

Conspiracy Theory in Film, Television, and Politics

Gordon B. Arnold

PRAEGER

Westport, Connecticut
London

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Belief and Disbelief

The early twenty-first century brought events that thrust the world into a far-reaching and new kind of global conflict, the War on Terrorism. In the months before the new millennium approached, however, there was little that foreshadowed the changes to come. Americans worried about politics and the economy, as they always did.

There was one new worry, however, which was the so-called “Y2K problem.” This was the name given to the discovery that widely used computer programs had not adequately included provisions for the change from 1999 to 2000. Computer programs mostly had coded calendar dates using only the last two digits of the year. Therefore, unless programs to correct this technical issue were prepared and installed, computers could interpret the year 2000 as the year 1900 and so forth. Far from a minor glitch, the fear was that the date problem would wreak havoc with financial and business systems—potentially jeopardizing national security and global banking—as well as causing major headaches for ordinary computer users. Since American life had grown dependent on computers and the Internet, some people also feared that the Y2K issue could be exploited by malicious computer hackers and criminals to intentionally stage a massive attack on the computers used for finance and government.

The approach of the year 2000 was a subject of much interest for many people in the United States for other reasons, as well. For example, the very designation of the year 2000, a reckoning of time based on the Christian calendar, suggested religious dimensions about the event to some people.

The end of the millennium indicated to some Christian groups that important prophesized occurrences, perhaps apocalyptic in scale, could be fast approaching. To those holding such views, the new millennium meant far more than simply turning the page on a calendar, then. It was the herald of a major moment in history that seemed imminent. Such ideas directly emanated from the Christian traditions that have always informed much of American culture.¹

Thus, for these and other varying reasons, some groups viewed the approach of the new millennium with apprehension. This sometimes prompted intense feelings of anticipation and anxiety. Frequently, it seemed that the people with the strongest, most apocalyptic beliefs regarding the subject were associated with groups that much of the public viewed as religious fringe groups or organizations with far-right political aspirations.

Interestingly, in the popular imagination, such groups often had been associated with various forms of conspiracy. This continued to be a frequent theme on screen and throughout popular culture. But even as the year 2000 came closer, the combination of millennial and conspiracy themes did not seem to excite the general population. In the United States, people seemed more worried about how they would celebrate the arrival of the new millennium.

The approaching event also did not elicit much interest from film-makers and television producers. Perhaps emblematic of this was the fate of the television series *Millennium*, which had been created for the FOX television network by Chris Carter. (He had also created their *The X-Files* series, which by then had also peaked in popularity.) Despite the apparently timely combination of millennial and conspiracy themes that ran throughout the *Millennium's* narrative, the series soon floundered. It was cancelled by the network in 1999.

AMERICAN POLITICAL SCENE

The year 2000 signaled the coming of the next presidential election in the United States. The polarizing figure of Bill Clinton, having survived two terms, would be ineligible to run. And so the prospect of a wide-open field of candidates from both the Democratic and Republican parties generated widespread anticipation and speculation well before the beginning of 2000. When the primary season was over, the conventions of the two major parties anointed their candidates. Vice President Al Gore received the Democratic nomination and Texas governor, George W. Bush, was selected by the Republicans.

Gore and Bush conducted vigorous, hard-fought campaigns in a close contest. But when the November election finally came, it produced results of historic ambiguity. At first, however, this was not apparent. Soon after the polls closed, some news organizations announced that Al Gore would win the contest, basing this prediction on exit polls. Within hours, such predictions

seemed premature. As more tallies became available, it appeared that the vote in Florida (the governor of which was the brother of the Republican candidate) would determine the final outcome. The Florida numbers were very close, but by the early hours of the next morning it appeared that Bush, rather than Gore, had carried the state.

When the official vote was finally recorded, therefore, it seemed that George W. Bush had defeated Al Gore in Florida, apparently settling the matter. But to Gore's supporters, the results did not seem correct, especially in three counties that usually voted Democratic. Further investigation revealed issues with vote counting procedures and, indeed, with the ballots themselves. The Gore camp requested a recount. It was a lengthy and tortuous path from that point forward.

A series of legal challenges led all the way to the Supreme Court. Indeed, though there was apparently dissension within the Court, America's highest judicial authority entered the fray and ultimately made the final decision about how to interpret the results of the election, and hence who would assume the Oval Office. The Supreme Court issued its 5-to-4 decision in mid-December, finally settling the matter. Despite some public apprehension about the legitimacy of the vote, George W. Bush was sworn into office on schedule in January of 2001. In the early months of his term, American politics seemed poised to return to relative calm.

