017: "What caught my attention was 'research.' *Do your own research. Don't take anything for granted.* I don't care who says it, even President Trump. Do your own research, make up your own mind."

[*Read: Trump needs conspiracy theories*]

The QAnon universe is sprawling and deep, with layer upon layer of context, acronyms, characters, and shorthand to learn. The "castle" is the White House. "Crumbs" are clues. CBTS stands for "calm before the storm," and WWG1WGA stands for "Where we go one, we go all," which has become an expression of solidarity among Q followers. (Both of these phrases, oddly, are used in the trailer for the 1996 Ridley Scott film *White Squall*—watch it on

YouTube, and you'll see that the comments section is flooded with pro-Q sentiment.) There is also a "Q clock," which refers to a calendar some factions of Q supporters use to try to decode supposed clues based on time stamps of Q drops and Trump tweets.

At the height of her devotion, Shock was spending four to six hours a day reading and rereading Q drops, scouring documents online, taking notes. Now, she says, she spends closer to an hour or two a day. "When I first started, everybody thought I was crazy," Shock said. That included her daughters, who are "very liberal Hillary and Bernie supporters," Shock said. "I still love them. They think I'm crazy, but that's all right."

Harger, too, once thought Shock had lost it. "I was doubting her," he told me. "I would send her texts saying, *Lorrie*."



"He was like, 'What the hell?'" Shock said, laughing. "So my comment to him would be 'Do your own research.'"

"And I did," Harger said. "And it's like, *Wow*."

Taking a page from Trump's playbook, Q frequently rails against legitimate sources of information as fake. Shock and Harger rely on information they encounter on Facebook rather than news outlets run by journalists. They don't read the local paper or watch any of the major television networks. "You can't watch the news," Shock said. "Your news channel ain't gonna tell us shit." Harger says he likes One America News Network. Not so long ago, he used to watch CNN, and couldn't get enough of Wolf Blitzer. "We were glued to that; we always have been," he said. "Until this man, Trump, really opened our eyes to what's happening. And Q. Q is telling us beforehand the stuff that's going to happen." I asked Harger and Shock for examples of predictions that had come true. They could not provide specifics and instead encouraged me to do the research myself. When I asked them how they explained the

events Q had predicted that never happened, such as Clinton's arrest, they said that deception is part of Q's plan. Shock added, "I think there were more things that were predicted that *did* happen." Her tone was gentle rather than indignant.

"I feel God led me to Q. I really feel like God pushed me in this direction."

Harger wanted me to know that he'd voted for Obama the first time around. He grew up in a family of Democrats. His dad was a union guy. But that was before Trump appeared and convinced Harger that he shouldn't trust the institutions he always thought he could. Shock nodded alongside him. "The reason I feel like I can trust Trump more is, he's not part of the establishment," she said. At one point, Harger told me I should look into what happened to John F. Kennedy Jr.—who died in 1999, when his airplane crashed into the Atlantic Ocean off Martha's Vineyard—suggesting that Hillary Clinton had had him assassinated. (Alternatively, a contingent of  QAnon believers say that JFK Jr. faked his death and that he's a behind-the-scenes Trump supporter, and possibly even Q himself. Some anticipate his dramatic public return so that he can serve as Trump's running mate in 2020.) When I asked Harger whether there's any evidence to support the  assassination claim, he flipped my question around: "Is there any evidence not to?"

[Peter Beinart: Trump's fantasy world got him into this]

Reading Shock's Facebook page is an exercise in contradictions, a toggling between banality and hostility. There she is in a yellow kayak in her profile

photo, bright-red hair spilling out of a ski hat, a giant smile on her face. There are the photos of her daughters, and of a granddaughter with Shirley Temple curls. Yet Q is never far away. On Christmas Eve, Shock shared one post that seemed to come straight out of the QAnon universe but also pulled in an older, classic conspiracy: “X marks the spot over Roswell NM. X17 Fifth Force Particle. X + Q Coincidence?” That same day, she shared a separate post suggesting that Michelle Obama is secretly a man. Someone responded with skepticism: “I am still not convinced. She shows and acts evil, but a man?” Shock’s reply: “Research it.” There was a post claiming that Representative Adam Schiff had raped the body of a dead boy at the Chateau Marmont, in Los Angeles—Harger shows up here, with a “huh??” in the comments—and a warning that George Soros was going after Christian evangelicals. In other posts, Shock playfully taunted “libs” and her “Trump-hating friends,” and also shared a video of her daughter singing Christmas carols.

