THE SECRET SOURCE WHO HELPED FUEL TRUMP'S BIG LIE

A Dallas information-technology consultant, code-named Spider, believes that the New World Order stole the 2020 election.

By Mike Giglio

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Joshua Merritt was about five years old when he first heard about what many Trump supporters now call the "deep state." **Photograph by Jake Dockins for The New Yorker**

Twelve days after Joe Biden was declared the winner in the 2020 Presidential race, Donald Trump's legal team laid out its master theory of the election in a dramatic press conference at the Republican National Committee's headquarters. "What we are really dealing with here, and uncovering more by the day, is the massive influence of communist money through Venezuela, Cuba, and likely China, and the interference with our elections here in the United States," Sidney Powell, one of the President's lawyers, declared as she stood before a row of American flags. Powell said that a Colorado-based company called Dominion Voting Systems had secretly manipulated the vote count in machines that were used in at least two dozen states and helped sway the results in Democrats' favor. In addition to foreign Marxists, the key conspirators included the Clinton Foundation and a large circle of élite business leaders. When Rudy Giuliani took his turn at the microphone, he added George Soros and big tech companies to the list. "Global interests," Powell had explained, were behind the failure of major news outlets to report on the fraud.

The following week, Powell began filing lawsuits with affidavits purporting to back her claims. One of them was from an anonymous hacker who was identified as "Spyder," or sometimes "Spider," a pseudonym inspired by the web-like diagrams that filled his supporting documents. By examining Dominion's network connections and finding vulnerabilities in its Web site, Spider alleged, he had uncovered "unambiguous evidence" that the company had allowed America's foreign adversaries to manipulate election results. In early December, Spider was unmasked after his name appeared in a bookmark of a court document: he was Joshua Merritt, a forty-three-year-old military veteran and information-technology consultant living in Dallas with his wife and children.

Acting on a hunch, I searched for Merritt's name in a leaked database that I had obtained the previous year which listed members of a militant right-wing group called the Oath Keepers. Merritt, it turned out, had joined the group in 2010, listing himself as a soldier with an address at a forward operating base in Afghanistan. Known for seeking to recruit current and former military and law-enforcement officials, the Oath Keepers had helped promote a version of a

decades-old conspiracy theory that a globalist business and political élite—often called the New World Order—were attempting to undermine American democracy and sovereignty. The theory mirrored, in many ways, the claims that Powell, Giuliani, and members of Trump's legal team advanced after the election. In his membership form, Merritt had written, "I have been in since after Sept. 11 to take up what I felt was the calling of our nation." He said that his time in Afghanistan and Iraq had left him with unsettling questions. "I started wondering why it felt wrong, there were things that didn't add up, and I looked around to see who else agreed," he wrote. Online, Merritt came across a video by an early advocate for the Oath Keepers, and, he wrote, "his words hit me like a wall of reality." I sent an e-mail to the address on his form. "You're well researched," Merritt quickly replied. "Give me a call."

In the months since, I've spent hours speaking with Merritt in person and over the phone. He said he was a turret gunner in Iraq and provided security for a counter-I.E.D. unit in Afghanistan; he received a commendation for serving in combat. A largely self-trained computer sleuth, Merritt can come across as a jarring blend of geek and grunt, moving seamlessly between war stories peppered with military jargon, obsessively detailed accounts of his cybersecurity exploits, and conspiracy theories. During our conversations, he laid out a political journey that illuminates the advance of a once-fringe ideology into the heart of contemporary U.S. politics. Months of interviews that I'd conducted with current and former Oath Keepers had made clear to me that the New World Order theory played a central role in motivating many members to arm themselves and prepare for political violence. The theory's history runs much deeper on the American right than QAnon.

Months after Biden took office, a third of Americans—and about two-thirds of those who lean Republican—continued to believe that he won the Presidency only through voter fraud. One of them is Merritt. During our conversations, he remained polite and genial, no matter where the discussion went. Despite his deep convictions—about election fraud and the shadowy actors he believes are behind it—he never seemed disappointed to find me unconvinced, displaying the quiet assurance of someone who'd long ago stopped worrying about being dismissed.

