

Fears of *Fédéralisme* in the United States: The Case of the 'North American Union' Conspiracy Theory

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Even before Barack Obama was sworn in as the 44th President of the United States the Internet was seething with lurid conspiracy theories tracing his alleged subversion and treachery. Obama, it was claimed, was a secret Muslim; he was not a proper citizen of the United States and his election as President should be overturned; he was the puppet of a cell of Jews and Communists in his Chicago neighborhood; he was a tool of the New World Order in a plot to establish a North American Union.

Warnings about the impending creation of a North American Union that would merge the United States, Canada, and Mexico into one federal unit are spreading across the United States. While this merger is not on any serious government agenda, the issue is increasingly being debated in print publications, on the Internet, and over the airwaves.¹

The claims primarily are concocted by marginal right-wing conspiracy theorists in what scholars call the 'Patriot' movement; however the issue surfaced in the campaign for the U.S. Presidential election of 2008, and was raised at an international press conference on 21 August 2007 featuring then President Bush of the United States, President Calderón of Mexico, and Prime Minister Harper of Canada.² What began as marginal rumors has entered mainstream political debate.

Like all conspiracy theories, these claims start with a grain of truth. There is a 'Security and Prosperity Partnership' project involving common interest planning and streamlining of regulations among the three countries.³ But the idea that this is a secret precursor to a planned North American Union is a concoction of right-wing conspiracy theorists drawing on historic suspicion of collectivism and abuses of federal 'Big Government'.

During the height of the armed citizen Militia Movement that crested in the

mid 1990s, there were widespread fears that the U.S. federal government was about to impose a draconian tyrannical dictatorship using jack-booted thugs delivered in black helicopters sent by the United Nations. The Militia Movement was a short-lived armed wing of the larger and more durable 'Patriot' movement in the United States, with its roots in Twentieth Century anti-communism and Cold War politics.⁴ The Patriot movement is often linked to tendencies called 'Americanist' or 'Nativist, and is composed of an overlapping series of dissident right-wing social and political movements located between mainstream conservatism and the ultra-right that is composed of neonazis, the Ku Klux Klan, and other similar militant and openly White supremacist and antisemitic racist groups.⁵ Patriot groups, as Durham notes, have taken a variety of forms.⁶ Activists are constantly stepping across boundaries into mainstream conservatism on one side or the ultra-right on the other, depending on the historic moment, political events, and shifting ideology.

Distrust of the federal government, distaste for bureaucratic regulation, and suspicion that national sovereignty is eroding - all of these are popular themes throughout the United States. This is, after all, a country where the bootlegger who makes homemade 'moonshine' liquor to avoid paying federal taxes is a folk hero. While the suspicious conspiracist concerns of the Patriot and armed Militia Movements reflect hyperbolized versions of these core themes, it is useful to see them as deeply rooted in specific nightmares that periodically disturb the American Dream.

The North American Union

The basic allegation of the North American Union (NAU) conspiracy theory is that 'behind closed doors, the Bush administration has collaborated with the governments of Mexico and Canada to merge the three nations into one Socialist mega-state'. This quote is from the introduction to an online video featuring long-time ultra-conservative leader Howard Phillips interviewing author Jerome Corsi on Phillips' 'Conservative Roundtable' program.⁷ Similar claims are now implicating the Obama Administration.

Phillips, Corsi, and Phyllis Schlafly are the major figures in the U.S. political right who, since 2006, have spearheaded the drive to expose the devious

NAU collectivist plot.⁸ Others who have spread the warning include former Republican and third-party Presidential candidate Patrick Buchanan, an icon of the xenophobic right in the United States; the ultraconservative John Birch Society; and supporters of right-wing libertarian Ron Paul, a U.S. Congressman from Texas who was a Republican Presidential nomination candidate in 2008.

Corsi touts the looming implementation of the NAU in his book, *The Late Great U.S.A.: The Coming Merger with Mexico and Canada*, published 4 July 2007 - which is the date Americans celebrate Independence Day. Within a few weeks, Corsi's book was in its third printing and a bestseller - reaching number 28 on the *New York Times* list and the 'No. 1 spot on Amazon's 'Nonfiction' list'.⁹ The publisher was WND books - an imprint of WorldNetDaily.com, a nasty right-wing website featuring xenophobia larded with conspiracy theories. Corsi writes columns for both WorldNetDaily (WND), and *Human Events*, an ultra-conservative newspaper.¹⁰ He is also a staff reporter for WND with a history of involvement in right-wing anti-liberal and anti-immigrant causes.¹¹

In June of 2006 Corsi explored a new front on the NAU conspiracy theory with his claims that the nefarious secretive globalists were:

(...) working behind the scenes to create the NAFTA Super Highway, despite the lack of comment on the plan by President Bush. The American public is largely asleep to this key piece of the coming 'North American Union' that government planners in the new trilateral region of United States, Canada and Mexico are about to drive into reality.¹²

This claim was picked up by Patrick Buchanan, who has a syndicated newspaper column, and who quoted television newscaster Lou Dobbs, who like Buchanan is xenophobic and anti-immigrant.¹³ According to Buchanan:

This is a 'mind-boggling concept', exploded Lou Dobbs. It must cause Americans to think our political and academic elites have 'gone utterly mad'.

