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2008

Excerpt from Conspiracy Theories: Secrecy and Power in American Culture (revised and updated edition)

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Available at: https://works.bepress.com/mark_fenster/11/

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Conspiracy Theories: Secrecy and Power in American Culture
(revised and updated edition)

Forthcoming, Fall 2008 from University of Minnesota Press

April 11, 2008

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INTRODUCTION: WE'RE ALL CONSPIRACY THEORISTS NOW

Two propositions dominate discussions of conspiracy theory. The first maintains that conspiracy theory, which I will define simply here as the conviction that a secret, omnipotent individual or group covertly controls the political and social order or some part thereof, circulates solely on the margins of society. Holding incredible, dangerous beliefs, conspiracy theorists are political extremists and unsavory characters—Oliver Stone, for instance, or members of the John Birch Society. They question whether the United States is a benign, pluralistic democracy, reject the notion that history moves through the triumph of progress and leadership and the vagaries of coincidence and mistake, and appear to disdain the established institutions and channels of democratic politics. The label “conspiracy theorist” insinuates that a person is extreme, threatening, *nuts*.

The second proposition, equally prominent when concerned commentators discuss conspiracy theory, maintains that conspiracy theory has come to predominate American political culture.¹ The specter of conspiracy circulates in the fictional trappings of movies, television shows, popular novels, video games, comic books, and even in an increasingly gullible and market-driven news media.² Most pernicious, of course, is the well-trodden but suspect realm of cyberspace, the Petri dish for paranoids.³ Conspiracy theory’s ubiquity, we are told, poisons our political system, culture, and public sphere to an unprecedented degree. They—or is it we?—are all conspiracy theorists now.

Margins or ubiquity: in this political and cultural moment, it seems, we either face the threat that conspiracy theory will invade from the hinterlands or we must respond to the fact that

it has captured popular consciousness. This book does not aim to resolve these competing descriptive claims—indeed, I think one can marshal evidence to claim that both are correct. A relatively small proportion of Americans seems to believe firmly that a grand conspiracy is the causal engine of politics and history, while a much larger proportion of the public engages in conspiracy theory at some level, whether for pleasure or as a potential explanation for events in their lives or in the country. Both claims, however, agree that conspiracy theory, in its dangerous conception of power, nationhood, and history, represents a dire threat. To illustrate, consider two recent examples, one from investigative journalism and the other from popular culture, in which assertions about conspiracy theory's otherness and grave or potential danger drive how conspiracy theory is described and understood.

Dark Alliance: The Journalist as Conspiracy Theorist

A series of stories written by investigative journalist Gary Webb and published in the *San Jose Mercury News* in 1996 reported that agents affiliated with the Contra rebels, revolutionaries in the Central American nation of Nicaragua with ties to the CIA, played a central role in the introduction of crack cocaine to American cities, and especially throughout African-American neighborhoods in Southern California.⁴ The stories, collectively titled “Dark Alliance,” circulated widely on the *Mercury News*'s relatively state-of-the-art Web site whose splash page featured a silhouette of a figure smoking a crack pipe superimposed on top of the CIA's official seal. “Dark Alliance” extended longstanding rumors and news reports of CIA ties to Central and South American drug dealers by claiming that at least some of the Contra-distributed drugs were sold to American users. Published at a time when the World Wide Web had begun to reach

critical mass, the stories received national coverage despite being published by a regional newspaper, causing uproar and political protest, especially among African Americans in Los Angeles.⁵

It is now ten years since “Dark Alliance” first appeared, and the common view among journalists and researchers who have reviewed Webb’s stories and have expertise on the Contras and the CIA’s role in Nicaragua is that the stories somewhat overstate and overplay the largely testimonial evidence Webb had gathered but nevertheless were neither false nor fantastic. This is true whether the commentators are sympathetic to or critical of Webb.⁶ The historical consensus—to the extent such a thing is possible concerning controversial covert operations—indicates that the basic outlines of the *Mercury News* stories were largely correct: there is no question that the CIA was involved in covert counterrevolutionary action in Nicaragua, while some Contra agents or individuals with ties to the Contras ran drugs and used some of the proceeds to purchase equipment and fund the revolutionary efforts in Nicaragua. It would not be wrong to say that some CIA agents at some time knew of the Contras’ activities and, indeed, that some of those drugs may have been sold on the streets of South Central Los Angeles.⁷ The evidence supporting the connections between each of these propositions is not entirely irrefutable, but when stated carefully, the theses of Webb’s stories are supported in the public record.

