

# Conspiracy *in* America

Recognizing and Confronting  
Assaults on Our Democracy



SHAY HORSE / NURPHOTO VIA AP

By Russell Muirhead and Nancy L. Rosenblum

Watching the spread of fantastical narratives like Pizzagate, which charges Hillary Clinton with running a child sex trafficking ring out of a pizzeria in Washington, DC, we grew concerned. Although the story is outlandish, some believe it—such as Edgar Welch, who was sentenced to federal prison for firing his assault rifle in the pizzeria because he was sure children were being held captive in the basement.<sup>1</sup> Many others did not take the conspiracy charge literally, but still eagerly shared it on social media. Why? Pizzagate converted a legitimate partisan opponent, Hillary Clinton, into someone who represents pure evil, so that the only appropriate action is to “lock her up.” This is one example of how today’s conspiracies assault democracy. These conspiracies—“rigged elections,” “birtherism,” and “deep state,” for instance—come from the Right, but there is nothing about conservatism or the Republican Party that makes the Right the natural or only carriers of conspiracism.

Our 2019 book, *A Lot of People Are Saying: The New Conspiracism and the Assault on Democracy*, is our effort to make sense of the startling appearance of conspiracy charges enveloping American politics. Here, we expand on that discussion of the ways

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conspiracy allegations threaten our democracy, and we describe the essential role of educators in helping students learn to critically evaluate such claims.

The most important example of current conspiracies is the “rigged election.” The Select Committee to Investigate the January 6th Attack on the United States Capitol provided a comprehensive account of the connection between the stolen election conspiracy charge and attempts by the former president to prevent the certification of the Electoral College votes in the 2020 election. Conspiracy charges were the necessary element in this, the first and only attempt in American history to prevent the peaceful, democratic transfer of power. Congresswoman Liz Cheney put it best: “Washington set the indispensable example of the peaceful transfer of power. What President Reagan called nothing less than a miracle. The sacred obligation to defend this peaceful transfer of power has been honored by every American president except one.”<sup>2</sup>

The stolen election conspiracy charge of 2020 did not come out of the blue. Donald Trump invented “rigged” in 2016 to explain why he lost the popular vote and he resorted to it again in 2018 when his party lost control of the House. And it is alive today, stalking the upcoming elections of 2022 and 2024. It is motivating efforts in the states to rewrite—and corrupt—the administration of elections.<sup>3</sup>

Conspiracy charges have distorted our politics and degraded the institutions that make our democracy work. The damage goes further, for they have also opened a path to threats, intimidation, and violence. And they know no bounds. Conspiracy charges spill over from Washington, DC, to state and local politics, workplaces, neighborhoods, and families and friends.

Conspiracies have even come to the classroom. Like civil servants in federal agencies who are cast as members of a “deep state” scheming to undermine Trump and the country, teachers are cast as subverting American values. The attack does not spring simply

from disagreements about the educational merits of curricula or the medical effectiveness of masking. It springs from the assumption that teachers are a cabal aiming to weaken the nation. So masking in schools is represented as the work of despotic school boards or teachers' unions whose purported aim is nothing less than an assault on personal liberty and parental authority.<sup>4</sup> Assigned readings in K–12 are seen as the agenda of educators intent on poisoning the patriotism of children or more broadly dictating cultural attitudes that some parents disagree with.<sup>5</sup> Those who see teachers as agents in a conspiracy want to microregulate what teachers say and do;<sup>6</sup> for instance, in the 2022 session, the New Hampshire state legislature considered a bill that would enforce teachers' "loyalty," prohibiting not only advocacy of communism, socialism, and Marxism but any teaching that deviates from heroic accounts of the American founding by examining the influence of racism on the drafting of the Constitution.<sup>7</sup>

Many forces are eroding democracy around the world today, from India to Hungary to Brazil to the United States.<sup>8</sup> Elected executives inclined to authoritarianism exploit constitutional loopholes and disregard settled political norms and "guardrails."<sup>9</sup> The rise in conspiracy charges is another key element in the assault on democracy, and it has a character all its own. One striking feature of conspiracy allegations is that they invade and distort not only official political arenas but every domain of social life.

