

Techtopia with Chitra Ragavan

Episode 1: Joseph Coohill

Chitra Ragavan:

How did technology help fuel the spread and reach of conspiracies that resulted in the unprecedented sacking of the US Capitol on January 6th, by violent supporters of President Donald Trump? And how does this event compare to others in history?

Chitra Ragavan:

Hello everyone. I'm Chitra Ragavan and this is Techtopia. On this podcast, we take a look at the addictive and inexorable forces of technology that are transforming people, society and humanity. Joining me now is the historian, Joseph Coohill. He's the producer and host of the popular Professor Buzzkill History Podcast, which addresses misconceptions and misunderstandings in history. Professor Coohill earned his doctorate in history from the University of Oxford in 1998 and has taught at universities in Britain and the United States. Joe, welcome to Techtopia.

Joseph Coohill:

Well thank you for having me on the show and I love the idea of Techtopia. It's a great podcast.

Chitra Ragavan:

Thank you. When you watched that riotous mob sacking the US Capitol last week, with your knowledge of modern world history, what were the first thoughts that came to your mind?

Joseph Coohill:

Well, it followed very similar patterns to other sorts of mobs that flock together and act together based on essentially very, very shallow and already discredited information. It was mob mentality. Most of the people who were there didn't know much beyond the idea that, "Oh, I believe Trump and Trump believes this." They weren't necessarily deep QAnon encyclopedic people, but, and that's very, very common. It's much easier to stir up emotions and have people rush to physically attack some place than it is to say, "Oh, okay, let's sit down and have a discussion about this." So it looked to me an awful lot, like as the media has portrayed it, as the Reichstag and various other things. And a lot of people stormed the Berlin Wall in 1989, for instance, who weren't necessarily anti-East Germany. They were just, it was a big mob and they wanted to get their sledgehammers out and did so. So it's a very, very common thing in history, unfortunately, but it's one of these things we constantly have to contend with.

Chitra Ragavan:

Were you surprised that it actually happened here in America?

Joseph Coohill:

Well, yes and no. Yes, because I would have thought, given that there had been so many protests in 2020 and that the police presence and the military presence around the BLM protests in 2020 had been so strong and there had been some rings around Lincoln Monument and rings of national guards being around the Capitol, that that would have been taken care of beforehand. So I'm not surprised that it happened here. I am surprised that it was that there was a kind of incompetent response by the security forces, if you will, not to be ready for it.

Chitra Ragavan:

There were people there from many different groups, many different beliefs, many different, who believed in a lot of different conspiracies. And before we kind of delve into that, I know you like to make this clarification between conspiracies, conspiracy theories, conspiracy mongering. What's that clarification?

Joseph Coohill:

Well, yeah, I think this is a real problem because after all, a conspiracy is just a group of two or more people who get together and decide to do something and not tell anyone else about it. They do it in secret. In fact, the word conspiracy comes from two Latin words, con and spire, which means to breathe together. So they are literally very much in sync, right? And there have been conspiracies in the past. Julius Caesar's assassins were obviously conspired. There were conspiracy to murder Lincoln and there've been other conspiracies.

Joseph Coohill:

But what we mean when we talk about conspiracy theories and the fact that most of these conspiracy theories are untrue and causes all these problems is the tendency of lots of people to, what I call, conspiracy monger. They want to understand something that they can understand, and it becomes much easier to apply a template of, "Oh, it's all the Jews" or "It's all the deep state," or "It's the Russians," back in the Cold War, that are doing all these things and planning all these things. That's a much simpler explanation than trying to figure out what's going on. And then it only spins out from there. So people to jump to conclusions about all kinds of things without even thinking about the evidence at all. So there are conspiracies, Watergate was a conspiracy, right? But not every government action is a conspiracy, even though conspiracy theorists and conspiracy mongers jump to that conclusion.

Chitra Ragavan:

When you look at some of these beliefs, from QAnon and other groups, some of it is so extreme and yet President Trump was able to tap into that extreme views. What helped him do it so successfully, would you say?

