Chapter 1 The Know Nothings

> *"I hate purity, I hate goodness. I don't want any virtue to exist anywhere. I want everyone to be corrupt to the bones."*
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> *"Well then, I ought to suit you, dear. I'm corrupt to the bones."*
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> George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*

It was a bright Sunday afternoon in the nation's capital when Edgar Maddison Welch walked into Comet Ping Pong and, after telling customers to flee, searched the restaurant and opened fire. After his arrest, police recovered a pistol and assault rifle at the scene and another gun in his pickup truck.

What prompted Welch to shoot up a pizzeria? He didn't have a grudge against a former boss or fellow employee. Welch had driven his truck from North Carolina to "self-investigate" a story he had seen online. The fake story claimed that coded emails on Hillary Clinton's private server revealed the pizza shop was a front for a child sex-ring in which she and other top Democrats were involved. The victims were supposedly imprisoned in vaults hidden below the shop.

Whatever fool Welch might have been, he was not alone in his thinking. A poll taken after Welch's arrest indicated that a third of American adults thought the sex-ring allegation was "definitely" or "probably" true. A third of adults is roughly 80 million people. If they could somehow join hands,

they would form six lines stretching all the way from New York to Los Angeles.

Absurd ideas are nothing new. When fluoride was added to the nation's water supply six decades ago, some Americans said it was a communist plot to poison the nation's youth. Fear of communism soon led to other bizarre ideas, including the claim that President Eisenhower and Martin Luther King were Soviet agents. In a seminal 1964 *Harper's Magazine* article, the historian Richard Hofstadter described such thinking as "the paranoid style." "No other word," Hofstadter wrote, "adequately evokes the sense of heated exaggeration, suspiciousness, and conspiratorial fantasy that I have in mind."

The crazed anti-communists of the Cold War era have met their match in recent years. Nearly every major political development has sparked fanciful claims, even when the facts are right in front of our eyes. On September 11, 2001, Americans saw commercial airliners plow into the World Trade Center towers and the Pentagon. Within days, they saw footage of the terrorists going through security lines at Boston's Logan airport and heard that they had taken flight training in Florida and Arizona. Nevertheless, conspiracy theorists claim it was an inside job orchestrated by the U.S. government. Rather than being piloted by hijackers, the airliners were said to be on autopilot. And rather than collapsing from intense heat, the World Trade Center towers were allegedly brought to earth by pre-set explosive devices triggered by government agents. The Pentagon, for its part, was said to have been hit by a cruise missile, timed to arrive at the precise moment as a pilotless airliner.

If 9/11 sparked some of the more farfetched conspiracies, one doesn't have to search hard to find others. They number in the scores and have one thing in common - the belief that powerful actors secretly plotted a foul deed and are getting away with it.

It is nearly impossible to convince conspiracy theorists that they are out of their minds. They've woven a story so tightly knit that it can't be unwrapped. The logic of a conspiracy theory is its own defense. Powerful actors who are clever enough to pull off an evil deed are clever enough to

cover their tracks with a plausible lie. Why did one of the hijacked airliners on 9/11 crash in a Pennsylvania field on its way to Washington? Conspiracy theorists would have us believe that the plane was shot down by a military jet, which officials covered up by saying that valiant passengers had attacked the hijackers, causing the plane to spin out of control.

How about our crazed pizza-shop shooter? How did conspiracy buffs deal with his fruitless search of Comet Ping Pong? After his arrest, they concluded that he was a plant - a "false flag" to use their term. They claimed he'd been sent to Washington by Clinton's agents to throw the police off track.

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Some conspiracy theories are harmful. A few are downright dangerous. Most are merely bizarre. They might even keep the paranoid among us from fixating on their neighbors.

More harmful to our democracy is a cousin of conspiracy theories - misinformation. It also involves fanciful ideas about the actual state of the world, but it is far more widespread and a far greater threat. At times, it describes the thinking of a majority, as it did during the lead up to the 2003 Iraq invasion. Polls showed that most Americans falsely believed that Iraq was aligned with al-Qaeda, the terrorist group behind the 9/11 attacks. Many Americans even believed Iraqis were flying the planes that slammed into the World Trade Center Towers and the Pentagon. Those with false beliefs were four times more likely than better informed Americans to favor an invasion of Iraq. Exclude them from the numbers and President Bush would have been forced to invade Iraq against the wishes of a solid majority. Whether he would then have pursued a different policy is impossible to know. But it's conceivable that he would have decided to rely on economic sanctions and UN weapons inspectors to contain Iraq, which would have limited the turmoil that ensued after the American invasion.

