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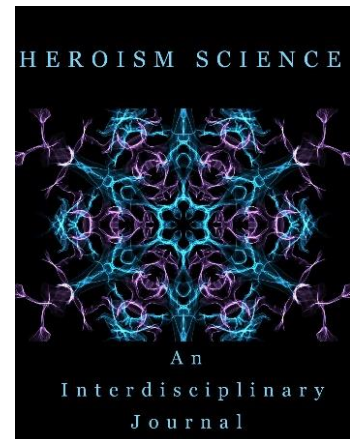
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The Conspiracy Theory Defense in Response to Whistleblower Accusations: Turning a Hero into a Villain



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ABSTRACT: Whistleblowers can be viewed as heroic actors who reveal institutional misdeeds. In contrast, conspiracy theorists are seen as members of a marginalized element perpetuating misinformation. Despite this apparent difference, the present analysis focuses on how similarities between the two constructs can allow a target to discredit a whistleblower accusation by countering that the whistleblower is operating as part of a conspiracy. More generally, this paper considers how the difficulty inherent in disproving conspiracy theory claims facilitates their utility as a defense. The case study of President Donald Trump's responses to whistleblower accusations are considered to illustrate the arguments.

KEYWORDS: *conspiracy theory, Donald Trump, heroism, paranoia, whistleblowers*

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1 THE CONSPIRACY THEORY DEFENSE IN RESPONSE TO WHISTLEBLOWER ACCUSATIONS: TURNING A HERO INTO A VILLAIN

On September 8, 2020, Brian Murphey, the former principal deputy undersecretary in the Department of Homeland Security's Office of Intelligence and Analysis, filed a whistleblower complaint against a group of President Donald Trump's political appointees including Acting Secretary Chad Wolf, former Secretary Kirstjen Nielsen, and senior DHS official Ken Cuccinelli (Kroll, 2020). The complaint alleged that these appointees exerted pressure to modify reports in order to downplay the threat played by White Supremacy, incorrectly emphasize the potential threat of left-wing groups, and withhold information about threats from Russian election interference. The report also advanced the allegation that Department of Homeland Security officials fabricated the threat that terrorists were entering the USA through the southern border to provide support for building Trump's border wall.

In a different incident one year earlier, Lt. Col. Alexander Vindman filed a whistleblower report about a phone call President Donald Trump had with Volodymyr Zelensky, the President of Ukraine (Cole, 2020). The whistleblower complaint alleged that Trump attempted to compel the Ukraine president to investigate political rival Joe Biden, saying that in exchange for much-needed aid "I would like you to do us a favor though" (Waldman, 2020). This *quid pro quo* threat was the basis for Trump's impeachment (Prokop, 2019).

Well before Election Day, Donald Trump championed the idea that widespread voter fraud would be the only possible explanation for why he could lose in 2020 (Blake, 2021). When it became clear that Joe Biden had won, Trump and his allies began the "Stop the Steal" movement (Bouie, 2021)—despite losing over 40 court-based election challenges (Shamsian & Sheth, 2021)—which culminated in the January 6th, 2021 insurrection at the Capitol (Murdock, 2021).

A consistent response that Donald Trump makes in his own defense is to respond to whistleblower accusations—and allegations in general—by referencing nefarious actions of career bureaucrats working to sabotage his presidency and operating in what he and his conservative

defenders call the *deep state* (Levitz, 2019). Trump has been termed “the Conspiracy-Theorist-in-Chief” because of his endorsements of conspiracy theories as a way to gain publicity, discredit opponents, and defend his own actions (Reston, 2020). As noted by Stone (2020, no page number), “The specter of deep state conspiracies against President Trump has long been a key rhetorical and political weapon in the arsenal of the Trump White House....The deep state offers a convenient cover and alibi for all manner of executive branch power grabs and abuses founded on alternative facts and paranoid pretexts.”