Joseph Coohill:

It seems to me, just by watching it in the news, one, he does tend to believe, does have a sort of paranoid streak to him. But two, it's very obvious and it's become more obvious to him over the 2016 Republican primary and the election that whipping up all these things like the War on Christmas, which has never existed, was extremely popular, and people flock to that sort of stuff. So he definitely realized and realizes that this is a way to gain supporters.

Joseph Coohill:

And unfortunately, this is one of the things that turns conspiracy theories from the back room of a pizza joint, with a couple of people talking about something, to actually having impact. When a major individual takes up these conspiracy theories and then promotes them, that's when they become really popular and really dangerous because it's a lot easier to believe in Trump, again that's a very simple one word sort of explanation, than it is to sit down and think about all the different things he's saying, right? The War on Christmas is a fast and easy one. But he's talking about all sorts of deep state things. Well, most people don't want to think about the deep state. They won't put that much work into it. But "I believe in Trump" means you that more easily follow everything else. And we see this with Hitler and Stalin and Mao and lots of other people.

Chitra Ragavan:

And a lot of people were warning each other and the government leaders, even his own opponents in the primary, about his tendency for these deep state theories and willingness to use them. But he didn't seem to have as much success as later in his presidency. What was the catalyst, that shift? When did you see that happen when he started to really resonate with the public?

Joseph Coohill:

Well, remember his first major conspiracy theory was the Obama birth certificate stuff. We should remember that that hooked in an awful lot of people who were otherwise sane, people who pay their taxes, raise their kids, go to work, do these things. But they believe that. And I think that it was the sort of paranoia and the resentment at being impeached and among his supporters by seeing him impeached, again, the first time, and then losing the election. That's when we saw the intensification of what happened on January 6th. Trump gave this speech about come to Washington, let's get together, let's stop the steal and all that sort of stuff. And there's something to hang your hat on that. There's like, "Oh right, Trump has been robbed, therefore I have been robbed and I'm going to go protest."

Joseph Coohill:

And so I think that was the difference that made that happen, on the 6th. And perhaps most importantly and what people should really think about is that a lot of the people interviewed or shouting during the event were saying things like "I've been robbed. I've had my rights taken away from me. We want our government back." And these are people for whom, I don't want to make too many assumptions here, but people for

whom they have everything going for them. First of all, in the United States, they're are white. Second of all, they're wealthy enough or well off enough to afford plane tickets to get there. The government, by any stretch of the imagination, the government is working for them, right? Democrats are working for them, Republicans are working for them. Yet, it's the sense of resentment, it's the sense of having your rights taken away that's stronger than the actual reality. So I think that the election result was enough to push people over the edge.

Chitra Ragavan:

Yeah. But Charlottesville also had a big impact, correct?

Joseph Coohill:

Yes.

Chitra Ragavan:

In building that audience for him and his brand in that regard.

Joseph Coohill:

Yeah. We can't forget, there are people who, I just said on the one hand, there are these people who are kind of normal who pay their taxes and raise their kids and otherwise fine. But then there are the real extremists, the real violent bigots and terrible people. And of course, obviously the Proud Boys are those people, and the KKK are those people. And unfortunately, it appears that those people will always be with us. But they can be marginalized by governments and by societies. And I think it's more important to have the marginalized by society than have them marginalized by governments, until some messianic leader comes along and then is elected president. And it sort of legitimizes what they say and what they want to do. And that's the scary part, and that's exactly how the Hitler thing happened.

Chitra Ragavan:

And not just messianic, but someone with a grasp of technology as Trump did with Twitter. Right? How do you see technology being used to communicate these messages to people and how it led to January 6th?

Joseph Coohill:

Well, I don't think Trump has a great conception of technology. What I think Trump has, is Twitter is a way to express his impulsiveness. He hates something, so he's able to say it right away and it gets out there immediately. And then it just feeds on that. I don't think Trump could handle 4Chan or 8Chan or anything beyond Twitter. But what technology seems to do is the spread of conspiracy theories, the spread of conspiracy mongering, the spread of fear and the spread of resentment goes at the pace of whatever the current technology is. So don't forget, in 1920s, late 1920s, 1930s Germany, hate spread very, very rapidly because there was a telegraph and there was the radio, and there were newspapers and all those sort of things.

