

How America Lost Its Mind

By Kurt Andersen, www.theatlantic.com

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The nation's current post-truth moment is the ultimate expression of mind-sets that have made America exceptional throughout its history.

*“You are entitled to your own opinion,
but you are not entitled to your own facts.”*

— *Daniel Patrick Moynihan*

“We risk being the first people in history to have been able to make their illusions so vivid, so persuasive, so ‘realistic’ that they can live in them.”

— *Daniel J. Boorstin*, *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America (1961)*

When did America become untethered from reality?

I first noticed our national lurch toward fantasy in 2004, after President George W. Bush’s political mastermind, Karl Rove, came up with the remarkable phrase *reality-based community*. People in “the reality-based community,” he told a reporter, “believe that solutions emerge from your judicious study of discernible reality ... That’s not the way the world really works anymore.” A year later, *The Colbert Report* went on the air. In the first few minutes of the first episode, Stephen Colbert, playing his right-wing-populist commentator character, performed a feature called “The Word.” His first selection: *truthiness*. “Now, I’m sure some of the ‘word police,’ the ‘wordinistas’ over at *Webster’s*, are gonna say, ‘Hey, that’s not a word!’ Well, anybody who knows me knows that I’m no fan of dictionaries or reference books. They’re elitist. Constantly telling us what is or isn’t true. Or what did or didn’t happen. Who’s *Britannica* to tell me the Panama Canal was finished in 1914? If I wanna say it happened in 1941, that’s my right. I don’t trust books—they’re all fact, no heart ... Face it, folks, we are a divided nation ... divided between those who think with their head and those who know with their heart ... Because that’s where the truth comes from, ladies and gentlemen—the gut.”

Whoa, yes, I thought: *exactly*. America had changed since I was young, when *truthiness* and *reality-based community* wouldn't have made any sense as jokes. For all the fun, and all the many salutary effects of the 1960s—the main decade of my childhood—I saw that those years had also been the big-bang moment for truthiness. And if the '60s amounted to a national nervous breakdown, we are probably mistaken to consider ourselves over it.

Each of us is on a spectrum somewhere between the poles of rational and irrational. We all have hunches we can't prove and superstitions that make no sense. Some of my best friends are very religious, and others believe in dubious conspiracy theories. What's problematic is going overboard—letting the subjective entirely override the objective; thinking and acting as if opinions and feelings are just as true as facts. The American experiment, the original embodiment of the great Enlightenment idea of intellectual freedom, whereby every individual is welcome to believe anything she wishes, has metastasized out of control. From the start, our ultra-individualism was attached to epic dreams, sometimes epic fantasies—every American one of God's chosen people building a custom-made utopia, all of us free to reinvent ourselves by imagination and will. In America nowadays, those more exciting parts of the Enlightenment idea have swamped the sober, rational, empirical parts. Little by little for centuries, then more and more and faster and faster during the past half century, we Americans have given ourselves over to all kinds of magical thinking, anything-goes relativism, and belief in fanciful explanation—small and large fantasies that console or thrill or terrify us. And most of us haven't realized how far-reaching our strange new normal has become.

Much more than the other billion or so people in the developed world, we Americans believe—*really believe*—in the supernatural and the miraculous, in Satan on Earth, in reports of recent trips to and from heaven, and in a story of life's instantaneous creation several thousand years ago.

We believe that the government and its co-conspirators are hiding all sorts of monstrous and shocking truths from us, concerning assassinations, extraterrestrials, the genesis of aids, the 9/11 attacks, the dangers of vaccines, and so much more.

And this was all true before we became familiar with the terms *post-factual* and *post-truth*, before we elected a president with an astoundingly open mind about conspiracy theories, what's true and what's false, the nature of reality.

We have passed through the looking glass and down the rabbit hole. America has mutated into Fantasyland.

How widespread is this promiscuous devotion to the untrue? How many Americans now inhabit alternate realities? Any given survey of beliefs is only a sketch of what people in general really think. But reams of survey research from the past 20 years reveal a rough, useful census of American credulity and delusion. By my reckoning, the solidly reality-based are a minority, maybe a third of us but almost certainly fewer than half. Only a third of us, for instance, don't believe that the tale of creation in Genesis is the word of God. Only a third strongly disbelieve in telepathy and ghosts. Two-thirds of Americans believe that "angels and demons are active in the world." More than half say they're absolutely certain heaven exists, and just as many are sure of the existence of a personal God—not a vague force or universal spirit or higher power, but some guy. A third of us believe not only that global warming is no big deal but that it's a hoax perpetrated by scientists, the government, and journalists. A third believe that our earliest ancestors were humans just like us; that the government has, in league with the pharmaceutical industry, hidden evidence of natural cancer cures; that extraterrestrials have visited or are visiting Earth. Almost a quarter believe that vaccines cause autism, and that Donald Trump won the popular vote in 2016. A quarter believe that our previous president maybe or definitely was (or is?) the anti-Christ. According to a survey by Public Policy Polling, 15 percent believe that the "media or the

government adds secret mind-controlling technology to television broadcast signals,” and another 15 percent think that’s possible. A quarter of Americans believe in witches. Remarkably, the same fraction, or maybe less, believes that the Bible consists mainly of legends and fables—the same proportion that believes U.S. officials were complicit in the 9/11 attacks.

When I say that a third believe X and a quarter believe Y, it’s important to understand that those are different thirds and quarters of the population. Of course, various fantasy constituencies overlap and feed one another—for instance, belief in extraterrestrial visitation and abduction can lead to belief in vast government cover-ups, which can lead to belief in still more wide-ranging plots and cabals, which can jibe with a belief in an impending Armageddon.

Why are we like this?

The short answer is because we’re Americans—because being American means we can believe anything we want; that our beliefs are equal or superior to anyone else’s, experts be damned. Once people commit to that approach, the world turns inside out, and no cause-and-effect connection is fixed. The credible becomes incredible and the incredible credible.

The word *mainstream* has recently become a pejorative, shorthand for bias, lies, oppression by the elites. Yet the institutions and forces that once kept us from indulging the flagrantly untrue or absurd—media, academia, government, corporate America, professional associations, respectable opinion in the aggregate—have enabled and encouraged every species of fantasy over the past few decades.

A senior physician at one of America’s most prestigious university hospitals promotes “miracle cures” on his daily TV show. Cable channels air documentaries treating mermaids, monsters, ghosts, and angels as real. When a political-science professor attacks the idea “that there is some ‘public’ that

shares a notion of reality, a concept of reason, and a set of criteria by which claims to reason and rationality are judged,” colleagues just nod and grant tenure. The old fringes have been folded into the new center. The irrational has become respectable and often unstoppable.

Our whole social environment and each of its overlapping parts—cultural, religious, political, intellectual, psychological—have become conducive to spectacular fallacy and truthiness and make-believe. There are many slippery slopes, leading in various directions to other exciting nonsense. During the past several decades, those naturally slippery slopes have been turned into a colossal and permanent complex of interconnected, crisscrossing bobsled tracks, which Donald Trump slid down right into the White House.

American moxie has always come in two types. We have our wilder, faster, looser side: We're overexcited gamblers with a weakness for stories too good to be true. But we also have the virtues embodied by the Puritans and their secular descendants: steadiness, hard work, frugality, sobriety, and common sense. A propensity to dream impossible dreams is like other powerful tendencies—okay when kept in check. For most of our history, the impulses existed in a rough balance, a dynamic equilibrium between fantasy and reality, mania and moderation, credulity and skepticism.

The great unbalancing and descent into full Fantasyland was the product of two momentous changes. The first was a profound shift in thinking that swelled up in the '60s; since then, Americans have had a new rule written into their mental operating systems: *Do your own thing, find your own reality, it's all relative.*

The second change was the onset of the new era of information. Digital technology empowers real-seeming fictions of the ideological and religious and scientific kinds. Among the web's 1 billion sites, believers in anything and everything can find thousands of fellow fantasists, with collages of facts and

“facts” to support them. Before the internet, crackpots were mostly isolated, and surely had a harder time remaining convinced of their alternate realities. Now their devoutly believed opinions are all over the airwaves and the web, just like actual news. Now all of the fantasies look real.

Today, each of us is freer than ever to custom-make reality, to believe whatever and pretend to be whoever we wish. Which makes all the lines between *actual* and *fictional* blur and disappear more easily. Truth in general becomes flexible, personal, subjective. And we like this new ultra-freedom, insist on it, even as we fear and loathe the ways so many of our wrongheaded fellow Americans use it.

