GOVERNMENT SECRECY AND CONSPIRACY THEORIES

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ABSTRACT

In the twentieth century, the U.S. government began expanding its size and power and keeping more information secret. Executive branch officials began spying on Americans, plotting to kill foreign leaders, and deliberately deceiving Congress and the media. As the government began to conduct real conspiracies, many Americans began to suspect it of even worse crimes, like the mass murder of American citizens to provide a pretext for war. Until the federal government becomes committed to transparency and openness, these toxic conspiracy theories will continue to pollute the body politic.

Keywords: conspiracy theory; government secrecy; transparency; United States history.

Consider this scenario: a cabal of industrialists and government officials wants to take the United States into a war. But they know that the American people are too sensible to support their desire for blood and profits. They need a pretext to fool their fellow citizens into backing their plots. Ultimately, they decide to put American citizens at risk – or even to murder them – and blame the attack on a useful scapegoat. As planned, the American people are fooled; and the war begins.
This is the scenario endorsed by post-9/11 conspiracists. Promoted on Internet sites, through leftist magazines and right-wing talk radio, at antiwar rallies, and even in the writings of elected American and British officials, the theory that the Bush administration planned the September 11 terrorist attacks has a dedicated following (Olmsted, 2009). But this formula is also used by those Americans who believe that government conspiracies lurk behind the “true” story of American intervention in World War I, Pearl Harbor, and even the Kennedy assassination. For some Americans, no crime was too monstrous for the evildoers of the secret government. They faked the moon landing. They killed the president. They stood by and allowed 2,400 servicemen in Hawaii – or 3,000 civilians in New York – to die needless, horrible deaths (Hofstadter, 1964, 1996). In their zeal to cover up their crimes, they killed witnesses, manufactured evidence, and sneaked into secure offices to snatch incriminating documents from the files.

As the historian Richard Hofstadter has shown, these theories are part of a long tradition of the fear of conspiracies in America. In a land of many ethnic and racial groups, where citizenship can be a choice as well as a birthright, some Americans have resorted to demonizing the “other” as a way of bolstering their own sense of identity. Historians, sociologists, political scientists, and cultural theorists have sought to explain and understand this American predilection for conspiracy theories.

But though Americans have a long history of support for conspiracy theories, in the twentieth century one particular type of theory became more prevalent and powerful: conspiracy theories about the government. As the federal government took on more power – and more secret power – the conspiracy theorists saw government itself as the source of conspiracy. Indeed, this transformation suggests both a new narrative for conspiracy theories and a new way to understand American reactions to governmental growth.

Antigovernment conspiracy theories reveal a great deal about American ambivalence about increasing state secrecy. Throughout the twentieth century, many Americans supported government expansion and governmental secrecy as necessary evils in a world filled with dangerous enemies. But even as citizens ceded more power to the government, they worried that public officials misused this power and harmed the interests of the republic. By the Cold War, the most popular conspiracy theories no longer focused on the old demons of bankers, Jews, and Masons but instead on the military, the intelligence community, and the president himself. The periodic revelation of real government conspiracies and cover-ups only worsened these fears.

World War I was a watershed in the development of the U.S. government. During the conflict, the federal government instituted its first highly effective
draft, nationalized railroads and other industries, and spied on and suppressed the opponents of the war. The government made opposition to the war illegal with the espionage and sedition acts, and Justice Department agents such as the young J. Edgar Hoover hounded antiwar radicals. Sinister forces in charge of the government could do a lot more damage in 1918 than they could have done just a few years earlier; in fact, in the view of some conspiracists, the state was the sinister force.

