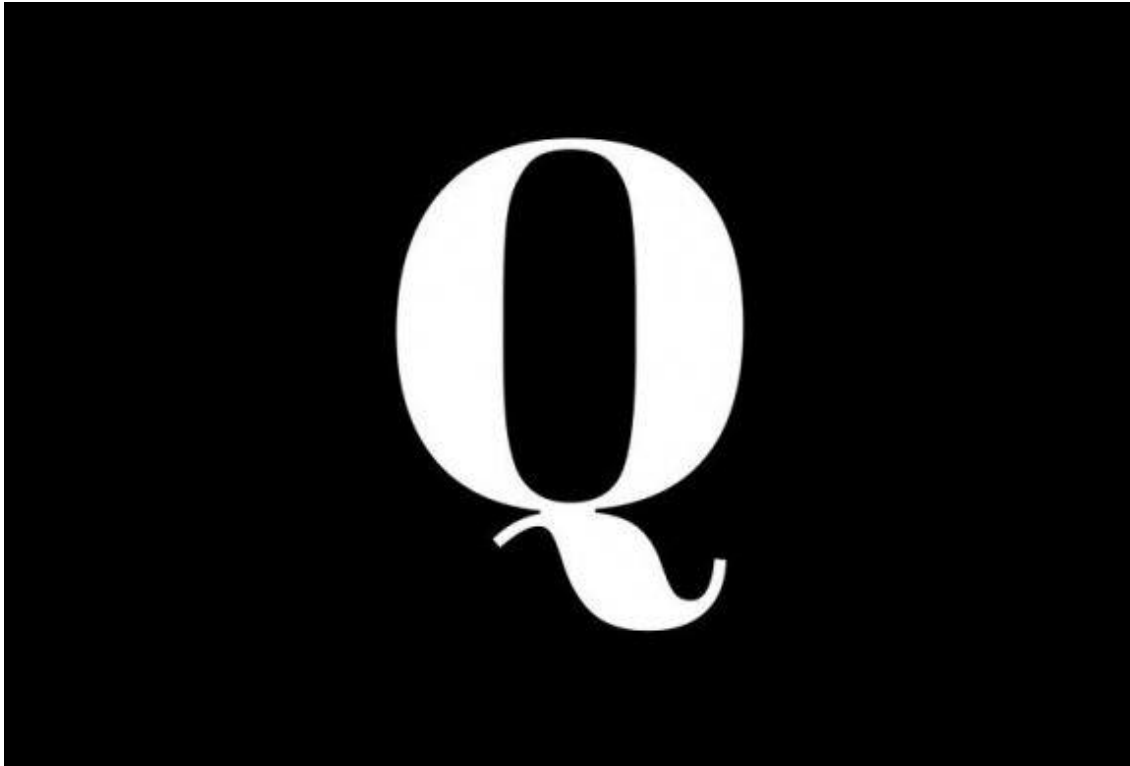


## QAnon

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- QAnon is a wide-reaching conspiracy theory popular among a range of right-wing extremists and even some public supporters of President Trump.
- QAnon, surfaced in 2017 on 4chan, is first and foremost an online trolling and disinformation movement. While it is difficult to gauge the size of the movement, it is likely that QAnon adherents number in the tens of thousands.
- Adherents follow the anonymous Q, and believe world governments are being controlled by a shadowy cabal of pedophiles (who will eventually be brought to justice by President Trump).
- The QAnon theory is scattershot and sprawling and anti-government elements; its adherents actively sow distrust in democratic institutions.

- While the ADL does not believe that all QAnon adherents are inherently extremists, this is a dangerous theory that has inspired violent acts.

## Video Backgrounder

### Introduction

QAnon is a global, wide-reaching and remarkably elaborate conspiracy theory that has taken root within [some parts of the pro-Trump movement](#). It is an amalgam of both novel and well-established theories, with marked undertones of antisemitism and xenophobia.