Treating real life as fantasy and vice versa, and taking preposterous ideas seriously, is not unique to Americans. But we are the global crucible and epicenter. We invented the fantasy-industrial complex; almost nowhere outside poor or otherwise miserable countries are flamboyant supernatural beliefs so central to the identities of so many people. This is American exceptionalism in the 21st century. The country has always been a one-of-a-kind place. But our singularity is different now. We're still rich and free, still more influential and powerful than any other nation, practically a synonym for *developed country*. But our drift toward credulity, toward doing our own thing, toward denying facts and having an altogether uncertain grip on reality, has overwhelmed our other exceptional national traits and turned us into a less developed country.

People see our shocking Trump moment—this post-truth, “alternative facts” moment—as some inexplicable and crazy new American phenomenon. But what's happening is just the ultimate extrapolation and expression of mind-sets that have made America exceptional for its entire history.

America was created by true believers and passionate dreamers, and by hucksters and their suckers, which made America successful—but also by a people uniquely susceptible to fantasy, as epitomized by everything from Salem’s hunting witches to Joseph Smith’s creating Mormonism, from P. T. Barnum to speaking in tongues, from Hollywood to Scientology to conspiracy theories, from Walt Disney to Billy Graham to Ronald Reagan to Oprah Winfrey to Trump. In other words: Mix epic individualism with extreme religion; mix show business with everything else; let all that ferment for a few centuries; then run it through the anything-goes ’60s and the internet age. The result is the America we inhabit today, with reality and fantasy weirdly and dangerously blurred and commingled.

The 1960s and the Beginning of the End of Reason

I don’t regret or disapprove of many of the ways the ’60s permanently reordered American society and culture. It’s just that along with the familiar benefits, there have been unreckoned costs.

In 1962, people started referring to “hippies,” the Beatles had their first hit, Ken Kesey published *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*, and the Harvard psychology lecturer Timothy Leary was handing out psilocybin and LSD to grad students. And three hours south of San Francisco, on the heavenly stretch of coastal cliffs known as Big Sur, a pair of young Stanford psychology graduates founded a school and think tank they named after a small American Indian tribe that had lived on the grounds long before. “In 1968,” one of its founding figures recalled four decades later,

Esalen was the center of the cyclone of the youth rebellion. It was one of the central places, like Mecca for the Islamic culture. Esalen was a pilgrimage center for hundreds and thousands of youth interested in some sense of transcendence, breakthrough consciousness, LSD, the sexual revolution, encounter, being sensitive, finding your body, yoga—all of these things were at first filtered into the culture through Esalen. By 1966, '67, and '68, Esalen was making a world impact.

This is not overstatement. Essentially everything that became known as New Age was invented, developed, or popularized at the Esalen Institute. Esalen is a mother church of a new American religion for people who think they don't like churches or religions but who still want to believe in the supernatural. The institute wholly reinvented psychology, medicine, and philosophy, driven by a suspicion of science and reason and an embrace of magical thinking (also: massage, hot baths, sex, and sex in hot baths). It was a headquarters for a new religion of no religion, and for "science" containing next to no science. The idea was to be radically tolerant of therapeutic approaches and understandings of reality, especially if they came from Asian traditions or from American Indian or other shamanistic traditions. Invisible energies, past lives, astral projection, whatever—the more exotic and wondrous and unfalsifiable, the better.

Not long before Esalen was founded, one of its co-founders, Dick Price, had suffered a mental breakdown and been involuntarily committed to a private psychiatric hospital for a year. His new institute embraced the radical notion that psychosis and other mental illnesses were labels imposed by the straight world on eccentrics and visionaries, that they were primarily tools of coercion and control. This was the big idea behind *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, of course. And within the psychiatric profession itself this idea had two influential proponents, who each published unorthodox manifestos at the beginning of the decade—R. D. Laing (*The Divided Self*) and Thomas Szasz (*The*

Myth of Mental Illness). “Madness,” Laing wrote when Esalen was new, “is potentially liberation and renewal.” Esalen’s founders were big Laing fans, and the institute became a hotbed for the idea that insanity was just an alternative way of perceiving reality.

These influential critiques helped make popular and respectable the idea that much of science is a sinister scheme concocted by a despotic conspiracy to oppress people. Mental illness, both Szasz and Laing said, is “a theory not a fact.” This is now the universal bottom-line argument for anyone—from creationists to climate-change deniers to anti-vaccine hysterics—who prefers to disregard science in favor of his own beliefs.

You know how young people always think the universe revolves around them, as if they’re the only ones who really get it? And how before their frontal lobes, the neural seat of reason and rationality, are fully wired, they can be especially prone to fantasy? In the ’60s, the universe cooperated: It did seem to revolve around young people, affirming their adolescent self-regard, making their fantasies of importance feel real and their fantasies of instant transformation and revolution feel plausible. Practically overnight, America turned its full attention to the young and everything they believed and imagined and wished.

If 1962 was when the decade really got going, 1969 was the year the new doctrines and their gravity were definitively cataloged by the grown-ups. Reason and rationality were over. The countercultural effusions were freaking out the old guard, including religious people who couldn’t quite see that yet another Great Awakening was under way in America, heaving up a new religion of believers who “have no option but to follow the road until they reach the Holy City ... that lies beyond the technocracy ... the New Jerusalem.” That line is from *The Making of a Counter Culture: Reflections on the Technocratic Society and Its Youthful Opposition*, published three weeks after Woodstock, in the summer of 1969. Its author was Theodore Roszak, age 35, a Bay Area

professor who thereby coined the word *counterculture*. Roszak spends 270 pages glorying in the younger generation's "brave" rejection of expertise and "all that our culture values as 'reason' and 'reality.'" (Note the scare quotes.) So-called experts, after all, are "on the payroll of the state and/or corporate structure." A chapter called "The Myth of Objective Consciousness" argues that science is really just a state religion. To create "a new culture in which the non-intellective capacities ... become the arbiters of the good [and] the true," he writes, "nothing less is required than the subversion of the scientific world view, with its entrenched commitment to an egocentric and cerebral mode of consciousness." He welcomes the "radical rejection of science and technological values."

Earlier that summer, a University of Chicago sociologist (and Catholic priest) named Andrew Greeley had alerted readers of *The New York Times Magazine* that beyond the familiar signifiers of youthful rebellion (long hair, sex, drugs, music, protests), the truly shocking change on campuses was the rise of anti-rationalism and a return of the sacred—"mysticism and magic," the occult, séances, cults based on the book of Revelation. When he'd chalked a statistical table on a classroom blackboard, one of his students had reacted with horror: "Mr. Greeley, I think you're an empiricist."

As 1969 turned to 1970, a 41-year-old Yale Law School professor was finishing his book about the new youth counterculture. Charles Reich was a former Supreme Court clerk now tenured at one of ultra-rationalism's American headquarters. But hanging with the young people had led him to a midlife epiphany and apostasy. In 1966, he had started teaching an undergraduate seminar called "The Individual in America," for which he assigned fiction by Kesey and Norman Mailer. He decided to spend the next summer, the Summer of Love, in Berkeley. On the road back to New Haven, he had his Pauline conversion to the kids' values. His class at Yale became hugely popular; at its

peak, 600 students were enrolled. In 1970, *The Greening of America* became *The New York Times*' best-selling book (as well as a much-read 70-page *New Yorker* excerpt), and remained on the list for most of a year.

At 16, I bought and read one of the 2 million copies sold. Rereading it today and recalling how much I loved it was a stark reminder of the follies of youth. Reich was shamelessly, uncritically swooning for kids like me. *The Greening of America* may have been the mainstream's single greatest act of pandering to the vanity and self-righteousness of the new youth. Its underlying theoretical scheme was simple and perfectly pitched to flatter young readers: There are three types of American "consciousness," each of which "makes up an individual's perception of reality ... his 'head,' his way of life." *Consciousness I* people were old-fashioned, self-reliant individualists rendered obsolete by the new "Corporate State"—essentially, your grandparents. *Consciousness IIs* were the fearful and conformist organization men and women whose rationalism was a tyrannizing trap laid by the Corporate State—your parents.

And then there was *Consciousness III*, which had "made its first appearance among the youth of America," "spreading rapidly among wider and wider segments of youth, and by degrees to older people." If you opposed the Vietnam War and dressed down and smoked pot, you were almost certainly a III. Simply by being young and casual and undisciplined, you were ushering in a new utopia.

