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THE DEVIL IS IN THE DETAILS: AN ANALYSIS OF THE SATANIC PANIC

by

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Abstract

The Satanic Panic was a period lasting from the early 1980s to the mid-1990s characterized by a series of modern-day witch trials. “Satan hunters,” emboldened by the rise of the New Right in 1980, persecuted hundreds of day care operators. Their actions propelled a Satanic conspiracy theory into the cultural mainstream and has had a lasting impact on conservative politics. This project explores how the Satanic Panic came to be, how it advanced and functioned, and how it ended. It also examines question and information often left out of Satanic Panic historiography, such as what Satanism actually is and the roles of class, gender, and race play. This project argues that Satanic conspiracism created a type of political capital that the New Right exploited to other its enemies and advance its causes. As the United States enters a new period of Satanic paranoia in the form of QAnon, understanding the most recent moral panic over Satanism and how it was used for political gain has taken on a new and urgent importance. What can we learn from The Satanic Panic to help address the problems of today?

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Introduction: The Devil We Know

In 1994, an Arkansas state prosecutor, John Fogelman, stood in a courtroom. The jury had been escorted out of the room as the credentials of one Dr. Dale Griffis were brought under scrutiny. Griffis was an expert in a most unusual subject, having written a doctoral dissertation on “Mind Control Cults and Their Effects on the Objectives of Law Enforcement.” The prosecutors began to question him, attempting to establish as an expert in the occult, especially Satanism. Griffis estimates that among the approximately seventy or so cases he has been a part of, around 80 percent of them were related to Satanism.¹

Paul Ford, the defense attorney for one of the teens on trial, soon had his opportunity to question Griffis’s credentials. After a considerable amount of leading, Ford sprang a trap on Griffis asking him what classes he took for his master’s degree. There was an awkward, long pause and Griffis answered that he took none. “No classes,” Ford continued, “Okay, between 1982 and 1984 when you became a PhD, what classes did you take?” “None,” replied Griffis. His degree was from Columbia Pacific University, a notorious degree mill closed in 2000 by a court order. After more questioning, Ford motioned to dismiss Griffis as an expert witness. The court answered that one does not need a degree to be considered an expert in a field. He would be allowed to testify as an expert on Satanism.²

Griffis’s testimony reads more like a Dresden Files novel than a trial in 1990s America. The prosecutors point to various parts of a diary where little doodles had been sketched by the defendants. Griffis confidently identified each symbol as occult iconography, a “white witch

¹ Douglass O. Linder, “The Damien Echols and Jason Baldwin Trial (February 28 - March 18, 1994): Dale Griffis,” Famous Trials, accessed October 17, 2023.

² Linder, “The Damian Echols and Jason Baldwin Trial;” Tanya Schevitz, “Marin County / Novato ‘diploma Mill’ Shut down by State,” SFGate, December 9, 1999.

pentagram” or other “pagan” symbols. A jury of twelve sat patiently on the side, absorbing all the information this alleged expert provided. Several months later, the prosecutor thunderously slammed the diary on a table and pointed to evidence presented throughout the trial used to paint the two teens as Satanists. The prosecutor insisted that each individual piece of evidence, such as listening to metal music – wearing black clothes and writing the diary– did not make one a Satanic murder, but that all together, it formed a pattern that pointed to the suspects in question as being Satanic cultists. He identified Damien Echols, as a Satanic cult leader who, with two of his friends, murdered three elementary school students at Robin Hood Hills in the name of their dark master. In a matter of hours, the jury concluded that the “West Memphis Three” were guilty and a judge sentenced them to death.

The “West Memphis Three” (WM3) case was two trials that took place over the course of 1993 and 1994. It sits at the tail end of a period known as “The Satanic Panic.” While an exact definition remains elusive, the Satanic Panic is generally considered to be a period of heightened paranoia and conspiracism about Satanic cults that waxed around 1980 and waned the middle of the 1990s.

Until the election of Donald Trump and the rise of the QAnon conspiracy, the Satanic Panic did not receive much scholarly attention. Most of the work on the Satanic Panic had been done by sociologists, journalists, literature critics, and psychologists. Feminist scholars in these fields paid especially close attention to the Satanic Panic as the rampant paranoia about Satanic cults most often directly impacted the lives of women. However, these ground-level examinations do not place the Satanic Panic in a broader historical context. The broader context of the Satanic Panic is that it is a symptom of modern right-wing ascendancy. Right-wing politics

had perhaps never been stronger and more popular in the modern era than it was in the 1980s. Only George W. Bush, in 2004, has won the popular vote in a presidential election as a Republican candidate since his father did in 1988. Reagan and George H. W. Bush won their popular votes by margins of eight to ten percent. Reagan and Bush Sr.'s popularity was part of a steadily growing trend of conservative backlash that had been rising since the 1960s.³

To be clear, accusations of Satanism were not a new development, even in the 1960s. Satanic accusations have been a consistent tool used throughout American history. While the Salem Witch Trials are perhaps the most famous example of a Satanic rumor panic, even George Washington had to answer questions about Satanic cults during the Illuminati scares of the late 1700s and early 1800s.⁴ Satanic accusations all have a deep history rooted in medieval Europe. The mother of all Satanic conspiracies is known as “blood libel,” the belief that Judaism is actually a Satanic cult unto itself and that Jews routinely sacrifice people, especially young children and virgin women, to Satan. The exact origins of blood libel are disputed. Some argue that blood libel dates back as far as the third century, during the rise of Christian Rome and the persecution of Jews. However, the term “blood libel” is believed to date to twelfth-century England and the murder of a young boy named William of Norwich.⁵ What singles out blood libel as a uniquely antisemitic accusation is that victims are allegedly murdered in a fashion similar to Jewish kosher butchering practices to obtain blood. Nearly all Satanic accusations in

³ “Election Results and Voting Information,” FEC.gov, accessed October 17, 2023; For more on conservative backlash to the 1960s see Jefferson Cowie, *Freedom's Dominion: A Saga of White Resistance to Federal Power* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2022); Axel R. Schäfer, *American Evangelicals and the 1960s* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2013); Kenneth D. Durr, *Behind the Backlash: White Working-Class Politics in Baltimore, 1941-1980* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2003).

⁴ George Washington, George Washington Papers, Series 2, Letterbooks 1754-1799, Library of Congress, accessed October 14, 2023.

⁵ For more on William of Norwich see Heather Blurton, *Inventing William of Norwich: Thomas of Monmouth, Antisemitism, and Literary Culture, 1150-1200* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2022).

history borrow from blood libel in some form or fashion. As a result, Satanic cult accusations all contain some form of antisemitic dog whistle that has tirelessly lured antisemites to lend their support to them throughout history. This was true even of the Satanic Panic, with antisemites like Pat Robertson lending their voices to a cause. Robertson's book, *The New World Order*, was laden with antisemitic tropes even if not overtly so.⁶

This is not to say that everyone who supports a Satanic conspiracy believes themselves to be an antisemite. The nature of the "dog whistle" is that it can lure people to the same cause who might otherwise be in opposition to one another. The Satanic Panic drew in a fair number of Jews to its cause. Patricia Pulling, a rabid crusader against the Satanic influence of *Dungeons & Dragons*, was a Jewish woman.⁷ During a 1989 episode of *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, a Jewish woman invited to speak on the show confessed that her family had ritually abused her in Satanic rituals. This seemingly direct admission and support for the blood libel conspiracy resulted in Oprah having to issue a public apology to the Jewish community.⁸ While it might seem paradoxical to have Jewish people and antisemites battling for the same cause, the nebulous nature of conspiracy theories means that one can read whatever they want into them. An antisemite may believe that the Satanic cults in the conspiracy are Jewish by nature, while a Jewish person may believe that Satanic cults are disconnected from ancient blood libel accusations.

Satanic accusations carry with them aspects that are unique to their time. For example, the Masonic scares of the early 1800s saw anger at elites turn to paranoia. The Catholic scares of the 1850s redirected similar concerns onto the Catholic Church. While conspiracists attacked the

⁶ Barkun, *A Culture of Conspiracy*, 126.

⁷ Pat Pulling and Kathy Cawthon, *The Devil's Web: Who Is Stalking Your Children for Satan?* (Lafayette, LA: Huntington House, 1989), i.

⁸ Jeremy Gerard, "Winfrey Show Evokes Protests," *New York Times*, May 6, 1989, sec. 1.

Freemasons over issues of class, the paranoia over the Catholic Church reflected fears over European immigration. The root cause and the targets of the conspiracy theory vary across historical eras. The 1980s saw America take a rightward turn not just politically but culturally as well. The new “Silent Majority” grew stronger since Nixon’s elections in 1968 and 1972. In 1980, Reagan continued Nixon’s work and forged a New Right that was aligned along a moral continuum rather than class lines. Yet, all was not harmonious within the Right-wing. Middle-class stress over a changing world caused them to lash out and turn against the newer, working-class conservatives in addition to continuing to assail their traditional Left-wing countercultural foes. They would all be lumped into a vast conspiracy theory that was a powerful political force throughout the 1980s and 1990s.⁹

What is a Conspiracy Theory?

The definition of a “conspiracy theory” is a subject of some debate. Numerous efforts from various different fields, especially political science, have attempted to set guidelines to define a conspiracy theory. For this project, the following criteria will be used to define a conspiracy theory:

1. *The enemy in the conspiracy has been “othered” and is seemingly devoid of all humanity.*

To a conspiracist, the enemy is wholly evil and has few other goals than to gain power and cause misery. One of the earliest historians to describe what we call conspiracy theories today, Richard

⁹ William Preston Vaughn, *The Anti-Masonic Party in the United States 1826-1843* (Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 2009); Bruce Levine, “Conservatism, Nativism, and Slavery: Thomas R. Whitney and the Origins of the Know-Nothing Party,” *The Journal of American History* 88, no. 2 (September 2001): 455-488; Joseph Crespino, *Strom Thurmond’s America* (New York, NY: Hill and Wang, a division of Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013), 11-15.

Hofstadter, expressed this idea by stating that “unlike the rest of us, the enemy is not caught in the toils of the vast mechanism of history, himself a victim of his past, his desires, his limitations. He wills... the mechanism of history, or tries to deflect the normal course of history in an evil way.”¹⁰ The foes in a conspiracy theory are akin to evil automatons. They do not often have complex personal motives and are seemingly infallible save for a few handfuls of mistakes they may make along the way. In the case of Satanic Panic conspiracism, the enemies were servants of Satan, corrupted by his power. Most were indistinguishable from literal demons, manifestations of a “cosmic evil.”

2. The enemy in the conspiracy is seemingly unaffected by forces outside of their control and instead is seen as controlling reality itself.

Conspiracy theories leave little room for happenstance or chance in their narratives. Their schemes are not foiled by bad weather or by someone betraying them. Mistakes are rare for their enemies. A classic example of this principle in action can be found in 9/11 conspiracy circles. A news agency reported the collapse of WTC 7 before it had collapsed. To those who believe 9/11 was the result of a conspiracy done by the US government, this was evidence that the news agencies were following a script and had accidentally gotten ahead of the script, rather than simply confusion going on at the ground level. Tower 7 was on fire and was believed to be on the verge of collapsing for some time before the news reported its collapse.¹¹

This same principle means that the absence of evidence is merely a confirmation of the power of their foes. In general, Satanic conspiracism holds that a literal and real Satan, an

¹⁰ Richard Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics and Other Essays* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 32.

¹¹ Barkun, *A Culture of Conspiracy*, 159-192.

ancient and powerful supernatural force, exists and influences the real world. While many Christians hold this belief and see this battle as taking place in a spiritual context, the extent to which a conspiracist sees this influence is beyond the norm. Satan is not only a spiritual threat, but he and his agents, both willing and unwitting, can be found in the secular world in such great numbers that they control vast swaths of society both nationally and globally.

3. *The conspiracy is so vast that it would be implausible that it has not been uncovered.*

The larger the conspiracy is, the more likely it is to be uncovered. This seems obvious. The more people one tells a secret to, the more people there are to leak the information. Real conspiracies tend to be small affairs among a few trusted people. Conspiracy theories often involved huge networks of people. To return to 9/11, to believe it was orchestrated by the government would require thousands of people, all of whom were so unscrupulous that they have said nothing in the decades since the event. To say this is implausible would be to put it mildly.¹²

During the Satanic Panic, the conspiracists' foes formed a global conspiracy. The Church of Satan, serial killers, daycare workers, musicians, communists, and others were all part of the conspiracy, working with a real and powerful supernatural demon. It was a network so vast that evidence for it should have been everywhere. There would have been compounds with the bones of dozens of sacrificed infants found across the country. Miles of underground tunnels and temples would have been discovered. The stories of these supposed "cult survivors" should have easily been verified with routine background checks. Yet, this was never the case. Bones were never found. Tunnels were never discovered. Background checks always contradicted the accounts of alleged cult survivors.

¹² Barkun, *A Culture of Conspiracy*, 159-192.

4. *The conspiracy is almost universally in contrast with mainstream interpretations of events, people, or organizations. Conspiracists are always out to find the “real story.”*

Michael Barkun, a political scientist who has studied conspiracy theories, wrote that: “Nothing is as it seems. Appearances are deceptive, because conspirators wish to deceive in order to disguise their identities or their activities. Thus the appearance of innocence is deemed to be no guarantee that an individual or group is benign.” As Barkun explains, conspiracists have to mold the world around them to fit their narratives. Games such as *Dungeons & Dragons*, by all observable evidence, were simply dice games where one pretends to be some fantastical creature. For Satanic conspiracists in the 1980s, this was simply the surface. It was what TSR, the publisher of the game, used to hide its real intentions. The absence of evidence is evidence unto itself for a conspiracist.¹³

These four criteria are more akin to guidelines than hard rules. Creating a line where healthy skepticism ends and paranoia begins is not one that can be drawn objectively. There is not a magic number of alleged conspirators that will make something into a conspiracy theory. Where exactly that line is drawn varies from person to person. For some, conspiracism around the assassination of John F. Kennedy is more plausible than something like the Flat-Earth conspiracy. Mick West, a video game developer who has devoted his life to deconverting conspiracists, has many examples of this in his book *Escaping the Rabbit Hole*.

People who believe in conspiracy theories are not necessarily unintelligent or in some way mentally ill. When Igor Lanis shot his wife, his daughter, and his dog in 2022, an act his other daughter blamed on QAnon, the immediate instinct of many was to assume that Lanis was

¹³ Michael Barkun, *A Culture of Conspiracy: Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary America*, 2nd ed. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2013), 3.

mentally unstable. This may have been true, and we will likely never know but it must be noted that mental illness and low intelligence are not requirements to believe in seemingly outlandish ideas. To use an extreme example, most studies of the psychological tests given to famous Nazi war criminals during the Nuremberg trials indicate that the Nazi leadership was, in all likelihood, perfectly sane and virtually indistinguishable from the average person in their testing.¹⁴

What is reasonable to believe for a person depends on a lot of varying criteria, including the culture they are immersed in. The rabbit hole of conspiracism pulls in the sane and insane alike. Mick West compares conspiratorial circles to being in a religion. They provide social support and friendship. They are unified by their beliefs. Belief in conspiracy theory correlates highly with feelings of being a social outsider and those individuals are likely to seek comfort where possible, including within conspiratorial circles. It might seem odd, conspiratorial narratives are often of comfort to those who believe in them. The idea that the world is controlled by omnimalevolent forces provides meaning to events that would otherwise seem random or outside of one's ability to influence and control. For those who embraced conspiracy during the Satanic Panic, seemingly senseless events could be given greater meaning within the conspiracy. For example, Patricia Pulling gave meaning to the tragic suicide of her son by blaming his death on roleplaying game *Dungeons & Dragons* and its "Satanic influences." Bink's death was not simply an act we may never fully understand, it was part of a vast conspiracy, a conspiracy she could fight against. This gave purpose to her suffering.¹⁵

¹⁴ Jack El-Hai, "The Nazi and the Psychiatrist," *Scientific American*, February 20, 2024; Kim Belware, "QAnon 'Rabbit Hole' Led Father to Shoot Daughter, Kill Wife, ...," *Washington Post*, September 12, 2022.

¹⁵ Mick West, *Escaping the Rabbit Hole: How to Debunk Conspiracy Theories using Facts, Logic, and Respect*. New York, NY: Skyhorse Publishing, 2023; Michael J. Wood and Karen M. Douglas, "Conspiracy Theory Psychology: Individual Differences, Worldviews, and States of Mind," in *Conspiracy Theories and the People Who Believe Them*, ed. Joseph E. Uscinski (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2019), 245–56.

Satanism and Assumptions of this Work

The Satanic Panic conspiracy incorporates Christian ideas about a literal Satan. Drawing a line between mundane, non-conspiratorial religious beliefs and conspiracism is more the realm of theologians and religious scholars than historians. This work will assume that the supernatural and the divine are not active forces at play in history. The conspiracy put forward in the Satanic Panic is assumed to be untrue. However, this assumption is not simply born from a rejection of the supernatural. There has never been any substantial evidence that supports a vast, interconnected, global network of Satanic cultists, as supported by numerous investigations, including a decade-long investigation conducted by the FBI.¹⁶ However, none of this means that Satanic cults are not real or that Satanists have not committed horrible crimes. Previous works on the Satanic Panic have often neglected to mention people and organizations that have killed in the name of Satan. David Berkowitz and Richard Rameirez are both famous serial killers who claim that what they did was the work of Satan, with Rameirez famously shouting “Hail Satan!” in the courtroom.¹⁷ Los Narcosatánicos, a Satanic cult and drug cartel, murdered a University of Texas student in Mexico, triggering an avalanche of occult crime bills in the late 1980s across several US states. The list of people in prison who blame Satan for their actions is substantial.¹⁸

There are many people who also claim to have killed in the name of various gods, including the Christian god. Most would make a distinction between the bulk of mundane followers of a religion and the extremists who kill in their god’s name. Satanism is not often afforded this luxury, yet the vast majority of Satanists are not murderous, evil people. The reality

¹⁶ Department of Justice and Kenneth V. Lanning, Investigator’s Guide to Allegations of “Ritual” Child Abuse § (1992).

¹⁷ Robert W. Stewart, “‘Hail Satan!’ Yells Suspect in Killings : Ramirez Shouts as He Leaves Court After Plea of Not Guilty to Night Stalker Murder Charges,” *Los Angeles Times*, October 25, 1985.

¹⁸ For more on the murder of Mark Kilroy see Jim Schutze, *Cauldron of Blood: The Matamoros Cult Killings* (New York, NY: Open Road Media, 2023).

of organized Satanism today is probably far less interesting and sinister than the conspiracist imagines it to be. The Church of Satan and most prominent Satanic organizations do not believe in a literal Satan and are in fact atheistic. Instead, Satan is simply a fictional figure that represents rebellion, in a way similar to the romanticized tale of Robin Hood. Today, one is more likely to find a professed Satanist erecting comical demonic effigies next to Christmas manger displays to protest what they see as violations of church and state rather than sacrificing young virgins to attain magic powers. There are a few organizations that do believe in a literal Satan. The Temple of Set, a splinter of Anton LaVey's Church of Satan, is perhaps the most prominent theistic Satanic group in the world. These major organizations, the Church of Satan and the Temple of Set, make a clear distinction between themselves and those who kill in the name of Satan. In fact, the Church of Satan proclaims that these types of cults are not "Satanists" but rather "devil worshippers" and regard them with disdain.¹⁹ Real Satanists differ greatly from the imagination of their conspiracist detractors.

Satanic conspiracists of the 1980s proposed a near universal network of cultists working in concert. They saw Satanism as so widespread and evil that it was lurking in every shadow. The Satanism envisioned by the conspiracist is one that is always masterminded by a supernatural Satan. One is lured into the cult slowly via mundane things like metal music and roleplaying games. Eventually one is driven to kill for their dark master or is perhaps saved by the power of the Christian god. The complex nature of real Satanism was lost to the conspiracists of the 1980s. Wherever Satan or demons were mentioned was surely connected to a grander narrative being driven by Satan's cosmic evil. The Soviet Union, metal music, roleplaying games, violence on television-- all were a part of a web of Satanic evil.

¹⁹ Geraldo. "Devil Worship..." 0:23:30-0:25:00.

Race, Class, Sex, Gender, Satan: Intersectionality and the Satanic Panic

The Satanic Panic, so often overlooked, has seldom had any form of intersectional analysis applied to it, with the lone exception of sex and gender aspects applied by feminist scholars. Feminist scholars, during the Panic and the decades after, have long reflected on the battles lost in the 1980s, particularly the aftermath of the defeat of the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA). While mainstream history taught in classrooms at the collegiate level often includes the end of the ERA battle, the forces that fought over it did not stop their struggle there. Feminist and conservative women continued to clash and fight throughout the 1980s. While these battles included many different facets, such as the struggle over pornography, Satanic Ritual Abuse (SRA) and the daycare panics brought on by Satanic conspiracism became key battlegrounds for women during the period. As a result, feminist scholars have devoted considerable time and effort to understanding the sex and gender components of the Satanic Panic in ways few other researchers have.