Joseph Coohill:

So it's not a new thing. It's just whatever stage technology happens to be at a certain point, then any information can flow that quickly. And it becomes very, very easy to read Twitter. And just based on Twitter alone, you can believe enough in Trump to go to Washington. But don't forget, John Wilkes Booth and his conspirators conspired through meeting and through the mail and even through coded telegraph messages. So it's not purely a modern as in 21st century thing. It just is more accelerated.

Chitra Ragavan:

Those who want to debunk these conspiracies have the access to the same technology. But why is it that one is more powerful than the other?

Joseph Coohill:

Well, I'm reminded by the famous quote that a lie gets halfway around the world before the truth is putting its shoes on. This is attributed to Mark Twain. It's not a Mark Twain quote. We've done a show about that, which people can look up. But the reason is because these conspiracy mongers and the people who produce these things, again, it's like this Trump impulsiveness. It's jumping at one, either one word or a very, very short explanation of something, right? And it's usually hate or some group they want to persecute. That travels a lot faster.

Joseph Coohill:

Again, I hate constantly keeping up the Hitler analogy, but this is what happened. "It's all the Jews," flies around the world or flew around Germany so much faster than a complicated analysis of whether Jewish bankers were in control of the world's monetary situation and on and on and on. And I remember even as a child, people would say things like, "Well, inflation is because of all the Jewish bankers in New York." I mean, this is just crazy. Things are very, very complex, but the simple answer can literally fly around almost at the speed of, well it's the speed of Twitter anyway. And the simple answer is always much more believable. People don't want to put in the work to try to figure out what happens.

Chitra Ragavan:

And he had a knack for distilling it down, like you said, to keywords like "Fight," which he repeated over and over again on January 6th, "Hate," key words. He had a knack or has a knack for simplifying and distilling the message and then sending it out on Twitter. So is there any particular piece of propaganda in history, Nazi propaganda, or anything else that you think sort of has some similarities to some of the messaging now?

Joseph Coohill:

Well, I think a very good parallel example is what was known as The Protocols of the Elders of Zion, which was a false document, a book written in Czarist Russia in the very first few years of the 20th century, in which it claimed to be a sort of guide book for Jewish elites on how to take over the world. We start with a merchant class and we go to banking and then we do this, then we do that. But it was completely fabricated by

anti-Jewish people. Well, this was believed, very quickly. First of all, Russia had recently conquered enough land and it expanded enough that a lot of Jews in Eastern Europe came under their sort of control. And czars didn't know what to do with these groups of people that seemed to be on the one hand, very clannish, right? But on the other hand, also very involved in things like banking. So they seemed to be a danger in both ways.

Joseph Coohill:

And so they create this thing about these Elders of Zion who are out there as a cabal, as a conspiracy, to rule the world. Now, relatively quickly, The Protocols of the Elders of Zion is proved to be a fake. But again, it's just like the lie traveling around the world before the truth gets its shoes on, it was too late by then. And Hitler had picked it up in the 1920s. Hitler relatively quickly stopped believing that The Protocols of the Elders of Zion was true, but since it fit his otherwise anti-Semitic narrative, he just kept pushing it. And Henry Ford, the American industrialist, even published and promoted it in the United States. And these things, according to Henry Ford, were supposed to be taught in schools, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. And it just kept spreading and spreading and spreading.

Joseph Coohill:

And again, like I say, well into the 1970s, you would hear grumbles at parties or sometimes family gatherings or other places where people would say, as I say, all the Jewish bankers in New York are controlling everything, when in reality, most bankers in New York are not Jewish. But again, it doesn't matter. And so The Protocols of the Elders of Zion was a way in which Hitler could add to his growing antisemitism and add to the growing antisemitism craze in Germany and just make everything worse.

Joseph Coohill:

And that's exactly what's happening with QAnon and the deep state. You can explain everything in the world that goes wrong with the deep state. 9/11 happened because the deep state wanted to be able to fight a war against so-and-so, so they let the planes come in and then they were able to whip up public opinion. The deep state is responsible for eventually a new world order and all these kinds of things. If there's some sort of big group that's secret that you can blame everything on, then that's what you do. And it seems again, to make sense, because it fits in with this template.