According to Wolf (2019, no page number), Stephen Miller, a top White House aide, viewed Lt. Col. Vindman as a “deep state operative” and asserted that it was in fact Trump who was a whistleblower against “a government run amok” and damaged by “three years of deep state sabotage.” Brian Murphey’s complaint stated that Ken Cuccinelli “expressed frustration with the intelligence reports, and he accused unknown ‘deep state intelligence analysts’ of compiling the intelligence information to undermine President Donald J. Trump’s ... policy objectives with respect to asylum” (Ward, 2020).

This paper examines how a target can discredit a whistleblower accusation by countering that the whistleblower is operating as part of a conspiracy intended to discredit the target. It is important to note that sometimes whistleblowers may be in error or committing outright fraud for their own interests (Cavalola, 2016). It can also be that what appear to be conspiracy theories are actually true (Sterbenz, 2013). In the instances examined in this paper, a significant body of evidence would discredit the conspiracy accusation Donald Trump and his associates directed at whistleblowers.

2 COMPARING WHISTLEBLOWERS AND CONSPIRACY THEORISTS

A whistleblower is as an underdog who reveals instances of workplace misconduct (Johnson, 2017). As noted by Jubb (1999, p. 78), “Whistleblowing is a deliberate non-obligatory act of disclosure, which gets onto public record and is made by a person who has or had privileged access to data or information of an organisation (sic), about non-trivial illegality or other wrongdoing whether actual, suspected or anticipated which implicates and is under the control of that organisation (sic), to an external entity having potential to rectify the wrongdoing.” Whistleblowers have the important

functions of detecting and preventing wrongdoing and promoting and upholding a moral standard (Anvari, Wenzel, Woodyatt, & Haslam, 2019).

In contrast, a conspiracy theory is as a “belief that some covert but influential organization is responsible for a circumstance or event” (Johnson, 2017, p. 758). Conspiracy theories refer to “explanations for important events that involve secret plots by powerful and malevolent groups” (Douglas, Sutton, & Cichocka, 2017, p. 538). Swami (2012, p. 1) echoed that conspiracy theories identify the root cause of an event as a “malevolent plot by multiple actors working together.”

Bale (2007, p. 55) distinguished between conspiracy theories and conspiratorial politics and noted “fundamental differences between ‘conspiracy theories’ and actual covert and clandestine politics...must be taken into account if one wishes to avoid serious errors of historical interpretation. The problem is that most people, amateurs and professionals alike, consistently fail to distinguish between them.” One way to discredit a whistleblower is to convince an audience the accusation represents an instance of conspiracy rather than the revelation of conspiratorial politics.

It is possible to differentiate belief in a conspiracy theory from paranoia (Imhoff & Lamberty, 2018, p. 911), specifically as “...beliefs in conspiracy theories are intrinsically tied to the sociopolitical realm and need not have very strong connections to people’s interpersonal and private life. The opposite...is true for paranoia. Paranoia is first and foremost a phenomenon of perceiving the immediate environment and can but need not be spelled out in relation to the larger social arena.” In other words, paranoia refers to a belief that a variety of sources threatens the self, whereas the hallmark of a conspiracy theory is that a small group of individuals threatens everyone.

There are two reasons why this distinction between paranoia and belief in conspiracy may be problematic when the person in question is the President of the United States. The first is that a threat to the self can be viewed as a threat to all the citizens of the United States (except those presumably who are part of the deep state). As such, the difference between the personal and sociopolitical realms may become blurred. The second reason the distinction is problematic is the matter of his or her personal endorsement. Given the power of the Presidency, a large number of people may act on his or her beliefs regardless of the truth-value of those beliefs. These actors are not limited to people who

strictly work for the President and the President's administration. They can also include citizens who accept the arguments made by the President.