Dr. Robert Pastor, vice chair of the Council on Foreign Relations Task Force on North America, had just appeared before a panel of the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations - to call for erasing all U.S. borders and a merger of the United States, Mexico and Canada in a North American union stretching from Prudhoe Bay to Guatemala.

Under the Pastor-CFR plan, the illegal alien invasion would be solved by eliminating America's borders and legalizing the invasion. We would no longer defend the Rio Grande.¹⁴

Discussion of and opposition to the NAU became so widespread, that in January 2007 an elected member of the U.S. Congress, Rep. Virgil Goode (a Republican from Virginia), drafted a resolution that urged President Bush to 'not to go forward with the North American Union or the NAFTA Superhighway system'. The story for the resulting Corsi article on WorldNet Daily crowed 'Congress debate begins on North America Union: Resolution calls for end of NAFTA superhighway, abandonment of integration with Canada, Mexico'. The kicker headline was: 'Premeditated Merger'.¹⁵

Scraps of Facts, Truckloads of Rumors

There is an actual 'North America's Supercorridor Coalition', and it received so many complaints about its suspected role in the NAU and the alleged 'NAFTA Superhighway' that at one point it junked its website's home page and pointed browsers to a statement that read in part:

As of late, there have been many media references to a 'new, proposed NAFTA Superhighway'. While NASCO and the cities, counties, states and provinces along our existing Interstate Highways 35/29/94 (the NASCO Corridor) have referred for years to I-35 and key branches as 'the NAFTA Superhighway', the reference solely acknowledged and recognized I-35's major role in carrying a remarkable portion of international trade with Mexico, the United States and Canada. In actual fact, there are no plans to build 'a new NAFTA Superhighway'. It already exists today as I-35 and branches.¹⁶

The left-leaning *Nation* magazine ran a story dismissing the claims about the NAU and the NAFTA Superhighway, but noted 'Though opposition to the nonexistent highway is the cause célèbre of many a paranoiac, the myth upon which it rests was not fabricated out of whole cloth. Rather, it has been sewn together from scraps of fact'.¹⁷

One of those factual scraps is Dr. Robert A. Pastor. He exists, and appears a bit tired of being cast in the role of a mendacious multinationalist Mephistopheles by conspiracy theorists. 'Nobody is proposing a North American Union', Pastor patiently told a reporter.¹⁸ Pastor, a professor at American University, authored 'Towards a North American Community: Lessons from the Old World for the New', a 2001 study that earned Pastor the reputation among Patriot conspiracy mongers as the 'father' of the North American Union. 'They also point to his co-chairmanship of a

Council on Foreign Relations task force that produced a report in 2005 on cooperation among the three countries'. Pastor blamed the panic over the NAU and 'NAFTA Superhighway' on 'the xenophobic or frightened right wing of America that is afraid of immigration and globalization'.¹⁹

By the end of 2006, even a number of conservative commentators were growing tired of the panic, and began to attack the right-wing conspiracy theorists. Corsi then wrote columns in *Human Events* denouncing the denouncers.²⁰

In July 2007 Marcela Sanchez wrote an online column for the *Washington Post* titled: 'Stop, Stop! A North American Union! As Some Stoke Fears of 'Dangerous' Partnership, Reality Takes a Detour'.²¹ The column ridiculed the conspiracy theories. Larry Greenley of the John Birch Society (JBS) denounced the Sanchez article in a response claiming that 'Even President Bush Called the Security and Prosperity Partnership a 'Union' Back in 2005'.²² For the JBS, the editors at the *Washington Post* are among the secret elites behind the sinister plot in the first place.

Shortly thereafter the meeting of the three national leaders took place on 21 August 2007. The question about the NAU was raised, and all three leaders responded:

President Bush: '(...) I'm amused by some of the speculation, some of the old - you can call them political scare tactics. If you've been in politics as long as I have, you get used to that kind of technique where you lay out a conspiracy and then force people to try to prove it doesn't exist'.

Prime Minister Harper: 'You know, we had some business leaders in front of us today; one in particular said, you know, the rules for jelly beans - he manufactures jelly beans - the rules for jelly bean contents are different in Canada and the United States; they have to maintain two separate inventories. Is the sovereignty of Canada going to fall apart if we standardize the jelly bean? I don't think so.'

