THE WEEKEND ESSAY

THE PRESIDENT WHO BECAME A PROPHET

For many of Donald Trump's followers, his appeal has an almost mystical dimension. What happens when the spell breaks?

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Illustration by James Kerr / Scorpion Dagger

On April 1st, the day before President Donald Trump's tariffs cratered global markets, House Speaker Mike Johnson told reporters "to trust the President's instinct on the economy." In the days afterward, Johnson's message was echoed by legions of online supporters, who, amid plunging stock prices and predictions of a global recession, reminded one another to "trust the plan," a catchphrase popular on QAnon forums.

For many devotees, Trump was a political savant. He was playing "4-D chess," they said, supposedly outsmarting billionaire backers like Bill Ackman and Elon Musk, analysts who expected trade wars and job losses, and the twenty-three Nobel Prize-winning economists who cautioned that his policies would cause "higher prices, larger deficits, and greater inequality." Elsewhere in the MAGAverse, self-proclaimed prophets announced that a divine plan was under way. In an April 7th video that's been viewed nearly four hundred thousand times, the Iowa-based evangelist Julie Green claimed that God had warned her of the economic crash before the tariffs were announced. "Your economy, and all the markets, have been overtaken by the enemies from within," God reportedly told her. "Their control over your nation, and its economy, is all collapsing in front of you."

The tone marked a vibe shift from the technocracies of yesteryear. "I know that sometimes when I was President, and even when I was a candidate, folks would say, 'Barack, you're talking too long. You're too professorial. You're explaining stuff too much,' " Obama said, in 2018. His was a politics of complexity and deliberation, of data and binders and reasoned debate. Trump's first term began in this style. Working alongside institutionalists like Paul Ryan and Mitch McConnell, and through appointees like Gary Cohn and H. R. McMaster, his Administration kicked off with a familiarly wonkish feel. But, in the eight years since Trump first took office, procedure has given way to prophecy. For millions of his followers, the President is no

longer the Administrator-in-Chief but something closer to the hero Rama in the Hindu epic the Ramayana: a divine avatar destined to wage a holy war against evil.

Trump's messianic appeal may seem like a twenty-first-century creation, a product of partisan rage, epistemic drift, and American-style evangelicalism. This is the conclusion of much of the analysis on the convergence of conspiratorial thinking and spiritual yearning, often termed "conspirituality." In "The Age of Magical Overthinking," the writer Amanda Montell treats the phenomenon as an algorithmic aberration: "Combine our organic animism with capitalism and tech-powered misinformation spread, and you get conspirituality." Likewise, the scholars Charlotte Ward and David Voas, in their 2011 paper popularizing the term "conspirituality," described it as a historically contingent synthesis: a fusion of the "female-dominated New Age (with its positive focus on self) and the male-dominated realm of conspiracy theory (with its negative focus on global politics)."

But to treat the right's politico-mystical fervor as a modern malfunction is to miss its deeper logic. The Trumpian mystique echoes a dynamic that has occurred for centuries and across cultures. Its core ingredients—an alleged league of pedophiles, a godlike miracle worker, promises of an Edenic restoration—resemble archetypes that have long occupied humanity's imagination. Trump's followers may communicate through memes and message boards, but their faith belongs to a much older mythology: the eternal face-off between shaman and witch, prophet and cabal.

In 1987, an army of between seven and ten thousand soldiers advanced toward Uganda's capital, Kampala. They were led by Alice Auma, a fishmonger turned spirit medium in her early thirties. A photograph from that period shows her seated between two followers. Dressed in a plain white top and a long patterned skirt, she looks less like a rebel commander than she does a schoolteacher or a market vender. To her supporters, though, she was a prophet possessed by the spirit of an Italian captain named Lakwena ("messenger," in the Acholi language) sent to cleanse the land of sin and

corruption. Known thereafter as Alice Lakwena, she pledged to destroy witches, purify warriors, and unite Ugandans against the President, Yoweri Museveni.

Alice was a healer before she was a fighter. Her first acolytes were fellow-members of the Acholi ethnic group. They feared extermination after Museveni, an ethnic Hima, overthrew Tito Okello, an Acholi officer, and the army demanded that all Acholi surrender their weapons. Her fighters later told missionaries, "The good Lord who had sent the Lakwena decided to change his work from that of a doctor to that of a military commander for one simple reason: it is useless to cure a man today only that he be killed the next day."