This fear that the newly expanded, newly secretive state could conspire against its citizens was apparent in the 1934–1935 congressional investigation of U.S. intervention in World War I. Almost two decades after the war, the U.S. Senate established a special investigating committee to examine whether bankers and arms manufacturers had exerted secret influence on the administration of President Woodrow Wilson back in 1917. The Special Committee on Investigation of the Munitions Industry, also known as the Nye Committee after its chair, Senator Gerald Nye of North Dakota, found no evidence that businessmen had forced policy changes in the Wilson administration, but some members were outraged to discover that Wilson had apparently lied to the Senate and to the American people about his knowledge of secret treaties signed by U.S. allies in the war. The investigation left many Americans anxious about the growth of state secrecy.

This anxiety only increased during World War II. From the moment of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941, some anti-interventionists believed that President Franklin Roosevelt might have maneuvered the United States into the war by somehow provoking Japan to attack. Soon, right-wing opponents of the president believed that he had received advance knowledge of the attack and deliberately withheld it from the American military. When the Roosevelt administration sought to conceal information about U.S. codebreaking during the war, as part of an understandable concern about wartime security, these opponents saw this secrecy as part of a conspiratorial cover-up.4

During the Cold War, the U.S. government created new secret agencies as part of its effort to fight the Soviets – and its agents began to hatch elaborate plots against enemies at home and abroad. In 1947, Congress and the president created a peacetime, centralized intelligence agency – the CIA – for the first time in U.S. history. U.S. officials believed that they were fighting an immoral enemy, and that “hitherto acceptable norms of human conduct” did not apply to the government’s secret warriors, according to a secret government report. By the height of the Cold War, government agents were contracting with the mafia to kill a foreign leader, testing hallucinogenic drugs on unsuspecting Americans, and discussing a plan to launch fake
terrorist attacks on Americans in the United States in order to justify an invasion of Communist Cuba. These officials justified their conspiracies as a response to conspiracies supposedly plotted by un-American forces. Later, as the media and congressional investigating committees revealed these real crimes by secret U.S. agencies, many Americans came to believe that the most outrageous conspiracy theories about the government could be true.

The federal government also created new domestic spying programs. The Federal Bureau of Investigation started a series of covert action programs known as COINTELPRO, in which agents would secretly join dissident groups and eventually try to “expose, disrupt, misdirect, discredit, or otherwise neutralize” them. The FBI did not just spy on these groups, but tried to “seed mistrust, sow misinformation” and to persuade them to commit crimes so that they could be arrested. Although the program was initially justified as the most effective way to undermine American communists, in fact the Communist Party of the USA had only a few thousand members by 1960. The FBI soon expanded COINTELPRO to include dozens of liberal groups and one right-wing organization, the Ku Klux Klan, and collected hundreds of thousands of files on individual Americans in the early 1960s.

These surveillance programs prompted many Americans to believe that the government was spying on them, as indeed it often was. As the poet Delmore Schwartz said, even paranoids have real enemies. But inciting these fears was actually one of the FBI’s goals. One purpose of COINTELPRO, according to an official memo, was to “enhance the paranoia endemic in [dissident] circles” and convince activists that “there is an FBI agent behind every mailbox.” The agents hoped that suspicion and paranoia would undermine the groups. In other words, the FBI conspired to create fear of conspiracy. And it succeeded. When the dissenters learned of these official government programs to deny them their First Amendment rights, they felt that their long-time fears had been vindicated.

The fear of government conspiracies became mainstream after the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. Government documents show that even officials in the White House, Justice Department, and the CIA suspected a conspiracy in the JFK assassination. These suspicions were founded on their access to secret information: they knew that the Kennedy administration had conducted real conspiracies – murder plots against Fidel Castro of Cuba – that might have led to the assassination in Dallas. The CIA, under presidents Eisenhower and Kennedy, had instigated several murder attempts against the Cuban leader, using anti-Castro Cubans and mafia hit men. The CIA developed a poisonous toxin for Castro’s cigars;
it cultivated a deadly fungus to dust in his skin-diving suit; it manufactured a pen that concealed a hypodermic needle filled with poison; and it built a bomb disguised as a beautiful seashell to place in the coral reefs where Castro often dove. To those who knew about these plots, they suggested the possibility that Castro might have ordered Kennedy's assassination, or that disaffected hit men or anti-Castro Cubans might have targeted the president.

