

Exhibit 56



[extremism](#)

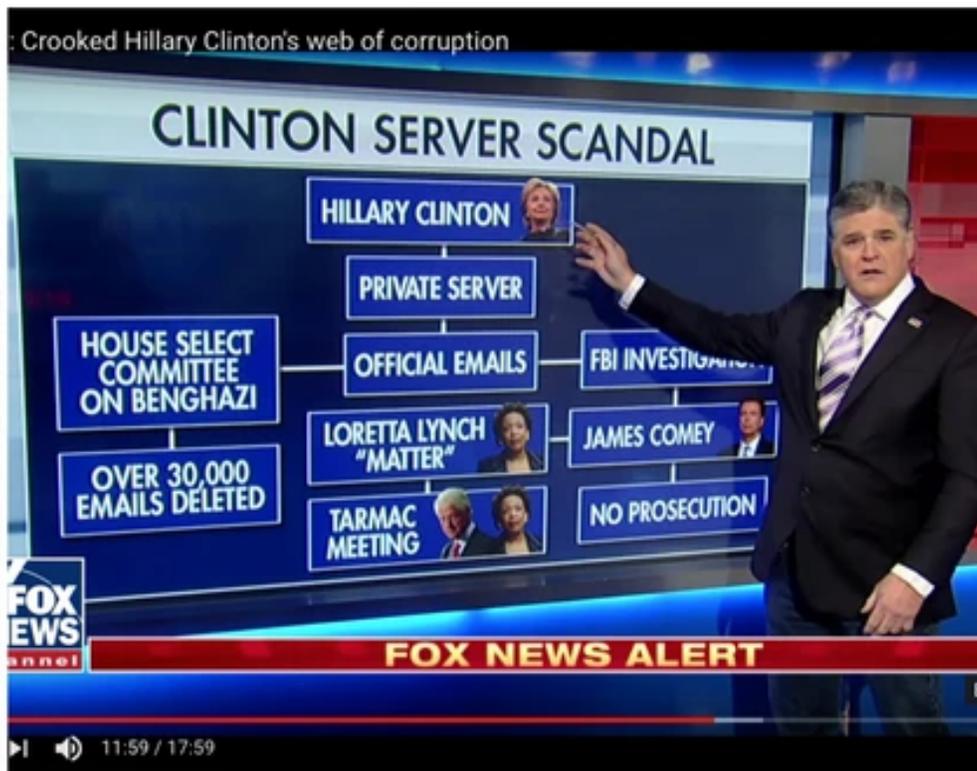
Texas Tea Partiers Are Freaking Out Over 'Deep State' Conspiracy Theories

Here's why the state is ground zero in the right-wing panic over threats to the Trump presidency.



By [John Savage](#)