SEPTEMBER 11 AND THE WAR ON TERRORISM

Whatever sense of calmness emerged in the first eight months of that year was shattered by the horrifying events of September 11. When hijacked planes were piloted into the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center in New York and the Pentagon just outside the nation's capital, the world changed. By mid-morning of that fateful day, it was clear that the attacks were the greatest tragedy in at least a generation. The death and destruction stunned and traumatized the nation, deeply scarring the American people.

In the wake of 9/11, the president solemnly announced that the attacks had constituted an act of war against the United States. He promised that swift and forceful justice would be carried out against the perpetrators of the catastrophe. Although the hijackers had died along with their victims in the attacks, officials soon determined that a known, but previously shadowy Islamist terrorist organization was behind the plot. Calling itself Al-Qaeda, the terrorist group seemed to be taking refuge in Afghanistan. Al-Qaeda's leader, a Saudi national named Osama bin Laden, soon became America's most hated and most wanted man.

The 9/11 attack was a genuine conspiracy of international proportions, and it brought the world to a dangerous new level of fear and hostility. When, immediately after the attack, the president framed the traumatic event as an act of war, however, the conspiracy aspect of the event seemed almost incidental to the greater threat. The newly recognized enemy was not feared

primarily because it was a conspiracy, even though it was on a grand scale. Instead, it caused fear and anger because of its terrorist goals and methods.

Thus, in post-9/11 rhetoric, Al-Qaeda was cast more in the role of a traditional enemy than a conspiratorial one. The conditions were seemingly ideal for the growth of conspiracy fears, however. Like the situation a half-century earlier, the September 11 attacks presented Americans with an external threat emanating from people who espoused beliefs that were highly dissonant with American ideals. Five decades earlier, the threat that global communism posed to the American way of life fueled fear and paranoia about conspiracy in the nation's midst. Now it was the threat of Islamist extremism. And just as there had been constant efforts to identify hidden enemies in the Cold War era, after 9/11 there were constant struggles to identify hostile persons and sleeper cells in the United States.

But unlike the case in the Cold War, in the wake of 9/11 there was little public concern that "ordinary" Americans might be involved in such treachery. Instead, in the public's mind, the threat mostly remained external. Of course, in the aftermath of the attacks, Americans did become much more cautious and suspicious. And some people were leery of anyone who appeared "foreign" or who seemed to be Islamic. To be sure, Americans remained apprehensive, resigning themselves to a new era of color-coded terrorism alerts and increasingly pervasive security measures in everyday life.

All of these anxieties did relatively little to evoke a widespread conspiracy theory interpretation of the frightening new situation, however. Indeed, by the early 2000s, America's ideas about conspiracy and conspiracy theory had undergone a dramatic transformation from the early Cold War, and whatever intense emotions the terrorist attacks elicited, fear and paranoia about the threat as a conspiracy *per se* were not foremost among them.

And so the United States began its military campaign against terrorism. Afghanistan was identified as the first target since Al-Qaeda seemed to be based there, and it seemed to be receiving support from the ruling Taliban, which was already known for its anti-Western views. That military action included a hunt for Osama bin Laden. But although the Taliban was quickly driven from power, bin Laden proved to be a wily and resourceful enemy. Despite numerous attempts to locate him, he managed to avoid death or capture, apparently escaping to the rugged region along the Afghan-Pakistani border.

WAR IN IRAQ

Soon after its initial success, the United States successfully assembled a group of willing nations to assume most of the security support for Afghanistan, as a new regime tried to rebuild the Afghan nation. Now largely freed from tending to the situation of Afghanistan, the president and his advisors considered the theaters of war they thought should follow Afghanistan in the global war on terrorism. The administration set its sites on Iraq. With

increasing confidence, White House officials declared that Iraq, a nation with which the United States had tangled in the Persian Gulf War a decade earlier, had harbored and aided terrorists and that it was somehow implicated in the September 11 attack.

The administration aggressively promoted the idea that Iraq was linked to the 9/11 attacks and that it was a dangerous terrorist state with weapons of mass destruction (nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons). They argued that Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein would surely make such weapons available to terrorist groups and perhaps even use them himself. In the wake of the horror of September 11, it was too dangerous to let this situation stand, according to administration officials. “Regime change” in Iraq was clearly their goal.