Class and race are two facets of the Satanic Panic which have received almost no attention in analyses of it. The impact of class is apparent in nearly every aspect of the Satanic Panic. Most, if not all, Satanic Panic criminal cases were charges brought by wealthier people against poorer people and community outsiders. This aspect of Satanic accusations goes back centuries. It was often the estranged and poor who were brought forth as witches and warlocks in Europe's medieval period. In the decades leading up to the Salem Witch Trials, neighboring Connecticut targeted Quakers with harsh laws and witchcraft accusations. Notably, not all accusations of devil worship in history have been along class lines. The Knights Templar, a wealthy and powerful order of the Catholic church during the Europe Middle Ages, were accused

of devil worship and destroyed by King Phillip I of France for blatantly political and financial reason. The Salem Witch Trials were a combination of these two strands of Satanic accusations. Outsiders to the community, such as Natives and Africans, were accused in the trial while others sought to gain financially from accusing their neighbors. Accusations of devil worship have been used as While accusations of Satanism were also leveled at certain elites during the Satanic Panic (famous musicians, wealthy business owners, and politicians), criminal charges were almost exclusively leveled at poor individuals like daycare operators and the poorest of the poor in a given community. The wealth divide between the two need not even be that great. In West Memphis, the parents of the murdered children were on the upper end of the lower-class, while the family of the accused teens were nearer the bottom of the economic ladder. As the mother of Damien Echols said during the Trial of the West Memphis Three: “If we had money, do you think these three boys would’ve been picked up?”²⁰

Race is another element of the Satanic Panic that has not been closely examined yet. It is perhaps one of the more perplexing elements to it. The people who were charged criminally as part of the Satanic Panic were overwhelmingly white and lower-class. This was anomalous. Accusations of Satanism have been consistently levied at people of color in American history. Native Americans, Hispanic Catholics, and enslaved Africans have all been the targets of various claims of devil worship. Indeed, imagery of Black voodoo practitioners was used in several Satanic Panic propaganda TV specials, including Geraldo Rivera’s “Satan’s Underground.”²¹ Yet,

²⁰ Gabriel F. Benzecry and Marcus Shera, “The King’s Gambit: Rationalizing the Fall of the Templars,” *Rationality and Society* 35, no. 2 (March 2, 2023): 167–90; *Paradise Lost: The Child Murders at Robin Hood Hills*, Amazon Prime (HBO, 1996), 1:30:10-19, Richard S. Ross, *Before Salem: Witch Hunting in the Connecticut River Valley, 1647-1663* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2017), 195-209; For more on the Salem Witch Trials see Benjamin C. Ray, *Satan & Salem: The Witch-Hunt Crisis of 1692* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2017).

²¹ “Devil Worship: Exposing Satan’s Underground,” broadcast, *Geraldo Rivera Special* (NBC, 1988), 0:24:00-0:26:00.

when it came to the criminal cases that resulted from the Satanic Panic, almost none of the victims have been people of color.

A likely explanation for this is that mechanisms were already in place to remove people of color from communities that felt threatened by them. Why accuse a Black man of being a Satanist when one could more easily accuse him of being a ‘gangster?’ Despite the limited success of Satanic Panic court cases, the majority of cases failed because many Americans struggled to embrace the Satanic conspiracy in its entirety. Proving someone was a Satanist in court often failed to be a compelling enough motive for a jury to convict. Whereas being a ‘gangster’ or a ‘welfare cheat’ had more understandable and believable motives for a jury to convict when other evidence was weak. However, being a ‘gangster’ and being a ‘Satanist’ are not mutually exclusive. It is possible that there was a slew of court cases in which prosecutors pursued more mundane criminal characterizations of defendants as opposed to Satanic ones because it would have been easier to sell to a jury. In this way, African Americans and other minorities could have been extensive victims of the Satanic Panic but may remain forever from view. In either case, being labeled a ‘gangster’ or ‘super predator’ or ‘Satanic cultist’ were all born from right-wing cultural persecution. Whatever the case maybe, by 1988, Satan hunters like Patricia Pulling argued against the idea that Black and other minorities were more likely to be Satanists. To her detractors she wrote that “almost without exception, the teenagers most likely to become involved in satanic activity are white males from middle- and upper-income families.”²²

Despite this, The Satanic Panic was not race blind or strictly an intraracial white struggle. People of color are present in the Panic at all levels from victims of it to perpetrators. Most conspiracies can bring together strange bedfellows. The Satanic Panic was no exception. Black

²² Pulling and Cawthorn. *The Devil's Web*, 34.

policemen told Geraldo all about the bizarre Satanic crimes they encountered working in San Francisco. Centrist feminists allied with hardline religious conservatives over the validity and reality of Satanic Ritual Abuse (SRA) allegations. The Satanic Panic was useful to people in various positions, allowing for unity across political and racial divides against common, if fictitious, foes.²³

Chapter Breakdown

Beyond the Satanic Panic itself, the history leading up to it is largely incomplete. Since most histories begin with the 1980 book *Michelle Remembers*, they often neglect the growing concern about Satanism leading up to it. Chapter 1, “Anno Satanas, 1964-1978,” will provide the history of Satanism and the concerns about it leading up to the 1980s, placing it into the greater context of the growing trend of conservative backlash that spawned the Satanic Panic.

Chapter 2, “The New Inquisition, 1979-1987,” will cover the initial rise of the Satanic Panic from 1980 to 1988. This chapter will examine the fracturing of the feminist movement in the early 1980s after the success of the STOP ERA movement and the rise of the New Right. These developments created fertile ground for the Satanic Panic to spread. From there, it will cover the rise of Satanic Rituals Abuse accusations and other occult crime crusades.

Chapter 3, “Dousing the Flames, 1988-1996”, will cover the slow downfall of the Satanic Panic from 1988 to 1996. With major defeats in the McMartin Trial and investigative journalism from newspapers, the influence of Satanic conspiracists began to wane. However, conspiracists scored a major victory in West Memphis that stood as a testament to a potential future had those who opposed the Satanic Panic been less vigilant.

²³ “Devil Worship,” 0030-00:38; Jeffrey S. Victor, *Satanic Panic: The Creation of Contemporary Legend* (Chicago, IL: Open Court, 1996), 224-225.

Finally, the conclusion, “Second Coming of the Antichrist,” will examine how the Satanic Panic fits into broader patterns of allegations. Satanic accusations are not strange or new, but are ever present. Today, these allegations have taken a new form in the QAnon meta-conspiracy. While the Satanic Panic and QAnon are similar, they also have some significant differences.

Chapter 1: Anno Satanas

Following the end of World War II in 1945, the United States found itself thrust into unfamiliar territory. The great empires of Europe had largely collapsed and continued to crumble. While the United States was originally the lone world power with atomic weaponry, the Soviet Union obtained the bomb just a few short years later in 1949. A hard-won peace soon gave way to simmering tension with the Eastern Bloc that threatened to boil over into nuclear war. At the helm of a new world order opposed to the Soviet Union was the United States, a newborn superpower.

This new place in the world dramatically impacted the American homefront. For those who survived the trials of World War II, creating an idyllic atmosphere at home was of paramount concern. The Montgomery GI Bill swelled the American middle class. Veterans gained access to home loans and free college education. White picket fences and fresh cut lawns began to consume the American landscape.²⁴ Technology advanced considerably, making homelife more comfortable than it had been previously with luxuries like the washing machine and dishwasher. The desire to create domestic bliss was so powerful that when Richard Nixon faced Nikita Khrushchev in the “Kitchen Debate,” it was this new middle-class ideal that he asserted made the United States superior to the Soviet Union, not the size of its nuclear arsenal or any of its other achievements.

But American domestic life was tainted by the growing Cold War. Conspiracism ran wild in the 1950s as the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) was reinvigorated by Joseph McCarthy and others. While the patriarchal family structure was at its zenith, cracks were beginning to form in the early 1950s. Taboos about sex were questioned after the findings of

²⁴ For more on the urbanization of the United States see “Kenneth T. Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of America* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1985).”

Alfred Kinsey in 1953 gained public attention. His research showed that most Americans did not strictly adhere to culturally enforced sexual norms. Homosexual encounters, masturbation, extramarital and premarital sex, and other taboos were widespread and called into question what qualified as “normal” sexual behavior. *Playboy* hit newsstands that same year, selling sex across the nation. A desperate struggle by moralists to contain sexual liberation began. In 1953, The Eisenhower administration began an extensive purge of suspected homosexuals from the government. While Eisenhower lambasted McCarthy for his bombastic approach to rooting out communists, the only substantial difference between their methods was that one was quieter. Tension was mounting both culturally and politically.²⁵

By the 1960s, the pressure became too much to bear which caused the decade to explode into multiple cultural revolutions. The 1963 book by Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, helped propel a nascent feminist movement to new heights. The struggle to end Jim Crow and systemic racism intensified as Black veterans received a much smaller portion of the wealth generated in the postwar era compared to their white counterparts. At the 1963 March on Washington, Martin Luther King Jr. declared that he had a dream. Five years later in 1968, he died, assassinated while fighting for the rights of sanitation workers in Memphis, Tennessee. His assassination was one of many throughout the decade, a list that included both Kennedy brothers.

During this chaos was *Anno Satanas*, the first year of the Church of Satan’s calendar. While the church owes its existence to the social upheaval created by the New Left, LaVeyan Satanism was ultimately a belief system of the extreme Right that praised Hitlers and other

²⁵ James T. Patterson, *Grand Expectations: The United States, 1945-1974* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press Inc, USA, 1998), 355-61; Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War*, Revised Edition (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2017), 89-108; David K. Johnson, *The Lavender Scare: The Cold War Persecution of Gays and Lesbians in the Federal Government* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2023), 119-146.

fascists for embracing “strength.” It rejected “New Age” philosophies and religions as foolish endeavors that embraced weakness. This frightening ideology was not the product of communist plotting, but rather a continuation of Libertarian Right ideologies. The creation of the Church of Satan and the spread of occult themes in popular music mingled with long-standing evangelical conspiracism throughout the 1960s and 1970s to create the witch hunt that began in the 1980s. The Satanic Panic’s origins are rooted in the same conservative backlash that led to the New Right.²⁶

The Rise of Pop-Satanism: Satanic Influence in Culture and Popular Media

In 1967, a young girl, age three, stood in a dark room. Her father stood before her in sinister-looking robes, complete with a set of horns jutting out from the side of the hood. A woman disrobed and stood before the man, before at last laying down to form a nude living altar for the ceremony. The man tapped his daughter five times with a sword. Hooded priests circled and chanted. They at last came together, then dispersed, ending the baptism. Beyond the priests and the child, the room was filled with the press. The man in the horned robe, the high priest, repeated the ceremony three times for them, allowing photos to be taken from multiple angles.²⁷ The man was Anton Szandor LaVey and the girl was his daughter, Zeena Lavey. The previous year, LaVey had founded the Church of Satan, considered the first Satanic religion in the world.

However, to many in the United States, the era of Satan had already begun. The relative bliss of post-World War II America had given way to the turbulence of the 1960s. Alongside the consumerism boom, the baby boom, and the housing booms, the postwar era also contained a religious boom. Over half of Americans attended church regularly by just 1950 after a decline

²⁶ Anton Szandor LaVey and Peter H. Gilmore, *The Satanic Bible* (New York, NY: William Morrow Paperbacks, 1976), 59-63.

²⁷ David Lamb, “‘Sorcerer’ Baptizes Child in Bizarre Anti-Religious Rites,” *Red Bluff Tehama County Daily News*, May 24, 1967.

during the Great Depression. By 1959, it was 69 percent, most of whom were Protestant.²⁸ By 1971, the *New York Times* reported that adult church attendance had dropped to nearly forty percent and that only thirty percent of eighteen- to twenty-nine-year-olds attended church. This figure remained stable through 1975.²⁹ This trend has largely continued, even in the face of Right-wing resurgence in the 1980s. In 2020, even those who simply claim membership in a church dropped below the majority in the United States for the first time. The gains of Christian America since World War II were cut roughly in half over the course of the 1960s as religious authority was challenged. Religion's popularity has never fully recovered.³⁰

Some claim that the decline came largely from two left-aligned forces: The New Left and the liberal establishment. The liberal establishment dealt a few blows to religious authority and moral crusaders through the Warren Court. *Engel v. Vitale* in 1962 concluded that prayer could not be required in public schools. *Jacobellis v. Ohio* in 1964 narrowed criteria that could pass the Roth Test, the standard by which a piece of material could be judged "pornographic." This allowed for greater flexibility in presenting taboo subjects. In 1965, the court ruled that married and unmarried people had a right to privacy when it came to the use of contraceptives.³¹

One of the last decisions of the Warren Court, *Stanley v. Georgia* in 1969, ruled that people had the right to view whatever they wished in their own homes, including pornography. Following this controversial ruling, President Johnson ordered the creation of the President's Commission on Obscenity and Pornography. The commission concluded, among other things,

²⁸ James T. Patterson, *Grand Expectations: The United States, 1945-1974* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press Inc, USA, 1998), 329.

²⁹ Kenneth A. Briggs, "Young Adult Church Attendance Found Stabilized in a Gallup Poll," *New York Times*, January 4, 1976.

³⁰ Jeffrey M. Jones, "U.S. Church Membership Falls Below Majority for First Time," Gallup.com, May 31, 2023.

³¹ For more on the Warren Court see Bernard Schwartz, *The Warren Court: A Retrospective* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1996); Patterson, *Grand Expectations*, 566-67.

that pornography appeared to have no harmful effects on adults and that laws prohibiting its sale to adults should be repealed. When Congress overwhelmingly rejected these findings, the report's author published it in a book the following year. It rapidly became a bestseller. Regardless of Congress's lack of cooperation, the damage was done. The report was held up by detractors as an example of the government attempting to suppress scientific truth.³²

While the liberal establishment of the 1960s hampered religious influence through legal and legislative means, the New Left challenged religion at a more grassroots level. This conflict most often centered around what would later become known as "family values" politics. Religious conservatives framed their positions as being in defense of "family" and painted numerous enemies, especially feminists, as opponents of the family. Their concept of family was somewhat idealized. In their view, families were meant to be patriarchal. Men worked out of the home and handled the public sphere. Women were to be subservient to men, maintain the household, and care for the children. Children were to be brought up according to biblical teaching and taught Christian morals. Feminists challenged this view. While radical feminists were perceived as the greatest threat for questioning everything from marriage to the nuclear family, even moderate feminists who questioned the role of the "male breadwinner" were still considered a threat. In this way, advancing the rights of women, sexual liberation, and anything that did not comply with Christian teachings made one an enemy. Historian Robert Self wrote that "breadwinner conservatism was a true ideology, impervious to reason and nuance." To the Conservative Christian, feminism could not coexist with religious conservatism as there was no room for secular reason.³³

³² The Report of the Commission on Obscenity and Pornography § (1970).

³³ Robert O. Self, *All in the Family: The Realignment of American Democracy Since the 1960s* (New York, NY: Hill and Wang a division of Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013), 276-279.

This version of family did not reflect any previous period in American history. In fact, the strictness with which post-war conservatives held to this ideal image of family was new. Men were not always patriarchs who could single-handedly care for their families financially. The Great Depression had forced many women into the workplace and into the public sphere so families could survive. The war itself saw women move into traditionally male dominated work, like factory jobs. Human sexuality has never been restricted by marriage. Extramarital and premarital relations have always been common fixtures in American society. In some places like New York, queer sexual relations and fluid gender identities were even publicly visible with large drag balls held annually.³⁴ Children throughout history, barring some extreme circumstances, have never been totally ignorant about sex until they marry the love of their life. In many ways, the New Left was advocating for the normalization of things that already existed. This made the religious conservatives of the 1960s not “conservative.” Historian Richard Hofstadter pointed out this phenomenon as early as 1955 in *The Pseudo-Conservative Revolt*. While Hofstadter focused on the politics of these so-called “pseudo-conservatives,” the same principle can extend to their outlook on family: they cling to an older values system with a new level of ferocity and strictness that made their position new.³⁵

While family-values conservatives couched their arguments in religious overtones, their opponents were almost universally secularists. The language of the New Left was often not one of religious conviction, except for some elements within the struggle for racial equality such as Southern Christian Leaders Conference (SCLC). While some elements in the Civil Right Movement adopted the language of religion and used Black churches as community organizing

³⁴ For more on queer history before Stonewall see George Chauncey, *Gay New York: The Making of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940* (London, UK: Flamingo, 1995).

³⁵ Richard Hofstadter, “The Pseudo-Conservative Revolt,” *The American Scholar Reader* 24, no. 1 (1954): 9–27.

centers, such as the Deacons for Defense, Christian doctrine was not their primary tool of resistance. In the case of the Deacons, the practice of armed self-defense was at the heart of their means of resistance.³⁶ The feminist movement of the 1960s was not combating the Right using scripture nor were advocates for sexual liberation. Their arguments rejected Christian doctrine out of hand. LaVey's Church of Satan also rejected Christian doctrine, though it was not entirely secular. To understand the unique position of the Church of Satan in the 1960s, one must have a basic understanding of the history that led to LaVey's movement.

There had been a long-standing view of Satan as a heroic, mythical figure going back nearly two centuries. As argued by Peter Schock in *Romantic Satanism*, the interpretation of Satan as a heroic figure can be traced back to the French Revolution. The notion of a fallen angel that rebelled against divinely granted authority took on a different meaning to the radicals of that era.³⁷ Rather than being a malevolent figure, Satan was seen as a tragic hero. Ruben Van Luijk expanded on Schock's work. Luijk added that throughout the nineteenth century, these Romantic Satanists, while not worshippers of Satan, continued to portray Satan in a more positive light. To these individuals, most of whom were poets and fiction writers, Satan represented their struggle to assert freedom over religious authorities. This was especially true of sexual liberty and scientific truth, both of which challenged religious authority. Romantic Satanism was maintained only by a small group of radical writers and was not a widespread movement. Still, with many of these writers achieving some recognition, they had an impact on culture disproportionate to their size due to their popularity amongst elites, even drawing the ire of European politicians at times.

³⁶ For more on the connection between the Civil Rights Movement and religion see Davis Houck and David Dixon, eds., *Rhetoric, Religion, and the Civil Rights Movement: 1954-1965* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2006); Lance E. Hill, *Deacons for Defense* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2004).

³⁷ Peter A. Schock, *Romantic Satanism: Myth and the Historical Moment in Blake, Shelley, and Byron* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).

Admiration of Satan had a long-standing, if small, tradition in American and European literature to draw from.³⁸

In its own history, the Church of Satan adds that America was undergoing an “occult revolution” at the time, something echoed even louder in the early 1970s by mainstream media.³⁹ The taboo was becoming more permissible as religious authority was challenged and suffered defeats in the public arena. While LaVey’s church was made possible by the radical left changing the political and cultural landscape, its own internal ideology was not left leaning. LaVey borrowed extensively from libertarian thinkers and was himself a neo-fascist. LaVeyan Satanism emphasized individual power and self-reliance as sacred ideals. It shunned collectivist ideologies like communism and socialism. The church’s teachings were partly influenced by one of the founding mothers of modern libertarianism, Ayn Rand, and her “Objectivist Movement.”⁴⁰ Rand argued against the standard conservative narrative that capitalism and Christianity were intertwined, balancing forces. In this narrative, religion checked the worst impulses of capitalism. To Rand, capitalism and Christianity were diametrically opposed forces. The free market was a pseudo-spiritual realm that Christianity interfered with. *The Book of Satan*, the first book of the Satanic Bible, assailed Christianity and its teachings in a similar fashion. LaVey mocked the “seven deadly sins” of Christianity arguing that there was nothing wrong with being greedy or pursuing self-satisfaction. Both the Objectivist movement and the Church of Satan advocated for social Darwinism, an ideology from the nineteenth century used to justify class inequality, racial segregation, and even the racial science of the Nazi party. Despite LaVeyan

³⁸ Ruben Van Luijk, “Sex, Science, and Liberty: The Resurrection of Satan in Nineteenth-Century (Counter) Culture,” essay, in *The Devil’s Party: Satanism in Modernity*, ed. Per Faxneld and Jesper Aagaard Petersen (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2013), 41–52.

³⁹ Blanche Barton and Peter H. Gilmore, *We Are Satanists: The History and Future of the Church of Satan* (La Quinta, CA: Aperient Press, 2021), 287.

⁴⁰ Barton and Gilmore, *We Are Satanists*, 326.

Satanism's ideological similarity to Ayn Rand and the libertarian Right, the Church of Satan was incompatible with religious conservatism. Though Rand remains ostracized by the Religious Right, her reputation with the Libertarian Right has remained strong over the decades. In 2005, future Republican Speaker of the House, Paul Ryan, stated that Rand was the reason he got involved in politics. However, he later disavowed her to gain broader appeal to religious conservatives. Despite the similarities between Rand and LaVey's philosophies, LaVeyan Satanism has never had the mainstream appeal that the Objectivist movement had.⁴¹

This was not an unexpected outcome to LaVey. It was clear that LaVey wanted Christians as his enemy and was unwilling to broker tolerance for political gain in the same way as the Objectivists. Many of the rituals, such as his daughter's baptism, were designed to put on a show for the press. To LaVeyan Satanists, rituals are "theatre" meant to evoke emotion.⁴² LaVey rejected Christianity for many of the same reasons that other eugenics advocates, like Adolf Hitler and Ayn Rand, did. He argued that it made people weak and tolerant of weakness. LaVey was directly involved with the National Renaissance Party, a neo-Nazi group that wanted to replace Christianity with a religion of "strength." Beyond LaVey, many members of the Church of Satan were deeply connected to white nationalist movements across the nation in the 1960s and 1970s. Occult groups like LaVeyan Satanists and many modern Odinists often attach themselves to right-wing white nationalist and neo-Nazi organizations in an effort to supplant Christianity. While this may seem peculiar given the power of far-right conservative Christianity,

⁴¹ LaVey and Gilmore, *The Satanic Bible*, 22-24; Jennifer Burns, *Goddess of the Market: Ayn Rand and the American Right* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2009), 175-178; Rachel Weiner, "Paul Ryan and Ayn Rand," *The Washington Post*, August 13, 2013.

