Conspiracy Theories

Do they threaten democracy?

President Barack Obama is a foreign-born radical plotting to establish a dictatorship. His predecessor, George W. Bush, allowed the Sept. 11 attacks to occur in order to justify sending U.S. troops to Iraq. The federal government has plans to imprison political dissenters in detention camps in the United States. Welcome to the world of conspiracy theories. Since colonial times, conspiracies both far-fetched and plausible have been used to explain trends and events ranging from slavery to why U.S. forces were surprised at Pearl Harbor. In today’s world, the communications revolution allows conspiracy theories to be spread more widely and quickly than ever before. But facts that undermine conspiracy theories move less rapidly through the Web, some experts worry. As a result, there may be growing acceptance of the notion that hidden forces control events, leading to eroding confidence in democracy, with repercussions that could lead Americans to large-scale withdrawal from civic life, or even to violence.
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Radio-show host Alex Jones warns listeners that Americans could be taken to detention camps by the government and tortured and murdered. Actor Charlie Sheen, a so-called “truther,” recently declared on Jones’ show, “The official 9/11 story is an absolute fairy tale, a work of fiction.” Jones’ popularity reflects the enduring appeal of conspiracy theories throughout U.S. history.

Jones maintains a Web site that gets roughly as much traffic as those of either conservative talk-show host Rush Limbaugh or the liberal new site Talking Points Memo. The popularity of Jones’ Web site points to the widespread appeal today of conspiracy theories and the corresponding emergence of hundreds of conspiracy-oriented Web sites, videos and books. Among their recent claims: President Barack Obama isn’t a U.S. citizen, and the “truth” about 9/11 remains hidden from most Americans.

Such theories represent only the latest variations on a conspiracy theme that traces its origin to the nation’s earliest days. The early conspiracists believed that American presidents headed criminal or treasonous conspiracies, some of them linked to longtime “villains,” such as international bankers and Jews. Indeed, presidential conspiracy theories run in an unbroken chain since President George H. W. Bush proposed a New World Order and, conspiracists believed, plotted the takeover of the United States.

The 2007 documentary-style movie “Zeitgeist,” for example, links 9/11 to an alleged plot that drew the United States into both world wars as well as the Vietnam War. An earlier, Web-distributed movie, “Loose Change,” played a key role in fostering the conspiracist view of the Sept. 11 attacks. More recently, bestselling author Dan Brown draws on conspiracy notions about the Freemasons in his new novel, The Lost Symbol, much as his phenomenally popular Da Vinci Code involved an ancient conspiracy within the Roman Catholic Church.

Oliver Stone’s 1991 film “JFK” presented one of the most persistent conspiracy subjects — President John F. Kennedy’s assassination — including the purported involvement of U.S. intelligence and military agencies. “The X-Files,” a hit TV series in the ’90s, merged Kennedy assassination and space-alien theories.

The view of events as stage-managed affairs designed to fool the public runs deep enough that an estimated 6 percent of the American people believe that the 1969 moon landing was a hoax. “A model of the moon is used for the Apollo 11 descent footage,” wrote Bart Sibrel, a Nashville filmmaker who made a movie to argue his theory. “Anyone with basic knowledge of motion pictures can see it’s a fake moon.”

The National Aeronautics and Space Administration is concerned enough about the doubtsters to post detailed rebuttals on its Web site.

Underlying many conspiracy theories is distrust of government, says John E. Moser, a history professor at Ohio’s Ashland University. “We don’t trust leaders anymore,” says Moser, a specialist in
20th-century conspiracism. “Maybe that’s a good thing, but it certainly leaves the door open to kookery. At various points in history, conspiracy theories captured a great part of the population, but they fizzled out as the sense of crisis passed. Now, conspiracy theories tend to stick around. I’m wondering if we’re not in a permanent crisis mode.”

Some experts even worry that the cynicism reflected in conspiracy theories today endangers U.S. democracy, not to mention Americans’ health: Conspiracy theorists even have stoked the widespread opposition to swine flu vaccine. (See “Current Situation,” p. 900.)

One thing is certain: Thanks to the ever-expanding Internet, disclosures of genuine government misdeeds have intensified the public’s suspicions. (See sidebar, p. 898.) Moreover, today’s unsettled climate — dominated by scandal, economic turmoil, war and intense partisan conflict — stimulates a search for explanations that often reach extremes.

A Public Policy Polling survey in September showed that 41 percent of Americans — and 64 percent of Republicans — didn’t believe or weren’t sure President Obama was born in the United States. Indeed, many “birthers” believe Obama has engaged in a decades-long deception about his place of birth. And 22 percent of all voters — and 37 percent of Democrats — either believed or questioned whether former President George W. Bush purposely allowed the 9/11 attacks to occur to provide a pretext for war in the Middle East.

Although the sample size was a relatively small 621 respondents, the results were consistent with a broader 2007 poll showing 22 percent of respondents thought Bush knew of the 9/11 attacks in advance.

The “birther” movement is raising enough jitters in the political mainstream that the Senate and House passed resolutions last July stating that Obama was born in Hawaii.

The resolutions followed the introduction of “birther”-influenced legislation

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From UFOs to Secret Societies

The popular conspiracy theory Web sites below are among hundreds of sites that present alternative theories on everything from 9/11 to environmental policies. They use the Internet to question mainstream ideas and have acquired a large following in recent years.

1. Above Top Secret www.abovetopsecret.com/

With nearly 176,000 members, the site is the Internet's largest and most popular community dedicated to a wide range of conspiracy topics, including UFOs, paranormal activity, secret societies, political scandals, “new world order” and terrorism.

2. Prison Planet www.prisonplanet.com/

Affiliated with radio host Alex Jones, the site features forums where members can discuss alternative theories on everything from 9/11 to swine flu vaccinations.

3. Infowars www.infowars.com

Radio broadcaster Alex Jones examines numerous topics and presents interviews with fellow “9/11 Truthers,” such as country singer Willie Nelson.

4. 911Truth www.911truth.org

Calls into question the U.S. government’s account of the events of 9/11/2001 and discusses alternative theories. The site wtc7.net features similar content.

5. Centre for Research on Globalization http://globalresearch.ca/

Based in Canada, the site promotes the “unspoken truth” on issues ranging from the U.S. invasion of Iraq to environmental policies.


Presents alternative theories focusing on the War on Terror and accuses the U.S. government of hiding information.

7. The Zeitgeist Movement www.thezeitgeistmovement.com

Promotes the idea that nations, governments, races, religions, creeds and social classes are false distinctions. Seeks to achieve unity among people through a common conception of nature.

8. The Jeff Rense Program www.rense.com

Radio broadcaster Rense positions himself as an opponent to mainstream news coverage. His Web site and radio broadcasts cover the daily news from an alternative perspective.

9. YouTube www.youtube.com

Most conspiracy theorists are putting their content here now in order to gain a wide audience.


Icke is popular with people who want to ridicule conspiracy theorists because he presents radical conspiracy theories, but he does not have a significant following among conspiracy theorists themselves.

proposed by Rep. Bill Posey, R-Fla., that would require presidential candidates to provide birth certificates; 11 House Republicans signed the bill. Limbaugh and Michael Savage, another conservative commentator, last year joined the chorus of those deriding Obama’s citizenship credentials.  

Administration officials, however, touch conspiracy matters at their peril. In September, Van Jones, an Obama environmental adviser, resigned after disclosure that he had signed a 2004 petition, popular with some on the left, calling for “immediate inquiry into evidence that suggests high-level government officials may have deliberately allowed the Sept. 11 attacks to occur.”  

Those who’ve tried arguing with “truthers” often find themselves accused of being in on the plot — a classic feature of conspiracy theories. For example, after an exhaustive investigation by Popular Mechanics debunked 9/11 conspiracy theories, the magazine was accused of being a CIA front and a friend of Israeli intelligence.  

“A common refrain in conspiracy circles is the claim that, ‘We’re just asking questions,’ ” wrote editor-in-chief James B. Meigs. “One would think that at least some quarters of the conspiracy movement might welcome a mainstream publication’s serious, non-ideological attempt to answer those questions. One would be wrong.”  

Conspiracists such as the late W. Cleon Skousen insist that major public figures can generate smoke screens that obscure conspiracies in action. A former Brigham Young University professor and FBI agent, Skousen heavily influenced Fox TV talk-show host Glenn Beck, whose introduction to one of Skousen’s books describes his writing as “divinely inspired.”  