One distinction in the connotation of meaning—though not necessarily fully justified—is that the whistleblower reveals a real conspiracy whereas a conspiracy theorist describes a false narrative or operates from a faulty set of assumptions. In other words, conspiracy theorist is a pejorative term; whistleblower denotes a complimentary and heroic role. The distinction between the two can become blurry because "...conspiracy explanations may, at times, have more than a kernel of truth to them and, as pertinent, rational analysts may be wrong..." (Wexler & Havers, 2002, p. 257). Hagen (2020) suggested replacing the orientation that views endorsing conspiracy theories as unhealthy with a motive to be fair and objective in evaluating—rather than automatically debunking—them.

Although superficially it would seem that a whistleblower revealing institutional mismanagement or misbehavior differs from a conspiracy theorist describing a secretive cooperative relationship among a group of powerful individuals, the two concepts possess a parallel structure. Jubb (1999) recognized six elements of the definition of whistleblowing: Actor, action, subject, recipient, outcome, and target. An *actor*—a person with special access—*discloses sensitive* information to an *external entity* in a *public manner*, which then *implicates* some organization. These same six elements apply to the description of how a conspiracy theory operates. As noted by Wexler and Havers (2002, p. 258), it is possible to view conspiracy discourse as a "...democratizing impulse by citizens seeking to hold the powerful—large business, government, and labor—accountable..." Likewise, whistleblowing is a means by which less powerful individuals can hold more powerful others accountable for misdeeds.

A conspiracy can become publicized because of an intentional leak by a participant (the classic definition of whistleblowing) or accidentally because a participant fails to adequately cover up some aspect of the conspiracy (Grimes, 2016). A whistleblower can also be a concerned third party, such as a government official, who becomes aware of some discrepancy or anomalous behavior (Dentith, 2019). Regardless of the origin of a whistleblower complaint, there is usually an accusation that some set of important people intentionally misled their constituents in an organized fashion, i.e., engaged in a conspiracy. For whistleblowing to occur there has to be a reasonably strong attempt to

suppress information, and, most likely, the suppression of this information takes a coordinated effort among a group of people. As noted by Mudrack and Mason (2013, p. 642), “A conspiracy is an agreement between at least two persons to break the law or otherwise commit and ethical violation at some point in the future.” Consequently, whistleblowing is unlikely to occur in the absence of a conspiracy.

Once a whistleblower complaint becomes public, the target of the complaint will most likely harmonize a response with his or her co-workers, subordinates, and even superiors. To the extent that there is any truth to the whistleblower allegation, this new response could also be termed a conspiracy to create and coordinate dissemination of a non-veridical counter-narrative. Thus, whistleblowing can be viewed as a response to a conspiracy as well as the catalyst for a new, embedded conspiracy perpetrated by the target. As an element of this embedded conspiracy, a target of a whistleblower complaint can frame his or her response as an accusation of a counter-conspiracy. That is, the target can argue that the whistleblower’s accusation is the product of a conspiracy against the target by the whistleblower and his or her associates.

Anvari et al. (2019, p. 49) defined *vicarious intergroup power* as “the perceived ability to prevent or change the ingroup’s wrongdoing through the influence of a person or group external to the offending ingroup, enlisted via whistleblowing.” From this perspective, vicarious intergroup power is a positive characteristic that can help the individual who possesses it to reduce organizational wrongdoing. However, it is also possible to view vicarious intergroup power as operating in a nefarious way, if an individual uses his or her influence outside of the ingroup to undermine the credibility of the whistleblower accusation. This is one way to frame Donald Trump’s strategy. He used the bully pulpit to attract media attention—especially from conservative outlets like Fox News—to his alternative framing of a whistleblower accusation as a conspiracy by an antagonistic outgroup composed of Democrats and RINOs (i.e., Republicans in Name Only, a term used by social conservatives trying to drive moderates from the Republican party, Miller & Schofield (2008)).

One way to think of the conspiracy theory accusation that Donald Trump uses is by asserting that the whistleblower has vicarious intergroup power of his or her own. For example, Lt. Col. Vindman he could have been viewed as a moderately important member of the National Security

Council. Alternatively—as argued by Donald Trump—he was a very important member of a deep state attempting to undermine Trump and his administration.