⁴² Barton and Gilmore, *We Are Satanists*, 498.

many white nationalists see the religion as not being “white.” They intentionally look for alternatives like Odinism and Satanism to “purify” their beliefs.⁴³

Despite the theatrics to garner attention, the Church of Satan never grew large enough to draw the full attention of their fundamentalist foes. The New Left remained the focus of the nascent religious Right. This was perhaps because beyond their religious schism, LaVeyan Satanism and Christian conservatives were not fighting for substantially different political goals. Still, the public watched on with a macabre fascination. In the year following the founding of his Church, LaVey and characters meant to represent him appeared in all sorts of media. In 1970, Lavey appeared on *The Joe Pyne Show*.⁴⁴ Pyne died of lung cancer a few months after interviewing LaVey, which has led to rumors that LaVey cursed Pyne. In 1972, he appeared in *TIME* magazine, the cover of which features an ominous black figure with the words “The Occult Revival” displayed on the front. Though he was not the sole focus of this lengthy article, it does feature Satanism prominently. Through the decades, until his death in 1997, LaVey regularly appeared in a variety of media. The theater of his work allowed him to garner attention for his church well above what an organization of its size would typically have been able to accomplish. Though both a plagiarist and a fascist, he was a brilliant marketer of himself and his organization.⁴⁵

One notable claim LaVey made was that he was an advisor for the film *Rosemary’s Baby* and that he appeared in the film as the Devil, though this story has been widely discredited.⁴⁶

Regardless of whether this story was true, America’s growing fascination with science fiction

⁴³ Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke, *Black Sun: Aryan Cults, Esoteric Nazism, and the Politics of Identity* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2003), 83.

⁴⁴ Joe Pyne, Interview, with audience participation, of Anton Szandor LaVey, founder of the Church of Satan, other, *The Joe Pyne Show* (Long Island City, NY: NBC, January 1970).

⁴⁵ “The Occult: A Substitute Faith,” *TIME*, June 19, 1972.

⁴⁶ Ed Park, “Rosemary’s Baby: ‘It’s Alive,’” *The Criterion Collection*, October 30, 2013.

and the occult in the 1960s inspired Ira Levin's original novel of the same name. Both the 1967 novel and the 1968 film tell the story of a woman, Rosemary, who is raped by Satan and gives birth to the antichrist. Throughout the film, she is the victim of a Satanic cult made up of her seemingly ordinary neighbors who have orchestrated her pregnancy with Satan's child. This film seems to be the origin of later depictions of cults during the Satanic Panic. However, there are earlier examples of films about similar Satanic cults such as the 1942 film *The Seventh Victim*, though it lacks the supernatural elements of the cult in *Rosemary's Baby*. The cultists were hidden in plain sight as ordinary people that secretly were working towards their sinister ends. This depiction of Satanic cults fits well with conspiratorial outlooks. Fictional works often become a form of evidence for people, or at least viable examples to use when examining the real world. For example, politicians have often invoked *1984* and similar works when voicing opposition to certain policies they believe are leading to a similar future.⁴⁷

The effects of *Rosemary's Baby* were even of concern to Ira Levin, the novel's author. In the afterword to the 2003 edition of the novel, he wrote that "the success of *Rosemary's Baby* inspired *Exorcists* and *Omens* and lots of et ceteras. Two generations of youngsters have grown to adulthood watching depictions of Satan as a living reality. Here's what I worry about now: if I hadn't pursued an idea for a suspense novel almost forty years ago, would there be quite as many religious fundamentalists around today?" Levin was inundated with letters from angry Christians around the nation.⁴⁸ Stories about how one could escape a *Rosemary's Baby*-type scenario became popular in the film's aftermath. In 1972, *The Satan Seller* was published, one of the first in a string of allegedly true stories of people escaping Satanic cults by embracing Christianity

⁴⁷ Hunter Schwarz, "Sales Are Spiking for '1984,' but It Has a Long History in Politics," CNN, January 26, 2017.

⁴⁸ Ira Levin, "Stuck with Satan": Ira Levin on the Origins of *Rosemary's Baby*," The Criterion Collection, November 5, 2012.

and the power of Jesus. Mike Warnke rode the wave of success from his book until 1992, when *Cornerstone Magazine* published an expose that debunked his story. Fundamentalists clamored for stories like *The Satan Seller*. This fueled the continued growth of “Pop-Satanism.”⁴⁹

Pop-Satanism is the modern embrace of Satanic imagery for “shock value.” The late 1960s produced a subculture around metal-music that strongly embraced Satanic imagery. Bands like Black Sabbath, Judas Priest, KISS, and AC/DC all rose to prominence in the 1970s. The concern over this music only continued into the 1980s and 1990s. These metal bands embraced Satanic imagery and lyrics in their music for many of the same reasons that Romantic Satanism had; however, the mantra of “sex, science, and liberty” was replaced with “sex, drugs, and rock and roll.” The metal music industry capitalized on the controversy and released numerous campy slasher films. For example, one such movie released in 1984, *Rocktober Blood*, was about a metal band’s lead singer returning from hell as a demon murder his bandmates. To the evangelical Christian, the growing visibility of Pop-Satanism and its popularity among children and teens in the form of popular music was cause for alarm. During the 1970s, Christian fundamentalists grew increasingly concerned about what their children were consuming through television, music, and other forms of entertainment. “Backwards masking,” also known as “Backmasking” or putting messages on records that can only be heard when they are played backwards, began to be of some concern to Christians at this time.⁵⁰

Adding to this trend of Pop-Satanism was the release of *Dungeons & Dragons* in 1974. The 1977 release of the *AD&D Monster Manual* for the game caused outrage amongst

⁴⁹ For more on Mike Warnke see Michael Hertenstein and Jon Trott, *Selling Satan: The Evangelical Media and the Mike Warnke Scandal* (Chicago, IL: Cornerstone Press, 1993).

⁵⁰ For more on backmasking and attempts at musical censorship see Peter Blecha, *Taboo Tunes: A History of Banned Bands & Censored Songs* (San Francisco, CA: Backbeat Books, 2004); Kier-La Janisse and Paul Corupe, eds., *Satanic Panic: Pop-Cultural Paranoia in the 1980s* (Godalming, UK: FAB Press, 2022), 173-216.

evangelical Christians because it featured actual demons from Christian mythology. The producers of the game removed mentions of demons and devils in the second edition of the *Monster Manual* and 1989. When Wizards of the Coast purchased the game in the late 1990s, they allowed, and even encouraged, references to demons and devils in the third edition of the *Monster Manual*.⁵¹ That same year the first *Monster Manual* was released, James Dallas Egbert III disappeared in the steam room tunnels beneath the campus of Michigan State. Since he was an avid Dungeons & Dragons player, critics of the game argued that Egbert entered some sort of psychosis from playing the game and believed the steam tunnels were a fantasy dungeon. Egbert was found alive after failing to commit suicide in the tunnels for reasons unconnected to the game.⁵² The truth of Egbert's disappearance did not prevent it from being exploited for profit. Rona Jaffe wrote the novel *Mazes and Monsters* in 1981. The story was a cautionary tale about the dangers of roleplaying games. The protagonist, inspired by Egbert, was a young man who became obsessed with a *Dungeons & Dragons*-like game to the point he believed he was his character. *Mazes and Monsters* was made into a television movie the following year and starred Tom Hanks in his first leading role.⁵³

While many elements of popular culture gave rise to a growing perception that Satanism was on the rise in the late 1970s, much of it was disconnected from actual Satanism. In fact, LaVeyan Satanism rapidly declined in the 1970s due to infighting. It came to light in 1975 that The Satanic Bible was heavily plagiarized from numerous sources. This revelation in the mid-1970s shattered the original church. Long brewing doctrinal issues over whether Satan was a real, spiritual entity or a representative of man's power boiled over. Michael Aquino, who later

⁵¹ Eric Grundhauser, "The 1980s Media Panic Over Dungeons & Dragons," Atlas Obscura, March 4, 2016.

⁵² "War Gamers Created Their Own Fairy Tales," *The Billings Gazette*, September 26, 1979.

⁵³ Rona Jaffe, *Mazes and Monsters* (New York, NY: Delacorte Press, 1981); *Mazes and Monsters* (Canada: McDermott Productions, 1982).

featured extensively throughout the Satanic Panic as a defender of his faith, left with a large following and formed the Temple of Set. Aquino's church believed in a literal Satan, making it the first theistic Satanic church in the world. The Black House in San Francisco that served as the home of the Church of Satan went into foreclosure and was later demolished. The Church of Satan diminished and fragmented into multiple smaller groups that would later form distinct branches of Satanism over the decades. As this was occurring, American Christians were uniting and about to turn their attention to Satanism and Satanic imagery with a fury unmatched since Salem as the religious Right came to power in 1980.⁵⁴

Red-Satan Hunters: Anticommunism and the Antichrist before 1980

The formation of the Satan hunters of the 1980s can be traced to the later half of the nineteenth century and the growing connection between communism, atheist, Satanism, and Judaism. The connection between Satanism and communism has had a longstanding precedent in American history. William E. Blackstone, an early premillennialist writer, wrote *Jesus is Coming* in 1878 about the threat of socialism and communism. In it, he wrote that “we believe... if we can rightly read the signs of the times, that the godless trio of communism, socialism and nihilism [are] preparing the way for Antichrist.” From the moment it was founded in the 1920s, fundamentalists connected the Soviet Union to the prophecies in the Book of Revelations, claiming that it was “Gog,” a nation that would betray the world during the final conflict against the Antichrist. Like the Nazis, the fundamentalists of the 1920s and 1930s strongly associated Jewishness and communism. Fundamentalists leapt to the defense of Henry Ford's publication of

⁵⁴ Eugene V. Gallagher, “Sources, Sects, and Scripture: *The Book of Satan* in The Satanic Bible,” essay, in *The Devil's Party: Satanism in Modernity*, eds. Per Faxneld and Jesper Aagaard Petersen (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2013), 103–122, 103-4.

the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. William Bell Riley, a prominent fundamentalist of the 1930s, praised Hitler for dealing with the “Jewish communists.” Satanism, communism, and Judaism were all one and the same to fundamentalists in the early twentieth century.⁵⁵

While evangelical Protestants formed the backbones of the future Satan hunting apparatus, they were not the only Christian faction making these connections. Conservative Catholics also aided these trends. Father Charles Coughlin, a Catholic priest, was on air with his infamous radio program throughout the 1920s and 1930s. The antisemitic priest assailed communism relentlessly, connecting it to Judaism. To Coughlin and his followers, communism was Satanic. Michael Kazin wrote that Coughlin saw communism as one of the “twin faces of Satan.” Coughlin even stated that the Bolshevik Revolution had been started by Satanic Jews. Coughlin and his sizable following organized into few different political movements over the period from the National Union for Social Justice to the more antisemitic Christian Front. While it is difficult to pin Coughlin and other conservative Catholics as being “conservative” in the same way Protestant Fundamentalists were, the spectrum of conservative Christians was firmly united in the idea that communism, Judaism, and Satanism were all part of one whole.⁵⁶

These two strands of conservative Christianity slowly united in the postwar era. After a string of embarrassments in the interwar period, such as the Scopes Trial, the fundamentalist movement took the lessons of the past to heart. Most fundamentalists supported the war effort and presented themselves as fervently patriotic. The term “fundamentalist” slowly fell out of favor. The term “evangelical,” while having a different meaning and longer history, became the new label for many fundamentalists looking to spread their beliefs. This time around, their

⁵⁵ Matthew Avery Sutton, *American Apocalypse: A History of Modern Evangelicalism* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2017), 8-9, 69-70, 125-127.

⁵⁶ Michael Kazin, *The Populist Persuasion: An American History* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2017), 112, 131.

doctrine was fanatically pro-war, rejecting hardline doctrinal stances in favor of American nationalism as a unifying factor. Fundamentalism emerged from the postwar era as a new Americanism that further merged Christianity, anti-communism, and right-wing ideology, embracing positions such as anti-unionism and anti-welfare. Billy Graham, perhaps the most important minister of the postwar era, continued the trend of anticommunist conspiracism. He stated that Satan himself had orchestrated the creation of the Soviet Union. He even compared the fighting between American and North Korean soldiers during the Korean War to the spiritual battle between God and Satan. Graham relentlessly painted the Cold War from the 1940s to the 1960s as a battle between Christianity and communism. Many other evangelists borrowed from the example set out by Billy Graham through the 1960s and 1970s, including Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson, two key figures in the Moral Majority of the 1980s.⁵⁷

While the clergy of various religions were preaching their newly formed Christian Americanism, a record number of Americans were listening. From the pulpit, the connection between Satanism, atheism, communism, and, in many cases, Judaism, was being made to millions of Americans every Sunday. Evangelicals aided every step of the Red Scare. In 1943, the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE), declared that Soviet infiltration into churches was of paramount concern only a year after it formed. In 1950, the NAE condemned the United Nations for being soft on communism. That same year, NAE president Frederick Fowler, who was also vice chairman of the All-American Conference to Combat Communism, warned that the United States had twice as many communists as Russia had when the Bolshevik Revolution occurred. A few years later, in 1953, the Eisenhower administration welcomed evangelicals.

⁵⁷ Daniel K. Williams, *God's Own Party: The Making of the Christian Right* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2012), 17, 19, 223; Andrew S. Finstuen, Anne Blue Wills, and Grant Wacker, *Billy Graham: American Pilgrim* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2017), 44, 223, 53.

Billy Graham served as the president's unofficial spiritual advisor and baptized him just two weeks into office. Eisenhower's rhetoric on the Cold War began to mirror that of Graham and the NAE, seeing it as a battle against Godless Atheism. Perhaps believing these things would safeguard the soul of the nation, "Under God" was added to the Pledge of Allegiance and "In God We Trust" to coinage and print currency. The Republican Party and evangelicals had largely unified by 1960, forming the basis for the later Moral Majority in 1980. In 1956, sixty percent of evangelicals voted for Eisenhower. Eighty-five percent of evangelical ministers supported him. In 1960, the vast majority of *Christianity Today*, the most prominent evangelical magazine, were Republicans.⁵⁸

During the 1960s, evangelicals, the Republican Party, and conservative Democrats worked together against many of the countercultural movements of the era. In the eyes of evangelicals, no threat was as dangerous as the feminist movement of the 1960s and 1970s. Evangelicals saw the feminist movement as being responsible for the disintegration of the American family. Feminists, in their view, were dissolving the separate spheres men and women were supposed to occupy according to Christian teaching. "Defense of the family" almost exclusively meant defense of the Christian ideal of family. While men were involved in the battle against feminism at almost every level, women were the central actors. As the National Organization for Women (NOW) pushed the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA), conservative women led the charge against it and ultimately solidified the antifeminist and feminist divide across party lines seen today. As the fight against the ERA dragged into the 1970s, conservative women poured out an abundance of literature. In 1972, Maxine Secrest published multiple articles about traditional women's roles in *Christian Crusade Weekly* and Anita Bryant published

⁵⁸ Williams. *God's Own Party*, 19, 26-28.

her book *Bless This House*. In 1973, *The Total Woman* was published by Marabel Morgan. In 1974, Helen Andelin republished *Fascinating Womanhood*. In 1976, *Let Me Be a Woman* by Elisabeth Elliot and *The Spirit-Controlled Woman* by Beverly LaHaye were both published. Their battles ⁵⁹

Beyond literature, conservative women organized throughout the 1970s in true grassroots fashion. Phyllis Schlafly began her STOP ERA (Stop Taking Our Privileges ERA) in the early 1970s. While she initially focused specifically on opposing the ERA, in 1972, she founded the Eagle Forum, a political activist group that had a broader focus than the ERA. Many of the issues the women of the Eagle Forum focused on were issues relating to family-oriented politics such as abortion and pornography. The Eagle Forum was an important organization in the build-up to the Satanic Panic. It was largely through the Eagle Forum and Schlafly that Evangelicals and Catholics began to work in concert with one another against their secular foes, especially feminists. Jerry Falwell complimented Schlafly as “the greatest leader Illinois has produced since Lincoln.” Evangelicals, conservative Catholics, and later, conservative Jews formed the rank and file of the Satan Hunters of the 1980s. Schlafly’s organization directly confronted feminists at the various state International Women’s Year conferences in the lead up to the national conference in 1977. Antifeminist activism in Oklahoma, Arkansas, and Mississippi dealt the ERA its first set of losses at the state level. When the 1977 IWY Conference in Houston took place, Schlafly and her allies hosted their own “Pro-Family” rally across town in opposition. While the feminists in Houston won the platform they desired and sent it to the president, the Carter Administration floundered on what do about the seemingly toxic issue. Ultimately, he abandoned the feminist

⁵⁹ R. Marie Griffith, *Moral Combat: How Sex Divided American Christians and Fractured American Politics* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2017); Marjorie Julian Spruill, *Divided We Stand: The Battle over Women’s Rights and Family Values That Polarized American Politics* (London, UK: Bloomsbury, 2019); Williams. *God’s Own Party*, 106-110.

cause in hopes of salvaging his dwindling popularity. However, it was too late, the battle over women's rights firmly planted antifeminists and their conservative Christian supporters in the Republican Party.⁶⁰

While feminists were fighting from a secular position for ERA, their opponents did not see it as merely a struggle between secularism and religion or simply two opposing ideas of a woman's roles in society. Rosemary Thomson, Schlafly's chief lieutenant against the ERA, was a fundamentalist woman who saw the ERA struggle as something more than a fight over women's liberation. She published the pamphlet "A Christian View of the ERA" in 1975 and a book, *The Price of LIBerty*, in 1978. Chapter 11 of her book, "Mexico City— A Blueprint," outlined her belief that the ERA and the International Women's Year (IWY) committee were Satanic plots orchestrated by communist globalists at the United Nations. She wrote the "IWY's twist to an old humanist idea is to require all women to play a major role in restructuring society into this world-wide socialistic system. Old and New Testament prophecies of a world government and an apostate religion ushering in a false peace are not difficult to imagine in light of the World Plan of Action. This proposed new society seems made-to-order for the world dictator of Revelation 13—antichrist." Thomson argued that the IWY and ERA were plots to turn women into workers that would destroy the American family, erode the strength of Christian America, and usher in the way for a socialist Antichrist. Her main form of evidence was to point out parts of the IWY Committee's recommendations such as allowing women equal pay and opportunity to work. Even the portrayal of women workers on television was part of the plan.⁶¹

Thomson made many more conspiratorial claims in her book. She claimed that "Women's Lib" wanted to totally destroy "masculinity." She wrote that the rise of homosexuality was a sign

⁶⁰ Spruill, *Divided We Stand*, 143-188, 235-261; Williams. *God's Own Party*, 116.

⁶¹ Rosemary Thomson, *The Price of LIBerty* (Carol Stream, IL: Creation House, 1978), 105-108.

of the apocalypse with Anita Bryant as a Lot-type figure sent to warn “liberal Miami” of God’s wrath. She claimed the United Nations was a precursor to a one-world government as prophesied in Revelations. She stated that MIT came up with a scientific study that would serve as a guide for forces bringing about the Antichrist. “Are we living in the days when ancient prophecies are being unsealed? Have we come full circle from Eden when the serpent beguiled Eve with the lie, ‘Ye shall be as God?’ The price of LIBerty has been grievous from the beginning!” she wrote at the end of her thirteenth chapter, “In the Last Days...” Most importantly, Thomson saw the increase in occult activity as a sign of growing apostasy. She pointed to various feminist witch organizations and the Church of Satan as examples of this increase. To her and many other evangelicals, the struggle against communism, feminism, and Satan himself were not distinct battles being fought individually but all part of one fight. The Satan-hunting apparatus of the 1980s was mostly built during the struggle over the ERA. When the ERA was fully defeated in the early 1980s, they continued to press their advantage against other perceived foes, particularly the various forms of media that contained pop-Satanic elements and anything that they perceived as a threat to the Christian ideal of family.⁶²

In the decades leading up to the 1980s, two major developments occurred that led to the Satanic Panic: the rise in visibility of Satanic imagery and actual Satanism collectively referred to a “pop-satanism” as well as the unification of conservative Christianity and the far Right into a political powerhouse. However, there were numerous genuine instances of Satanic and occult

⁶² Thompson, *The Price of LIBerty*, 119-128, 150.

related crimes that did occur in the period. It was not as though fears over cults materialized from thin air.