Skousen envisioned a plot by banker David Rockefeller and others in the financial elite to establish “ruler’s law” — as opposed to God’s law — in the U.S. “Rockefeller . . . has a plan,” Skousen once said. “He wants to restore ruler’s law and force the stupid masses — those are Lenin’s words — to do what’s good for them.”  

Beck hasn’t explicitly endorsed that view. But in September he hinted at a connection between the Rockefeller family, radical politics and Obama appointee Van Jones. The takeoff point was Beck’s interpretations of the artwork at Rockefeller Center by early-20th-century fascist- and communist-inspired artists. “It makes sense that you feel a little uneasy, and everything seems to be a little hidden,” Beck said. “Progressives, fascists, communists — now what do they all have in common today? That’s something you’re going to have to figure out.” But

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**Most Regard Obama as American-Born**

More than half of Americans believe that President Obama was born in the United States, not Kenya, including more than three-fourths of Democrats. But more than 60 percent of Republicans are skeptical. Nearly a quarter of Americans believe President George W. Bush knew about the Sept. 11 attacks before they occurred.

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**Do you believe Barack Obama was born in the United States?**

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<th>Yes</th>
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<td>Independents</td>
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<td>Democrats</td>
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<td>Republicans</td>
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**Do you think President Bush intentionally allowed the 9/11 attacks to take place because he wanted the United States to go to war in the Middle East?**

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**Do you think President Bush knew about the 9/11 attacks in advance?**

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Sources: Public Policy Polling; Rasmussen Reports
he added, “The Rockefeller Foundation, they gave a big award and an awful lot of credibility to — oh, Van Jones, our new green jobs czar.”

Beck had flirted with the idea that FEMA was setting up detention camps, but he eventually said evidence was lacking, telling CBS News anchor Katie Couric that the camps theory was “easy to debunk.” He also told her he is not a conspiracy theorist.

Jerome R. Corsi, a frequent guest on Alex Jones’ program, also rejects the conspiracist label. “I don’t think the term has any meaning,” he says. “It’s an intentionally politically charged term that’s used to demonize work somebody doesn’t agree with politically.” He describes himself as an investigative reporter and is active in the network of Obama-citizenship challengers.

But conspiracist or not, Corsi readily evokes the specter of Nazi Germany in describing a House bill introduced in January by Rep. Alcee Hastings, D-Fla. The bill would create six National Emergency Centers on military bases for use by communities hit by natural disasters.

Corsi wrote that the legislation “appears designed to create the type of detention center that those concerned about use of the military in domestic affairs fear could be used as concentration camps for political dissidents, as in Nazi Germany.”

Jones also depicts those he sees as the country’s enemies in the most sinister terms, along with the mainstream media that he accuses of serving the conspiracy. Jones’ Web site said the H1N1 flu originated with “powerful industrialists operating a crime ring [who] are behind the pandemic’s creation, media persuasions, vaccination preparations and health official promotions.”

The “globalists” who run the conspiracy have to be fought, Jones preaches. “I just want to get my hands around their throats. . . . And you know they feel the same about us.”

As conspiracy theories proliferate, here are some of the questions being debated:

**Are conspiracy theories becoming part of mainstream politics?**

Conspiracy theories are woven into the fabric of U.S. history. Some have spiracists who argued that the Masons were out to destroy Christianity.

Past generations of conspiracists, however, didn’t enjoy the global electronic megaphone — the Internet — that their political descendants now command. Radio and cable TV talk shows also have helped conspiracists reach wider audiences.

One of the day’s hottest issues concerns Obama’s birthplace. “Where’s the birth certificate?” asked a placard-carrying demonstrator at the “09.12.09 March on Washington.” Other signs at the rally depicted the president as, variously, a Nazi, a socialist and a communist.

While the embrace of the “birthers” by some radio and cable-TV talk-show hosts demonstrates the reach of conspiracy theories, experts disagree whether their appeal imbues them with political relevance. (Some conservative Obama foes vigorously reject the birthers.)

Political analyst Chip Berlet, a longtime chronicler of conspiracy movements, argues that conspiracy theories are on the upswing both in volume and influence.

“The government lacks transparency, which encourages a sense of delegitimization,” says Berlet, of Political Research Associates, a liberal consultancy in Cambridge, Mass. “And for a lot of conservative people, to have a black boss whom they see as a bully is quite unsettling. Proxies for that attitude are seen in claims Obama is a Muslim, or was not born in the United States or plans to socialize the economy through health-care reform.”

Berlet argues that conspiracy theories can help knit together groups that fundamentally have little use for each other — the Christian right, economic...
libertarians and white nationalists, to name a few. “All these sectors are pushing the idea that Obama is conspiring against the well-being of America.”

Not all conspiracy experts see an immediate danger. The fact that conspiracy theories are widely disseminated doesn’t in itself constitute a threat, says Daniel Pipes, director of the Philadelphia-based Middle East Forum, which advocates for U.S. interests in the Middle East. “Ultimately, it’s the impact that’s more important than volume,” says Pipes, who has written about conspiracy theories in U.S., Middle Eastern and European settings. “I see them more than I did 15 years ago, but their impact is still limited. You don’t see them really having an impact on the policies of government and the actions of Americans.”

Pipes cites the long-lived constellation of conspiracy theories about JFK’s death that has spread throughout popular culture to little political effect. “Kennedy assassination theories are voluminous, but irrelevant,” he says.

Other scholars argue that conspiracy theories challenging Obama’s legitimacy as president have the potential to be influential. “It seems that the election of an African-American president has triggered the anxieties of a big segment of the white population,” says Kathryn S. Olson, a professor of history at the University of California, Davis, and author of the new book Real Enemies: Conspiracy Theories and American Democracy, World War I to 9/11. 22

The racial factor, she says, adds a dimension that was absent in the conspiracy theories centering on President Bill Clinton. They reflected the fear and suspicion of growing federal power — as seen in violent confrontations between federal agents and armed government opponents. Whether the anti-Obama theories reach that level of intensity remains to be seen, Olsonst acknowledges. But, she says, “I think we’re in new territory.”

The communications revolution alone ensures that conspiracy theorists can reach millions more people, says Ashland University’s Moser. “Back in the 1930s, what we call today the mainstream media was pretty much the source of information,” says Moser, author of a biography of Pearl Harbor conspiracy theorist John T. Flynn. 23 “In the archives, you find conspiracy theories back then were expressed in very amateurish-looking newsletters, created on typewriter and circulated by mimeograph. Today they’re in very slick online formats.”

Still, presentation and audience don’t automatically confer influence, Moser adds. In fact, the easy accessibility of platforms may encourage some media figures to latch on to conspiracy theories — the more attention-grabbing the better — simply to get or keep audiences. For instance, “If you have a radio show, and you’re going to be on for three or four hours a day,” he says, “you have to say things that are going to get peoples’ attention. There’s no place for wim kness in the talk-radio format.”

Do conspiracy theories appeal more to the right than the left?

A long tradition among historians and political scientists links conspiracy theories with the far right. Historian Richard Hofstadter’s classic 1963 essay, “The Paranoid Style in American Politics,” focused exclusively on right-wing conspiracism. “The modern right wing . . . feels dispossessed: America has been largely taken away from them and their kind,” he wrote. “The old national security and independence have been destroyed by treasonous plots, that are as their most powerful agents not merely outsiders and foreigners but major statesmen seated at the very centers of American power.” 24

Increasingly, however, conspiracy theory-watchers are concluding that conspiracism’s appeal goes beyond ideology. For instance, the “truther” theories about the 9/11 attacks have attracted both left- and right-wingers. Indeed, some scholars have argued in recent years that theories once closely associated with the right have been attracting followers from the left. Anti-Semitism is the classic case, in the form of left-wing attacks on Israel that challenge its right to exist.