Misinformation has its comic side. In one poll, 10 percent of respondents thought Judith Sheindlin ("Judge Judy") holds a seat on the Supreme Court.
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But the grim side is alarming. It is easy today to find policy issues on which millions of Americans are wildly misinformed. Never in the history of scientific opinion polls, which date to the 1930s, has misinformation clouded the minds of so many people.

Some degree of political misinformation is to be expected. Politics is largely a second-hand experience - something we hear about from others. We would understand it better if we experienced it directly. A skier who has just smacked into a tree has a reality check denied to the citizen who is convinced that welfare recipients eat up half the federal budget.

But today's volume of misinformation is unprecedented. Some beliefs are so far off the mark as to raise doubts about our reasoning ability. A recent poll asked Americans for their "best guess" of the percentage of the federal budget spent on foreign aid. On average, respondents estimated it at 26 percent, which would make the foreign aid budget larger than that of the Pentagon or social security. The actual number is less than one percent. At that, much of this spending is in the form of foodstuffs and military hardware produced by Americans and sent overseas. Nonetheless, foreign aid tops the list when citizens are asked where they would like to see cuts in federal spending. Many Americans believe the savings would be large enough to balance the federal budget.

Ironically, the misinformed think they're highly informed. "Cognoscenti of their own bamboozlement" is how sociologist Todd Gitlin describes them. A study found, for example, that those who know the least about climate-change science are the ones who think they're the best informed on the issue. Another study found that those who are the least knowledgeable about welfare benefits are the ones who claim to know the most about it.

A full list of Americans' false beliefs would fill many pages. Here are some of the more prominent ones from recent years, along with the rough percentage of Americans who believed they were true at the time:

> Crime has gone up in the past decade (70 percent).
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> Donald Trump won the popular vote in the 2016 election (20 percent).

The unemployment rate went up during Obama's presidency (40 percent).

Iraqis used weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) against U.S. troops during the Iraq invasion (20 percent).

The 2010 Affordable Care Act includes "death panels" (40 percent).

Childhood vaccines cause autism (15 percent).

The federal budget deficit could be eliminated by cutting government waste and fraud (70 percent).

China owns more than half of U.S. debt (50 percent).

The 2010 Affordable Care Act provides free medical care to illegal immigrants (55 percent).

Millions of people cast illegal votes for Hillary Clinton in the 2016 election (30 percent).

Barack Obama was definitely or probably born outside the United States (30 percent).

Global warming is a hoax (35 percent).

Genetically modified foods are unsafe to eat (40 percent).

Russia didn't meddle in the 2016 presidential election (37 percent).

The 2009 economic stimulus bill caused job losses (20 percent).

U.S. military forces found weapons of mass destruction after invading Iraq (25 percent).

Social security will go totally broke in my lifetime (50 percent).

There is substantial empirical evidence to show that each of the beliefs is false. Not that the individuals who hold such beliefs would agree. As the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein wrote, "If there were a verb meaning 'to believe falsely,' it would not have any significant first person, present indicative."

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Early scientific opinion polls revealed that Americans didn't know much about public affairs. An alarming number of citizens couldn't answer simple questions like the name of their state's governor. Analysts questioned whether citizens were equipped to play the role that democracy asks of them.

Since then, there has been a revolution in mass communication and a substantial increase in the number of people with a college education. Americans have never had so much information available or been better trained to handle it. Yet, they are no better informed today than they were decades ago. The high-school-educated public of the 1950s knew as much about the structure of America's government as does the media-saturated, college-educated public of today. When asked in a recent national survey to name the three branches of government, only a third of respondents could do so. Another third could name one or two. The final third couldn't name a single one. Those ratios are nearly the same as when Americans were asked the question in a 1952 survey. In poll after poll, Americans come up short in their factual information about politics, even when prompted. A recent Pew poll, for instance, asked respondents to pick the current Israeli prime minister from a list of four - Benjamin Netanyahu, David Cameron, Ariel Sharon, and Hosni Mubarak. A majority of the respondents - three in every five - picked someone other than Netanyahu or said they didn't know.

Duke University's James David Barber wrote that the uninformed "are dangerously unready when the time comes for choice." But whatever risks the uninformed pose, it pales alongside the risks posed by the misinformed. The uninformed know what they don't know, whereas the misinformed think they know something but don't know it. It is the difference between ignorance and irrationality.

Scholars argue over the question of whether the public behaves rationally. Some scholars, noting the large number of uninformed citizens, say "no" while others, looking at the decisions of the public as a whole, say "yes." The second view acknowledges that many voters are uninformed and
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make erratic choices but concludes that their selections are random enough to cancel each other out, allowing better informed voters to decide the outcome.

