



# Keeping Faith with Trump: The Dangerous Causes and the Consequences

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As multiple polls show, the vast majority of the seventy-million Americans who voted for Trump continue to put their faith in him as their president.<sup>1</sup> In the face of so little evidence of voter fraud, why do so many people still believe his outlandish claims about the stolen election? Why do they think he should continue to be the president, even after the storming of the Capitol by a violent mob? Setting aside the vested interests of such figures as Senator Ted Cruz, lawyer Rudy Giuliani, or Fox News commentator Sean Hannity, why are so many “ordinary” Americans still so invested in the myth of Trump, of his virtue and invincibility? Why did they think that Trump would never leave the Oval Office, that there would be a smooth transition, as Secretary of State Mike Pompeo strangely asserted after the election, into Trump’s second term?<sup>2</sup> The situation strikes many as bizarre, and there appears to be even be a blurring of the lines between fantasy and reality for some.

Social scientists have been studying situations where people continue to believe things that appear to have been resoundingly refuted for decades, but rarely on such a massive scale. To briefly gain some perspective, we can glean pertinent insights from research on four aspects of the study of extremism: how people respond to the failure of prophecies; why people adopt extreme beliefs; the role of social dynamics and networks in consolidating extremist movements; and the nature and operation of charismatic leadership and authority.

In each case, the relevant literature is vast, and the findings complex. Nevertheless, there are certain key takeaways, which can be summarised in fairly straightforward terms. These coalesce to provide a better sense of what has been happening during Trump’s provocative presidency, and why his popularity may make him a force to reckon with for some time to come.

So, what are some of the pertinent lessons learned from these four areas of research?

## How People Respond to the Failure of Prophecies

Counterintuitively, most groups or movements that experience a clear failure of prophecy of an important expectation, like the Second Coming of Christ or a landslide victory in a hotly contested election for

example, do not give up or turn their backs on those who made the prophecy. Rather research shows they often instead hunker down and consolidate their commitment to the cause, and some supporters may even increase their proselytising. They employ an array of identified rationalisations to dissipate their disappointment and engage in acts of reaffirmation – often ritualistic in nature – to sustain their movement.<sup>3</sup>

Analysis of numerous studies of groups coping with a failure of prophecy suggests there are four main types of rationalisation employed. In accounting for the disconfirmation, leaders may choose to characterise the failed prophecy as a “test of faith,” or say that the result stems from “human error.” They may “blame others” for the missed opportunity, or offer what Gordon Melton calls a “spiritualisation” of events.<sup>4</sup> These rationalisations tend to occur in various combinations. Blaming others, for instance, may involve claiming that the believers did not prepare properly, or that the news media misunderstood what was at stake; or it may entail new revelations that some hostile agency, often supernatural for religious groups, interfered with the prediction.

In the study of religious groups, historical and contemporary, much actually depends on the successful implementation of a spiritualisation of the prophecy and the reaffirmation of commitment to the group through the creation and staging of new rituals and events. When nature, God, or our fellow humans fail either to destroy the world as predicted, or when the start of the millennium is postponed once again, prophetic leaders commonly seek to confound their critics by claiming that the events expected in this world have actually come true on another plane of existence or in another way. Christ did not literally return, as anticipated, or the extra-terrestrials did not land as predicted. Jesus, however, has set in motion the final process for our redemption in heaven, or the mothership of the extra-terrestrials is now orbiting the globe, but it is not yet propitious to land. This spiritualisation of the prophecy succeeds best when it is accompanied by a new program of activities, designed to mark and memorialise the moment when the faith of the followers was tested and reaffirm everyone’s commitment to the mission. Success also is contingent on how well the group has been prepared for hearing and accepting such an alternative account, how gifted the leader is in managing the crisis and exploiting the ideological resources at hand, and the amount of social support available in the group.<sup>5</sup>