September 20, 2018, 7:30pm



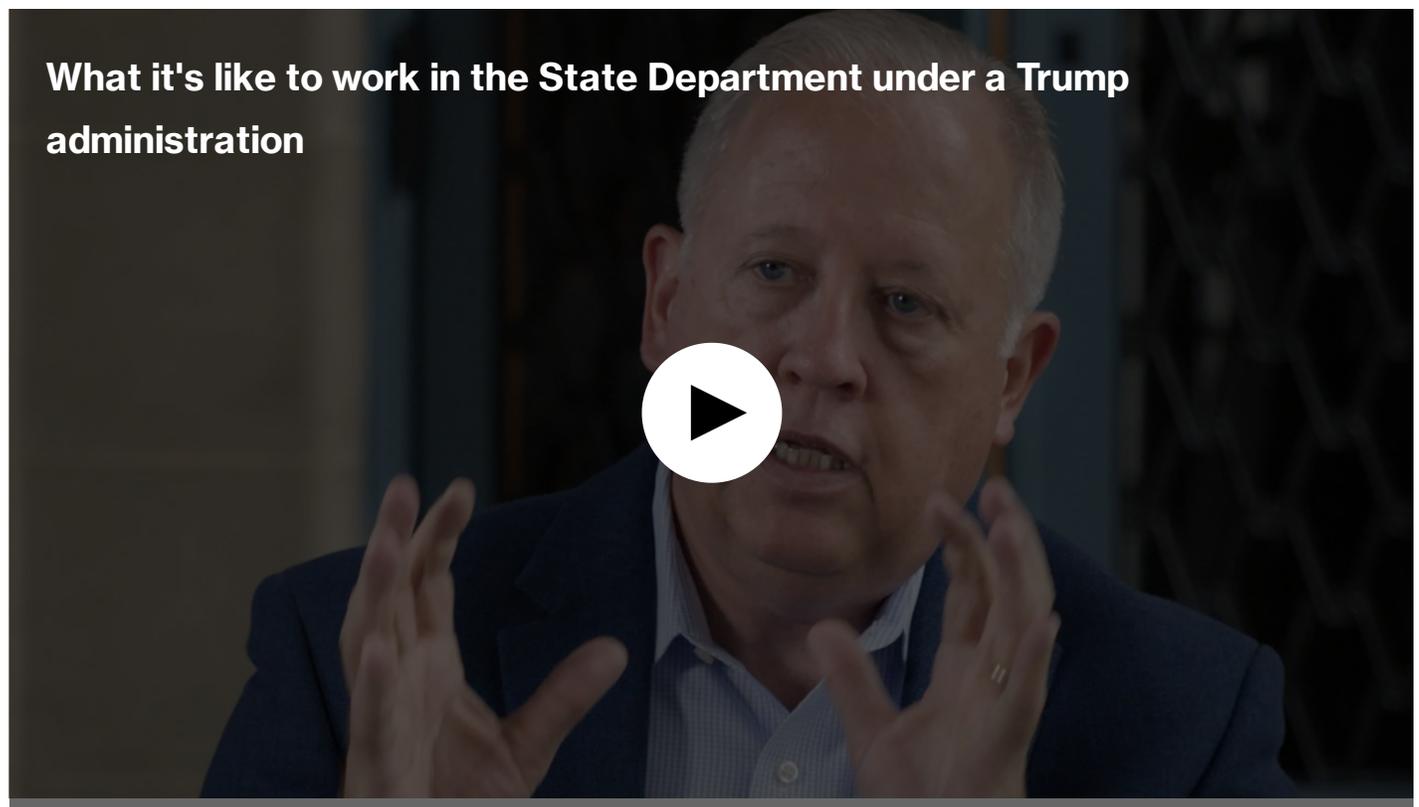
LEFT IMAGE: ALEX JONES (PHOTO BY TOM WILLIAMS/CQ ROLL CALL). RIGHT IMAGE: SEAN HANNITY (SCREENCAP VIA YOUTUBE)

On a blistering hot Tuesday evening in July, about 70 concerned citizens gathered in the Trinity Family Church just off Interstate Highway 20 in the small town of Forney, Texas, about 25 miles east of Dallas. Several people in the all-white group donned shirts

emblazoned with the letters USA and chatted animatedly near the church altar. The national flag, the Texas flag, and the Israeli flag were prominently displayed near the front of the sanctuary.

Members of at least three North Texas tea party-aligned groups, including the Van Zandt County Tea Party, the Kaufman County Tea Party, and the Red Texas Forum, joined a smattering of local political candidates and former elected officials to hear a presentation titled "Historical Roots of the Deep State—What it is and Where it came from." After an opening prayer, Russ Ramsland—a Harvard graduate, CFO of a Dallas-based private security firm, and former candidate for US Congress—wasted no time in laying out the threat posed by the Deep State, which he defined as a secretive, nefarious cabal of government bureaucrats, Islamists, leftists, and establishment Republicans that coalesced in Nazi Germany more than 75 years ago. Deep state actors desperately want to take out President Trump, and true patriots had to act now to save him, Ramsland explained.

Many in the audience nodded vigorously as he spoke.