How did we get here?

## Conspiracy Without the Theory

Conspiracy theories have always been a feature of American politics. The Declaration of Independence itself outlines a conspiracy theory that charges the British king with a scheme: a "long train of abuses" all tending to extinguish liberty in North America. Many conspiracy theories are vexing, self-validating systems of thought that attract and enmesh true believers. But some conspiratorial allegations can be true. And like the Declaration, true conspiracy theories can be liberating because they expose the covert workings of power.

The word "conspiracy" goes with "theory" naturally, but not every allegation of conspiracy is a conspiracy theory. A conspiracy *theory* is an explanation that tries to make sense of the world. It often starts with an event that is hard to understand: how a lone gunman managed to assassinate a US president, one of the most protected people in the world, or how a small band with few resources plotting from a compound in Afghanistan managed to destroy the World Trade Center and attack the Pentagon. In these examples, conspiracy theories supply a cause on par with the world-historical effect: the CIA, the Mob, or Cuba played a part in the Kennedy assassination; the US government itself plotted to destroy the World Trade Center.

For some, these often erroneous theories provide a more satisfying account than official explanations. Conspiracy *theorists* do not merely throw allegations at the wall to see what will stick. They do research, mimicking investigative journalists. They ferret out anomalies, gather evidence, and often devote their lives to connecting the dots to reveal patterns that others miss. A well-known example is Jim Garrison, the one-time New Orleans district attorney whose research on the Kennedy assassination became the basis for the 1991 Oliver Stone film *JFK*. While Garrison's assertions have been discredited, they were a genuine *theory*—an attempt to offer a better explanation than the official account by excavating previously unseen facts and evidence. Garrison was a maverick who

disputed official commissions, put himself forward as an expert, and fashioned an explanatory theory notwithstanding its defects.<sup>10</sup>

This is not to say that conspiracy theories are always well-intentioned or benign. Often, they see intentional patterns where there are only accidents or coincidences, or they feed deep-rooted prejudices. At their darkest, they scapegoat hated minorities—like blaming economic recessions on Jewish bankers.

Our purpose in introducing conspiracy theory is this: what we see enveloping American politics today is not conspiracy theory at all. It is *conspiracy without the theory*, accusations that float free of facts and events and are disconnected from serious (even if incorrect) evidentiary explanation. Just the words "hoax" or "witch hunt" dismiss any need for explanation. Conspiracy without the theory may claim to explain the world, but in fact it remakes it. Facts that are inconvenient to one's partisan loyalties are erased or denounced as "fake," and new fictions that serve political purposes are invented. Conspiracy without the theory is not an attempt to explain reality; it is an attempt to own reality.



To distinguish between allegations of conspiracy with and without theories, we use the term *conspiracism* for those allegations that disregard evidence (though we admit that there is a continuum from theory-based to theory-free charges). Relatively new communications technologies make today's conspiracism possible. With YouTube, Twitter, or TikTok, anyone can circulate their charges around the world for free. Fictional narratives like Pizzagate or QAnon—the mashup centered on the belief that Trump will arrest a cabal of liberal globalists engaged in child trafficking—are consumed by millions. The crucial payoff comes when unsupported charges are made respectable through sheer repetition.<sup>11</sup> If "a lot of people are saying it," it must be "true enough." True enough to retweet, to forward, to "like." True enough to be plausible, to affirm, and to act on. And conspiracy without the theory is easy to digest; it can be communicated in just a few characters on Twitter.

Conspiracism has distinctive appeal: it affords the immediate gratification of lashing out at those who disagree and identifying alleged political enemies. It also offers the gratification of belonging

# Conspiracism remakes the world: opponents are enemies and the losers of elections are winners.

to an exclusive group, a cognoscenti with inside knowledge of how to decode the machinations of the enemy within. QAnon is not a set of propositions about the way the world is so much as it is the membership card of a club. If you “get it,” you belong.