Shortly before the war in Iraq began in 2003, a conflict erupted in the anti-war left after Rabbi Michael Lerner of Berkeley, Calif., was blocked from speaking at a peace rally in San Francisco. Lerner had criticized one of the organizations sponsoring the event for planning to use it for anti-Israel propaganda purposes. “Fellow progressive Jews, some anxious to speak at these rallies, have urged me to keep quiet about anti-Semitism on the left,” Lerner wrote in The Wall Street Journal. 25

Since then, however, the furor over anti-Jewish prejudice on the left has quieted along with the anti-war movement. And some conspiracy theory opponents view the major conspiracist current of the moment as a right-wing trend. “Of all the conspiracy theorists, 90 percent are on the far right,” says Edward L. Winston, a St. Louis software engineer who runs a conspiracy-debunking Web site (conspiracyscience.com). But Winston adds that the widespread and growing skepticism about government favors the expansion of conspiracism beyond what he considers its natural right-wing constituency. Media productions such as the first “Zeitgeist” movie — which mixes classical conspiracy theories about “international bankers” and new ones about Sept. 11 — may be broadening the ranks of conspiracy believers, he says. “I was surprised how popular ‘Zeitgeist’ was and how many people believed it,” he says.

Conspiracy scholar Pipes argues that linking conspiracy theories exclusively to the right is a long-standing and erroneous response. “It’s as much a left phenomenon as it is right,” he says. “I would argue that the whole premise of communist ideology is a conspiracy theory — that the bosses are stealing your money.”

Vladimir I. Lenin — founder of the Soviet state — in effect confirmed the vision of those who denounced
Conspiracist beliefs have almost a stylistic appeal to them, he adds. "Going well beyond the extremes on both right and left. "They feel they know the truth, yet the majority of the country votes against them," she says. "Most people don't share their beliefs — or they think evil people in power are manipulating things."

Still, conspiracy theories that appeal to those on the right usually become more prominent, Olmsted says, "because they're backed generally by people with more power." Contrasting the attention that Limbaugh and other radio and TV talk-show hosts have given the "birther" theories, Olmsted notes that comparably popular supporters can't be found for the "truther" conspiracists. "Is there anyone really significant out there" among the 9/11 conspiracists "who has a real platform?" The "truther" movement generated no congressional legislation along the lines of the recent bill on birth certificates for presidential candidates.

Even so, the economic crisis may favor a resurgence of conspiracy theories that appeal to the left, says Michael Barkun, a professor of political science at Syracuse University who has studied conspiracies throughout his career. But that holds true for right-oriented theories as well, he adds. "Going well back into the 19th century, American conspiracists had almost a stylistic preference for conspiracy theories that emphasize financial power or financial manipulation," he says. That preference applies on the left and right.

In general, conspiracy theories draw their strength from deep-seated needs and emotions, not from ideology, Barkun says. "Conspiracy theories have the psychological benefit of taking a complex reality and simplifying it. Whatever these things that bother you, they all are the result of some single cause."

Do conspiracy theories threaten democracy?

The American system of government has survived more than 250 years of conspiracy theories, but the global picture is far grimmer.

In the 20th century alone, Nazi leader Adolf Hitler convinced millions of Germans that Jews were an evil force that had to be exterminated. Josef Stalin persuaded communists and sympathizers around the world that the millions of ordinary citizens — and ordinary citizens — executed in the "Great Terror" of 1937-1938 had been plotting the destruction of the Soviet state.

But conspiracy theories cooked up abroad also have proved dangerous to Americans. The 19 men who carried out the Sept. 11 attacks on the United States had been deeply influenced by a conspiratorial ideology that saw Muslims in general and Arabs in particular as the objects of manipulation by Western powers and Jews.

Mohammed Atta, the terrorists' on-scene commander, believed the Jews were behind wars against Muslims in the former Yugoslavia and Chechnya (now a Russian province). Even the White House sex scandal involving President Clinton fit into Atta's conspiratorial worldview, writes Lawrence Wright in his Pulitzer Prize-winning chronicle of the roots of the 2001 attacks. "He believed that Monica Lewinsky was a Jewish agent sent to undermine Clinton, who had become too sympathetic to the Palestinian cause."

Made-in-the-U.S.A. conspiracy theories generally have generated passion and activism — and violence — without producing major alterations in the course of events, even when believers have tried to exert influence. Timothy McVeigh, who detonated the powerful fertilizer bomb that destroyed the federal building in Oklahoma City in 1995, apparently believed he would spark a revolution against the Jewish-dominated system he perceived.

McVeigh killed 168 people, including 19 children, but no revolution occurred. Other conspiracists also were involved in conflicts that ended in multiple deaths, notably the 1993 showdown near Waco, Texas, at the Branch Davidian compound, in which about 80 sect members and four federal agents died. Church leader David Koresh had expounded "new world order" conspiracy theories in the 1990s. And earlier this year, a man in Pittsburgh, Richard Poplawski, was charged with killing three police officers in a confrontation apparently sparked by his beliefs in a coming social collapse engineered by "elite Jewish powers."

Those deaths, and others, bolster the argument by some conspiracy scholars that conspiracism represents a danger not to be taken lightly. "They can be a threat to democracy in the sense that conspiracy theories are premised on the idea that nothing is as it seems, that appearances can never be trusted," says Barkun of Syracuse University. "If you take that seriously, as many conspiracy believers do, then the work of democratic institutions is deemed fraudulent or a charade."

If large numbers of people believe the real work of government is carried out by people pulling strings behind the scenes, Barkun says, "that delegitimizes the political process."

The Middle East Forum's Pipes agrees, in principle, that conspiracy theories could threaten democracy. In practice, though, he thinks their appeal to Americans is limited. "I don't see a surge in conspiracy believers, he says. For example, Pipes notes, the fringe views of Obama's former minister in Chicago, the Rev.
Jeremiah Wright — who believed HIV was a government-invented tool of genocide — proved unacceptable in mainstream politics. 31

“He was marginalized and repudiated,” Pipes says. Conspiracy-watchers who have direct contact with conspiracy theory believers tend to be more likely to sense danger. “They don’t care about the republic,” debunker Winston says of people who post comments on his Facebook page. “Anyone who disagrees is an enemy. Conspiracy theorists claim that I really work for the government, that I’m getting paid to do this. Since I mounted a Web site, the consensus is that if I’m smart enough to do that, I must be getting paid.”

Winston has heard worse. “When I had my e-mail address posted, probably 50 percent of the e-mails I got were death threats or threats in general,” he says. “So I didn’t have it up for long.”

Even John Hawkins, who edits the “Right Wing News” Web site — slogan: “kneecapping Barack Obama at every opportunity” — has attracted hate mail for his scornful treatment of Obama-birthplace challenges, which he calls groundless. But that response hasn’t persuaded him that conspiracism represents a threat. “It would have to cross into the mainstream, and so many people who knew better would have to say nothing.”

Conspiracy theories do exert a strong appeal, given the natural urge to find explanations for events and trends, Hawkins says. But the theories, he argues, tend to be so intricate and dependent on leaps of faith that they’re easily punctured. “Everybody wants to believe that everything is not random and that somebody has control,” he says. “But I’m a conservative, I believe that government is too dumb to carry out these conspiracies. If you had enough people addressing a lot of these conspiracy theories, they would die down.”

**BACKGROUND**

### Witch Hysteria

In 1692, nearly a century before American independence, 20 men and women were executed in Salem, Mass. Their crime: They were thought to be witches plotting evil in the service of the devil. Historian Jeffrey L. Pasley of the University of Missouri calls the witch hysteria that briefly swept New England “the very first American conspiracy theories.” 32

As Americans were fighting for independence in 1776, a law professor in Bavaria (now a German state) founded Illuminism, a political philosophy that sought to create a world ruled by reason, not clerics — a blasphemous notion in a Roman Catholic state. 35

In 1784, the Society of the Illuminati, which had joined forces with the anti-clerical Freemasons, was outlawed in Bavaria amid a series of lurid confessions and supposed instructions on poisoning and counterfeiting. Defenders of the old order that was being shaken by the winds of change said the evidence proved the Illuminati had survived repression and were behind the French Revolution and ensuing Jacobin Reign of Terror and ultimately sought world domination.

Two books, one by a University of Glasgow scientist and the other by a French Jesuit priest, soon brought the Illuminati conspiracy theory to the United States. They claimed to have proved that the Illuminists aimed at world domination and the destruction of religion and morality. The Federalists, headed by President John Adams, feared that American acolytes of the radical Jacobin wing of the French revolutionaries were planning a wave of anti-religious destruction. However, after Thomas Jefferson — a French Revolution supporter whom some Federalists considered an Illuminist — became president in 1801, Illuminist conspiracy fears faded.

