and burned down the offices of the only local black newspaper. There is a monument in the center of town commemorating the event. "In the 1960s they had a lot of riots involving black people," Watkins continues. "No whites."

At a nearby café, Roxanne Noble, a registered nurse, calmly explains over an egg sandwich why she can't ever vote Clinton: Vince Foster, a onetime White House aide, was murdered to hide the Clintons' secrets. "I have followed the corruption, the deaths of people working with her," she says. "How could anyone who has educated themselves vote for this person?"

Five official investigations—by U.S. Park Police, the Justice Department, House Republicans, Senate Democrats and special prosecutor Kenneth Starr—ruled Foster's death a suicide. But there are thousands of web pages that describe fanciful Foster murder-plot conspiracies.

More crucially, Donald Trump, the GOP presidential nominee, has spent years regularly encouraging his followers to doubt much of what is known to be true: that the earth is warming, that Obama was born in the U.S., that the FBI's decision not to prosecute Hillary Clinton follows prosecutorial precedent. After losing the first presidential debate in September by every scientific measure, Trump and his campaign spent days promoting unscientific reader surveys, including one by TIME, to lay a claim to victory. And back in May, Trump even made common cause with Noble, declaring that Foster's death was "very fishy." "I will say there are people who continue to bring it up because they think it was absolutely a murder," Trump said.

No presidential candidate in modern memory has played footsie with fantasy like this during a campaign. But for Trump, casting doubt on what is demonstrably real and lending credence to what is not has become a core appeal of his campaign. Democratic societies function on faith in strangers—in police and judges to do their job without fear or favor; in government agencies to fairly enforce laws; and in experts of all stripes, from scientists to journalists to economists, to accurately report on what is happening in the world. Trump's central argument is that faith has been lost, and he has put himself forward as the only solution. "We will never fix our rigged system by relying on the people who rigged it in the first place," he says, when he takes the stage in Greenville.

One of the first casualties of this worldview is the ability to have a national debate with a common set of facts. When Trump talks about a rigged system, he is not just accusing Clinton of corruption. He is talking about the institutions that facilitate democracy: Election Day poll workers, who he says may try to swing the election for Clinton; the Federal Reserve, which he has accused of favoring Obama; the debate moderators, who he has falsely accused of being Democrats; and the rest of the national press, including the pages you are reading right now, which he claims function as agents of the "established elite." "She is being protected by the media, by the press, like nobody has ever been protected in the history of this country," he tells the Greenville crowd. "Me on the other hand, it's a total pile-on."

So it makes sense when Thiel grabs hold of the new headline on his cell phone on the convention floor. The false story about Obama's plans to abolish the 22nd Amendment appears to have originated about two years ago on a satirical site called the National Report, which publishes hoax headlines like "ISIS Claims Responsibility for Sinking Titanic." But in a world where nothing and no one can be trusted, the site looks just as real as anything else. In Trump's America, if people are saying it, it might be true.

FOUR YEARS AGO, the nation was embroiled in a very similar argument over the role of truth and accuracy in a presidential election. The campaigns of Barack Obama and Mitt Romney accused each other of lying to voters, and fact checkers said the misstatements were as bad as they had ever seen. On balance, Romney's deceptions were frequently more brazen, but Obama was not innocent. He made the false charge that Romney wanted to outlaw abortion in all cases a centerpiece of his campaign.

But the truth wars of 2012 now seem quaint in retrospect. The fibs mostly concerned policy, and both candidates limited their criticisms of the press, politely working the referees on the sidelines.

Since the country's founding, pamphleteers have spread lies to influence voters before elections. But in 2012, it became clear that there was no institution that could enforce norms of truth telling during the campaign. Fact checkers could rule that a candidate had his pants on fire, but voters would be far more likely to hear the deception in a campaign ad than the judgment in a newspaper.

No one was better prepared to exploit this systemic weakness than Trump, a salesman who had long become comfortable with manipulating reality and dabbling in falsehood. In his first book, The Art of the Deal, he boasted of the value of "truthful hyperbole," and in sworn depositions through the years, he had been rather transparent about how he understands the fungibility of facts. Whereas most politicians recoil from the public shame that comes with inaccuracy, Trump had taken the opposite lesson.