

CONSPIRACY RISING

**Conspiracy Thinking and
American Public Life**

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Contents

<i>Introduction</i>	ix
1. I Want to Believe	1
2. The Big Three: The Knights Templar, the Freemasons, and the Bavarian Illuminati	19
3. From Conspiracy to Superconspiracy, from Europe to America: Nesta Webster and Modern Conspiracy Thinking	43
4. Conspiracy in America?	69
5. 9/11	95
6. Extremism and Apathy: The Conspiratorial Paradox	109
<i>Notes</i>	125
<i>Bibliography</i>	151
<i>Index</i>	165

Introduction

*An evil group of men has always wanted to rule the entire world. In the past conquest has failed to achieve this, due to the resulting outrage and awareness of the enemy. In our present time an evil group are trying a subtle but effective way to rule. This is to gradually infiltrate and delude the masses into accepting their ideas. Such subtle gradualism, along with distraction (such as unnecessary work, study, entertainment and sport) is being used effectively. Few people will therefore be aware of what is going on.*¹

—Richard Hole, “True Conspiracies”

Today, talk of conspiracy pervades water-cooler discussions, Internet sites, and popular entertainment. Conspiracy theories exist that purport to explain matters as trivial as sports and entertainment, as well as some of the most significant economic and political issues of our times. Websites warn us that if any NFL game seems “too good to be true,” it is because the game has been fixed;² that Paul McCartney’s death in a 1966 car crash means that a look-alike has replaced him for the past 45 years;³ and that perhaps the notion that we need to drink eight glasses of water per day is a fabrication to encourage us to drink bottled water.⁴ More significantly, conspiracy theories have also come to pervade our political lives.

Some of the most significant of these conspiracy theories challenge political legitimacy and therefore have a potentially serious impact on the health of democratic political regimes. The American “Birther” movement, for example, claims—despite thorough evidence to the contrary—that Barack Obama is not an American citizen, and therefore ineligible to serve as president of the United States. The circulation of these types of theories has a political impact. A CNN poll in July of 2010 found that only 42 percent of Americans were certain that Obama was born in the United States.⁵

x Introduction

Whether or not you are a believer or a skeptic, it is difficult to escape discussions of conspiracy. They are everywhere. For believers, the prevalence of conspiratorial warnings is evidence of the veracity of their beliefs. We are living in special times. It is up to us to act now to prevent the conspirators from coming to power and preserve what is left of our liberty. In what we are told is the most important battle in human history, it is we and our era that are most critical. From warnings that a secret group of Jewish bankers is plotting a New World Order, to arguments that Barack Obama is in league with the Illuminati, and his presidency the final stage in installing totalitarian socialism in America, conspiracy theorists tell us that it is we and our times that are decisive. Can this be? Are we all that stands between life as we know it and an apocalyptic hell? If so, we had better join in the fight.

Those less inclined to accept a conspiratorial worldview are likely to scoff at such dire warnings, and even mock those who believe them.⁶ The “Glenn Beck Conspiracy Theory Generator,” for example, promises “Fair and Balanced Paranoia, Delivered on Demand.”⁷ Using common conspiracy villains, themes, and goals, along with various slogans of the political right and other miscellaneous terms, it generates slightly skewed conspiracy theories that fit surprisingly well into the conspiracy oeuvre. One such theory, for example, warns, “There are crypto-Muslim sleeper agents in every part of the government who are releasing flying monkeys as we speak to help them enslave you in FEMA camps.”⁸ Similarly, a wide variety of blogs criticize Hillary Clinton’s use of conspiracy theory to defend herself.⁹ Criticisms of Clinton’s claims are almost as prevalent on the right, as are the conspiracy theories of the left. Indeed, Clinton’s claims are also sometimes used for comedic effect. In 2008, for example, in attempting to explain some unusual behavior, Alec Baldwin complained that he had been the victim of a “vast right-wing conspiracy.”¹⁰ Many nonbelievers’ responses suggest that they view such beliefs as a subject for humor rather than as politically significant in any way.

This book challenges both conspiratorial ideas and those who dismiss them as trivial. Instead, it considers conspiratorial belief systems as inherently meaningful, not as true assessments of reality, but instead, as representations of a community’s experiences and concerns. In their architecture, choice of conspiratorial villains and victims, and in their view of the world’s future, these theories can tell us much about the nature of political life. Fundamentally, conspiracy theories concern political power, and their popularity during particular periods of human history is related

to shifts in the distribution of power, both within states, and in their international relations. Conspiracy theories therefore deserve reasonable and serious political analysis because they provide insight into how believers perceive the ways in which political power is used, and because these perceptions can influence their actions.

The book begins with an analysis of conspiracy thinking and a consideration of its different forms. There is an important distinction to be made regarding the ways in which the dominant conspiracy discourse has changed in the last 100 years. Discussions of conspiracy once focused on specific political events, for example, the assassination of John F. Kennedy or the death of Elvis Presley, and while these have continued, today we are perhaps more likely to hear that a conspiracy exists that is working to dominate every aspect of our existence. Typically these “superconspiracies” involve a number of secret groups, working in concert, and include such villains as the Illuminati, Freemasons, or Knights Templar. Some of the most popular conspiracy theories today, those which concern the New World Order and/or the North American Union, are of this type. The Illuminati, Freemasons, and Templars figure prominently in these efforts. There are good reasons why these groups are selected as the evil powers working to control the world. A consideration of the documented history of the Big Three conspiratorial villains provides insights into the reasons why they are often selected as the secret controlling forces of world history.

How did superconspiracies become such a popular way of understanding economics and politics? Interestingly, the person most responsible for this transformation of conspiracy thinking is Nesta Webster, a British woman who developed her theories in the first half of the 20th century. Webster was convinced that the world’s secret societies worked in concert, aiming to destroy British civilization. Her ideas found a significant audience during her lifetime; her books went into multiple editions, and she became a right-wing celebrity, running her own political information center in central London.

