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American Flat Earth Theory: Anti-Intellectualism, Fundamentalism and Conspiracy Theory

By  
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December 2017

On the evening before the 2016 United States (U.S.) presidential election, the majority of pollsters and experts predicted Trump would lose. The news media along with most intellectuals seemed confident that no one with Trump's record of wild conspiracy theorizing and disconnection from established facts could ever become president. Trump had repeatedly pushed conspiracy theories with little or no evidence and shown a disregard for expert opinion or evidence.<sup>1</sup> Trump's victory was a sign that there was a large segment of the U.S. population that wholly agreed with Trump's anti-intellectual stance. These Americans also believed in conspiracies by scientists, academics, and journalists to misrepresent the facts. Trump and his supporters shared the belief that the stories pitched from colleges and newsstands were lies.<sup>2</sup> However now Trump may have appeared, his constant conspiracy rhetoric, disregard for experts and facts diverges from previous figures only in magnitude and success. These views are not new, but Trump's victory changed the landscape of public discourse revealing and encouraging ideologies that were thought extinct. Trump's election has encouraged groups that reject the accepted facts of the contemporary world. One of the most extreme and strange is the Flat Earth movement.

Americans have a long tradition of anti-intellectualism and conspiracies real or imagined are a core part of how we view the world. A brief list of contemporary fact questioner's active in America include: New Earth Creationists, moon landing deniers, Kennedy assassination theorists, anti-vaccine activists, Truthers (9/11 conspiracy), Birthers (Obama a Muslim and or not an American). The fringe cousins Flat Earthers believe many of these along with their own unique cosmology. Every one of which from the only mildly implausible ideas like a conspiracy

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<sup>1</sup> Michael D'Antonio, "Reality Bites Trump," CNN, 9 Nov 2017, Accessed, 14 Nov 2017, <http://www.cnn.com/2017/11/08/opinions/trump-reality-opinion-dantonio/index.html>.

<sup>2</sup> Kurt Anderson, "How America Lost its Mind.," *The Atlantic*, September 2017, accessed 5 October 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2017/09/how-america-lost-its-mind/534231/>.

assassinating a sitting president to the extreme of Flat Earth believers see themselves as crusaders for truth in a murky dangerous world. Though anti-intellectualism is not always linked to conspiracy thinking, conspiracy theory involves a degree of distrust in established facts and the experts who purvey them.

Flat Earther's ideas seem impossible or even comical. However, every kind of anti-intellectual and conspiracy thinking has similar line of thought, "The established facts are wrong, and or someone is lying about them." Flat Earthers are not so different than vaccine skeptics or the widespread rural conservative idea that college intellectuals, as agents of a liberal agenda, are not to be trusted. The flourishing of extreme beliefs tells us that the environment of thought will allow it and is good evidence that while many American's would snicker at the conclusions of any one group some of the basis for doubt in the established ideas of the world is widespread. Flat Earth is a small, strange, piece of a wide ranging anti-intellectualism and fundamentalism in American society.

### **The Origin of Modern Flat Earth Theory**

For more than two thousand years scholars throughout the western world have concurred that the Earth was a globe. The medieval world adhered to the cosmology of Aristotle and Ptolemy, believing the spherical earth sat immobile at the center of the Universe.<sup>3</sup> In the sixteenth century, Nicholas Copernicus theorized that the Sun was the center with the planets orbiting it in perfect circles. Over time this view has been modified by other astronomers, like Galileo Galilei, Johannes Kepler, and Isaac Newton, which has led to the modern cosmological

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<sup>3</sup> Jeffery Burton Russel, *Inventing the Flat Earth: Columbus and Modern Historians*. (New York: Praeger, 1991), 14-26.

model.<sup>4</sup> In modern theory the Sun is one star of many and is more than a hundred times larger than our planet. Earth's orbit is elliptical, not circular, held in rotation by the force of gravity, a universal attraction between all mass in the universe. Earth's orbits keeps it an average distance of ninety-two million miles from the sun.<sup>5</sup>

In stark contrast to modern astronomy Flat Earth Theory places the Earth back at the center of the Universe. The theory proposes that the Earth is flat and bounded by an impassible ice wall, Antarctica, whose true dimensions are unknown. Flat Earth theorists have a diverse set of ideas. They are divided on the existence of gravity, the final dimensions of the Earth, and other cosmological details. Gravity is sometimes attributed to a continuous acceleration upwards of the entire Earth, like being in an elevator traveling up, or simply not explained. In Flat Earth all other astronomical bodies, are much smaller than the earth and closer. The sun and moon are presented as spotlights.<sup>6</sup>

There is a pervasive modern myth that medieval intellectuals, particularly priests, believed the world was flat. This theory can be traced most directly to Washington Irving's 1828 publication of *History of the Life and Voyages of Christopher Columbus*.<sup>7</sup> Irving portrays Columbus arguing against dogmatic priests trapped in orthodoxy.<sup>8</sup> This narrative of modern reason overcoming medieval religious ignorance was supported by some historians, who portrayed religion and science, in constant conflict throughout history. By the early twentieth

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<sup>4</sup> Allan Chapman, *Gods in the sky: astronomy, religion and culture from the ancients to the renaissance*. (London: Channel 4, 2002), 249-280.

<sup>5</sup> A description of modern scientific cosmology is available in modern astronomy textbooks. Or on Wikipedia.

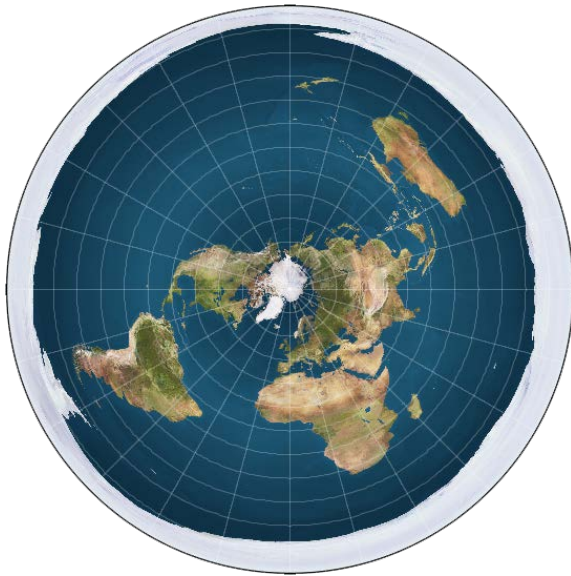
<sup>6</sup> See Flat Earth Wikipedia or IFERS website for various flat earth models.

[https://wiki.tfes.org/The\\_Flat\\_Earth\\_Wiki/](https://wiki.tfes.org/The_Flat_Earth_Wiki/) <https://www.tfes.org/>

<sup>7</sup>Russel, *Inventing the Flat Earth*, 54-55.

<sup>8</sup>Washington Irving, *History of the Life and Voyages of Christopher Columbus*. (London: John Murray, 1828) 117-131.

century credible scholarly work had discredited the Flat Error.<sup>9</sup> Yet the idea has entrenched in the popular imagination; it remains even today.



<sup>10</sup>A Diagram of the Flat Earth

Modern Flat Earth Theory can be traced directly to the nineteenth century theorist Samuel Birley Rowbotham. Rowbotham’s work remains central to Flat Earth Theory; his experiments are still presented on the International Flat Earth Societies website as key evidence for a Flat Earth.<sup>11</sup> He was a staunch biblical literalist and socialist reformer who saw the Bible as a Flat Earth document and had little respect for the conclusions of “elitist” science. While serving as the leader of a socialist commune in the 1830s he conducted his own experiments to support his scriptural conclusions.<sup>12</sup> During his following quest to prove the world flat Rowbotham went by the pseudonym Parallax, under which he both lectured and published.