But a wave of accusations against the Freemasons followed. Masonry, a conspiracy theorist claimed, was “an engine of Satan . . . blasphemous, murderous, anti-republican and anti-Christian.” 54

Denunciations of Masonry were followed by a more influential conspiracy theory centered on the Catholic Church. “A conspiracy exists . . . its plans are already in operation,” wrote Samuel Morse, inventor of the telegraph, in the 1830s. His agents, he said, included “Jesuit missionaries traveling through the land.” 35

As in other countries, U.S. conspiracy theories flourished during conflicts leading to war. Before the Civil War, abolitionists feared that Southern conspiracists were plotting to take over the federal government to ensure slavery’s survival. 36

Southerners and others indeed wanted to ensure slavery’s future, and its extension to newly created states, such as Kansas and California. While no proof of a federal takeover conspiracy surfaced, the so-called “slave power” plot set the stage for 20th-century conspiracy theories that built on established fact.

### Conspiracy American-Style

Americans in the 19th century began shaping their own conspiracy theories. But unlike their Old World models, which reflected threats to an ethnic homogeneity unknown in the U.S. melting pot, American conspiracy theories tended to focus on powerful and evil men acting in secret.

“A small, unelected minority representing un-American interests . . . takes over the federal government and uses it against the people,” writes conspiracy scholar Pipes at the Middle East Forum. 57 Even U.S. conspiracism focusing on Jews and Catholics typically centered on alleged manipulation rather than on threats to racial purity. Europe’s Rothschild banking family typically was

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excited to signify alleged Jewish control of world finances. As for Catholics in the late 19th century, they were “suspect as the pawns of a foreign power.”

By the mid-20th century, fear of foreign powers had morphed into fear that U.S. leaders were selling out the country's interests to foreigners. Following the devastating Japanese surprise attack on Pearl Harbor on Dec. 7, 1941, some U.S. isolationists claimed President Franklin D. Roosevelt had known about — and allowed — the attack because it would plunge the United States into the war in Europe.

In a 1944 article — “The Truth About Pearl Harbor” — The Chicago Tribune argued that Roosevelt had deliberately incited Japanese hostility, learned of the impending attack, failed to warn commanders at Pearl Harbor — and then blamed them for the absence of preparation.

In fact, Roosevelt and his aides did believe that U.S. entry into the war was inevitable and did conclude — days before Pearl Harbor — that American attempts to mitigate hostilities with Japan had failed. No one, however, expected Pearl Harbor to be a target.

A postwar disclosure during congressional hearings (1945-1946) added fuel to the conspiracists’ fire: Before the war began, the United States had broken the Japanese diplomatic code, which provided major evidence of U.S. awareness of pre-war Japanese intentions. The majority report said no evidence supported the claim that the FDR administration had schemed to get America into the war. But two Republicans signed a minority report claiming the administration withheld warnings from Pearl Harbor commanders in furtherance of “some long-range plan which was never disclosed to Congress or the American people.”

However, the conspiracists didn’t produce what would later be called a “smoking gun.” The decrypted Japanese cables — code named “Magic” — did reveal the Japanese saw war as imminent — but no cables mentioned an attack on Pearl Harbor.

**Cold War Conspiracies**

The threats of communist subversion dominated the conspiracy landscape following the war. The era’s rabid anti-communism — known as McCarthyism — was spawned by Sen. Joseph McCarthy, R-Wis., who depicted himself as a crusader against communist infiltration of the government.

In 1951, McCarthy accused Secretary of State Dean Acheson and Defense Secretary George C. Marshall of being Soviet agents. The false accusations were followed by news that Americans spying for the Soviet Union — Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, executed in 1953 — had been charged with stealing U.S. atomic bomb secrets. At the same time, American troops were fighting Soviet- and Chinese communist-backed forces in Korea. In this atmosphere, McCarthy’s sensational allegations of a “vast conspiracy . . . on a scale so immense as to dwarf any previous venture in the history of man” polarized the country.

Notwithstanding McCarthy’s demagoguery and disregard for fact, Soviet spies had, in fact, penetrated the U.S. government and defense contractors — but in the 1930s and ’40s. By the time McCarthy launched his campaign, the spies who had transmitted nuclear, high-tech and diplomatic information had been arrested, fled the country or gone to ground.

Even before McCarthy surged to prominence, investigators and loyalty boards in federal and state governments had begun probing thousands of public employees who might have participated in communist political activities in the 1930s and ’40s; some lost their jobs. When McCarthy’s Permanent Investigations Subcommittee took up the cause, alleged — and in a few cases actual — communists or ex-communists in government, entertainment and higher education were interrogated, sometimes in highly theatrical, televised public hearings.

While the injustice of the McCarthy “witch hunts” is widely acknowledged, some on the communist-influenced left hyped the McCarthy era into the equivalent of early Nazi Germany. “It seemed to us that America was veering toward fascism, a fascism that would be much the same as that of Nazi Germany,” Morton Sobell, an associate of the Rosenberg’s who served 19 years for espionage, wrote in a 2001 memoir, recounting what he and his comrades had forecast as imminent in the early 1950s. “We saw mass roundups, concentration camps and death ovens.” Sobell confessed in 2008 that he had been a Soviet spy.

McCarthy himself ended in political disgrace. After Republican President Dwight D. Eisenhower was elected in 1952, McCarthy stayed on the attack, and his Republican allies abandoned him.

Despite his political collapse, McCarthy helped spur an important development in conspiracism. His targeting of Acheson, an esteemed member of the East Coast foreign policy establishment, led other conspiracists to scrutinize the liberal Council on Foreign Relations (CFR), an influential think tank in New York whose members are high-profile scholars and former and future diplomats. For the new generation of right-wing conspiracists, the CFR figured prominently — along with the Rockefeller family — in alleged takeover plots. David Rockefeller, the senior member of the oil-and-banking dynasty, is now the council’s honorary chairman.

“The ultimate aim of the Council on Foreign Relations (however well-intentioned its prominent and powerful members may be) is the same as the ultimate aim of international communism: to create a one-world socialist system and make the United States an official part of it,” Dan Smoot, a former FBI agent and far-right activist and author, wrote in his influential 1962 book, The Invisible Government.

But scholars scoff at such efforts to link the CFR to conspiracy. “Finding a

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Critics Skewer Conspiracy Theories

“They have no clue what they’re talking about.”

N oam Chomsky, intellectual superstar of the international left, has been harshly analyzing U.S. policies since the Vietnam War. As The New Yorker’s Larissa MacFarquhar wrote, his works are a “catalogue of crimes committed by America, terrible crimes, and many of them . . . but it is not they that produce the sensation of blows: it is Chomsky’s rage as he describes them.”

No wonder, then, that people certain the George W. Bush administration connived in the Sept. 11 attacks have been trying to recruit Chomsky, an emeritus professor of linguistics at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). “I am bombarded with letters about this subject,” he said in a 2007 interview.

Many commentators shy away from tackling conspiracy theories, given the passion or fanaticism they inspire. But Chomsky subjected the 9/11 conspiracy theories to the same unsparing scrutiny that he focuses on government. “With regard to the physical evidence, can you become a highly qualified civil and mechanical engineer and expert in the structure of buildings by spending a couple of hours on the Internet?” he asked in 2007. “If you can, we can get rid of the civil and mechanical engineering departments at MIT.”

Another critic is Edward L. Winston, a 31-year-old software engineer in St. Louis who runs a Web site, “ConspiracyScience.com,” devoted to his merciless analyses of popular conspiracy themes.

In one of his responses to the most common Obama-birthplace theories, Winston took on the notion advanced by some “birthers” that a “natural born citizen” of the United States — an eligibility standard for the presidency — must be the child of two U.S. citizens. (Obama’s Kenya-born father was a British subject.)

“They have no clue what they’re talking about,” Winston writes. “Anyone born within the borders of the United States or within the territories of the United States is a natural born citizen. That even includes individuals born to two illegal immigrants on U.S. soil.”

Winston’s site also includes some of the messages he receives on his Facebook page from conspiracy believers. “With a last name like Winston, I’m sorry but you’ve got Jew in your blood,” one e-mailer wrote him. “So don’t say you’re not Jewish just because you don’t practice it. Jew is blood, Jew is usury.”

“Little Green Footballs,” an influential blog by Web designer Charles Johnson — once known for attacking radical Islamists and defending Israel — has in recent years been ridiculing far-right conspiracists. “Unbelievable,” Johnson wrote in September. “Now the Christian far right is promoting the mind-bogglingly dim ‘birther’ conspiracy theory, with an IQ-destroying infomercial. . . . (The site pictures President Obama with the caption ‘God’s Enemy.’)”