In Toledo, I asked Shock if she had any theories about Q’s identity. She answered immediately: “I think it’s Trump.” I asked if she thinks Trump even knows how to use 4chan. The message board is notoriously confusing for the uninitiated, nothing like Facebook and other social platforms designed to make it easy to publish quickly and often. “I think he knows way more than what we think,” she said. But she also wanted me to know that her obsession with Q wasn’t about Trump. This had been something she was reluctant to speak about at first. Now, she said, “I feel God led me to Q. I really feel like God pushed me in this direction. I feel like if it was deceitful, in my spirit, God would be telling me, ‘Enough’s enough.’ But I don’t feel that. I pray about it. I’ve said, ‘Father, should I be wasting my time on this?’ ... And I don’t feel that feeling of *I should stop*.”

Arthur Jones, the director of the documentary film *Feels Good Man*, which tells the story of how internet memes infiltrated politics in the 2016

presidential election, told me that QAnon reminds him of his childhood growing up in an evangelical-Christian family in the Ozarks. He said that many people he knew then, and many people he meets now in the most devout parts of the country, are deeply interested in the Book of Revelation, and in trying to unpack “all of its pretty-hard-to-decipher prophecies.” Jones went on: “I think the same kind of person would all of a sudden start pulling at the threads of Q and start feeling like everything is starting to fall into place and make sense. If you are an evangelical and you look at Donald Trump on face value, he lies, he steals, he cheats, he’s been married multiple times, he’s clearly a sinner. But you are trying to find a way that he is somehow part of God’s plan.”

You can’t always tell what kind of Q follower you’re encountering. Anyone using a Q hashtag could be a true believer, like Shock, or simply someone cruising a site and playing along for a vicarious thrill. Surely there are people who know that Q is a fantasy but participate because there’s an element of QAnon that converges with a live-action role-playing game. In the sprawling constellation of Q supporters, Shock and Harger seem prototypical. They happened upon Q and something clicked. The fable plugged neatly into their existing worldview.

IV. PROFESSIONALS

Q MAY BE ANONYMOUS, but leaders of the QAnon movement have emerged in public and built their own large audiences. David Hayes is better known by his online handle: PrayingMedic. In his YouTube videos, he exudes the even-

keeled authoritarian energy of a middle-school principal. PrayingMedic is one of the best-known QAnon evangelists on the planet. He has more than 300,000 Twitter followers and a similar number of YouTube subscribers. Hayes, a former paramedic, lives in a terra-cotta-roofed subdivision in Gilbert, Arizona, with his wife, Denise, an artist whom he met on the dating site Christian Mingle in 2007. Both describe themselves as former atheists who came to their faith in God, and to each other, late in life, after previous marriages. Hayes has been following Q since the beginning, or close to it. “QAnon is pretty darn interesting,” he wrote on his Facebook page on December 12, 2017, six weeks after Q’s first post on 4chan. That same day, he wrote about a sudden calling he felt:

My dreams have suggested that God wants me to keep my attention focused on politics and current events. After some prayer, I’ve decided to do a regular news and current events show on Periscope. I’m trying to do one broadcast a day. (The videos are also being posted to my Youtube channel.) That is all.

Hayes is a superstar in the Q universe. His video “Q for Beginners Part 1” has been viewed more than 1 million times. “Some of the people who follow Q would consider themselves to be conspiracy theorists,” Hayes says in the video. “I do not consider myself to be a conspiracy theorist. I consider myself to be a Q researcher. I don’t have anything against people who like to follow conspiracies. That’s their thing. It’s not my thing.”