Reich praises the "gaiety and humor" of the new Consciousness III wardrobe, but his book is absolutely humorless—because it's a response to "this moment of utmost sterility, darkest night and most extreme peril." Conspiracism was flourishing, and Reich bought in. Now that "the Corporate State has added depersonalization and repression" to its other injustices, "it has threatened to destroy all meaning and suck all joy from life." Reich's magical thinking mainly concerned how the revolution would turn out. "The American Corporate State," having produced this new generation of longhaired hyperindividualists

who insist on trusting their gut and finding their own truth, “is now accomplishing what no revolutionaries could accomplish by themselves. The machine has begun to destroy itself.” Once everyone wears Levi’s and gets high, the old ways “will simply be swept away in the flood.”

The inevitable/imminent happy-cataclysm part of the dream didn’t happen, of course. The machine did not destroy itself. But Reich was half-right. An epochal change in American thinking was under way and “not, as far as anybody knows, reversible ... There is no returning to an earlier consciousness.” His wishful error was believing that once the tidal surge of new sensibility brought down the flood walls, the waters would flow in only one direction, carving out a peaceful, cooperative, groovy new continental utopia, hearts and minds changed like his, all of America Berkeleyized and Vermontified. Instead, Consciousness III was just one early iteration of the anything-goes, post-reason, post-factual America enabled by the tsunami. Reich’s faith was the converse of the Enlightenment rationalists’ hopeful fallacy 200 years earlier. Granted complete freedom of thought, Thomas Jefferson and company assumed, most people would follow the path of reason. Wasn’t it pretty to think so.



I remember when fantastical beliefs went fully mainstream, in the 1970s. My irreligious mother bought and read *The Secret Life of Plants*, a big best seller arguing that plants were sentient and would “be the bridesmaids at a marriage of physics and metaphysics.” The amazing truth about plants, the book claimed, had been suppressed by the FDA and agribusiness. My mom didn’t believe in the conspiracy, but she did start talking to her ficuses as if they were pets. In a review, *The New York Times* registered the book as another data point in how “the incredible is losing its pariah status.” Indeed, mainstream publishers and media organizations were falling over themselves to promote and sell fantasies as nonfiction. In 1975 came a sensational autobiography by the young spoon bender and mind reader Uri Geller as well as *Life After Life*, by Raymond Moody, a philosophy Ph.D. who presented the anecdotes of several dozen people who’d nearly died as evidence of an afterlife. The book sold many millions of copies; before long the International Association for Near Death Studies formed and held its first conference, at Yale.

During the ’60s, large swaths of academia made a turn away from reason and rationalism as they’d been understood. Many of the pioneers were thoughtful, their work fine antidotes to postwar complacency. The problem was the

nature and extent of their influence at that particular time, when all premises and paradigms seemed up for grabs. That is, they inspired half-baked and perverse followers in the academy, whose arguments filtered out into the world at large: All approximations of truth, science as much as any fable or religion, are mere stories devised to serve people's needs or interests. Reality itself is a purely social construction, a tableau of useful or wishful myths that members of a society or tribe have been persuaded to believe. The borders between fiction and nonfiction are permeable, maybe nonexistent. The delusions of the insane, superstitions, and magical thinking? Any of those may be as legitimate as the supposed truths contrived by Western reason and science. The takeaway: Believe whatever you want, because pretty much everything is equally true and false.

These ideas percolated across multiple academic fields. In 1965, the French philosopher Michel Foucault published *Madness and Civilization* in America, echoing Laing's skepticism of the concept of mental illness; by the 1970s, he was arguing that rationality itself is a coercive "regime of truth"—oppression by other means. Foucault's suspicion of reason became deeply and widely embedded in American academia.

Meanwhile, over in sociology, in 1966 a pair of professors published *The Social Construction of Reality*, one of the most influential works in their field. Not only were sanity and insanity and scientific truth somewhat dubious concoctions by elites, Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann explained—so was everything else. The rulers of any tribe or society do not just dictate customs and laws; they are the masters of everyone's perceptions, defining reality itself. To create the all-encompassing stage sets that everyone inhabits, rulers first use crude mythology, then more elaborate religion, and finally the "extreme step" of modern science. "Reality"? "Knowledge"? "If we were going to be meticulous," Berger and Luckmann wrote, "we would put quotation marks around the two aforementioned terms every time we used them." "What is 'real' to a Tibetan monk may not be 'real' to an American businessman."

When I first read that, at age 18, I loved the quotation marks. If reality is simply the result of rules written by the powers that be, then isn't everyone able—no, isn't everyone *obliged*—to construct their own reality? The book was timed perfectly to become a foundational text in academia and beyond.

A more extreme academic evangelist for the idea of all truths being equal was a UC Berkeley philosophy professor named Paul Feyerabend. His best-known book, published in 1975, was *Against Method: Outline of an Anarchistic Theory of Knowledge*. “Rationalism,” it declared, “is a secularized form of the belief in the power of the word of God,” and science a “particular superstition.” In a later edition of the book, published when creationists were passing laws to teach Genesis in public-school biology classes, Feyerabend came out in favor of the practice, comparing creationists to Galileo. Science, he insisted, is just another form of belief. “Only one principle,” he wrote, “can be defended under *all* circumstances and in all stages of human development. It is the principle: *anything goes.*”

Over in anthropology, where the exotic magical beliefs of traditional cultures were a main subject, the new paradigm took over completely—*don't judge, don't disbelieve, don't point your professorial finger*. This was understandable, given the times: colonialism ending, genocide of American Indians confessed, U.S. wars in the developing world. Who were we to roll our eyes or deny what these people believed? In the '60s, anthropology decided that oracles, diviners, incantations, and magical objects should be not just respected, but considered equivalent to reason and science. If all understandings of reality are socially constructed, those of Kalabari tribesmen in Nigeria are no more arbitrary or faith-based than those of college professors.

In 1968, a UC Davis psychologist named Charles Tart conducted an experiment in which, he wrote, “a young woman who frequently had spontaneous out-of-body experiences”—didn't “claim to have” them but “had” them—spent four nights sleeping in a lab, hooked up to an EEG machine. Her assigned task was

to send her mind or soul out of her body while she was asleep and read a five-digit number Tart had written on a piece of paper placed on a shelf above the bed. He reported that she succeeded. Other scientists considered the experiments and the results bogus, but Tart proceeded to devote his academic career to proving that attempts at objectivity are a sham and magic is real. In an extraordinary paper published in 1972 in *Science*, he complained about the scientific establishment's "almost total rejection of the knowledge gained" while high or tripping. He didn't just want science to take seriously "experiences of ecstasy, mystical union, other 'dimensions,' rapture, beauty, space-and-time transcendence." He was explicitly dedicated to *going there*. A "perfectly scientific theory may be based on data that have no physical existence," he insisted. The rules of the scientific method had to be revised. To work as a psychologist in the new era, Tart argued, a researcher should be in the altered state of consciousness he's studying, high or delusional "at the time of data collection" or during "data reduction and theorizing." Tart's new mode of research, he admitted, posed problems of "consensual validation," given that "only observers in the same [altered state] are able to communicate adequately with one another." Tart popularized the term *consensus reality* for what you or I would simply call *reality*, and around 1970 that became a permanent interdisciplinary term of art in academia. Later he abandoned the pretense of neutrality and started calling it the *consensus trance*—people committed to reason and rationality were the deluded dupes, not he and his tribe.

Even the social critic Paul Goodman, beloved by young leftists in the '60s, was flabbergasted by his own students by 1969. "There was no knowledge," he wrote, "only the sociology of knowledge. They had so well learned that ... research is subsidized and conducted for the benefit of the ruling class that they did not believe there was such a thing as simple truth."

Ever since, the American right has insistently decried the spread of relativism, the idea that nothing is any more correct or true than anything else. Conservatives hated how relativism undercut various venerable and

comfortable ruling ideas—certain notions of entitlement (according to race and gender) and aesthetic beauty and metaphysical and moral certainty. Yet once the intellectual mainstream thoroughly accepted that there are many equally valid realities and truths, once the idea of gates and gatekeeping was discredited not just on campuses but throughout the culture, *all* American barbarians could have their claims taken seriously. Conservatives are correct that the anything-goes relativism of college campuses wasn't sequestered there, but when it flowed out across America it helped enable extreme Christianities and lunacies on the *right*—gun-rights hysteria, black-helicopter conspiracism, climate-change denial, and more. The term *useful idiot* was originally deployed to accuse liberals of serving the interests of true believers further on the left. In this instance, however, postmodern intellectuals—post-positivists, poststructuralists, social constructivists, post-empiricists, epistemic relativists, cognitive relativists, descriptive relativists—turned out to be useful idiots most consequentially for the American right. “Reality has a well-known liberal bias,” Stephen Colbert once said, in character, mocking the beliefs-trump-facts impulse of today's right. Neither side has noticed, but large factions of the elite left and the populist right have been on the same team.