Today’s conspiracism does not try to explain the world or hold the powerful to account in a meaningful way. Take the birther conspiracy, which posited that former president Barack Obama was constitutionally ineligible to serve in the presidency. There is no theory here at all—just fact-free fantasy of an African birth and Muslim faith that fuels and focuses political outrage.

So it is with Trump’s charge of a rigged election. The facts do not matter. He used that charge to refuse to do what every sitting president who lost an election has done since John Adams lost to Thomas Jefferson in 1800: peacefully turn over power to the opposition.

Conspiracism remakes the world into one where opponents are enemies and the losers of elections are winners. It is meant to arouse followers, stoke their anxieties, and organize and direct their fury. It is an instrument in the grab for power. And it is an irreplaceable weapon in the assault on democracy.

## Conspiracism’s Three Assaults on Democracy

Conspiracists are attacking our democracy by cultivating disorientation, denigrating specialized knowledge, and delegitimizing their political opponents. Although we discuss each in turn, these strategies mutually reinforce one another.

### 1. Cultivating Disorientation

The initial effect of the wave of evidence-free conspiratorial charges is disorientation. For many people, an early experience of disorientation happened on the first day of the Trump administration, when the National Park Service retweeted a post with photographs comparing Trump’s and Obama’s inauguration crowds. Trump had boasted that his crowd was the biggest ever, bigger than Obama’s. When the photos showed that attendance was modest, Trump raged that the images had been doctored. His press secretary repeated the absurdity.<sup>12</sup>

This was not just a lie, it was a conspiracy charge: unnamed civil servants were plotting to undermine the president by manufacturing evidence that his inaugural crowd was not the biggest in history. The charge came without argument or explanation of why, how, or who among the federal government’s official photographers would maliciously distort the true record of this national event.

The accusation of doctored photos was disorienting. It insulted our common sense. We had seen the ceremonies live on television. This conspiracy charge raised in stark terms the question of what it means to know something. What would it mean to know that

the 2017 inaugural crowd was the biggest in history, in spite of the evidence of our own senses and contemporary media accounts? Conspiracism’s power is to assert over and over that our basic perceptions have no reliable foundation. The point is to make these perceptions seem unmoored and to make us doubt our capacity to observe, understand, and challenge claims. Repeated over and over, even in the face of evidence to the contrary, the charge comes to seem unassailable—or at least plausible—to many people.

### 2. Denigrating Specialized Knowledge

Disorientation points to a second effect of conspiracy without the theory: denigrating the knowledge necessary for governing and for assessing government (and everything else). Public policymaking requires contributions by scientists, legal experts, economists, public health professionals, the diplomatic corps, experts on national security, and many others.

To be sure, skepticism about the power of experts is warranted. Specialists may be wrong. Conclusions may be uncertain and changeable as knowledge advances, so expert advice can be confusing. Experts may also be biased or bought.\* Elected democratic officials have the responsibility to weigh expert judgments and their appropriate place in making policy.

Conspiracism’s assault on knowledge does not correspond to reasoned skepticism, however. The assault is relentless and wholesale. It categorically denies the reliability of all the sources of evidence on which we depend. Only a tiny loyalist faction of the national press can be trusted. Climate science is a “hoax,” full stop. We saw a president decline to read the daily intelligence reports brought to him by his own national security team.<sup>13</sup> Judgments brought by multiple courts, including the Supreme Court, and opinions by specialists in electoral law were summarily dismissed as part of the “steal.”<sup>14</sup> Claims of deep state activity, rigged elections, and witch hunts were all that was on offer in the ceaseless rejection of unwelcome knowledge.<sup>15</sup>