The majority of Webster’s books remain in print today, and her influence can be found particularly in the conspiracy theories of the American far right (including the Militia and Patriot movements). Webster’s life and ideas are discussed in chapter 3, and they suggest an important theme of this book. The nature of the economic, social, and political upheaval of Webster’s lifetime conditioned her vision of a world torn by an intense and ultimate conflict between evil conspirators and their victims, a battle brought

to a head by Britain's loss of hegemony, and the forces of globalization. In a world where it was becoming increasingly obvious that events in one state could affect others, conspiracy discourse accommodated that new reality by expanding the number of its villains, and the scope of their reach.

This argument is considered in more detail in chapter 4, which examines what international relations scholars call "long cycles" of global politics. At the conclusion of each long cycle, a period during which the hegemonic power of the era is declining in its ability to maintain order in the international system, there appears to be a spike in the popularity of conspiracy theory. As the United Provinces declined, conspiracy theory first emerged as a mode of political explanation. As Britain began to lose its capacity to dominate the world system, conspiracy theory became a popular form of discourse once more, and in the new globalized world, appeared in a new globalized form. As the United States' capacity to order the international system has declined, conspiracy theory has become a powerful force in American politics.

The events of September 11, 2001, were a stark and tragic reminder that in the 21st-century world, political will could be violently expressed internationally, in unexpected ways. Relying on an airport security network that had perhaps grown complacent, and Western expectations that terrorists would want to preserve their own lives, 19 hijackers used American airliners, in American cities, to strike at symbols of American global power: the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. Passengers ensured that the third airplane—likely aimed at another Washington target, the Capitol or the White House—would not reach its target. They forced it into a Pennsylvania field. In scope and power these actions had no precedent, and for a nation historically protected from such violence by its geography and military power, they were shocking.

Almost immediately, the search for explanations began, and for many, the only rationale could possibly be that the government must have known in advance of the attacks, and perhaps was even responsible for them. For others, the attack was one component of a Zionist plot to control the world. "Didn't you know," said one of my students about a week later, "that 4,000 Jews didn't show for work at the World Trade Center on September 11?" He was not alone in this outrageous belief; the idea that a secret network had informed its allies of the impending disaster still circulates on the Internet. Chapter 5 considers why, in the wake of such a human tragedy, so many people, including thousands of Americans, would conclude that the

U.S. government, and/or a religious minority, would wish to kill innocent citizens.

The prevalence of conspiracy theory as a mode of political discourse during particular historical periods suggests that it is a response to uncertain conditions. Chapter 6 makes clear that there are particular dangers inherent in its structure. Conspiracy theory fosters two paradoxical tendencies: apathy and political extremism. Both of these propensities are unhealthy for the political community. Conspiracy thinking encourages believers to view the political world in a dualistic frame. It emphasizes a distinction between “us” and “them,” and therefore promotes a hostile political environment. Opponents become enemies. Politics, however, is not just about speech, it is also about action. For this reason, conspiracy theories can also be used to justify violence. While political apathy may not seem to be as great a threat, within democracies it too is problematic. If citizens are not vigilant and/or choose not to participate in the democratic process, government may overstep its limits and violate their rights and freedoms. By their very belief that the world is dominated by a conspiracy bent on destroying their freedom, conspiracy believers may in fact play a vital role in allowing their government to engage in just such a violation.

This project began in the Cambridge University Library, where I came across Nesta Webster’s many books, and was moved by her life story to pursue the question that has driven this research: why do people choose to believe in conspiracy theories? In beginning to answer that query, this research was supported by a grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, and a fellowship at Clare Hall, University of Cambridge. As the project expanded, it was furthered by my tenure as the Stephen Jarislowsky Chair in Religion and Conflict, a position which provided the necessary time and resources to complete this work. Over the course of this project, I have also had the assistance of a number of graduate research students; Jennifer Jannuska, Craig Brannagan, Jack MacClennan, and Herb Simms are deserving of special mention. I am also indebted to Paul Green, whose redrawing of Nesta Webster’s *Chart of the World Revolution* artfully clarifies her arguments. Any errors or omissions in this book are my own responsibility.

For many reasons, this project took a number of years to come to fruition. I owe a great debt to many people, including a very patient editor and colleagues who tolerated my intellectual meanderings on this topic. Thanks are also due to my friends and extended family, who were similarly long-suffering.

xiv Introduction

I am most grateful, however, for the support of my immediate family, who endured far too many dinner-table discussions concerning conspiracy theories and politics than anyone should have to, and did so with great patience. In this as in all else, I am indebted to John Sutcliffe, whose kindness, generosity, and sense of humor help me find joy every day, and to Rory and Iain, who question everything, and know that our world is one of infinite possibilities.

Chapter 1

I Want to Believe

The Al Qaeda attacks of September 11, 2001, transformed American politics; they changed the federal government's domestic and international policy agendas, individual citizens' sense of identity and security, and even the nation's conception of itself and its place in the world. The Global Language Monitor, an organization that analyzes and tracks language usage, notes that 9/11 also changed American political discourse. New words and phrases, such as "Ground Zero," entered the lexicon. Notably, too, the tone of political discussion became increasingly vitriolic. Opponents were openly called liars and even compared to Fascists. The Monitor comments that it is as if, "in the face of a nearly invisible, constantly morphing, enemy, we have turned the attack inward, upon ourselves, and our institutions."¹ As Americans and the world came to terms with the events of September 11, a significant minority questioned the government's account of that day. Among the alternative explanations that appeared was the assertion that it was in fact the U.S. government itself that had initiated an attack on its own citizens. In a 2006 Scripps Howard poll, 36 percent of those surveyed stated that they believed the American government participated in the attacks or knew about them, and did nothing to stop their occurrence.² In a radio interview, actor Martin Sheen commented, "Up until last year, I was very dubious...I did not want to believe that my government could possibly be involved in such a thing, I could not live in a country that I thought could do that—that would be the ultimate betrayal. However, there have been so many revelations that now I have my doubts."³ How and why could citizens of a democratic state believe that their own government would murder or allow others to destroy them?