Merritt was about five years old the first time that he heard about what many Trump

supporters now call the "deep state." He was living in San Antonio, Texas, when he overheard his step-grandfather and his father, whom he described as "a full-blown conspiracist," talking about the assassination of John F. Kennedy. His father believed that the C.I.A. had been involved in his killing. He and Merritt's mother were ex-hippies who had retained their suspicion of government and their addiction to drugs, according to Merritt and another family member. "My dad always told me don't ever believe anything the government says, because if they say it, there's an agenda behind it," Merritt told me.

When he was eight, Merritt woke one night to find his parents packing suitcases. They coaxed him back to sleep, and left. He ended up staying with his grandmother. Merritt described himself as a difficult child, prone to unruly behavior, and, after three years, his grandmother surrendered him to a group home in San Antonio for at-risk children. Its counsellors and rigid program helped him live what he considered close to a normal life. He attended local middle and high schools, played on the football team, and joined the R.O.T.C. At the same time, Merritt was creating a second life on the early Internet. He used the group home's shared computer to practice coding and script writing, explore, and hunt for information. As Merritt saw it, he was venturing out on his own to discover how the world really worked. When I asked him what he learned as a teen-age hacker, he replied, "Research. I learned to research."

Merritt had little contact with his parents, but, on weekends, he would often visit relatives in the Waco area including his paternal grandfather, a veteran of the Second World War and ham-radio operator who used a scanner to tune in to police traffic and eavesdrop on neighbors as they chatted on cordless phones. In 1993, the F.B.I. and other federal law-enforcement agencies conducted a seven-week siege of a compound near Waco that housed members of the Branch Davidians, a heavily armed religious sect. Merritt recalled sitting at his grandfather's kitchen table listening to the scanner, fascinated by the sense that he was getting an inside account of history. The standoff ended with an F.B.I. raid and the deaths of more than seventy Branch Davidians, including more than twenty children. The experience was seminal for the fifteen-year-old Merritt, vivid proof that his father had been right in his warnings about the government. After high school, following the example of a mentor at his group home, he enlisted in the Marines. After the discovery of a physical condition that he declined to discuss,

except to say that it was later resolved, he was medically discharged, he said. From there, Merritt bounced between jobs. For a time, he was also a professional wrestler on an underground circuit where he said he was hit in the head with steel chairs and fluorescent light bulbs. He was also in a psychobilly band. Eventually, he recalled, he ended up in California working as a computer-assisted designer.

After 9/11, he joined the Army. It was in Iraq and Afghanistan, he said, that he finally "woke up," and the conspiratorial thinking he'd been around all of his life solidified into a more cohesive belief system. Guarding an Afghan prisoner one day, Merritt told me, he fell into conversation with a tribal elder who'd been arrested for aiding the Taliban. As the man pressed him on what America was really doing in his country, Merritt realized that he didn't have a good answer. "I saw myself in him," he told me. "He was helping his countrymen." At the time, Merritt had begun interacting online with the supporter of the Oath Keepers and believed that American citizen militias, too, might one day have to face U.S. troops. He remembered thinking, of his Afghan prisoner, "That could very easily end up being one of us."

The New World Order is a contemporary appellation of the centuries-old fear that a secret international cabal is surreptitiously seeking global domination. For some adherents, the theory took on new credibility after George H. W. Bush, a former C.I.A. director, used the term in a speech he gave as President ahead of the Gulf War. "Out of these troubled times, a new world order can emerge, a new era, freer from the threat of terror and more secure in the quest for peace," Bush said. (The theory is also referred to as the One World Government, among other names.) Merritt and other adherents contend, roughly, that an alliance of business and political élites secretly use Marxism to weaken Western democracies. The main obstacles to the plotters are committed proponents of small government in America and the country's millions of gun-owning patriots. The New World Order, or N.W.O., manufactures conflicts, like the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, to expand its power, and has co-opted much of the U.S. political, business, and media establishment. In some versions, the theory is steeped in anti-Semitism and racism: the cabal behind it are Jews, including Soros, who use racial and ethnic minorities and immigrants to destabilize the U.S. In others, the New World Order is not about race or religion but oligarchy. Mainstream

politicians of both parties, especially Democrats, along with the government and intelligence officials who make up the so-called "deep state," are part of the scheme. Limited government, nationalism, anti-leftism, and gun rights are the solutions.