Even President Lyndon Johnson personally believed that Castro might have ordered the killing – "I never believed that Oswald acted alone," he said later – but he did not really want to know for sure (Janos, 1973). If he had proof that Castro was behind the murder, then he would be forced to invade Cuba, and the Soviets might respond by launching World War III. Johnson's White House tapes recorded his fear that allowing the public to believe conspiracy theories about the assassination could lead to nuclear Armageddon. To avoid this, the president appointed a panel, the so-called Warren Commission, to examine these theories – and to discredit them. In other words, Johnson wanted his commission to convince the public of something he did not believe.

In the case of the Kennedy assassination, conspiracy theories were not just the province of paranoids on the fringes of American politics, but of people at the very center of power. The nation's top leaders – the people who had the most information about the situation – believed in a conspiracy; and not because they suffered from paranoia, but because they were privy to information that would logically cause one to suspect a conspiracy.

After the release of the official government report supporting the lone gunman theory, government officials continued to worry about the implications of conspiracy theories. The CIA, for example, contended that the critics' attacks on the Warren Report "cast doubt on the whole leadership of American society." To counter the critics, an internal CIA memo urged government officials to seek out "friendly elite contacts" in the media and in Congress and suggest that "parts of the conspiracy talk appear to be deliberately generated by Communist propagandists." The "whole reputation of the American government" was at stake.

In other words, the Johnson administration, filled with top officials who suspected a conspiracy, expressed outrage at citizens who shared their suspicions. This is a case in which the state conducted real conspiracies, believed in some conspiracy theories, and tried to discredit alternative conspiracy theories.

In the 1970s, the Watergate scandal revealed more evidence that government officials had conspired against American citizens and abused
their powers. Officials for President Richard Nixon’s reelection campaign had extorted and bribed wealthy individuals and corporate leaders to raise money for illegal espionage and sabotage of their rivals’ campaigns. Oval Office tapes proved that Nixon had personally ordered a cover-up of a bungled burglary of the campaign headquarters of Nixon’s opponent in the general election.

The disclosure of the “White House horrors,” as Attorney General John Mitchell called the various abuses of the Nixon administration, prompted a wave of inquiries. Congress tried to restore national morale by launching investigations of past administrations. Several congressional probes, most notably the Church Committee in the Senate, revealed many government secrets and abuses of the Cold War: domestic spying by the CIA, COINTELPRO by the FBI, the Castro plots, and the drug-testing experiments. By the end of the 1970s, Americans knew more about their government’s misdeeds than any people in history. Ironically, though, the more Americans learned about their government’s past conspiracies, the more they suspected that the government was still hiding evidence of even worse crimes.

The real conspiracy of the 1980s known as the Iran-contra affair provided more proof that groups within the U.S. government could manage to subvert democracy. In 1986, the American public learned that officials in the Ronald Reagan administration had secretly and illegally sold arms to the Iranian government in hopes of obtaining the release of American hostages held in Lebanon, then diverted the profits to Central American counterrevolutionaries, even though Congress had specifically prohibited aid to these rebels. Iran-contra represented what conspiracy theorists since the World War I had feared the most: the executive usurpation of power. The Iran-contra conspirators had not subverted the government; they were the government. “We usually think of a junta as planning to overthrow a president,” explained political scientist Theodore Draper (1993, p. xiii): “[T]his junta came into being to overthrow an established constitutional rule of law, with the help of a president (Draper, 1993).” As the details of the scandal came to light, Americans’ faith in their government dipped to Watergate-era levels.

Although the details of Iran-contra were confusing, for many Americans, the scandal had one clear message: government officials routinely lied and broke the law. If they decried terrorism while selling arms to terrorists, if they fought a “war on drugs” while dealing with drug runners, what else might Reagan’s secret warriors be hiding?

