

## **The Truth is Out There: Conspiracy Theories' as part of American Political and Cultural Life**

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Conspiracy theories capture the imagination. They are intricately interwoven with lurid details of manipulation, murder, and intrigue surrounding a surreptitious cabal of insidious agents. While many may see these accounts as an obsession for the severely paranoid or a form of playful conjecture, the enduring popularity and longevity of conspiracy theories suggests something deeper at play. As someone who has always been fascinated with the power of the stories we tell, I saw the inflamed rhetoric and variety of evidence within conspiracies as fascinating lens to examine twentieth century American history.

To conduct this project, I examined a mix of secondary sources to contextualize paranoia and fear and primary sources on conspiracies themselves. Conspiracies shed light on many fascinating trends. My research illuminated how, at times, conspiracies highlighted a suspicion of power ingrained in the US national character. At others it seemed rooted in a manifestation of feelings of disenfranchisement. However, what truly caught my attention was how often these theories substantiated their claims through reference of historic abuses of the public's trust. Examining the events conspiracies alluded to, I was shocked at how often paranoia was grounded in historic precedent. Real misdeeds perpetrated by government actors litter modern history. Some accounts like MKUltra (where the CIA researched mind control by secretly drugging and engaging in psychological torture) were truly sensational. Other more famous revelations of the Watergate cover-up and CIA foreign assassination program showed cases of institutional abuses. Accusations such as the government's hand in the 9/11 Attacks seem less ludicrous in the context of something like Operation Northwoods (a real proposal by the joint chiefs to justify war with Cuba by creating a fake terror attack).

However, historic precedence isn't proof alone. The evidence these theories deployed was often circumstantial based on unexplained events and problems with the official story rather than evidence supporting the conspiratorial explanation. Proof of conspiracy came from reference to historic abuses of the past. Conspiracies thus assumed an intriguing role of historic revisionism. Real abuses were put into grander schemes, a secret history hidden from the eyes of the public. Furthermore, conspiracies theories often undermine their own purpose by making suspicion of government seem outrageous. Occasionally incriminating such a vast and ever changing assortment of actors, any real power to uncover possible hidden abuses was delegitimized by some of the most outrageous claims. To return to the example of the 9/11 Truther Movement, this conspiracy theory overshadowed efforts to uncover real government duplicity in justifying the war in Iraq.

Ultimately, conspiracies represent a suspicion of the powers at be. Often, this plays a fundamental role in democracy to curtail abuse but can be manipulated to flame unjust fears or break public trust in institutions. Conspiracy theories at their most outrageous even have the power to delegitimize real investigation of misdeeds, just as they have the potential to uncover insidious actions themselves. Moving forward, I plan to continue to research conspiracies as my honor's project.

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