The nation has paid a measurable price for conspiracists’ war against the advice of experts. Take the disregard of epidemiologists during the COVID-19 pandemic and the substitution of pseudoscience for their expertise. Trump sidelined his own medical team, recommended harmful alternative medicines, flaunted his own refusal to take precautions, and encouraged followers to resist public health measures.<sup>16</sup> This rejection was encased in conspiracism. Dr. Anthony S. Fauci, the charge goes, was conspiring to thwart Trump’s “total” authority (and Fauci’s life was threatened).<sup>17</sup> CDC scientists were said to constitute a “resistance unit” trying to undercut Trump’s reelection by tanking the economy.<sup>18</sup> There was even a vile conspiracy charge that the death rate was inflated by doctors who received a \$2,000 bounty for each death they claimed was because of COVID-19.<sup>19</sup> For conspiracists, the real “invisible enemy” is not the virus but “deep state” public health officials and others who advocate stringent measures designed to prevent deaths, which reached 1 million as of May 2022 in the United States alone.<sup>20</sup>

Denigrating expert knowledge is more than summarily rejecting the advice offered by doctors who study communicable diseases; it

\*To learn how some corporations influence expert opinion to protect their profits, read “Mercenary Science: A Field Guide to Recognizing Scientific Disinformation” in the Winter 2021–22 issue of *American Educator*: [aft.org/ae/winter2021-2022/michaels](https://www.aft.org/ae/winter2021-2022/michaels).

targets their advice as lies and manipulation. It targets the evidence offered and substitutes misinformation, and it flat-out attacks the knowledge-producers themselves. As a result, there is no need to comply with expert judgments, and the stage is set for resistance.

### 3. Delegitimizing Political Opposition

Democracy is not only about coming together (out of many, one); it is also about pluralism and disagreement (out of many, many). To make democracy work, we must work with those who disagree with us and who, even after hearing all the arguments we can muster, continue to disagree with us. Making it impossible to peacefully disagree is one of the gravest ways conspiracism damages democracy.

The first rule of democracy is that partisan opponents are not enemies. Democracy is a political system in which the opposition will not be murdered, exiled, or locked up. Political losers will live to try again. But today's conspiracism delegitimizes opposition. We pointed out how the Pizzagate conspiracy converted Hillary Clinton from an ordinary candidate into a figure of pure evil. Conspiracism extends the designation of enemy to Democratic officials, their supporters, and even Republicans who break with the new orthodoxy—charging them all with engaging in treasonous attempts to undermine the nation. “Lock her up” did not stop at Clinton; it is alive and well in the promise made by Newt Gingrich that if Republicans retake control of Congress in the upcoming 2022 midterm elections, the members of the House committee investigating the January 6 attack will face prison.<sup>21</sup>

Everywhere, rejection of legitimate political opposition is linked to both conspiracy theories and evidence-free charges that opponents are enemies conspiring to turn the United States into an alien country, alter the United States as a Christian nation, dilute the United States as a white nation, and cede sovereignty to a “new world order.”<sup>22</sup> What's more, partisan opponents-turned-enemies are believed to be a violent collection of “the radical left, the Marxists, the anarchists, the agitators, the looters.”<sup>23</sup>

To some people immersed in conspiracism, violence can come to seem like the only appropriate response. The opposition, believed to be treacherous, must be thwarted by any means.



AP PHOTO / JESSICA GRESKO

### Conspiracism's Path to Violence

Conspiracism dissolves the willingness to wait until the next election, when “our” side might win and get a chance to change things. When partisans absorb the lesson that the opposition is an enemy plotting to overturn the United States as they know it—when the threat is existential—there is no time to wait for regular policy processes, election cycles, or forms of advocacy (like citizen protests) that move officials to change course.

Before conspiracism entered the White House with Trump's 2016 election, rogue violence and intimidation spurred by large numbers of public officials to foment political divisions had not become an organized feature of public life. In the past few years, however, escalating conspiracism has cleared a path to threat, intimidation, and physical assault. With the January 6 insurrection, the potential of conspiracist charges to inspire violence and to create an atmosphere of fear and unsafety—both at critical political moments and in ordinary situations—was plain.

