

Conspiracy theories about Soros aren't just false. They're anti-Semitic.

Blaming Jewish outsiders for dissent and social unrest isn't new.

By Talia Lavin

On Monday, a pipe bomb was sent to the home of George Soros, the liberal billionaire philanthropist whose name has become a part of conspiracy theories around the world. Investigators have concluded that the pipe bomb was probably hand-delivered, and it was “proactively detonated” by a bomb squad without causing injury to anyone at Soros’s home in New York’s Westchester County.

Motives for the incident remain unclear. Law enforcement authorities have suggested that the same person who sent the device to Soros was also responsible for pipe bombs later sent to former president Barack Obama, former president Bill Clinton, former presidential candidate Hillary Clinton and the CNN bureau in New York.

But it’s no surprise that Soros would wind up as a target. He’s become the subject of escalating rhetoric on the right — including from President Trump — that posits Soros as a nefarious force, fomenting social dissent and paying members of a migrant “caravan” that has been the subject of intense right-wing fearmongering leading up to the November midterms. And that rhetoric draws on old, and deep-rooted, anti-Semitic ideas that have been deployed by the right for decades.

On Oct. 5, Trump theorized on Twitter that [Soros was behind](#) vocal protests against Brett M. Kavanaugh’s appointment as a Supreme Court justice, stating that “the very rude elevator screamers” were “paid for by Soros and others.” More recently, extreme-right Rep. Matt Gaetz [pointedly raised the question](#) of whether Soros was paying members of the migrant caravan. More bizarrely, a top lobbyist for Campbell Soup Company [was chastened by](#) his patrons for suggesting on Twitter this week that Soros’s Open Society Foundation controlled the migrant caravan — “including where they defecate.” (I work at Media Matters for America, which received a \$1 million donation from Soros in 2010, eight years before I joined.)

The far right has ecstatically embraced the spectacle of elected political figures such as Trump and Gaetz theorizing about Soros. After Trump’s Soros tweet about Kavanaugh, the neo-Nazi website the Daily Stormer echoed and surpassed Trump’s assertion that anti-Kavanaugh dissent was a nefarious,

paid-for plot.

“It is impossible to deny that subversive anti-American Jews were the primary force involved in a sinister plot to destroy Kavanaugh,” Lee Rogers wrote on the site a couple of days later. “These Jews do not represent the interest of America. They represent the interest of their diabolical and evil race first and foremost.”

In response to an Oct. 19 Trump speech in Missoula, Mont., in which Trump again suggested that protesters [were paid by](#) “Soros or somebody,” a commenter on an anonymous message board 4chan exulted, “TRUMP NAMED THE IMMIGRATION JEW.” (“Naming the Jew” is an anti-Semitic term that refers to pointing out purported nefarious Jewish influence on world events.)

The conspiracy theories around Soros, then, aren’t just expressions of bitter partisanship — and [fact-checking-focused](#) debunking that’s tempered [coverage of the claims](#) that he was involved in the caravan has skipped past an important subtext. Soros’s Jewish heritage is well known — his experiences in the Holocaust formed his identity as a philanthropist, in a decades-long effort to beat back a revanchist right. And his name has become a synonym for a well-worn anti-Semitic canard: the idea that Jews are malevolent fomenters of social dissent, agitators slyly funding and masterminding protest, seeking to undermine a white, Christian social order. It is a canard that resonates not just in European history, where the deadly consequences of anti-Semitic conspiracies are well-known, but throughout American history, and its renewed form draws on a long tradition of American anti-Semitism.

Journalists who post simple, factual rebuttals to anti-Semitic conspiracies ignore their radical potency. The notion that “the Jew” — whether it is Soros or a more nebulous conspiracy — is behind expressions of social discontent serves as an explanation that casts protest as inherently “other,” caused by sinister forces that transcend ideological disagreement or authentic upset, and thus renders opposition inherently illegitimate. These anti-Semitic canards render Jews in America a permanently placeless “other,” perennially out to subvert the country they reside in.

The idea that Jews are the malevolent *eminence grise* behind any upwelling of discontent is hardly new; in fact, it is not even new in the modern United States. Timothy McVeigh, a white nationalist terrorist who killed 168 in the infamous 1995 Oklahoma City bombing, drew much of his ideology from a 1978 white nationalist novel titled “The Turner Diaries.” The book, which [prosecutors claimed helped inspire McVeigh](#), casts Jews as agents of social dissent in the civil rights era, upending an order in which black Americans had deferred naturally to whites. The book decries “the unique historical role of the Jews as the ferment of decomposition of races and civilizations”; accuses Jews of plotting to “manipulate and exploit the entire racial ‘equality’ movement for their own ends”; and ultimately calls for violence against Jews, stating, “Your day is coming, Jews, your day is coming!”