Iran-contra prompted a surge in conspiracy theories on the left and the right. The scandal gave new support to existing theories that the CIA was
responsible for sparking the crack epidemic in American ghettos; that public officials were conducting hideous biomedical experiments with aliens from outer space; and that the government had been taken over by a cabal who planned to turn the country over to the United Nations.

By the 1990s, anti-government conspiracy theories had become so mainstream that even the head of government took them seriously. Soon after his election in 1992, President-elect Bill Clinton met with an old friend, Webster Hubbell, whom he planned to appoint to a high post in the Justice Department. As they talked privately, Clinton gave him some secret orders. “Webb,” Clinton said to his golfing buddy, “if I put you over at Justice, I want you to find the answers to two questions for me. One, who killed JFK? And two, are there UFOs?” The president, Hubbell said, was “dead serious” (Hubbell, 1997, p. 282).

In the twenty-first century, the energy among conspiracy theorists shifted to the left with the growth of the 9/11 Truth Movement. As with Pearl Harbor, some Americans suspected a conspiracy immediately after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. According to polls, one-third of Americans believed that Bush administration officials either knew about the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, in advance and did nothing to stop them, or actually perpetrated the attacks themselves.1\(^{11}\) Those who believed in a government conspiracy, who called themselves 9/11 truth activists, formed local chapters all over the United States and in Europe. The researchers linked to one another’s websites, thus proving that, as conspiracists had always argued, everything is connected. Enterprising theorists also edited their own documentaries on their laptops and uploaded them onto video-sharing sites like YouTube, where they have been watched by tens of millions of people worldwide.

The 9/11 conspiracy theories took on new power and urgency once the United States invaded Iraq in 2003. With the invasion, conspiracists believed that they now understood the administration’s “motive” for standing by and allowing the 9/11 attacks to occur. Once again, government secrecy inspired conspiracy theories. The Bush administration balked at releasing information about FBI surveillance of the hijackers before the attacks. And once again, the critics did not see this reluctance to release information as an attempt to cover up evidence of incompetence, or just the natural desire of officials to conceal information to increase their power. Instead, they saw it as proof of government crimes. The Bush administration tried to quiet these fears with the 9/11 Commission, but once again conspiracy theorists dismissed the official government inquiry as a whitewash.
Throughout the twentieth century, as the federal government expanded its budget and power, U.S. public officials grew more determined to shield state secrets from public view. Once protected by the veil of secrecy, government officials plotted murders of foreign leaders, overthrew democratically elected governments, spied on political dissidents, and tested drugs on unsuspecting citizens. Later, the revelation of these actions prompted even more citizen distrust of government. But increasing distrust was not the only consequence. In some cases, the exposure of these actions helped spur citizens to demand that their public officials be more open and accountable. Armed with the knowledge of these abuses, some citizens were determined to use their power to prevent future abuses.

More often, however, the culture of suspicion created by the revelations of government conspiracies undermines democracy. When citizens cannot trust their government to tell the truth, when they are convinced that public officials routinely conspire, lie, and conceal their crimes, they become less likely to trust the government to do anything. The result is a profoundly weakened polity, with fewer citizens voting and more problems left unaddressed for a future generation that is ever more cynical about the possibility of reforms.

The solution for this problem is obvious: more government openness. When Americans believe that their government is truthful, open, and accountable, they are more willing to trust it. If government officials insist on concealing their actions, though, the citizenry will become more disaffected, and ultimately the government will lack the credibility it needs to function at all.

NOTES

1. For examples of conspiracy theories about 9/11, see, 911truth.org, scholarsfor911truth.org, and infowars.com.
2. In addition to Hofstadter, see Davis, 1971; Bennett, 1998; Goldberg, 2001; Rogin, 1987; and Olmsted, 2009.
5. Ibid.
6. Church Committee Report, Book III, p. 34.
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