Conservative blogger John Hawkins combined mockery with textual analysis in a 2006 debate with the author of a theory that President George W. Bush was planning to erode U.S. sovereignty. Jerome R. Corsi had written: “President Bush is pursuing a globalist agenda to create a North American Union, effectively erasing our borders with both Mexico and Canada. This was the hidden agenda behind the Bush ad-

JFK and Beyond

The assassination of President Kennedy in 1963 launched the modern era of conspiracism. Ordinary citizens by the thousands embraced conspiracy theories about “what really happened,” and terms such as “grassy knoll” and “lone gunman” became staples of popular culture.

Citizen interest in the assassination got a major boost when the murder of Kennedy’s assassin, Lee Harvey Oswald, was broadcast live to millions of homes. Similarly, an 8 mm movie of the assassination — shot by Abraham Zapruder, a bystander along Kennedy’s limousine route — became a staple piece of evidence for assassination buffs, historians and conspiracists.

The conclusion of the government commission headed by Chief Justice of the United States Earl Warren — that Oswald conceived and carried out the assassination by himself — was greeted skeptically by many. The most widely circulated theories said that U.S. military and business interests had had Kennedy killed because he opposed their plans to escalate the Vietnam War, or that the Cuban government and/or its Soviet patron were responsible, in retaliation for U.S. plans to have Cuban leader Fidel Castro killed.

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hierarchy where none exists, reading discipline into a voluntary organization, the Right fingers the CFR as the ‘invisible government’ that really runs the United States,” writes conspiracism scholar Pipes. The Trilateral Commission, a similar group founded in 1973, also prompts conspiracist suspicions.

Members of the far right have gone even farther back in time in tracing the roots of plotting against the United States. “The John Birch Society has long held that the conspiracy of the Illuminati . . . is the predecessor of a modern-day conspiracy warring against our country and civilization,” John F. McManus, president of the right-wing organization, wrote in 2007. Long centered in Massachusetts, it is now based in Appleton, Wis., McCarthy’s hometown.
ministration’s true open-borders policy. . . . President Bush intends to abrogate U.S. sovereignty to the North American Union, a new economic and political entity which the President is quietly forming. ”

Debating Corsi, Hawkins, editor of the “Right Wing News” Web site, wrote, “There’s no real evidence . . . anywhere except in Jerome’s fevered imagination. . . . The misleading trash you’re cranking out on a weekly basis is duping people who would normally know better.”

Of course, the U.S.-Mexico-Canada borders remained intact after Bush’s term ended. But Corsi, who rejects the conspiracy theorist label, maintains that North American integration plans remain in place. “Certainly the writing that I and others did brought the agenda to light,” he says. “Largely, that was my goal.”

Whatever the precise goals of those who embrace theories about Sept. 11 and other events, anti-conspiracists from the left argue that the theories do serious damage to the left-liberal side even when presented under its banner. Chomsky, in fact, argued that the “power centers” preferred to see activists obsessing about conspiracy theories. “It’s a terrible drain of energy away from much more serious problems,” he said.

David Corn, Washington bureau chief for the leftist magazine Mother Jones and a harsh critic both of the Bush administration and the “truthers,” pointed to the latter as largely responsible for the resignation under pressure of Obama administration environmental appointee Van Jones, who had signed a 2004 “truther” petition.

“Mistrust of government in general grew even more in the late 1960s and early 1970s, as the Vietnam War ended in U.S. defeat in 1975, after years of optimistic official reports that the war was being won. Two years earlier, the Watergate scandal began coming to light, with its revelations of systematic official deceit and law-breaking and, ultimately, President Richard M. Nixon’s resignation.

Reports of questionable government activities continued during the Gerald R. Ford administration. In 1975, a commission headed by Vice President Nelson Rockefeller reported on a massive pattern of illegal CIA activities within the United States during the 1960s. And the Senate conducted a larger investigation headed by Sen. Frank Church, D-Idaho, that revealed the attempted FBI blackmail of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., the CIA’s attempt to use Mafia members to assassinate Castro, assassination plots against other foreign leaders and a host of other actions that might once have been dubbed the ravings of conspiracy theorists.

During President Ronald Reagan’s two-terms (1981-1989), White House officials were revealed to have been involved in a scheme to sell arms to the Islamic revolutionary government of Iran — a hostile power — in an effort to secretly raise money for weapons for U.S.-supported guerrillas fighting the Soviet-backed Nicaraguan government.

“The American taxpayers have lost a public servant who was uniquely qualified to help move the country in the right direction,” Corn wrote in September. “Jones is responsible for his own actions, but the 9/11 truthers are also responsible for concocting and spreading the poison that he drank.”

— Peter Katel

4 “Barack Obama — Obama was not born in the United States,” Conspiracy Science, undated, http://conspiracyscience.com/articles/obama/obama-was-not-born-in-the-united-states/obama_cannot_be_president_because_both_parents_must_be_citizens_for_one_to_be_eligible.
9 Chomsky, op. cit.

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Secret Files Shed Light on Real Conspiracies

“Operation Northwoods” fed suspicions about government plots.

Some conspiracy theories sound unbelievable, and they are. Others sound just as wild, but the paper trails they have left erase any doubts.

In 1962, soon after the Cuban Missile Crisis, Gen. Lyman L. Lemnitzer, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, proposed a series of fake Cuban attacks on the United States or its allies designed to provide a pretext for U.S. military intervention in Cuba. “Operation Northwoods,” which was never approved, is one of a series of secret plans that, once revealed, provided supporting evidence for conspiracists who believe in secret plots by government agents.

The government’s penchant for keeping secrets confers some value on conspiracy theories, says historian Kathryn Olmsted of the University of California, Davis. “They get people skeptical and demanding answers,” she says. “And you get big investigations that, at times, produce a lot of information.”

For example, Olmsted writes, a controversial San Jose Mercury-News investigation of an alleged CIA partnership with Central American drug dealers prompted a CIA internal investigation. That probe effectively confirmed that agency officials had worked closely with traffickers because they were part of a campaign to destabilize the communist-supported Nicaraguan government. However, the newspaper’s probe veered into conspiracism when it blamed the CIA, through its trafficker allies, of playing a key role in sparking the crack cocaine boom of the 1980s and ’90s.

“Operation Northwoods” took far longer to come to light. The scheme included a shootout — elaborately engineered to look like Cuban action — of a pilotless drone aircraft designed as an exact replica of a plane carrying passengers; shootings of Cuban exiles in Miami and the blowing up of a ship off the U.S. Naval Base at Guantánamo.

Kennedy administration Defense Secretary Robert McNamara threw out the entire proposal, wrote author James L. Bamford, who discovered the “Northwoods” memo in 2001, months before the Sept. 11 attacks.

In the years that followed, the “Northwoods” documents took on new life as support material for 9/11 “truther” theories. “Some of the ideas, such as the proposal to ‘blow up a U.S. ship in Guantánamo Bay and blame Cuba,’ would have required killing Americans,” wrote James Ray Griffin, a retired professor of philosophy and religion at Claremont School of Theology and a “truther” activist, suggesting that the government wasn’t beyond manufacturing the 9/11 attack.

Ten years after the “Northwoods” proposal, The Associated Press reported that the U.S. Public Health Service had for decades been injecting syphilis germs into illiterate black sharecroppers in Alabama without telling them what they were receiving. The justification was that the disease’s effects could be studied. The so-called “Tuskegee Experiment” was named after Tuskegee Institute (now Tuskegee University) Hospital, where the project was carried out.

The experiment helped sustain a strong belief today among black Americans — hit hard by HIV — that AIDS was produced in a government laboratory. About 50 percent of African-Americans share that view, according to a 2002-2003 survey by the RAND Corp. think tank and Oregon State University.

“The government lied about inventing the HIV virus as a means of genocide against people of color,” the Rev. Jeremiah Wright of Chicago said during one of the sermons that caused then-presidential candidate Barack Obama to back away from his ex-pastor.

Wright later cited the Tuskegee experiment in defending his statement. “I believe our government is capable of doing anything,” Wright said at the National Press Club.