The situation is complex, and there are idiosyncratic

1 “What’s next for trump voters who believe the election was stolen?” The Economic Times (20 January, 2021), <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/international/world-news/whats-next-for-trump-voters-who-believe-the-election-was-stolen/printarticle/79744997.cms>; Tucker Higgins,

“Trump retains overwhelming support from Republicans after deadly U.S. Capitol attack: NBC poll,” CNBC (17 January, 2021), <https://www.cnbc.com/2021/01/17/trump-retains-support-from-republicans-after-capitol-attack-nbc-poll.html>; Christopher Keating, “Quinnipiac Poll: 77% of Republicans believe there was widespread fraud in the presidential election; 60% overall consider Joe Biden’s victory legitimate,” Hartford Courant (10 December 2020), <https://www.courant.com/politics/hc-pol-q-poll-republicans-believe-fraud-20201210-pcie3uqqvrhylvnt7geohhsyep-story.html>.

2 Justin Vallejo, “Mike Pompeo says there will be a ‘smooth transition to second Trump administration,” The Independent (10 November, 2020), <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/us-election-2020/pompeo-trump-run-2024-election-inauguration-b1720645.html>

3 Lorne L. Dawson, “When Prophecy Fails and Faith Persists: A Theoretical Overview,” *Nova Religio* 3, No. 1 (1999): 60-82; Jon R. Stone, *Expecting Armageddon: Essential Readings in Failed Prophecy* (New York: Routledge, 2000); Lorne L. Dawson, “Prophetic Failure and Millennial Movements,” in Catherine Wessinger, ed., *Oxford Handbook of Millennialism*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011:150-170.

4 J. Gordon Melton, “Spiritualization and reaffirmation: what really happens when prophecy fails,” *American Studies* 26, No. 2 (1985): 17-29.

5 Simon Dein and Lorne Dawson, “The Scandal of the Lubavitch Rebbe: Messianism as a Response to Failed Prophecy,” *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 23, No. 2 (2008): 163-180.

aspects to each case, but the pattern is quite consistent across situations, and it does not take much imagination to see the strong parallels with the remarkable support given to Trump during his beleaguered presidency and after his electoral defeat. For years, Trump and his enablers have been preparing his followers, using social media and rallies to drive home the mission to “Make America Great Again” and celebrate the “greatest Presidency in history,” while discounting the views of opponents as “fake news” and branding them traitors engaged in “the greatest witch-hunt in American history.” The rhetoric of the Trump presidency is redolent with rationalisations of the kind used by other groups faced with a prophetic failure, culminating in the campaign begun before the election to justify a loss by claiming the election was “stolen.” As proof for this supplemental prophecy failed as well (i.e., when votes were recounted and court cases dismissed), Trump and some of his supporters clung ever more tenaciously, as the research predicts, to the original prophecy of political salvation.

The emergence of the QAnon conspiracy in 2017 ratcheted up the stakes, and things took on a quasi-religious cast, as Trump became a spiritual crusader working tirelessly behind the scenes to defeat the dark and satanic forces of the “deep state” and the liberals. New more explicit, yet characteristically cryptic, prophecies came into play, whereby followers were encouraged to “trust in the plan” and await the day of reckoning for those opposing their nativist vision of America.<sup>6</sup> All of these mythical forces were at work in the psyche of the mob that stormed the Capitol after hearing Trump’s “fighting” words. In the manner typical of millennial movements from time immemorial, the activists could not resist the urge to help the hand of God in precipitating the end, and like such groups, they also felt little need for a clear plan, since destiny was on their side.