Many White House officials saw the case against Iraq to be compelling in its own right and felt there was little need to obtain the approval from the United Nations before taking swift action. The most visible holdout to this view within the administration was Secretary of State Colin Powell. He strongly advocated that the matter be taken to the UN for their approval, and eventually this course of action was taken. Thereafter, in late 2002, the UN approved such a resolution. It demanded that Iraq give up any weapons of mass destruction it had stockpiled and that it promptly terminate any programs aimed at producing such weapons.

The Iraqis did not comply with weapons inspections to the satisfaction of the United States, and a few months later, in February 2003, Secretary of State Colin Powell was dispatched to the UN to call for swift follow-up action. In his speech to the world body, Powell spoke authoritatively about evidence he said the United States had assembled. This compelling evidence, he declared, demonstrated that Saddam Hussein’s regime already harbored a vast stockpile of weapons of mass destruction, and it defiantly maintained an aggressive program to produce or acquire nuclear weapons. (These assertions were in line with previous declarations from the Bush White House and its close ally, the administration of British Prime Minister Tony Blair.) Therefore, the United States requested the UN to support a resolution that specifically authorized the use of force to compel Iraqi compliance with the previous resolution. There was substantial opposition from other UN member states, however, and the proposal was withdrawn.

In March 2003, the White House announced that diplomatic efforts to secure Iraqi compliance had failed. Shortly thereafter, the United States and allies commenced the war in Iraq, which it called Operation Iraqi Freedom. The conflict initially went well for the United States and its allies. Baghdad soon fell. Saddam Hussein fled from the capital and went into hiding. (He was not captured until December.)

In May 2003, with the regime toppled, George W. Bush made a dramatic announcement on the flight deck of a U.S. naval aircraft carrier that was at sea off the coast of San Diego. He declared to Americans and the world, “Major

combat operations in Iraq have ended.” That assessment, however, would not turn out to be accurate.

Before the war, administration officials apparently believed that when the fighting concluded, the victorious Americans would be welcomed with open arms by a grateful Iraqi people. Although many Iraqi citizens were undoubtedly overjoyed to see the despotic regime of Saddam Hussein vanquished, the security situation in Iraq soon descended into chaos. Before long, it started to become clear that although Saddam Hussein had been driven from power, the United States would now face a violent and stubborn insurgency.

It was a development for which the administration was ill prepared. Over the coming months, it led to a much less secure Iraq and many more American casualties than had been anticipated. As the violence raged and as American troop deployments to Iraq involved more call-ups from the National Guard and longer tours of duty, public opinion polls showed Americans increasingly disapproved of the war.

Public approval of the war dropped precipitously as the conflict dragged on. But the war continued even as American support of it declined. Opponents of the war started to reassess the circumstances that led up to it. They began to look at how the nation had ended up in this troubling situation.

Despite confident predictions from administration officials before the Iraq war, when American and allied troops took control of Iraq, they were unable to locate weapons of mass destruction. Since the existence of these weapons had been the primary justification for launching military action, opponents of the war became suspicious. Many were angered by what they saw as a deliberate deception on the part of the administration, though the White House argued that it had acted on the basis of the best information that was available at the time. Furthermore, administration officials said, Saddam Hussein presided over an evil regime, and Iraqis were surely better off now that he had been removed from power.

Many war opponents were not persuaded by such arguments, however. They focused on the thought that the administration had decided to go to war with Iraq whether or not there was supporting evidence to justify such action. Indeed, some members of the administration, especially Vice President Richard Cheney and Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz, had long advocated for the Saddam Hussein’s removal from power. One of the chief architects of the administration Iraq war policy, Wolfowitz had previously championed the idea of preemptive strikes against hostile regimes.²

Moreover, before 2001, influential conservative voices had also argued for broad American intervention in the Middle East and around the globe. The neoconservative think tank Project on the New American Century, for example, had described a scenario much like the administration’s Iraq war policy. That group, which included leading neoconservatives William Kristol and Robert Kagan, issued a report entitled *Rebuilding America’s Defenses: Strategies, Forces, and Resources for a New Century* in 2000. It laid out a

vision of a unipolar world in which the United States would be the only superpower. Accordingly, the document presented the following:

America has a vital role in maintaining peace and security in Europe, Asia, and the Middle East. If we shirk our responsibilities, we invite challenges to our fundamental interests. The history of the 20th century should have taught us that it is important to shape circumstances before crises emerge, and to meet threats before they become dire. The history of the past century should have taught us to embrace the cause of American leadership.³

Such information fueled the growing skepticism about the administration's war policies for some people. As the war had become unpopular, critics increasingly examined what had come before. They scrutinized the justifications that the White House had offered for taking bold military action in the first place. The administration had made Iraq's alleged weapons of mass destruction the centerpiece of their argument for war, but weapons of mass destruction had not been found. The administration claimed that faulty intelligence had led to erroneous predictions, but that they had otherwise acted in good faith. It later became clear that important voices in and near the administration had desired American intervention in the region before the 9/11 attacks had even occurred, however. Critics therefore wondered if this is all there was to the story. Many war opponents thought that the administration had deliberately manipulated the intelligence information in order to justify an action that the White House had already decided to take. The resulting controversies over this question raged on.

FAHRENHEIT 9/11

These suspicions and more appeared in a new documentary film from director Michael Moore in 2004. Entitled *Fahrenheit 9/11*, Moore's new film assailed the president and his actions in the wake of the terrorist attacks. As the director lays out his version of the full story in the period of time before and after September 11, an extremely unflattering picture of the president emerges. The film implies that the Bush administration had been less than forthright about many things, especially regarding supposedly mysterious dealings with Saudi oil interests. According to Moore's argument, the president's agenda was already formed prior to September 11, and the terrorist attacks were used as a pretext to carry out goals that had already been established. The wars in Afghanistan and Iraq were not, then, the spontaneous decisions they appeared to be, but were instead part of a bigger master plan.

Moore's thesis was similar to an incarnation of conspiracy theory that had come to cultural prominence in the preceding years. It suggested that powerful people and institutions could not be trusted and that major events could be manipulated to further an unseen agenda. Such ideas had frequently appeared in fictional films and among committed conspiracy theorists. Moore,

a polarizing director with a high public profile, now suggested that one such scheme had actually been carried out. He did not make these claims from an obscure Internet Web site or underground newspaper or in a film that would be seen only by a few people. Instead, his version of history appeared in mainstream movie theaters across America, often playing to large audiences. By the end of 2004, *Fahrenheit 9/11* reportedly had grossed near \$120 million, a huge sum for a documentary film.

Fahrenheit 9/11 prompted vocal reaction. The response from film reviewers and political columnists was especially strong. Reaction was mixed and often partisan. For example, writing for *The Hollywood Reporter*, Kirk Hunnicutt reported, “Michael Moore drops any pretense that he is a documentarian to pull together from many sources an angry polemic against the president. . . . There is no debate, no analysis of facts or search for historical context. Moore simply wants to blame one man and his family for the situation in Iraq the United States now finds itself in.”⁴ *The Chicago Tribune*’s Michael Wilmington also noted the one-sided approach of the film, but judged that it was “among the movies everyone should see this year.”⁵

Moore’s film was provocative, indeed. It was especially despised by the president’s supporters. It was an incendiary film and pushed the political limits of what would be accepted in mainstream movie theaters. Yet, it was far from the most extreme version that this line of thinking produced. Indeed, lurking within the story that leads from September 11 to the war in Iraq were the makings of a more shocking and more explicit new conspiracy theory. Focusing on the 9/11 attacks that triggered subsequent events, the theory suggests a radically different interpretation of these events than what appeared in mainstream news accounts and official pronouncements. Although the majority of citizens seemed not accept the new theory as of 2007, the theory’s ideas gained much publicity and notoriety.

OTHER SCREEN TREATMENTS

There are many incarnations of this new variant of conspiracy theory, but they share a focus on the events of September 11, 2001. The various versions agree that the attacks of 9/11 were not what they seemed. Indeed, the central allegation is a jolting rejection of standard accounts of the attacks. The 9/11 conspiracy theorists claim that American interests and U.S. government officials were the masterminds behind the attacks. According to this view, the events of 9/11 were staged by the conspirators in order to make it appear that an outrageous act of war had been committed against the American people. The magnitude of the event would then provide justification for bold American military responses in the Middle East and elsewhere.

