

# The Great American Plots

*by Donald Critchlow*

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**Our internet-driven world has given conspiracy theories a new lease of life. They have, however, always been a central feature of American politics, and they should be regarded as more than a mere pathology.**

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The United States was born in conspiracy—theory and actual. Certain that there was a conspiracy within the English royal court and ministries to subvert their rights as Englishmen, conspiratorial minded Americans entered into an actual conspiracy to undertake a revolution against the mother-country, England. As such, Americans arguably have a natural disposition to frame the world in terms of conspiracy theories.

Three points should be made about understanding prevalence of conspiracies in America today:

1) Even though the United States was formed by conspiracy in theory and practice, conspiracy theories are not unique to America ;

2) believers in conspiracy theories, conspiracists, are convinced that they have a “secret” knowledge that others do not share. This psychology provides them with power of conviction ;

3) finally, and most important to understand the prevalence of conspiracy theories today, it that conspiracy takes on salience in American politics when party competition is most intense and there is a general sense within the electorate that mainstream parties are controlled by elites non-representative of the public interest.

Conspiracy views are especially alive and well in America today. Traversing the internet, social media, mainstream media, and political circles are conspiracy theories ranging from Trump, an agent of Russia to Soros, the conspirator of the New World Order. Long standing conspiracy theories of Masons, the Bavarian Illuminati, alien infiltration of government, Jews and Catholics, the UN, the Kennedy assassination remain as vibrant as ever. Conspiracy theories cut across political and ideological lines, young and old, gender, and race. Surveys show that

most Americans believe that there was a cover-up of Kennedy's assassination and that there was more than one shooter. A larger percentage of Americans believe that civil rights leader Martin Luther King, Jr.'s assassination was part of a conspiracy. A disproportionate number of today's young people are convinced that former President George W. Bush had prior knowledge of or was complicit in the 9/11 attack.<sup>1</sup>

Why is conspiracy theory so alive today? In part, the information age—the internet and social media—allows the proliferation of conspiracy theories. The more important reason, however, is that many Americans are given to conspiracy theories because of general distrust of political and economic elites; a lack of distrust in our political institutions; and a belief that neither the Republican Party or the Democratic Party represent their interest. Before turning to the question of why conspiracy theories are so widespread in America today, we should understand that conspiracy theories are by no means peculiar to democracies or to American politics. In addition, we should understand the psychology of the conspiracist mind, which makes conspiracy theories attractive to them and reinforcing to their sense of self-worth.

## **Conspiracy Is Not Unique to America**

Belief in conspiracy theories are by no means unique to Americans. Episodes of conspiracy fears can be found with intensity throughout history. Anti-Catholic hysteria swept England and its American colonies in 1688 when William of Orange arrived to restore “liberty” to England. By this time, rumors of a Catholic plot had already caused rioters in London and other cities and villages to loot, destroy churches, and attack priests. In 1768, when American colonists developed their own Radical Whiggish fears of a corrupt conspiracy emanating from the ministers of the Crown, the Qinglong emperor in China launched a massive investigation into a conspiracy of “soul stealers” who threatened to subvert the entire regime. In post-World War II America, fears of Communist subversion reached fantastic proportions in rightwing circles. During these same years, Soviet bloc countries were experiencing their own paranoid anxieties which had even more dire consequences, as Communist leaders were purged and executed as alleged Jewish and Masonic agents secretly operating to undermine Soviet rule. In

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<sup>1</sup> There is a rich literature on American political conspiracy. Any discussion of the conspiratorial mindset of the American revolutionaries must begin with Bernard Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (1967); David Bennett, *Party of Fear: From Nativism Movements to the New Right* (1988) captures the conspiratorial mind of nativists; Jill Lepore, *New York Burning: Liberty, Slavery, and Conspiracy in Eighteenth Century Manhattan* (2009); reveals how conspiracy and racism became conjoined; David Brian Davis, *The Slave Power Conspiracy and the Paranoid Style* (1979) shows how the politics of slavery and abolition gave rise to conspiracy on both sides; Lincoln assassination conspiracies, actual and imagined, are detailed in Edward Steers, *Blood on the Moon: The Assassination of Abraham Lincoln* (2001); and the abundance on modern conspiracies is abundant. Worth noting are Jody Dean, *Aliens in American Conspiracy Culture from Outspace to Cyberspace* (1998); Mark Fenster, *Conspiracy Theories: Secrecy and Power in American Culture* (1999); Richard Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics* (1996); and Michael Barkun, *A Culture of Conspiracy: Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary America* (2009).