Fundamentally, [the theory claims](#) that almost every president in recent American history up until Donald Trump has been a puppet put in place by a global elite of power brokers hell bent on enriching themselves and maintaining their Satanic child-murdering sex cult. Q is a reference to “Q clearance” or “Q access authorization,” terms used to describe a top-secret clearance level within the Department of Energy.

According to QAnon lore, this global elite, known as “The Deep State” or “The Cabal,” control not just world governments, but the banking system, the Catholic church, the agricultural- and pharmaceutical industries, the media and entertainment industry; all working around the clock to keep the people of the world poor, ignorant and enslaved.

### Connection to Mainstream Politics

Despite a profound lack of any supporting evidence, QAnon has successfully made the leap from the paranoid catacombs of online subculture [into America's mainstream conservative movement](#). As the QAnon ideology has gained a wider audience, a cottage industry of [merchandise, food supplements and lifestyle](#)

advice has emerged alongside it, all rooted in the same profound distrust in governments, established sciences and mainstream media. It has attracted a following of private citizens, rapacious grifters and [even national politicians](#), as well as considerable support within other extremist movements, particularly the [militia and anti-government movements](#).

QAnon adherents have been linked to acts of [murder, violence, kidnapping](#) and public disturbance. In 2020, the novel coronavirus has provided additional fodder for QAnon followers, who have eagerly folded the pandemic into their profoundly paranoid worldview.

In January 2020, [20 candidates running for U.S. Congress](#) openly supported the QAnon conspiracy theory. While some have already been defeated or dropped out, and it is unlikely that many of those remaining will win, the pervasiveness of the theory is striking. It is also concerning that support for QAnon has become conflated with allegiance to President Trump, perpetuating a belief that his political opponents are illegitimate enemies of humanity.

The QAnon movement has attached itself to the sense of persecution and unfair treatment felt not only by supporters of President Trump but often [voiced by the president himself](#), and while the President has not directly embraced QAnon, he has actively furthered the narrative that there are [traitorous forces](#) within the [government](#) and the [Democratic](#) party.

### **What followers believe**

QAnon contains a number of deeply convoluted and all-encompassing conspiracy theories; it is a host of seemingly disparate ideas touching on everything from [the faked death of JFK, Jr.](#) to [Satanic blood rituals](#) and nuclear deterrence, tenuously centered around the belief that society is controlled by a global cabal of high-powered criminals. This kitchen sink approach is a major reason why QAnon has gained such a substantial following in its relatively short life; it envisions a big tent conspiracy capable of accommodating all kinds of theories and global events.

It's not all doom and gloom: QAnoners also believe there are good forces at play, men and women working within the government to thwart the Deep State. QAnon followers refer to these people as the "white hats."

The internet has provided these would-be saviors a new opportunity to share the truth outside the strictures of the Deep State-controlled "mainstream media." Cell phones, email and social media have made it easier to disseminate what followers believe to be the facts about Deep State crimes and have made the criminals trackable and their crimes traceable.

In the infinitely hash-tagable world of QAnon, this development led to #ThePlan, a far-fetched pipe dream that explains not only the presidency of Donald Trump but also the resistance to his administration by the forces QAnon hopes to defeat.

According to Q, the mysterious insider who is "leaking" this information to the public, the white hats stopped Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton from stealing the 2016 election. [As the theory goes](#), the Democratic elites needed to win the presidency in order to pay back funds the Clinton Foundation stole from other nations under the guise of 2010 emergency earthquake aid to Haiti. Rather than help desperate Haitians, the Clintons used the money to fund a massive child sex trafficking operation from the disaster-stricken nation.

Luckily, the white hats identified the only person they consider honest and moral enough to resist the evil of the Deep State: then-candidate Donald Trump.

