‘QAnon’ comes out at Trump rally

- Toronto Star
- 4 Aug 2018
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Donald Trump supporters, proponents of the “QAnon,” gained their conspiracy theory some publicity — if not legitimacy — by going public Tuesday at a Tampa rally.

From somewhere in the vast and mysterious deep state, a dissident agent rises up to give the people cryptic clues about how their heroic president will push back the forces of evil and make America great again. The renegade informant is known only as “Q,” and if he actually exists, it’s not in a movie, but somewhere in the Washington, D.C., bureaucracy.

Energized by Q’s complex web of conspiracy notions about the forces aligned against President Donald Trump, Q’s followers have spread virally both online and now out in real life, too, forming a movement known as QAnon that is making itself visible at Trump’s rallies and other public gatherings.

QAnon is something old — the latest in a string of conspiracy ideas that take hold of the public’s imagination in times of social stress and technological change. And QAnon is something new — aleaderless popular movement made up of people who believe in no one and therefore are willing to believe almost anything.

To believers, Q is a pseudonym for a well-placed U.S. government agent who is posting online distress messages and bits of intel, known as “bread crumbs,” in an effort to save the country — and Trump — from hostile forces within the government. Q’s missives started appearing last October on 4chan, the mostly anonymous website where fringe ideas incubate and blossom.

In messages written in a telegraphic, cryptic style, Q called on Americans to rally behind Trump as he planned a counteraction against forces that would investigate him and remove

him from office. Some QAnon followers believe Trump himself inspired their movement with a comment he made last October at a photo session with military leaders. The president pointed to the officers' uniforms and said, "You know what this represents? Maybe it's the calm before the storm."

In far-flung corners of the internet, some speculated that that storm was a counterstrike against the deep state. Then along came Q to turn that speculation into concrete predictions — of the arrest of Hillary Clinton, of a roundup of anti-Trump liberals, of a crackdown on child-sex-trafficking rings.

Q's missives have spread virally online ever since and, in recent weeks, QAnon followers have started turning up in public, including on Tuesday at Trump's rally in Tampa, where the president came to stump for Republican candidates. "We Are Q," said a sign held up high for the TV cameras. Several people wore Q T-shirts or held Q-supportive posters.

At the rally, clusters of angry Trump supporters shouted curses at news reporters, and later that night the president and his son, Eric, retweeted video of rally-goers chanting "CNN sucks!"

"Pray Trump mentions Q!" one user wrote on 8chan. That didn't happen, but when news coverage of the rally captured images of the Q signs and shirts, Q's supporters on Reddit and 4chan celebrated QAnon's leap from internet message boards to the president's "Make America Great Again" tour.

"QAnon is finally trending on Twitter!" one user wrote on a Reddit board called "The Great Awakening."

The scene at Tuesday's rally seemed to some a disturbing threat.

"It's an incredibly dangerous movement when the president of the United States is part of an attempt to separate people from credible sources of information," said Chip Berlet, a Massachusettsbased author and researcher on political extremism and conspiracies. "You have a large number of people who accept this information from Q, even though they don't know if there's a real person or people behind it."

Even some of Q's most avid students say they do not know if Q is, as the anonymous author of a book compiling Q's missives put it, "either the most long lasting Live Action Role Playing (LARP), a.k.a. prank, on 4chan, or indeed the biggest intelligence drop from the U.S. government to the public ever."

One regular QAnon follower wrote on Reddit that "Reading and diving into Q had me occupied for many hours. Definitively better than watching mindless TV programs. Even if it was all a lie, the entertainment value is real :)"

A compiler of Q's messages wrote that he doesn't know if the messenger is real, but he nonetheless believes: "It is clear that whoever Q may be, his statements, questions and/or insinuations paint a compelling picture," the writer concluded, "a world out to be set free from the grip of a global cabal that includes CIA, FBI, banker families and royal dynasties."

Q is not the first purported Trump-era insider who dishes online about government secrets. Since shortly after the inauguration, a Twitter account called RoguePOTUSStaff has claimed to be the voice of White House staffers "operating in secrecy to reveal hidden truths of the Trump administration."

Whether Q is an individual, a group, a spoof, or an exercise in political mischief-making, the QAnon phenomenon fits neatly into centuries of history of movements that construct elaborate conspiratorial explanations of why the world is in such trouble and how it might triumph — or collapse.

