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Loneliness is breaking America

Trumpism — and far-right conspiracy theories like QAnon — thrive on America's loneliness epidemic. This has become worse in the Covid-19 crisis

I wasn't planning on reading any of the new batch of Donald Trump books. His vampiric hold on the nation's attention for five years was nightmarish enough; one of the small joys of the post-Trump era is that it's become possible to ignore him for days at a time.

But after reading an article adapted from 'Frankly, We Did Win This Election: The Inside Story of How Trump Lost' by Michael C. Bender, a Wall Street Journal reporter, I changed my mind and picked it up. What caught my attention wasn't his reporting on White House disarray and Trump's terrifying impulses — some details are new, but that story is familiar. Rather, I was fascinated by Bender's account of the people who followed Trump from rally to rally like authoritarian Deadheads.

Bender's description of these Trump superfans, who called themselves the 'front-row Joes,' is sympathetic but not sentimental. Above all, he captures their pre-Trump loneliness.

Loneliness and totalitarianism

'Many were recently retired and had time on their hands and little to tie them to home,' writes Bender. 'A handful never had children. Others were estranged from their families.' Throwing themselves into Trump's movement, they found a community and a sense of purpose. 'Saundra's life had become bigger with Trump,' he says of a Michigan woman who did odd jobs on the road to fund her obsession.

There are many causes for the overlapping dysfunctions that make contemporary American life feel so dystopian, but loneliness is a big one. Even before Covid-19, Americans were becoming more isolated. And as Damon Linker pointed out recently in The Week, citing Hannah Arendt, lonely people are drawn to totalitarian ideologies.

It's not just Trumpism that feeds on isolation.

'The chief characteristic of the mass man is not brutality and backwardness, but his isolation and lack of normal social relationships,' Arendt concluded in 'The Origins of Totalitarianism,' describing those who gave themselves over to all-encompassing mass movements.

The appeal of QAnon

A socially healthy society would probably never have elected Trump in the first place. As Daniel Cox, a senior fellow in polling and public opinion at the conservative American Enterprise Institute, wrote in FiveThirtyEight shortly after the 2020 election, the 'share of Americans who are more socially disconnected from society is on the rise. And these voters disproportionately support Trump.'

Polling data from AEI's Survey Center on American Life found that 17 per cent of Americans said they had not a single person in their 'core social network.' These 'socially disconnected voters were far more likely to view Trump positively and support his reelection than those with more robust personal networks,' wrote Cox.

It's not just Trumpism that feeds on isolation. Consider QAnon, which has morphed from an internet message board hoax into a quasi-religion. In his book 'The Storm Is Upon Us: How QAnon Became a Movement, Cult, and Conspiracy Theory of Everything,' journalist Mike Rothschild shows how central a sense of digital community is to QAnon's appeal. 'It's one of the reasons why baby boomers have fallen in with Q to such a surprising degree — many are empty nesters, on their own, or retired,' he writes.

It's also likely a reason that QAnon started expanding in tandem with Covid-19 lockdowns, finding new life among Instagram influencers, yoga practitioners, and suburban moms. Suddenly people all over America had their social lives obliterated, and many mothers found themselves trapped in domestic isolation beyond anything imagined by Betty Friedan. Stuck at home, they had more time to get sucked into internet rabbit holes. QAnon, which came to merge with Covid-trutherism, gave them an explanation for their misery and villains to blame.

'Nobody cares about anything'

A cruel paradox of Covid-19 is that the social distancing required to

control it nurtured pathologies that are now prolonging it. Isolated, atomised people turned to movements that turned them against vaccines. Here, too, Arendt was prescient. She described people shaken loose from any definite place in the world as being at once deeply selfish and indifferent to their own well-being: 'Self-centeredness, therefore, went hand in hand with a decisive weakening of the instinct for self-preservation.'

If you give people's life meaning, they'll give you everything.

One of the most vivid characters in Bender's book is Randal Thom, a 60-year-old Marine veteran whose wife and children left him because of his drug problem, and who spent time in prison. 'The rallies became the organizing principle in his life, and Trump fans loved him for it,' writes Bender. 'Like Trump himself, all of Randal's past mistakes didn't matter to them.' When he got sick with what he believed was Covid-19, he refused to go to the hospital, lest he 'potentially increase the caseload on Trump's watch.' (He survived but died in a car crash on his way home from a Trump boat parade in October.)

Toward the end of Bender's book, Saundra reappears. She'd just been at the Capitol for the 6 January insurrection and seemed ready for more. 'Tell us where we need to be, and we just drop everything and we go,' she says. 'Nobody cares about if they have to work. Nobody cares about anything.'

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