Conspiracist violence has roots in the great American tradition of freedom of association, specifically in the voluntary associations of “uncivil society” organized around guns. Self-styled militias, white supremacists, posses, the aptly named “sovereign citizens,” coercive cults, and other extremists in the grip of conspiracy notions have always existed on the fringes of political life. Today, they harass and intimidate, revile and discriminate, in full public view.<sup>24</sup> These associations revolve around preparing to combat what they see as tyranny and threats to “our way of life.”<sup>25</sup> They claim special authority to defend liberty against opponents cast as enemies. Many violent conspiracists see themselves as patriots—heirs of the revolutionaries of 1776 resisting despotism or carriers of the Confederate cause.<sup>26</sup>

The Proud Boys and Oath Keepers, whose violence Trump coyly encouraged, have come in from the cold. He invited them into national political life. He created a new, collective identity out of this disparate array of armed groups and enraged, unaffiliated citizens. He gathered them into what amounts to a private army directed to overturn the results of the 2020 election.<sup>27</sup>

Conspiracists' assaults are fueled by righteous anger. We have seen that for agitated defenders of freedom, “despotism” is not just a form of government or specific set of policies. Many conspiracists today embrace a brittle, extreme idea of personal liberty, so hospitals that require healthcare workers to be vaccinated against communicable diseases or schools that require students to wear masks are seen as attacking personal liberty.<sup>28</sup> Who should decide how much protection students, teachers, healthcare professionals, or workers on factory lines should receive? The conspiracist answer is “we alone decide.”

Here, we arrive at the most malignant effect on democracy: the insinuation of conspiracism and, with it, intimidation and violence everywhere. We call this *totalism*.

### Totalism: Conspiracism Everywhere

Conspiracist charges may appear anywhere. They have migrated from accusations of a deep state in the recesses of the federal government to the states and local communities. There is no place conspiracism cannot go. It seeps into social life and private life: into voluntary associations, workplaces, neighborhoods, families, and circles of friends. Conspiracism brings fear: How can we trust or build the reciprocal relationships on which the democratic social contract depends if our neighbors are inflamed and armed?

We could not have anticipated its scope. Some targets of conspiracist threats are simply bizarre—like the butterfly refuge at the Texas border that, despite a newly installed police guard tower, had to be abandoned by staff.<sup>29</sup> But other targets clearly reveal the agenda. Threats are leveled at judges.<sup>30</sup> Mobs support a plot to kidnap the governor of Michigan (after Trump directed followers to “liberate Michigan”).<sup>31</sup> Threats are aimed at state health officials and at government election workers and their families—and at

the 13 Republican members of Congress who voted for President Biden’s infrastructure bill.<sup>32</sup>

And as we said above, conspiracism and conspiracy theories even threaten the classroom. Local school board officials, principals, and teachers who encourage any measure judged as an assault on personal liberty are liable to become targets.<sup>33</sup> Teachers grapple with whether and how to discuss conspiracy claims that their students are exposed to online or at home. Should they ignore or discuss QAnon followers—those who believe satanic pedophiles are plotting against the nation—when the subject makes its way into their schools? Intimidation by students, parents, and opportunistic conspiracists enters into the decisions educators are now forced to make. As AFT President Randi Weingarten wrote in *American Educator*, “we must all take a stand against violence—just as we must all take a stand against systemic racism,”<sup>34</sup> but teachers who take on conspiracism risk being labeled as part of an organized plot to impose a radical ideology on children.

That conspiracism has seeped into the classroom points to the way totalism—the impetus for conspiracism to go everywhere—has become a defining element of the crisis of democracy. When the cast of enemies is ever-growing and pursued anywhere, when agents of violence spill their vitriol and menace everywhere, no sphere of social and personal life is secure from their charges and threats.

Consider what this means for day-to-day life. We all move in and out of social spheres, each with its own norms and practices. We participate in government; we work alongside colleagues; we join civil society groups like religious associations and advocacy organizations. We engage in daily interactions with neighbors, and we create our own company of family and friends. When colleagues, family members, and neighbors bring conspiracism into these spheres of life, accompanied by aggressive threats and what they believe to be righteous anger, it is not only political institutions that are damaged. Conspiracism today has the capacity to deform the different spheres of life into sites of partisan enmity and political extremism. Liberal democratic institutions and our own lives are being diminished.<sup>35</sup>

Although today’s conspiracism is disorienting and damaging to both political institutions and everyday relations, we are not signing on to a version of what Trump called “American carnage.”<sup>36</sup> Malignant conspiracism is not yet a malignant normality. Only some school boards, teachers, public health experts, Justice Department lawyers, and neighbors are targeted and have their lives turned upside down. Americans have been asking one another, “What is to be done?” We now have good answers in the robust resistance to democracy-destroying conspiracism.