[Read: The reason conspiracy videos work so well on YouTube]

Hayes has developed a following in part because of his sheer ubiquity but also because he skillfully wears the mantle of a skeptic—*I’m not one of those crazies*. Hayes is not a QAnon hobbyist, though. He’s a professional. There are income streams to be tapped, modest but expanding. On Amazon, Hayes’s book *Calm Before the Storm*, the first in what he says could easily be a 10-

book series of “Q Chronicles,” sells for \$15.29. Hayes writes in the introduction that he and Denise have devoted their attention full-time to QAnon since 2017. “Denise and I have been blessed by those who have helped support us while we set aside our usual work to research Q’s messages,” he wrote. He has published several other books, which offer a glimpse into an earlier life. The titles include *Hearing God’s Voice Made Simple*, *Defeating Your Adversary in the Court of Heaven*, and *American Sniper: Lessons in Spiritual Warfare*. Hayes registered Praying Medic as a religious nonprofit in Washington State in 2018.

Hayes tells his followers that he thinks Q is an open-source intelligence operation, made possible by the internet and designed by patriots fighting corruption inside the intelligence community. His interpretation of Q is ultimately religious in nature, and centers on the idea of a Great Awakening. “I believe *The Great Awakening* has a double application,” Hayes wrote in a blog post in November 2019.

It speaks of an intellectual awakening—the awareness by the public to the truth that we’ve been enslaved in a corrupt political system. But the exposure of the unimaginable depravity of the elites will lead to an increased awareness of our own depravity. Self-awareness of sin is fertile ground for spiritual revival. I believe the long-prophesied spiritual awakening lies on the other side of the storm.

Q followers agree that a Great Awakening lies ahead, and will bring salvation. They differ in their personal preoccupations with respect to the here and now. Some in the QAnon world are highly focused on what they perceive as degeneracy in the mainstream media, a perception fueled in equal measure by Q and by Trump. Others obsess over the intelligence community and the notion of a deep state. An active subsection of Q followers probes the Jeffrey

Epstein case. There are those who claim knowledge of a 16-year plan by Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama to destroy the United States by means of mass drought, weaponized disease, food shortages, and nuclear war. During the investigation into Russian interference in the 2016 presidential election, some Q followers promoted the idea that Trump was secretly working with Robert Mueller, and that the special counsel's report would both exonerate Trump and lead to mass arrests of members of the corrupt cabal. (The eventual Mueller report, released in April 2019, neither exonerated Trump nor led to mass arrests.)

These divergent byways are elemental to QAnon's staying power—this is a very welcoming belief system, warm in its tolerance for contradiction—and are also what makes it possible for a practical man like Hayes to play the role that he does. QAnon is complex and confusing. People from all over the internet seek guidance from someone who seems levelheaded. (Hayes was quick to respond to my emails but declined requests for an interview. He complained to me that journalists refuse to see QAnon for what it really is, and therefore cannot be trusted.)

The most prominent QAnon figures have a presence beyond the biggest social-media platforms and image boards. The Q universe encompasses numerous blogs, proprietary websites, and types of chat software, as well as alternative social-media platforms such as Gab, the site known for anti-Semitism and white nationalism, where many people banned from Twitter have congregated. Vloggers and bloggers promote their Patreon accounts, where people can pay them in monthly sums. There's also money to be made from ads on YouTube. That seems to be the primary focus for Hayes, whose videos have been viewed more than 33 million times altogether. His "Q for Beginners" video includes ads from companies such as the vacation-rental site Vrbo and from *The Epoch Times*, an international pro-Trump newspaper. Q evangelists have taken a "publish everywhere" approach that is half outreach,

half redundancy. If one platform cracks down on QAnon, as Reddit did, they won't have to start from scratch somewhere else. Already embroiled in the battle between good and evil, QAnon has involved itself in another battle—between the notion of an open web for the people and a gated internet controlled by a powerful few.

Illustration: Arsh Raziuddin; animation: Vishakha Darbha

V. WHO IS Q?

ANY NEW BELIEF SYSTEM runs into opposition. In December 2018, Matt Patten, a veteran SWAT-team sergeant in the Broward County Sheriff's Office, in Florida, was photographed with Vice President Mike Pence on an airport tarmac. Patten wore a patch on his tactical vest that bore the letter Q. The photograph was tweeted by the vice president's office and then went viral in the QAnon community. The tweet was quickly taken down. Patten was demoted. When I knocked on his door on a gloomy day in August, no one answered. But as I turned to leave, I noticed two large bumper stickers on the white mailbox out front. One said TRUMP, and the other said #QANON: PATRIOTS FIGHT.