In summary, the whistleblower, by publicizing a conspiracy, inadvertently creates two new conspiratorial threads. The first is the conspiracy the target creates in order to coordinate a response to the whistleblower's accusation. The second is that the whistleblower accusation encourages the target to assign a malevolent and conspiratorial intent to the motivations behind the whistleblower accusation. Both conspiracy theories and whistleblower complaints possess a recursive element that involves successively implicating more people.

By publicizing a conspiracy, a conspiracy theorist acts as a whistleblower to those who are in on the conspiracy. As noted by Wexler and Havers (2002, p. 249), “Since the conspiracy theorist or advocate tends to lack the power or status to enact change or seek more information regarding the perceived wrong-doing, cover-up or secret collusion, the conspiracy theorist or advocate must, like the whistle-blower, publicly call attention to his or her interpretation of wrongdoing...” Because a whistleblower discloses information that others desire to keep hidden, whistleblowing is as an act of dissent (Jubb, 1999). Because the actions of conspiracy theorists to publicize their theory work against the desires of some authority, they too can be viewed as dissenters. Although conspiracy theorists and whistleblowers may be conceived of as low-power agents (Thomas, 2020), it is possible that a conspiracy accusation against a whistleblower will be more effective as a countermeasure if it comes from someone high in power (such as the President of the United States).

Wexler and Havers (2002, p. 258-260) noted, “Conspiracy narratives emerge to provide a means for everyday men and women to make sense of uncertainty and contain anxiety but since conspiracy discourse comes to no conclusion other than distrust the official version, it fails as a concerted plan of action to right political and cultural wrongs”. Especially because laws have been put into place for their protection (Mechtenberg, Muehlheusser, & Roider, 2020), whistleblowers, in contrast to conspiracy theorists, possess a means of acting on any wrongdoing they discover.

3 THE HEROIC EVALUATION OF WHISTLEBLOWERS

Society often conceptualizes whistleblowers along two related but distinct dimensions of loyalty. With organizational loyalty, the whistleblower is viewed potentially as a tattletale, traitor, or troublemaker (Grant, 2002). As noted by Jubb (1999, p. 77), "...whistleblowing, even when acknowledged to be meritorious, typically results in victimisation (sic) of whistleblowers who are popularly associated with sneaks, spies, squealers and other despised forms of informer" who are traitors because they reveal confidential information or practices (Latimer & Brown, 2008). By extension, individuals who choose to become whistleblowers may be characterized as amoral opportunists trying to profit off their revelations.

Alternatively, observers may view whistleblowers as having loyalty to a higher principle such as moral correctness. In this instance, whistleblowers are heroes or saints (Black, 2016; Grant, 2002; Hersh, 2002). Although Brown (2017, p. 356) suggested, "Whistleblowing, or the act of speaking up with concerns or information about wrongdoing inside organizations and institutions, can be one of the most important and difficult forms of heroism in modern society," he also noted that the tendency to label whistleblowing as exceptional heroic behavior may be moderated by a number of contextual factors such as the degree of risk associated with speaking out. Olesen (2020) cautioned that an individual whistleblower might have to cross a number of thresholds to earn hero status.

In their analysis of whistleblowing in terms of hierarchically structured group memberships, Anvari et al. (2019) argued that a whistleblower will report wrongdoing to an outgroup which operates as psychologically external but also at a higher level of inclusiveness than the whistleblower's ingroup. In the case of using conspiracy theory narratives as a means of undermining the credibility of whistleblower accusations, the outgroup is better considered a rival rather than as a superordinate, more inclusive ingroup. For Trump, the outgroup represents both Democrats and RINOs, i.e., self-defined Republicans who expressed disagreement with Trump's agenda (Peters, 2021).

