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## Conspiracy Theories

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### Full Text:

A *conspiracy* refers to a situation in which a group of people work together to execute a secret plan, particularly for an illegal or nefarious purpose. A *conspiracy theory* invokes this kind of covert plot as a way of accounting for unexplained events or to provide an alternative to a more widely accepted narrative. Conspiracy theories have become increasingly prevalent in American society in recent decades. The nation's intensely partisan political culture has been identified as one factor driving the rise in *conspiracism*, the idea that members of the public are being manipulated into believing the narrative of a group with a secret agenda. Studies reveal that people are prone to accept conspiracy theories that align with their political beliefs and demonize their ideological opponents, and that such theories can have damaging social consequences.

Researchers speculate that a willingness to believe conspiracy theories may harken back to a survival instinct: a willingness to believe information about potential dangers to improve overall awareness. Others speculate that people pursue alternative narratives to feel a greater sense of control over their lives. Conspiracy theories cannot be dismissed entirely, however, because some conspiracy theories have turned out to be true.

## Demonizing the Other

One of the most enduring and widely spread conspiracy theories began in the early twentieth century when newspapers and publishing houses in Russia printed alleged excerpts of a secret meeting of Jewish leaders in which the leaders plotted world domination. This document became known as *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* and was discredited in the 1920s as not only fraudulent, but largely plagiarized from a French satire of Napoleon III that made no mention of Jewish people whatsoever. Despite being discredited, however, the document has been published in many countries and is still circulated on the Internet. The ideas that it presents—that a secret group of Jewish leaders seek to control the world's finances, media, and governments—inspired Nazi leader Adolf Hitler and frequently appears in the rhetoric of fringe political groups like the Alternative Right, or alt-right. Hamas, part of the Palestinian Unity Government, cited the book in its 1988 "Covenant of the Islamic Resistance Movement." Conspiracy theories about a secret world government have also drawn significantly from *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*.

Blaming religious outsiders is a common theme in conspiracy theories. The Catholic Church, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, and the Church of Scientology have all been at the center of conspiracy theories. Anxieties about terrorism by radical Islamist organizations also fueled conspiracy theories that American Muslims wish to impose Islamic religious law, known as *Sharia* law, in the United States. The widespread popularity of this unfounded conspiracy theory became apparent in June 2017 when protesters in twenty-eight cities organized "March Against Sharia" rallies. The events attracted several extremist groups as well as mainstream politicians, such as Georgia state senator Michael Williams, who spoke at the march in Atlanta. Islamophobia has inspired conspiracy theories about secret Muslim training camps in the United States and a debunked yet persistent theory that former president Barack Obama is a covert Muslim who was born in Kenya.

## Distrusting the Government

The US government has been at the center of conspiracy theories since the country was founded, when a small group of individuals conspired to overthrow the British colonial government. Conspiracy theorists speculate that American independence was part of a larger plot developed by a secret society. Many Founding Fathers and subsequent presidents have been members of Masonic lodges, inspiring conspiracy theories that the fraternal organization of Freemasons plays a covert role in US politics. Such conspiracy theories have been the subject of Hollywood blockbusters and paperback thrillers.

Many conspiracy theories developed from a fear that the government would be infiltrated by foreign interests. For instance, many Americans worried that the formation of the League of Nations after World War I, and later the United Nations, would lead to the creation of an oppressive world government. Anticommunist sentiment during the Cold War allowed Wisconsin Senator Joe McCarthy to use conspiracy theories about communists infiltrating the government to further his political career in the 1950s.

Several allegations have surfaced that the 1963 assassination of President John F. Kennedy could have been the result of conspiracies involving organized crime, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), Cuban exiles, the Cuban government, labor unions,

Soviet intelligence, his Vice President Lyndon Johnson, political rival Richard Nixon, or a combination of those suspects. A 2013 Gallup poll found that 61 percent of Americans doubt the official narrative that a single gunman acted alone in the assassination. Historians assert that the assassination has had a lasting effect on the public's trust in the government.

