

## Statement for the Record

**Submitted to the U.S. House of Representatives Select Committee to Investigate the  
January 6, 2021 attack on the United States Capitol**

**April 3, 2022**

Dear Members of the Select Committee to Investigate the January 6 attack on the United States Capitol:

My name is A.J. Bauer, and I am writing in my capacity as a historian and ethnographer of the modern conservative movement in the United States, specializing in conservative news and right-wing media. I am an Assistant Professor in the Department of Journalism and Creative Media at the University of Alabama, although my remarks reflect my views alone and not those of my employer or the State of Alabama. I hold a PhD in American Studies from New York University and am co-editor of *News on the Right: Studying Conservative News Cultures* (Oxford University Press, 2019). My research and commentary have appeared in *American Journalism*, *Radical History Review*, *Electronic News*, *Columbia Journalism Review*, *The Guardian*, *TV Guide*, and elsewhere.

These remarks are designed to assist you in your efforts to diagnose the myriad contributing factors resulting in the attempted insurrection of January 6, 2021. What follows is based upon more than a decade's worth of archival and periodical research into the long history of the modern conservative movement, its media activist and journalistic projects, and its contentious relationship to the "mainstream." I also draw upon my participant observation of the Tea Party movement in the summer of 2010, and my ongoing participant observations of right-wing social media which I began more than a decade ago.

### **Right-Wing Media vs. Conservative News Cultures**

Since Donald J. Trump's election to the U.S. presidency in 2016, a new genre of media criticism has grown in salience especially among progressives and some anti-Trump conservatives. This genre is epitomized in Jen Senko's 2016 documentary film, and 2021 companion book, *The Brainwashing of My Dad*. Senko depicts her elderly father as a liberal Democrat who, after tuning in to Rush Limbaugh and later Fox News, transformed into a conservative. Similar narratives have popped up around the QAnon phenomenon, which factored into the January 2021 attack on the Capitol—with various

individuals claiming to have “lost” loved ones to media manipulation or “brainwashing” at the hands of right-wing demagogues and Internet trolls.

Despite these popular understandings of conservative media’s efficacy, media influence is notoriously difficult to measure. Studies that show direct effects of media messages on individuals, often based on experiments or survey methods, are largely unable to map such influence at scale. Indeed, a prevailing “limited effects” tradition of mass communication research has long found media influence to be significantly mitigated by social networks.

Neither of these approaches—so-called “magic bullet” theories of strong media influence, nor “limited effects” theories of weak media influence—adequately describe the relationship between conservative media and their audiences. While Donald Trump’s election and the January 6, 2021 insurrection at the U.S. Capitol are both clearly influenced by right-wing media messages, neither result directly from any one message, personality, or outlet.

My colleague Anthony Nadler and I have developed a concept that might help clarify this relationship. In our book *News on the Right* (Oxford UP, 2019) we coined the term “conservative news cultures,” which we defined as the daily production and consumption of conservative news and the circulation of that news within and beyond the modern conservative movement. Conservative news cultures are partly rooted in the political economy of conservative media (who owns what outlets, those outlets’ profitability, etc.), partly in the media habits of conservative news consumers (where folks get their news, what folks consider to be news, what news folks find entertaining or informative, etc.), and partly in the circulation of conservative interpretations of the news (changes in technology, social media algorithms and user habits, etc.)—they are not reducible to any one of these factors.

To illustrate this concept, consider a typical day during the Trump presidency (before his Twitter suspension):

“Most days, Donald J. Trump tunes in to *Fox & Friends*, a cable show whose sometimes conspiratorial news judgment is often reflected in the president’s trademark early morning tweets. Those tweets are themselves treated as news—the controversial ones covered breathlessly by mainstream political reporters across mediums. The president’s supporters like and retweet his posts, spreading their content among likeminded friends and followers across platforms, while his detractors retweet with snarky rejoinders. Often rejoinder tweets themselves go viral, giving quaternary life to bits and pieces of news originating in the judgment of Fox News reporters, editors, and commentators” (Bauer and Nadler, 5).

As this example demonstrates, many factors contribute to whether or not a particular message circulates, how widely, and with what effects. No one actor entirely controls whether a message is received, how it is received, or by whom. While any one commentator or media message may have limited influence, the ownership structure of conservative media, new technologies, shifts in audience taste and habits each combine to impact the degree to which conservative ideas circulate and their relative salience among conservatives and among the general public at large. These conservative news cultures are historically contingent—they, and their impacts, change with time.

While many outlets and individuals shoulder some blame for the crowd that amassed to listen to President Trump and which subsequently stormed the Capitol on January 6, I want to draw your attention to a broader shift in conservative news culture in the United States that provided a fruitful soil for both Trump's election in 2016 and his attempts to invalidate his election loss in 2020.