Waco was a central event for Merritt and other followers of this theory, who cite it as an example of the violence that the U.S. government is willing to unleash on American citizens. Timothy McVeigh, a Gulf War veteran who had travelled to Waco to witness the siege, believed that it presaged a coming battle with the New World Order. On the two-year anniversary of the Waco deaths, he detonated a truck bomb outside a federal building in Oklahoma City, killing a hundred and sixty-eight people. The war on terror provided a push into conspiratorial thinking for a new generation of Americans, shaking their faith in the political and national-security establishment, which appeared to be sowing chaos abroad to enrich itself and acquire new powers at home. Disenchanted soldiers like Merritt certainly thought so. He found a natural home in the Oath Keepers, whose membership included passionate believers in the New World Order theory.

The group, which was launched online in early 2009, derives its name from the oath that soldiers take to "support and defend the Constitution against all enemies, foreign and domestic." Its founder, Elmer Stewart Rhodes, an Army veteran and Yale Law School graduate, argues that members of both the armed forces and the police can refuse to carry out orders, especially those related to gun control, that would supposedly enable tyranny. Other orders that they vowed to resist included placing Americans in detention camps and allowing foreign troops on U.S. soil. If it came to it, they could also fight. Membership in right-wing militant groups rose after Barack Obama took office, and their overarching view of American politics—as a battle between freedom and tyranny—was mirrored by many Tea Party conservatives. Rhodes published a code of conduct that prohibited racial and religious discrimination, helping to make the Oath Keepers more acceptable to a broader segment of conservatives. Dozens of people in the leaked database I obtained noted that they'd learned about the Oath Keepers through the Tea Party. Others said they were local Republican Party officials when they joined.

In 2013, Merritt received an honorable discharge from the military. As he transitioned to

civilian life, it seemed as if his fears of the New World Order were being embraced even by people who might not have heard of it. In years past, he'd stayed awake deep into the night listening to conspiratorial talk radio to indulge in the theory. Now he could hear echoes of it on Fox News. "More people were seeing it," he said.

Less than a year after Merritt left the Army, right-wing militants staged an armed standoff with federal authorities at the Bundy cattle ranch in Nevada. Rhodes and others gathered at the ranch to defend the family's desire to graze its cattle on federal land. Merritt told me that he remained in Texas but relayed what he thought was a helpful tip to Rhodes. He said he advised him that he had heard that the Obama Administration was planning to conduct a drone strike on the Bundy encampment, and urged people there to cloak themselves in heat-trapping Mylar blankets as a way to block drone temperature sensors. (An attorney for Rhodes told me that he doesn't remember who gave him the tip.) Instead of aiding the group, the tip sowed panic, and the militants descended into infighting, with the Oath Keepers ordering their people to leave. Eventually, the standoff ended without shots being fired. The episode so disappointed Merritt that he quit the Oath Keepers. It also revealed how paranoid many on the right had become regarding the Obama Administration, believing it capable of treating them as dangerous insurgents, just like Merritt's former Afghan prisoner.

In 2016, Trump evoked the conspiratorial narrative of the New World Order theory. He never mentioned it by name, but his talk of élites exploiting average Americans, and his tirades against the "deep state" after taking office, convinced Merritt and other adherents that he was fighting the same battle. To Merritt, Trump was an avenging outsider, the slayer of both the Bush and the Clinton dynasties, the opponent of foreign wars, and the enemy of treacherous U.S. intelligence agencies. "Trump really opened a lot of people's eyes up, because now everyone goes, 'Wow, a guy who's running for President, and is talking about the same stuff we've heard for the past twenty years,' " Merritt told me. When Trump entered the White House, Merritt saw him as "a buoy sitting in the middle of an ocean full of sharks."

In 2017, after attending a technical college in Texas, Merritt found a job at a private-intelligence firm named Allied Special Operations Group, or A.S.O.G., in Dallas. "Guys in the

military used to always say I hung around shitty people, had weird theories about the world," Merritt told me. Now his work at the firm put him in contact with well-connected Republicans, who were willing to listen to his concerns. Adam Kraft, an Army veteran and former official at the Defense Intelligence Agency, had recently co-founded the firm. (Kraft did not respond to a request for a comment.) Another executive was Russell Ramsland, a former Tea Party candidate and conservative political operative. According to the Washington *Post*, the firm offered cybersecurity services, physical protection, and open-source intelligence services to private, government, and corporate clients. At first, Merritt said, he stuck primarily to I.T. work, setting up servers and e-mail systems for its handful of employees, who worked out of an office in a hangar at Addison Airport, north of Dallas. Eventually, he began gathering information online on behalf of clients, he told me, professionalizing the cyber-sleuthing that he had been doing since he was a teen-ager. Merritt said he focused on mining open-source information and searching the dark Web.