## What Is Being Done?

A lot is being done.

The most elemental and yet powerful response to conspiracist fictions is simply speaking truth. Anyone can do it and everyone must—especially the responsible press and myriad advocacy groups dedicated to countering misinformation. Speaking truth seldom converts those possessed by conspiracist zeal. The purpose instead is to contain the effects of conspiracism, embolden the rest of us, and give strength to common sense. Speaking truth bolsters confidence in our collective ability to fight conspiracists’ attempts to own reality.

The Select Committee to Investigate the January 6th Attack on the United States Capitol tried to reclaim reality by offering a

coherent, comprehensive account of the course of events and the part played by individuals—both those who sought to destroy the integrity of the 2020 election and those who protected it. After the Committee interviewed over 1,000 people over the course of nearly a year, it held a series of public hearings beginning in June 2022. The hearings’ tone mattered: steady, deliberate, and self-disciplined. Although these congressional representatives’ own safety was threatened, the emotional undertone of Chair Bennie G. Thompson’s openings was a combination of outrage and sadness for the nation, rather than fear.

At another level, the Committee’s narrative was governed by the broader necessity to re-legitimate democratic processes. Significantly, the formal account of January 6 was not delegated to a remote special counsel or to a court but taken on by a congressional committee of bipartisan representatives chosen by the speaker of the House. They worked as democratic decision-makers must: in the face of uncertainty, disagreement, floods of information, and the need to come together to make difficult judgments. They took special care to articulate how their investigation proceeded and how their public hearings were organized. They demonstrated their adherence to regular investigative practices. They credited their staff, which provides professional counsel. They made the demanding requirements of democratic decision making legible. In all these ways their work, in our phrase, *enacted democracy*.



AP PHOTO / J. SCOTT APPLEWHITE

The responsibility to speak truth falls to all public officials and political candidates, especially Republicans. They have authority with their followers, and their rejection of conspiracism gets media attention. What’s known as John McCain’s “‘No ma’am’ moment” is a sterling example. While McCain was running for president in 2008, a voter in the grip of the birther conspiracy said at a town hall that Obama was ineligible to be president. McCain took the microphone from her and said, “No ma’am, he’s a decent family man, citizen, that I just happen to have disagreements with on fundamental issues, and that’s what this campaign is all about.”<sup>37</sup> That is what we saw in the public hearings of the January 6 Committee, and it is what we need from political candidates today.

Speaking truth is also the work of “witnessing professionals.” National intelligence experts defend colleagues against feckless charges of a “deep state.” Election law experts successfully challenge charges of “stolen elections” in court. Secretaries of state and other state officials, including some Republicans, gather and publicize evidence that American elections have been free and fair. Psychiatrists and psychologists identify the cognitive reasons behind dangerously distorted conspiracist thinking. Public health experts

publicize the traumatic effects and material costs of intimidation and violence.

Teachers are professionals on the frontlines who, like other witnessing professionals, are in a distinct position. As educators, we know that citizens need tools to identify the misinformation, particularly conspiracism, that permeates information streams today.

Teachers can engage the subject of conspiracism without parsing the specifics of particular charges. They might begin with the fundamental distinction we've emphasized here, between conspiracy theories that come with evidence and raw, evidence-free conspiracism. The educational aim is to equip students to critically evaluate particular charges, keeping in mind that not all conspiracy theories are false and that not all believers in conspiracy are delusional or senselessly following a leader. Students can be encouraged to try to identify the political purposes behind various conspiracy charges. It can be helpful to discuss why democracies will always have conspiracy theories: there is always the worry that those operating the levers of power will act in their own interests and betray the public good. And it is important to note that because conspiracy theories can be true, they can also be a form of vigilance.