Alice's rise was not anomalous. As I explore in my new book, "Shamanism: The Timeless Religion," upheaval often begets messianic revelation. When colonialism disrupted social orders in New Guinea and the surrounding islands, so-called cargo cults emerged, led by shaman-prophets who promised material abundance, the return of ancestors, and, in many instances, the end of foreign rule. In South Africa, the teen-age seer Nongqawuse foretold that the European settlers would be swept into the sea and a golden age would dawn—if only her people slaughtered their cattle and burned their crops. And in mid-nineteenth-century China, at a time of disasters, crippling taxation, and Western humiliation, a failed civil-service candidate claiming to be Christ's brother launched the Taiping Rebellion, vowing heavenly rule on earth and the expulsion of demons.

Such movements share a predictable structure. People in crisis exhibit an instinctive paranoia. They are quick to blame suffering on individuals, especially the distrusted and powerful. Charismatic figures co-evolve with these understandings. They name enemies, invoke cosmic stakes, and present themselves as exceptional in precisely the ways necessary to vanquish agents of misfortune. They offer futures that are prosperous and pure but also backward-looking—lost paradises regained through sacrifice.

Core to all of this are depictions of evil. Conjured opponents are more than malicious—they're inhuman, perverted, and often supernatural. In Alice's sermons, they were sorcerers. In the Taiping Rebellion, they were demons dressed as bureaucrats. When I analyzed beliefs about harmful magic across sixty diverse societies, I found that the most feared malefactors were suspected not just of causing calamity but of engaging in moral depravity, with a cross-cultural fixation on cannibalism and sexual deviance. Among the Tlingit of the Pacific Northwest, witches (both male and female) were said to have sex with corpses and their own family members. The Santal, in South Asia, believed that witches (always female) copulated with spirit familiars and devoured the organs of children. Similar fears haunted Europeans and British Americans during the early modern period; one need only consult the witchcraft paintings of Francisco Goya, which show covens of half-naked women killing babies, eating people, and cavorting with the Devil.

These depictions serve a purpose. Portrayed as cannibals, child-killers, and corpse-defilers, enemies become existential threats and the worst imaginable offenders, lying beyond the pale of redemption. The fear of them galvanizes collective action and deepens devotion to leaders. Unable to be reformed, opponents must be destroyed.

Trumpism revives these mythic structures. This fact is nowhere clearer than in QAnon, the sprawling super-conspiracy centered on three beliefs: first, the government, mainstream media, and élite financial institutions are controlled by Satan-worshipping pedophiles who exploit children in a global sex-trafficking ring. Second, Donald Trump was recruited in a secret campaign to dismantle the cabal. Third, there will come a moment, "the Storm," when mass arrests and public reckonings will purge the country of evil and restore the rightful to power.

QAnon arose during Trump's first Presidency, growing from obscure online chatter into a mass movement. Its adherents numbered in the tens of thousands in 2018 and surged to millions by 2020. After Biden was inaugurated, in 2021, QAnon seemed like it might fizzle. Its central

predictions—that Trump would win, that Hillary Clinton would be arrested, that televised tribunals would expose hidden debaucheries—failed to materialize. Q, the anonymous figure whose posts drove the movement's folklore, stopped writing on message boards.

But the creed didn't die. Like a spore-filled fungus, it ruptured, disseminating itself across the far right. By the end of 2021, polling by the Public Religion Research Institute revealed that more than one in six Americans accepted QAnon's core beliefs, while only a third completely rejected the doctrine. Prophecies about salvation, spiritual warfare, and diabolic foes merged seamlessly into American evangelicalism; the disorientation of the pandemic deepened the appeal, and Q's ideas found believers among yoga instructors, wellness influencers, and suburban moms.

The normalization of QAnon has coincided with a broader reënchantment. Astrology is booming, especially among millennials. Instagram teems with tarot, spell jars, and manifestation memes. WitchTok garners billions of views. In the 2021 census, "shamanism" ranked as the fastest-growing self-reported religion in England and Wales, beating out Zoroastrianism and Rastafari. Atheists, too, are feeling the vibes, with more than a quarter telling Pew, in 2023, that they've been contacted by a dead relative.

The two trends are connected. Trust in traditional sources of authority has plummeted. The public's faith in Congress, the Supreme Court, and the media is scraping historic lows. Even confidence in scientists and doctors—long among the most trusted groups—has fallen. Between 2020 and 2024, the share of Americans who trusted scientists to act in the public's best interest slipped from eighty-seven per cent to seventy-six per cent, while trust in physicians and hospitals plunged thirty points, to around forty per cent.

