

Written Testimony of
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Select Committee to Investigate the January 6th Attack on the United States Capitol
Regarding The Role of QAnon in the Events of January 6th and Beyond
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Thank you to the January 6th Select Committee for the opportunity to submit written testimony about the role of the QAnon conspiracy movement on the events of that day.

I am a journalist who has concentrated on researching and writing about the QAnon conspiracy theory. I am the author of “The Storm is Upon Us: How QAnon Became a Movement, Cult, and Conspiracy Theory of Everything,” published by Melville House in June. This was the first book to examine the QAnon movement from its predecessors in the world of scams and anti-Semitic tropes, through its embrace by Trump supporters on the internet, and up until the aftermath of the January 6, 2021 insurrection. As part of promoting the book and educating the public on the recent growth of the QAnon movement, I have given interviews or been featured by dozens of news outlets, including the Washington Post, CNN, the New York Times, NBC News, Vice, the Guardian, MSNBC, the New Yorker, Rolling Stone, the Daily Beast, the Financial Times, Politico, Bloomberg, Forbes, and many others.

Introduction – The Big Lie

The 2020 presidential election saw an explosion of conspiracy theories that began months before the first vote was cast, and has continued to this day. President Trump and his supporters spent almost the entire year pushing baseless claims that Joe Biden was incapable of carrying out basic campaign functions or speaking publicly, instead being hidden in a basement while COVID raged. Such a candidate could never beat Donald Trump fairly, so the cabal behind Trump’s opposition would have to enact a massive fraud at every level to propel him to the White House. This would include changing votes, rigging voting machines, dumping huge amounts of fake ballots to be counted in secret in the middle of the night, and doing it all with the support of multiple foreign actors and globalist bankers.

The consequences of what would become known as “The Big Lie” that Trump had actually won the election were profound. They emerged just hours after Election Day, continued to this day, and directly led to the U.S. Capitol riot. Trump relentlessly pushed conspiracy theories and hoaxes about Biden, which were also being pushed by the mysterious avatar known as “Q.” Stolen election theories made up the bulk of what Q posted about during 2020, as well as making up a substantial portion of the video and social media content created by believers in the QAnon conspiracy theory. There were hundreds of Q followers at and inside the Capitol that day, at least some of whom publicly professed their belief that the breach of the Capitol and the attempt to overturn the election was “the storm” that Q had been prophesizing about since 2017. Many were arrested, and several died during the violence.

Understanding how Q and the stolen election complex are linked is critical to understanding the Q movement’s role in January 6th, what brought believers there, and what they thought was going to happen. Q believers saw Trump as a messianic figure who was incapable of anything other than victory. When presented with his defeat, they created their own reality where the “defeat” was simply part of a bigger victory – and everything they did that day was to further the final triumph they believed was just about to happen.

What is QAnon?

By its very nature, QAnon is extraordinarily complex. The core of the movement revolves around what claims to be a team of military intelligence officers (which called itself “Q”) using the image boards 4chan and 8chan/8kun to leak cryptic clues to an upcoming purge of a powerful cabal of elite Democrats, Jews, business moguls, and entertainers. This “deep state” is supposedly the shadowy force

that controls world events, funds both sides of every war, suppresses secret technology and medicine, and uses the media and entertainment to brainwash the sleeping population into not knowing they're being controlled.

Such conspiracy theories have been common in American discourse for centuries. But Q presented them in a different way, broken down in cryptic riddles that only a select few knew how to decode. Those clues - called "drops" – take the form riddles and rhetorical questions that are "decoded" using the day's news and social media as a primer to unlock what's "really" going. They are full of jargon, rhetorical questions, riddles, codes, and links to right wing media sources, along with the memes and trolling familiar to image boards like 4chan. While Q claims to be an elite team of "less than 10" people who worked side by side with President Trump, no evidence supports this, or that they had any link to Trump or anyone in military intelligence.

Taken as a body of work, the Q drops purport to reveal a secret and silent war being fought between patriotic "white hats" in the Trump movement and Satanic "black hats." In this story, that war would only end with "the storm"—mass arrests carried out through sealed indictments that could only be unsealed by president Donald Trump. They would lead to field tribunals carried out by the military, with the verdict always "guilty" and the penalty always death. Afterwards, a new age of peace and harmony would follow, with secret medicine and energy made available to all, and the enemies of freedom brought to their knees.