It's also important for teachers to help students recognize the gratifications of conspiracy charges that make them alluring even when they lack evidentiary support. Students may subscribe to this or that conspiratorial allegation themselves, after all, and they may encounter ardent conspiracists among their families and friends.

What is conspiracism's appeal? To believe in conspiracism is to belong to a club of those with special knowledge. Adolescents especially face the temptation to belong to a community; they also understand the costs of going against the crowd and experience very real consequences when they do.<sup>38</sup> Teachers are in a unique position to help inoculate students against greedy, consuming political cults and to point to the countervailing gratification of collective opposition.<sup>39</sup>

**A**bove all, teachers have an opportunity to help students understand the defining place that legitimate political opposition occupies in democracy. Citizens in a democracy have to live with, tolerate, and do

Speaking truth bolsters confidence in our ability to fight conspiracists' attempts to own reality.

business with those who disagree—sometimes radically—about moral and political questions. To be a citizen is to have opponents in an ongoing system of political contest. But opponents are not enemies. Of course, teachers often focus on encouraging cooperation, but it is also necessary to work with students to understand democratic conflict. If students don't grasp the profound moral and political value of legitimate political opposition, they will be vulnerable to the kind of conspiracism that ushers in anti-democratic politics.

Right now, many forces of democracy are rallied against conspiracism and its effects on our political, social, and personal lives. Even so, conspiracists are unlikely to retreat to the political fringes any time soon. They will continue to agitate and motivate large numbers of people to engage in intimidation and violence. Conspiracism is a powerful tool for those who seek to own reality and achieve unconstrained power, and extremists have taken hold of this lever.

What has changed, however, is that we are paying careful attention. We have seen this script playing out, and we understand how it works. We are alert to how—and how badly—conspiracism degrades our governments and communities. We have witnessed its intimidation and seen its violence for what it is. We are ready now to recognize and confront conspiracism everywhere and stop this assault on our democracy. □

For the endnotes, see [aft.org/ae/fall2022/muirhead\\_rosenblum](https://aft.org/ae/fall2022/muirhead_rosenblum).

## Resources for Educators and Families

Adolescents are especially vulnerable to conspiracism and can be easily misled if they have trouble distinguishing reliable news from misinformation or assessing the credibility of a source.<sup>1</sup> Here are a few of the many resources available to help educators and families stop the spread of conspiracism and sharpen students' media literacy.

- **Confronting Conspiracy Theories and Organized Bigotry at Home:** This resource by the Western States Center highlights the appeal of conspiratorial ideas for adolescents, details ways that conspiracists and anti-democracy groups manipulate young people to promote their ideologies, and provides conversation starters and strategies to help parents and caregivers

recognize and counter conspiracism: [westernstatescenter.org/caregivers](https://westernstatescenter.org/caregivers).

- **NewsGuard:** This journalism and technology tool advances news literacy and promotes online safety by rating the reliability of websites and tracking the spread of misinformation narratives. NewsGuard partners with schools, public libraries, and other organizations to help users evaluate online news sources and identify misinformation. AFT members can access NewsGuard for free: [newsguardtech.com/aft](https://newsguardtech.com/aft).
- **Share My Lesson:** The AFT's Share My Lesson (SML) community has dozens of resources to help students make informed judgments about the news they consume. SML's Threats to Democracy collection includes webinars, lesson plans, and hand-

outs from iCivics, the Anti-Defamation League, Common Sense Education, and other contributors that highlight the importance of digital literacy and citizenship: [go.aft.org/37i](https://go.aft.org/37i).

- **News Literacy Project:** This nonpartisan education nonprofit provides lesson plans, classroom activities, and more to help educators teach news literacy; these free resources, also available to the general public, include a podcast, learning games, and the Checkology virtual classroom to help users distinguish between fact and fiction: [newslit.org](https://newslit.org).

—EDITORS

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