This book argues that the roots of these kinds of beliefs lie much deeper than 2001. Americans' mistrust of government goes back to the nation's

2 Conspiracy Rising

founding. The United States is, after all, a country founded in a revolution against government excess. Conspiracy thinking itself also has deep roots within the U.S. body politic. New, however, is the extent to which American public discourse is now permeated by the language of conspiracy.

Conspiracy theories, present on the fringe of American politics since the nation's founding, became an accepted part of popular discourse in the late 20th century. While once these views might have been considered the harmless and eccentric beliefs of a few, now they are neither. Paradoxically, they foster both political apathy and its opposite, political extremism, and significant numbers of people believe they provide reasonable explanations for economic, social, and political events. Talk of conspiracy is everywhere, from Tea Party assertions about Obama's birthplace⁴ to accusations regarding George W. Bush's political agenda and concern that the Federal Emergency Management Agency has established secret concentration camps to imprison American citizens.⁵ The history of this way of thinking about politics has much to tell us about our current political environment and its cleavages. This book is therefore not an effort to assess the truth of any of these conspiracies. Instead, it reflects upon the history of conspiracy theory as the history of a particular way of thinking about the world. It also examines why conspiracy theory has become more prominent within the United States in recent years.

Conspiracy Thinking

The word "conspire" literally means "to breathe together," and its connotation—men and women invisibly but intimately connected—fits the word's usage across the centuries. Historically, the term referred to individuals coming together to engage in a "criminal, illegal, or reprehensible" plot.⁶ Its usage, however, changed slightly but definitively in the 20th century. Rather than focusing on a small band of conspirators, the term instead came to refer most commonly to the belief that some covert agency "political in motivation and oppressive in intent" was directing world affairs.⁷ Today, the word "conspiracy" most likely conjures up in our imagination the image of a small cabal of individuals that somehow controls the political and economic world, and might also manipulate every aspect of our lives. While these two types of conspiracy thinking are related, one of the arguments of this book is that the distinction between them is meaningful, and that the growing importance of superconspiracies is particularly significant.

Today, conspiracy theories concerning single events still exist, and single events are often the subject of a multiplicity of such theories. Marilyn Monroe's suicide, for example, fostered the development of many theories that contradict the official autopsy results, and subsequent investigations by the authorities. Many of them name Robert Kennedy as the central figure responsible for her death. Each of those theories identifies different figures (Marilyn's psychiatrist, the Secret Service, the FBI, and even the Communists) as carrying out his plans. Other theories suggest that J. Edgar Hoover ordered her murder. Still others claim she was killed by the Mafia working with the Kennedy family, aiming to hurt the Kennedys or aiming to help the Kennedys.⁸ An entire body of literature exists, for example, that suggests that Marilyn was murdered because the Kennedy brothers had told her the real truth about UFOs and Roswell. One such theorist writes, "If Monroe was indeed aware of President Kennedy's [*sic*] secret visit to see downed alien life and technology, and was about to blow the whistle, then she was a security threat. She directly jeopardized the Kennedy brothers [*sic*] efforts to restore direct Presidential oversight of extraterrestrial related issues. The stakes couldn't be higher."⁹

In contrast, "superconspiracies" identify a single malevolent force at work behind a network of organizations attempting to consolidate control of all meaningful political and economic activity.¹⁰ Typically, they identify the shadowy masterminds behind these plans as mysterious groups such as the Knights Templar, Freemasons, or the Illuminati. Every superconspiracy identifies its own combination of conspirators; a small sample of the most popular of these includes specific individuals in the American government, Saudi oil interests, Jews, lizards in the center of the earth, extraterrestrial spirits invading human bodies, Osama bin Laden's Masonic connections, and a business lobby of "Freemasons loyal to the Zionists."¹¹ Superconspiracies have a life in mainstream political discourse that is both curious and profoundly troubling. A belief that individuals conspired to cause a single event may indicate a lack of information or perhaps a moderate and healthy skepticism, but belief in a superconspiracy suggests that perhaps the individual concerned has lost his sense of personal and political efficacy.

These two forms of conspiracy belief are not, however, clearly distinct. Groh suggests that modes of historical explanation exist on a spectrum, with conspiracy at one end and science at the other.¹² It is possible, he argues, that the degree to which individuals resort to conspiracy to explain the world also exists on a spectrum. Some individuals might use it in a very