### **The Decline of Conservative Respectability Politics**

In the late 1940s and 1950s conservatives were fragmented—minority factions in both major political parties—and their ideas were overwhelmingly unpopular. As conservatives Fred G. Clark and Richard Stanton Rimanoczy wrote in their 1948 self-help book, *How to Be Popular, Though Conservative*, “millions of unhappy Americans in all walks of life ... have found themselves branded with the nasty name, ‘conservative,’ which, in some circles, rivals the mark of Cain and the Cloven Hoof.”

This sense of unpopularity, even stigma, caused early post-war conservatives to frame their movement in ways designed to promote respectability in the eyes of liberal elites and the mainstream press (who were not so much “liberal” as influenced by a broad bipartisan consensus over Keynesian approaches to managing the domestic economy and containment of communism abroad). In its first issue, published in November 1955, the *National Review* explicitly positioned itself against not only liberals and communists, but as an improvement over the “irresponsible Right” that had preceded it.

By the early 1960s, the post-war conservative movement had built the basis of an alternative media system designed to promote conservative ideas—chief among them support for deregulated free market capitalism, for traditional values (particularly on issues pertaining to gender, sexuality, race and religion) and for U.S. interests overseas (particularly against international communism). Conservatives reached one another, and grew their ranks, through opinion magazines, books, newsletters, and radio broadcasts. All of these framed “mainstream” media outlets, like CBS, NBC, ABC, and most major newspapers, as “liberal” or even engaged in communist subversion. While this “liberal media” rhetorical foil allowed these movement media to increase their circulation among conservatives and members of the general public who disagreed with mainstream news media coverage (especially on issues like the Cold War and civil rights), none of these efforts were commercially viable. They were reliant on the

benevolence of donors, mostly wealthy businessmen who themselves were invested in promoting a version of conservatism that kept them in good standing within elite social circles.

Conservatives also invested in movement infrastructure, groups ranging from Buckley's Young Americans for Freedom to the John Birch Society. Founded by businessman Robert Welch, the latter was designed to mirror the tactics of communist front groups. Secretive, dogmatic, and conspiratorial, by the early 1960s the Birchers were gaining power but also risking the reputation of the broader movement by focusing on outlandish theories about the putatively toxic effects of fluoride, the United Nation's aspirations for world domination, and Supreme Court Justice Earl Warren's supposed communist sympathies.

Fearing that the Birchers' theories and tactics would discredit the conservative movement's efforts at respectability, William F. Buckley famously denounced Welch in the pages of the *National Review* in 1962. This, however, was only the most public of a series of efforts to insulate the modern conservative movement from its conspiratorial wing. In December 1964, at the inaugural board meeting of the American Conservative Union—explicitly formed as a corollary to the then-prominent liberal advocacy group Americans for Democratic Action—the ACU's first order of business was a motion by Buckley to exclude all John Birch Society leadership from membership.

While the John Birch Society persists to this day, and remains influential among certain segments of the conservative grassroots, the efforts of Buckley and the American Conservative Union to promote a "responsible" conservatism—defined by dismissal of conspiracy thinking and increasing acceptance of colorblind racial rhetoric—began to gain traction by the 1970s, a decade that culminated in Ronald Reagan's election to the presidency, a sort of high water mark for the post-war conservative movement.

One important contribution to this effort was the American Conservative Union's launch of the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) in 1974. Pitched as an "opportunity for the news media to see, meet, and hopefully better understand the ever-growing conservative movement in the United States," the conference was designed to showcase elected officials and a new professional class of political operatives who would soon rebrand (with the help of the mainstream news media who covered them) as the New Right.

These New Right political operatives were ultimately successful at integrating the modern conservative movement with the Republican Party, affecting an ideological sorting in the 1980s-1990s whereby most conservatives left the Democratic Party and most liberals left the Republican Party. New Right activists brought with them an entrepreneurial energy that was lacking in earlier generations of conservative activists. They launched endeavors—like Richard Viguerie's direct mail enterprise—that not only promoted conservatism but were designed to make a profit while doing so.

Commercially viable conservatism gained steam in the late 1980s, spurred in part by the Reagan administration's deregulatory reforms—including scaling back limits on media ownership and content regulations that had prevented stations from ideologically oriented programming. In 1987, the Reagan Federal Communications Commission ended the “fairness doctrine,” a regulation implemented in 1949 that had required broadcasters to cover issues of public controversy in a way that balanced differing ideological perspectives. Meanwhile, AM radio stations were in search of new programming formats after music began to dominate stereo-enabled FM frequencies. In 1988, Sacramento-based conservative talk radio host Rush Limbaugh achieved national syndication—leveraging the conservative base built by the New Right and Reagan into a highly lucrative mass audience.

By 1994, Limbaugh's sizeable influence had helped fuel the so-called “Republican Revolution,” when the party overtook both houses of Congress for the first time in 40 years. Republicans honored Limbaugh by recognizing him as an honorary member of their congressional caucus, but his enormous national audience and commercial viability increasingly meant that he was a source of power in his own right. Indeed, especially after the launch of Fox News Channel in 1996, conservative media began to diverge from the modern conservative movement and Republican Party which had enabled it.