Public trust was further eroded when evidence became available of actual government conspiracies. In 1971, the *New York Times* published a top-secret government study of US military involvement in Vietnam commonly referred to as the Pentagon Papers. The documents revealed that the government had repeatedly and deliberately misled the public about the Vietnam War. The following year, revelations surfaced that President Richard Nixon had participated in a genuine conspiracy involving a break-in at an office of the Democratic National Committee at the Watergate Hotel, as well as its subsequent cover-up. The scandal, which is often referred to as "Watergate," resulted in President Nixon's resignation, and several co-conspirators were indicted. In the aftermath of the scandal, journalists as well as a Congressional committee discovered evidence that government intelligence and law enforcement agencies had been, for many years, carrying out covert operations that including spying, drugging, and experimenting on American citizens. In 2016, a quote surfaced from a 1994 interview with author Dan Baum in which John Ehrlichman, a former top aide to Nixon, confirmed suspicions that the War on Drugs began as a means to vilify civil rights leaders, break up African American families, and suppress the counterculture.

Revelations of real government plots to deceive the American public gave rise to conspiracy theories that the government sought to control people's minds through the fluoridation of drinking water or by releasing chemicals from airplanes. Several conspiracy theories also accuse the government of trying to kill off entire sections of the population. For instance, one widespread theory accuses the CIA of creating AIDS to eradicate the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) and African American communities.

Unproven claims about government practices have also been spread by people in positions of power. Shortly following the 2016 presidential election, president-elect Donald Trump released a tweet indicating that he had lost the popular vote due to "millions of people who voted illegally," despite a lack of evidence that incidents of voter fraud are widespread enough to impact an election. In the following months, President Trump repeated these claims online. They were received with condemnation by many legislators and policy experts, who asserted that such allegations undermined the legitimacy of American democracy and the president's credibility. Members of President Trump's staff and other supporters, however, continued to echo concerns about voter fraud skewing election results, prompting the president to create an election fraud commission in May 2017. Many states have refused to provide the commission with voter data. Some critics contend that the commission makes use of government funds to pursue what they understand to be an unfounded conspiracy theory. Other critics lob the more serious accusation that the creation of the commission serves as a form of voter suppression.

## A Larger Audience for Fringe Content

At the end of the twentieth century, an explosion in media content began with the advent of twenty-four hour cable television channels and continued with the emergence of the Internet and a surge in talk radio shows. Without the same restrictions of traditional journalism, the Internet particularly provides a far-reaching platform for any users to share speculative theories, unsubstantiated claims, and misinformation. Many users have come to rely on the Internet to provide them with an alternative perspective on world events when the official narrative becomes suspect. Attempts to prevent the spread of rumors or unverified claims online have been met with criticisms of censorship.

Still, according to a 2016 survey conducted by the Pew Research Center, most Americans remain somewhat suspicious of information found from online sources such as social media. Additionally, independent resources such as the websites Snopes.com, which launched in 1994, and FactCheck.org, launched in 2003, have established themselves as resources for verifying information online. However, readers are less likely to make an additional effort to check the veracity of a claim that is supported by their biases. Additionally, psychologists report that a person is more likely to believe a falsehood if the falsehood is repeated frequently and discussed by a trusted source.

Conspiracy theories provide the basis for many talk radio programs such as *InfoWars*, hosted by Alex Jones, while discussion of such theories has become a regular fixture on more mainstream programming, including major news outlets like CNN and Fox. Alex Jones and other conspiracy-driven radio hosts broadcast to audiences with biases that may make them more prone to accepting conspiracy theories as plausible. Several of the spurious claims made by Alex Jones on his radio show and website have generated significant controversy, however. For instance, Jones has repeatedly denied the events of the 2012 shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut, in which twenty children and six adults were killed, claiming that the massacre was a hoax orchestrated by gun control activists.

On several occasions, Jones has had to issue apologies for defamation. In 2017, for example, Jones was forced to issue apologies both to the Chobani yogurt company for claiming that one of their factories had been linked to child sexual assault and a rise in tuberculosis, and to the Comet Ping Pong pizza restaurant for promoting claims that the business was involved in a child sex operation. Both claims were proven false, but not before Chobani suffered a loss in customers, and not before one of Jones's listeners became compelled to enter Comet Ping Pong with an AR-15 rifle and fire shots.

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