To many Americans, such claims were and remain an outrage. Yet, a report published in 2006 indicated that 36 percent of Americans thought that it was “‘very likely’ or ‘somewhat likely’ that government officials either allowed the attacks to be carried out or carried out the attacks themselves.”⁶ Some

of these people are very committed to the view, and they assume that even a nonexpert could determine the truth of these claims with a close look at the evidence. (Skeptics of the 9/11 conspiracy theory obviously disagree and generally think that the theorists are seriously misreading the evidence.)

The Internet has been an especially powerful tool in promoting variations of a 9/11 conspiracy theory. Public awareness of the claims has also been heightened by outspoken media celebrities, who have used their fame to call attention to the supposed discrepancies in standard accounts of the attacks.

Indeed, the 9/11 theory makes grand claims about the attacks. Most versions question official explanations about the way in which the World Trade Center towers collapsed, suggesting that the standard account is impossible and that the buildings must have been rigged with explosives. Some accounts do not believe that the occupants of the towers died, but that they were taken away in advance. Others suggest that the Pentagon attack, in which a jetliner flew directly into the building, did not really involve an aircraft at all and that the entire event was staged. In the many versions of the theory, an astonishing array of claims is put forward.

An amateur film called *Loose Change* pulled together footage and material relating to the 9/11 attacks. It purported to demonstrate flaws in the description of the attacks that appears in standard accounts. It suggests, for example, that the damage from the jetliner crashes appears inconsistent with what is known about such crashes. *Loose Change* assembles photographs, eyewitness accounts, and other material to make the case that the official story must be wrong.⁷ The film was widely circulated among members of the 9/11 Truth Movement, a group promoting September 11 conspiracy theory ideas and facilitating the distribution of new material that supports this cause.

Even the stalwart British Broadcasting Corporation forayed into the controversy with a television program called *9/11: The Conspiracy Files*. Although its producers claimed that its purpose was to thoroughly investigate the 9/11 conspiracy claims in order to distinguish fact from fiction, it was not fully successful in achieving this aim. It provocatively presented the ideas and seemed to encourage advocates of the theory. It was widely circulated among people interested in 9/11 conspiracy theory.

To skeptics, the central claims of 9/11 conspiracy theory appear to be ridiculous. Indeed, vigorous efforts to debunk such claims emerged as the public's awareness of them grew. But such refutations seem to have little effect on committed advocates of this theory. Indeed, the multitude of variations and the constant shifts in what is claimed in the 9/11 conspiracy theory make complete refutation difficult to achieve.

From one perspective, the determined advocacy of 9/11 conspiracy theorists appears to be the result of something more than only the events of September 11, 2001. Indeed, in some ways that 9/11 conspiracy theory can be seen as a new stage in the decades-long evolution of conspiracy theory in American popular culture. It continues the tradition of conspiracy theory

in the political realm—the realm that generated conspiratorial explanations for the AIDS epidemic, the assassination of a president, and many more real events.

But in other respects, the 9/11 conspiracy theory has strong similarities to more obviously fictional sources from the screen. The most obvious point of comparison is with the film *Capricorn One*, which had depicted how a NASA mission to Mars, complete with three astronauts, could be convincingly faked. Similarly, the 9/11 conspiracy theory suggests although the World Trade Centers towers were destroyed and the Pentagon was damaged in a massive explosion, the jetliners did not cause these results. Instead, according to the theory, the buildings were rigged in advance, as if a special effects scene from an elaborate movie production. Like a number of political conspiracy screen productions—*Seven Days in May*, *The Parallax View*, and *The X-Files* among them—the 9/11 conspiracy theory suggests that dramatic events can be created and manipulated through massive efforts of deception and subterfuge. Of course, such themes have been present in the writings of theories of various extremist and fringe groups at least since the nineteenth century. But in recent years, with the explosion of conspiracy theory themed productions in popular culture media, such ideas have also been circulated widely in the general population.

In the United States, the prolonged Iraqi insurgency generated political upheaval in the United States. As the perception that the war had stalled grew, public confidence in the administration's Iraqi policy declined. The 2004 elections yielded a reelection victory for George W. Bush, but it also resulted in Democratic control of Congress. Unsurprisingly, Washington politics became more rancorous, especially with regard to the war in Iraq.