Conspiracy and Paranoia in the 1970s

As the Vietnam War escalated and careened, antirationalism flowered. In his book about the remarkable protests in Washington, D.C., in the fall of 1967, *The Armies of the Night*, Norman Mailer describes chants (“Out demons, out—back to darkness, ye servants of Satan!”) and a circle of hundreds of protesters intending “to form a ring of exorcism sufficiently powerful to raise the Pentagon three hundred feet.” They were hoping the building would “turn orange and vibrate until all evil emissions had fled this levitation. At that point the war in Vietnam would end.”

By the end of the '60s, plenty of zealots on the left were engaged in extreme magical thinking. They hadn't started the decade that way. In 1962, Students for a Democratic Society adopted its founding document, drafted by 22-year-old Tom Hayden. The manifesto is sweet and reasonable: decrying inequality and poverty and "the pervasiveness of racism in American life," seeing the potential benefits as well as the downsides of industrial automation, declaring the group "in basic opposition to the communist system."

Then, *kaboom*, the big bang. Anything and everything became believable. Reason was chucked. Dystopian and utopian fantasies seemed plausible. In 1969, the SDS's most apocalyptic and charismatic faction, calling itself Weatherman, split off and got all the attention. Its members believed that they and other young white Americans, aligned with black insurgents, would be the vanguard in a new civil war. They issued statements about "the need for armed struggle as the only road to revolution" and how "dope is one of our weapons ... Guns and grass are united in the youth underground." And then factions of the new left went to work making and setting off thousands of bombs in the early 1970s.

Left-wingers weren't the only ones who became unhinged. Officials at the FBI, the CIA, and military intelligence agencies, as well as in urban police departments, convinced themselves that peaceful antiwar protesters and campus lefties in general were dangerous militants, and expanded secret programs to spy on, infiltrate, and besmirch their organizations. Which thereby validated the preexisting paranoia on the new left and encouraged its wing nuts' revolutionary delusions. In the '70s, the CIA and Army intelligence set up their infamous Project Star Gate to see whether they could conduct espionage by means of ESP.

The far right had its own glorious '60s moment, in the form of the new John Birch Society, whose founders believed that both Republican and Democratic presidential Cabinets included "conscious, deliberate, dedicated agent[s] of the

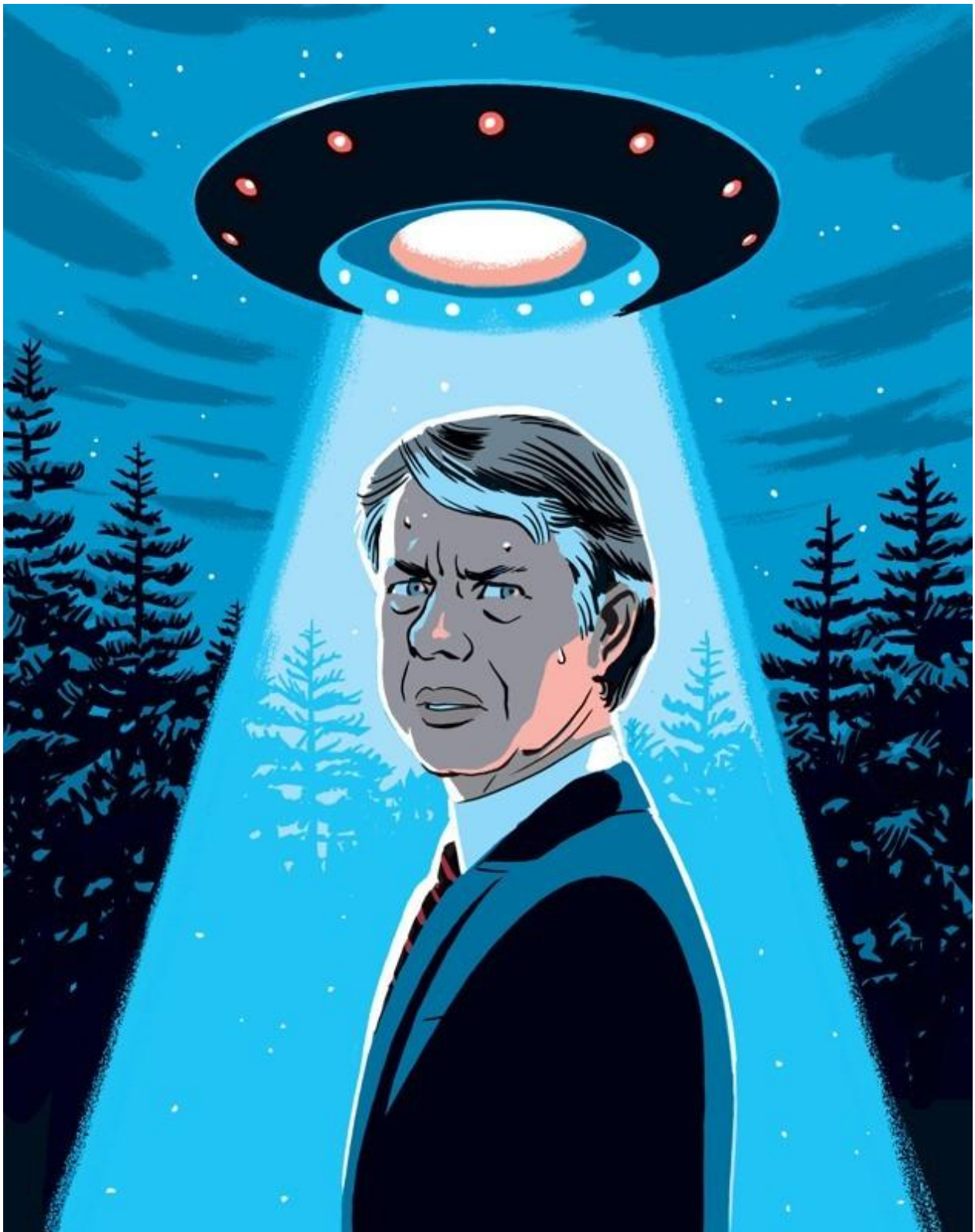
Soviet conspiracy” determined to create “a world-wide police state, absolutely and brutally governed from the Kremlin,” as the society’s founder, Robert Welch, put it in a letter to friends.

This furiously, elaborately suspicious way of understanding the world started spreading across the political spectrum after the assassination of John F. Kennedy in 1963. Dallas couldn’t have been the work of just one nutty loser with a mail-order rifle, could it have? Surely the Communists or the CIA or the Birchers or the Mafia or some conspiratorial combination must have arranged it all, right? The shift in thinking didn’t register immediately. In his influential book *The Paranoid Style in American Politics*, published two years after the president’s murder, Richard Hofstadter devoted only two sentences and a footnote to it, observing that “conspiratorial explanations of Kennedy’s assassination” don’t have much “currency ... in the United States.”

Elaborate paranoia was an established tic of the Bircherite far right, but the left needed a little time to catch up. In 1964, a left-wing American writer published the first book about a JFK conspiracy, claiming that a Texas oilman had been the mastermind, and soon many books were arguing that the official government inquiry had ignored the hidden conspiracies. One of them, *Rush to Judgment*, by Mark Lane, a lawyer on the left, was a *New York Times* best seller for six months. Then, in 1967, New Orleans’s district attorney, Jim Garrison, indicted a local businessman for being part of a conspiracy of gay right-wingers to assassinate Kennedy—“a Nazi operation, whose sponsors include some of the oil-rich millionaires in Texas,” according to Garrison, with the CIA, FBI, and Robert F. Kennedy complicit in the cover-up. After NBC News broadcast an investigation discrediting the theory, Garrison said the TV segment was a piece of “thought control,” obviously commissioned by NBC’s parent company RCA, “one of the top 10 defense contractors” and thus “desperate because we are in the process of uncovering their hoax.”