Since Trump's election, the narrative that a shadowy Deep State was conspiring to destroy his presidency has found receptive audiences across the country. Media outlets such as Fox News and Breitbart News have seized on the idea, and this month, Project Veritas, a right-wing activist group that uses selectively edited undercover recordings to embarrass its targets, has been rolling out a series of videos purporting to "unmask the Deep State." Meanwhile, the *New York Times* recently published an anonymous op-ed by a senior Trump administration official who claimed they and others were actively working to undermine the President, and last week, excerpts from Bob Woodward's new book *Fear* painted a picture of government officials openly mocking and subverting the president. The one-two punch bolstered not only the longstanding right-wing suspicion that anonymous bureaucrats were undermining Trump, but also suggested that his own hand-picked aides were, too.

All of which was likely to reinforce a sense of panic among some Trump supporters, while raising the less unhinged concern in some corners about what it all meant for democracy.

But perhaps nowhere has the most fringe interpretation of the "Deep State" threat resonated more—or for longer—than among Texas Tea Party-style groups. Movement leaders have for some time been spreading the word on a bevy of social media platforms and websites, and speakers like Ramsland have worked feverishly to disseminate the Deep State gospel in grassroots settings. But it's not just a hyper-local thing: In June, Texas Congressman Louie Gohmert railed against the insidious menace on Rush Limbaugh's radio show, and, after the *Times* op-ed was published, Ted Cruz—the fiery Tea Party-standard bearer fending off a challenge from Democrat Beto O'Rourke—could be found blustering about the Deep State with Fox News provocateur Sean Hannity.

While it may not be surprising that anti-government conspiracy theories might have found a foothold in Texas, given its deeply conservative history, it's remarkable that so many of the state's political leaders have taken to actively promoting the theories. And because Texas—a state that contains six of the 20 largest cities in the country, produces the most oil and gas in the nation, and is home to two of the last five Presidents—has been dubbed a useful long-term bellwether for national politics, the situation offers important warning signs for the future.

Ramsland told the assembled citizens in Forney that the Deep State wanted to "denigrate Christianity," to "cripple your children from becoming psychological adults," to "get rid of your Second Amendment rights," and to "get you to emotionally detach from the founding ideals of the country." He added: "Benghazi, the Las Vegas shooting, the whole Confederate monuments [controversy] are part of the cultural revolution that the Deep State wants to have happen."

Dwayne Collins, an affable and trim veterinarian and leader of the Van Zandt County Tea Party, told me he was confident conservatives would heed Ramsland's warning and do their part to bring down the Deep State. "More and more people are becoming aware of the threat," he said.

"The Deep State is real," Collins added, "and they want to take down Trump."

The Deep State is not the Texas far-right's first foray into the alternate universe of conspiracy theories. To take one recent example, on a humid Monday morning in the months leading to the 2016 presidential primary season, an angry crowd of about 150 people marched into a century-and-a-half-old county Courthouse in the small town of Bastrop, Texas. Waiting for them was a Lieutenant Colonel in the US Army, a man the Pentagon had dispatched to allay concerns about a military training exercise set to take place in Texas, and across the Southwest. The military maneuver went by the name Jade Helm 15, but many in the bustling audience were convinced it was something menacing: a covert attempt by the federal government to invade Texas, seize citizens' guns, and possibly imprison the state's conservative residents in abandoned Walmarts.

Austin-based conspiracy theorist Alex Jones had helped ignite the furor, and concerns about the training exercise quickly spread to Texas' robust network of Tea Party groups. Activists promptly reached out to the state's politicians, and Governor Greg Abbott swiftly announced he would deploy the Texas State Guard to monitor the US military's actions. The moment seemed ludicrous to many Democrats and moderate Republicans around the country, but it was a perfect window into Tea Partiers' propensity not only to believe conspiracy theories, but to compel credence from elected officials at all levels.