Scholarship on whistleblowing often implicitly or explicitly adopts the side of the whistleblower by advocating for policies that encourage whistleblowing and the protection of

whistleblowers (Paul & Townsend, 1996). Brown (2017, p. 360) viewed the oppositional stereotyping of the whistleblower as hero or villain as a “dichotomy which has confounded if not defeated much scholarship and commentary on whistleblowing over a long period.”

4 MANIPULATING THE EVALUATION OF A WHISTLEBLOWER

It is possible to conceptualize the response to a whistleblower in terms of outrage management (McDonald, Graham, & Martin, 2010) which focuses on ways to discredit an accuser using strategies that range from rejection to retaliation (Kenny, Fotaki, & Vandekerckhove, 2020). One model of perpetrator response to their victims, known as the DARVO model, identifies strategies of denial, attack, and reversing the roles of victim and offender (Harsey & Freyd, 2020).

As noted by Brown (2017, p. 360), “As soon as attempts are made to portray the average whistleblower as a hero, it becomes easier for those negatively affected by wrongdoing disclosures to discredit him or her by drawing attention to possible evidence of the opposite.” In this paper, I suggest that one form of discrediting is for the target to reframe the whistleblower as promoting or being part of a conspiracy rather than as bringing to light a legitimate scandal. By reversing the roles of victim and offender (Harsey & Freyd, 2020), the target then becomes a whistleblower to the whistleblower. Paradoxically, the reality was that Donald Trump was arguably the most powerful person on earth by virtue of his role as President of the United States of America, given that he had influence power derived from being a representative of Republican goals and values (Platow, Haslam, Reicher, & Steffens, 2015) as well as formal power as the President (Turner, 2005). However, as observed by Parker, Rucker, and Dawsey (2020, no page number, emphasis in original), “Trump often launches into a monologue placing himself at the center of the nation’s turmoil. The president has cast himself in the starring role of the blameless victim—of a deadly pandemic, of a stalled economy, of deep-seated racial unrest, all of which happened *to him* rather than the country.” In other words, Trump frames himself as the target of conspiracies.

Although it is possible to identify exceptions, society conceptualizes whistleblowers as heroes who risk their well-being in order to bring some institutional wrong to light. In contrast, society conceptualizes conspiracy theorists as fringe individuals who may be suffering from a psychological

disorder. As such, one way to discredit a whistleblower is to create the perception that he or she should be more accurately classified as a conspiracy theorist. From this perspective, then, the target of the whistleblower must reframe what might appear to be a credible accusation from a whistleblower as a non-credible allegation from a conspiracy theorist.

As part of this strategy, the target reveals (or appears to reveal) a secret about the whistleblower, a fact that has heretofore been unknown but undermines the credibility of the accusation. The underlying logic of this strategy rests upon what Goffman (1963) distinguished between a discrediting and discreditable stigma. A *discrediting* stigma was known, either because it was readily observable, such as race or a physical disability, or had been learned about by others, such as possessing a criminal record or having been institutionalized. A *discreditable* stigma was concealed but might become known in the future. A *dynamic* stigma, which begins as discreditable but concealed, is one that people eventually discover. As a result, it becomes discrediting (Berkley, Beard, & Daus, 2019). Conditions such as pregnancy (Jones, King, Gilrane, McCausland, Cortina, & Grimm, 2016) and certain health problems such as cancer (Yoo, Aviv, Levine, Ewing, & Au, 2010) fall into this category.

To develop an effective counter-strategy, the target of the whistleblower's accusation must create the belief that he or she possesses discreditable information about the whistleblower, i.e., that the whistleblower is actually a conspiracy theorist. As noted by Weiner (2020), Machiavelli described an *effective truth* as one that is politically useful rather than because it corresponds to objective reality. If the target advances information that is accepted by the audience, this discreditable information actually becomes discrediting regardless of its actual truth-value. Reframing a whistleblower accusation as stemming from a conspiracy against him or her promotes a counter-narrative that operates as a dynamic stigma. The target can actually frame himself or herself as a hero for revealing this discrediting stigma.