Chitra Ragavan:

And with the age of the Internet, with everything being available, even something as old as The Protocols of the Elders of Zion, probably you can still find on the Internet, right? So it's harder and harder to get rid of this stuff.

Joseph Coohill:

Oh yes. And in fact, I'm reliably informed by historians in Middle Eastern studies and political science and Middle Eastern studies, that there are a great number of groups in the Middle East who still believe The Protocols of the Elders of Zion was true and is true. Now the Internet can also, and has also, worked the other way. It can debunk a lot

of these things. And I've been hearing on the news lately, and had interviews with various people who have come out of these, if you will, conspiracy cults and said, "Well, you know what? I started to look at other things on the Internet and I started to talk to other people." And they started to realize that these things weren't true or that they were so farfetched that they couldn't be true. So yes, it spreads everything faster, but it can also spread the truth faster.

Joseph Coohill:

It just gets back to this, conspiracy mongering is always a very simple explanation for a bad thing. Whereas the truth is much more complicated. So that's the central problem. I don't necessarily think it's technology. Technology has accelerated it, right? But then it also has accelerated the truth. I read a lot more about conspiracy theories and the research on conspiracy theories because it's a lot easier to do than when I was in college in the 1980s. I can look stuff up, a lot of stuff is available that you had to get through inner library loan before, which sounds like ancient times. But it's easy to get books now on Kindle and everything else that makes it more possible to try to understand the broad nature. But I'm willing, and in fact, it's my job to put in the work and the time to read all these things. Whereas for most people, that's not the case.

Chitra Ragavan:

Having read all this stuff, what do you think is the level of challenge that the US government and other governments around the world are confronting in debunking these conspiracies, and can we get back to the way it was before January 6th, I guess, is the question?

Joseph Coohill:

Well, I would argue, be careful about that "back to the way" it was thing, because these things have always been with us. In the sixties and seventies, the John Birch Society had a tremendously strong network of information flow based on these newsletters that they would literally mail out to people which were crazy. But they worked on the technology of the mimeograph machine and the postal service. The reason they were never successful or any more successful than they were in just reaching a certain number of people was because they didn't have a champion, that great individual who stood up and said, "This is what explains everything." So I think what we have to try to stress is the continuation and the expansion of what we call an open society, right? The more information is out there, the more good information will eventually get out there.

Joseph Coohill:

But I also think that in order to help people sharpen their critical thinking skills, we should introduce into schools, what you don't really get to until you start college, which is called introduction to logic. It was a philosophy course everyone had to take. And in logic, there's something called informal logic, which deals with argumentative fallacies, and conspiracy theories are ripe with argumentative fallacies. I loved studying that in college because it explained an awful lot. And if you learn about argumentative fallacies and the way information is taught to you, earlier on, I think you're much less likely to buy

it later on. But also as so many people have been saying, one of the things that for instance, the incoming administration should concentrate on, is fixing society. So fixing our infrastructure, fixing a lot of other things that will then sort of draw the poison away from the conspiracy mongers, because society won't be failing the way it has been.

Joseph Coohill:

So for instance, the way Germany after the war was able to not only capture, but to defang what were called the Werewolves, a very, very small group of Nazi holdouts, once they fixed German society and it became just a ridiculous and counterproductive to try to fight it anymore. So I think creating a good and better society, and one where logic is taught at an earlier age is the key. But I don't envy the new administration at all because in the short term, it's going to be very, very difficult and I hope not bloody, but I wouldn't be surprised if it is. If Trump keeps talking, I think that'll continue.

Chitra Ragavan:

Now, you make this really important point that the stuff is always under the surface. And then when that messianic, charismatic leader, who's willing to say those things comes to the forefront, it can trigger these movements to come above the surface. So what does that mean for the Republican Party and for future elections in terms of how we can keep these forces at bay in the future?