Texas Tea Party-backed politicians have tended to include some of the most conspiracy-minded elected leaders in the country. There's US Representative Lamar Smith, who accused government climate scientists of engaging in a data conspiracy, and who, in January, charged Google with discriminating against conservatives by blocking users from searching for "Jesus, Chick-fil-A, and the Catholic religion." Google does not block searches for those terms.

There's US Representative Louie Gohmert, who, during a 2017 congressional hearing, displayed a labyrinthine flowchart that connected a host of political bogeymen. The chart linked the so-called "Uranium One" scandal, Hillary Clinton's "secret server," "Benghazi," Deputy US Attorney General Rod Rosenstein, former FBI Director Jim Comey, and Special Counsel Robert Mueller. The chart provided proof, Gohmert claimed, that the investigation into links between the Trump campaign and Russia was ethically compromised.

Texans like Gohmert and his supporters find anti-government conspiracy theories alluring in part because they are in thrall to a mythical reading of the state's history, suggested Cal Jillson, a political science professor at Southern Methodist University in Dallas. Deep in the heart of Texas' mythology rest some widely accepted axioms: the belief that individualism and strict limits on government made Texas great, and the opinion that any outside authority, especially the federal government, was to be regarded with suspicion.

While some Texas politicians may believe the anti-government theories they promote, others are performing for the state's Tea Partiers, Jillson told me. "It varies as you go from politicians like Louie Gohmert, who accepts conspiracy theories as real and at best has a tenuous grasp on reality, to Governor Abbott, who is a shrewd politician and understands the utility of conspiracy theories and the sway they hold with far-right voters in Texas," he said.

During his presentation in Forney, Ramsland detailed the founding of the Deep State—which he said was formed when the Muslim Brotherhood, Prescott Bush (the banker and father of former President George H.W. Bush), leftists, and George Soros came together in Nazi Germany in the 1930s (Soros, who is Jewish, was born in 1930).

"Soros was responsible for finding 400,000 Jews and sending them to the death camps," Ramsland said, falsely. Audience members gasped and shook their heads. (Governor Abbott often invokes Soros in fundraising emails.) Ramsland then directed everyone's attention to a couple of convoluted flowcharts and explained the links between a host of right-wing shibboleths—the Rockefeller family, Soros, Obama, the Clintons, Comey, and Mueller, to name a few.

Ramsey ended his presentation by telling audience members how they could help fight the Deep State: spread the word about the conspiracy; donate to people who support non-Deep State actors, such as groups like Judicial Watch and the Freedom Fund; and demand "that Comey and the others potentially be prosecuted." (Ramsland did not respond to a request for comment.)

But leaving aside Texans' deep-rooted distrust of outside authority—which, after all, could describe plenty of Americans—what else might help explain the state's organized Tea Partiers' willingness to dive so deep down the rabbit hole?

Demographic change and increasing socioeconomic uncertainty have amped up belief in conspiracy theories, according to Chip Berlet, co-author of *Right-Wing Populism in America: Too Close for Comfort*, a book published about two decades ago that seemed to anticipate this current moment, at least to some extent. "Conspiracy theories can be comforting and have found popularity at historical moments when people are unsettled," he told me. And it's no secret that Texas is undergoing massive demographic change: The state is 39 percent Hispanic, and that community has been estimated to outnumber the state's white population as soon as 2020.

Trump has of course effectively embraced conspiratorial thinking in an effort to defend himself from any allegations of wrongdoing, and that may largely remain a matter of political convenience. Likewise, national demographic change—and attendant white anxiety about a perceived loss in cultural clout—has been widely cited as helping explain Trump's rise.

But Texas seems to be experiencing both phenomena on steroids.

For his part, Dwayne Collins, the Van Zandt County Tea Party leader, said he thanked God for Trump, not only because he was doing a fine job as the leader of the free world, but because he understood the breadth and depth of the conspiracy threatening the country —one Texans have been onto for some time.

“I think Trump, with the Tea Party’s help, can stop the Deep State,” he told me.

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