1952, eleven leading officials of the Czech Communist Party, including the Secretary General of the party, Rudolph Slansky—a loyal Stalinist—were charged, convicted, and executed as agents of Masonry and Zionism.

## The Conspiracist Mind

Conspiracy theory attracts a certain mindset and, once accepted, becomes self-reinforcing. Conspiracy theories become wide-spread in a political climate of distrust. Conspiracy theories are constant, but gain traction at times of great political discord. Individuals attracted to conspiracy theories find self-reinforcement in their paranoid beliefs, which make it difficult and even impossible to dissuade them from their beliefs. One consequence of this mindset is that when conspiracy beliefs become shared and wide-spread within a body politic, political order becomes unstable and a return to normality becomes difficult because people are unwilling to be convinced that their view of the world is mistaken or just downright crazy.

Conspiracy theories are founded on perspectives that cannot be unproven. Indeed, conspiracy theory often rests on a belief that empirical evidence disproving the theory presents real proof of the conspiracy. It is this certainty of belief that affirms to the theorist that he/she holds a secret knowledge and a shared language with other believers.

The prevalence of conspiracy theories today raises, therefore, a fundamental question about the psychology of conspiracism (the theory of conspiracies) and its role and function in the psyche of individual conspiracy believers. Understanding this mindset must begin with the absence of empirical thinking.

A friend recently told me about a conversation he had with a man seated next to him on a plane trip.

“What do you do for a living?” his fellow passenger asked.

“I’m an historian,” my friend said.

“An historian of what?”

“An historian of the early American Republic,” my friend answered.

“Do you know who has been in control of our history? A Jewish-Masonic-Communist clique operating behind the scenes.

Flabbergasted, my friend asked, “How do you know this?”

The answer was simple, “I don’t have any proof. That’s the point. That’s how clever they are. That’s the conspiracy.” In this case, there are no facts, which actually become the facts.

In general, conspiracy theorists spend an inordinate amount of time discovering and mastering “evidence” to substantiate their views. This allows conspiracy believers to present themselves as scholars who know better than the so-called experts. Conspiracy offers a mechanism for people to sort confusing and complex political, economic, and social information into a carefully filtered construction of the world. Conspiracy provides a narrative for understanding how the world is ordered.

Conspiracy theory enhances the self-esteem of believers by imparting a “secret” and “hidden” knowledge that the rest of society does not know about. Through this believers find autonomy and power, which takes on particular importance in a mass society where a sense of community is more diffused and distrust of hidden governmental powers more astute. While often reinforcing traditional religious sentiment, conspiracy theories allow its believers to assume roles of importance in societies expressing dramatic social and cultural changes such as urbanization, pronounced technological transformation, and rapid demographic changes.

Believers in conspiracy find power, but of a certain type: subversive power. It expresses, quite often, the desire of those within a society who feel especially disenfranchised and of those seeking political gain or profit to exert status and power through a claim of their unique knowledge and understanding of the world. Conspiracy allows a bonding experience for believers, a sense of community of shared intimate and personal information. This community experience allows its followers to cope with social change. The psychological and sociological factors creating a sense of community among conspiracists (those accepting conspiracy theories) remain not fully explored by scholars, many who sought to root the conspiratorial mind within an authoritarian personality of the right or deep social status anxiety among groups being replaced by socio-economic change. The reasons a person becomes a conspiracist are unique to that person, but once declared a believer, the conspiracist joins a larger community of fellow believers. The point being made concerns a sociological outcome that within the conspiracist culture, a sense of community is created among its believers. Even when these believers are dismissed as “nuts” or labeled “cranks” it creates a sense of community among the believers.

Having attained this knowledge, conspiracy theorists believe they have an obligation to warn their fellow citizens of the dark, subversive forces operating in secret. Conspiratorial worldviews, for those who subscribe to them, have extrinsic value by rationalizing the world, even though these worldviews might be intrinsically irrational in their belief that a single force is in control of the world, manipulating world events, and keeping the truth from the masses.

These theorists employ a language that allows ideological groups to convey shared worldviews. When David Robinson in 1797, Federalist Timothy Dwight in 1798, and John Quincy Adams in 1834 spoke of “powerful enemies,” their followers knew without being told that these enemies were Masons. When anti-Catholic conspiracists such as abolitionist Elijah P. Lovejoy in 1835 and O. C. Lambert in 1956 talked of Romish plots, they referred to a worldwide conspiracy by the Vatican to subvert democratic government. The language of conspiracy encapsulates larger presumptions about the world and how it operates, and code words become a tool to rally followers and to gather new recruits to specific political positions.