The notion of an immense and awful JFK-assassination conspiracy became conventional wisdom in America. As a result, more Americans than ever became reflexive conspiracy theorists. Thomas Pynchon's novel *Gravity's Rainbow*, a complicated global fantasy about the interconnections among militarists and Illuminati and stoners, and the validity of paranoid thinking, won the 1974 National Book Award. Conspiracy became the high-end Hollywood dramatic premise—*Chinatown*, *The Conversation*, *The Parallax View*, and *Three Days of the Condor* came out in the same two-year period. Of course, real life made such stories plausible. The infiltration by the FBI and intelligence agencies of left-wing groups was then being revealed, and the Watergate break-in and its cover-up were an actual criminal conspiracy. Within a few decades, the belief that a web of villainous elites was covertly seeking to impose a malevolent global regime made its way from the lunatic right to the mainstream. Delusional conspiracism wouldn't spread quite as widely or as deeply on the left, but more and more people on both sides would come to believe that an extraordinarily powerful cabal—international organizations and think tanks and big businesses and politicians—secretly ran America.

Each camp, conspiracists on the right and on the left, was ostensibly the enemy of the other, but they began operating as de facto allies. Relativist professors enabled science-denying Christians, and the antipsychiatry craze in the '60s appealed simultaneously to left-wingers and libertarians (as well as to Scientologists). Conspiracy theories were more of a modern right-wing habit before people on the left signed on. However, the belief that the federal government had secret plans to open detention camps for dissidents sprouted in the '70s on the paranoid left before it became a fixture on the right.



Americans felt newly entitled to believe absolutely *anything*. I'm pretty certain that the unprecedented surge of UFO reports in the '70s was not evidence of extraterrestrials' increasing presence but a symptom of Americans' credulity

and magical thinking suddenly unloosed. We *wanted* to believe in extraterrestrials, so we did. What made the UFO mania historically significant rather than just amusing, however, was the web of elaborate stories that were now being spun: not just of sightings but of landings and abductions—and of government cover-ups and secret alliances with interplanetary beings. Those earnest beliefs planted more seeds for the extravagant American conspiracy thinking that by the turn of the century would be rampant and seriously toxic.

A single *idée fixe* like this often appears in both frightened and hopeful versions. That was true of the suddenly booming belief in alien visitors, which tended toward the sanguine as the '60s turned into the '70s, even in fictional depictions. Consider the extraterrestrials that Jack Nicholson's character in *Easy Rider* earnestly describes as he's getting high for the first time, and those at the center of *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* eight years later. One evening in southern Georgia in 1969, the year *Easy Rider* came out, a failed gubernatorial candidate named Jimmy Carter saw a moving moon-size white light in the sky that “didn't have any solid substance to it” and “got closer and closer,” stopped, turned blue, then red and back to white, and then zoomed away.

The first big nonfiction abduction tale appeared around the same time, in a best-selling book about a married couple in New Hampshire who believed that while driving their Chevy sedan late one night, they saw a bright object in the sky that the wife, a UFO buff already, figured might be a spacecraft. She began having nightmares about being abducted by aliens, and both of them underwent hypnosis. The details of the abducting aliens and their spacecraft that each described were different, and changed over time. The man's hypnotized description of the aliens bore an uncanny resemblance to the ones in an episode of *The Outer Limits* broadcast on ABC just before his hypnosis session. Thereafter, hypnosis became the standard way for people who believed that they had been abducted (or that they had past lives, or that they were the victims of satanic abuse) to recall the supposed experience. And the

couple's story established the standard abduction-tale format: Humanoid creatures take you aboard a spacecraft, communicate telepathically or in spoken English, medically examine you by inserting long needles into you, then let you go.

The husband and wife were undoubtedly sincere believers. The sincerely credulous are perfect suckers, and in the late '60s, a convicted thief and embezzler named Erich von Däniken published *Chariots of the Gods?*, positing that extraterrestrials helped build the Egyptian pyramids, Stonehenge, and the giant stone heads on Easter Island. That book and its many sequels sold tens of millions of copies, and the documentary based on it had a huge box-office take in 1970. Americans were ready to believe von Däniken's fantasy to a degree they simply wouldn't have been a decade earlier, before the '60s sea change. Certainly a decade earlier NBC wouldn't have aired an hour-long version of the documentary in prime time. And while I'm at it: Until we'd passed through the '60s and half of the '70s, I'm pretty sure we wouldn't have given the presidency to some dude, especially a born-again Christian, who said he'd recently seen a huge, color-shifting, luminescent UFO hovering near him.

The 1980s and the Smog of Subjectivity

By the 1980s, things appeared to have returned more or less to normal. Civil rights seemed like a done deal, the war in Vietnam was over, young people were no longer telling grown-ups they were worthless because they were grown-ups. Revolution did not loom. Sex and drugs and rock and roll were regular parts of life. Starting in the '80s, loving America and making money and having a family were no longer unfashionable.

The sense of cultural and political upheaval and chaos dissipated—which lulled us into ignoring all the ways that everything had changed, that Fantasyland was now scaling and spreading and becoming the new normal. What had seemed strange and amazing in 1967 or 1972 became normal and ubiquitous.

Extreme religious and quasi-religious beliefs and practices, Christian and New Age and otherwise, didn't subside, but grew and thrived—and came to seem unexceptional.

Relativism became entrenched in academia—tenured, you could say. Michel Foucault's rival Jean Baudrillard became a celebrity among American intellectuals by declaring that rationalism was a tool of oppressors that no longer worked as a way of understanding the world, pointless and doomed. In other words, as he wrote in 1986, "the secret of theory"—this whole intellectual realm now called itself simply "theory"—"is that truth does not exist."

This kind of thinking was by no means limited to the ivory tower. The intellectuals' new outlook was as much a product as a cause of the smog of subjectivity that now hung thick over the whole American mindscape. After the '60s, truth was relative, criticizing was equal to victimizing, individual liberty became absolute, and everyone was permitted to believe or disbelieve whatever they wished. The distinction between opinion and fact was crumbling on many fronts.

Belief in gigantic secret conspiracies thrived, ranging from the highly improbable to the impossible, and moved from the crackpot periphery to the mainstream.

Many Americans announced that they'd experienced fantastic horrors and adventures, abuse by Satanists, and abduction by extraterrestrials, and their claims began to be taken seriously. Parts of the establishment—psychology and psychiatry, academia, religion, law enforcement—encouraged people to believe that all sorts of imaginary traumas were real.

America didn't seem as weird and crazy as it had around 1970. But that's because Americans had stopped *noticing* the weirdness and craziness. We had defined every sort of deviancy down. And as the cultural critic Neil Postman put it in his 1985 jeremiad about how TV was replacing meaningful public discourse with entertainment, we were in the process of amusing ourselves to death.

How the Right Became More Unhinged Than the Left

The Reagan presidency was famously a triumph of truthiness and entertainment, and in the 1990s, as problematically batty beliefs kept going mainstream, presidential politics continued merging with the fantasy-industrial complex.

In 1998, as soon as we learned that President Bill Clinton had been felled by an intern in the West Wing, his popularity *spiked*. Which was baffling only to those who still thought of politics as an autonomous realm, existing apart from entertainment. American politics happened on television; it was a TV series, a reality show just before TV became glutted with reality shows. A titillating new story line that goosed the ratings of an existing series was an established scripted-TV gimmick. The audience had started getting bored with *The Clinton Administration*, but the Monica Lewinsky subplot got people interested again.

Just before the Clintons arrived in Washington, the right had managed to do away with the federal Fairness Doctrine, which had been enacted to keep radio and TV shows from being ideologically one-sided. Until then, big-time conservative opinion media had consisted of two magazines, William F. Buckley Jr.'s biweekly *National Review* and the monthly *American Spectator*, both with small circulations. But absent a Fairness Doctrine, Rush Limbaugh's national right-wing radio show, launched in 1988, was free to thrive, and others promptly appeared.

For most of the 20th century, national news media had felt obliged to pursue and present some rough approximation of *the* truth rather than to promote *a* truth, let alone fictions. With the elimination of the Fairness Doctrine, a new American laissez-faire had been officially declared. If lots more incorrect and preposterous assertions circulated in our mass media, that was a price of freedom. If splenetic commentators could now, as never before, keep believers perpetually riled up and feeling the excitement of being in a mob, so be it.

Limbaugh's virtuosic three hours of daily talk started bringing a sociopolitical alternate reality to a huge national audience. Instead of relying on an occasional magazine or newsletter to confirm your gnarly view of the world, now you had talk radio drilling it into your head for hours every day. As Limbaugh's show took off, in 1992 the producer Roger Ailes created a syndicated TV show around him. Four years later, when NBC hired someone else to launch a cable news channel, Ailes, who had been working at NBC, quit and created one with Rupert Murdoch.