4 Conspiracy Rising

limited way, while others might use it to explain quite simply everything, a view that implies that there are some conspiracy beliefs that are not as harmful as others. In 1997, for example, Diana, Princess of Wales, was killed in a terrible Paris car crash, along with her boyfriend, Dodi Al-Fayed; the official French inquiry found that the driver of their car had consumed a significant amount of alcohol and was driving above the speed limit, and that his passengers were not wearing seat belts. A number of individuals, including Mohamed Al-Fayed, Dodi's grieving father, claimed that "the British Establishment" wanted Diana and Dodi dead. He complained that the inquests were incomplete and inaccurate: "The jury have found that it wasn't just the paparazzi who caused the crash, but unidentified following vehicles. Who they are and what they were doing in Paris is still a mystery."¹³ Conspiracy theorists have pounced upon Al-Fayed's observations. A limited conspiratorial interpretation of these events might be that Diana had "finally had enough of the Windsors" and was assassinated before she could reveal their darkest secrets.¹⁴ A more extreme and problematic conspiratorial view is that "the death of Diana was engineered by the satanic thirteen interrelated family bloodlines collectively known as the Illuminati and that the thirteenth pillar [of the tunnel] was deliberately selected as the point of impact."¹⁵ This is a significantly expanded conspiracy theory that involves the British and French Secret Services, by implication the British and French governments, as well as the Illuminati and the Freemasons, secret organizations that in this view are capable of orchestrating the broad sweep of world history, down to its finest details. Here, the first type of conspiracy thinking suggests a kind of extreme suspicion of the British monarchy, and in the case of Mohamed Al-Fayed, a father's grief. The second type evidences faith in unseen forces of history that can somehow control the details of everyday existence, down to which pillar a speeding car hits in a Paris tunnel. It implies a particularly pathological way of understanding history and politics.

Barkun contends that while more limited conspiracy beliefs may seem harmless, there is no safe conspiracy theory because contemporary conspiracy theories evidence a "dynamic of expansion." Accepting one such theory inclines one to accept another. This process means that one moves from the explanation of one event to eventually arrive at a "superconspiracy," the view that a single, all-powerful, evil force is directing numerous conspiracies that are hierarchically linked together and directed.¹⁶

These arguments are supported by surveys of conspiracy believers. In 1994, Ted Goertzel found that people who believe in one conspiracy theory are likely to believe in others, and that those theories do not have to be thematically or logically related.¹⁷ Goertzel's survey questioned respondents regarding theories as diverse as: "the American government deliberately put drugs into the inner city communities"; "the Japanese are deliberately conspiring to destroy the American economy"; and "Ronald Reagan and George Bush conspired with the Iranians so that the American hostages would not be released until after the 1980 elections."¹⁸ His findings are supported by two more recent studies. A 1999 study of university students found that those who had adopted specific conspiratorial theories did not just believe in one conspiracy; they believed in an average of 5.7 conspiracies.¹⁹ These conspiracies were unrelated, and extremely diverse, including arguments that the United Nations is taking over the United States, that the American government has engaged in cover-ups of alien landings, that water fluoridation is a conspiracy, and that a cabal of Jews has taken control of the banking system.²⁰ A more recent British study made a similar finding. Following September 11, 2001, researchers found that one of the principal traits of those who believed the events of that day were the work of conspirators was belief in other conspiracy theories.²¹ That is, "believing that John F. Kennedy was not killed by a lone gunman, or that the Apollo moon landings were staged, increases the chances that an individual will believe in 9/11 conspiracy theories."²² The authors of both studies point out that conspiracy theories provide easily accessible explanations for events that might threaten an individual's belief system.

For Barkun, these types of links are problematic. He argues that as conspiracy beliefs expand, so does believers' perception of the domain of evil. The number of conspiracy participants and their powers increase. An apparently benign belief can be one step toward the acceptance of a more malevolent conspiracy theory. Indeed, Barkun points out that many members of the UFO subculture have come to believe that the explanations for history and politics provided in the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* are true.²³ At gatherings of the militia movement, for example, the *Protocols* are openly supported.²⁴

The document known as the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* is a prominent anti-Semitic conspiracy document, and for that reason, it is worth considering briefly here. Written by Russia's czarist secret police sometime before World War I, it is perhaps the world's most famous forgery. The *Protocols*

6 Conspiracy Rising

allegedly documents a secret meeting of Jewish leaders who are planning to take over the world and institute totalitarian control over every aspect of human existence.²⁵ Despite the fact that the document is a complete fabrication, it was published across Europe and Asia as a true account. In the United States, Henry Ford sponsored its publication, and it sold hundreds of thousands of copies.²⁶ As Barkun suggests, a most notable feature of the *Protocols* is its adaptability and malleability; from its first appearance onward, it has morphed into a variety of forms (linking various combinations of secret societies to the Jews' supposed nefarious schemes). In 2002, for example, Egyptian television aired a 41-part television series that dramatized the forged document. Every episode began with the same introduction:

Two thousand years ago the Jewish Rabbis established an international government aiming at maintaining the world under its control and suppressing it under the Talmudic commands, and totally isolating them from all of the people. Then the Jews started to incite wars and conflicts, while those countries disclaimed them. They falsely pretended to be persecuted, awaiting their saviour, the Messiah, who will terminate the revenge against the Goyim that their God, Jehovah, started.²⁷

In the architecture of superconspiracy theories, the *Protocols* provides a readily accessible link to anti-Semitism.

Believers in superconspiracies are also likely to be more rigid in their beliefs than those who adopt only single-event conspiracy theories. The scope of a superconspiracy means that the final conflict believers envision can only be concluded with an “Armageddon-like” battle.²⁸ In addition, they are less likely to give up their beliefs. Their belief system is not just one of many that compete in the marketplace of ideas, but the expression of absolute truth.²⁹ The internal construction of all conspiracy theories is hyper-rational and effectively impossible to disprove. This is particularly true of superconspiracies that purport to explain everything. All actors and events are active in the conspiracy; events that appear not to fit its pattern actually do, but in hidden ways.