SYRIANA

The 2005 film *Syriana*, which was directed by Stephen Gahan, was released in this context. *Syriana's* executive producer was George Clooney, who also starred in it along with Matt Damon, Jeffrey Wright, and Amanda Peet. Clooney's association with the project probably brought the political underpinnings of the story more partisan attention than it might otherwise have received. A popular actor who often appeared on the cover of weekly entertainment magazines and tabloids, his outspoken endorsement of liberal political causes was also well known.

The story in *Syriana* was reflective of the confusing and sometimes perplexed mood of American voters. Indeed, one reviewer noted that it "is the kind of serious-minded project one is predisposed to embrace, especially those who believe the U.S. government is engaged in a devious partnership with conglomerates to dominate the world."⁸ Clooney plays CIA agent Bob Barnes, who becomes entangled in a complicated story involving the intersection of political intrigue, corrupt oil business, and terrorism. Barnes

is an experienced agent and believes in the importance of his work for the intelligence agency. He uncovers massive corruption and deception—some of which even emanates from the White House—and is even tortured by men who had once been allies. Still, he cannot quite believe it when his CIA superiors abandon him.

The narrative of *Syriana* has many ambiguous and inconclusive elements. It is far from a clear-cut story. But rather than a filmmaking deficiency, here the element of uncertainty and the muddled portrayal of global politics are consistent with the film's overall purpose. *Syriana* is a metaphor for the real world of global politics, which, for much of the general public, often seems to be no more comprehensible. The Bob Barnes character, in this reading of the film, is in some respects a surrogate for the average person. He has trusted the goals and motives of his country and thought that the world of oil and politics was essentially as it appears. He finds it difficult to accept that he has been deceived or that his country, represented here symbolically by various officials and agencies.

Syriana is not so much a movie depiction of conspiracy theory as the representation of the world that conspiracy has created. Conspiracy theory in this film—like conspiracy theory that had been seeping into the mainstream of American consciousness for several decades—is not a function or reflection of fear and paranoia only.

CONSPIRACY THEORY AND DISAFFECTION

Upon examining the ways that conspiracy theory has been represented since the tragedy of September 11, it is clear that the concept has changed since its use during the Cold War. In popular culture forms (such as film and television) and in the realm of mainstream American politics, the proliferation of conspiracy theory that came about with the emergence of the Cold War was almost always associated with the fear and anxieties of those times. With the seeming political paranoia of the McCarthy era, the connections between conspiracy theory and the broader political environment became unmistakably clear. For a long time thereafter, standard interpretations of conspiracy theory, as a cultural phenomenon, continued to stress that it was largely the manifestation of this underlying mood.

Critics of conspiracy theory often complain of its potentially damaging and corrosive influences on society. One scholarly view is that “social scientists scorn conspiracy theory—big time. Likewise, they scoff at the conspiracy politics in popular films.”⁹ Another scholar suggested, “The greatest danger we face in taking the risks of conspiracy theory seriously is a divisive, society wide paranoia.”¹⁰ Comments such as these probably represent the mainstream of academic thinking about conspiracy theory as something that is detached from reality and that represents an interpretation of world events that is highly unlikely, and sometimes absurd.

A common view, then, is that the spread of conspiracy theory is detrimental because it could cause the public to become paranoid, fearful, or some similar state. But this idea is based on assumptions that may no longer be accurate. If the record of conspiracy theory in the popular cultural media of film and television is any indication, over recent decades the concept has often drifted quite far from its Cold War-era fear-and-paranoia origins.

Indeed, while conspiracy theory with such underpinnings has occasionally resurfaced, in recent decades conspiracy theory often appears to have different underpinnings. It is disaffection, not paranoia, which appears most prominently. Instead of an expression of fear, this disaffection suggests varying degrees of alienation from some aspects of contemporary life.

PARANOIA, CYNICISM, AND DISAFFECTION

As found in American popular and political cultures since the late 1940s, the conspiracy theory theme has passed through at least three evolutionary stages. At first, the theme emerged from the paranoia, fear, and anxiety that are so often mentioned. The external threat of the Soviet Union and the prospect of nuclear annihilation found expression in a vein of conspiracy theory that represented this widespread interpretation of the world. On screen, this articulation of conspiracy theory can be found in *Big Jim McLain*, *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, *The Manchurian Candidate*, or any of a host of other movies in which the theme was represented.

