

Origins of the “conspiracy meme”

Description

For more detailed information visit: conspiracy-theories.eu

The term “conspiracy theory” was invented and put into public discourse by the CIA in 1964 in order to discredit the many skeptics who challenged the Warren Commission’s conclusion that President John F. Kennedy was assassinated by a lone gunman named Lee Harvey Oswald, who himself was assassinated while in police custody before he could be questioned. The CIA used its friends in the media to launch a campaign to make suspicion of the Warren Commission report a target of ridicule and hostility. This campaign was “one of the most successful propaganda initiatives of all time.”

This writes political science professor Lance deHaven-Smith, in his peer-reviewed book which was published by the University of Texas Press. He reports the story of how the CIA succeeded in creating in the public mind uncritical, reflexive, automatic, (System 1) stigmatization of those who challenge official government explanations (cf. [ostracism](#)).

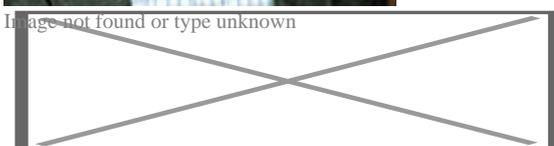
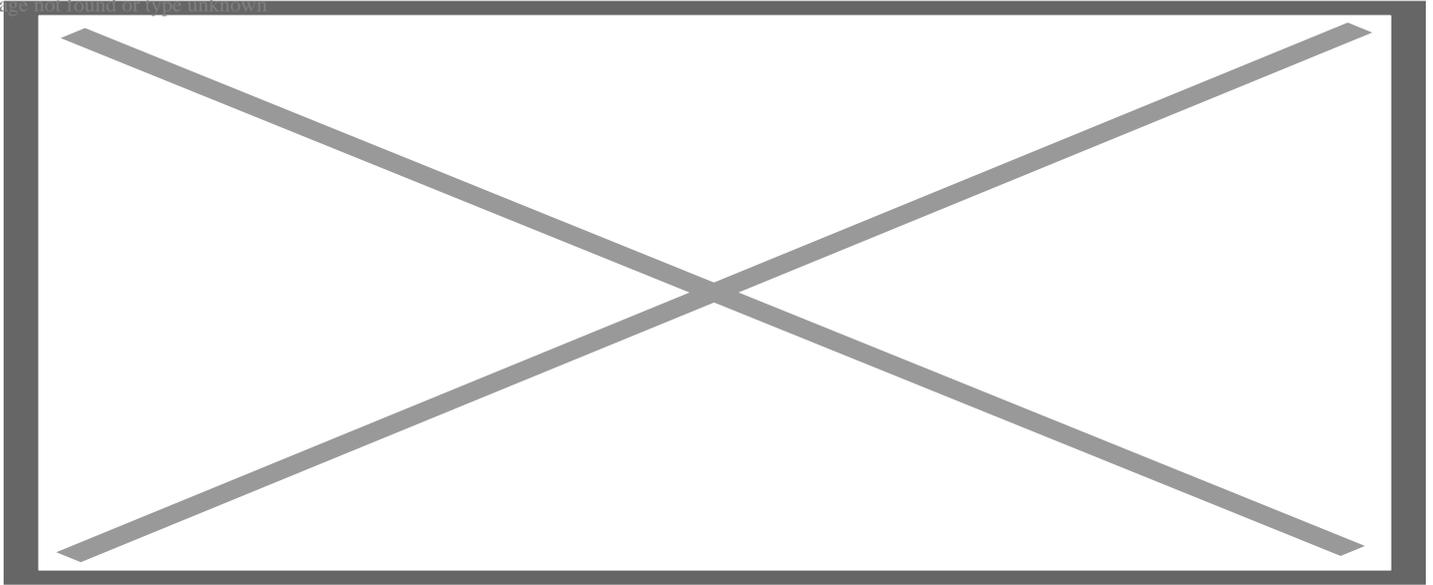


Image not found or type unknown



CIA Document #1035-960

RE: Concerning Criticism of the Warren Report

Note: Released in response to a 1976 FOIA request by the New York Times. The document shows how the term "conspiracy" is being utilised to prevent critical rational analysis and "dissenting" perspectives.