<sup>9</sup> Russell, Jeffrey Burton. *Inventing the Flat Earth: Columbus and modern historians*. (New York: Praeger, 1997), 69-70.

<sup>10</sup> “Frequently Asked Questions,” The Flat Earth Wikipedia, The International Flat Earth Society, Accessed 12 November, 2017, [https://wiki.tfes.org/Frequently\\_Asked\\_Questions](https://wiki.tfes.org/Frequently_Asked_Questions).

<sup>11</sup> “Experimental Evidence,” The Flat Earth Wikipedia, The International Flat Earth Society. Accessed 10 November 2017, <https://www.theflatearthsociety.org/tiki/tiki-index.php?page=Experimental+Evidence/>.

<sup>12</sup> Christine Garwood, *Flat Earth: The History of an infamous idea*. (New York: St. Martin’s Press 2007), 36-37.

Rowbotham lectured at public halls throughout England explaining his Flat Earth model and evidence. As he gained attention he also published articles in local papers and periodicals. He attacked the basis and validity of modern science itself, not just the conclusions of geography and astronomy. Maintaining that the complex inaccessibility of modern science was erroneous, Rowbotham presented his evidence and conclusions as part of a common-sense approach requiring no special equipment or expertise. Even while continuously attacking the basis and conclusions of science he maintained an aura of gentility never accusing scientists of fraud or attacking them personally.<sup>13</sup> He published, *Zetetic Astronomy: Earth not A Globe*, where he presented the core of his arguments that has formed the basis for Flat Earth Theory to this day.

In the opening of *Zetetic Astronomy* Rowbotham attacked the use of theories and hypotheses as guesswork “oppressive to reasoning” and proposes a new “Zetetic” method to replace science. He believed that the scientific process became a show where evidence was collected only to support the already believed theories of the time such as gravity and the globe shape. He described this “Zetetic” method as,

Let the method of inquiry—the “Zetetic” process be exclusively adopted—experiment tried and facts collected—not such only as corroborate an already existing state of mind, but of every kind and form bearing on the subject, before a conclusion is drawn, or a conviction affirmed.<sup>14</sup>

Which does not sound altogether problematic, however modern historians of science such as Thomas Kuhn have shown that existing paradigms, pre-existing ideas, are essential to the experimental process.<sup>15</sup> It is impossible for any person to perform an experiment without their own personal prejudice and predispositions. Rowbotham’s objection to scientific “theories” as

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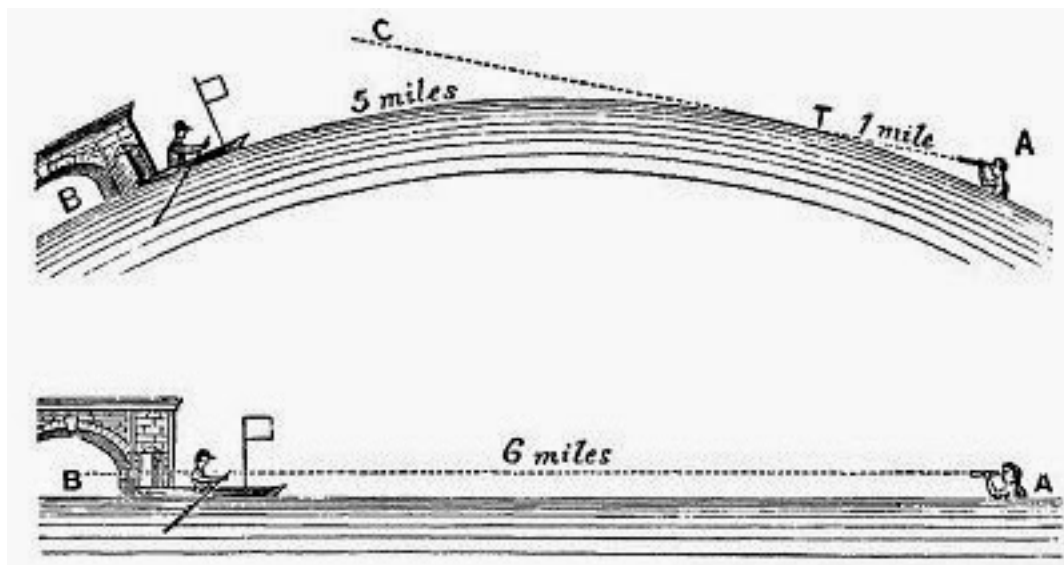
<sup>13</sup> Garwood, *Flat Earth*, 50-55.

<sup>14</sup> Samuel Rowbotham, [Parallax], *Zetetic Astronomy: The Earth Not A Globe* (London: Simpkin, Marshal and Co: 1865), 3.

<sup>15</sup> Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, (University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 2012), 11-64.

unproven guesses have resonated with anti-intellectual American's. It is identical to the common statement that evolution is “just a theory,” and thus can be ignored.

Rowbotham's experimental evidence focused on easily describable proofs. The majority of these are experiments were on water. On a globe, over a given distance, there must be a corresponding vertical change due to the curve. Rowbotham claimed to have demonstrated irrevocably that water was not convex. His most famous experiment, on the Bedford canal in England, consisted of viewing a flag set at five feet in a boat from the surface of the canal at a distance of six miles, well beyond what is possible on a globe. Rowbotham claimed all his observations could only be explained if the Earth was a flat surface.<sup>16</sup> Unsurprisingly, when repeated, only Flat Earther's confirmed his results.



<sup>17</sup> The Bedford Level Experiment

The remainder of the book was split between describing Flat Earth cosmology and attempts to refute common “proofs of the Earth's rotundity.” He theorized how phenomenon

<sup>16</sup> Rowbotham, *Zetetic Astronomy*, 6.

<sup>17</sup> Rowbotham, *Zetetic Astronomy*, 9-10.



such as eclipses, seasons, and circumnavigation could occur on a Flat Earth. Rowbotham's alternatives seemed plausible however detailed investigation reveals that his ideas do not fit observed facts.<sup>18</sup> The simplest example of this is circumnavigation, Rowbotham claimed a boat could sail around in a circle on a flat disc, possible but the times of navigation would be vastly longer and when considered make Rowbotham's position untenable. Again, Rowbotham's pattern of providing a counter argument while ignoring relevant facts is reflected directly in American anti-intellectual circles. "Isn't it possible..." has been invoked repeatedly by anti-vaccine activists, creationists and conspiracy theorists throughout US history.

In his conclusion Rowbotham unleashed a biblical tirade. He attacked any metaphorical interpretation of the Bible and claimed it was a source of scientific knowledge: "To say that the Scripture was not intended to teach science truthfully is, in substance, to declare that God himself has stated, and commissioned His prophets to teach things which are utterly false."<sup>19</sup> He stated that every section of the Bible is literally true and claimed that when his Flat Earth truth is accepted it will "destroy the vain and flimsy structures of human ingenuity, and turn the hearts of philosophers and all grades of men of learning to the wisdom and consistency and demonstrable truths contained in the 'Word of God' the scriptures."<sup>20</sup> Rowbotham's rhetoric is identical to American fundamentalist views unchanged since he was alive, a modern example creationist groups such as Ken Hamm's Answers in Genesis presenting the book of Genesis as a literal history.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Rowbotham, *Zetetic Astronomy*, 94-110.