As Barkun points out, accepting a conspiracy is ultimately not a judgment based on proof, it is a leap of faith.³⁰ When they are considered in this way, conspiracy theories resemble religious doctrines. They identify a hidden power that is moving history toward its conclusion, and ultimately they rely on believers' faith—their conviction—rather than scientific

evidence. In the words of Matthew Gray, conspiracism is therefore “the act of developing and sustaining a discourse, usually a counter-discourse, that challenges conventional or accepted explanations for events, and that uses weak, flawed, or fallacious logic, seeks to convince through rhetoric and repetition rather than analytical rigor and most often aims to develop a theory that is broad, even universal in scope.”³¹

Barkun argues that all conspiracy theories share three characteristics. They assert: (1) that the world is governed by design and purpose, and therefore there is no accident or coincidence; (2) that “nothing is as it seems,” and therefore appearances cannot be trusted; and (3) that “everything is connected,” and therefore even those entities that may on the surface appear to be diametrically opposed in ideology or political goals are working in concert.³² In other words, the architecture of conspiracy belief systems reassures believers that their lives are meaningful and that they exist in a meaningful universe. All conspiracy theories suggest that real power is exercised in hidden ways, and that even those who appear to wield significant political and economic influence—the president of the United States, or the Al-Fayed family, for example—may be its victims. Likewise, conspiracy theories identify unusual and hidden alliances among political actors. Prior to the end of the Cold War, for instance, the American Liberty Lobby suggested that Communists and international bankers were in league to transform the world’s governments to Communist dictatorships; adherents argued that Communism, while purporting to elevate the masses, in fact served the interest of international financiers.³³ Adapting their message for the times, the group’s publications now argue that the bankers are in league with the American government to cover up the extent of Alaska’s oil reserves: “The United States has more oil reserves than Saudi Arabia but this happy though shocking information has been covered up for years. The wells have been drilled, it’s merely a matter of turning on the faucets to supply America’s needs for 200 years.”³⁴

Another example of the startling connections sometimes made within conspiracy theories can be found in Dr. Boyd Graves’s contention that at the height of the Cold War, American and Soviet scientists cooperated to create the Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) to use against “undesirable” populations.³⁵ Related to this, Graves also argues that the American government discovered the cure for AIDS in 1997 (patent number 5676977) but has not allowed it to be manufactured and released because as yet, an insufficient number of people have died.³⁶

8 Conspiracy Rising

For believers, counterintuitive alliances such as exist in Graves's theories provide evidence of the hidden nature of power. The conspirators are clever and able to pursue world domination in innovative ways, utilizing for example a ruse as complex as the Cold War to mask their plans. For nonbelievers, however, these alliances may seem extremely unlikely. Would Western business elites really cooperate with Communists in order to create dictatorships? Would the American government conceal oil wealth from its own population? Would the Soviet Union and the United States cooperate to create a deadly virus and delay releasing its cure? For conspiracists, the answer to these questions is always yes. In the view of the late Mae Brussell, for example, John Lennon's assassination was a complex conspiracy:

His death was a well-constructed plot that involved careful manipulation of Mark David Chapman through hypnosis and mind control, starting with anti-Beatles propaganda when he became a Fundamentalist Christian. The church sucked him in, then the CIA took over. During Chapman's travels to London, Hawaii, Israel, Hong Kong and Korea, he was in the specific cities where the people identified with the Kennedy assassination all have bases. Why Lennon? The Reagan administration intends to make war on various soils, and John Lennon's energy was the greatest force for peace demonstrations. It was their desire to prevent a repeat of the demonstrations of the '60s.³⁷

Within conspiracy belief systems, power operates in these unusual ways. In so doing, believers argue, it can successfully operate and continue undetected. In their view, if you do not see these connections, it is because you are part of the conspiracy, or because you have been duped.

A multitude of ancient and modern conspiracy theories therefore exists, purporting to explain everything from the death of Elvis to the American invasion of Iraq. This host of theories provides a veritable smorgasbord of explanations for politics and history, and within it, villains, victims, events, and the power that links them can be combined in a wide variety of ways. Believers can select the items they prefer, and link them together in whatever way they choose. The rich panoply of conspiracy theories suggests that it is perhaps the very idea of conspiracy and the structure of the belief system itself that draw so many people to this way of thinking.

A worldview wherein the personification of evil exists, working covertly, and exercising its power in a systematic way might be frightening to most of us. To others, however, it is reassuring. The world can be a terrifying place.

The evening news is rife with real horrors: terrorist acts, wars, and natural disasters. Random cruelty and injustice may be less threatening if they are understood to be the product of a known, identifiable enemy. Conspiracy theories provide believers with knowledge (and therefore a degree of control), an enemy against which to fight, and a purpose that is linked to a grand historical narrative.³⁸ As Jeffrey Bale comments, conspiracy theories explain why “bad things are happening to good people,” and in so doing, they reaffirm a believer’s potential to exert control over the future.³⁹

While this aspect of conspiracy belief is part of its appeal, it also suggests a most important flaw in this way of thinking. While it is certainly true that elites and individuals can have an impact on politics and history, it is far from clear that they can know and direct the very course of world events. The historian Dieter Groh writes, “Men make their history themselves, but that which results as history is not *their* history in the sense that it is what they intended.”⁴⁰ Because human beings exist in situations that are neither standardized, nor under our control, we cannot develop rules of action from them that would allow us to—literally—make the future.⁴¹ Every human action can have both intended and unintended consequences. From the perspective of politics, the assumption that history can be controlled is also problematic. Hannah Arendt writes that the fundamental quality of human political life is natality, “the birth of new men and the new beginning, the action they are capable of by virtue of being born.”⁴² With every moment, new possibilities for the world emerge. They are unpredictable, and their implications are unknown: “The fact that man is capable of action means that the unexpected can be expected from him, that he is able to perform what is infinitely improbable.”⁴³ For most historians and political theorists, therefore, conspiracy theories are fundamentally unsound. They presuppose that there exists a reason that is active in history, and that its purpose is knowable.