Joseph Coohill:

Well, I actually think it's not the fault of the establishment, for instance, the establishment within the Republican Party, but it's the fault of the people. I think one of the things, in a sort of backwards way, that proved the fact that American democracy in terms of elections really works, is that Trump did get the Republican nomination. Despite everybody in the Republican Party, all the elites, Lindsey Graham saying he's a bigot, Ted Cruz saying that this is madness, well, they couldn't stop the votes. So I think what Republicans should concentrate on is going out to their base, going out to the Republican Party voters and talking in more common sense terms. Everyone sort of thought, it'd be crazy to vote for Trump. We don't have to worry about that, this is just a flare up. It's not going to happen. But in fact, because he was able to pick up on these certain traits, he was able to get the nomination.

Joseph Coohill:

So I think flooding the zone, if you will, with normal Republican presidential candidates will help a lot. And I hope that again, we don't have a nominee or a person running for the nomination who's like that. But again, it's very worrying because you can see the Ted Cruz on the one hand in 2016 was very anti-Trump and saying, "This is madness," and "This can't happen." But now, he's right not only on the Trump train, he's whipping up supporters because he sees that as a way to get more support for him. So we all constantly have to deal with the, I don't know, the perfidity of politicians. Ted Cruz is willing to go over to the dark side because it's more likely to get them the nomination than if he remained pure.

Chitra Ragavan:

Yeah. And we're talking about the Republican Party now because of what happened, but one could say these principles apply to both parties. There's crazy people on both sides of the spectrum. We're dealing with a crisis right now that's sort of putting the Republican Party in the spotlight, but I'm sure there are many other examples that you can point to on the other side.

Joseph Coohill:

Well, except that what I don't understand is, and I mean that, I genuinely don't understand this, the analog for Trump on the democratic side would have been Marianne Williamson, this sort of new age guru or whatever she was, and that didn't work. And if you look at the history of the Republican Party since the 1950s, the forties and fifties, they seem to continually nominate extremists. So for instance, Eisenhower jumps into the 1952 Republican nomination. By the way, he was also recruited by the Democrats to join, and he was a pretty much a 50/50, whether he was going to be Republican or Democrat. But he jumped into the 1952 nomination because he saw Senator Taft, Robert Taft, who was, if not directly in league with, Joseph McCarthy and the extremists, the Republican Party, was certainly leaning that way and saw the power that that sort of hate mongering could bring to a political campaign.

Joseph Coohill:

Eisenhower jumped in as the, "No, I'm going to be the moderate here, and I'm going to make sure the Republican Party doesn't go down the crazy train." But for instance, he had an order to not to alienate all the Republicans, he had to pick a relative extreme vice presidential nominee, Richard Nixon, right, who was not McCarthy, but he certainly was on the far right of the Republican Party. And then, Eisenhower is able to govern. But then boom, lo and behold, in 1964, the Republicans nominate Barry Goldwater, which is just crazy. And even later on, they nominate Ronald Reagan in. People forget, because he's now depicted as this great healer, but Reagan was considered, by other Republicans, to be a right wing extremist.

Joseph Coohill:

We were going to have the collapse of society because he was going to take all of the governing infrastructure down because he wanted to have complete tax cuts, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. So the party seems to keep doing this. We only occasionally get a McCain or a Romney or a, if you will, a moderate. I don't know why there's this tendency in one party or the other, of one party to nominate the people on the extreme. The Democrats haven't nominated an extremist since forever. Carter was very, very moderate. Carter was considered a right wing Democrat. McGovern was kind of a left wing Democrat, but a peacenik. But nobody else was, Hubert Humphrey was an establishment figure. John Kerry was certainly an establishment figure. Barack Obama was very, very moderate and on and on and on. So I don't know. Again, when I said a minute ago, I literally don't understand this. I literally don't understand why the Republican Party has been doing this for so long, and I am very, very worried about it.

Chitra Ragavan:

And there have been news reports recently that Donald Trump has been very upset by comparisons to Richard Nixon. What comparisons, if any, are there in terms of this preponderance to spread conspiracy theories or to believe in them, et cetera?