Charles Manson and his “family” ritually murdered pregnant actress Sharon Tate and four others in 1969. While Manson’s connections to Satanism is dubious at best, he was a believer in the occult. According to her autobiography, Sharon Atkins, one of the members of the Manson Family, once danced topless for Anton LaVey in a nightclub.⁶³ There seems to be no other connection between LaVey and the Manson family. David Berkowitz, the “Son of Sam” killer, claimed that a demon had possessed a dog and told him to murder people in the name of Satan until he was caught in 1977. For many years Berkowitz claimed he had a cult aiding him, but more recently the story has changed so that only he was the killer.⁶⁴ The Son of Sam killings drew the attention of many future Satan hunters, particularly Patricia Pulling, who sought to destroy the game *Dungeons & Dragons*.⁶⁵

However, the targets of these Satan hunters were seldom connected to any real Satanic organizations. The churches of actual Satanists like Michael Aquino and Anton LaVey were actually quite lawful organizations. LaVey was adamant that all chapters of his church be in compliance with the law. Organized Satanic religions disavow those who kill in the name of Satan, labeling themselves as “devil worshippers” and not “Satanists.” Detractors might argue that this is a flimsy excuse, that Satanism was and is an inherently dangerous ideology. Yet, few would hold other religions to the same standard. If one believes that an abortion clinic bomber

⁶³ Susan Atkins and Bob Slosser, *Child of Satan, Child of God* (San Juan Capistrano, CA: Menelorelin Dorenay’s Pub., 2005).

⁶⁴ Scott Bonn, “Serial Killer David Berkowitz, Aka Son of Sam, Tells Professor ‘I Was Once an Evil Person’ in Prison Conversation,” CBS News (CBS Interactive, March 18, 2013).

⁶⁵ Pat Pulling and Kathy Cawthon, *The Devil’s Web: Who Is Stalking Your Children for Satan* (Lafayette, LA: Huntington House, 1989), ix.

does not represent all of Christianity, then it would seem only fair that David Berkowitz should not represent all Satanists.

The assumption of the Satan hunters in the 1980s was that all appearances of Satanic imagery in our culture were one cohesive element. They were unwilling to divorce Berkowitz or Manson from demonic imagery in popular media, like metal music or roleplaying games. In their view, this Satanic conspiracy had spent decades, perhaps centuries, infiltrating American society with the aim of corrupting it for the coming of a communist Antichrist. In 1980, the Christian Right and its soon-to-be Satan hunters rode into power and crippled left-wing resistance for over a decade.

Chapter 2: The New Inquisition, 1979-1987

The New Right's witch hunt in the 1980s was an old concept adapted for the modern era. In Europe's Middle Ages, suspected witches were dragged before church sanctioned inquisitors for evaluation. These inquisitors were supposedly experts in their craft, trained to identify witches, demons, cultists, and any threat to the prevailing orthodoxy. They brandished tools of torture and consulted texts like the *Malleus Maleficarum*, the "Hammer of Witches," to help guide their decisions. They were judge, jury, and often the executioner of alleged witches and heretics. The Satan hunters of the 1980s were not dissimilar in form and function despite living in a time when witches and demons were considered fairy tales to most Americans. They formed their own texts and training regimes. They sought the validation of scholars and experts. They organized and used the legal system to hunt down the alleged cultists in their midst. Just like the witch hunts of ages past, it was often the poorest and the shunned of a community that faced the brunt of the Satan hunters' wrath in the 1980s.

The New Right's cultural and political impact created the perfect environment through which the modern witch hunt could arise. The New Right carved out a new order that crippled the American left and increased the power of evangelicals. For decades, conservative Christians long resented the permissive liberal outlook on moral matters like pornography, homosexuality, women's liberation, and yes, even Satanism. Kevin Kruse and Julian Zelizer described American history since the 1960s as a continual process of cultural fracturing and political realignment that has divided Americans further along a left-right axis. The Satanic Panic was one of many tools used by the New Right to bring about a new cultural hegemony.⁶⁶

⁶⁶ Kevin Michael Kruse and Julian E. Zelizer, *Fault Lines: A History of the United States since 1974* (New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, 2020).

Right-Wing Reconquista: The Age of the New Right

The Reconquista was a process that took nearly eight centuries in Europe. Steadily, bit by bit, various European kingdoms drove Muslim powers off the Iberian Peninsula. To hunt down and remove the remaining heretics from these realms, the Spanish Inquisition, famously one of the most brutal organizations in human history, was born. For the New Right, the presidential campaign leading up to the election of Ronald Reagan must have felt like a “Reconquista” of sorts. They fought to reclaim the cultural baton from a long-hated enemy, the liberal elite, for decades. The powerful New Deal coalition, born in the 1930s, utterly collapsed by the end of the 1960s. What would become the New Right began its final push to take control through the 1970s. At last, this “Right-wing Reconquista” was all but complete in 1980. Like the Spanish before, the Right needed to restore cultural order to its new conquest. However, to understand the Satan hunters, the modern inquisitors, the political landscapes that gave rise to them must be understood. To understand the Spanish Inquisition, one must understand the new Spanish Kingdom and its rulers. To understand the Satan hunters of the 1980s, one must understand the New Right.

For the New Right, 1979 could be considered the equivalent of 1482 in the Reconquista, when the campaign to retake the final Moorish holding, Granada, began. In November of that year, Reagan declared his candidacy for president. He had narrowly missed the nomination in 1976 and learned a great deal from his battles with Gerald Ford. Reagan’s old-fashioned charisma combined with the plummeting popularity of Jimmy Carter created the perfect storm necessary to propel a man once considered an extremist to the presidency.

Reagan was not the only New Right supported figure moving in 1979. Jerry Falwell and the Moral Majority, a coalition of ultra-conservative protestants that supported Reagan, rose to prominence. Falwell's coalition was the product of at least three decades of collaboration between evangelicals and the Right. From its onset, Falwell laid the groundwork for the Satan hunters to thrive. Even his "Moral Majority" stump speech lambasted music and drugs as part of a "satanic design to destroy our little children." Falwell and the Moral Majority brought evangelical Christian principles to the fore of American right-wing politics, and with it, Satanic conspiracism. During the 1980 presidential campaign, Falwell explained to the *Tampa Tribune* that he believed young people either joined a Christian church or a Satanic cult. He made it clear to his congregation and supporters that "Reagan was the only man running." Falwell firmly believed that Reagan was the man to make his vision of a conservative Christian America a reality.⁶⁷

Falwell's dream of a Reagan victory came true in the 1980s. This was a pivotal year for the political right in America. Having steadily gained ground since the 1960s, a New Right surged into power. Looking back at the map of his electoral victory over forty years later, his astounding four-hundred and eighty-nine electoral votes painted virtually all of the country red. However, this map belies the closeness of the race. Reagan won many states by a narrow margin. The popular vote was approximately eight million apart with Reagan at nearly forty-four million votes to Carter's thirty-five million. Forty-two percent of voters in 1980 had cast their vote for incumbent president Jimmy Carter, a much larger number than the Electoral College victory might suggest.⁶⁸

⁶⁷ Susan Friend Harding, *The Book of Jerry Falwell: Fundamentalist Language and Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001); Leon Daniel, "The Falwell Phenomenon," *The Times*, August 29, 1982; Steve Hill, "Falwell Seeking Moral Majority," *The Tampa Tribune*, August 25, 1979.

⁶⁸ "1980," The American Presidency Project, accessed February 2, 2024.

The New Right was an alarming entity, not just to the battered political left, but also to a fair number of conservatives. In 1980, Alan Pell Crawford, a conservative columnist, wrote *Thunder on the Right* to “clear his conscience” and to declare that the “New Right” did not represent him or his politics. Crawford was a William Buckley-type of conservative who lamented the bombastic attitude of individuals like Ronald Reagan. He wrote that he believed this new Reagan-led era would set back conservative causes just as Joseph McCarthy and Richard Nixon had in decades prior. Crawford’s book focused on his experience working in various conservative groups from 1973 to 1979. Crawford argued that dangerous extremists had seized the Republican party. To Crawford, the New Right did not stand for conservative principles any longer and was instead akin to populist revolt fixated on destroying its perceived enemies, which included right-wing apostates like himself.⁶⁹

“Protecting Hearth and Home: The Woman’s Place” was the title of Crawford’s fifth chapter. In this chapter, he described New Right women as the leaders in the effort to police morality on the domestic front. He credited the struggle over the Equal Right Amendment (ERA) throughout the 1970s as a training ground for these women and their allies in the Christian right. He wrote that Anita Bryant, Phyllis Schlafly, and Jerry Falwell were three figures who rose to prominence in the ERA and morality struggles of the 1970s. While Anita Bryant’s star fell in 1980 amid her divorce, Schlafly and Falwell continued their ascent to prominence in the New Right. It was this battle-hardened cadre of culture warriors that helped to spawn a witch hunt in the 1980s.⁷⁰

⁶⁹ Alan Pell Crawford, *Thunder on the Right: The “New Right” and the Politics of Resentment* (New York, NY: Pantheon Books, 1980).

⁷⁰ Crawford, *Thunder on the Right*, 144-164.

In 1979, Phyllis Schlafly and her allies convinced Congress to lock the ERA into its original timeline. This prevented the deadline for states to ratify the ERA from being further extended. In 1982, the ERA was officially defeated, just three states shy of the thirty-eight needed to pass the amendment. There was little that the feminist opponents of the STOP ERA movement could do after the 1979 failed effort to extend the deadline. Campaigning both for and against the amendment waned dramatically.

The battle over the ERA caused the reactionary right to organize like it never had before. The far-right had transformed from a shunned fringe to the mainstream of the Republican Party. Ronald Reagan, once considered an extreme and frightening candidate on par with Barry Goldwater in the 1960s, was a leading Republican presidential candidate by 1979. As historian Gil Troy wrote about Reagan, “he could make what had sounded extreme in Goldwater’s terms – and during Goldwater’s times– seem reasonable.”⁷¹ As Troy noted, Reagan’s charisma was only part of how Reagan’s Goldwater-style rhetoric came to be acceptable. The American political right had moved further right since Goldwater’s defeat in 1964, honed by the cultural conflicts of the 1960s and 1970s.

As both Troy and Crawford note in their respective books, charisma was still a key component to the success of the New Right. They made the extreme seem palatable, even sensible. Goldwater’s downfall in 1964 and Nixon’s resignation in 1974 taught many on the political right valuable lessons, the most important of which was that branding and perception was perhaps more important than even policy. Republican strategist for both Nixon and Reagan, Lee Atwater, explained this transition succinctly in 1981 when he explained in an interview that “you start out in 1954 by saying, ‘N---er, n---er, n---er.’ By 1968 you can’t say ‘n---er’ ... So

⁷¹ Gil Troy, *Morning in America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), 39.

you say stuff like... forced busing, states' rights... and you're getting so abstract. Now, you're talking about cutting taxes, and all these things... are totally economic things and a byproduct of them is, blacks get hurt worse than whites."⁷² This type of abstraction is referred to as a "dog whistle," a type of coded political speech meant to be understood by a particular group while remaining hidden from others that is typically racist in nature. In this case, Lee Atwater was explaining how Republicans garnered the support of white racists while hiding it from moderate Republicans and those on the Left. Reagan used the dog whistle extensively throughout the 1980s, using this coded language to drum up support from racist white voters.⁷³

The New Right made extensive use of dog whistles throughout the 1980s. One of the most famous was Reagan's welfare queens, which he routinely lambasted. While his anecdotes were loosely based on a woman named Linda Taylor, the details were often grossly exaggerated. The welfare queen was not an isolated instance to Reagan but rather represented a significant portion of welfare recipients. He repeatedly brought up this nebulous figure throughout his 1976 campaign and into his presidency in 1980. Reagan never mentioned the race of his welfare queen, but she was always assumed to be a Black woman. It was a dog whistle to draw racists to the conservative cause of cutting welfare while being abstract enough that right-wing moderates could continue to support the position with a clean conscience.⁷⁴

On a national level, the dog whistle was the primary way in which New Right politicians advanced Satanic conspiracism. Examples of national politicians who claimed to believe in a vast Satanic conspiracy directly during the 1980s are seemingly non-existent. Senator Jesse

⁷² Rick Perlstein, "Exclusive: Lee Atwater's Infamous 1981 Interview on the Southern Strategy," *The Nation*, December 7, 2018.

⁷³ Ian Haney Lopez, *Dog Whistle Politics: How Coded Racial Appeals Have Reinvented Racism and Wrecked the Middle Class* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2015), 55-75.

⁷⁴ "Welfare Queen' Becomes Issue in Reagan Campaign," *The New York Times*, February 14, 1976.

Helms (R-NC) was one of the few exceptions. Helms wrote the foreword to Rosemary Thomson's 1978 book, *The Price of LIBerty*, in which she described the ERA as a Satanic plot to spread communism to the United States and bring about the prophecy in Revelations. Even here, Helms himself mentions nothing about Satanism, only that he agreed with her that the family was under attack from threats like homosexuality, which was often tied to Satanism. Though Helms did not mention the prophecy of Revelations, he compared the United States to ancient Greece stating that "aversion to marriage and the family, the practices of homosexuality, infanticide, and abortion" were the causes of its downfall. "We must ask ourselves whether America is not threatened with a similar destruction," he wrote shortly thereafter, evoking apocalyptic imagery without referencing the same apocalypse as Thomson.⁷⁵ In 1985, Helms put forward a bill that passed without opposition which prevented Satanic organizations from seeking tax exempt status and from receiving federal funding. The bill passed solely by voice vote and with no debate on the Seante floor.⁷⁶

Beyond the Helms bill, 1985 was the most active year for overt Satanic conspiracism in national political discourse. The Senate held hearings on everything from metal and rock music to *Dungeons & Dragons*. These hearings were spearheaded by Senator Al Gore (D-TN) at the behest of his wife and family-values activist, Tipper Gore, the head of the Parents Music Resource Center. While the hearings were largely about sexual content in music (referred to as "porn-rock"), Satanic lyrics were also cause for concern, as much an alleged threat to the family as sexually graphic lyrics.⁷⁷ The threat of Satanism, sexual perversion, and a myriad of other perceived societal woes were all interconnected. Politicians across the spectrum linked these

⁷⁵ Thomson, *Price of LIBerty*, 5-6.

⁷⁶ "Senate Votes Against Satan," *The Daily Spectrum*, September 26, 1985.

⁷⁷ "Rock Lyrics Record Labeling." C-SPAN. Accessed February 6, 2024.

alleged threats together, which made the dog whistle particularly effective for Satanic conspiracists to latch onto. National politicians seldom needed to call out Satanic cults directly when it was more politically effective to point to homosexuality, sexually graphic music, and child predation and let the public interpret the meaning as they wished.

Despite the efforts of Helms and Gore, overt Satanic conspiracy was rare on the Senate floor. Even as the Satan hunters of the decade grew in number and influence, it was an uphill battle to convince most Americans of the full extent of the conspiracy. National politicians had to placate a broader audience and therefore could not afford to come off as raving doomsayers who believed the literal Antichrist and his Satanic minions were mere moments from seizing power. Instead, most opted to couch their support for the Satanic conspiracist in the language of family values politics.

While the New Right and the Republican Party were the primary proponents of Satanic conspiracism, the reeling political left also began to use it to their advantage to stay politically relevant throughout the period. Many who would form the basis of the “New Democrats” in the 1990s embraced many elements of family-values politics. Al and Tipper Gore showed their commitment to family-value with the 1985 “porn-rock” hearings. Bill Clinton and Hilary Clinton often targeted violent video games, with the former commissioning a study in 1999 on their full effects.⁷⁸ Though some, like Hilary Clinton, have softened their positions in the decades since, the New Democrat movement was also aiding Satanic conspiracism by embracing family-values style politics at a national level. An early and important fight in Clinton’s 1992 presidential campaign centered around recapturing the narrative of family values from the Right. Clinton

⁷⁸ John M. Broder, “Clinton Orders Study on Selling of Violence,” *The New York Times*, June 2, 1999, sec. A.

portrayed the Left as the real protectors of the family. Ultimately, he did not disagree with many of the issues the Right claimed were problems. Instead, he disagreed with their methods.⁷⁹

While national politicians played a largely indirect role in aiding the Satanic Panic, state politics saw more direct advocacy for Satanic conspiracism. This was largely for two reasons. The first was that legislators at a state level did not often represent as diverse a population as national politicians and were far more secure from any potential backlash for harboring views that would be considered extreme. Some recognized these issues well before the Satanic Panic. In 1949, Lashley Harvey of Boston University lamented that smaller, sparsely populated districts had the same recognition in state legislatures as larger metropolitan areas and often neglected to update their legislatures to reflect population changes. The second reason is that the ERA battle focused primarily on mobilizing at a state level to counter the amendment's ratification. The network that formed the New Right was already structured in a way that allowed it to move at a grassroots level in various states, particularly Florida, Ohio, and Indiana where the ERA battles were fiercest. Since the ERA struggle of the previous decade had been primarily concerned with women, women continued to play a role in state level advancement of Satanic conspiracism.⁸⁰

Joan Gubbins, a prominent state senator from Indiana, moved into a role at the Department of Education in 1980 at the request of the Reagan administration. Gubbins was a prominent ally of Rosemary Thompson and worked with her in the STOP ERA movement throughout the 1970s. Gubbins stated that she did not believe in the conspiracy put forward by

⁷⁹ Ronald Brownstein, "Clinton, Bush Step Up Debate on Family Values: Politics: Both Focus on the Issue in Cleveland Speeches. The Arkansas Governor Accuses the President of Not Helping Troubled Families.," *Los Angeles Times*, May 22, 1992.

⁸⁰ Marjorie Julian Spruill, *Divided We Stand: The Battle over Women's Rights and Family Values That Polarized American Politics* (London, UK: Bloomsbury, 2019); Catherine E. Rymph, *Republican Women: Feminism and Conservatism from Suffrage Through the Rise of the New Right* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2006); 1. Lashley G. Harvey, "Some Problems of Representation in State Legislatures," *Western Political Quarterly* 2, no. 2 (June 1949): 265–71.

Thomson, Satanic or otherwise, about the ERA. Instead, she saw the political utility of it because “it got women thinking about the problem of federal usurpation and the states.” True believer or not, her support for people like Thomson helped advance dangerous conspiracy theories for the sake of political aims.⁸¹

As the 1980s progressed, the figurative army of conservatives that had won the battle over the ERA coalesced. Conservative women continued to press their advantage against feminists. The feminist movement fractured in the 1980s after ERA collapsed and went through a period of redefining itself. As the New Democrats would later do in the 1990s, some feminists felt that finding common ground with conservative women was a better strategy.⁸² Feminist proponents of the ERA in Indiana had attempted a similar plan known as “low-key” feminism in the previous decade. They played up traditional “mom and apple pie” feminine imagery in support of the ERA. The result was that radical feminists felt alienated and conservative women remained unconvinced. The results of this tactic during the 1980s remained much the same. Feminists continued to splinter into various factions.⁸³

Gloria Steinem was the archetypal moderate feminist of the period. Steinem stood with conservatives on a number of issues including pornography and support for the existence of Satanic Ritual Abuse (SRA). Feminist organizations like “Women Against Pornography” (WAP) found strong support from evangelicals and conservatives despite protesting pornography for two separate reasons. This fracturing of the feminist movement left gaps which the New Right was able to exploit to keep their opponents divided. Radical feminists had little recourse other than to voice dissent. Debbie Nathan, a radical feminist, wrote in 1987 that feminists “have examined

⁸¹ Erin M. Kempker, *Big Sister: Feminism, Conservatism, and Conspiracy in the Heartland* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2018), 57.

⁸² Beck, *We Believe*, 132-133.

⁸³ Kempker, *Big Sister*, 57.

power arrangements inside the family, then shown how child battering, wife battering, and incest are linked to extramural violence like rape. But in the Reganite 1980s feminist consciousness raising about sexual violence hadn't led to a critique of the family; rather, it had encouraged moralism against evil people and narrowly legalistic remedies."⁸⁴ Nathan explained that feminists had done extensive work showing that it was not external factors like pornography that led to the issues women were facing but rather internal, familial issues that requires a rethinking and restructuring of the concept of family. Some feminists were abandoning what they had learned over decades to protect a patriarchal family structure and belief system they had concluded to be harmful.

As the feminist movement shattered, conservative women ascended. Phyllis Schlafly entered the battle against pornography, releasing a book titled *Pornography's Victims* in 1987. The book is mostly an edited copy of The Attorney General's Commission on Pornography that lasted from November 1985 to January 1986. The introduction, written by Schlafly, argued that no woman willingly entered adult entertainment. Schlafly accused those who believe pornography to be free speech are nothing more than abusers and deviants themselves. She argued that the United States had cleaned up the environment but that when the pollution was "of our minds and spirits," nothing was done. Schlafly's arguments in the introduction had a surprisingly left leaning, perhaps even feminist, bent to them. She argued that pornography was exploiting women and that people who "cry censorship" were working in the \$8 billion dollar-a-year pornography industry.⁸⁵ This feminist-style argument mixed with Schlafly's moralist approach

⁸⁴ Beck, *We Believe*, 136-139, 160.

⁸⁵ Phyllis Schlafly, *Pornography's Victims* (Alton, IL: Pere Marquette Press, 1987), 9-16.

could have been an attempt to reach out to disaffected feminists and bring them over to the political right.