<sup>19</sup> Rowbotham, *Zetetic Astronomy*, 248.

<sup>20</sup> Rowbotham, *Zetetic Astronomy*, 251.

<sup>21</sup> Bodie Hodge, "Why Do You Take The Bible Literally." Answers in Genesis. Jan. 13 2006. Accessed Dec. 4 2017, <https://answersingenesis.org/bible-questions/why-do-you-take-the-bible-literally/>.

## The Flat Earth Comes to America

While the Flat Earth idea continued in England it found even more fertile ground across the Atlantic. William Carpenter, one of Rowbotham's followers, emigrated to Baltimore in 1879 where he began teaching, publishing and lecturing on Flat Earth Theory. Rowbotham's idea had preceded Carpenter, he found likeminded people already living around the nation arguing and teaching Flat Earth doctrine.<sup>22</sup> It was Carpenters work that first gained Flat Earth Theory wide notoriety especially his publication *100 Proof's the Earth is not a Globe*, which is extremely simple to read, accessible, and very striking. It presents Flat Earth arguments in short compact statements. Many of his arguments seem to make sense but logically break down when examined. As an example, Carpenter's sixty second proof simplifying and repeating Rowbotham's argument about circumnavigation reads,

It is commonly asserted that "the Earth must be a globe because people have sailed around it." Now, since this implies that we can sail round nothing unless it is a globe, and the fact is well known that we can sail round the Earth as a place, the assertion is ridiculous, and we have another proof that Earth is not a globe.<sup>23</sup>

Carpenter's initial point is sound, there is a possible route of circumnavigation. However his conclusion that this proves the Earth is not a globe does not follow since one can circumnavigate a globe as well. Throughout his work Carpenter calls upon the common sense of man over scientific complexity and set the stage for much of American Flat Earth thought. It also reveals one of the great appeals of anti-intellectualism the universal desire to see oneself as knowledgeable. Intellectuals all too often challenge this by revealing our ignorance.<sup>24</sup> When the answers are simple, quick, and easy it removes the need for intellectuals. Carpenter died in

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<sup>22</sup> Garwood, *Flat Earth*, 145,160.

<sup>23</sup> William Carpenter, *100 Proofs That the Earth is not A Globe*. (Self-Published. Baltimore 1885).

<sup>24</sup> Tom Nichols, *The Death of Expertise*, (Oxford University Press. New York 2017), 16.

1896, Flat Earth proselytizing continued in America and would gain a standard bearer two decades later in Wilbur Glenn Voliva and a center in the town of Zion, Illinois, the first Flat Earth community in American history.

### **Zion, A Bible Town Where the Earth was Flat**

The town of Zion Illinois was founded by a popular faith healer and preacher Alexander Dowie. Believing that Christians could not lead good, honest lives surrounded by the evils of modern society, Dowie, invested the wealth of his popular ministry in a plot of land near Chicago and built a town there owned by his Christian Catholic Church (CCC), which despite the name was entirely protestant. Zion industries, a manufacturing company owned by the church which produced some of the earliest fig bars, was highly successful, it utilized a large pool of willing hard workers to grow and prosper. Dowie emboldened by succes began to spend lavishly both on himself and on attempts to build his church into a world religion. His efforts bankrupted the city. Dowie became ill in 1906 and asked Wilbur Glenn Voliva, who ran the CCC branch in Australia, to return to oversee Zion. When Voliva arrived with the support of the church elders he deposed Dowie and set himself as Head Overseer of Zion .<sup>25</sup>

Zion became known nationally for restrictive moral codes. The CCC banned modern medicine, evolution, immodest dress, smoking and other “immoral” activities. Voliva went further. Morality was not the only problem Voliva had with the modern world. He was a strict literalist Christian fundamentalist who saw modern science and religion in conflict. Voliva set himself apart from other fundamentalists of his day by extending this to the shape of the Earth.

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<sup>25</sup> Garwood, *Flat Earth*, 190-193.

Billboards presenting Voliva's views were seen all around Zion, a trend fundamentalists continue to this day with biblical truth billboards around the nation.



Flat Earth Billboard from Zion<sup>26</sup> and Modern Anti-Evolution Billboard<sup>27</sup>

Under Voliva's leadership Zion became the first Flat Earth community in America. He banned globes in Zion and had students instructed in his flat Earth model.<sup>28</sup> In the church newspaper *Leaves of Healing* he published a special sixty-four-page edition detailing his flat Earth views. In terms of experimental evidence Voliva added nothing new to Flat Earth Theory sticking closely Rowbotham, and Carpenter's ideas. He contended that numerous lakes are completely flat which can be seen easily by looking across them. The essence of Voliva's real argument was biblical. He quoted biblical passages with two themes, the Earth being immovable<sup>29</sup> and having corners.<sup>30</sup> Many theologians have categorically rejected the argument that the Bible is a Flat Earth document. The title of the special issue describes Voliva's Flat Earth views and their basis perfectly, "Which Will You Accept? The Bible, the Inspired Word of

<sup>26</sup> Retrieved from Free To Find Truth Blog, Jan 15, 2016. Retrieved Dec. 4, 2017. <http://freetofindtruth.blogspot.com/2016/01/wilbur-glenn-voliva-zion-city-flat.html>.

<sup>27</sup> Retrieved from Reddit [https://www.reddit.com/r/atheism/comments/2fb6k8/new\\_antievolution\\_billboards\\_all\\_over\\_busy\\_i75/](https://www.reddit.com/r/atheism/comments/2fb6k8/new_antievolution_billboards_all_over_busy_i75/).

<sup>28</sup> Garwood, *Flat Earth*, 210.

<sup>29</sup> Psalm 93:1, Psalm 96:10, 1 Chronicles 16:30 Earth Unmovable.

<sup>30</sup> Revelations 7:1, Revelations 20:8 The Earth having corners.

God or the Infidel Theories of Modern Astronomers.”<sup>31</sup> Even a brief examination reveals that Voliva felt the Bible trumped evidence and he had little interest in arguing the merits of science.

Voliva saw the spiritual conflict between science and religion as nothing short of the battle against the devil. His strict biblical literalism made Voliva, in modern terms, a strict new earth creationist, anti-evolutionist, anti-intellectual, and Flat Earther. Voliva spent much of his life attacking what he called the big “three evils”: Darwinism, modern astronomy, and higher criticism.<sup>32</sup> Both modern sciences contradict the biblical origin story and biblical scholarship threatens any literal biblical interpretation. His completely hard line stance placed Voliva at odds even with other fundamentalists, who from his time on have been focused on being anti-evolution. Voliva embraced this reputation saying he was, “the only true fundamentalist in America,” claiming to be more true to the Bible.<sup>33</sup>

Voliva was uninterested in debating or arguing evidence for what he saw as biblically proven. When interviewed about his flat earth beliefs in 1928, Voliva replied, “I know the earth is flat, so why should I bother about demonstrating it.”<sup>34</sup> To reach people he had *Carpenters 100 Proofs* reprinted along with his own special *Leaves of Healing* issue. Though uninterested in debating the merits of his proof Voliva did recognize the need to present a model to replace the conventional globe he denied. He lectured on his disc model of the Flat Earth, including a massive ice wall that surrounded the known world. Voliva even offered a \$5,000 prize to anyone who could prove to him the world was round.<sup>35</sup> To continue spreading his controversial views

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<sup>31</sup> Wilbur Glenn Voliva, *Leaves of Healing*, (Zion Illinois) May 1930.