No credible scientific evidence exists to support the notion that the government developed AIDS. But an AIDS-origin conspiracy did exist in the Soviet intelligence establishment. In the mid-1980s, when the AIDS epidemic was generating global alarm, the Soviet Union heavily promoted the notion that the U.S. military invented AIDS. “The AIDS virus is the unfortunate candidate Pat Robertson promoted this conspiratorial vision in a best-selling book, New World Order. He wrote of “a single thread (that) runs from the White House to the State Department to the Council on Foreign Relations to the Trilateral Commission to secret societies to extreme New Agers.” Robertson also invoked the specter of the Illuminati, the purported villains in the oldest conspiracy theory in U.S. history: “The New Age religions, the beliefs of the Illuminati, and Illuminated Freemasonry all seem to move along parallel tracks with world communism and world finance.”

The flames of conspiracism that Robertson helped fan reached new heights during Bill Clinton’s two terms (1993-2001). Clinton and his wife, Hillary, were targeted by a series of allegations about their real estate dealings and commodities trades that grew progressively more conspiratorial, especially after the 1993 suicide of lawyer Vincent Foster, a senior White House aide.

Hardcore anti-Clinton activists developed a wealth of evidence that showed, they said, that Foster had been murdered, possibly on the Clintons’ orders — contrary to what police and an independent counsel reported.

In addition to Foster’s death, Clinton conspiracists also zeroed in on Clinton’s supposed involvement in drug-smuggling and the training of Nicaraguan guerrillas while he had been Arkansas governor.

Distributed by a Soviet press agency, versions of the conspiracy theory appeared in newspapers in 50 countries, a Reagan administration official wrote in 1987. “Obviously the United States is technically capable of almost anything,” a government official in Africa told Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Kathleen Bailey. “Also, why would such a story be in so many newspapers if it’s not true?” ¹⁰

Further instigating suspicion about U.S. government activities, an American spy agency waited until 1995 to release documentary evidence of spying by hundreds of Americans for the Soviet Union before and during World War II.

The “Venona Papers” were a series of decryptions by American and British decoding experts of messages between spy-handlers in the United States and their bosses in Moscow.

Venona was so secret that even President Harry S Truman was kept in the dark — though Moscow knew about the project by 1949. “The president thus saw little proof of a real espionage conspiracy but heard many tales told by self-interested and alarmist conspiracists,” historian Olmsted writes. As a result, Truman remained highly skeptical of reports of Soviet spying. ¹¹

A few years later, Sen. Joseph McCarthy, R-Wis., made his wild accusations of a government completely penetrated by Soviet spies. The charge flourished because only a handful of people were aware of how much the government actually knew. “Had we learned about the Venona Project in the late 1940s, had the FBI revealed it was following Soviet spies, that would have shut up McCarthy,” argues historian John E. Moser of Ohio’s Ashland University.

In the end, Moser says, excessive government secrecy can provide fertile soil for conspiracy theories. “So many theories from the 18th and 19th centuries focused on monasteries and convents, because they were closed institutions. A levered imagination can come up with all kinds of ideas.”

Indeed, some Kennedy assassination experts say that the CIA — to this day — is giving conspiracists plenty of grounds for suspicion. The spy agency is still fighting against releasing documents concerning a CIA officer’s ties to an anti-Castro group that clashed with Lee Harvey Oswald, who later killed Kennedy, The New York Times reported on Oct. 16. ¹²

Gerald Posner, author of a book rebutting conspiracy theories of the assassination, says of the CIA’s conduct: “It feeds the conspiracy theorists who say, ‘You’re hiding something.’” ¹³

— Peter Katel

Meanwhile, two deadly events sparked a wave of far-right conspiratorial thinking. In 1992, a mother and son were killed by federal agents during the siege of a right-wing survivalist family at Ruby Ridge, in northern Idaho. A year later the botched confrontation and lethal fire at the Branch Davidian compound near Waco, Texas. ⁵²

In far-right circles, the deaths were interpreted in light of a conspiracist belief that black helicopters were constantly sweeping through the U.S.-Canadian border area in preparation for military occupation by U.N. troops that would rule the United States as part of the “New World Order.” ⁵³

However, another leading conspiracist, Linda Thompson, who headed the Indianapolis-based America Justice Federation, took a more limited view of the black helicopters. Holding that the government murdered the Waco cult members, she claimed the choppers were part of a CIA-sponsored “private mafia” aiming at “a military takeover of the United States through a combination of drug running, gun running, lobbying, blackmailing congressmen and terrorism.” ⁵⁴

Thompson’s was a prominent voice of the militia movement, a loosely organized group that included far-right extremists and apolitical survivalists, many given to conspiracism. The movement virtually disappeared after the 1995 bombing of the federal building in Oklahoma City by Army veteran McVeigh, who had traveled in militia circles.
CURRENT SITUATION

Swine Flu Plot?

Medical professionals are battling a host of conspiracy theories and other scares about the swine flu pandemic and the vaccine against it.

“We have the right vaccine for this virus,” Health and Human Services Secretary Kathleen Sebelius told ABC News in early October. “We also have years of clinical data on seasonal flu vaccine and a great safety record.” 55

Yet 41 percent of adults told pollsters for the Harvard School of Public Health they won’t get vaccinated. And only 51 percent said they definitely would vaccinate their children. 56

Forty-eight percent of those not getting vaccinated said lack of trust in public officials’ information on the vaccine played a role in their decision. 57

The survey didn’t ask about the sources of that mistrust, but flu-related conspiracy theories have been flying around the Web since news of the new flu strain broke last spring.

Dr. Paul A. Offitt, chief of infectious diseases at the Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia, sees two major schools of conspiracism — the belief the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention is misrepresenting or falsifying data, and that profit-obsessed pharmaceutical companies are indifferent to vaccine quality.

“As far as the most extreme theories — that they’re making products to kill us — that is so outlandish that I have trouble commenting on it,” Offitt says.

Yet such over-the-top theories are plentiful. Mike Adams, editor of a “natural health” Web site, asked readers in April: “Could world governments, spooked by the prospect of radical climate change caused by overpopulation of the planet, have assembled a super-secret task force to engineer and distribute a super-virulent strain of influenza designed to ‘correct’ the human population (and institute global Martial Law)?” 58

A writer for the respected British magazine New Scientist dismissed such speculation. “Deliberately engineering a virus of this kind would be a huge challenge,” wrote Michael Le Page, though he conceded a laboratory mistake could conceivably have a played a role. 59

Extreme conspiracism that sees the HINI flu and/or the vaccine as deliberately fatal coexist with generalized suspicion. Right-wing radio and TV hosts Glenn Beck and Rush Limbaugh have been skeptical and belligerently suspicious, respectively. “Screw you, Mrs. Sebelius! I’m not going to take it precisely because you’re telling me I must,” Limbaugh shouted on his show. 60

But Limbaugh’s response was mild compared with some of the flu conspiracies taking shape on the Web. “In the next few months, we are about to face our own American soldiers who have killed and maimed indiscriminately in Iraq and Afghanistan,” wrote Ilya Sandra Perlimgieri, who writes frequently on health matters from an anti-medical establishment viewpoint. “These soldiers will now probably be deployed to accompany FEMA to come door-to-door into our homes to force us to take these poisonous injections. . . . We are at the brink of even the loss of our very own lives all under the guise of protecting us from a non-existent ‘pandemic.’ [They will] genetically engineer the flu in some biowarfare lab, and then create debilitating and deathly vaccines that will do further harm to everyone.” 61

Perlimgieri’s denunciation was posted on rense.com, a site with a heavy interest in Holocaust denial and so-called anti-Zionism. One graphic on the site shows a baby about to be stabbed to death on an altar bearing a Star of David overlaid with a “Z” as Obama and other world leaders, dressed in black robes, look on.

Outside that wing of the conspiracist community, the focus is on pharmaceutical companies. Paul Joseph Watson, a writer on Alex Jones’ “Prison Planet” site blames a “mammoth level of fear-mongering” on drug firms’ appetite for profits during a recession. The high level of public resistance to the vaccine is anti-corporate victory in the face “of such a huge effort on behalf of the pharmaceutical industry and their soapbox, the mass media.” 62

“Birthers” Challenged

U.S. District Judge David O. Carter of Orange County, Calif., is weighing dismissal of a lawsuit challenging President Obama’s citizenship and, consequently, his eligibility for office. If the recent actions of other federal judges in similar suits are any guide, the suit’s chances are slender.