Ever since Trump's election, Q and the white hats have been embroiled in what they view as an epic battle with the Deep State. The successful completion of the Plan hinges on thousands [of alleged secret indictments](#), supposedly to be compiled by the Department of Justice against prominent Democrats, elites and Hollywood celebrities. Once these indictments are unsealed, they believe the crimes of the elites will be exposed, and they will promptly be arrested and sent to Guantanamo Bay.

Several aspects of QAnon lore mirror longstanding antisemitic tropes. The belief that a global “cabal” is involved in rituals of child sacrifice has its roots in the antisemitic trope of [blood libel](#), the theory that Jews murder Christian children for ritualistic purposes. In addition, QAnon has a [deep-seated hatred for George Soros](#), a name that has become synonymous with perceived Jewish meddling in global affairs. And QAnon’s ongoing obsession with a global elite of bankers also has [deeply antisemitic undertones](#).

## Origins

On Saturday afternoon on October 28, 2017, [a post cropped up](#) on 4chan’s profoundly racist, sexist and xenophobic /pol forum. Sandwiched between racist commentary and a post speculating about a non-existent Hilary Clinton sex tape, the post offered a stark news flash: “HRC extradition already in motion effective yesterday with several countries in case of cross border run.” Over the next few days, the user (who would not introduce the “Q” moniker for several days) made a series of cryptic predictions referencing the Mueller probe, the Clintons, Soros and Obama, and hinted at a vast conspiracy within the U.S. government. “Priority to clean out the bad actors to unite people behind the America First agenda. Many in our govt worship Satan,” an October 29 post warned. Initially lost in the cacophony of 4chan, the posts were brought to the attention of [#pizzagate](#) adherent Tracy Diaz who shared them with her sizeable audience.

Soon, discussion boards dedicated to Q popped up on Reddit, widening the audience for the fledgling conspiracy theory. Not only was Reddit significantly more user friendly than the bewildering boards on 4chan, it already had a thriving community of conspiracy theorists who were more than happy to take the QAnon ball and run with it. From there, the theory spread to even more mainstream platforms like Facebook, YouTube and Twitter, where users, both real and [fake](#), shared and amplified the increasingly serpentine theory. As the theory became more widespread, the Q logo became a commonplace sight at Trump rallies where [adherents parsed every word and gesture from the President, looking for hints](#)

about the Plan or Q. Even Trump joined the fray, [retweeting noted](#) QAnon adherents or [slogans](#).

## **Leadership and followers**

Nobody knows who is behind the QAnon conspiracy theory, although rumors abound. From the very first posts in late 2017, Q's identity has eluded the hordes of self-proclaimed Q researchers who obsessively pore over every detail of every post. Because of the anonymous nature of the message boards where Q posts, the real identity of the poster is almost impossible to ascertain.

QAnon believers claim Q is a person, or persons, within the top echelons of government with access to highly sensitive data, who have chosen this moment to reveal the nefarious conspiracy outlined in The Plan. There is no evidence to suggest that the entity behind the posts is a government employee or has access to secret information. Q's "information" is so cryptic and vague that the author could be anyone.

In many posts, Q encourages their audience to put the pieces together themselves, or "paint the picture," thereby allowing QAnon adherents to fill in the numerous blanks with their own musings and paranoias. This creates the illusion that Q is bestowing valuable information, while actually supplying virtually nothing.

A faction of Q researchers believe that Q is a man in his twenties named Austin Steinbart who is posting from the future using quantum computing. In the world of QAnon, this seems as likely as anything else.

When it was revealed in early April that Steinbart had been arrested for extortion and likely suffered from mental illness, the Q community – characteristically -- considered it both definitive proof that he was Q and absolute proof that he wasn't.

## **Activity**

Although QAnon followers are primarily active online, apart from displaying logos and merchandise at public rallies, in several cases the conspiracy theory has spilled into the real world with violent consequences. In August last year, [Yahoo! News reported](#) that the FBI considers “conspiracy-driven domestic extremism” to be a growing threat. An FBI intelligence bulletin, written by the bureau’s Phoenix field office and obtained by Yahoo News, specifically mentioned QAnon and explained, “The FBI assesses these conspiracy theories very likely will emerge, spread, and evolve in the modern information marketplace, occasionally driving both groups and individual extremists to carry out criminal or violent acts.”