1. Our Concern. From the day of President Kennedy's assassination on, there has been speculation about the responsibility for his murder. Although this was stemmed for a time by the Warren Commission report, (which appeared at the end of September 1964), various writers have now had time to scan the Commission's published report and documents for new pretexts for questioning, and there has been a new wave of books and articles criticizing the Commission's findings. In most cases the critics have speculated as to the existence of some kind of conspiracy, and often they have implied that the Commission itself was involved. Presumably as a result of the increasing challenge to the Warren Commission's report, a public opinion poll recently indicated that 46% of the American public did not think that Oswald acted alone, while more than half of those polled thought that the Commission had left some questions unresolved. Doubtless polls abroad would show similar, or possibly more adverse results.

2. This trend of opinion is a matter of concern to the U.S. government, including our organization. The members of the Warren Commission were naturally chosen for their integrity, experience and prominence. They represented both major parties, and they and their staff were deliberately drawn from all sections of the country. Just because of the standing of the Commissioners, efforts to impugn their rectitude and wisdom tend to cast doubt on the whole leadership of American society. Moreover, there seems to be an increasing tendency to hint that President Johnson himself, as the one person who might be said to have benefited, was in some way responsible for the assassination.

Innuendo of such seriousness affects not only the individual concerned, but also the whole reputation of the American government. Our organization itself is directly involved: among other facts, we

contributed information to the investigation. Conspiracy theories have frequently thrown suspicion on our organization, for example by falsely alleging that Lee Harvey Oswald worked for us. The aim of this dispatch is to provide material countering and discrediting the claims of the conspiracy theorists, so as to inhibit the circulation of such claims in other countries. Background information is supplied in a classified section and in a number of unclassified attachments.

3. Action. We do not recommend that discussion of the assassination question be initiated where it is not already taking place. Where discussion is active [business] addresses are requested:

a. To discuss the publicity problem with [?] and friendly elite contacts (especially politicians and editors), pointing out that the Warren Commission made as thorough an investigation as humanly possible, that the charges of the critics are without serious foundation, and that further speculative discussion only plays into the hands of the opposition. Point out also that parts of the conspiracy talk appear to be deliberately generated by Communist propagandists. Urge them to use their influence to discourage unfounded and irresponsible speculation.

b. To employ propaganda assets to [negate] and refute the attacks of the critics. Book reviews and feature articles are particularly appropriate for this purpose. The unclassified attachments to this guidance should provide useful background material for passing to assets. Our ploy should point out, as applicable, that the critics are (I) wedded to theories adopted before the evidence was in, (I) politically interested, (III) financially interested, (IV) hasty and inaccurate in their research, or (V) infatuated with their own theories. In the course of discussions of the whole phenomenon of criticism, a useful strategy may be to single out Epstein's theory for attack, using the attached Fletcher [?] article and Spectator piece for background. (Although Mark Lane's book is much less convincing than Epstein's and comes off badly when confronted by knowledgeable critics, it is also much more difficult to answer as a whole, as one becomes lost in a morass of unrelated details.)

4. In private to media discussions not directed at any particular writer, or in attacking publications which may be yet forthcoming, the following arguments should be useful:

a. No significant new evidence has emerged which the Commission did not consider. The assassination is sometimes compared (e.g., by Joachim Joesten and Bertrand Russell) with the Dreyfus case; however, unlike that case, the attack on the Warren Commission have produced no new evidence, no new culprits have been convincingly identified, and there is no agreement among the critics. (A better parallel, though an imperfect one, might be with the Reichstag fire of 1933, which some competent historians (Fritz Tobias, A.J.P. Taylor, D.C. Watt) now believe was set by Vander Lubbe on his own initiative, without acting for either Nazis or Communists; the Nazis tried to pin the blame on the Communists, but the latter have been more successful in convincing the world that the Nazis were to blame.)

b. Critics usually overvalue particular items and ignore others. They tend to place more emphasis on the recollections of individual witnesses (which are less reliable and more divergent—and hence offer more hand-holds for criticism) and less on ballistics, autopsy, and photographic evidence. A close examination of the Commission's records will usually show that the conflicting eyewitness accounts are quoted out of context, or were discarded by the Commission for good and sufficient reason.

c. Conspiracy on the large scale often suggested would be impossible to conceal in the United States, esp. since informants could expect to receive large royalties, etc. Note that Robert Kennedy, Attorney