Q believers, then, are not nihilists who want to watch the world burn, they're utopians who believe they want to make it better – through violence and conspiracy theories. It's that desire to usher in a better world, rather than destroy it, that powered many of them to go to DC on January 6th. Q pumped them full of patriotic nonsense that they were the change agents the world needed to be freed from the shackles of the dark cabal, which Trump would carry out.

It's still not known who wrote and posted the Q drops. The most likely suspects, identified through stylometry analysis and their own statements, are South African programmer Paul Furber as being the person who initially started making Q drops, and former 8kun administrator (and son of 8kun's owner) Ron Watkins for making the drops at some point after early 2018¹. The ownership of the "Q" mantle likely changed hands many times, and the security measures to prevent hacking and stealing the account's password were negligible.

Over 4,900 "drops," which are still freely available on numerous aggregator websites, Q spun a technothriller like a Tom Clancy novel set at a religious revival. And believers played a central role in that secret war, by creating their own social media and video content, adding their own wrinkles to the story QAnon was spinning, and increasingly giving up other elements of their lives to endless hours of research and connecting with fellow travelers. They also committed a long list of crimes, ranging from petty vandalism to kidnapping to attempts to assassinate Joe Biden to multiple murders.

The story Q was telling touched on countless new and old elements in the conspiracy world, from fluoride to aliens. But for 2020, Q mostly cast the election as a struggle between patriots and the deep

¹ David Kirkpatrick, "Who is Behind QAnon? Linguistic Detectives Find Fingerprints," *New York Times*, February 19, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/19/technology/qanon-messages-authors.html>

state that would decide the fate of the free world. It was, as Q said many times, “not just another four-year election.” Instead, it was the culmination of a battle that been going for centuries, maybe even longer – one that Donald Trump had to win, and would win, unless the all-powerful cabal took that victory away from him by cheating.

QAnon and the 2020 Election

Even before Biden locked down the Democratic nomination, both Trump and Q had spent months attacking the former vice president’s age, mental health, financial dealings, past history, previous allegations, and previous record as a senator and vice president. The tone of their accusations was almost identical, though there’s no evidence either side was actively coordinating with the other.

“HOW DO YOU SHELTER [BIDEN] FROM DEBATES? HOW DO YOU SHELTER & PROTECT [BIDEN]?”² drop #4245 in May, making the claim that the Democrats would “change out” the nominee for Hillary Clinton or Michelle Obama at the last moment. Echoing Trump, Q claimed that the mail-in voting push being driven by the pandemic was part of a massive scheme to steal the election through “harvesting,” that the polls were rigged to show support for Biden, and that China would be participating in the fraud by “cloning” ballots from battleground states. Drop #4738, On September 20, 2020, less than six weeks before the election, painted exactly how the election would be stolen and how the deep state would stop at nothing to force Trump out:

How do you 'extend' lockdown(s) [economic hardship(s), unemployment, fear, death count, dementia Joe, etc.] in order to paint narrative mail-in voting [when did narrative start (March?_early?_planned?)] needed to 'save' lives [+ballot harvesting] in order to generate a future narrative election day +1 which casts doubt as to legitimacy of POTUS win [Constitutional Crisis][“not all mail-in ballots counted” “how many mail in ballots lost or did not arrive in key battleground states which could have returned a different result” “we must investigate who cast a vote but it did not register” “we must go door-to-door if needed [ballot harvest]” “our lives are at stake” “the sky is falling” in order to legally challenge, delay results, enact riots and chaos in an attempt to overturn [coup d'etat].

CRIMES AGAINST HUMANITY?

At the same time, the isolation of the COVID-19 pandemic was driving more people to seek alternative explanations for the chaos and upheaval the world was going through.³ What were once separate worlds of more progressive “health freedom” crusaders and more conservative Trump supporters were coming together to create a world where the election and COVID went hand-in-hand, engineered by the same people to achieve one goal: Trump losing the election. There would be massive harvesting of mail in ballots, convicts released from prison to vote Democratic, the arrest of in-person voters, a ramping up of COVID-19 hysteria, and wholesale social media censorship.

² All Q drop text taken from aggregated posts available on qposts.online

³Marianna Spring and Mike Wendling, “How Covid-19 myths are merging with the QAnon conspiracy theory,” BBC News, September 3, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/blogs-trending-53997203>

After a few late swings in the wee hours of November 4, 2020, thanks to voting centers in major cities turning ballots in late—just as election experts widely predicted would take place⁴—it became apparent that Biden would win. Q promoters quickly claimed that Trump not only had won, but he had won 400 Electoral College votes in a landslide victory that the media was desperate to cover up. Once the fraud was revealed at exactly the right time, the corruption would be so obvious that Biden would have to admit his treasonous actions and concede, and Trump (through means that have never been fully explained) would continue with his presidency.