President Calderón: (As translated.) '(...) In actual fact, there are several myths about this meeting, some more jovial, funnier than others. What we tried to do is simply to meet, talk about our common problems and see what we can do in practical terms in order to improve the lives of our people. Whether it's to standardize the parameters for chocolates or medicines, I think these are common-sense things (...).'²³

The conspiracists were not amused. Phyllis Schlafly responded with a column titled 'Bush Refuses to Deny the North American Agenda'.²⁴ This

follows the typical conspiracist format in which no comment is further proof to the conspiracists of the truth of the allegation; and in which the plotters are asked to disprove a negative premise – which is impossible. Corsi followed up with an interview with a trucking industry Teamster Union leader headlined: 'Bush creating North American Union: Teamsters boss: Mexican trucks part of 'master plan' for 'super-government'.²⁵

In mid October 2007 the John Birch Society magazine *New American* published an entire special issue devoted to alerting the nation: 'Merger in the Making: North American Union Edition'.²⁶

Not all the conspiracy theorists peddling the NAU and 'NAFTA Superhighway' myths are on the political right. In mid 2007 the ostensibly left-wing Centre for Research on Globalization published an article, 'Canadians Completely Unaware of Looming North American Union'. The Centre has a history of transposing right-wing conspiracy theories into articles for a leftist audience.²⁷ The June 2006 article by Corsi on the 'NAFTA Super Highway' even won an award from the left-leaning watchdog group, Project Censored.²⁸ Still, most critics appear to be on the political right and have ties to the Patriot movement.

The dynamic of conspiracism is the same across the Patriot movement – the more that mainstream publications, politicians, and pundits dismiss or ridicule the North American Union conspiracy theory, the more Patriot proponents see this as evidence that the plan is underway. The secret elites are behind it, and mainstream publications, politicians, and pundits are part of the plot. Barkun has called this dynamic 'stigmatized knowledge' in which lack of evidence confirms how sneaky the plotters really are, and denials are just more evidence of the truth of the sinister plan.²⁹

Roots of Suspicion

Why did these rumors about the NUA spread so quickly through the U.S. Patriot movement and burst into mainstream public policy discussions? Because such rumors are rooted in the American tradition; and it has happened before – repeatedly.³⁰

Davis suggests that movements to counter the 'threat of conspiratorial

subversion acquired new meaning in a nation born in revolution and based on the sovereignty of the people'. In the US, 'crusades against subversion have never been the monopoly of a single social class or ideology, but have been readily appropriated by highly diverse groups', notes Davis.³¹

The witch hunts in Salem in the 1600s combined Protestant apocalyptic belief with fears of evil conspiracies. In the late 1700s the ink on the U.S. Constitution had barely dried when fears of 'alien' sedition swept the new country. The 1800s saw panics about the Illuminati, the Freemasons, and the Catholics. Claims of Jewish cabals emerged in the early 1900s. The next 50 years witnessed a series of Red Scares in the United States that stretched from the anti-immigrant Palmer Raids of 1919-1920, to the Cold War McCarthy Period in the 1950s.³²

The tendencies that create these periods of patriotic conspiracy belief draw from deep wells in the American heartland: 'states rights', 'rugged individualism', Social Darwinism, a *Laissez Faire* form of economic libertarianism, and a tradition of populist political rhetoric.³³ All five tendencies feed a distrust of the regulatory functions of federal governments and international agencies; and fuel paranoia about the prospect of even larger federations among nations.

The causes of the U.S. Civil War involved many factors, but much of the populist rhetoric of politicians such as John C. Calhoun and Ben Tillman centered on calls to preserve States Rights under the federal system as a way to ensure white rule in the South, even after the war was over.³⁴ States Rights has always been an issue central to the ideology of the ultraconservative advocacy group, the John Birch Society, and it became a major theme within the Patriot and armed Militia Movements in the 1990s.³⁵

As anyone who has ever watched a John Wayne film can attest, tales of the American Western frontier and the spirit of the pioneers reflect parables of 'rugged individualism'. This is a 'core American cultural value', that is 'especially significant in the American psyche'.³⁶

Social Darwinism takes the idea of the survival of the fittest in nature and

imposes it on economic systems by arguing that fierce and unregulated competition builds individual character and national economic health.³⁷ Social Darwinism is 'a secularist philosophy', explains Hofstadter, but it is influenced by 'a kind of naturalistic Calvinism in which man's relation to nature is as hard and demanding as man's relationship to God under the Calvinistic system'.³⁸ A return to early Calvinist doctrine is a popular theme in some sectors of the Christian Right in the United States, and Calvinism strongly influenced the early American outlook.³⁹ The relationship between libertarian *Laissez Faire* Capitalism and Calvinist Protestantism was explored by Weber.⁴⁰

In the early Twentieth Century there were popular tracts in the United States warning that the federal income tax was theft and the Federal Reserve banking system a corrupt plan to loot the economy. These ideas were repackaged numerous times, with right-wing groups such as the John Birch Society and Liberty Lobby peddling them in the 1960s and the 1970s.⁴¹

When President Roosevelt was elected President in 1933 he increased the size and role of the federal government significantly. Libertarian and *Laissez Faire* ideologues were outraged. To counter this new role for 'Big Government', associations of manufacturers and corporate executives spent millions of dollars to distribute 'educational' materials warning that a bloated federal government was the road to collectivism, communism, and tyranny. Economic libertarianism was a bedrock assumption of the American political economy up until the Franklin Roosevelt Administration of 1933 to 1945. Right-wing ideologues still claim that Roosevelt sent the country marching down the road to socialism.⁴²

After World War Two, conservative activists led by William F. Buckley, Jr. launched a campaign to rollback the size of the federal government. This became a major rhetorical goal of the Reagan Administration in the 1980s.⁴³ Distrust of the federal government by North American Union conspiracy believers is thus fed from several interwoven strands of U.S. history, and then wrapped in populist rhetoric.