The New Right was determined to bring about a new moral order. While the mainstream of New Right politicians and activists eagerly engaged with popular causes like opposition to pornography and homosexuality, focusing on more controversial issues like Satanic cults required more tact. Their endorsement of the Satan hunters operating under them was more indirect, conveyed via dog-whistling. To many of the supporters of the New Right, homosexuality, pornography, communism, and criminality were all well connected to Satan and Satanism. As Schlafly raged against pornography, the implication that the pornographers were in league with Satan simply went without saying, especially given that many places in the nation were undergoing Satanic Ritual Abuse trials at the time of her book's publication.

The "Right-Wing Reconquista" served very much as the setting for the new inquisitors to rise and organize. There was almost no one to stop them. The political left was shattered. Feminist groups were reeling and re-evaluating. No politician wanted to be seen as "pro-Satan" in Reagan's America. While the New Right seldom overtly ordained the Satan hunters of the 1980s, its silence on the matter was a tacit endorsement.

The Inquisitors: The Satanic Panic Begins

While the New Right's ascendancy that began in the late 1970s allowed for the Satan hunters to exist, it does not explain what exactly sparked their crusade. But this was a time of considerable unease domestically. Serial killers ran amok in the 1960s and 1970s, or at least

press coverage increased. Charles Manson and his family ran rampant in the late 1960s, murdering famous actress Sharon Tate. David Berkowitz, the Son of Sam Killer, gunned down at least six people between 1976 and 1977. Ted Bundy, John Wayne Gacy, and numerous other serial killers were active during this time. Why so many serial killers rose to prominence in the 1970s is unknown, but one prominent theory suggests heavy lead exposure in children from leaded gasoline and other sources caused many children to develop criminal tendencies as adults. A 2023 survey of the metadata found in the US National Institute of Health on the lead-crime hypothesis suggested “an excess risk for criminal behavior in adulthood exists when an individual is exposed to lead in utero or within childhood.” However, what percentage of violent crime during the period could be attributed to lead exposure was difficult to determine. Regardless of the veracity of the lead-crime hypothesis, the New Right’s many moral crusaders.⁸⁶

The New Right’s attacked the “permissive society” of liberal America and blamed it for societal woes. There was perhaps some truth to the New Right’s criticism of liberal research on things like child abuse. Throughout much of the early twentieth century, the prevailing school of thought was not dissimilar to how the New Right saw things. The believed that small things like viewing pornography and masturbating led one down a path to committing greater and more dangerous acts until eventually rape and murder were acceptable. These people became “sex psychopaths” and needed to be expelled from society. Throughout the 1930s and going into the 1950s, the prevailing idea was moral policing could prevent the “sex psychopath” from being created.⁸⁷

⁸⁶ Maria Jose Talayero et al., “The Association between Lead Exposure and Crime: A Systematic Review,” *PLOS Global Public Health* 3, no. 8 (August 1, 2023).

⁸⁷ Philip Jenkins, *Moral Panic: Changing Concepts of the Child Molester in Modern America* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005), 50-74

Liberal ideas from the 1950s and 1960s swung the pendulum in the other direction. Prevailing research at the time did not see certain sexual crimes as being all that serious. Child molestation was not considered all that harmful unless it was violent. Part of the issue liberal experts faced was that so little credible research had been about child molestation. For example, the term “pedophile” did not even come into parlance until the 1950s and even then, it took over a decade for an agreed upon definition to be reached. Liberal sex researchers classified non-violent child molestation in the same category as homosexuality and the consumption of pornography, which they had begun to see as harmless. During the 1970s and 1980s, the New Right worked to swing the pendulum back the other way. Their cause was incidentally aided by feminists raising awareness of sexual assault and sexual harassment in the early 1970s. The New Right largely succeeded, and the pendulum has remained firmly in favor of the conservative view.⁸⁸ To be clear, liberal sex research did not necessarily translate into liberal political policy. At times such research found itself at odds with liberal politics, such as the 1967 Presidential Commission on Obscenity and Pornography. While those at the top, politicians and right-wing national activists, did much of the pendulum pushing, the actual enforcement of this new-yet-old orthodoxy was left to a cadre of professionals in agreement with the New Right’s vision for America. Social workers, police, prosecutors, psychiatrists, psychologists, concerned parents, and others set about validating and enforcing the conservative worldview on criminality. These were the new inquisitors.

This inquisition did not spring forth suddenly. Instead, it grew steadily, like a snowball that rolled down a hill and collected more snow as it went. The initial catalyst for the panic was the release of the book *Michelle Remembers* in 1980. *Michelle Remembers* was the archetype of

⁸⁸Victor, *Satanic Panic*, 99-105.

what would become known as Satanic ritual abuse (SRA) or simply “ritual abuse.” The book, authored by psychiatrist Lawrence Padzer, chronicled his work with a woman named “Michelle Smith.” During her treatments, Smith began to uncover alleged “repressed memories” from her childhood in the 1950s. These “memories” were of horrific abuses such as watching infants be thrown onto a bonfire and sacrificed to Satan. His treatments for her included baptizing her in the Catholic faith.⁸⁹ The tale spun by Padzer was not dissimilar to stories like Mike Warnke’s *Satan Seller* but this time it had the authority of a professional psychiatrist behind it.

It must be noted that no corroborating evidence of Smith’s claims has ever been found, not even a single infant skeleton from the numerous sacrifices described in her account. Her family vehemently denied her accusations. It is possible, perhaps even probable, that Padzer and Smith invented their story using elements from an earlier book, *Sybil*, published in 1973. Like *Michelle Remembers*, *Sybil* was also an allegedly true story of a psychiatrist treating a mentally ill-woman who had Multiple Personality Disorder (MPD), the common diagnosis for “victims” of SRA. *Sybil* had allegedly developed sixteen different personalities to repress memories of being repeatedly raped by her mentally ill mother. Later, it was discovered that *Sybil* had schizophrenia and that the psychiatrist treating her had encouraged her to invent the personalities to better sell the book.⁹⁰ MPD and repressed memories are largely considered defunct science today. While MPD still survives as “dissociative identity disorder” (DID) today in the psychiatric Diagnostic and Statistical Manual V (DSM-V), it is mired in controversy and rarely diagnosed.

⁸⁹ Michelle Smith and Lawrence Pazder, *Michelle Remembers* (New York, NY: Congdon & Lattes, Inc., 1980), 139-40, 150.

⁹⁰ Debbie Nathan and Michael Snedeker, *Satan’s Silence: Ritual Abuse and the Making of a Modern American Witch Hunt* (San Jose, CA: Authors Choice Press, 2001), 49-50. (pages for second part needed)

While DID is alleged to have some form of repressed memory, the general idea of repressed memories as they functioned in SRA is almost universally rejected.⁹¹

Regardless, the protests of Smith's family fell on deaf ears. *Michelle Remembers* went on to sell considerably well in 1980 and throughout the decade. Soon after, therapists across the United States were inundated with copy-cat Michelle Smiths, all of them claimed to have repressed memories of Satanic abusers. Therapists were the frontline of the ritual abuse scare. Sociologist Jeffery Victor described the rapid acceptance of SRA among therapists as the possible product of groupthink, where many accepted it was true because others had. Additionally, he notes that therapists do not have a vested interest in determining whether what their patients say is true or not. Instead, therapists almost exclusively accept what their clients tell them about their condition and seek only to remedy their patient's distress.⁹²

Most SRA victims were women. Indeed, ritual abuse was a sharply gendered issue, which can be attributed to two factors. One reason is that men as sexual assault and rape victims was not taken seriously or even considered possible throughout the Satanic Panic. By definition, rape victims had to be female to be tracked by the Department of Justice.⁹³ This remained the case throughout the Satanic Panic, until decades later, in 2012, when the FBI and the Department of Justice redefined rape to include male victims.⁹⁴ While these standards were specifically for rape, these definitions marked a culture that stigmatized male sexual abuse claimants. However, abuse claims against male children were treated differently and contributed to the second reason why

⁹¹ Joe Pierre, "The Debate over Whether Dissociative Identity Disorder Is 'Real,'" *Psychology Today*, February 7, 2023; Henry Otgaar et al., "The Return of the Repressed: The Persistent and Problematic Claims of Long-Forgotten Trauma," *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 14, no. 6 (October 4, 2019): 1072–95.

⁹² Victor, *Satanic Panic*, 92-93.

⁹³ Adolfo L. Paez and Richard W. Dodge, "Criminal Victimization in the U.S., 1979-1980," Bureau of Justice Statistics, 3.

⁹⁴ Jerry Markon, "Justice Dept. Expands Definition of Rape to Include Other Forms of Sexual Assault," *The Washington Post*, January 6, 2012.

SRA was dominated by women. Since the major proponents of SRA were often New Right defenders of the nuclear family, women were the ones who took to fighting against it as “defenders of hearth and home.” Debbie Nathan and Michael Snedeker argued that “believing the children” was a feminine role. If a woman herself was not the “victim” of SRA, then it was her children that were. It was her role to take the children to therapy, to speak with the police, or any of the other myriad of tasks associated with the alleged abuse. While SRA had a strong feminine association, it was not as though men were not present throughout. Male and female children were all cast as victims and often the father and male relatives were accused of being the Satanic abusers. Men also played a prominent role as Satan hunters aligned with various law enforcement organizations.⁹⁵

As the ritual abuse scare progressed throughout the 1980s, the network of Satan hunters grew. As these women reported the horrible crimes committed against them, the police and the judicial system became involved. Where were these cultists? Who were they? How could they be stopped? All of these were burning questions to law enforcement. Networks of Satan hunters began to form in the early 1980s, the earliest of the modern inquisitors. As therapists began to set up conferences and meetings to discuss how to handle the growing SRA epidemics, law enforcement and other professions also started to attend. 1980 to 1983 can best be described as a building period. While individuals prominent in the Satanic Panic, like Kee MacFarlane, had long been concerned about the sexual abuse of children going back to the mid-to-late 1970s, the specific focus on the Satanic abuse began grow. Law enforcement faced a critical problem: investigations into these accusations turned up little to no evidence of Satanic cults. Rather than following that evidence to the logical conclusion that these Satanic abusers did not exist, law

⁹⁵ Nathan and Snedeker, *Satan's Silence*, 120-121.

enforcement generally believed that their officers simply lacked the proper training and tools to be able to find their elusive foes.⁹⁶

This belief spawned an industry of Satanic cult hunting “experts” who, for a modest fee, would provide their expertise on the occult to law enforcement. Often these Satan hunting experts were retired law enforcement. Their knowledge and expertise were often dubious at best. Dale Griffis, one of the earliest and most famous of these alleged experts, had a doctorate degree from a diploma mill in California.⁹⁷ Robert Simandl, a former Chicago detective turned Satan hunter, also toured the country providing his expertise. Simandl, along with fellow Satan hunter Pamela Klein, caused a Satanic scare in the United Kingdom. Their 1987 seminar on how to identify Satanic abusers caused law enforcement and social workers to see abusers everywhere. Children were taken from parents who had committed no crime on the advice of these Satan hunters. By 1988, an entire cottage industry had cropped up to train prosecutors and law enforcement how to identify cultists in their midst. Everything from pamphlets and newsletters to VHS training tapes were being produced to train police.⁹⁸

These training materials owed much of their popularity to a single court case, the McMartin Preschool Trial in California. As of this writing, the McMartin Preschool Trial remains both the longest and most expensive trial in America. While often referred to as a singular trial, it was two trials overall, the initial trial and the attempted retrial. In the beginning, the McMartin Trial had no connection to SRA. In 1982, a woman named Judy Johnson became concerned about discoloration around her toddler son’s anus. Her doctor was unconcerned. Several months later, Johnson contacted the police when a similar occurrence happened. She began contacting

⁹⁶ Victor. *Satanic Panic*, 232-237; Beck. *We Believe*. 38-49; Nathan and Snedeker. *Satan’s Silence*. 107-136.

⁹⁷ *Paradise Lost: The Child Murders at Robin Hood Hills*, film (USA: Home Box Office, 1996), 1:09:07-1:13:02.

⁹⁸ Victor. *Satanic Panic*, 233-234; Aaron Hyzen and Hilde Van den Bulck, “Conspiracies, Ideological Entrepreneurs, and Digital Popular Culture,” *Media and Communication* 9, no. 3 (September 13, 2021).

other parents, none of whom said anything was out of the ordinary with their children. Later Johnson contacted the police and told them that Ray Buckey, the lone male member of the preschool's staff, had made her son wear women's clothing. In 1983, police arrested Buckey, and a letter was sent out to current and former parents who had used the preschool, asking them if their children had experienced any abuse. The letter contained a warning not to talk to anyone about the letter that was thoroughly ignored.⁹⁹

As the investigation progressed, more and more sinister claims were made about Ray Buckey and the other members of his family who helped operate the daycare. Buckey was accused of everything from using his penis as a thermometer to sacrificing animals in front of the children. The allegations largely came from Kee MacFarlane and Children's Institute International (CII), the organization the Manhattan Beach police used to interview the children. MacFarlane and her staff interviewed the children. They were widely criticized for leading the children to the answers they wanted and bullying them into confessing Buckey's guilt. For example, in one interview, MacFarlane, through a puppet, asked a child if they were "stupid" when they refused to cooperate.¹⁰⁰

These allegations were further inflamed by the Satan hunters, who latched onto the McMartin Trial. They alleged that Satan abuses had occurred or speculated about Satanic cult involvement to the media. In 1984, Lawrence Padzer went to speak personally with the parents of the children involved with the McMartin Trial and advised them that anyone could be a Satanic cultist, even members of the Anaheim Dodgers baseball team.¹⁰¹ All across the country, a mounting pile of similar trials began. In 1984, Frances Ballard and Betty Stimpson of the

⁹⁹ Beck, *We Believe*, 32-37.

¹⁰⁰ Beck, *We Believe*, 39.

¹⁰¹ Nathan and Snedeker, *Satan's Silence*, 89-90.

Georgian Hills Day Center were charged with McMartin-like crimes in Memphis, Tennessee.¹⁰² In 1985, Gayle Doyle was charged with sexually abusing children, including sticking sharp objects into their genitals, at a daycare in El Paso, Texas. Kelly Michaels and others on the daycare staff were accused of similar crimes in New Jersey the same year. Dozens of daycare panics erupted across the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom.¹⁰³ In his 1990 reflection on the Satanic Panic, columnist Alexander Cockburn noted the connection between “commie hunters and Satan hunters.” Sgt. Jerry Davis, the lead Satanic cult expert for the Memphis Police Department during the Georgian Hills Trial was also in charge of investigating student groups for subversions during the 1960s. Davis was known as “Mr. Conspirator” to his colleagues.¹⁰⁴

The Satan hunters were sure that daycares were the preferred hunting ground of the Satanic cultists. The McMartin Trial became the battleground that provided an aura of legitimacy to the Satanic conspiracy. One of the reasons the McMartin Trial was so expensive was that prosecutors and law enforcement investigated numerous outlandish leads, the most persistent of which was that there were secret tunnels beneath the McMartin Preschool where Satanic rituals were held. Police dug up the grounds of the McMartin preschool numerous times looking for animal bones and secret tunnels. Gloria Steinem personally donated money to help search for these tunnels. No tunnels were ever found. Despite this, as with most conspiracies, the absence of evidence simply became evidence for the power of the conspirators.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰² Tom Chardier and Shirley Downing, “Fact, Fantasies Caught in Tangled Web,” *The Commercial Appeal*, January 17, 1988, Sunday Morning edition, sec. A, pp. 1, A8-A11.

¹⁰³ Nathan and Snedeker. *Satan's Silence*, 3, xi.

¹⁰⁴ Alexander Cockburn, “Beat the Devil: ‘Out of the Mouths of Babes: Child Abuse and the Abuse of Adults,’” *The Nation*, February 12, 1990.

¹⁰⁵ Jenkins, *Moral Panic*, 186.

While the formation and the growth of the Satanic Panic are well written about and well understood, what is given little attention is why certain people and groups were targeted. Many of those accused by the Satan hunters fit into a pattern. Those who were charged with crimes were almost always poor, or at least poorer, than those accusing them. For example, The McMartin family was much poorer than the wealthy professionals who paid for their daycare services. The politics of the accused seemed to have little effect on the choice of target. The McMartins were ardent Reagan supporters in a heavily Republican area. While accusations of Satanism were prominent during the 1980s, those charged with a crime were almost exclusively lower-class individuals. Whether this was simply opportunism, or some other reason remains a subject for debate.

Despite that the original SRA claims, like those in *Michelle Remembers*, explained that the cults were multigenerational family affairs, the daycare panic revealed that this model of SRA as an internal threat to families was not a sustainable one for the New Right's inquisitors. If families were the source of the cultists and how they hid, then this meant that there was an issue with the concept of family that needed to be examined. Family values politics was incompatible with this viewpoint. Strengthening traditional nuclear families was the solution to societal woes to the New Right culture warriors, not their cause. By moving the emphasis from multigenerational family-type cults to daycare operators and "threats" that were external to the family unit, the Satan hunters made SRA and the Satanic conspiracy have broader appeal.

Another notable quality about many of those charged during the Satanic Panic is that they were largely white. There were several prominent cases of Black and Latino daycare workers being charged, such as the Bronx Five in New York, but the majority were white individuals. It is possible that other accusations such as gang association were more effective tools for stressed communities

to use against people of color. It is possible that prosecutors in some criminal cases chose to avoid Satanic cult accusations in favor of more proven strategies when it came to people of color, such as emphasizing Black criminality tropes.

Between 1979 and 1987, the Satanic Panic grew from the fertile soil that the New Right had tilled over the course of the previous decade. Born from the brewing right-wing backlash to the 1960s and intensified by the ongoing fracturing of American culture and politics, the Satanic Panic grew from a humble kernel of fear into a powerful weapon of persecution endorsed by the New Right through its silence. However, many stood against the rising tide of conspiracism across the nation and would not allow the Satanic cult narrative to go unchallenged.

Chapter 3: Dousing the Flames, 1988-1996

Truth and untruth operate on a simple principle: untruth spreads faster than truth. To spread an untruth, one only needs to assert a piece of information is true. Those who stand to benefit from that information being true will often assume it is and spread it to others equally inclined to accept its validity. One prominent example during the 1890s was the Taxil Hoax. In fin de siècle France, Leo Taxil duped the Catholic Church into propagating numerous lies he had invented about the 'Palladists,' a group of fictitious Satanists that operated under the guise of Freemasonry. Taxil aimed to show the folly of the Catholic Church by showing how readily they accepted his claims without verifying them. It took Arthur Waite, a British occultist and Freemason, several years to investigate and publish his initial debunking of the hoax a year before Taxil revealed the deception. Waite's delayed rebuttal to Taxil's hoax demonstrates the slow-moving process of creating truth. Truth requires empirical evidence, which can sometimes take years to gather.¹⁰⁶

Untruths are like wildfires. Often, firefighters extinguish wildfires, or wildfires burn out naturally before they get too far out of control. They may burn some small acreage before doing so, but often, the damage is repairable and likely unnoticed by most people. Good forest maintenance and firefighters see that most wildfires do not burn out of control. Similarly, conspiracy theories often do not spread because they are incompatible with the lived reality of most people. More outlandish and dangerous conspiracies, like the Reptilian conspiracy, seldom gain traction because they swiftly cross most people's demarcation line, where a person decides what is believable. Societal pressures often supplement these internal means of resistance. Telling friends and co-workers that one believes the President of the United States is a

¹⁰⁶ Arthur Edward Waite, *Devil Worship in France: Diana Vaughan and the Question of Modern Palladism* (York Beach, UK: Samuel Weiser, 1896).

shapeshifting lizard-person generally carries immediate and direct social consequences. Outside of conspiracist communities, one can expect to rapidly become a social outcast by preaching such beliefs. One such example of this would be David Icke. Icke, once a left-wing spiritualist in the 1970s, declined in popularity as he moved further and further into conspiracy theory territory. Once known for as a gifted sportscaster, he is now mostly known for his belief that malevolent aliens control most of human society. Occasionally, these containment mechanisms fail, and conspiracy theories become like a devastating, uncontrolled wildfire on our social and political way of life. The Satanic Panic was one such wildfire.¹⁰⁷

The raging inferno of the Satanic Panic peaked in 1988. Television specials and books about Satanic cults flooded the market in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The Satanic conspiracy, born from the imagination of the growing New Right, became an accepted fact to many Americans. Some argue that the Satanic Panic never ended because Satanic conspiracism did not vanish from American cultural and political discourse.¹⁰⁸ However, it is more accurate to say that Satanic conspiracism has been a constant in American history, just like wildfires. There is likely a wildfire burning somewhere in the United States at this very moment, with around seventy-thousand occurring every year.¹⁰⁹ Wildfires are routine, as is Satanic conspiracism. Most Americans do not notice that their country is routinely on fire unless it directly impacts them, or a specific wildfire has grown so large that it has garnered media attention. The Satanic Panic was akin to the latter, an outlier among wildfires that burned thousands or even millions of acres before it stopped. Every iteration of Satanic conspiracism is different in some way. The Satanic

¹⁰⁷ Barkun, *A Culture of Conspiracy*, 103-108.

¹⁰⁸ Aja Romano, "Why Satanic Panic Never Really Ended," Vox, March 31, 2021.

¹⁰⁹ Climate Change Indicators: Wildfires. EPA July 2022.