The churn of “Biden will steal the election” conspiracy theories coming from Q believers was so powerful that at one point, two percent of all tweets referencing voting in 2020 posted in August and September were from accounts linked to QAnon.⁵

As the inauguration approached, it became clear that none of the Trump team’s dubious lawsuits, pleas to the Supreme Court or military to step in and order a “redo” of the election, or faked “evidence” of fraud were going to have any impact on the final result.

There was only one desperate action left – the name going around Q and MAGA social media was “the Pence card⁶.” It was the idea, first floated by Michael Flynn acolyte Ivan Raiklin, that in his capacity as President of the Senate, Mike Pence could unilaterally decide that certain Electoral College votes had been won due to illegal voting, and disregard them. Such an action would ensure that neither candidate could go over the 270 needed to win the election, and lead either to a “re-vote” overseen by the military, or the House of Representatives holding a special election based on the 12th Amendment. The details were vague and unclear, but the outcome would be the same – Pence would, in effect, re-elect Trump without a public mandate. And whatever would happen had to happen on the day that the Vice President accepted and opened the certified electoral votes of the states – January 6, 2021.

Q Makes the Journey to DC

The idea that Mike Pence could “overturn” the election all by himself has no legal basis, and runs counter to the very idea of representative democracy. It was also never mentioned in a Q drop, as Q made their last post in December 2020 and the idea appeared to percolate in conspiracy circles after that.

But Q believers definitely wanted it to be true, because they’d been fed a story that what was happening was impossible. Trump could not be denied another term, there simply had to be another explanation for what was going on – it had to be part of the plan.

⁴ “Fact check: Vote spikes in Wisconsin, Michigan and Pennsylvania do not prove election fraud,” Reuters, November 10, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-factcheck-wi-pa-mi-vote-spikes/fact-check-vote-spikes-in-wisconsin-michigan-and-pennsylvania-do-not-prove-election-fraud-idUSKBN27Q307>

⁵ Ben Collins, “QAnon accounts make a dent in voting discussion on Twitter,” NBC News, October 16, 2020, <https://www.nbcnews.com/tech/tech-news/qanon-accounts-make-dent-voting-discussion-twitter-n1243748>

⁶ Aram Roston, Brad Heath, John Shiffman and Peter Eisler, “The military-intelligence veterans who helped lead Trump’s campaign of disinformation,” Reuters, December 15, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/usa-election-military/>

Q believers generally were not fans of Pence, and Pence was no fan of QAnon – he had dropped out of a fundraiser being given by major Republican donors after news broke that they had shared QAnon memes on social media.⁷

But this wasn't about Pence, it was about Trump. He had asked them to be there, promised them a "wild" time, and made it clear that the more support he got that day, the likelier it was that something magical would happen. Many believed that their presence in DC would be all that was needed to get Pence to "do his duty" and declare Trump as the real president. Many rioters spoke openly during the attack of the president calling for them and needing their help, and some believed that the reversal of the election would lead to the arrests of those who had perpetrated the fraud – "the storm" that Q had talked about so much.

Fueled by Q-adjacent conspiracy theories, January 6th rioters thought that Trump would speak, something magical would happen, and Trump would prevail. The details vary, but they ultimately aren't important. Only the end result matters, not how it happens. Such nearly-magical beliefs are common in complex conspiracy movements like Q, driven by gurus and secret intelligence and great events that are always on the verge of taking place. They depend on believing hard enough that something great will happen, and then it will happen, and your belief will be validated. Q had said for a year that Trump would be victorious, so Q believers in the crowd believed it would happen.

One believer who thought her presence in DC would usher in "the storm" that day was Air Force veteran and San Diego resident Ashli Babbitt, shot and killed by Capitol Police attempting to break into the Speaker's Lobby in the Capitol.⁸ Babbitt was one of several Q believers who died that day, waiting for "the storm" to break and wash away all of the evil.

What the plan was, or indeed, if there was any plan at all, was secondary. When Pence announced in a statement before the rally that he would do his constitutional duty and open the envelopes, the specifics of the plan changed, but what was supposed to happen didn't change – because it was inevitable. As Q said many times in drops, including one of the last ever drops, "nothing can stop what's coming." Q believers were used to disappointment, and Pence's "betrayal" was just another let down. They'd win in the end.