A second general error in the logic of conspiracy theories is their equation of coincidence with a meaningful plan. It is, for example, apparently possible to fold a \$20 bill in such a way as to create a picture of the World Trade Center and Pentagon attacks of September 11, 2001, and apparently to fold other bills to show the sequence of events that day. Is this evidence that the government planned the attacks? Some people think so.⁴⁴ It is difficult to explain, however, why the government might telegraph a covert plan to commit mass murder and subsequently invade Afghanistan and Iraq on dollar bills. It does not seem like a reasonable action for a government that

10 Conspiracy Rising

wished to keep its plans secret from the American people (to say nothing of why any individual might think that currency origami might be the best way to learn about government policy). While true believers might claim “there are no coincidences,”⁴⁵ a lack of evidence supporting these arguments makes it difficult for outsiders to believe this is the result of anything but chance.

Similarly, as Gray points out, political acts may be similarly interpreted.⁴⁶ In the context of the 2003 Iraq War, for example, then President George Bush’s changing explanations for the invasion appeared curious. Was he covering the tracks of a major conspiratorial plot, or adjusting his story for the sake of political expediency? In the summer of 2010, President Obama found himself the center of controversy when he commented on a proposal to build an Islamic center and mosque near the site of Ground Zero. He later emphasized that he was not expressing support for the proposal but was instead only remarking on the fact that the United States Constitution provided for freedom of religious expression.⁴⁷ Were his comments evidence that he is in fact a Muslim, conspiratorially hiding his religious faith? A poll in August 2010 suggested that despite his history of church attendance, an increasing number of Americans were confused about his religious faith, and close to one in five Americans believe he is a Muslim.⁴⁸ Obama must balance dozens of interests on this question, and as a politician, perhaps a critical point is the importance of midterm elections and his own eventual electoral success. In addition, however, he must also consider the impact of his comments on the families of 9/11 victims, U.S. foreign policy, American Muslims, the Muslim Brotherhood, debates within Islam concerning the political meaning of that faith, and the nature of American international influence in the 21st century, to name only a few of the groups and debates upon which his remarks will have a meaningful impact.⁴⁹ Politicians frequently adjust their rhetoric and change their explanations as new information and/or public opinion develops. Such situations are the product of a lack of planning or the inability of individuals to control a situation, rather than evidence of a complete control over human history.

David Aaronovitch argues that this tendency of conspiracy theories to assume deliberate agency where chance or accident is more likely the cause should be understood as an inherent aspect of conspiracy thinking. He points out that it is simply more reasonable to believe that in 1969 men actually landed on the moon than to believe that thousands of people engaged in an elaborate plan to construct, maintain, and sustain a

conspiratorial deception.⁵⁰ In this context, he comments that Occam's razor reminds us of another way of considering this problem. Aaronovitch translates the famous aphorism *Pluralitas non est ponenda sine neccisitate*, as "Other things being equal, one hypothesis is more plausible if it involves fewer numbers of new assumptions."⁵¹ In other words, the simplest explanation is likely the most accurate explanation.

Conspiracy Theories: Paranoid Delusion or Politically Meaningful?

It is reasonable to question why anyone would come to understand history as the product of conspiracy. An easy answer might be that those who propagate and adopt conspiracy theories are paranoid. Their beliefs are rooted in a psychological problem that marks the way in which they interpret the world. Swami et al. found in their survey of British citizens that there were several character traits that correlated positively with belief in conspiracy theories. Those related personality factors include: a cynical attitude toward politics, defiance toward politicians, support for democratic principles, and an appreciation for new and unusual ideas. The study also found conspiracy belief to be negatively correlated with agreeableness, a factor the study's authors comment "likely stemmed from the association between disagreeableness and suspicion and antagonism towards others."⁵² Goertzel's 1994 study produced similar findings, concluding that belief in conspiracies correlates with feelings of political alienation from the political system.⁵³ In addition, conspiracy theories helpfully provide a host of enemies toward which believers can direct their anger, and in this way function to resolve the tension that might exist between an individual's view of the world, and reality.⁵⁴

The title of Richard Hofstadter's classic article "The Paranoid Style in American Politics" suggests that he argues that those who believe in conspiracy theories are simply irrational and suspicious. Hofstadter makes clear, however, that he is borrowing the clinical term "paranoid" for other purposes. While he argues that those who adopt conspiracy theories suffer from a deep sense of persecution, which they systematize in "grandiose theories of conspiracy,"⁵⁵ he distinguishes between the "clinical paranoiac" and the "paranoid political spokesman." Although they share some characteristics—both are "overheated, oversuspicious, overaggressive, grandiose, and apocalyptic in expression"—there are clear differences

12 Conspiracy Rising

between them. Most notably, Hofstadter argues, the clinical paranoid believes threats are being directed against him, but the political paranoid believes the threats are directed against a nation, culture, and/or way of life.⁵⁶ For these reasons, political paranoids understand their convictions to be both unselfish and patriotic, and support them with a sense of “righteousness and moral indignation.”⁵⁷

Conspiracy thinkers often fall into this second category, and it is therefore more accurate and useful to consider how and why adopting conspiracy beliefs might appeal to the political sensibilities of particular individuals. First, as noted above, part of conspiracy theory’s appeal—and one of its flaws—is the assumption that it is possible for human beings to make history, that is, to shape the world to their will. This way of understanding can be reassuring, for it begins with the assumption that it is possible for individuals to exercise some form of control over the world. This is also linked to the notion of identity. As James points out, where previously identity was ascribed, in modernity, we can create our own identity.⁵⁸

Second, through their explanation of history, conspiracy theories provide their adherents with an explanation of how and why evil is at work in the world. Rather than addressing the complexity of human existence, however, they identify good and evil in clear-cut terms, and in so doing, also divide human beings into those who are good and those who are evil. In this world, shades of gray do not exist. Flanagan notes that this dualistic way of approaching politics is useful in times of war and for populist movements aiming to take power.⁵⁹ It clearly distinguishes between political allies and political enemies.