Approach, edited by Michael Butter and Maurus Reinkowski, De Gruyter, 2014, pp. 35-58. *Linguae & Litterae* 29. Wippermann, Wolfgang. *Agenten des Bösen: Verschwörungstheorien von Luther bis heute* [Agents of Evil: Conspiracy Theories from Luther until Today]. be.bra-Verlag, 2007. Wisnicki, Adrian S. *Conspiracy, Revolution, and Terrorism from Victorian Fiction to the Modern Novel*. Routledge, 2008. *Literary Criticism and Cultural Theory*. Wood, C., and W. M. L. Finlay. "British National Party Representations of Muslims in the Month after the London Bombings: Homogeneity, Threat, and the Conspiracy Tradition." *The British Journal of Social Psychology*, vol. 47, no. 4, 2008, pp. 707-26. Wiley Online Library, doi.org/10.1348/014466607X264103. Wood, Gordon S. "Conspiracy and the Paranoid Style: Causality and Deceit in the Eighteenth Century." *The William and Mary Quarterly*, vol. 39, no. 3, 1982, pp. 402-41. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/1919580. —. *The Creation of the American Republic, 1776-1787*. U of North Carolina P, 1998. Wood, Michael J. "Conspiracy Suspicions as a Proxy for Beliefs in Conspiracy Theories: Implications for Theory and Measurement." *British Journal of Psychology*, vol. 108, no. 3, 2017, pp. 507-27. Wiley Online Library, doi.org/10.1111/bjop.12231. —. "Some Dare Call It Conspiracy: Labeling Something a Conspiracy Theory Does Not Reduce Belief in It." *Political Psychology* vol. 37, no. 5, 2016, pp. 695-705. Wiley Online Library, doi.org/10.1111/pops.12285. Wood, Michael J., and Karen M. Douglas. "Online Communication as a Window to Conspiracist Worldviews." *Frontiers in Psychology*, vol. 6, art. 836, 2015, pp. 1-8. *Frontiers in Psychology*, doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2015.00836. —. "What about Building 7? A Social Psychological Study of Online Discussion of 9/11 Conspiracy Theories." *Frontiers in Psychology*, vol. 4, art. 409, 2013, pp. 1-9. *Frontiers in Psychology*, doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2013.00409. Wood, Michael J., Karen M. Douglas, and Robbie M. Sutton. "Dead and Alive: Beliefs in Contradictory Conspiracy Theories." *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, vol. 3, no. 6, 2012, pp. 767-73. SAGE Journals, doi.org/10.1177/1948550611434786. Woods, Jeff R. *Black Struggle, Red Scare: Segregation and Anti-Communism in the South, 1948-1968*. Louisiana State UP, 2003. *American History*. Woodward, Mark. "Rumors, Religion, and Political Mobilization: Indonesian Cases, 1965-1998." *Rumor and Communication in Asia in the Internet Age*, edited by Greg Dalziel, Routledge, 2013, pp. 94-106. *Media, Culture and Social Change in Asia* 32. Wulff, Erich. "Paranoic Conspiratory Delusion." *Changing Conceptions of Conspiracy*, edited by Carl F. Graumann and Serge Moscovici, Springer, 1987, pp. 171-89. Würzler, Andreas. "Conspiracy and Denunciation: A Local Affair and Its European Public (Bern, 1749)." *Cultures of Communication from Reformation to Enlightenment: Constructing Publics in the Early Modern German Lands*, edited by James van Horn Melton, Ashgate, 2002, pp. 119-31. Wyler, Helen, and Margit E. Oswald. "Why Misinformation Is Reported: Evidence from a Warning and a Source-Monitoring Task." *Memory*, vol. 24, no. 10, 2016, pp. 1419-34. Taylor & Francis Online, doi.org/10.1080/09658211.2015.1117641. Yablokov, Ilya. "Conspiracy Theories as a Russian Public Diplomacy Tool: The Case of Russia Today (RT)." *Politics*, vol. 35, no. 3-4, 2015, pp. 301-15. SAGE Journals, doi.org/10.1111/1467-9256.12097. —. "Feinde, Verräter, fünfte Kolonnen: Verschwörungstheorien in Russland" ["Enemies, Traitors, Fifth Columns: Conspiracy Theories in Russia"]. *Osteuropa*, vol. 65, no. 4, 2015, pp. 99-114. —. *Fortress Russia: Conspirac Theories in the Post-Soviet World*. Polity, 2018. —. "Pussy Riot as Agent Provocateur: Conspiracy Theories and the Media Construction of Nation in Putin's Russia." *Nationalities Papers*, vol. 42, no. 4, 2015, pp. 622-36. Taylor & Francis Online, doi.org/10.1080/00905992.2014.923390. —. "Social Networks of Death: Conspiracy Panics and Professional Journalistic Ethics in the Post-Soviet Russia." *Les theories du complot à l'heure du numérique* [Theories of Conspiracy in the Digital Age], special issue of *Quaderni*, vol. 94, pp. 53-62. OpenEdition, journals.openedition.org/quaderni/1113. —. "Why Are Russia's Journalists So Prone to Conspiracy Theory?" Opendemocracy.net, 9 May 2016, www.opendemocracy.net/od-russia/ilya-yablokov/why-are-russia-s-journalists-so-prone-to-conspiracy-theory.