Around the time of the 2018 midterm elections, the firm began to focus on election fraud. Merritt purports to have been a key part of this. According to the *Post*, their early work on the issue included investigating the recent loss of Pete Sessions, a Republican congressman in Dallas; Sessions described Merritt as a "top computer forensic expert." From there, Merritt's research expanded. He investigated the Web sites of electronic-voting companies. He looked to see if administrators used weak password security or if private details about poll workers could be discovered. He believed that he was uncovering "flaws within the system": vulnerabilities that malicious hackers could exploit.

Democrats like Elizabeth Warren and Amy Klobuchar have accused private-equity-owned voting-software companies of shoddy work that put profit over security. Merritt, however, saw something darker. Although no proof has ever emerged that U.S. voting machines have been manipulated to change election results, Merritt believed that votes had been switched in the midterms. He looked into the employees and advisory boards connected to the voting-software companies and flagged foreign nationals, and he identified former government officials who took jobs with these firms. Just as the New World Order theory can grow from an acorn of truth—the idea that the super-rich and corporations exert outsized power—Merritt took

legitimate issues with voting-system security and the revolving door between business and politics and declared them conspiracies. He believed that the vulnerabilities he found had to have been intentional. He believed that the companies must want votes to be hacked.

For years, Republicans had pushed exaggerated claims of election fraud as they worked to pass voting laws that might limit Democratic turnout. In 2016, Trump injected new life into these claims, saying without evidence that Democrats had tried to steal the election, an accusation he repeated in 2020. Ramsland, Merritt told me, began to share Merritt's work on election fraud with Republican politicians in Washington, including Louie Gohmert, an eight-term Republican congressman from a district east of Dallas. Gohmert did not respond to a request for comment, but the Washington *Post* reported that he was briefed by A.S.O.G.

At the firm's offices in Dallas, Merritt said he briefed Sidney Powell, before she became Trump's lawyer; and Allen West, before he became chairman of the Texas Republican Party. (Powell and West did not respond to requests for comment.) Pro-Trump Republican donors from the Dallas area and beyond, Merritt said, also were briefed on his research. Kevin Freeman, a Dallas-area author and security consultant who is well connected in conservative circles, told me that he sat through Merritt's briefings with West and others. He said that Merritt's work impressed people in the room and described him as "highly skilled," "highly motivated," and "highly patriotic."

In late 2019, Merritt left A.S.O.G. to work on his own, but stayed in touch with Ramsland. About a year later, on Election Night, Merritt said Ramsland called him and asked him if he was following the claims of late-night ballot dumps and other fraud circulating on conservative media. That night, Merritt began compiling the research that, together with affidavits from other sources, Powell would use to make her claims about Dominion Voting Systems.

After the election, the people in the A.S.O.G. network started promoting Trump's unsubstantiated claims about the election. On his Web site, Freeman called the race "one of the most contested elections in history" and predicted that the "far left" would conduct a violent insurrection; Louie Gohmert acted as a megaphone in Congress for Trump's claims of election

theft; Allen West seemed to threaten that Texas and other "law-abiding" states would secede. Sessions, newly reëlected to Congress, called for the results to be investigated and voted on January 6th against certifying Biden's victory. And Powell, of course, led the charge.

Merritt initially wanted to protect his identity because he feared that liberals, or members of the "deep state," might target him with harassment or even violence. He described working with Trump's legal team as chaotic. "They just kept telling me, 'O.K., we need it in this direction, we need info on this group and that group,' " he said. "I would then kick it up the chain." Merritt shared several e-mails from this period with me. One shows someone named Benjamin setting up a call with him about what became known as the Spider affidavit. Others were from a former Trump Administration staffer. "Your testimony is playing a HUGE role," the person wrote, and said he was passing Merritt's work to "Sidney." "Do you also have anything showing that China played more of a role than Russia? I am not sure if it is true, but trying to understand all the different adversaries at play here and their different attack vectors." At the end of one of his e-mails, which included multiple Christian invocations, he thanked Merritt. "Great work and keep the faith, Gideon's army!!!"