The stories had a life of their own, however. In suggesting that the Reagan Administration and the CIA assisted a revolutionary movement involved in drug trafficking, Webb’s series led a segment of the American public (especially those most adversely affected by the ravages of crack cocaine) to infer that a government agency perpetrated an illegal, conspiratorial act that harmed Americans—not to mention Nicaraguans. Recall the broader

historical context within which this inference was drawn. The precise nature of the relationships among the characters in this story—the CIA, the Contras, wholesale drug traffickers, and retail drug dealers—was, and remains, unknown. The federal government and its intelligence community continue to hoard information about its Cold War–era engagement in proxy wars and counterrevolutionary campaigns, while their disclosures and pronouncements on the CIA’s role in Nicaragua appear sufficiently strategic to warrant suspicion—especially in light of the secret, illegal machinations revealed in the Iran-Contra scandal.⁸ A long history of allegations ties the CIA’s covert operations to malevolent political forces in Central and South America (as well as in southeast Asia and Africa) that engaged in illegal activities, including drug dealing. In short, although these conspiratorial inferences went beyond what the “Dark Alliance” series described and could prove, such speculative, unsubstantiated conclusions were not wholly irrational or unmoored from accepted fact.

Soon after its publication, the nation’s most respected newspapers denounced “Dark Alliance” and condemned Webb’s work for engaging in groundless speculation about government conspiracies and thereby exceeding the boundaries of acceptable investigative journalism.⁹ Faced with damning criticism from its competitors, the *Mercury News* ultimately apologized for “Dark Alliance” and demoted Webb, irreparably damaging his career.¹⁰ Lowering journalistic standards was not the worst effect of the *Mercury News*’s transgressions, however, according to critics of the series. The story was so overstated and overwrought, they maintained, that “Dark Alliance” spread viciously through a black community that was susceptible to absurd speculation and paranoid fantasies. This latter, quasi-sociological claim about the state of black America sought to explain condescendingly how a population could fall prey to irresponsible reporting that alleged outrageous conspiracy. An article in *Time*, for

example, noted a propensity in the African-American community to host a “Black Telegraph” of rumor-mongering that “has been a font of bizarre fantasies”; an op-ed in the *Los Angeles Times* by historian Michael Kazin described belief in the CIA–Contra–cocaine conspiracy as “paranoid” and suggested it was based on “the flimsiest of evidence”; while Timothy Golden, in an article accompanying his professional journalistic criticism of Webb’s reporting, offered telling examples of average African-Americans’ willingness to believe an investigative series whose “force . . . appears to have relatively little to do with the quality of the evidence that it marshals to its case.” Each writer also conceded that the black community might have good historical reasons to be paranoid, of course, but they all rejected the notion that this excused its inability to distinguish fact from conspiratorial fiction, and they suggested that conspiratorial fantasies pushed an already separate black community further to the margins.¹¹ In his 1997 book, *Conspiracy: How the Paranoid Style Flourishes and Where It Comes From*, Daniel Pipes saw no reason even to accept an excuse for blacks’ adoption of conspiracy theory, which, he argued, was fueled by black journalists and leaders who “dislike the existing order and offer radical ideas about changing it.” These spokesmen, in turn, have transformed the black community into an “organized group of malcontents” who prefer to lay the blame for their tragic circumstances on shadowy forces rather than assume it themselves.¹² For Pipes, and for other mainstream critics to a lesser but still significant degree, conspiracy theory’s desperate, tempting, and dangerous call to and from the margins neither accepts nor belongs in the responsible public discourse that characterizes democracy.