It's become clear in the months since January 6th that while many of those who breached the Capitol did have a specific tactical plan, many others had no idea what they were doing, where they were going, or what was supposed to happen when they got there. Many wandered around the building taking selfies, astounded at how far they got. And they had no trouble using their real names and livestreaming themselves without covering their faces – because they believed they were digital soldiers following orders from a commander who would take care of them.

⁷ "Pence drops plan to go to fundraiser hosted by QAnon backers," Associated Press, September 12, 2020, <https://www.kbtx.com/2020/09/12/pence-drops-plan-to-go-to-fundraiser-hosted-by-qanon-backers/>

⁸ Peter Jamison, Hannah Natanson, John Woodrow Cox and Alex Horton, "The storm is here': Ashli Babbitt's journey from capital 'guardian' to invader," *Washington Post*, January 10, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/dc-md-va/2021/01/09/ashli-babbitt-capitol-shooting-trump-qanon/>

As one former Q believer in DC that day told NBC News of what was meant to happen, “all the world would be liberated, everyone would be happy.”⁹

Why Does Anyone Believe QAnon is Real?

The idea that Q will liberate the world is critical to understanding why people believe it – because it’s about freedom, not violent chaos. And the idea of working with like-minded people to make the world freer is something that can appeal to anyone.

Both polling and anecdotal evidence shows that the biggest demographic common to Q believers is not race or religion or even political affiliation, but already believing in other conspiracy theories¹⁰. People who get sucked into QAnon definitely can be the stereotypical MAGA devotee, who believes Trump can do no wrong and is willing to commit violence on behalf of their beliefs.

But that stereotype doesn’t represent all Q believers. Many others are progressive-leaning Bernie Sanders supporters, New Age and wellness devotees, disaffected Democrats, foreigners with no connections to American politics, or just people who like believing in conspiracy theories and enjoy decoding puzzles. Not all are violent, and the vast majority are not mentally ill.

QAnon can appeal to virtually anyone who has any kind of propensity toward fringe beliefs, New Age concepts, conspiracy theories, alternative medicine, or who is simply looking for someone to blame for their lot in life. All it requires is the belief that someone is keeping something wonderful from you, and you want to know what it is.

Like those pulled into conspiracy theories of the past, QAnon believers are often people looking for answers in a chaotic world, and for patterns in what seems like disorder. They believe that powerful people get away with things they can’t get away with, that what happens in the world is being manipulated by hidden hands, and that vast and monstrous crimes not only go unpunished, but are committed by the very people tasked with defending the republic and protecting helpless children. They also believe that everyone in power is lying to them, including the media, experts, doctors, politicians, and prominent business people; and that they know the truth. What they learn from Q gives them the power to see through those lies to what “they” don’t want revealed. And that secret knowledge gives them the power to shape their own destiny.

Essentially, this can be almost anyone inclined to disbelief the media or politicians, and distrustful of “official stories” of events.

The Impact of Failure on QAnon Believers

The fact that the attack on the Capitol didn’t change the electoral process didn’t dissuade QAnon believers from thinking that Trump would still prevail. There was barely even a trace of disappointment among Q believers on the 6th. Once Pence released a statement saying he’d do his constitutional duty

⁹ Brandy Zadrozny, “Escape from QAnon: How Jan. 6 changed one person’s path,” NBC News, January 18, 2022, <https://www.nbcnews.com/tech/internet/qanon-jan-6-changed-one-persons-path-rcna11276>

¹⁰ “Understanding QAnon’s Connection to American Politics, Religion, and Media Consumption” PRRI-IFYC, May 27, 2021, <https://www.prii.org/research/qanon-conspiracy-american-politics-report/>

and carry out his role under the Electoral Count Act, the focus of QAnon rage became Pence himself and not Biden – as illustrated by the audible calls to “hang Mike Pence” shouted by Capitol breachers¹¹. But despite the setback, they still believed that Trump would prevail on that day – just in a different way that hadn’t been revealed yet.

It was only once the insurrection had finally dispersed and Congress had re-entered the chamber that many Q believers coalesced around an alternative narrative – that the whole thing was just a patriotic expression of dissent, and that the majority of protestors there that day had been nonviolent, with only FBI or antifa operatives working undercover being responsible for any violent incidents. Many would attempt to absolve themselves of responsibility, saying they’d gotten caught up in the moment because of their support of Trump and had no intention to overturn the election or commit any violent acts.