The conspiracy theories concerning the North American Union and the

'NAFTA Superhighway' follow a populist political tradition that is also deeply rooted in American history. Canovan identifies several types of populism, including calls for more political participation in the form of populist democracy; the use of populist rhetoric by politicians claiming to represent the interests of 'the people' and reactionary populism which tends to mobilize a specific racial or ethnic group by scapegoating an alien 'other', seen as subverting the idealized society. Kazin speaks of populism as a rhetorical style that can be applied to multiple situations from multiple political and ideological perspectives.⁴⁴

Populism, then, is a rhetorical style that seeks to mobilize 'the people' as a social or political force to counter entrenched elites. Populist rhetoric is used in both left wing and right wing movements. It can be used to challenge or defend the status quo. It can end up promoting or undermining democratic civil society.⁴⁵ The central populist motif of many historic right-wing dissident movements in the United States is the claim that the current government regime is indifferent, corrupt, or traitorous.⁴⁶ Episodes of right-wing populism are often caused by economic, social, or cultural stress that assists right-wing organizers mobilizing an alienated cross-class sector of the population.⁴⁷

In the United States, populism often involves the use of a 'producerist' narrative that portrays a noble middle class of hard-working productive citizens being squeezed by a conspiracy involving secret elites above and lazy, sinful, and subversive parasites below.⁴⁸ White supremacist used producerist narratives to fuel the attack on the freed Black former slaves in the U.S. South after the Civil War.⁴⁹ Producerist versions of antisemitism helped German Nazis recruit an alienated mass base.⁵⁰ Producerist forms of populism can weave together strands of integralism, organicism, and *völkish* nationalism.⁵¹

The result of all of these antecedents is that a large portion of the U.S. Right adopts, often in an unwitting or crude form, a version of individualistic populist anti-elitism which facilitates the ease in which anti-government and anti-federalist conspiracy theories move through sectors of the Right in the United States and then into the mainstream.⁵²

Some Sociological Frameworks

It is easy to dismiss people who believe in conspiracy theories as simply crackpots, but when these claims spread across a society, something more complicated is happening. In recent years sociologists who study right-wing political and social movements have been identifying specific ideologies, frames, narratives, styles, processes, methodologies, and triggers that shape how right-wing movements work.⁵³ Sociologists especially look at how particular 'frames' of reference are used to take a political ideology and build collective action movements that seek a change in society.⁵⁴

Sociologists use the term 'narratives' to discuss how stories are used in social movements to build group cohesion, and mobilize supporters to action. It does not matter if these stories are based on personal experiences or largely mythical.⁵⁵ What matters is that movement participants believe them to be true, and shape their actions based on this belief.⁵⁶

It has only been since the 1970s that most sociologists began to agree that right-wing movements use frames and narratives in ways that are similar to other movements. This is true even with extreme right groups.⁵⁷ The Patriot movement in the United States often combines frames and narratives that utilize dualism, demonization, scapegoating, and conspiracism. They combine these tendencies with an apocalyptic sense that time is running out so that quick action is needed. By looking at how these factors operate we can see that inside the U.S. Patriot movement and its precursors, what at first glance might appear to be simply irrational paranoid panic over the North American Union can be put into a context of social movement strategy aimed at shaping public policy debates.

Apocalypticism

When looking at social movements, the word 'apocalypse' is used in a generic sense, and refers to the idea that there is an approaching confrontation, cataclysmic event, or transformation. This upcoming struggle between good and evil will mark the end of an epoch. During the apocalyptic transformation, hidden truths are revealed and a new reality emerges to replace the old.⁵⁸ Apocalyptic movements generally believe that time is

running out, and that a handful of people have been given the news, which means they have a duty to warn others and make appropriate preparations. This frame is an effective tool for mobilizing mass movements.⁵⁹ Sometimes the term 'millenarianism' is used to describe movements that are apocalyptic, and the term 'millennialism' is used to refer specifically to movements that are tracking a one thousand year time span or a similar lengthy period.⁶⁰

A significant number of Christian activists in the United States are mobilized into action by apocalyptic and millennialist themes derived from the Christian Bible, especially the book of Revelation.⁶¹ This can generate conspiracy theories with a prophetic religious basis.⁶² The book of Revelation is read in this idiosyncratic way by some Christians, especially fundamentalist evangelical Protestants in the United States. They see in Biblical prophecy a warning that just before the return of Jesus Christ in his 'Second Coming', powerful political and religious figures will forge an alliance with the evil 'Antichrist', and a false prophet, and seek to build a one world global government and establish a New World Order - after which Christians will be hunted down and the world run on behalf of Satan himself.⁶³ Today this belief is transmuted into conspiracy theories about liberal 'secular humanist' collectivists building a global government through the United Nations with the collusion of multi-national corporations.