Fox News brought the Limbaughvian talk-radio version of the world to national TV, offering viewers an unending and immersive propaganda experience of a kind that had never existed before.

For Americans, this was a new condition. Over the course of the century, electronic mass media had come to serve an important democratic function: presenting Americans with a single shared set of facts. Now TV and radio were enabling a reversion to the narrower, factional, partisan discourse that had been normal in America's earlier centuries.

And there was also the internet, which eventually would have mooted the Fairness Doctrine anyhow. In 1994, the first modern spam message was sent, visible to everyone on Usenet: global alert for all: jesus is coming soon. Over the next year or two, the masses learned of the World Wide Web. The tinder had been gathered and stacked since the '60s, and now the match was lit and thrown. After the '60s and '70s happened as they happened, the internet may have broken America's dynamic balance between rational thinking and magical thinking for good.

Before the web, cockamamy ideas and outright falsehoods could not spread nearly as fast or as widely, so it was much easier for reason and reasonableness to prevail. Before the web, institutionalizing any one alternate reality required the long, hard work of hundreds of full-time militants. In the digital age, however, every tribe and fiefdom and principality and region of Fantasyland—every screwball with a computer and an internet connection—suddenly had an unprecedented way to instruct and rile up and mobilize believers, and to recruit more. False beliefs were rendered both more real-seeming and more contagious, creating a kind of fantasy cascade in which millions of bedoozled Americans surfed and swam.

Why did Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan begin remarking frequently during the '80s and '90s that people were entitled to their own opinions but not to their own facts? Because until then, that had not been necessary to say. Our marketplace of ideas became exponentially bigger and freer than ever, it's true. Thomas Jefferson said that he'd "rather be exposed to the inconveniences attending too much liberty than those attending too small a degree of it"—

because in the new United States, “reason is left free to combat” every sort of “error of opinion.” However, I think if he and our other Enlightenment forefathers returned, they would see the present state of affairs as too much of a good thing. Reason remains free to combat unreason, but the internet entitles and equips all the proponents of unreason and error to a previously unimaginable degree. Particularly for a people with our history and propensities, the downside of the internet seems at least as profound as the upside.

The way internet search was designed to operate in the '90s—that is, the way information and beliefs now flow, rise, and fall—is democratic in the extreme. Internet search algorithms are an example of Gresham’s law, whereby the bad drives out—or at least overruns—the good. On the internet, the prominence granted to any factual assertion or belief or theory depends on the preferences of billions of individual searchers. Each click on a link is effectively a vote pushing that version of the truth toward the top of the pile of results.

Exciting falsehoods tend to do well in the perpetual referenda, and become self-validating. A search for almost any “alternative” theory or belief seems to generate more links to true believers’ pages and sites than to legitimate or skeptical ones, and those tend to dominate the first few pages of results. For instance, beginning in the '90s, conspiracists decided that contrails, the skinny clouds of water vapor that form around jet-engine exhaust, were composed of exotic chemicals, part of a secret government scheme to test weapons or poison citizens or mitigate climate change—and renamed them chemtrails. When I Googled *chemtrails proof*, the first seven results offered so-called evidence of the nonexistent conspiracy. When I searched for *government extraterrestrial cover-up*, only one result in the first three pages didn’t link to an article endorsing a conspiracy theory.

Before the web, it really wasn't easy to stumble across false or crazy information convincingly passing itself off as true. Today, however, as the Syracuse University professor Michael Barkun saw back in 2003 in *A Culture of Conspiracy*, "such subject-specific areas as crank science, conspiracist politics, and occultism are not isolated from one another," but rather

they are interconnected. Someone seeking information on UFOs, for example, can quickly find material on antigravity, free energy, Atlantis studies, alternative cancer cures, and conspiracy.

The consequence of such mingling is that an individual who enters the communications system pursuing one interest soon becomes aware of stigmatized material on a broad range of subjects. As a result, those who come across one form of stigmatized knowledge will learn of others, in connections that imply that stigmatized knowledge is a unified domain, an alternative worldview, rather than a collection of unrelated ideas.

Academic research shows that religious and supernatural thinking leads people to believe that almost no big life events are accidental or random. As the authors of some recent cognitive-science studies at Yale put it, "Individuals' explicit religious and paranormal beliefs" are the best predictors of their "perception of purpose in life events"—their tendency "to view the world in terms of agency, purpose, and design." Americans have believed for centuries that the country was inspired and guided by an omniscient, omnipotent planner and interventionist manager. Since the '60s, that exceptional religiosity has fed the tendency to believe in conspiracies. In a recent paper called "Conspiracy Theories and the Paranoid Style(s) of Mass Opinion," based on years of survey research, two University of Chicago political scientists, J. Eric Oliver and Thomas J. Wood, confirmed this special American connection.

“The likelihood of supporting conspiracy theories is strongly predicted,” they found, by “a propensity to attribute the source of unexplained or extraordinary events to unseen, intentional forces” and a weakness for “melodramatic narratives as explanations for prominent events, particularly those that interpret history relative to universal struggles between good and evil.” Oliver and Wood found the single strongest driver of conspiracy belief to be belief in end-times prophecies.

The Triumph of the Fantasy-Industrial Complex

As a 13-year-old, I watched William F. Buckley Jr.’s *Firing Line* with my conservative dad, attended Teen Age Republicans summer camp, and, at the behest of a Nixon-campaign advance man in Omaha, ripped down Rockefeller and Reagan signs during the 1968 Nebraska primary campaign. A few years later, I was a McGovern-campaign volunteer, but I still watched and admired Buckley on PBS. Over the years, I’ve voted for a few Republicans for state and local office. Today I disagree about political issues with friends and relatives to my right, but we agree on the essential contours of reality.

People on the left are by no means all scrupulously reasonable. Many give themselves over to the appealingly dubious and the untrue. But fantastical politics have become highly asymmetrical. Starting in the 1990s, America’s unhinged right became much larger and more influential than its unhinged left. There is no real left-wing equivalent of Sean Hannity, let alone Alex Jones. Moreover, the far right now has unprecedented political power; it controls much of the U.S. government.

Why did the grown-ups and designated drivers on the political left manage to remain basically in charge of their followers, while the reality-based right lost out to fantasy-prone true believers?

One reason, I think, is religion. The GOP is now quite explicitly Christian. The party is *the* American coalition of white Christians, papering over doctrinal and class differences—and now led, weirdly, by one of the least religious presidents ever. If more and more of a political party's members hold more and more extreme and extravagantly supernatural beliefs, doesn't it make sense that the party will be more and more open to make-believe in its politics?

I doubt the GOP elite deliberately *engineered* the synergies between the economic and religious sides of their contemporary coalition. But as the incomes of middle- and working-class people flatlined, Republicans pooh-poohed rising economic inequality and insecurity. Economic insecurity correlates with greater religiosity, and among white Americans, greater religiosity correlates with voting Republican. For Republican politicians and their rich-getting-richer donors, that's a virtuous circle, not a vicious one.

Religion aside, America simply has many more fervid conspiracists on the right, as research about belief in particular conspiracies confirms again and again. Only the American right has had a large and organized faction *based on* paranoid conspiracism for the past six decades. As the pioneer vehicle, the John Birch Society zoomed along and then sputtered out, but its fantastical paradigm and belligerent temperament has endured in other forms and under other brand names. When Barry Goldwater was the right-wing Republican presidential nominee in 1964, he had to play down any streaks of Bircher madness, but by 1979, in his memoir *With No Apologies*, he felt free to rave on about the globalist conspiracy and its “pursuit of a new world order” and impending “period of slavery”; the Council on Foreign Relations' secret agenda for “one-world rule”; and the Trilateral Commission's plan for “seizing

control of the political government of the United States.” The right has had three generations to steep in this, its taboo vapors wafting more and more into the main chambers of conservatism, becoming familiar, seeming less outlandish. Do you believe that “a secretive power elite with a globalist agenda is conspiring to eventually rule the world through an authoritarian world government”? Yes, say 34 percent of Republican voters, according to Public Policy Polling.

In the late 1960s and '70s, the reality-based left more or less won: retreat from Vietnam, civil-rights and environmental-protection laws, increasing legal and cultural equality for women, legal abortion, Keynesian economics triumphant.