<sup>32</sup> Voliva, *Leaves of Healing*, May 1930 131-159.

<sup>33</sup> Garwood, *Flat Earth*, 208.

<sup>34</sup> “‘Prophet’ Voliva’s Peculiar test to prove the Earth is Flat”, *Ogden Examiner*, Utah March 4, 1928 accessed 1 October 2017, [www.newspaper.com](http://www.newspaper.com).

<sup>35</sup> Jay Earle Miller, “\$5000 for Proving the Earth a Glove,” *Modern Mechanix*, October 1931, accessed Oct. 1 2017, <http://blog.modernmechanix.com/5000-for-proving-the-earth-is-a-globe/>.

he bought a radio transmitter and set up a station in Zion. Radio has since been a powerful tool for anyone wanting to spread controversial ideas. It is a perfect platform since the broadcaster controls both who speaks and how they are presented.

As an anti-intellectual Voliva took an absolute stance. He simply thought scientists and other intellectuals were completely wrong. He was totally uninterested in the evidence they gathered because in his eyes any evidence that contradicted Biblical authority was obviously false. His complete disregard for intellectuals, particularly scientists, including essentially any of their conclusions went much farther than Rowbotham, Carpenter, or any of the Flat Earth Theorists before him. Voliva set out his simple proofs, often completely biblical and dismissed any evidence to the contrary. He did not bother debating science directly because to him it was non-credible. He already had a devoted, following, in the people of the CCC. He used his controversial beliefs to maintain media attention for himself and Zion. Convinced he was correct Voliva never seemed troubled by his messages lack of mainstream approval.

Zion's fortunes changed, the Great Depression led to the decline of Zion industry's fortunes, and over time the church lost control of the town. By 1935 the citizens of Zion elected leaders who reversed Voliva's Flat Earth policies. Voliva would see a giant symbol of the infidel modern astronomy, a massive globe, in the center of Zion. As Voliva's health faded he began to spend less and less time in Zion. Semi-retired in Florida Voliva died in 1942.<sup>36</sup> The Flat Earth idea remained with a few scattered believers but lacked any kind of central organization or visible spokesperson.

### **The International Flat Earth Society**

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<sup>36</sup> Garwood, *Flat Earth*, 218.

The next voice for the Flat Earth movement to emerge in the United States was Charles K. Johnson. In 1971, he obtained part of the library of Daniel Shenton, who had headed a British Flat Earth society, from Shenton's widow. The nominal head of the British society after Shenton's death, Ellis Hillman, lectured on Flat Earth as a curiosity but did not himself believe the world was flat. Johnson, who had corresponded with Shenton, and was a believer, thought Hillman shouldn't be allowed to represent the Flat Earth movement and felt the need to carry on Shenton's work. In 1971, Johnson founded the International Flat Earth Society of America (IFES), incorporating in California, and served as its president until his death in 2001.<sup>37</sup>

Johnson was joined by his wife Marjory, the society's secretary, and together stood against the ignorance they saw in the modern world. Johnson retired from his work as an airplane mechanic to lead the Flat Earth crusade. Marjory, a native Australian was quite offended that people referred to her home as "Down Under" and once swore in an affidavit that she had "never hung from her feet" under the globe.<sup>38</sup> According to Garwood, "Johnson evidently garnered a sense of personal identity and framework of meaning from his flat-earth quest and consequently transformed his life to clear the way for his new role."<sup>39</sup> In many ways Johnson's work was a marriage of the methods of Rowbotham's simple experimental evidence with Voliva's ardent fundamentalism. In contrast to his predecessors Johnson brought conspiracy theory to the center of his Flat Earth discussion. Though he often quoted the Bible and clearly believed it was a literal source of truth, he also attempted to use more secular information to prove his world view including wide ranging attempts to discredit the globe theory.

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<sup>37</sup> Garwood, *Flat Earth*, 321-322.

<sup>38</sup> Quoted in Garwood, *Flat Earth*. 324.

<sup>39</sup> Garwood, *Flat Earth*, 321.

Johnson's chosen instrument for disseminating the truth was the regular production of *The Flat Earth News*, a quarterly newsletter available to associate members for ten dollars a year. He presents experimental descriptions with a focus on "common sense," returning repeatedly to non-convex water proofs especially in lakes. He also wrote, or published from others, a number of articles attempting to disprove other concepts of modern science, especially gravity, which he believed was ridiculous. Johnson attempted to discredit scientists as foolish, blind followers of a dogmatic faith in past theories and when this wasn't enough he presented them as insane and or as drug users. Johnson advocated conspiracy theories to explain the "false" evidence depicting the spherical world. Johnson presented himself and the IFES as the last bastion of calm reason in an insane world.<sup>40</sup>

Johnson's need to explicitly call out a global conspiracy came from the change in available information over time. Though the globe theory had been generally uncontested for almost two thousand years by the 1970's the availability of first hand evidence for everyone which did not involve any kind of math or complex understanding, was new. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century Rowbotham could point to the thinking of a few experts and try to sway public opinion that these experts were mistaken, even into Voliva's there was little easily available first-hand evidence of the planets shape. As space travel became a reality and pictures of the Earth become commonplace trying to argue that the world was flat took on a whole new dimension. Almost every person in America had seen the moon landing and at least one picture of the Earth from

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<sup>40</sup> An Archive of the Flat Earth news is available on the International Flat Earth Society website. Johnson, Charles. Flat Earth News. <https://www.tfes.org/library.php>.

<sup>40</sup> Charles K. Johnson, *Flat Earth News*, March 1979, 1-3. The Article titles of the Flat Earth News are confusing and sometimes unclear so I have omitted them when they were excessive or unclear.



space. The ubiquity of images, particularly photographs from manned space flights, required Flat Earth theorists to either admit they were wrong or declare the images a lie.

Johnson's experimental proofs are almost exact copies of Rowbotham and other early Zetetic experimenters. In a typical proof in the March 1979 issue of *Flat Earth News*, he demonstrates that the sea of Mecca, i.e. the Salton Sea, in Mecca California is perfectly flat. In the article Johnson states,

If earth was a globe planet as claimed by the cunning devisers of Fables, this this SEA would have 66 FEET of "curve" across the width and over 660 FEET of "curve" in the length! Quite a "HUMP" would exist in either direction! As you can see in the picture we took each scene showing miles of water.... The water is FLAT, no HUMP.<sup>41</sup>

Johnson's experimental evidence was essentially a return to Rowbotham's "water is flat." argument. Alongside his own observations he reprinted portions of earlier Flat Earth proponents including Rowbotham, Carpenter, and Voliva. He knew the IFES lacked credibility in many eyes and believed claiming membership in a long tradition would improve that credibility. With confidence, Johnson claimed the origin of the IFES lay with Moses and included George Washington, Charles Lindbergh, and Christopher Columbus as Flat Earth believers. Through all of Johnson's articles he makes no clear distinction between evidence and his own opinion.

As with any believer in a worldwide conspiracy. The exact nature of the conspiracy Johnson believed in is a little unclear. In fairness, it would be hard or even impossible to know exactly the motivation of a secret group without being a member. In the March 1980 issue of the *Flat Earth News*, Johnson explained how Nikita Khrushchev, who is both the antichrist and the father of NASA, made a deal with John F. Kennedy, for the US to make the moon landing "movie" and in exchange Russia received control of Cuba. The "space hoax," apparently written

by Arthur C. Clark and fabricated at NASA, was according to Johnson conducted purely to shore up the flagging round Earth theory with the express purpose of destroying the world's religions.