A third reason for the appeal of conspiracy theories lies in the security they provide to their adherents. As citizens of the modern world, we are accustomed to encountering change and crisis in our day-to-day lives. To varying degrees, we become adept at living with uncertainty. We learn to adapt to small scale personal change such as moving house or changing employment. We apprehend that at the national and international levels, change is also a constant feature of the political landscape. The events of September 11, 2001, shocked and saddened us, but it was the scope of their violence, and their implications that may have surprised us, not the fact that the nature of international politics could change. It is the case, however, that a small but significant minority of individuals do not, and perhaps cannot, adequately adapt. They are threatened by significant alterations to their lives.

In his study of conspiracy belief, Goertzel found that one factor that significantly correlated with conspiracy beliefs was concern about one's employment security.⁶⁰ One way in which individuals respond to these kinds of threats is to turn to belief systems that offer them comfort and security by providing an explanation for their problems and the promise that a solution exists that will allow things to be better in the future. While these types of ideologies are not always dangerous, they frequently have pathological aspects. An individual who loses his or her job and falls into this trap might be inclined to blame "immigrants swamping the job market," and conclude that the deportation of immigrants is an appropriate solution. Very few problems in the modern world, however, have such clear explanations, and it is rare that they have a clear-cut solution. Blaming a particular group or groups for one's own problems is a much easier intellectual enterprise than considering the ways in which forces of the global economy have transformed the employment market.

An important point of clarification here is that although conspiracy theories may at first seem to provide a very simple explanation for political events, when one considers them carefully, it becomes apparent that they often paint a picture of the world that is extremely complex. A number of conspiracy theories exist, for example, that suggest some type of international Jewish conspiracy was behind the events of September 11, 2001.⁶¹ One such theory claims that 4,000 Jews were warned to stay home from work on that day on the instruction of the Israeli Secret Service, a theory apparently based on a *Jerusalem Post* article that stated 4,000 Israelis were believed to have been near the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on the day of the attacks.⁶² Although this explanation appears simple, if it were true, it would rely on the collusion of over 4,000 individuals to keep the truth secret, and a vastly complex chain of power relationships. The official story is much simpler.⁶³ Once again, Occam's razor suggests the conspiracy theory is unlikely.

Groh suggests that at the level of everyday perception, it is only an individual's "healthy common sense" that prevents him or her from adopting conspiracy theory as a mode of explanation for events.⁶⁴ In that sense, conspiratorialists are not abnormal. Every human being might at any time be tempted to cross the line and utilize conspiracy as explanation. It is, he writes, a "permanent temptation,"⁶⁵ and we are all potentially susceptible to such belief systems. Indeed, the leap to conspiracy theory may not be as great as we imagine. Conspiracy theories are internally consistent, and like

14 Conspiracy Rising

more scientific understandings of the world, they begin with the assumption of explicit causality. Indeed, they surpass reality in terms of their logical consistency. Individuals and events are connected in ways that are more coherent than in the real world, where errors and ambiguity exist.⁶⁶ Nesta Webster, arguably the most influential conspiracy theorist of the 20th century, became convinced that the world was governed by conspirators while she researched the French Revolution. She argued that since it was impossible for the masses to create such an upheaval themselves, it was therefore reasonable to ask “by whom was it made?”⁶⁷ She concluded that a Jewish conspiracy controlling such forces as “Grand Orient Masonry, Theosophy, Pan-Germanism, International Finance, and Social Revolution” was involved, and this conspiracy was the cause of all threats to Britain and “Christian civilization.” Webster developed an elaborate schematic table that purported to illustrate secret links among groups as diverse as the Fenians and the British Conservative Party.⁶⁸

Finally, as Hofstadter remarks, it is certainly true that history has been marked by a good number of conspiratorial acts. This is because all political behavior requires strategy; strategy may depend on secrecy; and anything that is secret might be described as conspiratorial.⁶⁹ In addition, real political conspiracies have existed. The “massive campaign of political spying and sabotage”⁷⁰ that constituted the Watergate scandal, for example, revealed the duplicity of the political leaders concerned and their capacity to engage in illegal conspiratorial behavior to accomplish their political goals. As Johnson points out, however, real conspiracies are not the rigid systems of power that conspiracy theorists believe exist. They are comprised of people, not “mindless pawns of evil.”⁷¹ The Watergate conspiracy is notable, but so too is its discovery and aftermath. Individuals—even those involved in illegal conspiracies—often behave in unpredictable ways, and in democracies, this capacity can be fully expressed. Participants or observers to a conspiracy may decide to speak up and reveal what has happened, as Deep Throat did in the case of Watergate. In a similar vein, Aaronovitch argues that the most effective conspiracy involving the American government was the 1985–86 Iran-Contra Affair.⁷² This conspiracy saw senior members of the Reagan administration circumvent a congressional prohibition on support for the Nicaraguan Contras by selling weapons to Iran. It was intended both to secure the release of American hostages in Iran and provide support for the Contra rebels in Nicaragua. The elaborate scheme unraveled, and

eventually 14 people were charged in the affair. Again, reality proved too difficult to control.