I have long sided with the second view, which is similar to that of James Surowiecki's notion of the "wisdom of crowds." But I am now less sure that the evidence supports a claim of collective rationality. If vast numbers of citizens are misinformed, and make policy and candidate choices on that basis, it becomes harder to assert that ignorance is randomly distributed and that the public as a whole knows what it's doing. Rationality goes out the window when citizens lose touch with reality. The problem of the misinformed voters is not their logic. Their decisions make perfect sense given what they believe. The problem is that they are living in an alternative world. It is a bit like going into a store thinking you are buying half-a-dozen donuts and proudly walking out with a six-pack of beer.

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Anxiety can play tricks on the mind. It was anxiety stemming from the threat of a nuclear-armed Soviet Union that spawned wild ideas in the 1950s about the extent of the communist threat. My childhood home was a rural Minnesota town of a thousand people. I heard some townsfolk say - whether they were joking or serious I was too young to know - that our local jeweler was a communist sympathizer. Mr. Kalle was a small, frail man with tiny fingers, thinning hair, and translucent skin. His solitary manner was a sign that he might be up to no good. But his glasses were a dead giveaway. They were the only ones like it for miles around. Wire frames with round lenses - the same type worn by the alleged master spy Julius Rosenberg!

Anxiety is raging in today's America. The American Psychological Association conducts a yearly survey of Americans' stress over issues such as work and money. In the most recent survey, 80 percent of respondents reported a symptom of stress during the past month, such as feeling overwhelmed or depressed. Two-thirds of respondents expressed anxiety over the country's future.
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We don't have to look hard for reasons. The middle class has shrunk, despite the fact that dual-income households are now the norm. The manufacturing sector with its high paying union jobs has shrunk while the service sector, with its lower wages and smaller benefits, has grown dramatically. Mechanized farming, smaller families, and flight to the cities have hollowed out many of our rural communities.

When anxiety is high, people look for someone or something to blame for why things are not going well. Their identification with those who share their plight strengthens, as does their belief that other people are the source of their problem. If that belief is dismissed by outsiders, it heightens their sense of injustice. It becomes easier for them to accept the notion that immigrants are the major cause of low wages or that free trade is the main reason for the loss of factory jobs, although neither belief is factually correct.

The need to cast blame outweighs the urge to discover the truth. In *Thinking Fast and Slow*, Nobel laureate Daniel Kahneman demonstrates that people are not driven by a desire for accuracy. What they seek instead are explanations that meet their psychological needs. We have, says Kahneman, an "almost unlimited ability to ignore our ignorance."

Well-educated citizens would like to believe that misinformation is a problem of the uneducated. That is generally true. Psychologists have found that individuals with weaker cognitive skills suffer from an inflated sense of what they know. Nevertheless, when it comes to misinformation on more complicated issues, the well-educated are often the most misinformed. How can that be? What kind of world would place the educated at the top the delusional chart? It's known as the "smart idiot effect." On more complicated subjects, well-educated individuals with strong opinions find it easier to come up with reasons for why their thinking is correct. The smarter they are, the more likely they are to manipulate information to fit what they prefer to believe. Highly educated Republicans, for example, are more likely than other Republicans to believe that the theory of climate change is a hoax.

Changes in communication have fueled the rise in misinformation. The traditional guardians of information - our journalists, educators, and scientists - have been losing authority while less reliable sources - our talk

show hosts, bloggers, and ideologues – have been gaining our loyalty. At the same time, faster modes of communication have supplanted slower ones. Before the internet, people had a harder time peddling crackpot ideas. When the John Birch Society in the late 1950s began touting the notion that fluoridation was a communist plot, it took a lengthy period for the claim to be widely known. Even the John Birch Society itself operated in obscurity until its founder, candy mogul Robert Welch, accused President Eisenhower of being a communist stooge, at which point the news media took an interest. As the negative publicity mounted, Welch begrudgingly recanted. "Eisenhower," he said, "may be too dumb to be a communist."

With the internet, crackpots don't need the news media to spread their nonsense. The Comet Ping Pong allegation started on the internet and then was propelled by fake news sites and amplified by Twitter bots based in Eastern Europe. Within a few weeks, the claim was known to most Americans.

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Although collective ignorance on the scale of recent years is rare, the casual way in which Americans arrive at their opinions is altogether ordinary. We are far too busy and the world is far too complex to be traversed without mental shortcuts - what the mathematician George Zipf called the "principle of least effort." We routinely take shortcuts, as when we follow a store owner's advice on which coffee maker to buy rather than consulting Consumers Report.

When it comes to politics, party loyalty is the typical shortcut. In an experiment designed to demonstrate partisan cueing, Stanford psychologist Geoffrey Cohen ....

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