<sup>42</sup> With Johnson's conspiracy claim, space travel was a hoax and any accompanying satellite photos of Earth could be ignored.

Confronted with abundant Globe evidence Johnson attacked the character and reputation of the scientists responsible. Copernicus, who Johnson referred to as "Copernicious", and Galileo were hallucinating drug addled junkies. He called the heliocentric theory the "Copernicious dope fiend dream,"<sup>43</sup> and accused scientists, particularly Newton, of being dogmatic priests uninterested in reason and instead presented them as purveyors of clever lies trying to cover incorrect assumptions. In response to the evidence these scientists presented he accused them of shrouding the reasonable demands of truth seekers in "mathematical jargon."<sup>44</sup> Johnson, who had once repaired aircraft, had little respect for scientists or their conclusions. But even after lumping together political authority from across the world with the entire intellectual establishment in a massive shadowy conspiracy, Johnson was not finished. The scope of those who Johnson considered part of the conspiracy seemed endless. Fellow Christians and even other fundamentalists with less extreme views than Johnson were part of the problem in his eyes.

Johnson repeatedly declared that no real Christian could embrace the "grease ball" model of the world. The "grease ball" term was Johnson's own creation, after rejecting gravity Johnson surmised that if the world was a globe everyone would fall off. He often vitriolically attacked Jews, Baptists, and any other religious group who did not see the obvious wisdom in the flat Earth model. Seeming unable to come to terms with who exactly was part of the conspiracy he

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<sup>42</sup> Johnson, *Flat Earth News*, March 1980, 1.

<sup>43</sup> Johnson, *Flat Earth News*, Dec 1980, 1.

<sup>44</sup> Johnson, "Eclipses," *Flat Earth News*, Sep 1979, 3.

constantly added new threats to the safety and sanity of the world. In the June 1980 issue of FEN, he refers to the “CRAZED SATANIC DEMENETED DOGMA OF JEWISH CHRISTIAN SCIENCE.”<sup>45</sup> Throughout his first decade of publishing Johnson presents arguably the most inclusive possible conspiracy group in human history including: Democrats, sodomites, lesbians, Harvard, the NAACP, masturbators, and the dope seller’s union.

Continuing a tradition started by Rowbotham, Johnson objected to the scientific use of terms like theory, law, and hypothesis. In the March 1978 issue Johnson’s article “Gravitation Hocus Pocus,” in typical all caps, he explains his problem about Newton’s first law of motion “WE HAVE NO PROOF AND IN THE NATURE OF THINGS CAN NEVER GET ONE.”<sup>46</sup> In a way Johnson’s complaint makes sense, a scientific law is precisely when experimental evidence has repeatedly shown something to be true but the reason is unknown. As an airplane mechanic Johnson was well aware that aircraft designed based upon principles derived from science rooted in Newton’s laws worked perfectly well. Johnson admitted Newton’s work explained observable phenomenon but could not accept truth without a clear underlying understanding. Similarly, he saw theories, as Rowbotham had, as guesses which functional or not could not be accepted as facts. Here we see Johnson repeating one of the most common misconceptions about science that a scientific theory is a guess not a rigorously verified explanation that has been checked repeatedly against available evidence.

Johnson published the *Flat Earth News* for almost two decades. The articles were a grab bag of conspiracy, flatness and horror at a world gone wrong, his tone, grammar, and focus in the articles is wild and at times almost deranged. Yet however strange Johnson’s work, it clearly

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<sup>45</sup> Johnson, *Flat Erath News*, June 1980, 6.

<sup>46</sup> Johnson, “Gravitation or Hocus Pocus,” *Flat Earth News*, March 1978, 2.

connected with some people. His distrust of intellectuals and wide net of guilty conspirators attracted a following. When he took on the mantle of leading the Flat Earth struggle in 1972 there were around two hundred members in Shenton's organization. After two decades in the mid-nineties two thousand people were associate members of the International Flat Earth Society.<sup>47</sup> Johnson always maintained there were many more Flat Earth believers afraid to openly embrace Flat Earth Theory. Though it is hard to tell for sure, it would be unfair to paint all of these members as insane or foolish, Johnson claimed his members were mostly professional men, the most represented group lawyers.<sup>48</sup> By all available indicators, Johnson's attempts to spread his belief were successful.

Johnson's Flat Earth crusade was separated from Voliva's by three decades. The two shared a common ideology both were anti-intellectual; and staunch fundamentalists. Johnson, however, had a distinct conspiracy mindset that Voliva lacked. Whatever else Voliva thought of scientists; wrong, foolish, wasting their lives complicating questions the Bible had already answered, he never accused large groups of people of colluding to cover up the truth he presented. Voliva even seemed to like scientists, once learning Albert Einstein was in New York while he was there he sent an assistant to challenge him to a friendly debate, he called Relativity "bunk" but seemed amused rather than hostile.<sup>49</sup> Conspiracy thought has never been a stranger to the US so this difference cannot be explained purely by a lack of exposure to Conspiracy thinking on Voliva's part.

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<sup>47</sup> Garwood, *Flat Earth*, 320.

<sup>48</sup> Garwood, *Flat Earth*, 327.

<sup>49</sup> Tom Pettey, "So's Your Old Relativity", *Cincinnati Enquirer*. March 5 1931. Accessed Oct. 1 2017, [www.newspaper.com/](http://www.newspaper.com/).

Charles K. Johnson died on March 19 of 2001. He had outlived his wife and closest Flat Earth companion by five years. A man of firm conviction he carried on his crusade to return the world to sanity. After his wife's death, he said, "It's very lonely without Marjory, but she wanted to keep the work going so I'm forcing myself to go on."<sup>50</sup> However strange the Johnsons ideas it is difficult not to admire their commitment and courage in the face of adversity. Further it is an example of the extreme lengths people will go to over time to defend their beliefs. The movement survived both Johnsons' deaths and continues to this day. Modern Flat Earth Theorists mostly operate online although localized groups also exist across the country.

By Johnson's day the core of anti-intellectualism had become much more generalized. The second Red Scare personalized by McCarthy's war against communists and fellow travelers, the term assigned to sympathizers who were not full members of the communist party, had caught hundreds of intellectuals in a dragnet. Mccarthy's crusade became a modern witch hunt and left an a lasting stain on intellectuals in the public imagination.<sup>51</sup> After Mccarthy the 1960's became an era of massive upheaval and new sources of doubt in the capabilities of the intellectual became common place. Though many remember the 60's as a politically one-sided decade, Susan Jacoby points out that, "the nation's education in the irrational, which often included attacks on irrationality itself, was being conducted from both left and right."<sup>52</sup> The fundamentalists had their own resurgence in the 1960's; a sort of counter-counterculture which also centered in the youth, exemplified in the Campus Crusade for Christ. Both groups had little

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<sup>50</sup> Quoted from Garwood, *Flat Earth*, 348: *Boston Globe*, 14 October 1996, 1.

<sup>51</sup> Hofstadter, *Anti-Intellectualism in American Society*, 3-5.