All of the legal action has centered on what the “birther” movement insists is lack of definitive official proof that Obama was born in the United States — evidence to the contrary notwithstanding. Orly Taitz, the Southern California lawyer who has filed the most recent of these cases, takes that claim of a non-U.S. birthplace several steps further.

Taitz told The Washington Post she thought Obama had been born in Kenya — his father’s native country — then brought to Hawaii by his mother, who persuaded state workers to falsify his birth record. She also entertained the idea — a common one among “birthers” — that Obama was also a citizen of Indonesia, where he lived for several years as a child while his mother was married to her second husband, who was Indonesian. “He is lying about his identity, he is hiding his whole identity, this is dangerous!” Taitz told the newspaper. 63

Weeks earlier, U.S. District Judge Clay D. Land of Columbus, Ga., had

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conspiracy theories are not harmless. They are exaggerated stories falsely portraying a scapegoated group as plotting against the common good. Throughout the history of our country, mass movements have been built around conspiracy theories targeting witches, Freemasons, Catholics, Jews, immigrants and “Reds.”

In the 1800s, an angry mob near Boston was so enraged by conspiracy stories about Catholic priests and nuns that it burned a convent school to the ground. Between 1919 and 1921, thousands of Italian and Russian immigrants were rounded up and deported by our government based on conspiracy feammongering falsely targeting them as subversives and terrorists. The McCarthy period illustrated the damage conspiracy theories can do to a society.

The administration of President Bill Clinton was sidetracked by waves of conspiracy theories claiming he had ordered the assassination of a key aide or was plotting a U.N. takeover of America with jackbooted troops arriving in black helicopters.

Now the “birthers” and other conspiracy theorists circulate false allegations that President Obama is not really a U.S. citizen; is planning to merge the U.S., Canada and Mexico into a North American Union or that he is a secret Muslim plotting more terror attacks. The xenophobic and racist subtext here is clear. Some people have acted on these base and baseless claims. Since Obama’s inauguration there have been nine murders where the alleged killers have been entangled in white supremacist or anti-Semitic conspiracy theories.

James W. von Brunn, accused of killing a guard at the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C., feared a conspiracy of Jews and Freemasons to control the world and keep white Christians subjugated while at the same time elevating blacks to undeserved positions of power. Other conspiracists blame Muslims, immigrants, Mexicans, feminists and gay people.

The recent “Tea Party” protests and town hall disruptions are awash in conspiracy claims and false and misleading information. Democracy is based on informed consent — not myths and lies woven into conspiracy theories.

It is unlikely that conspiracy theorists will overthrow the government. They can, however, poison the body politic; distort and derail public policy debates; spread bigotry and paranoia and wind up some people so tightly that they commit acts of violence against targeted scapegoats. Conspiracy theories are toxic to democracy.

ngry right-wing talk radio hosts suggest that financier/philanthropist George Soros is secretly pulling the strings of the Obama White House, while equally angry “birthers” deny that the president was born in the United States. A few years ago, we heard from the left that the election of 2000 had been “stolen,” that 9/11 was an “inside job” and that Halliburton, the global oil field services company once headed by Dick Cheney, was secretly behind the war in Iraq.

Conspiracy theories do seem to be everywhere in today’s society, although, like body odor, they are generally things that other people have. Are they a threat to our democracy? One might be tempted to say so, until one recognizes that conspiracy theories have an old and distinguished place in American political history. It is hard to imagine that the War of Independence would have been fought had Britain’s American colonists in 1775 not been convinced that George III was actively plotting to enslave them. New Englanders were convinced in the late 1790s that the country had been infiltrated by members of a secret organization known as the Bavarian Illuminati, and Thomas Jefferson, it was claimed, was one of their agents.

Nor is it likely that there would have been a Civil War — or the subsequent destruction of slavery — had it not been for Northern claims of a “slave power conspiracy,” matched only by the Southern notion that their neighbors to the North were intent on destroying their way of life. Fears of communist subversion shaped the 1950s as surely as theories over who shot President Kennedy influenced the 1960s.

Some may claim, however, that conspiracy theories pose a greater danger today because they seem to circulate so quickly. This is certainly the case, thanks largely to so-called “new media” such as talk radio, the Internet and 24-hour news networks. Moreover, thanks to the Watergate scandal, Americans today understand that major conspiracies can, and do, exist.

Yet what is striking about so many of the conspiracy theories that have found adherents throughout American history is that they all purport to identify threats to our form of government. In addition, they represent a deep distrust of traditional authority, whether it be the government, corporations, the mainstream media or “the experts.” In other words, far from being a danger, the presence of such theories — as silly as most of them are — might actually be seen as a sign of a healthy democracy.
dismissed a similar case, ruling that it was based on “sheer conjecture and speculation.” The judge also remarked that Taitz “is a self-proclaimed leader in what has become known as the birther movement.” 64

Taitz fired back with a motion to remove Land from the case. In it, she called “birther” a “pejorative appellation (often coupled with even more colorful epithets such as ‘batshit crazy’).” 65

The preferred designation among Obama birth-certificate challengers is “eligibility movement.” 66

Even before Obama was elected, some of them questioned why his original birth certificate wasn’t on file in the Hawaii public records system. Hawaii had stored all original birth certificates, making them available only to people with “a tangible interest” in the documents. The state does make available a “certification of live birth” — as opposed to a “certificate” — which states that Obama was born in Hawaii. 67

Then, in early August, WorldNet Daily, a Web site that has made the theme a specialty, posted a story reporting that Taitz’s discovery of an alleged Kenyan birth certificate for Obama could be “the smoking gun” of the entire subject. 68

But PolitiFact, a fact-checking arm of the St. Petersburg Times, reported persuasive evidence that the “Kenyan” certificate was a digitally altered Australian birth certificate that its owner had posted on a genealogy Web site. “Same format,” PolitiFact said. “Same book and page number in the birth registry. Some of the officials’ last names were even the same.” Factcheck.org, owned by the University of Pennsylvania’s Annenberg Public Policy Center, has also concluded that challenges to Obama’s citizenship are groundless. 69

By the time PolitiFact posted its report, WorldNet Daily’s editor and CEO, Joseph Farah, had backed away from the story. “No one here has made a judgment that it is real,” he wrote. 70

Farah went on to question the “Certification of Live Birth” that PolitiFact posted. “Anyone could march into a Hawaii Public Health Department office and say he or she had a baby, fill out a form with the pertinent details, sign it and there would be no questions asked,” he wrote. 71

But even before the election, Chiyome Fukino, Hawaii Health Department director, said that she and the registrar of vital statistics “have personally seen and verified that the Hawaii State Department of Health has Sen. Obama’s original birth certificate on record.” 72

Robert Farley of PolitiFact acknowledged that Obama hasn’t posted his original birth certificate. “Maybe the original would identify the hospital where Obama was born, but that’s irrelevant,” he wrote. “The issue is in what city, and therefore country, was he born. The document posted by the campaign proves Obama was born in Honolulu, according to Health Department officials. And that’s really the central issue here.” 73

Even outside the WorldNet Daily orbit, not everyone agrees Obama has resolved the issue satisfactorily. “There are legitimate questions about the documentation of Obama’s birth certificate,” Camille Paglia, a political iconoclast who largely supports Obama, said on National Public Radio’s “Fresh Air” in September. “I’m sorry, I’ve been following this closely from the start.” 74

Others argue that those challenging Obama’s eligibility are operating outside the world of fact and evidence. “If the long-form birth certificate were released, with its unequivocal identification of Hawaii as Obama’s place of birth, the cycle would almost certainly continue,” Alex Koppelman, a staff writer for the online magazine Salon, wrote before Obama was sworn in. He noted that talk-show hosts Limbaugh and Savage, as well as author Corsi, had questioned Obama’s mid-campaign trip to Hawaii to see his dying grandmother. “It’s got to do with his birth certificate,” Savage said of the trip. 75

Obama may well have concluded that releasing his original birth certificate would never quiet the attackers. “As long as he doesn’t, the ‘birthers’ are going to keep going, and as long as they do, they’re going to look ridiculous,” suggests Ashland University historian Moser. “The people who believe in the theory, they’re never going to go for him. So why not keep it alive?” 76

## OUTLOOK

### Looking for Answers

Conspiracy theories will be part of the national conversation over the next decade, Moser says. “This is a side effect of America losing its unquestioned position of dominance in the world that it has enjoyed since World War II,” he explains. “We’re not going to become a Third World country, but we’re not going to be on top, as many Americans are used to seeing the United States. People are going to look for conspiracy theories to explain that.”