While most QAnon believers are not violent and limit their involvement to furthering the conspiracy online, a number of real-world events have borne out the FBI’s warning.

- August 12, 2020, Waco, Texas: [Police arrested and charged 30-year-old Cecilia Celeste Fulbright with driving while intoxicated and aggravated assault](#) after she chased two cars and crashed into one. Fulbright [claimed she was attempting to “save a child from pedophiles.”](#) Fulbright’s social media history indicates that she was deeply influenced by the QAnon conspiracy theory. She once wrote in a text message to an acquaintance that President Trump was “literally taking down the cabal and the pedophile ring.” This paranoid obsession with pedophiles and child trafficking is common within QAnon. A former roommate said Fulbright had a history of untreated mental health issues.
- August 2020: Several hundred “Save the Children” rallies were organized across the country. In the early days of August, QAnon followers began using the hashtags [#savethechildren](#) and [#saveourchildren](#) to garner attention for their baseless allegations of child sex trafficking by Democrats. This campaign quickly made the leap into the real world with nationwide rallies. Not all these rallies were directly linked to QAnon, [but an NBC investigation](#) found that the organizers of the largest rallies all espoused QAnon opinions on their private social media.

- March 20, 2020, Russellville, Kentucky: QAnon follower Neely Blanchard was charged with kidnapping her children. Blanchard has been active online promoting [both QAnon conspiracies and anti-government, sovereign-citizen dogma](#).
- December 30, 2019, Kalispell, Montana: Cynthia Abcug was taken into custody, charged with conspiracy to commit kidnapping. Her son had previously been taken from her after Abcug had become [obsessed with QAnon conspiracy theories](#), claiming in one YouTube video that child protective services “has child trafficking rings in certain areas.” A warrant by the Parker Police Department says that child protective services took custody of her child because Abcug was suspected of Munchausen syndrome by proxy. [According to the Washington Post](#), Abcug stopped going to therapy and started leaving her Denver-area home only to meet with QAnon followers. She spoke of “evil Satan worshipers” and pedophiles, according to her daughter’s report to police.
- April 2019, New Mexico: Members of the United Constitutional Patriots militia, a right-wing militia operating on the US-Mexico border, [held nearly 300 migrants at gunpoint](#). The group and its leader, 69-year-old Larry Mitchell Hopkins, [actively promote](#) the QAnon conspiracy theory on their social media accounts.
- March 13, 2019, [Staten Island, New York: Anthony Comello allegedly shot and killed](#) Gambino family crime boss Francesco Cali outside his home on Staten Island, New York. In court Comello displayed many references to QAnon. According to statements made to his attorney at the time of arrest, Comello believed that Cali was part of the “deep state” working to unseat President Trump. In court filings, Comello’s attorney has argued that “Mr. Comello’s support for QAnon went beyond mere participation in a radical political organization, it evolved into a delusional obsession.”
- January 23, 2019, Washington, DC: Ryan Jaselkis attempted to set fire to the Comet Ping Pong pizza shop. Jaselkis had [previously posted](#) a QAnon



conspiracy video on his parents' YouTube channel. Comet Ping Pong is an important location in QAnon circles; in 2016, Edgar Maddison Welch [fired a military-style rifle into the pizzeria](#) because he believed it was harboring a Democrat-run sex slavery ring. The #pizzagate conspiracy theory forms much of the basis for QAnon.

- June 16, 2018, Hoover Dam, Nevada: QAnon believer Matthew Wright [pleaded guilty](#) on a terrorism charge after blocking the Hoover Dam in Nevada with a homemade armored vehicle on June 15, 2018. Wright was armed and had more 900 rounds of ammunition in his vehicle when he was arrested.