<sup>52</sup> Jacoby, *Age of American Unreason*, 134.

use for the intellectual elites “tired” modernism and represented a deepening anti-intellectualism that transcended political boundaries.<sup>53</sup>

### **Conspiracy and Anti-Intellectualism**

Despite near identical ideologies, Johnson and Voliva differed greatly in circumstance. Voliva was a powerful wealthy man as head of Zion industries he was a millionaire. As general overseer of the Zion church he was surrounded by people who looked to him for spiritual and personal guidance. In contrast Johnson and Marjory lived alone and isolated in the California desert. They had a very small fixed income and their pleading for members to pay dues in almost every issue of the FEN shows that they struggled to provide the means to continue their crusade. These represent two key factors that lead to people embracing conspiracy thinking feeling isolated and powerless. As academic psychologist, Rob Brotherton, explains, “Conspiracy theories seem to be popular among people suffering a surfeit of paranoia, as well as people who find themselves alienated from mainstream society and feeling like they are at the mercy of forces outside themselves.”<sup>54</sup> This explains why Johnson and Voliva would differ on conspiracy but does not explain why Johnson’s theorizing, which was often quite wild and baseless, did not prevent him from gathering a following. Johnson’s followers were not living alone in the desert with a meagre income.

This brings up a vital question, how accepted is conspiracy thinking and who are conspiracy theorists? A common image people form of a conspiracy theorists is a middle aged, male, unwashed, loner, who most people will assume differs from them ideologically. Joseph

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<sup>53</sup> Jacoby, *Age of American Unreason*, 131-162.

<sup>54</sup> Brotherton, Rob. *Suspicious minds: why we believe conspiracy theories*. (New York, NY: Bloomsbury Sigma, 2016), 109.

Uscinski and Joseph Parent, both political scientists at the University of Miami conducted a study to determine the scope of and participation in conspiracy theories. Their conclusions indicate conspiracy thinking is roughly equal across ethnicity, gender, and political spectrum.<sup>55</sup> In addition Education and wealth are inversely related to high tendencies to accept conspiracy thinking.<sup>56</sup> This relationship with education suggests a possible, but not conclusive, connection to anti-intellectualism.

Uscinski and Parent theorize that there is a “Conspiracy Dimension” which is an aspect of any persons character defines how likely that person is to accept conspiracy as an explanation for a phenomenon. They believe this trait is primarily driven by socialization and experience. This theory places every person on a spectrum of extremely likely to accept any given conspiracy theory to extremely unlikely to accept conspiracy as an explanation. The tipping factor is “political opportunity” or more simply targeting a group or person who opposes your viewpoint, in the U.S. political arena this would be represented by a tendency to believe in conspiracies led by members of the opposite political party.<sup>57</sup> In the case of a flat earth conspiracy theorist, like Johnson, whose views put him at odds with almost everyone, people he saw as targets of “political opportunity” were a diverse group.

The last piece of conspiracy theory’s power over public imagination is the sure knowledge that conspiracies have happened in the past, which leads to expecting they will and are happening again. In the case of any particular conspiracy this is particularly true if the past conspiracy is similar to the current possibility. For example the widespread belief that John F.

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<sup>55</sup> Joseph E. Uscinski, and Joseph M. Parent, *American conspiracy theories*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 89.

<sup>56</sup> Uscinski and Parent, *American conspiracy theories*, 86, 101.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.* 74-78.

Kennedy was killed as part of a conspiracy which was then covered up by the Warren commission. Brotherton notes that 84 real people's names have been listed as the real assassin with hundreds of co-conspirators including individuals or groups.<sup>58</sup> One obvious contributor to this theory's widespread appeal is the very real conspiracy plots to kill past presidents. Most famously Lincoln who was very conclusively killed by a conspiracy plot headed by John Wilkes Booth. However, something seems to set some conspiracy theories apart from others.

Some conspiracy theories defy reasonable belief. The sheer size of the conspiracy Johnson claims exists immediately seems unbelievable. It is not that the government, or a group of intellectuals, could not be part of a hidden plot. The Tuskegee experiments where scientists working for the government failed to treat African American's infected with syphilis even though they had a cure available is an example of a well-documented conspiracy involving both intellectuals and the government.<sup>59</sup> Reasonable people believe the government is hiding things today. Similarly, scientists somewhere are almost certainly secretly performing experiments that the public probably would not accept. Rather it is that Johnson's conspiracy is too big. A round Earth hoax would have to cross over every nation, university physicist and astronomer, airplane pilot and mariners. The list of required parties continues and defy belief though as the theorists would undoubtedly point out it does not make it "impossible." Belief in some conspiracies has much stronger ground, in some cases conspiracy is a plausible explanation.

In the end Uscinski, Parent, and Brotherton all share one conclusion. Conspiracy thinking is widespread even universal. Or as Brotherton puts it, "We're all conspiracy theorists,

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<sup>58</sup> Rob Brotherton, *Suspicious minds: why we believe conspiracy theories*. (New York, NY: Bloomsbury Sigma, 2016), 204.

<sup>59</sup> Uscinski, and Parent. *American Conspiracy Theories*, 32.



at least some of the time.”<sup>60</sup> Uscinski and Parent concur, “most of us believe in one conspiracy theory or another.”<sup>61</sup> Conspiracy thinking is widespread because people have good evidence to believe that conspiracies are real and should not be ignored. Neither Flat Earth believers or other conspiracy advocates can be dismissed out of hand.

Flat Earth belief cannot be attributed to primarily to conspiratorial thinking and the Flat Earther’s belief that space travel is a conspiracy does not separate them from other people except in specifics. To believe Flat Earth Theory, NASA and space travel must be a hoax, however it does not necessarily follow that the purpose is a global cover up of the shape of the earth, many Flat Earthers believe NASA is just a big embezzlement opportunity.<sup>62</sup> In a similar fashion while fundamentalism seems to be a constant part of Flat Earth theory it cannot be the primary motivator behind Flat Earth belief because many, in fact most, fundamentalists do not believe the world is flat. It is the depth of anti-intellectual views that leads fundamentalists to doubt scientific data and with enough doubt push people to believe the world is flat.

Individuals, even tiny groups can easily come about with extremely aberrant, crazy, beliefs. So long as they are alone there is no need to explain how or why people believe “crazy” things. Both Johnson and Voliva were however public men who addressed the average American and successfully gained a following. The anti-intellectualism that connected them was a value common to the society they addressed. Neither Voliva or Johnson invented distrusting intellectuals; they inherited a rich, storied American tradition of doubt in academic learning. Over the nation’s history this relationship has become increasingly complicated as the need for the expertise intellectuals provide has steadily increased over time. A culture of devoted

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<sup>60</sup> Brotherton, *Suspicious minds: why we believe conspiracy theories*, 107.

<sup>61</sup> Uscinski and Parent, *American Conspiracy Theories*, 32.

<sup>62</sup> “The Conspiracy,” *The Flat Earth Wiki*, Accessed November 15, 2017, [https://wiki.tfes.org/The\\_Conspiracy](https://wiki.tfes.org/The_Conspiracy)

egalitarianism, whose citizens are doubtful of intellectual claims to authority, has also contributed to this complex relationship.

Before the United States existed, the first intellectuals in the British North American colonies were religious. The early colonists were deeply committed to the value of education quickly established institutions of higher learning. Harvard College was founded in 1636 only eight years after the Massachusetts bay colony was established. It produced scholars who were rapidly recognized in Europe as well-educated men. Popular memory of these early Puritan intellectuals is tied to the Salem Witch Trials and the names Cotton and Increase Mather. The way they are remembered sets a tone common to American thinking about intellectuals. Richard Hofstadter claims,

Like most intellectual groups, the Puritan ministry had serious faults, and these became dangerous when the ministers wielded power. But what is significant for us-and it may serve as the paradigm of the situation of the intellectual in America- is that the Puritan ministry is popularly remembered almost entirely for its faults, even for faults for which it was less culpable than the community in which it lived.<sup>63</sup>

This is an example of the need to externalize blame, intellectuals either as leaders or advisors are a convenient place to lay culpability when problems occur.