A secularized version of this apocalyptic narrative about federal plans for tyranny and a global 'New World Order' has been around for decades, and circulated within the Patriot and armed Militia Movements in the 1990s.⁶⁴ This secularized conspiracist narrative sometimes is picked up by the political left in the United States.⁶⁵

Griffin uses the term palingenesis to describe a populist drive for a 'heroic rebirth' of society; and he sees this as a key element of fascism as a mass movement.⁶⁶ Palingenesis appears in other movements as well, especially where apocalyptic belief adopts the dualistic or Manichean idea of an inevitable struggle between good and evil forces. Lifton observes that 'historically the apocalyptic imagination has usually been nonviolent in nature', but apocalypticism also can generate horrific violence.⁶⁷ It is likely

that there is an increased risk of violence with apocalyptic movements (or governments) where there is a higher level of authoritarianism.⁶⁸ Still, it is important to observe that militant ideologies do not automatically create violent methodologies.

The apocalyptic sense that time is running out runs through the North American Union conspiracy theories. The plans have been hatched; national leaders have met in secret. Is it already too late? No, say the conspiracy theorists, not if bold men heed the warning and stand up against evil tyranny. This frame of impending betrayal welded to a narrative of heroic resistance is very compelling to potential recruits. It also writes a script in which the conspiracy theorist is a hero for spreading the dualistic stories of evil intent.

Dualism

Dualism divides the world into good versus evil with no middle ground allowed. You are either with us or against us. Complexity, nuance, and ambiguity are swept away in the binary frame of reference. At the same time, anger and aggression are often directed at people who suggest coexistence, toleration, pragmatism, compromise, or mediation. Richard Hostadter noted that the 'fundamentalist mind... is essentially Manichean'.⁶⁹ This is probably an overgeneralization, but there are fundamentalist evangelical Protestants and traditionalist or conservative Catholics in the United States who see the world through the lens of dualism.⁷⁰

In its most vivid form, dualism is a core aspect of all totalitarian movements and governments. Arendt in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, describes how both Hitler and Stalin used dualism as a tool to enforce their will on a nation.⁷¹ Lifton looks at the same process in small groups.⁷² Arendt uses the term 'totalitarianism', while Lifton uses 'totalism'. They are describing the same type of group on different levels of social organization. It is likely that all large scale totalitarian movements are what Voegelin calls 'political religions' and Gentile calls the 'sacralization of politics'.⁷³ This does not refer to the intersection of religion and politics, but to the process of raising the stakes in a political struggle to the level of ultimate cosmological significance. To be on the 'wrong' side means that you betray some entity that has been elevated to what is essentially a sacred status.

Anthony and Robbins use the phrase 'exemplary dualism' for a specific form of dualism in which 'contemporary sociopolitical or socioreligious

forces are transmogrified into absolute contrast categories embodying moral, eschatological, and cosmic polarities upon which hinge the millennial destiny of humankind'.⁷⁴ They find this in 'totalist' religious and ideological movements 'with highly dualistic worldviews' and 'an absolutist apocalyptic outlook' where members cast a 'projection of negativity and rejected elements of self onto ideologically designated scapegoats'.⁷⁵

When dualism is widespread in a society or socio-political movement, it often generates three related processes: demonization, scapegoating, and conspiracism.⁷⁶

In the process of scapegoating on a societal level, a person or group of people are wrongfully stereotyped as having negative traits or sinister plans, and are singled out for blame. By projecting societal problems onto the scapegoat, mass movements allow the actual sources of societal problems to be overlooked or absolved of blame. This is true even when the societal problems are largely fictitious or manufactured – scapegoating serves as a distraction.⁷⁷ It is easier to get people to engage in scapegoating if the scapegoated target is demonized.⁷⁸

Demonization occurs when an individual or group is portrayed as the embodiment of evil.⁷⁹ This involves a sequence of denigration, dehumanization, and demonization, which results in generating hatred of the objectified target.⁸⁰ One way to demonize is to claim that the scapegoat is plotting against the public good.⁸¹ This can involve demagogic appeals, and for this to work, movement participants must see the movement leader as charismatic. Otherwise the performance is easily exposed as buffoonery. Some populists have used demagogic appeals to denounce corrupt elites, but government officials sometimes use demagoguery and conspiracy theories to justify political repression against scapegoated groups. In both instances, when the demagoguery works, it is because there are pre-existing and widespread societal fears of conspiracies by real and imaginary subversive elements.⁸²

These dualistic narratives in which a heroic good 'Us' is pitted against a dastardly bad 'Them' are therefore powerful emotional tools, and can be modified to subvert the status quo, or defend it against attack by

subversives.⁸³

Conspiracism

The use of conspiracy stories in public debates has a long tradition in the United States. When used in a socio-political movement, a conspiracy theory is a narrative form of scapegoating. The term conspiracism is used by some scholars to describe this worldview. Conspiracism exists around the world, and under some conditions, can move quickly from the margins of a society to the mainstream.⁸⁴ There are real conspiracies in which groups of people with political power or wealth secretly organize to enforce or challenge the status quo, but in the long run, these conspiracies do not control the broad sweep of history.⁸⁵