Many believed right up until Biden was sworn in that Trump would still find some way to retain the presidency through judicial or military means – with Biden being arrested seconds before noon Eastern Time on January 20th. They saw January 6th as a victory for their movement, marveling at how they’d been able to get into the Capitol, how many people had come together to support Trump, and the worldwide coverage that showed Q flags and shirts to millions of people watching the news.

Biden’s actual inauguration brought momentary frustration, as believers took to social media to lash out or declare they’d been lied to.¹² But this didn’t last long, as many others publicly urged each other to have faith in Trump and be patient. This type of disconfirmation leading to renewed belief was common in Q, a movement able to absorb countless failed predictions and blown deadlines of when the dark forces would be brought down. Believers quickly embraced new theories that posited an even more complex conspiracy theory that Trump had to pretend to leave office in order to actually expose the electoral fraud, and would be “reinstated” as president once the time was right.

The result was a seemingly endless series of audits, lawsuits, and demands by Q promoters to “fix 2020” and “restore” Trump to office. Those calls continue to this day, echoing the idea that January 6th was not a failure or a climactic battle, but one more step on what proponents see as a journey from darkness to light.

The Role of QAnon Influencers in Convincing Believers to Go to DC

Unlike the “storm” of mass arrests that Q foretold, the run-up to the January 6th insurrection wasn’t done in secret, using codes and ciphers. Major QAnon promoters pumped out a stream of content telling believers to go to DC, and pumped them up for the great events that were about to take place.

No Q influencer might have played more of a role in encouraging people to go to DC than Ron Watkins, the 8kun administrator who had re-invented himself as an election fraud guru and expert in the technical aspect of large-scale voting machine systems (he was neither of these.) Watkins spent the weeks before January 6th pumping out pro-Trump slogans, such as #CrossTheRubicon (a reference to

¹¹ Jesse Rodriguez and Rebecca Shabad, “Trump defends Jan. 6 rioters' 'hang Mike Pence' chant in new audio,” NBC News, November 12, 2021, <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/donald-trump/trump-defends-jan-6-rioters-hang-mike-pence-chant-newly-n1283798>

¹² Shayan Sardarizadeh and Olga Robinson, “Biden inauguration leaves QAnon believers in disarray,” BBC News, January 21, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/blogs-trending-55746304>

Caesar seizing power in ancient Rome) and encouraging the president to invoke the Insurrection Act. As January 6th got closer, Watkins was organizing efforts to help rally-goers drive across the country together in caravans¹³. Days before the rally, he tweeted “If you are planning to attend peaceful protests in DC on the 6th, i [sic] recommend wearing a body camera. The more video angles of that day the better.” That tweet was quickly retweeted by President Trump, one of nearly half a dozen times the president shared statements by the likely owner of the QAnon password.¹⁴

Watkins, who had well over half a million Twitter followers before his permanent suspension after January 6th, even offered to “sponsor people to go to DC” – though he quickly deleted the tweet.¹⁵ Watkins’ tweets encouraging people to form huge convoys to DC got massive engagement, often being retweeted tens of thousands of times. And they were referenced by others in Trump’s inner circle, including journalists friendly to the stolen election cause.

It should be noted that Ron was living in Sapporo, Japan at the time – though his father, 8kun owner Jim Watkins, was in the crowd that day. Even in the days leading up to January 6th, Ron Watkins continued churning out hints of great events to come, including a “MOAB” – Q speak for a major revelation, using the acronym given to a large piece of military ordinance – that would change everything we knew about that day. The “revelation” turned out to be another fizzle, a retweet of a series of blog posts about Mike Pence having committed treason originally written by another QAnon promoter, a failed screenwriter named Robert Cornero.¹⁶

Other major figures in the QAnon world followed suit with their exhortations for people to go for Trump. Many were familiar names who had relentlessly promoted Q, like Michael Flynn, Sidney Powell, and Lin Wood. Flynn, for example, relentlessly tweeted in the runup to January 6th that the certification of the Electoral College vote should be delayed, that Trump really won the election, and said that “On 6 JAN, Patriots across the nation who can’t make it to our Nation’s Capital should respectfully & peacefully

¹³ Atlantic Council’s Digital Forensic Research Lab, “#StopTheSteal: Timeline of Social Media and Extremist Activities Leading to 1/6 Insurrection,” February 10, 2021, <https://www.justsecurity.org/74622/stopthesteal-timeline-of-social-media-and-extremist-activities-leading-to-1-6-insurrection/>