Joseph Coohill:

I think the biggest one is the paranoia and "Everyone is against me." And Nixon had that since his very early days as a Congressman. And I think what that manifested itself by lashing out at other groups. So Nixon comes to prominence in the forties and the early fifties by lashing out at people who are pink, who are proto-communist or pseudocommunist. And he's not Joe McCarthy, but he almost is. He goes around saying all these people are communists, and we need to rid them from the government. And then of course, he becomes vice president and then loses the election and thinks, although this is historically incorrect, thinks that election was stolen from him in 1960. That adds to his paranoia. Then he immediately loses the 1962 gubernatorial election in California, which should have been a cakewalk. So he thinks the entire establishment is against him.

Joseph Coohill:

And that's the sort of paranoia that's being fed to Trump. He didn't win the popular vote in 2016. He lost this election. He has certain Republicans like Romney and others actively opposing him. So it just feeds this everyone's against me. And the same sorts of reports you're hearing coming out of the White House that he's raving and that he's ranting, and that he's doing all this, are exactly what happened with Nixon in the very last days. Nixon was literally on the floor in the Oval Office in a fetal position, crying uncontrollably. But in Nixon's case, he knew he had done it to himself. Trump still believes it's being done to him by other people.

Chitra Ragavan:

And it could take a while before he, if ever, that he's able to accept that.

Joseph Coohill:

Yes. And I think we have to accept the fact that Richard Nixon was miles ahead of Donald Trump in the intelligence department. Even as paranoid and as problematic as Richard Nixon psyche was, he's definitely infinitely smarter than Donald Trump.

Chitra Ragavan:

And just going back to this theme of technology, and you were talking about Richard Nixon lashing out at people. With Donald Trump, that lashing out was what has caused so much fear in the Republican Party, his ability to lash out on Twitter, the bullying and the name calling. He has this knack for tearing people down on Twitter that oppose him, and that seems to be another way that technology has enabled him to carry out his agenda.

Joseph Coohill:

It's because it works completely well. A number of those writers were going through the Congress looking for pens to quote, "Hang Mike Pence." Now Mike Pence is as right-wing as you can get in the Republican Party in the 21st century. It's not like they were running through the Congress looking for Romney. But Trump had just recently said how disappointed he was in Pence because Pence wasn't going to contest the election. And so, again, it comes back to this idea that the messianic figure says, "Ah, Pence is the problem." Therefore, now we believe Pence is the problem and Romney is forgotten. So it really is a combination of this paranoid tendency, this tendency to believe the simplest answer. And when those two things are championed by a popular individual figure, then it's almost impossible to stop it without direct intervention by the military.

Chitra Ragavan:

Do you have any other closing thoughts on where we are and where we need to be?

Joseph Coohill:

No, it's just a please, please, please, people, well, first of all, listen to my show. But also, read a book on argumentative logic and argumentative fallacies. It really makes a huge difference in how you can understand the world. For instance, if you get your history, I do deal a lot in Irish history, if you get your history from folk songs, you're going to have a very skewed and incorrect and factually dodgy version of Irish history. The same thing happens in the American left. If you walk around singing Pete Seeger songs and Joan Baez songs, as much as I might personally agree with them, that's not what happened. So you really have to read more and think more and react, maybe not react less, but react much less impulsively.

Chitra Ragavan:

Joe, thank you so much for joining me on Techtopia.

Joseph Coohill:

Well, thanks for having me. It's been great.

Chitra Ragavan:

Joseph Coohill is the producer and host of the very popular Professor Buzzkill History Podcast, which addresses misconceptions and misunderstandings in history. Professor Coohill earned his doctorate in history from the University of Oxford in 1998 and has taught at universities in Britain and the United States. This is Techtopia, I'm Chitra Ragavan.

Chitra Ragavan:

Techtopia is a podcast from Goodstory, an advisory firm helping technology startups with brand strategy, positioning and narrative. Our producer is Jeremy Corr, founder and CEO of Executive Podcasting Solutions. Our creative advisor is Adi Wineland. Don't forget to subscribe to the show on Apple Podcasts or your preferred podcast platform. And if you like the show, please rate it five stars, leave a review and do recommend it to

your friends, families, and colleagues. For questions, comments, and transcripts, please visit our website at goodstory.io, or send us an email at podcast@goodstory.io. Join us next week for another episode of Tectopia. I'll see you then.