Popular culture has also absorbed these ideas. From the early 1990s onward, the idea of conspiracy has featured in a variety of media. Chris Carter's *X-Files* franchise brought conspiracy theory to American prime-time television for almost 10 years, quickly becoming part of the cultural landscape. As Joyce Millman wrote for the *New York Times*, "It hauntingly captured the cultural moment when paranoid distrust of government spilled over from the political fringes to the mainstream, aided by the conspiracy-theory-disseminating capability of the Internet. With its high-level cover-ups, Deep Throats and adherence to the watchwords "Trust no one," *The X-Files* tapped into still-fresh memories of Iran-Contra and Watergate, not to mention Ruby Ridge and Waco."⁷³ Building on a surging mistrust of government, the program followed two FBI agents, Fox Mulder and Dana Scully, as they investigated cases that involved extraterrestrial intervention in world affairs, and which seemed to suggest that a secret group of government officials and business executives were working together toward nefarious ends. Interestingly, *The X-Files* is one of the first appearances in popular culture of the superconspiracy form; the program's story lines involve evidence going back in history thousands of years.⁷⁴

More recently, Dan Brown's novel *The Da Vinci Code* and its follow-up, *The Lost Symbol*, have further extended the reach of conspiratorial thinking. Brown's stories concern the adventures of Harvard symbologist Robert Langdon, whose esoteric knowledge draws him into the inner workings of the Illuminati, Freemasons, and Knights Templar, and there is no denying the books' appeal. *The Da Vinci Code* sold over 80 million copies worldwide, and on its first day of release, *The Lost Symbol* was the fastest selling adult book ever, with sales of over one million in the United States, the United Kingdom, and Canada.⁷⁵ The books purport to reveal the hidden truths of the Knights Templar, the Freemasons, the Illuminati, and that other secret society with a worldwide reach, the Roman Catholic Church. Dan Brown was aware he was writing fiction, but the publicity his work received, and the response of these institutions to the charges made against them by characters in the books, suggested that at least in some people's minds, the books were either too close to the truth or a threat for other reasons. In Britain, the Catholic "DaVinci Code Response Team" commissioned a survey concerned with gauging the effect of the book. It found that of those who had read the novel, 60 percent believed that its claim

16 Conspiracy Rising

that Jesus fathered a child with Mary Magdalene was true.⁷⁶ The response by the Catholic Church in the United States was similar. The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops launched the website Jesusdecoded.com to counter the book's claims. Those with the conspiracy mind-set, however, were unlikely to be convinced—in fact, they were more likely to have their beliefs reaffirmed—by such a campaign. *The Da Vinci Code* movie struck a similar chord.

Dozens of other conspiracy-oriented movies have been made, in the post–Cold War, post-Watergate era, and many of them have been marked by, if not antigovernment themes, then certainly the message that one ought to be suspicious of politicians and one's government. Barry Levinson's *Wag the Dog*; Michael Mann's *The Insider*; Steven Spielberg's *Minority Report*; Oliver Stone's *JFK* and *Nixon*; Andy and Larry Wachowski's *The Matrix*; and of course, Richard Donner's *Conspiracy Theory* all fall into this category. With the decline of the Soviet Union as a dependable foil for United States' interests, one suspects, a conspiracy-minded public's adoption of the government as the people's enemy became a particularly appealing plot line.

Conspiracism's infiltration of popular culture has increased familiarity with the content of specific conspiracy theories and arguably also increased their acceptance as a mode of political explanation.⁷⁷ In addition, the Internet has spread conspiracy theories further and faster than ever before. Barkun argues that this method of transmission also makes them a more respectable form of explanation. Conspiracy theories were once a form of stigmatized knowledge; the larger political community marginalized them. Through the Internet, however, they have moved closer to the mainstream. With millions of pages of information and no means for its readers to distinguish between fact and fiction, the Internet blurs the line between these two realms. As a result, once stigmatized forms of knowledge may become indistinguishable from more mainstream ways of thinking.

Barkun notes that through popular culture, individuals who are inclined to think in terms of conspiracies are given further reason to do so, and through the Internet, they are provided with a smorgasbord of options as well as a means of disseminating their own views.⁷⁸ Jodi Dean, in fact, goes so far as to suggest that conspiracy theories are a reasonable form of political expression. She argues that a shared conception of “reality” does not exist, so that conspiracy theories are perhaps plausible ways to understand the world and must be taken seriously. Thus, conspiracy is no longer part of

the “lunatic fringe, but a “vehicle for political contestation.”⁷⁹ While Dean’s arguments are interesting, this book takes the position that although conspiracy theories very often spring from legitimate political grievances and/or are the result of significant political concerns, their content and structure are problematic and rarely reflect the genuine condition of political existence.

Another reason for the prevalence of conspiracy theories is that modern governments are extremely complex entities and require significant bureaucracies in order to function. The complexity of these systems can make their behavior occasionally incomprehensible to their citizens. Government policies may be influenced by specific interests and marked by contradictions. In addition, civil servants may not always effectively or consistently implement those policies. This situation lends itself to conspiratorial explanations. If one cannot understand how governmental decisions are made and policies implemented, one might assume that an elite conspiracy of individuals is indeed directing a government’s behavior, and as Hofstadter points out, in democracies, this is particularly problematic.⁸⁰ This possibility, coupled with high-profile political events in which government appeared ineffective (for example, Hurricane Katrina, the events of September 11, 2001, and even the Deepwater Horizon oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico), contributed to making conspiracy theories appear to be reasonable explanations for the government’s lack of response to the chaos of human existence.

Conspiracy theories have long been a part of American political life, but there are particular historical periods in American history when they have developed into a more significant part of public discourse. The remainder of this book attempts to answer the question of why this is the case, and it explores the significance of this phenomenon. An important part of this endeavor is a consideration of the content of those beliefs. The 20th century was littered by the emergence of a multitude of single-event conspiracy theories, but the real innovation in conspiracy thinking was the rise of superconspiracies. While conspiracy thinkers had previously identified the Knights Templar, Freemasons, and Illuminati as conspirators, it is really only in the past 100 years that these three groups have found their way into the majority of modern superconspiracies. The historical record of the Templars, Freemasons, and Illuminati is enlightening, for it illustrates that these groups and their leaders are very different from the place they hold in 20th-century conspiracy theories. The distance between reality and their symbolic meaning reveals much about the appeal of modern conspiracy theories.