Further research indicates that two things in particular are required for a group to be resilient in the face of a seeming prophetic failure. First, the leader must react quickly and defiantly. He or she must provide a rationalisation in keeping with the group’s ideological worldview, and disseminate it widely to the followers. Trump has done so amply. Second, everything hinges on the amount of social support people find in the group. Faith is sustained because the devotees are

deeply socialised to the cause and they perceive their participation as providing social benefits (e.g., attention, camaraderie, status, excitement, and a greater sense of purpose), on a daily basis and level that cannot be obtained in their lives otherwise.<sup>7</sup>

## Why People Adopt Extreme Beliefs

Why, however, do people become involved with such groups and movements in the first place? The research literature on why people adopt extremist views and join extremist groups is far too large to summarise here. In many ways, however, the different theories that have gained currency in terrorism studies distil down to saying that people are drawn to extremism in compensation for experiences of profound uncertainty in their lives.<sup>8</sup> In some instances, this uncertainty is born of personal traumas, but more pervasively and subtly, it is the impact of perceived affronts to their sense of self-worth and status in society that matter. It is the sense of relative deprivation, especially of a “fraternal” type, involving the suffering of the group(s) to which one belongs, that fire the desire to secure a greater measure of identity certainty in seemingly troubled times.

Outwardly, this may not always be abundantly clear, as with many of Trump’s die-hard supporters from the middle and even upper classes. Overall, though, downward mobility and displacement, real or imagined, appear to be the primary engines of discontent.<sup>9</sup> Over time this perception has created what theorists of late modern society have aptly called a sense of “ontological insecurity.”<sup>10</sup> The sources of this fundamental insecurity are largely social structural and global, and hence hard to grasp and seemingly beyond the control of each person.

Yet, extremist movements and their leaders hold out a fantastical promise of redress, one whereby individuals can reverse this state of decline and achieve a new dignity by simply engaging in certain idealistic actions. In the American case, the narrative entails re-invigorating their sense of the special nature and destiny of America (a white, nominally Christian, and abstractly “free”

6 Adrienne LaFrance, “The Prophecies of Q,” *The Atlantic* (June 2020), <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/toc/2020/06/>; Blyth Crawford, “QAnon and the 2020 US Election: What Trump’s Loss Means for the pro-Trump Conspiracy,” International Centre for Studies in Radicalisation, Insight (November 2020), <https://icsr.info/2020/11/13/qanon-and-the-2020-us-election-what-trumps-loss-means-for-the-pro-trump-conspiracy/>; Amarnath Amarasingam and Marc-André Argentino, “The QAnon Conspiracy Theory: A Security Threat in the Making?” *CTC Sentinel* (July 2020), <https://ctc.usma.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/CTC-SENTINEL-072020.pdf>.

7 Lorne L. Dawson and Bradley C. Whitsel, “Leadership and the Impact of Failed Prophecy on New Religious Movements: The Case of the Church Universal and Triumphant,” in Dianna G. Tumminia and William H. Swatos, Jr., eds., *How Prophecy Lives* (Leiden, Brill, 2011), 115-151.

8 For example, Mark Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000); Quintan Wiktorowicz, *Radical Islam Rising* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2005); Michael A. Hogg, “From Uncertainty to Extremism: Social Categorization and Identity Processes,” *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 23, No. 5 (2014): 338-342; Arie Kruglanski, David Webber, Katarzyna Jasko, Marina Chernikova, and Erica Molinaro, “The Making of Violent Extremists,” *Review of General Psychology* 22, No. 1 (2018): 107-120; Stijn Sieckelink, Elga Sikkens, Marion van San, Sita Kotnis, and Micha De Winter, “Transitional Journeys Into and Out of Extremism: A Biographical Approach,” *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 42, No. 7 (2019): 662-682.

9 For example, Ted Robert Gurr, *Why Men Rebel* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970); ; Arie Kruglanski, Xiaoyan Chen, Mark Dechesne, Shiren Fishman, and Edward Orehek, “Fully Committed: Suicide Bombers’ Motivation and Quest for Personal Significance,” *Political Psychology* 30, No. 3 (2009): 331-357; Harriet Allan, Andrew Glazzard, Sasha Jeperson, Sneha Reddy-Tumu, and Emily Winterbotham, “Drivers of Violent Extremism: Hypotheses and Literature Review,” Royal United Services Institute (16 October, 2015), [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/57a0899d40f0b64974000192/Drivers\\_of\\_Radicalisation\\_Literature\\_Review.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/57a0899d40f0b64974000192/Drivers_of_Radicalisation_Literature_Review.pdf);