Yusuf, Huma. "Conspiracy Fever: The US, Pakistan and its Media." *Survival*, vol.53, no. 4, 2011, pp. 95-118. Taylor & Francis Online, doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2011.603564. Zaller, John R. *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion*. Cambridge UP, 1992. Cambridge Studies in Public Opinion and Psychology. Zaller, John R., and Stanley Feldman. "A Simple Theory of the Survey Response: Answering Questions versus Revealing Preferences." *American Journal of Political Science*, vol. 36, no. 3, 1992, pp. 579-616. JSTOR, doi.org/10.2307/2111583. Zantides, Evripides. "Cyprus and Conspiracy Theories after the Troika Levy in 2013." *Complotto [Conspiracy]*, edited by Massimo Leone, special issue of *Lexia: Revisita di Semiotica [Journal of Semiotics]*, vol. 23-24, 2016, pp. 245-56. Zdybel, Lech. *Idea Spisku i Teorie Spiskowe w ?wietle Analiz krytycznych i Bada? Historycznych [Conspiracy and Conspiracy Theories in the Light of Critical Analyses and Historical Research]*. UMCS, 2002.—. "?????? ???? ? ?????????? ?????????? ??????????" ["The Conspiracy Theory in Political Mythological Modernity"]. ?????????????? ?????????????? ?? ?????????????? ??????????, vol.3, 2006, pp. 169-83. Zeineddine, Fouad Bou, and Felicia Pratto. "Political Distrust: The Seed and Fruit of Popular Empowerment." *Power, Politics, and Paranoia: Why People Are Suspicious of Their Leaders*, edited by Jan-Willem van Prooijen and Paul A. M. van Lange, Cambridge UP, 2014, pp. 106-29. Cambridge Core, doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139565417.010. Zelizer, Barbie. *Covering the Body: The Kennedy Assassination, the Media, and the Shaping of Collective Memory*. U of Chicago P, 1992. 94. Zernike, Kate. "The Persistence of Conspiracy Theories." *The New York Times*, 30 April 2011, www.nytimes.com/2011/05/01/weekinreview/01conspiracy.html. Ziolkowski, Theodore. *Lure of the Arcane: The Literature of Cult and Conspiracy*. Johns Hopkins UP, 2013. Zollo, Fabiana, et al. "Debunking in a World of Tribes." *PLOS ONE*, vol. 12, no. 7, 2017, pp. 1-27. *PLOS ONE*, doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0181821. —. "Emotional Dynamics in the Age of Misinformation." *PLOS ONE*, vol. 10, no. 9, 2015, pp. 1-22. *PLOS ONE*, doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0138740. Zonis, Marvin, and Craig M. Joseph. "Conspiracy Thinking in the Middle East." *Political Psychology*, vol.15, no. 3, 1994, pp. 443-59. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/3791566. Zukier, Henri. "The Conspiratorial Imperative: Medieval Jewry in Western Europe." *Changing Conceptions of Conspiracy*, edited by Carl F. Graumann and Serge Moscovici, Springer, 1987, pp. 87-103. Zwielerin, Cornel. "Security Politics and Conspiracy Theories in the Emerging European State System (15th/16th c.)." *Security and Conspiracy in History, 16th to 21st Century*, special issue of *Historical Social Research/Historische Sozialforschung*, vol. 38, no. 1 (143), 2013, pp. 69-95. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/23644491. Zwielerin, Cornel, and Beatrice de Graaf. "Security and Conspiracy in Modern History." *Security and Conspiracy in History, 16th to 21st Century*, special issue of *Historical Social Research/Historische Sozialforschung*, vol. 38, no. 1 (143), 2013, pp. 7-45. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/23644489.

[/su_spoiler]

Category

1. History
2. Legal
3. Neuropolitics
4. Politics
5. Primary documents
6. Psychopolitics
7. Social psychology

Date Created

10. January 2019

Author

web45