

# Since Jan. 6, the pro-Trump Internet has descended into infighting over money and followers

Far-right influencers and QAnon devotees are battling over online audiences in the power vacuum created by Trump's departure from office



By [Drew Harwell](#)

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The far-right firebrands and conspiracy theorists of the pro-Trump Internet have a new enemy: each other.

QAnon devotees are livid at their former hero [Michael Flynn](#) for accurately calling their jumbled credo “total nonsense.” Donald Trump superfans have voiced a sense of betrayal because the former president, [booed](#) for getting a [coronavirus immunization booster](#), has become a “vaccine salesman.” And attorney [Lin Wood](#) seems mad at pretty much everyone, including former allies on the scattered “elite strike-force team” investigating nonexistent mass voter fraud.

After months of failing to disprove the reality of Trump's 2020 presidential election loss, some of the Internet's most popular right-wing provocateurs are grappling with the pressures of restless audiences, saturated markets, ongoing investigations and millions of dollars in legal bills.

The result is a chaotic melodrama, playing out via secretly recorded phone calls, personal attacks in podcasts, and a seemingly endless stream of posts on Twitter, Gab and Telegram calling their rivals Satanists, communists, pedophiles or “pay-triots” — money-grubbing gifters exploiting the cause.

The infighting reflects the diminishing financial rewards for the merchants of right-wing disinformation, whose battles center not on policy or doctrine but on the treasures of online fame: viewer donations and subscriptions; paid appearances at rallies and conferences; and crowds of followers to buy their books and merchandise.

But it also reflects a broader confusion in the year since QAnon's faceless nonsense-peddler, Q, went mysteriously silent.

Without Q's cryptic messages, influencers who once hung on Q's every “drop” have started fighting to “grab the throne to become the new point person for the movement,” said Sara Aniano, a Monmouth University graduate student of communication studying far-right rhetoric and conspiracy theories on social media.

“In the absence of a president like Trump and in the absence of a figure like Q, there's this void where nobody knows



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The cage match kicked off late in November when Kyle Rittenhouse, acquitted of all charges after fatally shooting two men at a protest last year in Kenosha, Wis., told Fox News host Tucker Carlson that his former attorneys, including Wood, had exploited his jail time to boost their fundraising “for their own benefit, not trying to set me free.”

Wood has since snapped back at his 18-year-old former client, wondering aloud in recent messages on the chat service Telegram: Could his life be “literally under the supervision and control of a ‘director?’ Whoever ‘Kyle’ is, pray for him.”

The feud carved a major rift between Wood and his former compatriots in the pro-Trump “stop the steal” campaign, with an embattled Wood attacking Rittenhouse supporters including Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene (R-Ga.); Flynn, a former national security adviser to Trump; Sidney Powell, Flynn’s attorney; and Patrick Byrne, the Overstock founder who became a major “stop the steal” financier.

Each faction has accused the opposing side of betraying the pro-Trump cause or misusing the millions of dollars in funds that have gone to groups such as Powell’s Defending the Republic.

Wood has posted recordings of his phone calls with Byrne, who can be heard saying that Wood is “a little kooky,” and Flynn, a QAnon icon who can be heard telling Wood that QAnon’s mix of extremist conspiracy theories was actually bogus “nonsense” or a “CIA operation.”

Beyond the infighting, both sides are also staring down the potential for major financial damage in court. A federal judge last month ordered Wood and Powell to pay roughly \$175,000 in legal fees for their “historic and profound abuse of the judicial process” in suing to overturn the 2020 presidential election. And Powell and others face potentially billions of dollars in damages as a result of defamation lawsuits filed by Dominion Voting Systems, which they falsely accused of helping to rig the 2020 race.

To help cover their legal bills, the factions have set up online merchandise shops targeting their most loyal followers. Fans of Powell’s bogus conspiracy theory can, for instance, buy a four-pack set of “Release the Kraken: Defending the Republic” drink tumblers from her website for \$80. On Flynn’s newly launched website, fans can buy “General Flynn: #FightLikeAFlynn” women’s racerback tank tops for \$30. And Wood’s online store sells \$64.99 “#FightBack” unisex hoodies; the fleece, a listing says, feels like “wearing a soft, fluffy cloud.”

Their arguments increasingly resemble the performative clashes of pro wrestling, said Mike Rothschild, a conspiracy theory researcher and author of a book on QAnon: full of flashy, marketable story lines of heroes conquering their enemies. The drama, he said, gives the influencers a way to keep their audiences angry and engaged while also offering them a chance to prove their loyalty by buying stuff.

QAnon is “the easiest money that you could possibly make if you don’t have a conscience, but there’s only a certain number of people you can fleece. It’s not a renewable resource,” said Rothschild (who has no relation to the famous banking family targeted in antisemitic conspiracy theories).