Goldberg notes that the word 'conspiracy' tracks back to the 'Latin word *conspirare* - to breathe together'.⁸⁶ Conspiracism frames demonized enemies as part of a vast insidious plot against the common good, while it valorizes the scapegoater as a hero for sounding the alarm.⁸⁷ According to Fenster, conspiracy theorists are involved in a misdirected attempt to explain how power is exercised in a society.⁸⁸ Exposing alleged conspiracies of secret elites attracts attention and gains status for the 'truth teller' in some conspiracy-oriented socio-political movements. Governments can engage in conspiracism as well, which often leads to political repression by state agencies.⁸⁹

In the United States there are three main traditions woven into conspiracy theories, with the following historic scapegoated villains:

- Freemasons and the Illuminati.⁹⁰
- Plutocrats & the 'Banksters'.⁹¹
- Jews⁹²

Daniel Pipes suggests that the two main branches of contemporary conspiracism (Jews and Freemasons) have 'parallel histories', and track back to 'conspiracist traditions' that emerged during Christianity's 'Crusading era'. Pipes dates this to '1096 for the Jews, 1307 for secret societies', and notes the parallelism extends to 'basic themes, mutual influences, shared beliefs, and overlapping culprits'.⁹³ A synthesis of the two earlier main branches of conspiracism, the conspiracy theory about

the Plutocrats & the 'Banksters' spread to a broader audience during a period of widespread populism in the United States in the late 1800s.

Sometimes conspiracy narratives focus on one main target; while in others the story lines are blended, resulting in a myriad of variations.⁹⁴ In the North American Union conspiracy theories, the scapegoats vary depending on the source of the call to resist tyranny, and include all three forms listed above.

The American Dream State & Paranoid Nightmares

We now have three sets of inter-related factors we can use to explain the potent synergy of the NAU conspiracy theory.

Historic Antecedents

- States rights
- Rugged individualism
- Social Darwinism
- *Laissez Faire* economic libertarianism
- Populist political rhetoric

Active processes involving frames and narratives.

- Apocalypticism
- Dualism, Demonization, & Scapegoating
- Conspiracism

Familiar Scapegoats

- Freemasons and the Illuminati
- Plutocrats & the 'Banksters'
- Jews

All these factors interact, blend, and mutually support each other to produce informed leaders, passionate followers, and a large pool of potential recruits for the North American Union conspiracy theory in the United States. The interplay of these processes occurs throughout U.S. history.

In studying the anti-Masonic movement of the 1800s, Hofstadter wrote of the 'apocalyptic and absolutist framework' of the participants and their conspiracy theories.⁹⁵ In the next century, anti-communism was assisted by pre-existing libertarian anti-collectivism, but also Christian apocalyptic prophecy. Donner notes that following the revolution in Russia:

Bolshevism came to be identified over wide areas of the country by God-fearing Americans as the

Antichrist come to do eschatological battle with the children of light. A slightly secularized version, widely shared in rural and small-town America, postulated a doomsday conflict between decent upright folk and radicalism—alien, satanic, immorality incarnate.⁹⁶

This gravitation toward apocalyptic conspiracy theories was dubbed by Hofstadter the 'paranoid style in American politics', Hofstadter identified 'the central preconception' of the paranoid style as a belief in the 'existence of a vast, insidious, preternaturally effective international conspiratorial network designed to perpetrate acts of the most fiendish character'. According to Hofstadter, this was common in certain figures in the U.S. political right, and was accompanied with a 'sense that his political passions are unselfish and patriotic' which 'goes far to intensify his feeling of righteousness and his moral indignation'.⁹⁷ According to Hofstadter:

(...) the feeling of persecution is central, and it is indeed systematized in grandiose theories of conspiracy. But there is a vital difference between the paranoid spokesman in politics and the clinical paranoiac: although they both tend to be overheated, oversuspicious, overaggressive, grandiose, and apocalyptic in expression, the clinical paranoid sees the hostile and conspiratorial world in which he feels himself to be living as directed specifically *against him*; whereas the spokesman of the paranoid style finds it directed against a nation, a culture, a way of life whose fate affects not himself alone but millions of others'.⁹⁸

Thompson suggests Hofstadter was right to articulate the 'startling affinities between the paranoid style and apocalyptic belief', especially the demonization of opponents and 'the sense of time running out'. Thompson, however, argues Hofstadter should have made a more direct connection by considering 'the possibility that the paranoia he identified actually derived from apocalyptic belief; that the people who spread scare stories about Catholics, masons, Illuminati and Communists' were extrapolating from widespread Protestant End Times beliefs. Furthermore, the persistence of End Times belief 'in the United States rather than Europe surely explains why the paranoid style seems so quintessentially American'.⁹⁹

In the United States, pre-existing Christian Right dualism and their ongoing frame of an apocalyptic battle against potentially satanic collectivism provides a fertile field for planting the narrative of the North American Union conspiracy theories.