A second stage of evolution saw the conspiracy theory theme transform from an expression of fear and paranoia to one that reflected cynicism. This came about as the focus of conspiracy theory changed from a foreign, external threat to one that was a domestic, internal threat. The enemy was no longer from the outside; it came from the inside. And with this change in focus, the underpinning of fear and paranoia was slowly replaced by one of increasing cynicism.

The film *Seven Days in May* foreshadowed some of this change with its story of a government takeover plot originating in the Pentagon. The threat was relocated to within the American system, but the film did not exude the degree of cynicism that would be found a decade later. In the end, the system works and can mostly be trusted. By the mid-1970s, a film such as *All the President's Men*, which repeated the true story of Watergate, more overtly reflected the cynical streak that had become a regular feature of American politics. The film showed that the government—or some of it, anyway—could be very untrustworthy, but at the same time showed that Americans institutions, in this case the news media, were still reliable. Later in 1970s, the fictional narrative of *Capricorn One* went much further in portraying a conspiracy theory based on cynicism. Its story showed government agencies that would engage in massive public deception and resort to the use of unwarranted deadly force in order to maintain the secrecy of its scheme. Here, though the news media has not lost all of its luster, it is easily fooled

and does not, for most of the film, seem up to the task of shining a light on the true inner workings of a government that could veer into conspiratorial actions.

During the 1980s, conspiratorial thinking became more overtly directed at the heart of American institutions, which were frequently shown as untrustworthy, ineffective, occasionally criminal, and prone to covering up their misdeeds. The theme was widely scattered across a wide array of screen productions. It appeared prominently in movies as varied as *Rambo*, *Silkwood*, and *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*.

By the 1990s, the cultural representation of conspiracy theory reflected not only cynicism, but also a strong sense of disaffection from at least some parts of the American society and its politics. This is not really a surprising development in most respects. There had been many indicators, after all, that a substantial segment of the population had become disengaged in civic participation. Voter apathy in the United States has been a persistent problem, for example. And by the 1990s, there was a widespread sense that there is not much use in engaging with the institutions of society since they do not seem to reflect the interests of ordinary people anyway.

On screen, such productions as *JFK*, *The X-Files*, and *The Truman Show* mostly took for granted the cynical side of conspiracy theory. Many other films, such as 1999's *The Matrix*, wove themes with conspiracy theory origins into their narratives that focused on other topics. Their portrayals of conspiracies of enormous scale and complexity suggest not only that some parts of society should not be trusted, but that engaging with them at all is almost pointless. Once the scale reaches mammoth proportions, only luck and good fortune will save a person.

Some people may always be attracted to conspiracy theory as a literal way of explaining parts of their lives or the events in the world around them. In some matters, such theories may even turn out to be true. But the pervasiveness of conspiracy theory in contemporary American culture seems to reflect something more than attempts to provide comprehensive explanations of these sorts.

Taken as a metaphor, rather than as literal truth, however, conspiracy theory can be a powerful lens. For those looking through it, this lens can make sense of a world that is ambiguous and often confusing and cruel. Indeed, as it has become a pervasive feature in modern life, the example of conspiracy theory suggests that belief can precede experience. The conspiracy theory lens stands as a readymade template through which to interpret troubling or otherwise inexplicable events. One does not examine evidence and then construct a theory of conspiracy, therefore. Through the conspiracy theory lens, one sees that a person has little power or influence in the face of much greater forces, seen and unseen.

But in the world of the twenty-first century, it is no longer shocking to suggest that complex forces, which sometimes remain unidentified, influence

and shape the world and individual lives. In its metaphorical sense, conspiracy theory is a way of talking about these forces.

A CHANGING METAPHOR

Conspiracy theory is still a shorthand way to see the world, but it has been so frequently invoked that its power as an explanation has become diluted. For those people seeking to sound an alarm bell about what they think is an actual large-scale conspiracy, the very label “conspiracy theory” chips away at credibility. Now interpreted as a metaphor, the suggestion of conspiracy theory as a literal phenomenon often receives little consideration.

Conspiracy theories about many different subjects abound. They offer explanations about the coordinated scheming of mysterious forces that try to control worldly affairs. But the cultural idea of conspiracy theory, as a metaphor for the world of experience, has largely replaced these more literal ideas. Indeed, frequent and casual use of the label has stripped the idea of most of its literal meaning. Still, it has been a durable concept in popular culture and politics. Undoubtedly, future screen productions will continue to reflect changes in ideas about conspiracy theory. How it will be incarnated in the future remains to be seen.