¹⁴ Ryan Goodman, Mari Dugas and Nicholas Tonckens, “Incitement Timeline: Year of Trump’s Actions Leading to the Attack on the Capitol,” JustSecurity.org, January 11, 2021, <https://www.justsecurity.org/74138/incitement-timeline-year-of-trumps-actions-leading-to-the-attack-on-the-capitol/>

¹⁵ @get_innocuous, “Watkins and Wood spent the weeks leading up to 1/6 frequently retweeting one another as they hyped the gathering in DC and Pence's role as the one person that could help keep Trump in office. On 12/22 Ron had even offered to sponsor people to make it out to DC.”, January 5, 2022, 11:53 AM, Tweet, https://twitter.com/get_innocuous/status/1478816896833101827

¹⁶ @ get_innocuous, “One year ago today, Ron Watkins, Lin Wood and Q-influencer Neon Revolt would collaborate on a hype building exercise ahead of 1/6 with the goal of convincing their 1.6 mil (combined) followers that Mike Pence should be arrested,” January 5, 2022, 11:21 AM, Tweet https://twitter.com/get_innocuous/status/1478808992822353920

protest this fraudulent election at your State’s Capitals [sic].” Flynn had 1.2 million followers at this point, and every one of his tweets got thousands of shares.¹⁷

Just as important in the effort to get Q believers into a frenzy over January 6 were the semi-anonymous influencers who had been making Q content from the very start, and who relentlessly pushed the stolen election hoax. Many of these are figures known primarily to Q believers – with screen names like InTheMatrixxx, StormIsUponUs, and Praying Medic.

These gurus had hundreds of thousands of social media followers, and kept their fans on the hook with an endless line of written and video content about how the election was stolen, Trump was the rightful winner, Biden would be exposed, and that the “military is the only way” to ensure that justice is done.¹⁸

Promoter InTheMatrixxx (real name, Jeffrey Pederson) shared with his 260,000 followers dozens of tweets by lawmakers announcing they would vote against accepting the Electoral College results, and retweeted a photo from an anonymous account that appeared to show National Guard members flying from Atlanta to DC.¹⁹ Praying Medic (AKA David Hayes) shared Watkins’ requests to organize convoys to DC with his 475,000 followers, along with other tweets hinting that Pence had the ability to resolve “dueling electors” by making refusing to accept either slate.²⁰

Crucially, none were actually at January 6. In fact, of the QAnon believers arrested that day, only “Q Shaman” Jacob Chansley was well-known in the movement, and Chansley had a fairly small social media footprint compared to these other major personalities. The rest were rank and file devotees, who went out to fight for Trump and pay the consequences while the gurus of their movement stayed home and cheered on the invasion of the Capitol.²¹

The Role of Racism and Anti-Semitism in QAnon

Believers in QAnon cast themselves as a race-blind, apolitical, religiously tolerant movement. Q would often use thought-terminating clichés like “patriots have no skin color” and “we do not look at race” and “they want you divided by religion” to claim that Q welcomed anyone of any race or creed as long as they wanted to fight for truth and justice.

¹⁷ Michael Flynn, “I know a thing or two about the “Just Us” department. On 6 JAN, Patriots across the nation who can’t make it to our Nation’s Capital should respectfully & peacefully protest this fraudulent election at your State’s Capitals. @realDonaldTrump #FightForTrump,” Twitter, December 26, 2020, <https://web.archive.org/web/20210106082247/https://twitter.com/GenFlynn>

¹⁸ Alex Kaplan, “The QAnon Dallas event just showed a video that was similar to the March 4 conspiracy theory, including pushing the QAnon line “military is the only way” regarding getting Trump back into office.” Twitter, May 30, 2021, 2:09 PM <https://twitter.com/alkapdc/status/1399110648412397575>

¹⁹ InTheMatrixxx, Twitter, <https://web.archive.org/web/20210104213559/twitter.com/inthematrixxx>

²⁰ Praying Medic, Twitter, <https://web.archive.org/web/20201222194250/twitter.com/prayingmedic>

²¹ Jim Vorel, “An Epic Timeline of QAnon Delusions, From Election Day to Inauguration Day,” Paste Magazine, January 21, 2021, <https://www.pastemagazine.com/politics/qanon/qanon-trump-parler-gab-conspiracy-theories-inauguration-day/#qanon-on-the-capitol-storming-riots>

This is entirely untrue. QAnon is a deeply racist and anti-Semitic movement that routinely uses common Jewish tropes and stereotypes to advance the bigoted idea that a cabal of wealthy Jewish families controls world events.