Distrust of authority and belief in over-arching conspiracies of powerful elites are common in what some scholars call the 'cultic milieu', in which ideas outside of the norm are coupled with a closed system of received

knowledge and a sense of the heroic mission of the true believers. Michael Barkun calls the cultic milieu a 'domain of rejected and stigmatized knowledge'.¹⁰⁰ The more mainstream authorities try to debunk these conspiracist beliefs, the more the true believers see this as evidence of the righteousness of their views and the utter depravity and deceitfulness of the powerful elites.

Certain actions by the U.S. government have also provided sustenance for these conspiracy theories. 'Conspiracism thrives when power is exercised at a distance by seemingly selfish groups zealous in their authority', writes Goldberg. 'When the present continues to reveal the past, all are susceptible to the prompting of conspiracy thinking, with class and gender lines offering no barriers'. He warns, 'Conspiracism demands confrontation'.¹⁰¹

This is certainly true within conspiracist sectors of the anti-globalization movement, which overlaps significantly with anti-federalism in the United States, especially on the political right. Secrecy in government, lack of transparency, even outright falsifications by U.S. government officials all feed the growth of the anti-federalist North American Union conspiracism.

Contemporary Conspiracism

Fears of federalism and global cooperation in the United States gained an increased following in the 1990s as conspiracy theories and libertarian ideology intersected and flourished during the growth of the Militia wing of the Patriot movement.¹⁰² This had real world implications. For example, the international Biodiversity Treaty was stopped in part by a coalition of Patriot, Wise Use, and Lyndon LaRouche network organizers who peddled conspiracist theories.¹⁰³ In the state of New Jersey Patriot activists distributed flyers and faxes to rally support to derail a proposed environmental law.¹⁰⁴ This methodology spread across the country.¹⁰⁵

In the mid 1990s the Council of State Governments and National Governors' Association planned to hold a national 'Conference of the States'. Conservative and Patriot groups rallied against the event, warning that it was actually a secret plot to rewrite the U.S. Constitution to remove the Second Amendment (right to bear arms) to allow federal agents to confiscate guns as a preface to tyranny.¹⁰⁶ Michael Reagan, a national radio

talk show host, suggested the conference was part of the plan to establish a One World Government.¹⁰⁷ Even as the armed Militia Movement was dwindling, conspiracist Patriot themes continued to attract supporters. In the state of Montana several state legislators in the late 1990s were still promoting the Patriot agenda.¹⁰⁸

Federal and international cooperation to protect the environment is a frequent target of conspiracist right-wing activists. As Lyons and I wrote:

In 1997 U.S. Rep. Helen Chenoweth of Idaho introduced a bill cosponsored by 43 House members to block a federal plan to designate certain historic waterways 'heritage rivers'. The primarily symbolic gesture had been attacked by the Patriot movement and the overlapping anti-environmentalist 'Wise Use' movement as a federal land grab. Some claimed it was part of a UN-backed New World Order initiative. Conspiracy theories about environmental activists created an atmosphere where confrontations accelerated in rate and intensity.¹⁰⁹

Ten years later the same themes were still being used to mobilize opposition to environmental cooperation. Compare the text above from 1997 with the text below, from an apocalyptic Christian Patriot conspiracist warning in 2007 about international Heritage Park designations.

The powerful UNESCO and its arms of outreach, the World Heritage do not seem at all restrained from taking more control of certain areas... the Government really relinquishes control of said areas. The United States is definitely led by some people who see the control of international groups, governing bodies, as a good thing. There are others who are positioning the US to become part of a New Global government... the areas in the USA deemed to be under the guidance and control of a foreign body, namely the World Heritage Organization under the UNESCO brand, and an outreach of the United Nations... The problem for many of us is the every increasing foreign control to the once free country called the United States...it is accompanied by slavery and bondage to a New World Order. Beware of the Controllers; they want your blood, sweat, and your money.¹¹⁰

Why is the United Nations such a boogeyman? For most of the 20th century, the conspiracy theories in the Patriot, Americanist, and nativist movements focused on the threat of global communism. During the Cold War it was common in Patriot circles to argue that liberal elites in the U.S. government were in league with communists.¹¹¹ When communism collapsed in Europe, some sectors of the political Right focused attention on generating populist resentment aimed solely at the elites who 'controlled' the U.S. federal government.¹¹² In the Christian Right, this was tied to the idea of a 'secular humanist' conspiracy.¹¹³ One alleged goal of this Godless conspiracy is to build the One World Government prophesied as part of Satan's End Times

plan for world conquest. The United Nations, global treaties, the European Union, the European Parliament, and the North American Union therefore are all seen as signs of the impending confrontation with the forces of evil. With the Euro currency in circulation, can the 'Amero' be far behind?