Late last summer, Q himself lost his platform. He had migrated from 4chan (fearing that the site had been "infiltrated") to the image board 8chan, and then 8chan went dark. Three days before I stood on Patten's doorstep, 22 people had been killed in a mass shooting at a Walmart in El Paso, Texas, and police revealed that the alleged killer had posted a manifesto on 8chan just before carrying out the attack. The episode had eerie similarities to two other shootings. Four months earlier, in April 2019, the suspected shooter in a murderous rampage at a synagogue in Poway, California, had posted an anti-Semitic letter on 8chan. Weeks before that, the man who killed 51 worshippers at two New Zealand mosques had posted a white-supremacist manifesto on 8chan.

After El Paso, 8chan's owner, Jim Watkins, was ordered to testify before the

House Committee on Homeland Security. Watkins had bought the site four years earlier from its founder, Fredrick Brennan, now 26, who eventually cut all ties to 8chan. “Regrettably, this is at least the third act of white supremacist extremist violence linked to your website this year,” wrote Representatives Bennie Thompson, a Democrat from Mississippi, and Mike Rogers, a Republican from Alabama, when they summoned Watkins to Capitol Hill. “Americans deserve to know what, if anything, you, as the owner and operator, are doing to address the proliferation of extremist content on 8chan.”

8chan had already lost crucial services, which had forced it to shut down. The CEO of Cloudflare, which had helped protect the site from cyberattacks, explained his decision to drop 8chan in an open letter after the El Paso shooting: “The rationale is simple: They have proven themselves to be lawless and that lawlessness has caused multiple tragic deaths.” Watkins promised to keep the site off the internet until after his congressional appearance. He is a former U.S. Army helicopter repairman who got into the business of websites while he was still in the military. Among other things, in 1997, he launched a successful porn site called Asian Bikini Bar. On his YouTube channel, where he posts under the username Watkins Xerxes, he frequently sings hymns, reads verses from the Bible, praises Trump, and touches on themes underlying QAnon—warning against the deep state and reminding his audience members that they are now “the actual reporting mechanism of the news.” He also shows off his fountain-pen collection and practices yoga. When he arrived on Capitol Hill, in September 2019, Watkins wore a bulbous silver Q pinned to his collar. His testimony was behind closed doors. In November, 8chan flickered back to life as 8kun. It was sporadically accessible, limping along through a series of cyberattacks. It received assistance from a Russian hosting service that is typically associated with spreading malware. When Q reappeared on 8kun, he used the same tripcode that he had used on 8chan. He posted other hints meant to verify the continuity of his identity, including

an image of a notebook and a pen that had appeared in earlier posts.

[Renée DiResta: The conspiracies are coming from inside the house]

Fredrick Brennan's theory is that Jim and his son Ron, who is the site's administrator, knew 8kun needed Q to attract users. "I definitely, definitely, 100 percent believe that Q either knows Jim or Ron Watkins, or was hired by Jim or Ron Watkins," Brennan told me. Jim and Ron have both denied knowing Q's identity. "I don't know who Q is," Ron told me in a direct message on Twitter. Jim told an interviewer on One America News Network in September 2019: "I don't know who QAnon is. Really, we run an anonymous website." Both insist that they care about maintaining 8kun only because it is a platform for unfettered free speech. "8kun is like a piece of paper, and the users decide what is written on it," Ron told me. "There are many different topics and users from many different backgrounds." But their interest in Q is well documented. In February, Jim started a super PAC called Disarm the Deep State, which echoes Q's messages and which is running paid ads on 8kun.

Brennan has long been feuding with the Watkinses. Jim is suing Brennan for libel in the Philippines, where they both lived until recently, and Brennan is actively fighting Jim's attempts to become a naturalized citizen there. "They kept Q alive," Brennan told me. "We wouldn't be talking about this right now if Q didn't go on the new 8kun. The entire reason we're talking about this is they're directly related to Q. And, you know, I worry constantly that there is going to be, as early as November 2020, some kind of shooting or something related to Q if Trump loses. Or parents killing their children to save them from the hell-world that is to come because the deep state has won. These are real possibilities. I just feel like what they have done is totally irresponsible to keep Q going."