More than a hundred Republican members of Congress and seventeen attorneys general eventually joined a lawsuit repeating key parts of Powell's unsubstantiated Dominion claims. After lawmakers announced plans to challenge the Electoral College result on January 6th, Rhodes, the leader of the Oath Keepers, called it the last chance to stop the globalist conspiracy. Merritt remained in Dallas, but more than a dozen alleged Oath Keepers and their associates were charged with participating in the Capitol riot. One was Jon Schaffer, whose name was listed in the leaked database that I had received. Schaffer, a heavy-metal guitarist, later pleaded guilty to breaching the Capitol. "I'm a devout patriot," his entry in the database reads, "and can get word to the youth on a worldwide level about the NWO and their agenda."

In February, I travelled to Dallas to meet Merritt in person for the first time. He said he'd pick me up at my hotel, and I waited on a patch of grass down the street, figuring he would call when he arrived. Instead, a large pickup pulled up beside me, and Merritt stepped out to shake my hand. He was broad-shouldered and tall, though middle age had softened his

wrestler's frame. His hair was receding around the edges of a buzz cut. In his truck, the console was strewn with bullets for his pistol, and the earphones that he wears at the shooting range hung beside his window. Six years had passed since he had quit the Oath Keepers after the Bundy Ranch fiasco, but he still had his faded membership card in his wallet. On the back was the group's list warning of gun grabs and detention camps, a nod to the New World Order theory. When I asked how it felt to see elements of the theory become more mainstream, he corrected me, saying, "It became reality."

Merritt drove me to a barbecue restaurant, where he said he and his wife often drink beer on the patio while their daughter is at karate. I asked him how, if he really thought the New World Order had stolen the election, he could continue living his normal life. He found my question odd. New World Order adherents believe that a secret global cabal has been controlling the country's affairs for decades. The Trump years were just a brief respite. Now things were back as they long had been, with politicians controlled by the New World Order back in power. Ramsland was still at A.S.O.G., while Adam Kraft, the former Defense Intelligence Agency official, had, according to his LinkedIn profile, joined a government-contracting firm based in Virginia. Merritt, meanwhile, was struggling to find new work. But he still felt some optimism about all that had happened with the election. The chaos surrounding the results, he said, would help more Americans to "wake up," as he once had, to how the world really worked.

During our conversations, Merritt spoke about his sense of purpose. He said that he'd lost it when he left the military. "I couldn't get anywhere. I couldn't get a normal job," he recalled. "You grow a beard. You get tired of exercising. You don't like routines anymore, because, I mean, it sort of comes off as being pointless. Once you're a civilian, then why am I going to wake myself up at six in the morning?" He struggled to relate to those who hadn't served. Meanwhile, friends from the military were dying from suicide. One was Erik Jorgensen, who served with him in Afghanistan. "We all left our units, and he went back home to Idaho," Merritt recalled. "And he never reached out to any of us. I always told my guys, no matter where I was, give me a call, if you need just to talk. And, um, they found the dude on the back forty of the range with a round in his head."

He said that he found new meaning in his work for A.S.O.G. “And then, when we got into the election fraud, I started getting a sense of purpose,” Merritt told me. “It sort of helped me focus myself as a veteran and now civilian, because I was lost.” I thought, when he said this, that he’d touched on a fundamental appeal of conspiracy theories. They bring a community and a sense of mission. They offer a chance to participate in an urgent effort to stop a plot. Thanks to his claims about the 2020 election, Merritt was able to participate in such an effort more than he likely had ever dreamed. He also demonstrated the risk of conspiracy thinking: once people surrender to it, it’s impossible to know where it will lead. When I asked Merritt about the anti-Semitic elements of some versions of the New World Order theory, he responded that, while he didn’t believe the conspiracy was “a Jewish idea,” he did think there were “more people within those systems that are Jewish than aren’t.” During our conversations, he outlined a form of grievance politics that reached new prominence in the Trump era, telling me that the most marginalized people in America are “white Christians,” and that the New World Order was stoking fears about racism and white supremacy in order to “balkanize” U.S. society.

Merritt told me that he was disappointed in Trump, who he felt had given up the fight against the stolen election too easily. Despite courts rejecting claims of widespread voter fraud, Merritt still spoke about his theories regarding the firm with excitement. He dreamed of doing a TED-style talk that would lay it all out in a way that more people could understand. When he complained that members of Powell’s team were prevented from conducting their own firsthand analysis of the Dominion machines, I asked him if even that would have convinced him that no fraud had taken place. Merritt responded, “I would have to see the source code.” There would always be another layer of the plot to uncover.