10 Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991).

nation), and being a “patriot” in various clichéd ways. It is the myth of American exceptionalism, which involves a triumph of vision over reality, and symbolic gestures over social analysis and service. Of course, it also implicitly involves excluding “others” from sharing in the benefits of the new (and greater) America. For many of Trump’s supporters this is a secondary concern. Disconcertingly, however, a racist agenda is at the core of the support of some for his patriotic fantasy of “Making American Great Again,” and violence is increasingly seen as a legitimate means of turning the fantasy into reality.

## The Role of Social Dynamics and Networks in Consolidating Extremist Movements

If there is a consensus on anything from research into violent extremism, it is that small group dynamics and social networks drive such movements.<sup>11</sup> This holds true for the reactionary socio-political movements of revolution that have emerged in America. Family members, friends, neighbours, and work mates recruit each other. For many, in fact, it is the social dividends of belonging that at first matters more, with a conviction in the actual beliefs emerging later. Once participating, however, the well-documented social-psychological effects of group activity take over and there is a shift to greater conformity to the group’s expectations, personally, and to greater tolerance of risky behaviour, collectively.<sup>12</sup>

Today, the internet and social media extend and magnify these social-psychological effects, collapsing time, space, and resource barriers.<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, research shows that face-to-face contact remains essential to welding the kind of group activity that translates talk into political action, and especially violence (whether spontaneous or planned).<sup>14</sup> Yes there are dangerous lone-actor terrorists to deal with, who can wreak havoc and are so much harder to detect. In truth, though, most of these lone actors are not nearly as alone as once thought.<sup>15</sup> So-called lone actors think they are acting

on behalf of a group, and most interact with others, and share their frustrations and plans.

By de-platforming and suppressing the social media activity of these lone actors and extremist groups, we can deprive them of the social support they need to thrive. As research on the campaigns against the jihadists has shown,<sup>16</sup> we can cripple the growth capacity of extremist movements, and curtail their ability to influence the wider public. Once established, however, as study of jihadists also shows, there is a certain base resilience that can allow the larger networks, both real and virtual, to sustain themselves and harness the sense of alienation they foment to prompt actions, often violent ones, to renew attention for the cause. Many simply will not turn away until they can find a viable alternative for satisfying the social benefits they receive from this activity.

## The Nature and Operation of Charismatic Leadership and Authority

At the heart of things, of course, stands President Trump. He is the charismatic figurehead who has united a disparate array of conservative and far-right elements in American politics – providing a kind of symbolic unity unseen before. Much as those opposed to Trump may find his appeal mystifying, the extent and intensity of that appeal indicates that he is a charismatic leader in more than a colloquial sense. Much like Benito Mussolini, Adolf Hitler, Juan Peron, Fidel Castro, Hugo Chavez, Vladimir Putin, and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Trump’s followers have imbued him with a saviour-like status – a hallmark of the academic conception of “charismatic authority.”<sup>17</sup> As such, it is likely that these followers have projected their highest aspirations onto him and he has become the personification of their ideals. In fact, it is likely that many of his devotees have entered into a kind of identity fusion with him, whereby they react to all affronts to Trump as attacks on their own integrity and identity.<sup>18</sup>

11 Marc Sageman, *Understanding Terror Networks* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004); Clark R. McCauley and Sophia Moshalenko, *Friction: How Radicalization Happens to Them and Us* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); Joel Busher, “What part do social networks play in radicalisation?” *Radicalisation Research, Briefing* (6 July, 2015), <https://www.radicalisationresearch.org/debate/busher-social-networks/>.