# The Ups and Downs of Conspiracism in the US

Because a conspiracy theory voices discontent with the established political order and helps bond true believers through their shared subversive knowledge, it can appear more intense—and operationally useful—when a dominant political regime is experiencing change. During periods when the established political order comes under attack, conspiracy theories can obtain greater acceptance among some political leaders and elements of the electorate. In such situations, both defenders and challengers of the established regime may subscribe to such theories. American political history is replete with examples of the relationship between regime change and the projection of conspiracy.

As the Federalist Party entered into a decline that led to the triumph of the Jeffersonian Democratic-Republicans, archconservatives within the party, led by New England ministers such as Timothy Dwight and Jedidiah Morse, drew upon an anti-Enlightenment literature from anti-revolutionary France and England which alleged a Masonic conspiracy of the Bavarian Illuminati. In the 1820s, anti-Anglo financial conspiracy theories emerged around the establishment of a national bank as the political order again underwent change, giving rise to Jacksonian democracy. Anti-Masonic tendencies found expression in the Whig Party in the 1830s which rose to challenge the Democratic Party. And in the volatile politics of the 1850s, political conspiracies abounded, focusing on nativist, anti-Catholic, and anti-Mormon sentiments.

This pattern stands out in sharper relief when examined in those states and regions experiencing intense political competition in the absence of a dominant political party. In antebellum America, these theories found their most violent expression in frontier states and territories that were up for grabs politically, creating a hothouse for conspiracies. The decline of the Whig Party in the 1850s also fueled this phenomenon.

Anti-Mormonism led to outbreaks of violence in Missouri and Illinois in the 1820s and 1830s. The slave conspiracy, which mirrored the abolitionist conspiracy, exploded in Missouri and Kansas in the 1850s. Similarly, conspiracies of the monied interests found political expression in the Greenback Parties in states such as Indiana, Illinois, and Missouri in the 1870s. The Republican ascendancy of the 1890s coincided with the eruption of anti-Catholic, anti-immigrant, anti-Semitic, and anti-monied conspiracies. Such views could be found in every social class and region.

These prejudices were not unique to any one political party. The political realignment brought about by the Great Depression and the ascendancy of the New Deal order provided fertile ground for conspiracists on the right to attack the Roosevelt administration on a variety of charges, including manipulation of money for the benefit of internationalists, infiltration of the government by communists, and a scheme to engineer America's entry into the Second World War. Fears of conspiracy, however, were found also on the left as rumors spread of a military takeover of the government.

In the postwar era, the right raised fears of the subversion of national sovereignty through communist infiltration and internationalism operating under a variety of guises, including the United Nations and groups such as the Bilderbergers, an actual group of powerful economic, financial, and political leaders who meet annually to discuss world affairs. As liberalism came under challenge by an ascendant conservative political order in the late twentieth century, conspiracists revived older theories and devised new ones that represented racial and ethnic fears in a global age.

## **Conspiracy as part of US Political History**

The belief in conspiracy presents a disturbing aspect of our history since the strength of democratic government rests on the trust of the people in their public officials. Fear of conspiracy projects mistrust in political leadership because it has been corrupted by subversive forces. The Founding Fathers carefully placed safeguards into the system to protect from manifestations of popular irrationality that might be encouraged and exploited by self-serving political interests and demagogues.

And yet, conspiracy theories have been integral to American political life. Conspiracies have allowed political mobilization against elite control of government. They have expressed genuine reform sentiment against the evils of slavery and actual financial manipulation of government such as cornering the gold market in 1871. They have tempered public opinion on war.

Historians and political scientists have given much attention to specific historical conspiracies, as well as the ideological ramifications of these conspiracies. Less explored, however, has been the utility of conspiracy theories in politics. Those who promulgate conspiratorial world views are often portrayed in the literature as outsiders, intruding into politics. Instead of being outliers, conspiracy theorists can be seen as integral to politics; conspiracy theories arise from the requirements of politics. Conspiracy theories have utilitarian value as a political tool in which leaders can mobilize followers to challenge the existing establishment.

Historians face a crucial question of whether regular patterns of mass conspiratorial expression can be derived from American politics—based on party conflict, economic cycles, immigration waves, or some other variable. We can agree with both that conspiracy theories needed to be placed within specific historical settings. In short, conspiracy needs to be historicized.

But there is a more disturbing question: Are humans by nature paranoid? The existential question becomes: if every culture and polity is full of people who accept conspiracy theories, are people by nature given to think that their lives and governments are controlled by insidious hidden forces? This question takes us into the realm of what is human nature—are we

given as much to the irrational as to the rational? We are left with the unsatisfactory conclusion that we are all paranoid—some of us more so than others and some of us rightfully so.

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