5 THE IMPACT OF THE CONSPIRACY THEORY ACCUSATION

The main power of the conspiracy theory accusation as a rebuttal to a whistleblower accusation is the difficulty inherent in rebutting the rebuttal. Just as it is impossible to perfectly defend

the assertion that all ravens are black (Hempel, 1945), it is impossible to refute the possibility that a whistleblower accusation arises out a conspiracy to undermine the authority of the target. This impossibility rests on the target's assertion that the conspiracy is either so vast or so well hidden that it is difficult to expose fully. In the first two years of Trump's presidency, Republicans were in control of the Executive branch as well as the House and Senate; yet, they tried to portray themselves as victims of a deep state.

Another reason why refutation is difficult is a lack of relevant expertise works in favor of those who propagate a conspiracy. One problem involved in assessing the validity of a conspiracy theory is finding and vetting experts who are qualified to give an informed opinion about the details of the conspiracy (Dentith, 2018). Conspiratorial expertise may be difficult to put into play because some conspiracy theories are quite complex and would require cross-disciplinary knowledge to fully understand or refute. It is overwhelming to imagine how many types of expertise would be required to contradict the argument that a deep state was interfering covertly with Donald Trump and his administration. Furthermore, even if we could find these experts, how much time would they be willing to spend to dispute all the claims?

In some instances, refuting a conspiracy like a deep state would require access to privileged information, such as material classified as top secret by the government, which debunkers could not use in debates. Those with access to the knowledge are assumed acting in concert with individuals covering up the facts.

Donald Trump took and continues to take advantage of the ease of asserting but problems inherent in definitively disproving a conspiracy allegation. According to (Cohen, 2020, no page number), the phrase "they spied on my campaign" is "...a shorthand used to encapsulate Trump's grandiose conspiracy theory about the 2016 election....In his view, Obama and former Vice President Joe Biden abused their powers by ordering US intelligence agencies to spy on Trump's campaign, to prevent him from winning....By coining a simple slogan to capture his grievances against Obama and federal law enforcement, Trump gave his supporters something to latch onto."

One dimension to consider with regard to experts is their level of sincerity, which refers to the degree to which an expert's stated opinions would mesh with what he or she really believed to be true.

Although people assume scientists' goal is the pursuit of truth, there are many instances when what appeared to be a reputable scientist was outed for intentional deception (e.g., Kupferschmidt, 2018). With political authority or politically based expertise, titular experts may express beliefs at odds with their own views because doing so gains them some strategic advantage.

An example of how expertise from one field can be misapplied concerns Dr. Scott Atlas, a legitimate medical professional and professor from Stanford, who asserted that, despite the Covid-19 pandemic, it was safe to open schools and return to normal regardless of countervailing recommendations from public health officials including Anthony Fauci (Cook, 2020). Atlas has expertise in radiology and neuroradiology, not infectious diseases. As noted by Cook (2020, no page number), "Critics, including other conservatives and health officials, say he is shading science and facts with a partisan lens to elevate himself and gain power in Republican circles." Dentith (2018) posited that in some cases experts might conspire against conspiracy theorists and their conspiracies for their own personal or collective reasons.

6 CONCLUSION

Partisan selective exposure refers to the tendency for individuals to seek out information that confirms their preexisting viewpoints (Metzger, Hartsell, & Flanagin, 2020) that can create a closed system of information processing and further entrench preexisting beliefs. As noted by Slater (2007, p. 299), "...mutually reinforcing processes of media use choices and their effects serve to maintain political, religious, and lifestyle subcultures," though some researchers have found that exposure to counter-attitudinal messages can lead to depolarization as well (Beam, Hutchens, & Hmielowski, 2018).