Q routinely boosts general anti-Semitic concepts of Jews controlling the world and funding wars on both sides, and on one occasion posted an extremely vulgar anti-Semitic cartoon originating in eastern Europe in the 1930's. But the two primary targets of Q's antagonism are Hungarian billionaire philanthropist George Soros, and the Rothschild banking family (no relation to the author of this statement). Q brings them up constantly as funders of whatever evil scheme Q is trying to stop.

Q's second ever drop references Soros donating the bulk of his fortune to his own Open Societies Foundation, while later accusing Soros of funding domestic terrorism, hiding vast amounts of money through shell companies, attempting to rig both the 2016 and 2020 elections, being a secret Nazi, secretly working with Ukraine for evil purposes, and consistently working against the US government. Q also accuses the Rothschild family of owning almost every central bank in the world, of hosting parties where they hunt humans on their vast estates, of funding human trafficking, and of manipulating world events through the Clinton Foundation and other powerful agents.

Racial tropes also find a home in Q's drops, particularly the racist conspiracy theory that Barack Obama – who Q usually refers to as “Hussein” after his middle name – was born in Kenya. Q also claims that Democrats have a “slave grip” on the “black pop,” claimed the Black Lives Matter movement is a money laundering scheme, that the Congressional Black Caucus is a con, and that “illegals” are being imported from Central and South America to vote for Democrats.

As the COVID pandemic deepened, Q believers began echoing racist statements by President Trump blaming Chinese people or Asians in general for the virus²², while openly claiming the virus was developed using money provided by George Soros. Finally, Q believers parrot other tropes relied on by more outwardly white nationalist movements. Some of these include the “Byzantium” theory of supposed white dominance, and Crusader and Viking tropes used by alt-right mass shooters.²³

QAnon also has many of the same tenets as believers as the “replacement theory” which holds that non-whites are being imported to breed whites into minority status. But they're also different in several significant ways. Q at least puts up the patina of being a non-racist, inclusive movement – while believers in the “Great Replacement” make no such effort, openly advertising their white nationalist beliefs to win new converts. Q is also much more based around riddles and cryptography, and less around outward calls to violence; while replacement theory offers no puzzles to solve or clues to decode – merely offering its believers targets for their hatred.

²² Anita Chabria, “QAnon now pushes alarming conspiracy myths targeting China and Jewish people,” *Los Angeles Times*, March 23, 2021, <https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2021-03-23/qanon-conspiracy-evolves-new-world-order-china-jewish-people>

²³ Roland Betancourt, “Why white supremacists and QAnon enthusiasts are obsessed – but very wrong – about the Byzantine Empire,” *The Conversation*, March 4, 2021, <https://theconversation.com/why-white-supremacists-and-qanon-enthusiasts-are-obsessed-but-very-wrong-about-the-byzantine-empire-154994>

While Q is a movement rooted in violence, it's not genocidal or nihilistic. This reliance on hope is what brought many believers to Washington that day – it wasn't about destruction, it was about creating a better world. In that sense, Q is much better at hooking new converts and keeping current believers hanging on – it gives them hope for the future, rather than supplying them with endless targets for hate.

How Trump and His Administration Fed the Delusions of Q Believers

Beyond the constant mentions of QAnon by major figures in the stolen election world like Mike Flynn and Sidney Powell, numerous other officials connected to the Trump administration or Trump himself shared QAnon material. The most important of these was almost certainly Trump himself.

While it's impossible to know exactly what Trump knew about Q and when he knew it, it's clear that somehow, this material was finding its way to Trump to retweet. On November 25, 2017, just weeks after the first Q drops on 4chan, Trump retweeted an account called @MAGAPILL, sharing a link to a site created by that account called "THE President Donald Trump Accomplishment List Website." That account was also an avowed QAnon supporter, having blogged about the "Q operation" right around the same time.