But then the right wanted its turn to win. It pretty much accepted racial and gender equality and had to live with social welfare and regulation and bigger government, but it insisted on slowing things down. The political center moved right—but in the '70s and '80s not yet *unreasonably*. Most of America decided that we were all free marketeers now, that business wasn't necessarily bad, and that government couldn't solve all problems. We still seemed to be in the midst of the normal cyclical seesawing of American politics. In the '90s, the right achieved two of its wildest dreams: The Soviet Union and international communism collapsed; and, as violent crime radically declined, law and order was restored.

But also starting in the '90s, the farthest-right quarter of Americans, let's say, couldn't and wouldn't adjust their beliefs to comport with their side's victories and the dramatically new and improved realities. They'd made a god out of Reagan, but they ignored or didn't register that he was practical and reasonable, that he didn't completely buy his own antigovernment rhetoric. After Reagan, his hopped-up true-believer faction began insisting on total victory. But in a democracy, of course, total victory by any faction is a dangerous fantasy.

Another way the GOP got loopy was by overdoing libertarianism. I have some libertarian tendencies, but at full-strength purity it's an ideology most boys grow out of. On the American right since the '80s, however, they have not. Republicans are very selective, cherry-picking libertarians: Let business do whatever it wants and don't spoil poor people with government handouts; let individuals have gun arsenals but not abortions or recreational drugs or marriage with whomever they wish; and don't mention Ayn Rand's atheism. Libertarianism, remember, is an ideology whose most widely read and influential texts are explicitly *fiction*. "I grew up reading Ayn Rand," Speaker of the House Paul Ryan has said, "and it taught me quite a bit about who I am and what my value systems are, and what my beliefs are." It was that fiction that allowed him and so many other higher-IQ Americans to see modern America as a dystopia in which selfishness is righteous and they are the last heroes. "I think a lot of people," Ryan said in 2009, "would observe that we are right now living in an Ayn Rand novel." I'm assuming he meant *Atlas Shrugged*, the novel that Trump's secretary of state (and former CEO of ExxonMobil) has said is his favorite book. It's the story of a heroic cabal of men's-men industrialists who cause the U.S. government to collapse so they can take over, start again, and make everything right.

For a while, Republican leaders effectively encouraged and exploited the predispositions of their variously fantastical and extreme partisans. Karl Rove was stone-cold cynical, the Wizard of Oz's evil twin coming out from behind the curtain for a candid chat shortly before he won a second term for George W. Bush, about how "judicious study of discernible reality [is] ... not the way the world really works anymore." These leaders were rational people who understood that a large fraction of citizens don't bother with rationality when they vote, that a lot of voters *resent* the judicious study of discernible reality. Keeping those people angry and frightened won them elections.

But over the past few decades, a lot of the rabble they roused came to believe all the untruths. “The problem is that Republicans have purposefully torn down the validating institutions,” the political journalist Josh Barro, a Republican until 2016, wrote last year. “They have convinced voters that the media cannot be trusted; they have gotten them used to ignoring inconvenient facts about policy; and they have abolished standards of discourse.” The party’s ideological center of gravity swerved way to the right of Rove and all the Bushes, finally knocking them and their clubmates aside. What had been the party’s fantastical fringe became its middle. Reasonable Republicanism was replaced by absolutism: *no* new taxes, virtually *no* regulation, *abolish* the EPA and the IRS and the Federal Reserve.

When I was growing up in Nebraska, my Republican parents loathed all Kennedys, distrusted unions, and complained about “confiscatory” federal income-tax rates of 91 percent. But conservatism to them also meant conserving the natural environment and allowing people to make their own choices, including about abortion. They were emphatically reasonable, disinclined to believe in secret Communist/Washington/elite plots to destroy America, rolling their eyes and shaking their heads about far-right acquaintances—such as our neighbors, the parents of the future Mrs. Clarence Thomas, who considered Richard Nixon suspiciously leftish. My parents never belonged to a church. They were godless Midwestern Republicans, born and raised—which wasn’t so odd 40 years ago. Until about 1980, *the Christian right* was not a phrase in American politics. In 2000, my widowed mom, having voted for 14 Republican presidential nominees in a row, quit a party that had become too Christian for her.

The Christian takeover happened gradually, but then quickly in the end, like a phase change from liquid to gas. In 2008, three-quarters of the major GOP presidential candidates said they believed in evolution, but in 2012 it was down to a third, and then in 2016, just one did. That one, Jeb Bush, was careful to say that evolutionary biology was only *his* truth, that “it does not need to be in the

curriculum” of public schools, and that if it is, it could be accompanied by creationist teaching. A two-to-one majority of Republicans say they “support establishing Christianity as the national religion,” according to Public Policy Polling.

Although constitutionally the U.S. can have no state religion, faith of some kind has always bordered on mandatory for politicians. Only four presidents have lacked a Christian denominational affiliation, the most recent one in the 1880s. According to Pew, two-thirds of Republicans admit that they’d be less likely to support a presidential candidate who doesn’t believe in God.

As a matter of fact, one of the Constitution’s key clauses—“no religious test shall ever be required as a qualification to any office or public trust”—is kind of a theoretical freedom. Not only have we never had an openly unbelieving president, but of the 535 members of the current Congress, exactly one, Representative Kyrsten Sinema of Arizona, lists her religion as “none.” Among all 7,383 state legislators, there is apparently only one avowed atheist: Nebraska Senator Ernie Chambers.

I’m reminded of one of H. L. Mencken’s dispatches from the Scopes “monkey trial” in 1925. “Civilized” Tennesseans, he wrote, “had known for years what was going on in the hills. They knew what the country preachers were preaching—what degraded nonsense was being rammed and hammered into yokel skulls. But they were afraid to go out against the imposture while it was in the making.” What the contemporary right has done is worse, because it was deliberate and national, and it has had more-profound consequences.

The Rise of Donald Trump

I have been paying close attention to Donald Trump for a long time. *Spy* magazine, which I co-founded in 1986 and edited until 1993, published three cover stories about him—and dozens of pages exposing and ridiculing his lies, brutishness, and absurdity. Now everybody knows what we knew. Donald Trump is a grifter driven by resentment of the establishment. He doesn't like experts, because they interfere with his right as an American to believe or pretend that fictions are facts, to *feel* the truth. He sees conspiracies everywhere. He exploited the myths of white racial victimhood. His case of what I call Kids R Us syndrome—spoiled, impulsive, moody, a 71-year-old brat—is acute.

He is, first and last, a creature of the fantasy-industrial complex. “He *is* P. T. Barnum,” his sister, a federal judge, told his biographer Timothy O'Brien in 2005. Although the fantasy-industrial complex had been annexing presidential politics for more than half a century, from JFK through Reagan and beyond, Trump's campaign and presidency are its ultimate expression. From 1967 through 2011, California was governed by former movie actors more than a third of the time, and one of them became president. But Trump's need for any and all public attention always seemed to me more ravenous and insatiable than any other public figure's, akin to an addict's for drugs. Unlike Reagan, Trump was always an impresario as well as a performer. Before the emergence of Fantasyland, Trump's various enterprises would have seemed a ludicrous, embarrassing, incoherent jumble for a businessman, let alone a serious candidate for president. What connects an Islamic-mausoleum-themed casino to a short-lived, shoddy professional football league to an autobiography he didn't write to buildings he didn't build to a mail-order meat business to beauty pageants to an airline that lasted three years to a sham “university” to a fragrance called Success to a vodka and a board game named after himself to a reality-TV show about pretending to fire people?

What connects them all, of course, is the new, total American embrace of admixtures of reality and fiction and of fame for fame's sake. His reality was a reality show before that genre or term existed. When he entered political show business, after threatening to do so for most of his adult life, the character he created was unprecedented—presidential candidate as insult comic with an artificial tan and ridiculous hair, shamelessly unreal and whipped into shape as if by a pâtissier. He used the new and remade pieces of the fantasy-industrial complex as nobody had before. He hired actors to play enthusiastic supporters at his campaign kickoff. Twitter became his unmediated personal channel for entertaining outrage and untruth. And he was a *star*, so news shows wanted him on the air as much as possible—people at TV outlets told me during the campaign that they were expected to be careful not to make the candidate so unhappy that he might not return.

Before Trump won their nomination and the presidency, when he was still “a cancer on conservatism” that must be “discarded” (former Governor Rick Perry) and an “utterly amoral” “narcissist at a level I don’t think this country’s ever seen” (Senator Ted Cruz), Republicans hated Trump’s ideological incoherence—they didn’t yet understand that his campaign logic was a new kind, blending exciting tales with a showmanship that transcends ideology.