North American Union conspiracism has taken place during the growing destabilization of societies around the world brought by globalization dominated by transnational corporate interests. The tensions inside the United States caused by this transformation reflected the fact that they were within the nation that is the primary engine of corporate globalization, so these tensions were different than in many other countries, but no less significant.¹¹⁴

Mark Rupert describes the right wing anti-globalist worldview as envisioning 'a world in which Americans are uniquely privileged [and] inheritors of a divinely inspired socio-political order which must at all costs be defended against external intrusions and internal subversion'. He argues that this analysis seeks to challenge corporate power without comprehending the nature of 'capital concentration and the transnational socialization of production':

Insofar as it seeks to preserve capitalism while reversing its central processes, we might anticipate the ongoing frustration of the reactionary vision, and an attendant intensification of scapegoating and hostility toward those seen as outside of, different or dissenting from its vision of national identity.

This predictive description by Rupert certainly resembles the frames, narratives, and public statements of leaders of the conspiracist movement against the North American Union, and is incorporated into populist appeals for resistance. Similar tendencies have swept across Europe in recent years.¹¹⁵

Right-wing populist parties in Europe attracted a disproportionate number of men, persons employed in the private sector, and younger voters', reports Betz. These populists clustered in two distinct categories: working class resentment of immigrants, and entrepreneurial libertarian resentment of government bureaucrats.¹¹⁶ Anecdotal evidence suggests this pattern is followed in the United States as well.

Male angst is another factor in energizing contemporary right-wing movements. In the 1980s and 1990s alienation was generated by an identity crisis for many men triggered by tensions over shifting roles and privileges based on gender and race.¹¹⁷ When placed in a larger context of economic, social, cultural, and political grievances, it is mostly angry straight White Christian men who seem to comprise a large pool of potential recruits for right-wing movements.¹¹⁸ Women do play significant roles in some of these movements.¹¹⁹ Nonetheless, the Militia Movement was primarily led and populated by white men, and many of them used apocalyptic rhetoric with Christian references. The situation remains similar inside the ongoing Patriot Movement.

According to Quinby, among some right-wing groups 'the reassertion of masculinist hierarchy is being cast in terms of apocalyptic avowals of (heterosexist) family values and the New World Order'.¹²⁰ Kintz notes this 'linkage between God, the Constitution, and masculinity provides a powerful foundation of emotion'.¹²¹

Conclusions

Benedict contends that nationalism is based primarily on the concept of 'imagined communities'. Nordstrom invoked Benedict when writing about the nationalism of the U.S. anti-Catholic movement around the turn of the Twentieth Century.¹²² Nordstrom's description still resonates as an explanation of today's conspiracist fears of alien ideas penetrating the federal union and turning federal officials and employees into traitorous termites:

(...) claims of Catholic subversion, immorality, and danger to the nation can thus be understood as illustrating an 'imagined' community of rural Anglo-Saxon Protestants valiantly defending the nation from threats by an internal, foreign, and sinister force invading American cities.¹²³

Therefore, wrote Nordstrom, attempts by Catholics 'to win the American public's support and respect were extremely dangerous because they threatened this idyllic imagined depiction of American nationalism'¹²⁴ Catholics are now part of the collective 'imagined community' in the United States, but the frames and narratives of conspiracist scapegoating share essential components across decades and even centuries. It is still

about defending an 'idyllic imagined depiction of American nationalism'.

Who knows what those foreign bureaucrats in Belgium really are brewing up as part of their sinister plan to create a New World Order? In one hundred years the fears might focus on those bureaucrats in Marseille...or on Mars. The scapegoats change, the fear of losing sovereignty and individual rights to faceless bureaucrats with alien ideas remains a constant.¹²⁵

When government officials and the corporate media dismiss conspiracist claims it is interpreted by conspiracists as further proof of how really clever and nasty are the planners and their plans. The voices of conspiracists are always whispering of plots, observes philosopher Herman Sinaiko, but in a healthy community, few take these claims seriously.¹²⁶ The antidote to widespread conspiracism is to reduce government secrecy and increase the transparency of government operations.¹²⁷ Open public debates sluice out the sewers of conspiracism. It is the majority of residents in a nation who relegate conspiracist voices to the dustbin of history - but only if a majority of residents have good reasons to trust their government.

Many of those involved in the Patriot and armed militia movements appear to fear a falling socio-economic status, have already been downsized, or are experiencing an economic reversal or sense that one is on the horizon.¹²⁸ Joining the campaign against the North American Union can give men (and women) a sense of agency and restored status in a heroic battle against an evil conspiracy of duplicitous federal puppets building a New World Order that would smash national sovereignty. In the United States, a considerable portion of the society has been primed by the interrelated factors discussed here to be a 'bludgeon for the right', observes Ehrenreich.¹²⁹

When the North American Union conspiracy theory collapses, there will be another conspiracy theory to replace it. In the face of the current economic crisis, it is likely that the next scapegoats will not only be easily woven into the time-honoured conspiracist narratives, but also more likely to face physical threats and acts of violence. That is what has happened in the past in similar circumstances... and 'what's past is prologue'.¹³⁰

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