By the 2020 election, Trump was regularly sharing the memes created by members of the movement. Even in early March 2020, as COVID-19 was rapidly spreading around the world, Trump responded with a meme—of him playing a fiddle with the text "MY NEXT PIECE IS CALLED . . . NOTHING CAN STOP WHAT'S COMING," with Trump himself adding, "Who knows what this means, but it sounds good to me!" It was one of 315 known instances of Trump retweeting a QAnon meme or a tweet by a QAnon linked account.²⁴

Finally, when asked about QAnon after years of Q believers demanding the media "ask the question" of the president, Trump seemed to know little about it – but also knew at least something. In August 2020, Trump claimed he didn't know anything about Q except that "they like me" and claimed he was willing to help them "save the world from problems."²⁵ Two months later, Trump again refused to disavow Q, while simultaneously saying he knew "nothing about it" but that they are "very much against pedophilia."²⁶ Such knowing winks and nods to the Q movement were critical to advancing the idea Trump was on their side, he knew of their devotion to him, and he'd reward it in time.

Trump wasn't the only person close to the White House sharing Q material. His son Eric shared a QAnon meme on Instagram in June 2020²⁷, while numerous Trump-friendly members of Congress and party

²⁴ Alex Kaplan, "Trump has repeatedly amplified QAnon Twitter accounts. The FBI has linked the conspiracy theory to domestic terror," Media Matters, updated January 11, 2021, <https://www.mediamatters.org/twitter/fbi-calls-qanon-domestic-terror-threat-trump-has-amplified-qanon-supporters-twitter-more-20>

²⁵ Katie Rogers and Kevin Roose, "Trump Says QAnon Followers Are People Who 'Love Our Country,'" *New York Times*, August 19, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/19/us/politics/trump-qanon-conspiracy-theories.html>

²⁶ Maegan Vazquez, "Trump again refuses to denounce QAnon," CNN, October 15, 2020, <https://www.cnn.com/2020/10/15/politics/donald-trump-qanon-town-hall/index.html>

²⁷ Jack Brewster, "Eric Trump Promotes QAnon Conspiracy On Instagram While Plugging Tulsa Rally," *Forbes*, June 20, 2020, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/jackbrewster/2020/06/20/eric-trump-promotes-qanon-conspiracy-on-instagram-while-plugging-tulsa-rally/>

officials have attended QAnon-themed conferences or meetings²⁸. Former White House director of social media Dan Scavino routinely posted QAnon memes and shared short videos that Q believers saw as shoutouts to the Q movement²⁹, while Trump campaign deputy communications director Erin Perrine went on the Q-themed livestream Patriots Soapbox to recruit volunteers³⁰. That list doesn't even include Michael Flynn, who'd been appointed and fired as National Security Advisor months before Q appeared.

Other members of the Trump administration said on the record that the president knew nothing about Q and changed the subject when reporters brought it up. But it was clear that many people working directly for Trump understood the lightning in a bottle that Q represented. And they made no qualms about exploiting Q believers' devotion to Trump.

Conclusion – The Ongoing Peril of QAnon

The QAnon movement and the January 6th insurrection are inseparable in their doctrine, violence, and mythology casting Trump as the victim of a giant conspiracy to steal the election. Dozens of people arrested that day for breaching the Capitol, and hundreds more in the crowd outside who never got in, had expressed sympathy for Q or espoused its tenets. And Q's rhetoric of an election that Trump could only lose if the deep state stole it with fraud was almost the same as Trump's own rhetoric.

Even with Q not having made a drop for over a year, it remains a dangerous and violent movement. Its mythology is seeping into mainstream discourse over vaccines, censorship, elections, border security, and politics, with the Q branding used less frequently as more people embrace it. It's entirely possible that without QAnon, the January 6th insurrection would have been significantly less destructive and violent; and the stolen election movement might have gotten considerably less support in the mainstream GOP.

²⁸ Abby Livingston, "Texas officials speak at QAnon-affiliated event where Trump adviser Michael Flynn encouraged military coup on U.S. government," *Texas Tribune*, June 1, 2021, <https://www.texastribune.org/2021/06/01/texas-allen-west-sid-miller-louie-gohmert-qanon/>

²⁹ Isaac Stanley-Becker, "How the Trump campaign came to court QAnon, the online conspiracy movement identified by the FBI as a violent threat," *Washington Post*, August 1, 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/how-the-trump-campaign-came-to-court-qanon-the-online-conspiracy-movement-identified-by-the-fbi-as-a-violent-threat/2020/08/01/dd0ea9b4-d1d4-11ea-9038-af089b63ac21_story.html

³⁰ Eric Hananoki, "A Trump official went on a QAnon show to recruit campaign volunteers," *Media Matters*, July 14, 2020, <https://www.mediamatters.org/qanon-conspiracy-theory/trump-official-went-qanon-show-recruit-campaign-volunteers>