While McVeigh's ideological influences illustrate the potency of anti-Semitism as a political force on the American right, it dates back far longer. Anti-Jewish sentiment rose in the United States in the 1920s and 1930s, egged on by such figures as Henry Ford and radio broadcaster Father Charles Coughlin, who crudely postulated that a communist threat to the United States was being controlled and catalyzed by Jewish agents.

But perhaps the greatest rhetorical use of the Jewish "threat" was made by segregationists in the midcentury South, asserting that the civil rights movement of that era was nothing less than a wholesale Jewish plot to destroy the country.

In "The Rabble Rousers: The American Far Right and the Civil Rights Era," historian Clive Webb details the degree to which American Jews were blamed for fomenting the desire for social change in the form of racial integration. Webb describes the views of John Kasper, a Ku Klux Klan member and influential segregationist who ran a racist newspaper in the 1950s.

"According to Kasper, the individuals, organizations and institutions that promoted racial integration were either Jewish or under the financial and political control of Jews," Webb writes. "The NAACP, he insisted, did not represent the opinion of African Americans, most of whom accepted segregation of the natural social order, but rather acted on the instructions of its Jewish paymasters." A local police officer investigating a 1960 synagogue bombing in Gadsden, Ala., was quoted by the Jewish Telegraphic Agency [as stating](#), "You Jews brought it on yourselves by encouraging the Negroes to integrate." Hatred of Jews among racists extended well beyond the height of the civil rights movement. J.B. Stoner ran for the U.S. Senate in Georgia on a platform of opposition to both black people and Jews in 1972 and decried serpentine, sneaky Jewish influence by calling Jews "vipers of hell." To a B'nai B'rith leader, the 30,000 votes cast for Stoner, who finished fifth in Georgia's Democratic primary, illustrated "how much raw bigotry still exists in our nation."

Soros has been the target of anti-Semitism more globally, too. In March, far-right Hungarian leader Viktor Orbán gave a Jew-baiting speech denouncing Soros and his Open Society Foundations as "crafty" and someone who "speculates with money." Orbán said Soros was "not national but international." This rhetoric echoed in a speech [in which Trump declared](#) that he was a "nationalist," not a "globalist" — delivered on the same day Soros received a mail bomb. The term "globalist" is frequently used as a euphemism for Jew, including by far-right news site Breitbart, which surrounds Jewish former Trump economic adviser Gary Cohn's name with globe emoji, for "globalist." The notion of Jews as internationally beholden to some Jewish conspiracy and its goals, rather than serving as loyal subjects of their home countries, dates back at least to a 1920s pamphlet, "The International Jew," published by Henry Ford. Nazi-era political cartoons depicted the Jew as an octopus, encircling the world with its many devious tentacles, exerting an irresistible, slimy control.

Journalists who cover the contretemps around Soros today — and in particular, those responsible for

providing explanation and context for Republican remarks around him — must not shy from the anti-Semitism inherent in right-wing attacks on the philanthropist. It's not even hidden, at least not to the people hearing the dog-whistle: Searching "Soros" on Twitter or Facebook brings up conspiracy theories ranging from the subtly expressed to the downright deranged. Soros is merely the latest Jew whose public perception has been distorted by anti-Semites. While researching this article, I searched the term "antisemitism in the civil rights movement." Google's auto-complete response filled in the rest: "rothschild funded civil rights movement," it spat forth, an algorithm blossoming immediately with the conspiracy it had taken half a century to sow.

High-tech manifestations of anti-Semitism on social media belie the crude and ancient nature of the hatred. Anti-Semitism is a useful way to blame a hawk-faced, devious "other" for the rents in the social fabric that appear in tumultuous times. The attack is two-pronged: It renders authentic protest illegitimate, and it renders a tiny religious minority a seeking, devious force, whose vile otherness precludes tolerance. This kind of conspiracy theory is slick and burrowing, and it resists logic, casting itself as an undeniable truth. And it draws on a long history, in this country and elsewhere — one with the potential for incendiary violence in its clenched fist.

Read more:

[Why do anti-Semites hate Jews? Because we Jews can fight them.](#)

[Anti-Semitism doesn't bother Benjamin Netanyahu if it comes from his allies](#)

[How to tell when criticism of Israel is actually anti-Semitism](#)

Talia Lavin

Talia Lavin is a writer and researcher based in Brooklyn. Follow 