Panic and modern Satanic conspiracists like the QAnon movement are both fires but are different types of fires.

Like wildfires, the Satanic Panic had its own set of firefighters who fought to douse the flames of conspiracism before more people were hurt. These professionals led to the decline of the Satanic Panic. But who were these firefighters? Three professions were central to ending the panic: lawyers, medical researchers, and journalists. The Satanic Panic's decline is a poorly understood phenomenon because the mechanisms that create truth are often slow-moving and hard to see in the historical record. It took a concerted effort from these key professions to find and present the evidence needed to counteract the influence of the conspiracy theorists.

Lawyers played the most central role in battling the Satanic Panic. Even before the Satanic Panic reached its peak around 1988, lawyers had already endured several years of conflict with the Satan hunters and their conspiracy theories. As accusations of Satanic abuse at daycares led to arrests and trials, the intervention of lawyers was all but inevitable. In Kern County, California, the case of Mary Ann Barbour served as the model for nearly all SRA cases afterward. The trial began slightly before the McMartin Preschool Trials and was largely concurrent. The Barbour case was a convoluted web of relations and accusations. Mary Ann married Gene Barbour, who had been married several times before and had children from a previous marriage named Debbie and Cindy. During her youth, Debbie originally lived with her biological mother, Linda, and her new husband, Rod Phelps. Debbie later came to live with Mary Ann and Gene, claiming that Phelps had molested her. Debbie later married Alvin McCuan, a steelworker, at age fifteen. They had two children, Bobbie and Darla. Mary Ann was the step-grandmother of Bobbie and Darla, the first children involved in the case.

Mary Ann routinely inspected Bobbie and Darla's genitals. She claimed that during these inspections, she had found that their genitals were bruised and swollen. The children refused to say anything about it. Mary Ann believed that Rod Phelps had molested the girls. Years later, after another inspection, she took the children to a doctor who confirmed that an adult had penetrated the children. Mary called in a friend and social worker. The children stated that their step-grandfather, Rod Phelps, had molested them. The social worker then went to the home of the McCuans, who said that Phelps would no longer be allowed at their home.

It was possible that her inspections had caused the bruising to begin with and that she had influenced the girl's confessions, which would fit a pattern to come. When social services refused to remove the girls from the McCuan family home, she became irate and drew a gun and knife on her husband, Gene. She was hospitalized and released. Eighteen months later, Mary Ann contacted the same social worker and insisted that the children had seen Rod Phelps two months earlier and that the girls' genitals had bruises afterward. When the social worker interviewed them, the girls stated that their father, Alvin, was responsible. The girls were removed from the home and placed into the care of Gene and Mary Ann.

Throughout the trial, the names of molesters expanded. Next, the girls accused their mother, Debbie. After Scott and Brenda Kniffen testified as character witnesses in the trial in favor of the McCuans, the girls stated that the Kniffens were also child molesters, and their children were abuse victims. The trial grew into a circus from 1982 to 1984. The accusations mounted with the addition of a Satanic pedophile ring that had murdered multiple people. The FBI provided ground-penetrating radar to find buried bodies and secret tunnels connected to the

cult. Investigators found no physical evidence to substantiate the cult or that any abuse had occurred. Despite this, they were found guilty in 1984.¹¹⁰

The McCuans and the Kniffens served twelve years in prison until their release in 1996. Their liberation was a long process. The initial appeal process floundered. The alleged medical evidence of abuse was too powerful to overcome. In 1992, the children all recanted their testimonies and stated that Mary Ann had told them to testify against their parents. Despite refusing to examine the case again in 1994, the courts finally accepted the review of the appeal in 1996. The appeal went to Kern County Superior Court, where, at long last, a judge freed the McCuans and the Kniffens.¹¹¹

The Barbour case represented the long, uphill battle that defense lawyers faced while engaging with the Satanic conspiracy. Satan hunters entered the judicial arena armed and equipped with new evidence and tools. The defense lawyers in the Barbour case were the first in the country to encounter the Satan-hunting apparatus in a legal battle. Though they lost initially, the case showed other lawyers where to focus. One insight was that the defense knew the children's testimony was the weakest point. Eyewitness testimony is often faulty, as human memory is imprecise. Children's testimony is especially unreliable. Children's brains are not fully developed and are susceptible to believing whatever adults tell them. The trustworthiness of children in court gained renewed vigor with the advent of Satanic ritual abuse. If children could not be believed, then the entire premise of SRA would fall apart, as it later did. Even today, the topic of children's testimony in court is difficult.

During the Barbour case, the defense lawyers put considerable effort into examining the children's testimony. After a member of the defense team spoke to Bobbie and Darla, the girls

¹¹⁰ Nathan and Snedeker. *Satan's Silence*, 53-66.

¹¹¹ Alexandra Gross, "Scott Kniffen," National Registry of Exonerations, accessed February 22, 2024.

said that it was Mary Ann who had told them to say their parents had abused them. The prosecution and the judge in the case accused the defense of manipulating the children and refused to let the girls' new confession stand.¹¹² The Kniffen's two boys also repeatedly denied their parents had abused them, something that the prosecution and the police never let see the light of day until years later. Medical evidence ultimately overrode the boy's protests. A doctor who had examined the boys found that one of them had a "winking anus" response, which at the time was considered evidence of abuse.¹¹³ In the 1996, a judge overturned the convictions of both Kniffens and the McCuans, citing substantial prosecutorial and police misconduct.¹¹⁴ In other words, the Satan hunters had cheated to win by suppressing evidence that ran contrary to their narrative. This issue was common with most SRA trials that ended in conviction. Dozens of convictions were overturned towards the end of the Satanic Panic and well after because of misconduct by the prosecution and police.

As the Barbour case concluded in 1984, the McMartin Trial continued. The McMartin Trial was a national media circus in urban Manhattan Beach, a suburb of Los Angeles, while the Barbour case was largely limited to rural Kern County. Consequently, the McMartin Trial faced intense scrutiny from nearly the entire nation. National media attention was a double-edged sword for Satan hunters. Satan hunters benefited tremendously from latching on to sensationalized television news. For example, Geraldo Rivera's 1988 television special, *Devil Worship: Exposing Satan's Underground*, and other similar programs boosted Satanic conspiracies to a national audience. This exposure strengthened their national presence and helped to create a cohesive narrative among the Satan hunters. McMartin Trial

¹¹² Gross, "Scott Kniffen."

¹¹³ Nathan and Snedeker. *Satan's Silence*, 180-181.

¹¹⁴ Gross, "Scott Kniffen."

National attention also exposed the inner workings of the conspiracy theory to its opponents. The Barbour case led to convictions partly because few outside eyes could scrutinize the conduct of the police and the prosecution. Rural isolation was a powerful tool of Satan hunters. In his examination of newspaper articles about Satanic cults during the 1980s, Jeffery Victor noted that smaller, local newspapers wrote about Satanic cults more regularly and consulted with local "experts" on Satanism as authorities. Often, these "experts" would confirm the presence of a cult active in the area. Larger urban newspapers provided more skeptical coverage of Satanic cults. These papers consulted with nationally recognized experts who were skeptical of the claims made by Satan hunters.¹¹⁵ This connection led Victor to believe that there was a sharp urban/rural divide over belief in Satanic cults. While Victor seemed to avoid making a political connection, the rural-versus-urban divide could also be due to the politics typically found in those areas. Kern County was a right-wing stronghold in the 1980s, having swung to Reagan in 1980 and 1984 and Bush in 1988. In these politically favorable and isolated rural environments, the Satan hunters were able to achieve victory.

This type of isolation was not possible with urban Manhattan Beach despite it also being a conservative bastion in the period. The prosecution knew it needed conclusive, legitimate evidence. The McMartin Trial proved to be the definitive battle over the legitimacy of the Satanic cult conspiracy. The future of the Satanic conspiracy hinged on one very specific argument about the validity of the victim's testimony. The Satan hunters knew if the defense in the McMartin Trial could throw accounts of Satanic abuse into doubt on a national stage, the conspiracy itself would be vulnerable. The two defense lawyers for the McMartins, Dean Gits, representing Peggy McMartin Buckey, and Daniel Davis, representing Raymond Buckey,

¹¹⁵ Victor, *Satanic Panic*, 254.

focused on the children's testimony and the lack of physical evidence. Both opening of their statements assailed Kee MacFarlane and the Children Institute International's interviews. The children's tales were wild and full of inconsistencies. In one example mentioned by Gits, a child stated during an interview they had been locked in a closet at the daycare despite there being no closets in the building. Daniel Davis argued that police and prosecutors had paid CII to generate witnesses favorable to their cause.¹¹⁶ Their focus on the validity of testimony worked. Gits and Davis dismantled the methods used by CII throughout the trial. This strategy was not an unexpected outcome for the prosecutors in the case. One co-prosecutor even stated before the trial that "Kee MacFarlane could make a six-month baby say he was molested" and urged Lael Rubin, the chief prosecutor, to drop the charges against the rest of the McMartins except Peggy and Ray Buckey. Rubin strongly supported Kee MacFarlane and her work and refused to yield for months until she finally complied with her co-prosecutors. Despite knowing that the CII and MacFarlane had provided them with flimsy evidence at best, the validity of their testimonies became a central point of contention throughout the trial. The defense was ultimately successful. The jury rendered a verdict of not guilty on nearly all of the charges. Speaking to the media after the trial, one juror stated, "We never got the children's story in their own words." The prosecution tried again in 1990 under a new district attorney and again met with defeat.¹¹⁷

While the questionable validity of victim testimony was perhaps the most important result of the McMartin Trial, the medical evidence was also a key focus of the trial. For much of history, children, particularly young girls, have had their genitals and other private areas examined for signs of abuse. During the Satanic Panic, such examinations were commonplace.

¹¹⁶ Paul Eberle and Shirley Eberle, *The Abuse of Innocence: The McMartin Preschool Trial* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2007).

¹¹⁷ Beck. *We Believe*, 206.

The court sentenced the Kniffens to prison during the Barbour case based on an examination by a doctor that had found a "winking response" from the anus of one of their children. However, it was not until 1988 that a doctor conducted any credible research on what exactly constituted "normal" when it came to children's genitals. Dr. John McCann of the University of California's San Francisco School of Medicine completed a long-term study on the genitals of children who, to the best of their knowledge, had not been sexually abused. The study concluded that many of the traditional indicators of sexual abuse in children were completely normal, including the "winking response." McCann's research began alongside the increased interest in children's sexual abuse brought on by the Satanic Panic and the increased pressure to define what "normal" genitals looked like on a child.¹¹⁸

Why had it taken this long for a professional to conduct such a study? Part of the issue was there had not been considerable interest in the issue of child sexual abuse for decades until the 1970s when both the feminist movement and the growing New Right took an interest in sexual assault. The feminist movement engaged with the topic of sexual abuse both against women and children as a defining issue for women and a critique against an oppressive family model. The growing New Right engaged with sexual abuse as a sign of moral degradation in the United States and the world at large. Though their reasons for engaging with the topic differed tremendously, the sudden interest in the issue spawned a plethora of research on the subject, much of which was rushed and poorly conducted. Several incorrect identifiers of sexual abuse came to the fore during this time, including the "winking response," "jagged" hymens, and the four-millimeter hymen standard. The studies that produced these responses all had critical flaws. For example, the doctor in Brazil who invented the four-millimeter hymen standard did not track

¹¹⁸ Nathan and Snedeker. *Satan's Silence*, 180-181.

the age or size of the person in question, both of which are factors that affect the size of any opening on the body.¹¹⁹

By 1988, the medical community began to produce more solid research on the subject of child sexual abuse, such as Dr. McCann's work. Other medical and psychiatric professionals produced new studies relating to other issues. For instance, a long-term study on the effects of table-top roleplaying games concluded in 1990. It showed that games like *Dungeons & Dragons* caused no negative psychological effects on children.¹²⁰ However, the Satan hunters caused a great deal of damage before the study's completion. In the early 1990s, Nathan and Snedeker wrote that though the scientific community had accepted this research, it was slow to trickle across the country, and few of the doctors who had helped send seemingly innocent people to prison had spoken up about their mistakes.¹²¹ While some medical researchers and professionals worked to counter the Satanic conspiracy, others resisted, clinging to outdated standards despite the newest data. The slow spread of information amongst the medical community helped to ensure that the Satanic Panic would decline slowly rather than swiftly.

While medical professionals and lawyers worked to establish facts and legal precedent, many journalists worked hard to combat the Satanic Panic's narrative in the media. Newspapers in major urban centers worked diligently to counter the Satanic conspiracy. In January 1988, *The Commercial Appeal*, the main newspaper for the Memphis metropolitan area in Tennessee, published a series of articles that examined the daycare panic titled "Justice Abused: A 1980s Witch-Hunt." The series ran from the 17th to the 22nd of that month, with six parts in total. Investigative journalists Shirley Downing and Tom Charlier wrote the series after an extensive

¹¹⁹ Nathan and Snedeker. *Satan's Silence*, 207-208.

¹²⁰ Lisa A. DeRenard and Linda Mannik Kline, "Alienation and the Game Dungeons and Dragons," *Psychological Reports* 66, no. 3 (December 1990): 1219-22.

¹²¹ Nathan and Snedeker. *Satan's Silence*, 198-199.

investigation of multiple daycare panics. The paper's editor claimed that, to the best of their knowledge, this investigation was the first of its kind by a major newspaper in the country.¹²²

The first of these six articles was the largest and the most damning indictment of the Satanic conspiracy narrative. Charlier and Downing examined thirty-six cases of Satanic ritual abuse. Most cases showed that seemingly mundane things, such as a mosquito bite, some redness around a child's genitals or anus, or even a girl saying the word "penis," had exploded into a series of bombastic accusations about Satanic abuse that incorporated more and more people. In one case in Jordan, California, a woman named Christine Brown accused trash collector James Rud of molesting her daughter. By the end of the police investigation, sixty children had claimed abuse in Jordan, and police arrested twenty-four adults as suspects, including Christine Brown herself. The children had claimed that adults in the town had stabbed and murdered other children and then thrown them in a river, among other wild accusations.¹²³

Charlier and Downing also contributed to the public discourse around the first McMartin Trial. They spoke with a former co-prosecutor, Glenn Stevens, about the case. Stevens explained the absurdity of the testimony that drove him to leave the prosecution team. According to Stevens, one child told a story that Ray drove the children to a cemetery with shovels and pickaxes. They allegedly dug up a body, at which point "Ray Buckey would then take an arm out of a body, cut it with a knife, and watch the body bleed and say, 'This will happen to you and your parents if you ever tell what happened at the school'... And not a parent ever knew this." Stevens continued that "nobody in their right minds would believe that story... But we will

¹²² David Wayne Brown, Colleen Conant, and David Vincent, "Shades of Salem," *The [Memphis] Commercial Appeal*, January 17, 1988, sec. Editorials, E4; Tom Charlier and Shirley Downing, "Justice Abused: A 1980s Witch-Hunt," *The [Memphis] Commercial Appeal*, January 17, 1988, A10-A11.

¹²³ Charlier and Downing, "Justice Abused," A10-A11.

gladly accept the fact that the child was molested."¹²⁴ The sheer implausibility of the stories the Satan hunters had championed for the last eight years was on full display.

Major newspapers across the United States and the United Kingdom followed suit, typically responding to local outbreaks of Satanic conspiracism. In 1990, the British newspaper *The Independent* published an article explaining how moral panic over Satanic cults resulted in social workers taking children from their parents across the United Kingdom. The article showed how Christian evangelical movements in the United States had networked with UK-based social workers to spread Satan-hunting training across the Atlantic. The following year, a judge ordered the return of the taken children.¹²⁵

The journalistic counter-narrative was not purely limited to newspapers. Journalism in niche communities was also at work by the late 1980s. In 1989, fantasy author Michael Stackpole published *Game Hysteria and the Truth*, a book combating Satanic conspiracies surrounding table-top roleplaying games. Games like *Dungeons & Dragons*, which used demonic imagery, were often used as indicators of Satanic activity among teens by Satan-hunting organizations. "Bothered About Dungeons & Dragons," or "BADD," was an organization founded by Patricia Pulling after her son's death in 1982. Pulling blamed the game *Dungeons & Dragons* for her son's suicide and went on a crusade against roleplaying games throughout the 1980s.¹²⁶ Pulling even appeared on 60 Minutes for a segment alongside Gary Gygax, one of the creators of *Dungeons & Dragons* and the CEO of TSR games.¹²⁷ BADD published and distributed materials to police across the nation to help them uncover alleged Satanic activity

¹²⁴ Charlier and Downing, "Justice Abused," A8.

¹²⁵ Victor, *Satanic Panic*, 118-119.

¹²⁶ Pat Pulling and Kathy Cawthon, *The Devil's Web: Who Is Stalking Your Children for Satan* (Lafayette, LA: Huntington House, 1989), 1-12.

¹²⁷ Edward Rudolph Bradley, "Dungeons & Dragons," broadcast, *60 Minutes* (CBS, 1985).

among teenagers. In 1989, Pulling published her book, *The Devil's Web: Who is Stalking Your Children for Satan?* which compiled her nearly seven years of "evidence" into one place. After examining her book, Stackpole published "The Pulling Report," which went through her book and several different materials published and distributed by BADD. He debunked many of her claims and showed that Pulling had lied about her qualifications, experience, and several gross misrepresentations of facts. Pulling quit BADD later that year. Despite clinging to existence, the organization never recovered and dissolved after Pulling died in 1997.¹²⁸

Though the resistance from lawyers, medical professionals, and journalists against the Satanic conspiracy had started to turn the tide by 1988, the conspiratorial wildfire was not ready to die. Even as major newspapers and others worked to debunk conspiratorial claims, television news, and talk shows embraced the sensational Satanic conspiracy. *Devil Worship: Exposing Satan's Underground* was produced in October 1988 by his investigative journalism team; however, the program displayed the logo of NBC's investigative journalism team. Hosted by Geraldo Rivera, the special featured a variety of different aspects of Satanic cult conspiracism. The show featured interviews with murderers who claimed to have killed in the name of Satan, a segment on metal music featuring Ozzy Osbourne, interviews with actual Satanists from the Temple of Set and the Church of Satan, and a segment where Geraldo interviewed the parents of the McMartin children.

This television special displayed a faux objectivity and balance seemingly designed to give it an air of legitimacy. For example, Geraldo had both Michael Aquino and Zeena LaVey on to represent Satanists and, at one point, allowed them to express their position before immediately confronting them with the fact the entire audience was composed of people who

¹²⁸ Michael A. Stackpole, "The Pulling Report," RPGStudies.net, 1990.

claimed to be survivors of Satanic cults. While interviewing Aquino, Geraldo noted that some parents at an army base where he worked accused him of ritually abusing children despite an investigation that cleared him of wrongdoing. Shortly after that, he confronted Aquino again, a colonel in the US Army, with a man who claimed a Satanic cult abused his daughter while she served in the army. The segment before Ozzy Osbourne spoke featured a Satanic metal band that stated they were not interested in recruiting Satanists despite their songs having lyrics about Satan, which Geraldo called "bull." The addled rockstar rambled about being working-class and not wanting people to be murderers before his busy schedule demanded he leave. Opposition to Satanic conspiracism was practically nonexistent on the program.¹²⁹

Despite its lack of objectivity, the program was a ratings hit. On October 27th, The Los Angeles Times reported that the program was watched by over 19 million households, nearly a third of all households watching television at that time. Notably, the network lost around 500 thousand dollars in revenue from advertisers who did not want to be associated with the subject matter. It was unclear if the ratings boost had accounted for the lost revenue. "Documentaries" like Geraldo's were possible partly due to the relaxation of NBC's journalistic standards. This loosening of standards allowed the network to purchase documentaries made by outside companies. Tom Brokaw commented that the types of documentaries NBC's entertainment division was purchasing "troubled him greatly." He stated, "We feel very strongly about the need to protect the integrity of our product and of this network. I think that opening that kind of door to quasi-news programs cheapens the genuine news product."¹³⁰

¹²⁹ "Devil Worship: Exposing Satan's Underground," broadcast, *Geraldo Rivera Special* (NBC, 1988).

¹³⁰ Jay Sharbutt, "Cauldron Boils Over Geraldo's 'Devil Worship: 'Satan' Wins Ratings, Loses Advertisers," *Los Angeles Times*, October 27, 1988.