During the campaign, Trump repeated the falsehood that vaccines cause autism. And instead of undergoing a normal medical exam from a normal doctor and making the results public, like nominees had before, Trump went on *The Dr. Oz Show* and handed the host test results from his wacky doctor.

Did his voters know that his hogwash was hogwash? Yes and no, the way people paying to visit P. T. Barnum's exhibitions 175 years ago didn't much care whether the black woman on display was really George Washington's 161-year-old former nanny or whether the stitched-together fish/ape was actually a mermaid; or the way today we immerse in the real-life fictions of Disney World. Trump waited to run for president until he sensed that a critical mass of Americans had decided politics were *all* a show and a sham. If the whole thing is rigged, Trump's brilliance was calling that out in the most impolitic

ways possible, deriding his straight-arrow competitors as fakers and losers and liars—because *that* bullshit-calling was uniquely candid and authentic in the age of fake.

Trump took a key piece of cynical wisdom about show business—*the most important thing is sincerity, and once you can fake that, you've got it made*—to a new level: His actual thuggish sincerity is the opposite of the old-fashioned, goody-goody sanctimony that people hate in politicians.

If he were just a truth-telling wise guy, however, he wouldn't have won. Trump's genius was to exploit the skeptical disillusion with politics—there's too much equivocating; democracy's a charade—but *also* to pander to Americans' magical thinking about national greatness. Extreme credulity is a fraternal twin of extreme skepticism.

“I will give you *everything*,” Trump actually promised during the campaign. Yes: “Every dream you've ever dreamed for your country” will come true.

Just as the internet enabled full Fantasyland, it made possible Trump as candidate and president, feeding him pseudo-news on his phone and letting him feed those untruths directly to his Twitter followers. He is the poster boy for the downside of digital life. “Forget the press,” he advised supporters—just “read the internet.” After he wrongly declared on Twitter that one anti-Trump protester “has ties to isis,” he was asked whether he regretted tweeting that falsehood. “What do I know about it?” he replied. “All I know is what's on the internet.”

Trump launched his political career by embracing a brand-new conspiracy theory twisted around two American taproots—fear and loathing of foreigners and of nonwhites. In 2011, he became the chief promoter of the fantasy that Barack Obama was born in Kenya, a fringe idea that he brought into the mainstream. Only in the fall of 2016 did he grudgingly admit that the president

was indeed a native-born American—at the same moment a YouGov/*Huffington Post* survey found that a majority of Republicans still believed Obama probably or definitely had been born in Kenya. Conspiracies, conspiracies, still more conspiracies. On *Fox & Friends* Trump discussed, as if it were fact, the *National Enquirer's* suggestion that Ted Cruz's father was connected to JFK's assassination: "What was he doing with Lee Harvey Oswald shortly before the death, before the shooting? It's horrible." The Fox News anchors interviewing him didn't challenge him or follow up. He revived the 1993 fantasy about the Clintons' friend Vince Foster—his death, Trump said, was "very fishy," because Foster "had intimate knowledge of what was going on. He knew everything that was going on, and then all of a sudden he committed suicide ... I will say there are people who continue to bring it up because they think it was absolutely a murder." He has also promised to make sure that "you will find out who really knocked down the World Trade Center." And it has all worked for him, because so many Americans are eager to believe almost any conspiracy theory, no matter how implausible, as long as it jibes with their opinions and feelings.

Not all lies are fantasies and not all fantasies are lies; people who *believe* untrue things can pass lie-detector tests. For instance, Trump probably really believed that "the murder rate in our country is the highest it's been in 47 years," the total falsehood he told leaders of the National Sheriffs' Association at the White House in early February. The fact-checking website PolitiFact looked at more than 400 of his statements as a candidate and as president and found that almost 50 percent were false and another 20 percent were mostly false.

He gets away with this as he wouldn't have in the 1980s or '90s, when he first talked about running for president, because now factual truth really is just one option. After Trump won the election, he began referring to all unflattering or inconvenient journalism as "fake news." When his approval rating began

declining, Trump simply refused to believe it: “Any negative polls” that may appear, the president tweeted at dawn one morning from Mar-a-Lago, “are fake news.”

The people who speak on Trump’s behalf to journalists and the rest of the reality-based world struggle to defend or explain his assertions. Asked about “the president’s statements that are ... demonstrably not true,” the White House counselor Kellyanne Conway asked CNN’s Jake Tapper to please remember “the many things that he says that *are* true.” According to *The New York Times*, the people around Trump say his baseless certainty “that he was bugged in some way” by Obama in Trump Tower is driven by “a sense of persecution bordering on faith.” And indeed, their most honest defense of his false statements has been to cast them practically as matters of religious conviction—he deeply *believes* them, so ... there. When White House Press Secretary Sean Spicer was asked at a press conference about the millions of people who the president insists voted illegally, he earnestly reminded reporters that Trump “has believed that for a while” and “does believe that” and it’s “been a long-standing belief that he’s maintained” and “it’s a belief that he has maintained for a while.”

Which is why nearly half of Americans subscribe to that preposterous belief themselves. And in Trump’s view, *that* overrides any requirement for facts.

“Do you think that talking about millions of illegal votes is dangerous to this country without presenting the evidence?,” David Muir, the anchor of ABC’s *World News Tonight*, asked Trump in January.

“No,” he replied. “Not at all! Not at all—because many people feel the same way that I do.”

The idea that progress has some kind of unstoppable momentum, as if powered by a Newtonian law, was always a very American belief. However, it's really an article of faith, the Christian fantasy about history's happy ending reconfigured during and after the Enlightenment as a set of modern secular fantasies. It reflects our blithe conviction that America's visions of freedom and democracy and justice and prosperity must prevail in the end. I really can imagine, for the first time in my life, that America has permanently tipped into irreversible decline, heading deeper into Fantasyland. I wonder whether it's only America's destiny, exceptional as ever, to unravel in this way. Or maybe we're just early adopters, the canaries in the global mine, and Canada and Denmark and Japan and China and all the rest will eventually follow us down our tunnel. Why should modern civilization's great principles—democracy, freedom, tolerance—guarantee great outcomes?

Yet because I'm an American, a fortunate American who has lived in a fortunate American century, I remain (barely) more of an optimist than a pessimist. Even as we've entered this long winter of foolishness and darkness, when too many Americans are losing their grip on reason and reality, it has been an epoch of astonishing hope and light as well. During these same past few decades, Americans reduced the rates of murder and violent crime by more than half. We decoded the human genome, elected an African American president, recorded the sound of two black holes colliding 1 billion years ago, and created *Beloved*, *The Simpsons*, *Goodfellas*, *Angels in America*, *The Wire*, *The Colbert Report*, *Transparent*, *Hamilton*. Since 1981, the percentage of people living in extreme poverty around the globe has plummeted from 44 percent to 10 percent. I do despair of our devolution into unreason and magical thinking, but not everything has gone wrong.

What is to be done? I don't have an actionable agenda, *Seven Ways Sensible People Can Save America From the Craziest*. But I think we can slow the flood, repair the levees, and maybe stop things from getting any worse. If we're splitting into two different cultures, we in reality-based America—

whether the blue part or the smaller red part—must try to keep our zone as large and robust and attractive as possible for ourselves and for future generations. We need to firmly commit to Moynihan’s aphorism about opinions versus facts. We must call out the dangerously untrue and unreal. A grassroots movement against one kind of cultural squishiness has taken off and lately reshaped our national politics—the opposition to political correctness. I envision a comparable struggle that insists on distinguishing between the factually true and the blatantly false.

It will require a struggle to make America reality-based again. Fight the good fight in your private life. You needn’t get into an argument with the stranger at Chipotle who claims that George Soros and Uber are plotting to make his muscle car illegal—but do not give acquaintances and friends and family members free passes. If you have children or grandchildren, teach them to distinguish between true and untrue as fiercely as you do between right and wrong and between wise and foolish.

We need to adopt new protocols for information-media hygiene. Would you feed your kids a half-eaten casserole a stranger handed you on the bus, or give them medicine you got from some lady at the gym?

And fight the good fight in the public sphere. One main task, of course, is to contain the worst tendencies of Trumpism, and cut off its political-economic fuel supply, so that fantasy and lies don’t turn it into something much worse than just nasty, oafish, reality-show pseudo-conservatism. Progress is not inevitable, but it’s not impossible, either.