12 Douglas McAdam, “Recruitment to High-Risk Activism: The Case of Freedom Summer,” *American Journal of Sociology* 92, No. 1 (1986): 64-90; Ziad Munson, *The Making of Pro-life Activists: How Social Movement Mobilization Works* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

13 J. M. Berger and Jonathon Morgan, “The ISIS Twitter Census Defining and Describing the Population of ISIS Supporters on Twitter,” *Analysis Paper The Brookings Project on U.S. Relations with the Islamic World*, (March 2015), [https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/isis\\_twitter\\_census\\_berger\\_morgan.pdf](https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/isis_twitter_census_berger_morgan.pdf); Alexander Meleagrou-Hitchens and Nick Kaderbhai, “Research Perspectives on Online Radicalisation: A Literature Review, 2006-2016,” *International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation*, (2017), [https://icsr.info/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/ICSR-Paper\\_Research-Perspectives-on-Online-Radicalisation-A-Literature-Review-2006-2016.pdf](https://icsr.info/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/ICSR-Paper_Research-Perspectives-on-Online-Radicalisation-A-Literature-Review-2006-2016.pdf).

14 Petter Nesser, *Islamist Terrorism in Europe: A History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

15 Bart Schuurman, Lasse Linkekilde, Stefan Mathaner, Francis O’Connor, Paul Gill, and Noémie Bouhana, “End of the Lone Wolf: The Typology that Should Not Have Been,” *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 42, No. 8, (2019): 771-778; David C. Hofmann, “How ‘Alone’ are Lone-Actors? Exploring the Ideological, Signaling, and Support Networks of Lone-Actor Terrorists,” *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 43, No. 7, (2020): 657-678.

16 J. M. Berger and Heather Perez, “The Islamic State’s Diminishing Returns on Twitter: How Suspensions Are Limiting the Social Networks of English-Speaking ISIS Supporters” (George Washington University: Program on Extremism, February 2016), [https://cchs.gwu.edu/sites/cchs.gwu.edu/files/downloads/Berger\\_Occasional%20Paper.pdf](https://cchs.gwu.edu/sites/cchs.gwu.edu/files/downloads/Berger_Occasional%20Paper.pdf); Amarnath Amarasingam, Shiraz Maher, and Charlie Winter, *How Telegram Disruption Impacts Jihadist Platform Migration*, CREST (8 Jan. 2021), <https://crestresearch.ac.uk/resources/how-telegram-disruption-impacts-jihadist-platform-migration/>

17 S.N. Eisenstadt, ed., *Max Weber on Charisma and Institution Building* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968); Ruth A. Wilner, *The Spellbinders: Charismatic Political Leadership* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984); Lorne L. Dawson, “Charismatic Leadership in Millennialist Movements,” in Catherine Wessinger, ed., *Oxford Handbook of Millennialism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 113-132.

18 Lorne L. Dawson, “Psychopathologies and the Attribution of Charisma: A Critical Introduction to the Psychology of Charisma and the Explanation

When Trump chose to validate the extremist conspiracy theories of QAnon and others, to serve his own egoistic needs, he set the conditions for the rampant spread of the anger felt by those threatened by the changes enveloping America. The importance, then, of his role, of his public persona, in perpetuating the conditions that could result in more violence should not be underestimated. Should his inflammatory rhetoric go unchecked in the years to come there will be little hope of reconciling a significant segment of the American public to the existing social and political order. This will set the conditions of pervasive social support for ongoing violent extremism.

The spell may be broken if Trump were to be convicted of crimes, but given his current cult status it seems likely he would emerge as a martyr for the movement. To avert potential violence, it would be best if he quietly retired from public office, and faded from the scene. However, since the conditions that have fuelled the process of charismatic projection are unlikely to change soon, this seems improbable. Regrettably, given the social psychological processes at work, the impact of Trumpism on American politics, and perhaps national security, is likely to persist, and perhaps even grow.<sup>19</sup>

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of Violence in New Religious Movements,” *Nova Religio* 10, No. 2 (2006): 3-28.

19 Adrian Morrow, “The movement Trump built isn’t going to vanish overnight,” *Globe and Mail* (19 January 2021), <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/world/us-politics/article-ive-covered-trump-nation-for-five-years-its-not-going-to-vanish/>

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