At the same time, he’s skeptical that conspiracism will come to dominate the political landscape. “You can be a listener to talk radio and enjoy it, but that doesn’t mean you’re going to buy into the whole master theory,” he says, likening talk radio to pro wrestling.

But the political system may be vulnerable in ways that an entertainment spectacle is not, argues Berlet of Political Research Associates. “Conspiracism is a threat because democracy is not a stable system,” he says. “It’s constantly being buffeted by people who want to subordinate subversives or an external threat. Constant waves of scapegoating and bigotry have to be pushed back.”

Moreover, Berlet says, the so-called mainstream media have effectively relinquished their monitoring role — “watchdogs on Valium,” he calls them. “There are no stories about maybe some-
thing is wrong in society if people are this unhappy. There is almost no analytical presence in the media that most people consume — no coverage of ideas."

However, conservative blogger John Hawkins says fact-based Web media can react more quickly when conspiracy theories appear. "In the old world, media didn't have to address these," he says. "In the new world, people will address them and kill them in their cradle."

Speed is important, Hawkins says, because of the Web's oft-noted role in propagating conspiracy theories. "I think it's very important to turn these things around before people get them in their heads," he says. "If you do a Google search on a conspiracy theory, you'll find 50 articles all borrowing from each other, each saying there's a conspiracy. Joe Average will say, 'Maybe it's true; I don't see anything going in the other direction.'"

Historian Olmsted at the University of California is uncertain if conspiracism will gain strength over the next decade, noting that the "truther" theories lost momentum once Bush left office. For now, "There is always a surge in conspiracy theories when there's an economic crisis," she says. "Also, it seems that the election of an African-American president has triggered the anxieties of a significant segment of the white population."

Along the same lines, anti-conspiracist Web writer Winston of St. Louis also notes an Obama effect. "If he's reelected, I would say that conspiracy theories definitely will not die down."

Winston adds, "A minority of them are dangerous enough to warrant people being a little worried about them."

Still, conspiracy expert Pipes hasn't seen present-day theories rise to the level they sometimes reached in the early and middle 19th century.

Further, some well-known conspiracy theories center on the facts of past events, Pipes notes. So, by definition, these theories look backward instead of forward. As a result, "Something like the 'truther' phenomenon looks pretty impactless," he says.

But radio host Jones is looking to the future. And it's a grim one. "You're in locked-down prison cities," he said, in a message that he says is aimed at people living 20 or 30 years from now. "Your mother, your father, your children are dying from the bioweapons, you're dying from the engineered cancers." 76

The only positive feature of this horrific universe, Jones said, is that people would know who their enemies are. "If you're listening to me 20-30 years in the future," he said, "just please fight against the new world order." As for present-day listeners who laugh at Jones' forecast, he called them "buffoons." 77

Clearly, Jones has a perspective on the future. But even conspiracy theories that don't focus on what's ahead may build constituencies for forward-looking theories. "My guess is that people who believe in the 'birther' theory have probably folded it into other conspiracy theories," says Syracuse University's Barkun.

Whether conspiracy theories maintain their present momentum or not, Barkun says one facet of conspiracist thinking seems unlikely to change: adherents' resistance to argument. "Some months ago I got an e-mail from someone teaching at a university in Montana," he says. "All her neighbors were listening to Alex Jones. What could she do about it? How could she convince them they were mistaken? I told her, I don't think you can do anything."

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**Statement of Ownership Management, Circulation**

*Act of Aug. 12, 1970: Section 3685, Title 39, United States Code*


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**Notes**


About the Author

Peter Katel is a CQ Researcher staff writer who previously reported on Haiti and Latin America for Time and Newsweek and covered the Southwest for newspapers in New Mexico. He has received several journalism awards, including the Bartolome Mitre Award for coverage of drug trafficking, from the Inter-American Press Association. He holds an A.B. in university studies from the University of New Mexico. His recent reports include “Mexico’s Drug War,” “Hate Groups” and “Vanishing Jobs.”

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40 Quoted in ibid., p. 79.


42 Pipes, op. cit., p. 116; the subcommittee’s closed sessions are now online, “Historic Senate Hearings Published,” United States Senate, www.senate.gov/artandhistory/history/common/generic/McCarthy_Transcripts.htm.


47 Except where otherwise indicated, material for this subsection is drawn from Olmsted, op. cit.

48 The film is now viewable on the Web; “The Zapruder Film,” www.youtube.com/watch?v=E66_vymfPA.


52 Katel, op. cit.


54 Quoted in ibid.


57 Ibid.


71 Ibid.

72 Quoted in Farley, op. cit.

73 Ibid.


77 Ibid.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Defend Our Freedoms Foundation, 29839 Santa Margarita Pkwy., Rancho Santa Margarita, CA 92688; (949) 663-5411; www.oryltaitzesq.com. The Web site of Orly Taitz, a leader among those claiming that President Obama wasn’t born in the U.S.


911truth.org: (785) 597-5729; www.911truth.org. Assembles key “truther” documents to raise questions about the origin of the Sept. 11 attacks.

Alex Jones’ Infowars.com. Offers access to conspiracy theorists’ daily broadcasts, as well as interpretations of current events from the conspiracist perspective.

Political Research Associates, 1310 Broadway, Suite 201, Somerville, MA 02144; (617) 666-5300; www.publiceye.org. A liberal think tank that monitors conspiracism on the right but also reports critically on theories that attract left-wing followers.


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Oct. 23, 2009

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Books


A leading conspiracy scholar at Syracuse University explores the links between conspiracism and “new age” beliefs.


The late Columbia University historian authored a key work in the study of American conspiracism.


A University of California, Davis, historian explores how conspiracism grows out of real events and trends.


A former newspaper reporter lays out world history as one big conspiracy theory.


The director of a Middle East-related think tank analyzes the roots and consequences of U.S. and Western conspiracy theories.

Articles


A respected fact-checking organization says President Barack Obama’s birthplace and nationality are definitively established.


An influential liberal profiles radio host Alex Jones, judging his influence to be growing.


Fights within the Obama-birthplace movement are becoming more intense, a Southern California weekly newspaper reports.


The president of the far-right John Birch Society links a Democratic Party leader and a globalist conspiracy.


A *Washington Post* report chronicles an academic’s exploration of the origins of a conspiracist notion of candidate Obama as a radical Muslim.


Even today, the intelligence agency is resisting disclosing some Kennedy assassination-related files.


A news organization with a track record of skepticism toward government takes an equally skeptical look at conspiracy theories.


Zaitchick reports on the intellectual influence of the late W. Cleon Skousen on radio host Glenn Beck.

Reports and Studies


A conspiracy expert concludes that the trend is on the rise and dangerous.


Two lengthy and technically detailed analyses of the Sept. 11 attacks attempt to answer questions raised by the “truther” movement.
Alex Jones


A new film documents the conspiracy theories of Alex Jones and challenges viewers to question the politics around them.


Alex Jones and his followers believe that many of the government’s actions are designed to bring about a “new world order” that puts a select few in control.


Alex Jones believes Wall Street is trying to create a “one-world government” in which it has the upper hand.

“Birthers”


An Obama birth certificate supposedly certifying the president’s birth in Kenya was manufactured using the template of a real birth certificate in Australia.


At least a dozen lawsuits were filed trying to block Barack Obama from being sworn in as president on the grounds that he was not a naturally born citizen of the United States.


“Birthers” believe Barack Obama is not eligible to be president of the United States because he was born overseas, and no amount of evidence can convince them otherwise.


Many constituents are demanding that Republican legislators resolve the argument over whether Barack Obama was born in the United States.

Sept. 11, 2001, Attacks


Conspiracies began almost immediately after the attacks in order to make sense of the disaster.


An entire American subculture has emerged that suggests the government was behind the 9/11 attacks.


The conspiracy claims about 9/11 are so outrageous and the evidence so flawed that supporters must ignore logic in order to believe.


About two-thirds of Americans believe the federal government had warnings about 9/11 but chose to ignore them, according to a national survey.

Validity


The rise of independent media has spawned conspiracy theories that many regard as legitimate subjects of journalistic inquiry.


Political rumors and conspiracy theories thrive only in the minds of people who are predisposed to believe them.


The Internet has popularized many conspiracy theories in which facts are largely absent or buried under mounds of fiction.

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