The first intellectuals were religious and consequently the root of American anti-intellectualism has been religious. This conflict, through most of American history, is over the proper separation of reason and emotion in interpreting Christianity.<sup>64</sup> The question of the place of reason in religion is not limited to the United States, it exists in any religious community. As the US developed, a lack of established religious institutions hampered the proponents of a more scholarly centralized religion, giving anti-intellectual religion greater authority than places with

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<sup>63</sup> Hofstadter, *Anti-Intellectualism in American Society*, 59.

<sup>64</sup> Hofstadter, *Anti-Intellectualism in American Society*, 55.

more history. Susan Jacoby traces the first great national challenge to intellectualism in the 19th century Great Awakening. This struggle was between religion willing to accommodate new information and a more literal interpretation of faith. She explains how this has projected throughout American history,

Whatever the denomination or religion, fundamentalism has always been defined by its refusal to adapt to any secular knowledge that conflicts with its version of revealed religious truth; that refusal, in science and humanities, has been the most enduring and powerful strand in American anti-intellectualism.<sup>65</sup>

This central conflict between two ideas of religion predates any direct secular versus religious conflicts.

The most unifying issue for this fundamentalist objection was the theory of evolution. Fundamentalists objected on grounds of biblical literalism and even beyond literalist Christians there was an impression that evolution was designed to assault traditional values of what defined identity. This conflict started as soon as Darwin published his theory in 1859 and led to an immediate war amongst intellectuals but received little public attention initially. Instead, as the public lecture flourished as a method of entertainment and new media became available, primarily radio and magazines, information, ways of life, and ideas began to spread rapidly.<sup>66</sup> Rural children began hearing jazz from Chicago and eventually people taught evolution in schools.

It was not just Darwin but modernity itself and new ways of living that primarily rural fundamentalists saw invading their way of life. It would be hard to imagine silencing Chicago's radios but evolution was a single recognizable target which could be opposed and fundamentalists pushed back hard. Hofstadter sums their perspective, "A good deal of their

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<sup>65</sup> Jacoby, *The Age of American Unreason*, 39.

<sup>66</sup> Jacoby, *The Age of American Unreason*, 76.

ferocity is understandable if one realizes that they saw (and still see) the controversy as a defense of their homes and families.”<sup>67</sup> Discussing evolution it is important to remember that Flat Earther’s see their issue in exactly the same context, often seeming bemused that creationists don’t share a wider ranging condemnation of modern astronomy along with biology. Charles Johnson, seeing an obvious connection, tried to merge with the Creation Sciences Institute which was denied. In response Johnson declared them part of the problem; snakes in the grass claiming to be friends of religion.<sup>68</sup>

Evolution also brings up one of the great failings of American Intellectuals. Alongside the very real and evidence based biological ideas of Darwin and his era arose the much more questionable Social Darwinism. Now labeled a pseudoscience with no real evidence Social Darwinism claimed that natural selection could be applied directly to society implying that the wealthy and powerful had gotten there by being more “socially evolved.” This theory claimed the auspices of an objective science while being little more than an excuse for the wealthy, and elites, to claim they held power for logical scientific reasons. It was extremely popular among American intellectual elites, many of whom attacked detractors as anti-intellectual at the time.<sup>69</sup> Many anti-Darwinists also objected to Social Darwinism, Hofstadter points out that charitably it would probably have been hard for many American’s to understand the difference including fundamentalist leaders like Voliva.<sup>70</sup> Social Darwinism was profoundly anti-egalitarian and in addition to angering fundamentalists who claimed the Bible clearly stated all men were equal it

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<sup>67</sup> Hofstadter, *Anti-Intellectualism*, 126.

<sup>68</sup> Garwood, *Flat Earth*, 333-334.

<sup>69</sup> Jacoby, *Age of American Unreason*, 74-76

<sup>70</sup> Jacoby, *Age of American Unreason*, 79.

conflicted directly with one of America's great self-identifying beliefs, the exceptionalism of the average American.

This exceptionalism is tied directly to US citizen's identity. The common "everyman" of America has always been portrayed as extra ordinarily competent. It is an enduring myth that this is the source of America's wealth and world position. Americans have always nurtured a special respect for the common-sense wisdom of average citizens. Hofstadter saw a link between egalitarian politics and a distrust of specialization and experts as a defining part of American society.<sup>71</sup> The nature of an expert opinion is more informed by facts and information than the opinion of an everyday citizen. However, the everyman American exceptionalism implies that every opinion should be considered. This can lead to the idea that every opinion is equally valid a problematic contradiction with the nature of expertise. In order to utilize expertise we must recognize that experts have better informed opinions than ours.

The everyman myth has always existed however the growing complexity of the world requires expertise. Over time the specialization required to perform tasks required to sustain society has increased. In the 1960's Hofstadter noted that over time, "the complexity of modern life has steadily whittled away the functions the ordinary citizen can intelligently and comprehendingly perform for himself."<sup>72</sup> This combination of need and distrust leads to a constant societal tension between "elite" intellectuals and anyone who feels less able.

The next milestone of anti-intellectualism, and the most defining of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was Communism. The first Red Scare between the World Wars including William Jennings's Bryant and his fundamentalist crusade and the second Red Scare during the Cold War left a lasting

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<sup>71</sup> Hofstadter, *Anti-Intellectualism*, 151-155.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid 34.

impression on American culture. Labeling liberals and intellectuals as Communist or Communist sympathizers remains a potent political weapon until this day.<sup>73</sup> Though Mccarthy's trials were often baseless and ridiculous, there was a kernel of truth, in the early twentieth century Marx's ideas and Communism in general attracted considerable support among American intellectuals.<sup>74</sup> As vanguard anti-intellectuals the Johnson was rabidly against communism and both Voliva and Johnson vehemently denied evolution. Flat Earther's continue to claim they are the real guardians of the Bible's truth to this day.

Evolution and Communism defined the visible state of anti-intellectualism during these two major periods of Flat Earth proselytizing, Voliva during and after the first Red Scare and Johnson at the tail end of the Cold War following up the second Red Scare and into the confusion of the 1960's. The Evolution debate has continued unabated for more than century revealing a divide that seems unbridgeable.

Though anti-intellectualism has always been a part of America society it has never been the sole or central force in American culture. According to Hofstadter, "Although I am convinced that anti-intellectualism is pervasive in our culture, I believe that it can rarely be called dominant."<sup>75</sup> Anti-intellectuals exists on a spectrum and not as a complete force, with few if any individuals choose to completely ignore all intellectual content. Rather there is a spirit of ambivalence about it mixing "respect and awe with suspicion and resentment."<sup>76</sup> Perhaps the most common kind of intellectualism is merely being extremely selective about who the real intellectuals are; in the Flat Earther's case they often portrayed themselves as the real seekers of

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<sup>73</sup> Jacoby, *Age of American Unreason*, 83.

<sup>74</sup> Jacoby, *Age of American Unreason* 88.