Despite the protests of Brokaw and others about the nature of these types of "documentaries," the ratings they brought in proved too lucrative for television media to ignore. NBC was not the only news network to feature segments on Satanic cults between 1988 and 1996. CNN featured several. On Halloween 1990, Larry King invited a Satanic cult "survivor" named Vicky Taylor onto his program. Alongside Taylor were three additional guests. The first one King brought on was Ed Pierce, a policeman from Rhode Island. After a commercial break, two other guests, Joseph Brennan, a reverend and SRA counselor, and David Alexander, editor of the *Humanist* magazine and a skeptic of the Satanic cult conspiracy. Unlike many other similar programs, King asked nearly every guest hard-hitting and probing questions. When he asked, "How do you remember things from age zero to five," she explained that she didn't until a therapist recognized her symptoms. King probed her again and asked if she was simply imagining these events, reiterating that few people had many memories before age five. She eventually answered that "it came back" to her, brought out by her therapist. This exchange highlighted how therapists manufactured SRA victims. Vicky went to see a therapist for something unrelated to ritual abuse, and after months of "treatment," she had come away convinced her Satanic foster parents had ritually abused her.¹³¹

Throughout the segment, King questioned the authenticity of both Pierce and Brennan's stories. Notably, Pierce became interested in Satanic abuse after he attended a workshop by Dale Griffis, the same man who, in just a few short years, would testify as an expert in the West Memphis Three Trial. Pierce also claimed to have worked on cases with the Royal Canadian Mounted Police and the Metro Toronto police. King routinely probed both Pierce and Brennan for hard evidence, which was not forthcoming. As Alexander entered the conversation, heated

¹³¹ Larry King. "Satanic Cults," *Larry King Live* (CNN, October 31, 1990).

exchanges occurred between him and the other guests. The *Humanist* editor pressed the other guests for evidence, citing that FBI agent Kenneth Lanning's seven-year investigation had turned up no evidence of widespread Satanic cults.¹³²

Throughout the 1980s and into the 1990s, Lanning was a controversial figure among Satan hunters. In *Devil's Web*, Pat Pulling cited Lanning's work to support her own, using the FBI definition of "ritual sacrifice."¹³³ Others, like Charlier and Downing, used Lanning's work to support their positions in their 1988 series on the daycare panic.¹³⁴ By 1990, the Satan hunters seemed to have largely accepted that he was an enemy to their cause due to several interviews in which he expressed skepticism of Satanic cult claims. Satan hunters balked at his findings, just as Pierce did on *Larry King Live* in 1990 when he argued that Lanning had never worked on any of the 300 cases he had examined. Some even accused him of being a Satanist, allegations he denied in his completed 1992 report on ritual crime. Lanning concluded that "until hard evidence is found and corroborated, the public should not be frightened into believing that babies are being bred and eaten, that 50,000 missing children are murdered in human sacrifices, or that Satanists are taking over America's daycare centers..." It was a damning indictment at the federal level of the Satanic conspiracy.¹³⁵

The following year, in August, Larry King once again had an SRA "victim" and a therapist, Robert Mayer, the author of *Satan's Children*, on his show. The encounter went much like before, though King asked fewer probing questions. This segment featured several callers who asked the guests questions. None of the three callers questioned the authenticity of the

¹³² King. "Satanic Cults."

¹³³ Pulling and Cawthon, *The Devil's Web*, 56.

¹³⁴ Charlier and Downing, "Justice Abused," A10-A11.

¹³⁵ Department of Justice and Kenneth V. Lanning, Investigator's Guide to Allegations of 'Ritual' Child Abuse § (1992).

story.¹³⁶ It was not just King's programs on CNN that reflected a bias from the callers. A segment from *Sonya Live* in 1993, shortly after police arrested the West Memphis Three, also had two callers who did not contest the stories told to them on screen. One of these callers even claimed to be involved in a Satanic cult for over twelve years.¹³⁷ While five is a small sample, this could have indicated that those who viewed such segments were largely believers in the Satanic conspiracy. It could also have meant that the network only filtered in favorable callers. Either of these being true would have troubling implications for television's role in spreading moral panic.

News programs were not the only part of television media that had learned the "Satanism-equals-ratings" formula. Talk shows had been experimenting with Satanic fear-mongering for a long time. Oprah produced several episodes on Satanism in the 1980s, such as one that featured Michael Aquino in 1988.¹³⁸ While Oprah Winfrey had produced a few shows on Satanism before 1989, one episode in May of that year drew particular ire from the Jewish community when a woman named "Raquel" claimed that her Jewish family was, in fact, Satanic murderers and the Jewish people routinely ritually murdered people. Her claim that the ancient antisemitic conspiracy of blood libel was true infuriated the Jewish community and prompted Oprah to meet with leaders in the Jewish community of New York, where she apologized and claimed ignorance.¹³⁹ Tabloid talk shows like *The Oprah Winfrey Show* were designed to shock audiences into watching. They were so effective at this that despite never featuring anyone from

¹³⁶ Larry King, "A Satanic Cult," *Larry King Live* (CNN, August 2, 1991).

¹³⁷ Sonya Friedman, "Satanic Connection," *Sonya Live* (CNN, June 9, 1993).

¹³⁸ "Satanic Worship," broadcast, *The Oprah Winfrey Show* (Chicago, IL: ABC, 1988).

¹³⁹ Barbara Grizzuti Harrison, "The Importance of Being Oprah," *The New York Times*, July 11, 1989, sec. 6, 28.

Procter & Gamble, the rumor that a representative for the company confessed to Satanic allegations on *Donahue* has persisted since 1982.¹⁴⁰

While television media continued to fan the flames of Satanic conspiracism, two major events occurred that reinvigorated the Satan-hunting cause between 1988 and 1996. The first of these events was the murder of Mark Kilroy in the spring of 1989. Kilroy was a student at the University of Texas in Austin who traveled to Mexico during spring break of that year. He was captured by a small Satanic drug cartel called the "Narcosatanists." He was then murdered and mutilated as part of a ritual invented by the cartel leader. Mexican authorities found Kilroy and the remains of several other people and animals the cult buried on a ranch. The cultists were subsequently arrested and sent to prison. In addition to aiding Satan hunters, Kilroy's murder was also used as fuel in the ongoing War on Drugs. James Kilroy, Mark's father, stated that "Marijuana killed Mark," in reference to the various cartels smuggling it across the border. The following year, the Kilroy's pressed the Galveston County in Texas to institute a random drug testing policy.¹⁴¹

The 1989 murder of Mark Kilroy sparked a wave of Satanic paranoia across the country. Several states across the country responded by passing "occult crime bills." Kilroy's home state of Texas was among the first to pass such a bill, SB 30.¹⁴² Louisiana and Illinois followed shortly after that. An Illinois state representative, Robert Reagan, worked closely with former police detective Robert Simandl to craft several occult crime bills.¹⁴³ Simandl was in part responsible

¹⁴⁰ Lisa Belkin, "Procter & Gamble Fights Satan Story," *New York Times*, April 18, 1985, sec. C.

¹⁴¹ Christi Daugherty, "Suspect: Ringleader Murdered UT Student," *The Galveston Daily News*, April 13, 1989; Christi Daugherty, "Elder Kilroy Says Drugs Killed Son," *The Galveston Daily News*, April 13, 1989; 1. Amy Couvillon, "Commissioners May Implement Drug Tests for County Employees," *The Galveston Daily News*, January 6, 1990.

¹⁴² Texas Legislature Online - 71(1) history for SB 30, accessed March 23, 2024.

¹⁴³ Michael Hawthorne, "Governor Gets Satanic Crimes Bills," *Chicago Sun-Tribune*, June 26, 1989.

for triggering the United Kingdom's Satanic cult scare after he delivered a seminar that year.¹⁴⁴ In November, Idaho adopted an occult crime law after a baby was found outside the town of Rupert, partially burned in a metal box. An autopsy found that the infant had died of pneumonia. Investigators believed a frightened migrant family discarded the infant in a panic.¹⁴⁵ Kay Stienmertz helped to pass Missouri's occult crime bill in 1991. In a 1996 interview with the State Historical Society of Missouri, Steinmetz explained that she became concerned about Satanic abuse in her state after speaking to highway patrol officers who informed her of Satanic abuse. She then went into communities and held public hearings for input on how to craft her occult crime bill. She claimed that she ran the Satanists out of her state.¹⁴⁶ While the legislators involved varied in their party affiliation, each claimed "family" as a primary political interest.¹⁴⁷ In 2015, Missouri's state legislature repealed Stienmertz's occult crime bill due to its lack of use.¹⁴⁸ In the decades since their passage, many of these bills have either been repealed or remain neglected legislation.

The second event that breathed new life into the fading Satanic Panic was the murders at Robin Hood Hills in Arkansas, just across the Mississippi River from Memphis, and the subsequent West Memphis Three Trials. In 1993, police found three eight-year-old boys murdered in a creek bed, their bodies mutilated and tied up. Using training provided by Satan hunters, the West Memphis police determined the crime was a ritual murder. Police arrested

¹⁴⁴ Victor. *Satanic Panic*, 119.

¹⁴⁵ Brian Holmes, "Back in 1989, A Moral Panic Caused Idaho's Satanic Law," *ktvb.com*, October 31, 2023.

¹⁴⁶ Will Sarvis and Kaye H. Steinmetz, An Interview with Kaye H. Steinmetz, other, *Kaye H. Steinmetz Oral History Interview* (The State Historical Society of Missouri, December 17, 1996).

¹⁴⁷ "About James David." James David Cain for Insurance Commissioner, 2011; Judith Zaffrini, "Faith and Family," Senator Judith Zaffrini on the Issues, accessed June 4, 2023; Sarvis and Steinmetz. "An Interview..."; Kenan Heise, "Robert P. Reagan, Broker, Former State Legislature," *Chicago Tribune*, May 4, 1995, sec. Obituaries.

¹⁴⁸ Nathan Elwood, "The Satanic Panic in the Missouri General Assembly," Missouri Legislative Library, October 2020.

three teens (Damien Echols, Jessie Miskelley, and Jason Baldwin) because they fit the profile of "Satanic killers." These "cult indicators" were largely mundane and included how they dressed and the music they listened to. When Jessie Miskelley, who allegedly had an IQ of seventy-five, confessed after hours of police interrogation, the police went forward with a trial. Despite no physical evidence linking any of the teens to the crime, all three were convicted, with the alleged ringleader, Echols, sentenced to death.¹⁴⁹

West Memphis lagged behind much of the country in rejecting the Satanic cult narratives. By 1993, guidance from the FBI to reject cult narratives without express evidence had been officially out for nearly a year and unofficially out for years before that. The trial featured prominently in media throughout the larger Memphis metropolitan area but did not reach the same national attention as the McMartin Trial had in the previous decade. The Memphis Commercial Appeal, once at the forefront of opposition to the Satanic Panic, ran stories such as "Officials Find Signs of Cult Activity." The article centered on the urban legend of an old cotton silo known as "Stonehenge" that had Satanic graffiti and several dead animals around it. Similar to the Barbour case in California, the isolated environment and lack of national attention allowed victory for the Satan hunters.¹⁵⁰

This victory won by the Satan hunters in West Memphis was pyrrhic in nature. The 1996 documentary *Paradise Lost: The Child Murders at Robin Hood Hill* was released two years after the end of the second West Memphis Three Trial. Law enforcement allowed an HBO documentary crew unparalleled access to the trial and the investigation. The documentary was the first time Metallica allowed the documentary to use their music, drawing considerable

¹⁴⁹ *Paradise Lost: The Child Murders at Robin Hood Hills*, film (USA: Home Box Office, 1996).

¹⁵⁰ Marc Perrusquia and Bartholomew Sullivan, "Officials Find Signs of Cult Activity," *The [Memphis] Commercial Appeal*, June 7, 1993, B1-B2.

attention. *Paradise Lost* portrayed the teens as victims of overzealous prosecution targeted them for their aesthetics. The documentary soon spawned a campaign to free the West Memphis Three that lasted nearly twenty years. Celebrity support from people like Johnny Depp, Peter Jackson, and Eddie Vedder drew even more attention to the West Memphis Three and by extension, the issues around Satanic conspiracism in general. In 2012, the courts released the West Memphis Three after they signed Alford pleas, which removed the state from admitting wrongdoing.¹⁵¹

The West Memphis Three Trials were the last major trials of the Satanic Panic. *Paradise Lost*, its sequels, and the subsequent campaign to free the West Memphis Three irreparably damaged the Satan hunting apparatus. A new awareness of what was happening in American court systems sped up the already ongoing process started by lawyers, medical professionals, and journalists in the late 1980s.

There were, of course, other factors that contributed to the downfall of the Satanic Panic beyond the ground-level work done by various professionals. The New Right and the Moral Majority fractured at the end of the 1980s. The political environment changed. In 1992, the New Democrats ascended to power with the election of Bill Clinton. While the conservative politics of the 1980s heavily influenced the New Democrats, their zeal to wage a culture on behalf of the Religious Right was not of primary concern to them. The Gay Rights movement continued to grow through the 1990s. In 1997, Ellen Degeneres came out as a lesbian on national television. In 1998, the show *Will and Grace* featured an openly gay character. While many in the nation still opposed some elements of Gay Rights, such as gay marriage, the fear of 'Satanic homosexuality' was diminishing slowly.¹⁵² The feminist movement began to recover from the battering it received through the 1970s and 1980s. The early internet and the 1995 UN women's

¹⁵¹ "Star Support for the West Memphis 3," CBS News, August 10, 2012.

¹⁵² "LGBTQ+ Rights," Gallup.com, March 14, 2024.

conference in Beijing greatly strengthened their movement. It allowed for decentralized networking and a resurgence in feminist ideology among women.¹⁵³

Even as the winds of social change came through the 1990s, dousing the inferno of the Satanic Panic took considerable and consistent effort on the part of many professionals. Despite setbacks, committed journalists, medical professionals, and lawyers refused to yield in the face of an overwhelming tide of Satanic conspiracism. The daycare panic, ritual abuse, repressed memories, occult crime bills, and occult crime training for police were all eventually consigned to the dustbin of history. America owes a considerable debt to those who did the grunt work of combating untruth with truth regarding Satanic conspiracism.

¹⁵³ For more on the feminist movement in the 1990s, see Lisa Levenstein, *They Didn't See Us Coming: The Hidden History of Feminism in the Nineties* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2020).

Conclusion: Discarding an Inconvenient Truth

The Satanic Panic death knell in the mid-1990s signaled the beginning of a low point for Satanic conspiracism in the United States; however, vestigial elements of it continued. Pat Robertson, televangelist, and one-time Republican presidential candidate continued to use rhetoric from the Satanic Panic well into the twentieth century. In 2011, he argued that Harry Potter was glorifying the occult. In 2012, he said that the *Twilight* Series was “demonic.” In 2013, he claimed that killing people in video games was like killing people in real life.¹⁵⁴ Many who were Satan hunters during the height of the Satanic Panic continued their rhetoric. However, they could no longer conduct their witch hunts through the legal system as effectively. Notably though, some avid supporters of the Satanic conspiracy apologized for their part. In 1995, Geraldo Rivera publicly apologized for spreading Satanic conspiracy theories. “I am convinced that I was terribly wrong,” he said, “many innocent people were convicted and went to prison...” Still, prison robbed many victims of the Satanic Panic of years of their lives.¹⁵⁵

While the Satanic Panic may have ended, Satanic conspiracism continued and evolved. During the Obama presidency, rumors that he was the Antichrist ran rampant on the political right. Alex Jones, renowned right-wing conspiracy theorist and podcast host, got his start by circulating conspiracy theories about President Obama in the late 2000s and early 2010s. In 2009, he produced *The Obama Deception*, a ‘documentary’ that argued Kennedy was the last real president and that all the presidents who came after were puppets to a shadowy cabal of elites.¹⁵⁶ That same year, a public policy poll in New Jersey noted that 18 percent of

¹⁵⁴ Meredith Bennett-Smith, “Pat Robertson: Video Game Killing, ‘Virtual Sins’ Are Like Murder,” HuffPost, August 7, 2013.

¹⁵⁵ Elwood, “The Satanic Panic.” Missouri Legislative Library, 2020,

¹⁵⁶ *The Obama Deception: The Mask Comes Off*, DVD (United States: Alex Jones Productions, 2009).

conservatives polled believed Obama to be the Antichrist.¹⁵⁷ Jones had a considerable audience ready-made for his content. His obsession with Obama's Satanic nature continued throughout his entire presidency. As the 2016 presidential election was nearing its end, Jones released a segment in which he argued that flies landing on Obama indicated he was an actual demon, that a demon-possessed Hillary Clinton, and that both smelled like sulfur.¹⁵⁸ Beyond Satanic conspiracies, Jones helped propel numerous conspiracy theories about Barack Obama to the fore, such as "birtherism," a conspiracy theory that argued Obama was born in Kenya and, therefore, not eligible to be president. Future president Donald Trump appeared on Jones's Infowars program in December 2015.¹⁵⁹ While the pair did not discuss conspiracy theories on that broadcast, Trump was also an early and major proponent of the birther conspiracy, espousing his 'concerns' about Obama's place of birth on multiple television programs.¹⁶⁰

The Right embraced conspiracism with renewed vigor during the Obama presidency. In many ways, the Obama presidency mirrored the Carter presidency. The struggle against the New Right marred the Carter presidency. Marjorie Spruill's book, *Divided We Stand: The Battle over Women's Rights and Family Values that Polarized American Politics*, argued that the women's rights struggle in the 1970s was a central battleground that splintered American politics. Antifeminists aligned with the New Right collided with feminists in the late 1970s over the Equal Rights Amendment, abortion, and gay rights. The resulting conflict caused feminists and antifeminists to almost completely align with the Democratic and Republican parties,

¹⁵⁷ Amarnath Amarasingam, "Baracknophobia and the Paranoid Style: Visions of Obama as the Antichrist on the World Wide Web," in *Network Apocalypse: Visions of the End in an Age of Internet Media* (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2011), 96–123, 97-98.

¹⁵⁸ Alex Jones, "Video: Alex Jones Reports That Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton Are Demons Who Smell like Sulfur," Twitter, October 10, 2016.

¹⁵⁹ Alex Jones, "Infowars: Alex Jones Interviews Donald Trump - December 2, 2015," Factbase Videos, November 4, 2017.

¹⁶⁰ Michael Barbaro, "Donald Trump Clung to 'birther' Lie for Years, and Still Isn't Apologetic," *The New York Times*, September 16, 2016.

respectively. The rallies held by the Tea Party in the 2010s were reminiscent of STOP ERA and other group rallies at various International Women's Year conferences throughout 1977.

Feminists and their supporters became disillusioned with Carter's poor response to their agenda, just as many on the Left became disillusioned with Obama's centrist governing style after a promising progressive campaign.¹⁶¹

Though mainstream media outlets made much of the Tea Party during the Obama presidency, it was merely the larval form of something much more dangerous, QAnon. Like Carter and the New Right, an aggressive, new, and extreme right-wing movement in the Tea Party contributed significantly to Democratic losses in Congress under Obama. While politicians like Jesse Helms and Ronald Reagan were ushered into power by the New Right throughout the 1960s and 1970s, the Tea Party ushered in its batch of far-right candidates such as Michelle Bachman, Mike Lee, Ted Cruz, and others.¹⁶² The Tea Party's failure to prevent Obama's second term took much of the wind from the movement's sails; however, the Tea Party's anger and frustration with the Obama presidency did not simply evaporate. It was this fury that dark-horse presidential candidate Donald Trump successfully tapped. Already known to the right-wing for his birther credentials and numerous appearances on Fox News, Trump surged through the Republican primary and narrowly defeated Hillary Clinton in the 2016 presidential election.

In 2017, the QAnon movement was born on the website 4Chan when an account named "Q Clearance Patriot" (typically referred to as "Q") claimed to be a government insider who was working with Trump to defeat a Satanic pedophile cabal. For years after, Q posted cryptic messages known as "Q Drops" that followers attempted to decipher. While originally on 4Chan,

¹⁶¹ Marjorie Julian Spruill, *Divided We Stand: The Battle over Women's Rights and Family Values That Polarized American Politics* (London, UK: Bloomsbury, 2019).

¹⁶² Thomas Ferraro et al., "Factbox: Key Players in the Tea Party Movement," ed. Philip Barbara, Reuters, 2010.

Q moved to 8Chan and later to 8Kun after the government shut down the former website. Many QAnon adherents used apps to collect all Q Drops into one location. One of these apps was so popular that it reached the top ten paid apps on the Apple App Store.¹⁶³ In 2019, several QAnon followers published *QAnon: An Invitation to the Great Awakening*, a book designed to convince others of the validity of their conspiracy theory. The book's authors collectively identify as "WWG1WGA," meaning "where we go one, we go all." WWG1WGA is the unofficial motto of QAnon. Though some attribute the phrase to President Kennedy, it actually originated from the 1996 film *White Squall*. The film was about a ship that sailed into a deadly "white squall" storm and struggled to survive. The group likely uses this as their motto because they believe an event called "The Storm" will occur in which Donald Trump will expose the Satanic cabal and arrest them. Much like the characters in the film, QAnon supporters believe that they must band together to weather the storm.¹⁶⁴

The Great Awakening makes no effort to mask the group's belief that the cabal that runs the country is Satanic. Multiple Q Drops also reflect this belief. "Many in our government worship Satan..." wrote Q in one such drop quoted in *The Great Awakening*. "The perpetrators are Luciferians and Satan-worshippers. They run pedophile networks across continents, through the Vatican, and underneath the cover of charities and child protective services," wrote Lori Colley, one of few authors who used their actual name in the book. "It's not just harmless fashion, folks, it's a satanic mindset," wrote another about "globalist singer" Celine Dion's line of gender-neutral clothing for children. One chapter is an interview with no context, in which someone named "SW" questions a "Det. R" about the pedophile ring. Given the line of

¹⁶³ Kevin Roose, "What is QAnon, the Viral Pro-Trump Conspiracy Theory?," *The New York Times*, August 18, 2020.

