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## The best medicine against the conspiracy candidate

by [Anne Applebaum](#)

*“They say they found a pillow on his face, which is a pretty unusual place to find a pillow.”*

— [Donald Trump](#), on the death of Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia, Tuesday.

In the past several months, far too much time has been spent on analysis of the “anger” being expressed by the supporters of Donald Trump. Not nearly enough time has been spent examining another central aspect of his appeal: his penchant for conspiracy theories. Trump’s first big contribution to national politics was his vigorous support for “[birtherism](#)” — the belief, against a vast range of evidence, that Barack Obama was born in Kenya. One of his first major contributions to this presidential race was the statement that on Sept. 11 “[thousands and thousands](#)” of Muslims in New Jersey gathered to cheer as the twin towers burned.

In its essence, a conspiracy theory is the modern equivalent of a myth: It’s a story that people tell to explain otherwise inexplicable events. The appeal of conspiracy theories is so deep because the human need for meaning is so profound. Why does the sun rise in the morning? Because that’s when the god Apollo rides his chariot across the sky. Why did Scalia die right now, in the middle of a presidential campaign? Because someone is pulling strings behind the scenes, trying to manipulate events.

The human brain is designed to reject the random, the haphazard, the arbitrary. It’s just too much for many people to accept that accidents happen, planes crash, ships founder on the rocks and elderly people die in their sleep: A dramatic event must fit into a larger narrative. For others, conspiracy theories are a useful way to explain personal failure: It wasn’t me, it was the Freemasons/capitalists/Jews/immigrants/murderers of Scalia who deprived me of success.

Americans are no strangers to conspiracy theories. The Kennedy assassination’s “[second shooter](#),” [Area 51](#), the [faked moon landing](#), Obama birtherism and 9/11 trutherism — all of these have their adherents. But we have been blessed in recent history by a political system that has, for the most part, kept them outside the mainstream of American political life. With the possible

exception of the anti-Masonic movement in the 19th century and some of the madder moments of the Nixon presidency, conspiratorial thinking has never been central to the political debate.

Instead, we have become accustomed to the idea that political debate must be, at least in theory, related to reality. But other nations have not been so lucky. When conspiracy theorists actually run the government, they can do enormous damage, diverting public funds and institutions to cope with imaginary threats. [Srdja Popovic](#), a Serbian activist who helped overthrow the authoritarian leader Slobodan Milosevic, has reminisced about the day he switched on the television and learned of a “high-level CIA conspiracy to overthrow Milosevic by using well-paid student activists,” among them himself. Much later, he learned that police really were spending time and money searching the world for the international headquarters of his movement. In fact, it was in his parents’ living room in central Belgrade. In the Soviet Union, that kind of thinking led to mass murder.

I’m guessing that Americans’ long-standing aversion to conspiracy theory derives from our devotion to commerce: Businessmen, at the end of the day, need to have a grasp on reality to make money. But something did change in American public life with the appearance of Glenn Beck and other dodgy members of what the writer David Frum has called the “[conservative entertainment complex](#).” The general deterioration of trust in the government and, after 2008, the financial establishment made the situation worse. Now Trump has placed conspiratorial thinking squarely at the center of the Republican primary. A whole generation of people who get their information from random sources on the Internet have eagerly taken up his invented stories and are reposting them as fast as they can. Trump’s lies and his distortions of reality don’t stick to him because his followers are not interested in truth. They prefer satisfying stories.

Popovic has written that it’s impossible to debunk conspiracy theories, and I can confirm that he is right, being the subject of several myself. He argues, instead, that the best weapon against conspiratorial thinking is laughter. He and his friends wore T-shirts with the slogan “Touch me — I’m a foreign mercenary.” Maybe, just maybe, that might work: When [President Obama](#) [mocked](#) Trump’s birther campaign at the White House correspondents’ dinner in 2011, Trump did shut up for a while. But I’m afraid that as Trump looks more and more likely to become the Republican presidential nominee, it’s going to get harder and harder to find him funny.

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