The story of Q is premised on the need for Q to remain anonymous. It's why

Q originally picked 4chan, one of the last places built for anonymity on the social web. “I’ve often related Q to previous figures like John Titor or Satoshi Nakamoto,” Brennan told me, referring to two legends of internet anonymity. Satoshi Nakamoto is the name used by the unknown creator of bitcoin. John Titor is the name used on several message boards in 2000 and 2001 by someone claiming to be a military time traveler from the year 2036.

QAnon adherents see Q’s anonymity as proof of Q’s credibility—despite their deep mistrust of unnamed sources in the media. Every faction of QAnon has its own hunches, alliances, and interpersonal dramas related to the question of Q’s identity. The theories fit into three broad groups. In the first group are theories that assume Q is a single individual who has been posting all alone this entire time. This is where you’ll find the people who say that Trump himself is Q, or even that PrayingMedic is Q. (This category also includes the possibility, raised by people outside of QAnon, that Q is a lone Trump supporter who started posting as a form of fan fiction, not realizing it would take off; and the idea that Q began posting in order to parody Trump and his supporters, not anticipating that people would take him seriously.) The second group of theories holds that the original Q posted continuously for a while, but then something changed. This second category includes Brennan’s idea that the Watkinses are now paying Q, or are paying someone to carry on as Q, or are even acting as Q themselves. The third group of theories holds that Q is a collective, with a small number of people sharing access to the account. This third category includes the notion that Q is a new kind of open-source military-intelligence agency.

[Read: I was a teenage conspiracy theorist]

Many QAnon adherents see significance in Trump tweets containing words that begin with the letter Q. Recent world events have rewarded them amply. “I am a great friend and admirer of the Queen & the United Kingdom,”

Trump began one tweet on March 29. The day before, he had tweeted this: “I am giving consideration to a QUARANTINE.” The Q crowd seized on both tweets, arguing that if you ignore most of the letters in the messages, you’ll find a confession from Trump: “I am ... Q.”

VI. REASON VERSUS FAITH

IN A MIAMI COFFEE SHOP last year, I met with a man who has gotten a flurry of attention in recent years for his research on conspiracy theories—a political-science professor at the University of Miami named Joseph Uscinski. I have known Uscinski for years, and his views are nuanced, deeply informed, and far from anything you would consider knee-jerk partisanship. Many people assume, he told me, that a propensity for conspiracy thinking is predictable along ideological lines. That’s wrong, he explained. It’s better to think of conspiracy thinking as independent of party politics. It’s a particular form of mind-wiring. And it’s generally characterized by acceptance of the following propositions: Our lives are controlled by plots hatched in secret places. Although we ostensibly live in a democracy, a small group of people run everything, but we don’t know who they are. When big events occur—pandemics, recessions, wars, terrorist attacks—it is because that secretive group is working against the rest of us.

QAnon isn’t a far-right conspiracy, the way it’s often described, Uscinski went on, despite its obviously pro-Trump narrative. And that’s because Trump isn’t a typical far-right politician. Q appeals to people with the greatest attraction to conspiracy thinking of any kind, and that appeal crosses ideological lines.

QAnon carries on a tradition of apocalyptic thinking that has spanned thousands of years. It offers a polemic to empower those who feel adrift.

Many of the people most prone to believing conspiracy theories see themselves as victim-warriors fighting against corrupt and powerful forces. They share a hatred of mainstream elites. That helps explain why cycles of populism and conspiracy thinking seem to rise and fall together. Conspiracy thinking is at once a cause and a consequence of what Richard Hofstadter in 1964 famously described as “the paranoid style” in American politics. But do not make the mistake of thinking that conspiracy theories are scribbled only in the marginalia of American history. They color every major news event: the assassination of John F. Kennedy, the moon landing, 9/11. They have helped sustain consequential eruptions, such as McCarthyism in the 1950s and anti-Semitism at any moment you choose. But QAnon is different. It may be propelled by paranoia and populism, but it is also propelled by religious faith. The language of evangelical Christianity has come to define the Q movement. QAnon marries an appetite for the conspiratorial with positive beliefs about a radically different and better future, one that is preordained.