<sup>75</sup> Hofstadter, *Anti-Intellectualism in American Society*, 19.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid* 21.

truth and understanding.<sup>77</sup> In recent years anti-intellectualism seems to be on the rise. Trump, and other recent public figures have increasingly disparaged the role that academic experts play in our society and Trumps election itself is clearly a high point in anti-intellectual fervor.

On first inspection, conspiracy theory seems like the center of Flat Earth belief. That anyone could push so far against the conclusions of the modern world while living in it appears deeply connected to a conspiratorial mindset. However, closely inspecting the Flat Earthers themselves shows that this is not true. Though Flat Earth belief, or any other rare belief places someone on an ideological fringe, may contribute to conspiracy thinking they are not causally correlated. Simply Flat Earthers can believe that the “false facts” of science are due to a deliberate cover up or merely an old mistake being religiously repeated due to incompetence. Both represent a complete repudiation of the intellectual world but for very different reasons. Both seem strange and hard to believe to anyone looking in from the outside at Flat Earth Theory.

Susan Jacoby proposes that, “the unwillingness to give a hearing to contradictory viewpoints, or to imagine that one might learn anything from an ideological or cultural opponent, represents a departure from the best side of American popular and elite intellectual traditions.”<sup>78</sup> By adopting a sympathetic view it becomes possible to understand how a belief that pushes against so much evidence can continue to exist. When she Considering the general character of Flat Earth proponents Christine Garwood concluded they were, “Neither grasping charlatans nor curious throwbacks, the principal public flat-earth believers were serious minded individuals, widely read and irrevocably committed to their perception of truth.”<sup>79</sup> The reason for the drastic

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<sup>77</sup> Garwood, *Flat Earth*, 357.

<sup>78</sup> Jacoby, *Age of American Unreason*, xix.

<sup>79</sup> Garwood, *Flat Earth*, 351.

difference in truth is a completely divergent view of the source of the evidence that should be considered. This is the key factor that really defines fundamentalist ideas.

Flat Earth theorists, and other fundamentalists beliefs are not innately illogical or unreasonable. The biggest separation between these groups and people who look at facts empirically is in the source of credible information. Fundamentalists embrace over reaching principles or authorities, such as the literal Biblical tradition, as the most reliable source of information. Put simply Christian Fundamentalism is the belief that the Bible is a better source of information, including facts, than experiment and observation. To people with this belief empirical evidence is logically less important than scripture.

The most important lesson that can be gleaned about Fundamentalism from Flat Earthers is that their view of *everything*, including facts, is grounded directly in a single source. The primacy of this source, for Christian Fundamentalists the bible, not only over rides other sources but also makes an implication that information not in the Bible is probably wrong. For most, this devotion to fundamentalist principles is bizarre and hard to understand. Jacoby notes, “Nevertheless many intellectuals who might be considered members of ‘the elites’ simply do not understand the depth and sincerity of literal biblical faith in America today.”<sup>80</sup> For any literalist, the Bible is the ultimate authority on anything it provides definitive guidance on. The difference between this fundamentalism and secular, or liberal religious thinking, is a deep seemingly unbridgeable chasm. Flat Earthers have attempted to bridge this chasm with “common sense” experimental evidence and arguments.

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<sup>80</sup> Jacoby, *Age of American Unreason*, 191.



The first, most obvious, argument of every Flat Earther is astoundingly simple. When presented with the theory that the world is round they remember years of experience, perhaps glance out a window at a landscape that appears flat, and respond with doubt demanding evidence. This is not an illogical or insane demand. When presented with an idea that contradicts experience or innate understanding the intellectually responsible answer is to demand proof. The standard response of many to Flat Earth Theory, mockery and dismissal, is far more intellectually lazy than Rowbotham's attempt to prove it is wrong. One standard Flat Earth complaint, that people are just passive receptors accepting one authority or another, may be distressingly true.

The second key part of the Flat Earth argument is that the counter arguments are needlessly complex. They claim world appears flat and the explanations otherwise seem like over-complex attempts to hide the truth particularly if they do not understand them. This is tied up in anti-intellectualism and the everyday faith of people in their own understanding. When faced with the dilemma of digging deep into an explanation that is not immediately obvious and thus requires more work many people refuse. It is simpler, and easier, to assume that you already have the answer. Flat Earther's begin believing the place they live is the unmoving center of the Universe, a simple place governed by simple rules, they are loathe to let go of what they know. In doing so they provide a simple clear lesson, it is hard to let go of what you think you know.

The truth is that we need experts of all kinds. And the saving grace of modern society is that many, if not most, people are expert's intellectual or not. Part of the driving force behind anti-intellectualism is the implied elitism of these intellectuals. There is a general perception that the skills intellectuals practice is unavailable or better than the skills practiced by the legions of

other experts that exist in our society. Both are untrue. An historian may practice speed reading, rapidly working his way through a book or document searching for key points and idea, which might seem too a car mechanic who rarely reads nearly magical. However, that same historian watching the mechanic open the hood of his car will see her instantly declare that the radiator must be replaced and feel the same sense that he is watching the mechanic applies extraordinary knowledge. The implied elitism of intellectualism is a false preference for one expertise over another.

### **Conclusion: Living with Flat Earthers**

If Flat Earthers, or any modern counter-idea group, are to be addressed it must start with a thoughtful consideration of their complaints and evidence. They are not “crazy” nor unable to perform basic reasoning. The unfortunate conclusion when comparing empiricism and fundamentalism is that the conversation may remain impossible. If a common source of credibility cannot be agreed upon debate of ideas remains impossible. Debate over sphericity with Flat Earthers or evolution with Creationists may remain impossible so long as they refuse to accept contrary evidence. In this case the important thing for more empirically minded people to do is remember that fundamentalists exist. Creationists are real and plentiful and the existence of Flat Earthers is a clear indication of deep anti-intellectualism in our society.

Though it may sound alarmist this disrespect for facts is getting worse. In November of 2017 an international Flat Earth conference was held in North Carolina. Group founding and internet traffic give clear indications that this idea is growing. While these may seem amusing a little consideration should make it clear just how frightening this rise of fact deniers really is. The shape of the world is one of the simplest modern scientific ideas to prove to yourself without any advanced mathematics or equipment. The rise in Flat Earth is just a small part of a culture

divorcing itself from facts. The election of Trump a president whose rhetoric would have fit in well with Charles Johnson's *Flat Earth News* should be enough to give anyone pause. This rise in fact denial requires us to speak and act. Facts are real and we need them; "alternate facts" are either lies or an inability to understand what a fact is.

Finally, the Earth is not Flat. It is a large sphere that absolutely rotates while flying through space. The evidence is overwhelming and well documented. In the case of the shape it is even easily available. There is nothing wrong with doubt and if someone requires evidence recommend they look up the original method used by Eratosthenes in 100B.<sup>81</sup> By all means do it yourself. Fundamentalism does not deserve the same place in public conversations as evidence based facts. How can I make that claim? The Results of science are well documented and all around us. Vaccines work. Generations of American's have not known Polio. We get into cars every day and the engines, designed using principals derived from Newton and the "theories" Flat Earther's mock, work perfectly. Ships disappear over the horizon. It is round.



The Blue Marble, Apollo 17 Crew.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> A good description is on Wikipedia <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eratosthenes>.

<sup>82</sup> <http://web.archive.org/web/20160113230850/http://grin.hq.nasa.gov/IMAGES/SMALL/GPN-2000-001138.jpg>

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*The Flat Earth Society Website Library (there are two websites),*

<https://www.tfes.org/library.php>

<https://theflatearthsociety.org/home/index.php/library>.