This climate of distrust has eroded institutional legitimacy. The German sociologist Max Weber famously observed that societies undergo a "routinization of charisma." They use rules, procedures, and bureaucracy to

tame the instability of magnetic leaders, with authority becoming less personal and more institutionalized. But today that process is unravelling. As many question the fairness and neutrality of political systems, the model of an ideal leader shifts from the administrative back to the messianic. And as faith in science and expertise recedes, it unleashes older, more intuitive ways of knowing—astrology, shamanism, divine revelation, and witchy paranoia.

The question, then, is whether the fervor will outlast the figurehead. Trump feels inherent to Trumpism. He also seems to have been uniquely prepared for a populist Presidency by a lifetime in the spotlight, including more than a decade as a reality-TV star. But, if his prophetic aura reflects a deeper, more universal pattern, what happens when he fades away? Does the mythology collapse? Or will a new messiah rise to take his place?

Alice's power began to fade on September 30, 1987. Museveni's military located her troops in the Tororo district, some two hundred kilometres from Uganda's capital. The two armies had clashed many times before. Weeks earlier, Alice's soldiers repelled his forces, nabbing a radio, AK-47s, and other weapons. This time was different. Museveni's army encircled them and, for hours, pounded them with mortar fire. Alice's troops eventually broke the siege, but at a cost. Nearly a third of the forces got separated and misdirected. Her civilian followers escaped into the swamps and lost their way. The battle was one of her bloodiest and most demoralizing.

Alice's crusade had endured failures before, yet it had always managed to produce a scapegoat, often Alice herself. On at least two occasions, the spirit Lakwena—using her as his vessel, supposedly—rebuked her for disobedience. But, this time, the spell had been broken. Five hundred soldiers left immediately; in the month that followed, the movement bled support. On November 2nd, when Lakwena called on fighters, only three hundred and sixty answered. Days later, this remnant was scattered by Museveni's army, and Alice disappeared into Kenya.

In interviews with Alice's former soldiers, the German anthropologist Heike

Behrend came across numerous theories for the defeat: the spirit Lakwena had punished them; it had deserted Alice for defying orders; Alice was a witch; Museveni had hired a "witch doctor" from far away who supplied his army with medicines powerful enough to counteract Lakwena's blessings.

Yet, through another viewpoint, Alice's movement didn't die. It evolved. New prophets competed to revive her army in their image. Her father, Severino Lukoya, attracted two thousand followers and preached his own brand of end-time revelations, which centered on a "New World" in which God, humans, angels, and animals coexisted peacefully. His tenure was short-lived, however: within a year, he was declared a sinner and imprisoned by another Acholi prophet: Joseph Kony.

Claiming to be Alice's cousin, Kony hijacked her campaign, turning it crueller and more militaristic. He made familiar promises of destroying evil and ushering in an age free of suffering, yet his techniques were more grotesque. He named his organization the Lord's Resistance Army, and it became notorious for abducting tens of thousands of children for sex and warfare. In the nineteen-nineties and the two-thousands, the L.R.A. ravaged communities across east and central Africa, displacing some two million people and provoking the United States to spend millions a month to try to stop it. All the while, Kony retained his prophetic posture. In 2004, after the Ugandan President reportedly reached out for peace talks, Kony replied, "I will communicate with Museveni through the holy spirits and not through the telephone."

Kony's cannibalization of Alice Lakwena's movement carries a dark lesson. Prophets may fail. Their predictions may go unfulfilled. They may die or abandon their followers when ruin is imminent. Yet new narratives can emerge to justify the collapse: the prophet was false; we were betrayed; the enemy had unnatural powers. Whatever the story, prophetic energy can survive, awaiting a new commander to channel it toward a more ambitious purification.

Trump is brusque and erratic, but he is far from irreplaceable. Although he has no clear successor, there are numerous contenders who orbit his office like hungry ghosts. These include the dynastic heirs (Donald Trump, Jr.), the administrative acolytes (J. D. Vance, Stephen Miller, Pam Bondi), and the new-media influencers (Tucker Carlson, Steve Bannon). Carlson, for his part, has begun speaking in occult terms, claiming this past November that he was "physically mauled" by a "demon." Whether any of them will manage to consolidate Trump's power remains to be seen. But unless the grievances that fuelled his apotheosis are reckoned with, his downfall may only clear the stage for someone else—more polished, more destructive, more ruthless—to ascend his holy throne and finish what he began. ♦