When the President of the United States advocates conspiracies, they receive close attention but also extensive reinforcement. In contrast to the established methods of science, according to Bump (2018, no page number), White House advisor Peter Navarro saw his role to the president as, "My function, really, as an economist is to try to provide the underlying analytics that confirm his intuition. And his intuition is always right in these matters." As observed by Collinson (202), no page number), "A defining trait of Donald Trump's presidency is his incessant destruction of reason,

evidence and science in the service of his personal whims, conspiratorial mindset and political requirements.”

The way that people can use the trappings of science to defend themselves actually leads to a surprising and counterintuitive nuanced assertion about Donald Trump. Rather than thinking of Trump as someone with no respect for science, it is possible that he does value data, empirical proof, and the credentials of scientists. According to Nakamura (2020, no page number), when touring the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), Trump said, “I like this stuff. I really get it.” He also said, “People are really surprised I understand this stuff,” and “Every one of these doctors said, ‘How do you know so much about this?’ Maybe I have a natural ability.” Further, Nakamura wrote, “Trump boasted to reporters during a tour of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta, where he met with actual doctors and scientists who are feverishly scrambling to contain and combat the deadly illness. Citing a ‘great, super-genius uncle’ who taught at MIT, Trump professed that it must run in the family genes.” The problem with Trump’s relationship with science and truth is that Trump feels his “gut” or natural instinct is as good as or better than the systematic training received by others.

As noted by Soares (1999, p. 225), “The rise of social science itself was based on the unveiling of the covert, the disclosure of deception, the revelation of what is hidden behind the masks of ideology...the specter of conspiracy haunts the halls of academia.” Wexler and Havers (2002, p. 248) described conspiracy theories as “viable sense-making heuristics emerging to help citizens adapt to the fragmented nature of social life in a time of unpredictable uncertainties.” Alternatively, they state that the explanation for a conspiracy can be as a “paranoid’s story fallen upon a fertile cultural context” (p. 248). What appears to be a modern and growing seduction by conspiracy theorists of the reasoning processes of the American people is occurring in a world where the architects of uncertainty include the growing threat of terrorism, destructive climate change, extreme wealth inequality, and the ravages of a pandemic.

A core desire in human beings, framed as a biological and psychological necessity, is the motivation for control (Leotti, Iyengar, & Ochsner, 2010). The endorsement of conspiracy theories or holding paranoid beliefs has a complex relationship with the need for control. On the one hand,

people who believe in a secret plot they are helpless to stop seem to be giving up their own control.

Evidence indicates that endorsing conspiracy theories makes people believe they lack control (Douglas & Leite, 2017). A loss of control may encourage people to see patterns in random or unrelated stimuli (Wexler & Havers, 2002). On the other hand, scholars have suggested that the desire for control motivates a belief in conspiracy theories or the endorsement of paranoid beliefs (Goertzel, 1994; Oliver & Wood, 2014).

One difficult to answer question is whether Donald Trump believed in the deep state or only advanced the idea as a means to achieve his political goals. Paradoxically, it is possible that using the currency of conspiracy as a means of defending himself against whistleblower attacks actually made him more likely to come to believe the conspiracies he was proselytizing for instrumental gain. Observers (e.g., Stone, 2020, no page number) have noted, “True-believing Trump administration loyalists have erected a deep state complex to shield and advance Trump’s agendas in the sanctums of Washington power and to boost his campaign prospects....”

Although the call to Volodymyr Zelensky, the President of Ukraine, was seen as a major transgression by many (Fandos, 2019), and led to Trump’s first impeachment (Fandos & Shear, 2019), it merely foreshadowed what could be viewed as an even bigger, more serious offense. The January 6th insurrection was viewed as both evidence of and a consequence of systematic efforts of Donald Trump to undermine democracy and democratic institutions (Baker, 2021). It was perhaps prophetic that Imhoff and Laberty (2018, p. 911) wrote, “...secret plots are dangerous not because they harm one individual person but because they undermine society as a whole and democratic principles in general.” Ultimately, Donald Trump’s conspicuous use of conspiracy theories and (what could be viewed as) paranoid thinking led to the insurrection and a true threat to democracy.

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8 CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.