“The fact that they’re all mad at each other, that’s all a byproduct of the fact that they’re just desperate for money, and there’s only a certain amount,” he added. So now, he said, the us-vs.-them argument for many QAnon influencers is: “They’re the pedophiles, the Freemasons, the illuminati. I’m the truth-teller. I’m the one who’s trying to save the world.”

Although Trump is only indirectly connected to some of the increasingly personal battles, many of them show clear signs of his playbook: winning attention and overwhelming the enemy through constant, uninhibited attacks. And the



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yet, though some have used the three stars as a punchline.)

QAnon's credibility didn't exactly climb when its long-heralded promise — that Trump's long-secret war against a Satan-worshipping “deep state” would culminate in a righteous apocalyptic battle known as the “storm” — collapsed last January. As Joe Biden entered the White House, Trump took refuge in Palm Beach, Fla., and most of Trump's enemies were left unvanquished.

Many believers have sought since then to distance themselves from the QAnon name, which they've called a “moniker created by [them] to attack us,” though Q is still their central prophet, devotees still call themselves “anons” and the theories remain the same.

Fans of Flynn have argued that, in his caught-on-tape conversation, he was merely disavowing the QAnon media creation, not them, leaving the sanctity of Q intact. On Telegram last month, Wood said that while “Q speaks truth” in the fight against “pedophilia and satanic rituals,” the broader QAnon movement is “likely a Deep State operation.”

But the movement has far from evaporated. Dozens of candidates who have boosted QAnon talking points are running for Congress this year, including Ron Watkins, the longtime administrator of Q's favorite message board, 8kun, (who, as one unproven theory argues, was perhaps once even Q himself.) And Q-inspired offshoots are promoting anti-vaccine propaganda and other bizarre theories: One group in Dallas has camped out for weeks awaiting the second coming of President John F. Kennedy's long-dead son.

The power vacuum has played out as Trump and his allies have fought not only an investigation into pro-Trump rioters' storming of the U.S. Capitol but separate inquiries into his family business. And Trump himself has had to go on defense. After he promoted coronavirus vaccines as having “saved tens of millions of lives worldwide,” some of his most ardently supportive online communities pushed to brand him a traitor.

In an anonymous poll posted to QAnon-boosting Telegram channels asking whether Trump's receipt of a booster shot made them comfortable getting vaccinated, 97 percent of the more than 19,000 votes said no. Andrew Torba, the head of Gab, a social network popular with the far right, posted that Trump's promotion of “his biggest ‘accomplishment,’ the death jab,” was “so cringe.”

With Facebook and Twitter banning many Q-related accounts, much of the QAnon discussion has played out in the past year on social media platforms popular with far-right sympathizers. But even those online communities have found themselves in conflict with one another.

In posts to his 3 million Gab followers, Torba has criticized Gettr, launched by Trump's longtime aide Jason Miller, and Rumble, which Torba said was run by “Canadian blockheads” pushing “the establishment right's second subversion attempt of the true alternative tech movement.”

Torba has also shared clips of conspiracy theorist Alex Jones saying he would “declare war” on Trump over his support for vaccines. Jones — facing his own financial pressures after a judge ruled in November that he must pay damages to families of children killed in the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting, which he falsely called a hoax — has recently started hawking a membership-only video series for “navigating the apocalypse” for \$222.75.

Even beyond QAnon, many in Trump's orbit appear eager to settle scores and wage long-running feuds. Trump confidant Roger Stone, pardoned by Trump after his 2019 conviction on a charge of lying to Congress, invoked his



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lying about him during the 2019 trial — “gave the order to breach” the Capitol “to curry favor” with an uninterested Trump. (In his next post, Stone advertised his online fundraising auction, in which he’s offering autographed rocks for \$50.)

The cage match, coupled with months of pro-Trump prophecies falling apart, appears to have worn down some QAnon promoters. One influencer who recently voiced some exasperation with the “annoying” Wood-vs.-Flynn drama, “SQvage DQwg,” said he was considering leaving Telegram and his roughly 50,000 followers “if nothing happens publicly before the end of this year. The time is now. We are tired. Exhausted. Hold the Line doesn’t have the same meaning anymore.”

But many of the fights still show the tried-and-true signatures of modern-media storytelling: the bitter rivalries and gossip that online audiences often can’t help watching.

“It’s become almost like reality TV, and what makes great reality TV is conflict,” Aniano said. “Conflict creates great content. And these people are content creators, if nothing else.”

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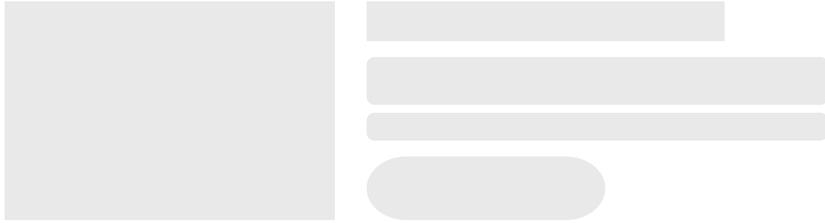
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