In 2004, it was still possible to see conservative media figures like Limbaugh and Fox as serving the interests of the conservative movement and Republican Party. In their book *Echo Chamber*, scholars Kathleen Hall Jamieson and Joseph Cappella showed how commercial conservative media outlets policed Republican politicians to keep them in line with Reagan-era conservative values—the “respectable” fusionist conservatism pioneered by Buckley, the *National Review* and the ACU.

But something happened around the election of Barack Obama in 2008. With conservatives out of power, leading conservative outlets needed to keep their disaffected audiences tuned in. Increasingly, these outlets promoted conservative grassroots organizing that diverged from the interests of the Republican Party establishment. Starting in 2009, and boosted by Fox and Limbaugh both, the Tea Party movement followed the lead of the New Right of the 1970s—creating new organizations and business ventures designed to capitalize on the outpouring of conservative angst against Obama and the Democratic Party. These Tea Party era initiatives also benefited from Web 2.0, the rise of social media platforms that enabled user-generated content and circulation at unprecedented speeds and scales.

While the conservative movement and Republican Party capitalized on these new media driven innovations, they no longer controlled them. While Limbaugh, Fox and a growing array of conservative digital news outlets (ranging from Drudge Report, to Breitbart, to the Daily Caller, to the Daily Wire, to Right Side Broadcasting Network) were interested in promoting conservative causes and candidates, they were also motivated by profit—

the need to amass large, or at least highly engaged, audiences for the purpose of selling advertisements. Commercial viability meant that conservative ideological needs were increasingly subordinated to the drive for clicks and audience engagement, shaping which issues and candidates received the attention and promotion of conservative outlets. Profitability eclipsed respectability as the driving force of modern conservatism.

This helps explain how Donald Trump, an opportunist and by no means a movement conservative or establishment Republican prior to his nomination in 2016, was able to win the presidency. His chaotic charisma, his puffery, his outright lies about political opponents (Remember when he claimed Barack Obama wasn't born in the United States? Or when he implied that Ted Cruz's father conspired to murder John F. Kennedy?) drove ratings and engagement. Even so called "mainstream" media outlets like CNN, which in 2016 made a habit of airing Trump rallies live in full, rushed to capitalize.

By the time Trump lost the 2020 presidential election, a new generation of media companies and personalities (from Midwestern pillow magnate Mike Lindell, to upstart livestreaming outlets like Right Side Broadcasting Network, to social media influencers like Scott Presler) had hitched their stars to engagement from ardent Trump supporters. Investing in #StopTheSteal was a last-ditch effort to keep the Trump-era conservative media bubble inflated—to maintain profitability or relevance at a moment that the MAGA movement seemed to be running out of steam. Trump's desire to remain in power dovetailed with their desire to maintain influence and profitability. The result is a movement whose beliefs are detached from empirical reality, whose fever dreams about rigged elections are used to justify throwing away centuries of democratic traditions, even the U.S. Constitution itself.

### **What Is to Be Done?**

In short: due to shifts in the political economy of media, new technologies, and shifts in the composition and strategy of modern conservatism and the Republican Party, conservatism is no longer an unpopular political ideology. It is now a highly profitable niche lifestyle brand. The individuals and media companies that profit off the audiences and consumers attracted to this lifestyle are no longer answerable to movement leaders or party elites. They are a third source of power on the right, unto themselves.

As January 6, 2021 demonstrated, when the interests of this third source of right-wing power dovetail with the institutional powers of the Republican Party and the presidency, the democratic institutions enshrined in our Constitution become imperiled. Our current conservative media culture is rooted in perverse incentives, where profit, engagement, and relevance supersede principle, prudence, and respectability.

Because this problem is not rooted in any one outlet, medium, technology, or personality, there are no simple solutions. Cultures, whether oriented around

conservative news or otherwise, are shaped by regulatory environments and technological innovations, but they are fundamentally the result of individual routines and habits in aggregate. Conservatism's commercial viability means that movement conservatism and the Republican Party have less ability to alter the media habits of their constituents and audiences. If the movement's stigmatization of the John Birch Society helped mitigate that group's impact from the 1960s onward, it seems unlikely that the Republican Party can simply denounce QAnon, or Trump's lies about election fraud, and expect similar results.

Nevertheless, it would be immensely helpful if the Republican Party and modern conservative movement started disciplining members who promote false information about election fraud (not to mention the COVID-19 pandemic). It would also be helpful if the remaining solvent democratic institutions (Congress, the Justice Department, the Supreme Court, etc.) held accountable those who conspired to transform a peaceful, if delusional, rally in support of Donald Trump into an organized effort to overturn the will of voters and the Constitutional system itself.

Accountability won't disrupt the conservative news cultures that enabled the January 6 insurrection, but it will add new incentives that, with time, might shift it in a less destructive direction.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'A.J. Bauer', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

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