

NATION-WORLD

'QAnon' conspiracy theory creeps into mainstream politics



Randy Jacobson, left and Diane Jacobson speak to other Trump supporters before a campaign rally for President Donald Trump Tuesday, Jan. 14, 2020, in Milwaukee. (AP Photo/Jeffrey Phelps) (ASSOCIATED PRESS)

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FEB. 9, 2020 | 5:24 AM



MILWAUKEE — President Donald Trump was more than halfway through his speech at a rally in Milwaukee when one of his hand gestures caught the eye of a supporter standing in the packed arena.

The 51-year-old woman believed the president had traced the shape of the letter "Q" with his fingers as a covert signal to followers of QAnon, a right-wing, pro-Trump conspiracy theory. She turned to the couple on her right and excitedly asked, "Did you see the 'Q'?"

"He just did it?" asked Diane Jacobson, 63, of Racine, Wisconsin.

"Was that a 'Q'?" added Jacobson's husband, Randy, 64.

"I think it was," replied their new friend, Chrisy. The Geneva, Illinois, resident declined to give her last name in part because she said she wanted to avoid negative "attention."

The Jacobsons met Chrisy and her husband, Paul, hours earlier in the line to get into the Jan 14 rally. The couples bonded over their shared interest in QAnon, which centers on the baseless belief that Trump is waging a secret campaign against enemies in the "deep state" and a child sex trafficking ring run by satanic pedophiles and cannibals.

What started as an online obsession for the far-right fringe has grown beyond its origins in a dark corner of the internet. QAnon has been creeping into the mainstream political arena for more than a year. The trend shows no sign of abating as Trump fires up his reelection campaign operation, attracting a loyal audience of conspiracy theorists and other fringe groups to his raucous rallies.

Trump has retweeted QAnon-promoting accounts. Followers flock to Trump's rallies wearing clothes and hats with QAnon symbols and slogans. At least 23 current or former congressional candidates in the 2020 election cycle have endorsed or promoted QAnon, according to the liberal watchdog Media Matters for America, which compiled online evidence to support its running tally.

Conspiracy theorists aren't the only fringe characters drawn to Trump rallies. The Oath Keepers, an anti-government group formed in 2009 after President Barack Obama's election, has been sending "security volunteers" to escort Trump supporters at rallies across the country.

University of California, Davis history professor Kathryn Olmsted, author of a book called "Real Enemies: Conspiracy Theories and American Democracy, World War I to 9/11," said it's unclear whether QAnon has attracted more believers than other conspiracy theories that have intersected with U.S. politics.

"What's different now is that there are people in power who are spreading this conspiracy theory," she said, adding that Trump's conspiracy-minded rhetoric seems to fire up part of his base. "Finally, there is someone saying they're not crazy."

Conspiracy theories are nothing new, but experts fear the powerful engine of social media and a volatile political climate have ramped up the threat of violence. An FBI bulletin in May warned that conspiracy theory-driven extremists have become a domestic terrorism threat. The bulletin specifically mentions QAnon.

A Trump campaign spokeswoman and a White House spokesman didn't respond to emails seeking comment. Asked about QAnon in 2018, then-White House press secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders said Trump "condemns and denounces any group that would incite violence

against another individual." Some major Trump supporters, including former White House aide Sebastian Gorka, have denounced QAnon.

For more than two years, followers have pored over a tangled set of clues purportedly posted online by a high-ranking government official known only as "Q." Many followers believe the late John F. Kennedy Jr. is a Trump supporter who faked his death in a 1999 plane crash. Another core belief is that thousands of deep state operatives and top Democrats, including Hillary Clinton and Obama, will be rounded up and sent to Guantanamo Bay during an event called "The Storm."

The first Q "drop" appeared on the 4chan imageboard in October 2017. The messages migrated to 8chan until a string of mass shootings by gunmen who posted manifestos on the site led to it getting forced offline in August. The disruption, which ended when the imageboard relaunched in November under the new name 8kun, hardly spelled the end of QAnon.

Travis View, a conspiracy theory researcher who co-hosts The QAnon Anonymous Podcast and has written about QAnon for the Washington Post under his pseudonym, said the sense of community forged by QAnon believers has helped it endure beyond the life span of other conspiracy theories.

"People in the QAnon community feel like they are banding together to uncover the real truth behind the scenes," said View, who works as a marketer for a San Diego company and says he uses the pseudonym to protect himself. His acerbic comments about what he calls an "apocalyptic political cult" have earned him more than 20,000 followers on Twitter and vitriol from QAnon believers.

Before Trump's rally in Milwaukee, thousands waited in line for hours to enter the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Panther Arena. Some wore apparel adorned with a "Q" or "WWG1WGA," which stands for the QAnon slogan, "Where we go one, we go all."

The frigid, gloomy weather didn't dampen the spirits of QAnon follower Donna Shank, 50, of Burlington, Wisconsin. Shank, who said she voted for Obama in 2008, was ambivalent about politics before she stumbled across QAnon online and joined Facebook groups to learn more.

"I just woke up," she said. "I was a sheep. I followed anything and everything."

Diane Jacobson attached a pink "Q" and a blue "Q" to the back of her black "Make America Great Again" hat. She and her husband were eager to attend their first Trump rally.

"Trump is trying to tell us, to the best he can without compromising intelligence, what's really going on," she said.

Jacobson knows many people, including some of her relatives, scoff at QAnon.

"You really can't argue with them," she said.

Jacobson celebrated with her new friend, Chrisy, when the doors to the downtown arena opened.

"All these people believe me! I'm not crazy here!" Chrisy shouted.

Hours later, during Trump's speech, Chrisy's husband, Paul, grinned when the president said "the whole world is watching" what's happening with protesters in Iran.

"That's a Q reference," Paul said, noting the phrase "the world is watching" has appeared several times in Q drops.

The May 30 bulletin sent by the FBI's Phoenix field office warned of conspiracy theories inspiring violence by groups and "individual extremists," according to an October court filing for a QAnon-related criminal investigation in Colorado. Police in the Denver suburb of Parker said [Cynthia Abcug](#) was accused of conspiring with QAnon supporters to kidnap her son from foster care. Abcug was arrested in Montana on Dec. 30 and awaits extradition to Colorado.

Internet-fueled conspiracies already have been linked to acts of real-world violence. A man charged with killing the reputed boss of the [Gambino crime family](#) last March showed off a QAnon symbol scrawled on his left hand during a court appearance. In 2017, a North Carolina man was sentenced to prison for firing a rifle in a Washington, D.C., pizza restaurant at the center of the debunked "[Pizzagate](#)" conspiracy theory that high-profile Democrats run a child sex trafficking ring out of the restaurant's (nonexistent) basement.

Pizzagate and [other far-right conspiracy theories](#) have faded, but experts see no end in sight to QAnon's popularity.

Nancy Rosenblum, a Harvard University professor emeritus of ethics in politics and government, said the apocalyptic nature of the QAnon narrative resonates with those who want to believe that their political enemies will be vanquished and a better future will rise from the ashes.

"What makes it unique is that Trump is the chosen one," said Rosenblum, co-author of the book "A Lot of People Are Saying: The New Conspiracism and the Assault on Democracy."

Associated Press reporter Colleen Slevin in Denver contributed to this report.