[Read: The paranoid style in American entertainment]

That was part of the reason Uscinski’s mother, Shelly, 62, was attracted to QAnon. Shelly, who lives in New Hampshire, was tooling around on YouTube a couple of years ago, looking for how-to videos—she can’t remember for what, exactly, maybe a tutorial on how to get her car windows

sparkling-clean—and the algorithm served up QAnon. She remembers a feeling of magnetic attraction. “Like, *Wow, what is this?*” she recalled when I spoke with her by phone. “For me, it was revealing some things that maybe I was hoping would come to pass.” She sensed that Q knew her anxieties—as if someone was taking her train of thought and “actually verbalizing it.” Shelly’s frustrations are broad, and directed primarily at the institutions she sees as broken. She’s fed up with the education system, the financial system, the media. “Even our churches are out of whack,” she said. One of the things that resonated most with her about Q was his disgust with “the fake news.” She gets her information mostly from Fox News, Twitter, and the *New Hampshire Union Leader*. “In my lifetime, I guess, things have gotten progressively worse,” Shelly said. She added a little later: “Q gives us hope. And it’s a good thing, to be hopeful.”

Shelly likes that Q occasionally quotes from scripture, and she likes that he encourages people to pray. In the end, she said, QAnon is about something so much bigger than Trump or anyone else. “There are QAnon followers out there,” Shelly said, “who suggest that what we’re going through now, in this crazy political realm we’re in now, with all of the things that are happening worldwide, is very biblical, and that this is Armageddon.”

I asked her if she thinks the end of the world is upon us. “It wouldn’t surprise me,” she said.

[*Read: The normalization of conspiracy culture*]

Joseph Uscinski is disturbed by his mother’s belief in QAnon. He’s not comfortable talking about it. And Shelly doesn’t quite appreciate the irony of the family’s situation, because she doesn’t believe QAnon is a form of conspiracy thinking in the first place. At one point in our conversation, when I referred to QAnon as a conspiracy theory, she quickly interrupted: “It’s not a theory. It’s the foretelling of things to come.” She laughed hard when I

asked if she had ever tried to get Joseph to believe in QAnon. The answer was an unequivocal no: “I’m his mom, so I love him.”

VII. APOCALYPSE

WATCHKEEPERS FOR THE End of Days can easily find signs of impending doom—in comets and earthquakes, in wars and pandemics. It has always been this way. In 1831, a Baptist preacher in rural New York named William Miller began to publicly share his prediction that the Second Coming of Jesus was imminent. Eventually he settled on a date: October 22, 1844. When the sun came up on October 23, his followers, known as the Millerites, were crushed. The episode would come to be known as the Great Disappointment. But they did not give up. The Millerites became the Adventists, who in turn became the Seventh-day Adventists, who now have a worldwide membership of more than 20 million. “These people in the QAnon community—I feel like they are as deeply delusional, as deeply invested in their beliefs, as the Millerites were,” Travis View, one of the hosts of a podcast called *QAnon Anonymous*, which subjects QAnon to acerbic analysis, told me. “That makes me pretty confident that this is not something that is going to go away with the end of the Trump presidency.”

QAnon carries on a tradition of apocalyptic thinking that has spanned thousands of years. It offers a polemic to empower those who feel adrift. In his classic 1957 book, *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, the historian Norman Cohn examined the emergence of apocalyptic thinking over many centuries. He found one common condition: This way of thinking consistently emerged

in regions where rapid social and economic change was taking place—and at periods of time when displays of spectacular wealth were highly visible but unavailable to most people. This was true in Europe during the Crusades in the 11th century, and during the Black Death in the 14th century, and in the Rhine Valley in the 16th century, and in William Miller's New York in the 19th century. It is true in America in the 21st century.

The Seventh-day Adventists and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints are thriving religious movements indigenous to America. Do not be surprised if QAnon becomes another. It already has more adherents by far than either of those two denominations had in the first decades of their existence. People are expressing their faith through devoted study of Q drops as installments of a foundational text, through the development of Q-worshipping groups, and through sweeping expressions of gratitude for what Q has brought to their lives. Does it matter that we do not know who Q is? The divine is always a mystery. Does it matter that basic aspects of Q's teachings cannot be confirmed? The basic tenets of Christianity cannot be confirmed. Among the people of QAnon, faith remains absolute. True believers describe a feeling of rebirth, an irreversible arousal to existential knowledge. They are certain that a Great Awakening is coming. They'll wait as long as they must for deliverance.

Trust the plan. Enjoy the show. Nothing can stop what is coming.

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Related Video