¹⁶⁴ WWG1WGA, *QAnon: An Invitation to the Great Awakening* (Dallas, TX: Relentlessly Creative Books., 2019); Will Rahn and Dan Patterson, "What Is the QAnon Conspiracy Theory?," *CBS News*, March 29, 2021.

questioning, "Det. R" appears to be a detective who investigated missing children's cases. "How many cases have cult or satanic underpinnings?" asked SW. Det. R replied, "A lot of them, especially right now between the full moon and Halloween." Det. R was likely one of the Satan hunters during the Satanic Panic and made continual references back to the 1980s and 1990s. The end of the book has a glossary of terms, including "ritual abuse," as defined in the 1980s.¹⁶⁵

The connection to QAnon and the Satanic Panic is virtually undeniable. Nevertheless, QAnon is not simply a direct continuation of the Satanic Panic. The first difference is that QAnon is almost exclusively limited to the American Right and has only minuscule cross-appeal to the Left. The extreme polarization of American politics has worked to limit QAnon's ability to spread. During the Satanic Panic, the battered political Left embraced some right-wing policies to remain politically solvent. Democrats and Republicans paid lip service throughout the 1980s to the "family values politics that allowed Satanic conspiracism to thrive. Some feminists had also taken up the cause of Satanic ritual abuse, which allowed for In today's politically polarized environment, QAnon has little appeal to the Left, save perhaps a segment of left-leaning anti-vaccine conspiracists who may share a common belief in the alleged dangers of vaccination. QAnon is openly hostile to the political Left, accusing the Democratic Party of human trafficking, drug running, harvesting children for adrenochrome, and all sorts of other criminal activities.¹⁶⁶ Liberal also been a very vocal opponent of QAnon, with President Joe Biden stating, "This is not who we are" when asked about the rampant conspiracy theory.¹⁶⁷ Unlike the Satanic Panic, which masked itself in politically neutral language, QAnon's overt political allegiance to the political right caused the political Left to rise as a mainstream opponent of it.

¹⁶⁵ WWG1WGA, *QAnon*, 37, 39, 50, 178-179, and 248.

¹⁶⁶ WWG1WGA, *QAnon*, 43.

¹⁶⁷ Darragh Roche, "Joe Biden Bemoans QAnon: 'We've Got to Get Beyond This,'" *Newsweek*, July 22, 2021.

Another significant difference between QAnon and the Satanic Panic is that the only people courts are sending to prison are QAnon believers. The Satan hunters of the 1980s and 1990s wielded the American, Canadian, and British justice system like a sword against alleged Satanic cultists. Hundreds of seemingly innocent people languished in prison cells for years during the Satanic Panic. It is possible the Satanic Panic served as an inoculation against similar efforts that QAnon might have tried. Satanic conspiracy theories had their day in court already and were ultimately defeated. The same tricks used before would be unlikely to work a second time.

Additionally, the people QAnon targets are considerably different from those targeted by earlier Satan-hunters. During the Satanic Panic, Satan hunters largely targeted poor outsiders in various communities. These people had little resources to fight against the state. QAnon's main targets are liberal and leftist elites such as politicians and celebrities, people who have considerable wealth and power to fight in court and win. It is a far more populist movement than the Satanic Panic. QAnon believers distrust authority and believe that Satanist pedophiles are controlling the government and courts, and so are disinclined to believe that they can get justice through such systems. Instead, QAnon believers are prone to take matters into their own hands. Some QAnon believers, such as the "QAnon Shaman," famously storm the US Capitol on January 6, 2021, when they attempted to overturn the 2020 presidential election by storming the US Capitol building. As a result, they wind up in prisons more often than those they accuse of being members of the Satanic cabal.

The methods used to combat the Satanic Panic also seem largely ineffective in stopping the spread of QAnon. It took a concerted effort from authoritative sources to end the Satanic Panic. Lawyers, medical professionals, and journalists played key roles in diminishing Satanic

paranoia. For the most part, QAnon believers distrust professionals who disagree with their conspiracy theories and actively work to discredit them. Even when staunchly conservative news outlets disagree with the QAnon narrative, the conspiracists shun them. During the 2020 presidential election, QAnon and other Trump supporters were outraged when Fox News declared Arizona for Biden. They turned off the network in droves to watch One America News (OAN) and other outlets that claimed the state was still contested and later stolen in a conspiracy.¹⁶⁸ Allegiance to the narrative is a requirement to be trusted by QAnon believers, whereas traditional gatekeepers of information, such as newspapers, held considerable sway as relatively neutral arbiters of truth during the Satanic Panic.

By rejecting virtually all information that does not conform to their conspiratorial worldview, QAnon believers shelter themselves from the complexity of actual Satanism. Satanists today are not found in the upper echelons of government harvesting orphan blood for adrenochrome and plotting the demise of the world. Two distinct branches of Satanism evolved in the decades since Anton LaVey founded his church. One branch that includes organizations like The Satanic Temple (TST) are left-leaning atheists who use Satan as a symbol of rebellion, much like the Romantic Satanism of past centuries. Such groups often erect Satanic monuments in opposition to Christmas manger displays and use their religion to advance liberal causes, such as building abortion clinics.¹⁶⁹ Groups like TST, now the largest Satanic group in the nation, were created as a reaction to right-wing culture war efforts.¹⁷⁰ Satan hunters and right-wing culture warriors seem to have inadvertently created the very enemy they have always feared.

¹⁶⁸ Peter Baker, "Inside the Panic at Fox News after the 2020 Election," *The New York Times*, March 4, 2023.

¹⁶⁹ "About Us," *The Satanic Temple*, accessed March 20, 2024.

¹⁷⁰ Mark Oppenheimer, "A Mischievous Thorn in the Side of Conservative Christianity," *The New York Times*, July 11, 2015.

While TST advances leftist causes the Christian Right fears the most, The Satanic Temple and similar groups are far less dangerous than some of their counterparts.

Jacob Senholt, a researcher who has written extensively about modern Satanism, has identified what he refers to as the "Sinister Tradition" in Satanism, which includes theistic Satanic organizations like the "Order of Nine Angles" (ONA) and the Temple of Set. This tradition continues the extreme right-wing beliefs held by Anton LaVey, such as race theory, social Darwinism, and sympathy for Nazism. In the 1990s, far-right Nazi-Satanist groups like ONA were on the rise in popularity and advocated for things like actual human sacrifices. Like LaVey, their opposition to Christianity stemmed from a belief that it weakened people.¹⁷¹ The Sinister Tradition also embraces newer ideas, such as the infiltration and disruption of political powers in society, the very thing that QAnon believers and Satan-hunters fear has already happened. Notably, ONA has not been successful in its efforts.¹⁷² While the Satan-hunters of the past and QAnon believers of today look ever leftward for Satanic cults, if they looked rightward, they would find the Satanists they have always been looking for. The most dangerous Satanic traditions are typically born from right-wing extremism, not left-wing.

This reality does not fit into the preferred narrative of Satanic conspiracists, and they will go to great lengths to work around it. In 2021, Representatives Mo Brooks of Alabama, a known QAnon sympathizer, and Louie Gohmert of Texas went as far as to stand before Congress and argue that Adolf Hitler was a far-left socialist and that fascism was a leftist ideology.¹⁷³ They were not the first to make such an argument, Peter Hitchens, a right-wing commentator, wrote

¹⁷¹ Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke, *Black Sun - Aryan Cults, Esoteric Nazism, and the Politics of Identity* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2003), 215-219.

¹⁷² Jacob C. Senholt, "Secret Identities in the Sinister Tradition: Political Esoterism and the Convergence of Radical Islam, Satanism, and National Socialism in The Order of Nine Angles," in *The Devil's Party: Satanism in Modernity* eds. Per Faxneld, Jesper Aa. Petersen. (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2013), 250–74, 252-253.

¹⁷³ Jane Coaston, "Adolf Hitler Was Not a Socialist," Vox, March 27, 2019.

“Hitler the Progressive” in 2019.¹⁷⁴ Even he was not the first to make such an argument. There is a lengthy tradition of the American Right attempting to move Adolf Hitler and the Nazi Party to the other side of the political spectrum. There are numerous reasons for this, but as it relates to Satanism, it allows for its connection to Nazism to be evidence of its connection to socialism and the Left. The Nazi Party had an acute fascination with the occult for the same reason that Neo-Nazis are infatuated with Satanism. The Nazi Party thought that Christianity, both Protestants and Catholics, exploited the German people and weakened them. Hitler and the Nazis turned to pagan mythology that they believed would strength German. They wanted religion to be subordinate to nationalism.¹⁷⁵

Why go to such extreme measures to hide the political alignment of dangerous Satanic organizations? Why do Satanic conspiracists not acknowledge the truth of Satanism? The answer is that the hunt for Satanic cults in the post-World War II era was not about combating any real threat posed by the more extreme, fascistic elements of Satanism. It was about exploiting the political capital of moral panic. Whitney Strub argued that the New Right capitalized on moral panic over pornography and obscenity to divide the nation and politically conquer it. The New Right created a moral crisis and claimed the high ground within that crisis to resounding political success, all the while further destabilizing and polarizing American culture in the process.¹⁷⁶

Moral panic over Satanism was both connected to and distinct from moral panic over pornography. Satanic conspiracism remains a powerful othering tool. To the conspiracist, Satanism's connection to pornography, homosexuality, communism, and various other 'immoral'

¹⁷⁴ Peter Hitchens, “Hitler the Progressive,” *First Things*, 2019.

¹⁷⁵ For more of Nazis and the Occult see “Eric Kurlander, “Hitler’s Monsters: The Occult Roots of Nazism and the Emergence of the Nazi ‘Supernatural Imaginary,’” *German History* 30, no. 4 (October 29, 2012): 528–49.”

¹⁷⁶ Whitney Strub, *Perversion for Profit: The Politics of Pornography and the Rise of the New Right* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2013).

things was a given. Throughout the 1950s, John Stormer, an anticommunist writer, connected pornography to a communist plot. In 1978, the Southern Baptist Convention declared pornography "a tool of Satan."¹⁷⁷ Rosemary Thomson, Phyllis Schlafly's lieutenant, argued that communism itself was a Satanic plot in 1978.¹⁷⁸ The political Right drew connections between all these elements regularly. In this way, Satanic conspiracism contributed to the moral panic over pornography, homosexuality, and communism. Moral panic over Satanism was also a separate exploited element with its own political capital. Political capital from SRA funded the New Right's war on a variety of things they found disagreeable, from daycares to metal music. Certain feminist groups used that same well of political capital to advance their agenda of combating sexual abuse, incest, and rape. Al and Tipper Gore exploited Satanic fears when they pursued censorship of "porn rock" in 1985.¹⁷⁹ Today, that same political capital gives QAnon its strength. Donald Trump's power, and by extension much of the Republican Party's, is held aloft by the conspiratorial spider web that is QAnon, and what a web it is.

QAnon is not merely a Satanic conspiracy. It is called a "meta-conspiracy," or a conspiracy incorporating multiple conspiratorial strands. Some QAnon supporters believe that John F. Kennedy Jr. is still alive and will run for president alongside Donald Trump in the 2024 presidential election.¹⁸⁰ Matthew Coleman, a QAnon supporter, also believed in the reptilian conspiracy and murdered his two infant children after he suspected his wife had "serpent DNA."¹⁸¹ While not every QAnon supporter believes in all aspects of the conspiracy theory,

¹⁷⁷ Strub, *Perversion for Profit*, 116-117, 185.

¹⁷⁸ Thomson, *Price of LIBerty*, 105.

¹⁷⁹ "Rock Lyrics Record Labeling," C-SPAN, accessed February 6, 2024.

¹⁸⁰ Phil Thomas, "Why Some QAnon Believers Think JFK Jr Is Still Alive – and About to be Vice President," *The Independent*, December 18, 2023.

¹⁸¹ David Gilbert, "QAnon Surfer Who Killed His Kids was Radicalized by Lizard People Conspiracies," *VICE*, April 5, 2022.

conspiracists are likely to believe in more than one conspiracy theory and have relatively inconsistent beliefs. Because of this, it is very difficult to assess the number of QAnon supporters. While experts believe the number of direct QAnon supporters to be small and stable over time when polled about the beliefs of QAnon, around 25 percent of Republicans believed in the core tenets of the conspiracy. QAnon's impact on right-wing politics is much greater than the number of direct followers would suggest.¹⁸²

Moving beyond the murky waters of identification, QAnon supporters craft elaborate narratives that weave together multiple conspiracy theories. The process of meshing together these different conspiratorial beliefs create "meta-conspiracies." Meta-conspiracies indicate a worldview, the "paranoid style," as Hofstadter put it in the 1960s.¹⁸³ Since conspiracy theories use similar types of "evidence" to support them, the leap from one conspiratorial belief to another is common. Conspiracy theorists see a world where truth is always hidden and societal ills are the result of a malevolent force. Those studying conspiracism have often focused extensively on why this worldview appeals to so many people. Their answers range from a bizarre comfort in the idea that the world is controlled and completely logical to mass mental illness. Fewer have tried to look at the value of the conspiratorial worldview in politics.

Perversion for Profit's sixth chapter, "Resurrecting Moralism," argued that the New Right turned to fully embrace overtly Christian, religious arguments against pornography in the late 1970s, which allowed them to largely dispense with the need for secular arguments.¹⁸⁴ While the Right in America will still use secular arguments when reality becomes inconvenient, they have no

¹⁸² PRRI, "New PRRI Report Reveals Nearly One in Five Americans and One in Four Republicans Still Believe in QAnon Conspiracy Theories," PRRI, February 23, 2022.; Adam M. Enders et al., "Who Supports QAnon? A Case Study in Political Extremism," *The Journal of Politics* 84, no. 3 (July 1, 2022): 1844–49.

¹⁸³ Hofstadter, *Paranoid Style*, 3-40.

¹⁸⁴ Strub, *Perversion for Profit*, 173-212.

issues discarding them and embracing conspiratorial arguments. The "paranoid style," the conspiratorial worldview, and related concepts are politically valuable tools for working around scientific truths and secular arguments.

While the Right does not monopolize conspiracism, they have been the primary benefactors of its use in politics since World War II. While Hofstadter argued that the "paranoid style" had long been a force in American political history, Jesse Walker, in his 2014 book *The United States of Paranoia*, argued that the "Paranoid Style is American Politics." He explored numerous examples in American history where paranoid thought deeply impacted American politics. These examples ranged from conspiratorial accusations around the attempted assassination of Andrew Jackson to accusations of murder surrounding the death of Vince Foster in the 1990s. Walker carefully indicated that he believed the paranoid style was prevalent on both sides of the political spectrum. He pointed out numerous examples of leftists in American history using conspiratorial accusations, such as Charles Dabney accusing William Jennings Bryan and the Populist Party of being a part of a sinister cabal and the large numbers of African Americans who insisted that O.J. Simpson was innocent and that the trial was a conspiracy. Walker argued that Hofstadter did not apply his insights to his elite audience.¹⁸⁵

Walker may be right that conspiratorial accusations appear across the political spectrum; however, in the modern era, the Left has not weaponized those accusations in the same manner as the right has. There has been no Left equivalent in post-World War II American history to McCarthyism, the Satanic Panic, and QAnon. While some left-leaning groups have used conspiracy theories to their political benefit, such as sex-negative feminists, they failed to rise to the same level of power and influence. In the case of sex-negative feminists, they ultimately

¹⁸⁵ Walker. *United States of Paranoia*,1-22.

aided right-wing causes more than feminist ones by advancing conservative narratives about pornography and obscenity. The Right's use of conspiracism's political capital has had deadly consequences, including an attempt to seize power in a coup on January 6, 2021.

With the 2024 election closing in, the rematch between Biden and Trump threatens to fan the flames again. If Trump loses in 2024, will someone in the future write about the lives lost on January 6, 2025? What can be done to combat such a future? As mentioned earlier, the mechanisms that slowed the Satanic Panic to a halt are seemingly no longer effective. Even unethical and possibly criminal behaviors from QAnon darlings like Matt Gaetz and even Trump, which has an entire Associated Press webpage devoted to tracking all his pending cases, have failed to elicit a similar reaction to when the Senate merely censured Joseph McCarthy.¹⁸⁶ Since the rise of QAnon in 2017, journalists, scholars, and others have been sounding the alarm about the dangers this conspiratorial movement poses to the nation. Article after article, book after book, has been published on conspiracy theories, and QAnon specifically, in a vain effort to smother the flames. Election fraud conspiracy theories continued to strengthen the movement even after Trump's election loss. As of 2022, polling suggested that QAnon support had grown despite the disappearance of Q.¹⁸⁷ Even in 2023, polls suggested that nearly one-third of Americans believed that Biden stole the election from Trump. This belief flourished well after the Trump campaign lost over fifty court cases related to voter fraud.¹⁸⁸

¹⁸⁶ Will Steakin, "Gaetz Subpoenaed by Woman He Allegedly Had Sex with When She Was a Minor in Defamation Suit Brought by Friend," ABC News, March 13, 2024; Michael R. Sisak, "Tracking the Criminal and Civil Cases against Donald Trump," Associated Press, March 18, 2024.

¹⁸⁷ David Smith, "Belief in QAnon Has Strengthened in US since Trump Was Voted out, Study Finds," The Guardian, February 24, 2022.

¹⁸⁸ Ben Kamisar, "Almost a Third of Americans Still Believe the 2020 Election Result Was Fraudulent," NBCNews.com, June 20, 2023.

In the closing paragraphs of *Perversion for Profit*, Strub argued that the absence of strong opposition to the New Right's narrative on sex and pornography allowed them to gain the moral high ground in the debate over it. He suggested that if the Left were to strongly take up the cause of sex education and wrest control of the narrative from the Right, their ability to utilize the political capital of moral panic over pornography would be limited.¹⁸⁹ This tactic worked for the Satanic Panic as well. Although not expressly political, powerful opposition to the conspiracy theory stymied its advance. This method also worked to a lesser extent against QAnon. Most news organizations and politicians, even Republicans, condemn the QAnon conspiracy.¹⁹⁰ While it is difficult to measure how much of a factor opposition to the QAnon conspiracy impacted the 2020 presidential election, it likely played a role in motivating the Left to rally behind Joe Biden.

Unlike the Satanic Panic, opposition to QAnon has only served to contain its spread. Core support for the QAnon conspiracy has remained steady and sometimes grown slightly, even though the opposition routinely assails it. It is difficult for those who speak out directly against any conspiracy to make any considerable inroads to changing the minds of its supporters because they believe the truth cannot be found through typical means like mainstream news.¹⁹¹ The enemy to a conspiracist is an utterly othered, demonic force. At best, conspiracists consider vocal opponents to be unwitting accomplices who, through ignorance, support the agenda of evil. At worst, they consider their opponents part of the conspiracy, demons in human skin. This tactic is known as "the shill card." Mick West, a prolific debunker of conspiracy theories, described "the shill card" as "a tactic used by the promoters of disinformation to discredit people who point out their errors." Beyond being applied to people, "the shill card" can be applied to sources of

¹⁸⁹ Strub, *Perversion for Profit*, 295-297.

¹⁹⁰ Susan Cornwell, "US House Condemns 'QAnon' Conspiracy Theory; 17 Republicans Vote No," Reuters, October 2, 2020.

¹⁹¹ Barkun, *A Culture of Conspiracy*, 7-8.

information. When using sources like Snopes or similar fact-checking websites, conspiracy theorists "poison the well" and often use those websites to indicate that the opposite of what they say is true. Core QAnon believers are not fazed by any number of books or news articles that point out their errors. To them, that is often just evidence that they are right.¹⁹²

Still, the perpetual act of containment is not a vain struggle. While QAnon supporters are unlikely to be dissuaded from their path, ensuring the public is aware of the history and danger posed by Satanic conspiracism can help prevent considerable damage from being done. For example, what if Pizzagate occurred in 1986 instead of 2016? Comet Ping-Pong was bombarded by calls and even invaded by an armed gunman looking for Hillary Clinton's pedophile sex dungeon in the basement of an establishment that did not have one.¹⁹³ Excavators did not dig up the area, looking for the hidden tunnels to the basement. The strong stance taken against QAnon has had a considerable impact compared to moral panics over Satanism from the past.

Is it even possible to defeat QAnon? There will likely always be some support for Satanic conspiracy theories present in America. In this way, it is not possible to entirely end belief and support for QAnon or whatever its ideas and tenants morph into in the future. However, history shows that Satanic conspiracism has not always held a mainstream presence in American politics and culture. Responsibility for weakening QAnon's hold on right-wing politics rests with them. The New Right, its predecessors, and successors benefit from spending the political capital of moral panic over Satanism. However, this capital is cursed. Spending it creates monsters the conservative establishment can scarcely contain. While the attempted coup on January 6, 2021, served as a wake-up call for many Republicans, the temptation to downplay or endorse QAnon

¹⁹² Mick West, *Escaping the Rabbit Hole: How to Debunk Conspiracy Theories Using Facts, Logic, and Respect* (New York, NY: Skyhorse Publishing, 2023), 63-64.

¹⁹³ Cecilia Kang and Adam Goldman, "In Washington Pizzeria Attack, Fake News Brought Real Guns," *The New York Times*, December 5, 2016.

and its beliefs for political gain remains for many right-wing politicians. So long as it remains acceptable to wink and nod to conspiracy theorists, QAnon and Satanic conspiracism are here to stay.

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