Such ideas have won popular support regularly throughout U.S. history. From the Illuminati, the 18th-century notion that a secret society was bent on sowing mayhem and revolution in Europe and later in the United States, through to the 1980s and 1990s New World Order belief in a cabal of foreign agents aiming to undermine U.S. sovereignty. And on to the

Pizzagate conspiracy theory that led a gunman to open fire in a northwest Washington pizza place last year.
Trump himself has at times purveyed conspiracy theories, notably in refusing for years to back down from his false claim that Barack Obama was not born in the United States. He also asserted without evidence that Obama had wiretapped Trump Tower, peddled the debunked idea that millions of illegal votes cost him the popular vote, and associated the father of Sen. Ted Cruz, R-Texas, with the assassin who shot John F. Kennedy.
On the QAnon message boards, users reach for another level of conspiracy ideas: Trump only feigned collusion to create a pretense to hire Special Counsel Robert Mueller, who is actually working as a "white hat," or hero, to expose Democrats' misdeeds. Barack Obama, Hillary Clinton and George Soros are planning a coup — and traffic children in their spare time. J.P. Morgan, the American financier, sank the Titanic.
"These ideas never completely die," said Michael Barkun, a political scientist at Syracuse University, who studies conspiracy theories and political extremism. "They get recycled every generation. And in America some of the most powerful conspiracy ideas deal with an enemy inside the government who is really pulling the strings, but cannot be identified."
The "Deep State," that favourite notion of Trump and his former top strategist, Stephen K. Bannon, is "a classic conspiracy idea," Barkun said, "where the conspiracy is always invisible."
Q is supposedly a renegade member of that deep state, cryptically sounding the alarm and offering hints about what horrors are being cooked up inside the gov- ernment. Q's predictions are alarming, apocalyptic even.
Last year, Q announced that the president had ordered a "state of temporary military control" accompanied by "public riots," designed "to take back our country and make America great again." This was to have happened last November. It did not.
The Illuminati loom large in QAnon, as do the Rothschilds, the wealthy Jewish family that conspiracy theorists have long vilified as leaders of a satanic cult.
Conspiracy theories are often aimed against people in power, but in Trump's case, as a longtime conspiracy buff, he more often ends up as the hero.
When Q is absent for long stretches of time, followers take note.
"Please tell me where to go," one wrote last month. "I feel lost without Q."
Some big names have bought into the fantasy. Roseanne Barr, the disgraced star of the cancelled ABC revival that bore her name, has posted messages on Twitter that appear to endorse the QAnon world view, fixating on child sex abuse.
She has sought to make contact with Q on social media and has retweeted messages summarizing the QAnon philosophy. And Curt Schilling, the former major league pitcher who now hosts a show on Breitbart Radio, tweeted about QAnon and said on his program that "I know there's something there."
Learning about Q involves entering a community of conspiracy buffs who are, naturally, deeply reluctant to step into the sunshine. The author of one book that delves into QAnon responded to an interview request with a curt "No comment." A researcher who is reported to know about QAnon turns out to be a phantom, an alias purportedly protecting the identity of another government agent.
Online books such as QAnon: The Secrets Behind the Secrets, which consists of four months worth of Q's messages, invariably have unnamed authors.
QAnon followers speculate avidly about who Q might be and where his secret identity came from. Q was, after all, the name of the gadget-making genius in many James Bond movies. And Q was the name that Star Trek creator Gene Roddenberry chose for the great and powerful galactic force that appeared in the original show in the 1960s and in the sequel series in the 1990s. In the final episode of Star Trek: The Next Generation in1994, Q poses

one final test for an otherwise doomed people. “I don’t know why anybody would confuse a mole in a so-called deep state with the omniscient, omnipotent Q,” said Brannon Braga, one of the writers of that famous final episode.

In that show, “Q was putting the captain to a test to see beyond his own limitations and perceptions,” Braga said. “It’s a test to see if humanity’s really worth being part of the intergalactic club. Ultimately, it was very uplifting — the idea that by exploring the galaxy, we are taking a step toward exploring ourselves.” Braga had never heard of QAnon. “People take these episodes and make them their own,” he said.