The Da Vinci Code: The Novel and Conspiracy Theory

From the geopolitics of Central America and the tragedy of crack cocaine to the fictional banal: consider the phenomenon of *The Da Vinci Code* (2003), the enormously successful novel that has sold tens of millions of copies internationally.¹³ It posits a world filled with secret societies desperately fighting over suppressed knowledge, their existence exposed by characters who solve hidden clues embedded in famous works of Renaissance art and in word puzzles placed by a recent murder victim. At stake in this struggle are some of the basic tenets of Christian faith, including most prominently Jesus's status as divine Son of God, as well as the supposed truth of the Holy Grail—which is merely a symbol for the womb of Mary Magdalene, who carried and then gave birth to Jesus's child and established a “royal bloodline” that secretly survives to the present. The struggle to control this information pits the Roman Catholic Church and the fundamentalist Catholic organization Opus Dei against the Priory of Sion, a secret society that attempts to protect the relics and writings that document the truth about Jesus and his descendents. Two characters serve as the novel's protagonists: Robert Langdon, professor of “Symbolology” at Harvard, and Sophie Neveu, a cryptologist with the French National Police and granddaughter of the clue-leaving murder victim Jacques Saunière, who had been a curator at the Louvre and, it turns out, Grand Master of the Priory of Sion. (Sophie, we learn at novel's end, is one of the last remaining descendents in the “royal bloodline.”)

A complicated conspiracy lurks beneath the alternative religious and world history the novel proposes. The Church and Opus Dei want to destroy the Grail and, with it, the evidence that would contradict the basis of Church doctrine; to do so, they must defeat the Priory, who wants to preserve and maintain control over it. Langdon and Neveu, meanwhile, begin as

innocents drawn into this struggle by the clues Neveu's grandfather has left. Deploying their ability to uncover secrets embedded in symbols and codes, as well as their desire to solve the murder with which the novel begins, they heroically attempt to protect the truth from those who would steal it. Decoding da Vinci, and thereby finding conspiracy, is the central action of the novel, and the book's invitation to decode and find is the key to its narrative momentum and pleasure. "Everyone loves a conspiracy," Langdon tells Neveu, and in a close reading of da Vinci's art, "the conspiracies [keep] coming" (*Da Vinci Code*, 169). Indeed, reports of the novel's success cited the cultural and aesthetic appeal of its conspiracy-themed plot. The book invites the reader into the "netherworld" of conspiracy theories, *U.S. News & World Report* suggested, while an article in the *Los Angeles Times* listed the novel as part of a "wave" of conspiracy theory in popular culture.¹⁴

Each act of decoding by the protagonists leads to another clue, until the great secret that is revealed is that the secret conspiracy itself is concerned above all with keeping knowledge secret. The heroes' role, they are told, is to make certain that "the information" about Jesus can survive (*Da Vinci Code*, 256). The novel's conspiracy theory thus is doubly about information: the characters and readers both gather information to learn *about* a conspiracy and then they learn that the conspiracy itself is about the conspiratorial suppression and disclosure *of* information. Although putatively about the truth of historical Jesus, the Holy Grail is the *object* of a conspiratorial plot by the Church and Opus Dei, which hope to steal it, but it is also *itself a conspiratorial plot* on the part of the Priory, which hopes both to retain it and keep it hidden. The heroes, drawn to aid the Priory, and the readers, drawn to root for the heroes and to decode da Vinci along with them, become part of this latter conspiracy. Strangely, the novel's resolution—which reveals Sophie's preeminent family but also allows the Priory's representatives to explain

why this revelation must be kept secret from the public—invites readers within the Priory’s circle. The conspiracy is thus everywhere *within* the novel and, in the novel’s omnipresence as an international bestseller and blockbuster movie, the conspiracy exists *outside* the novel, in the world of popular culture and in the numerous conversations and book club meetings where friends and strangers discuss it. *The Da Vinci Code*’s resolution suggests that the novel’s readership is now part of a conspiracy that maintains the truth as a secret, and that the public imagined in the novel and non-readers in the real world live unaware of the secrets that remain available only to those initiates who can decode them. At the same time, initiates continue their conspiracy hunt even after they put their books down. They can read Brown’s earlier novel starring Robert Langdon, *Angels and Demons* (which concerned another “real” secret society, the Illuminati),¹⁵ and await another, *The Solomon Key* (reportedly about the Freemasons). At least twenty books are available that attempt to debunk or explore further *The Da Vinci Code*’s conspiracy, while the especially obsessed can take *Code*-specific tours of Paris to the sites and art works that the novel claims offer great symbolic meaning.¹⁶ Conspiracy is not a “theory”—in fact, it is everywhere—once you learn to see and read the code.

Conspiracy theory’s ubiquity presents a problem for those implicated in the conspiracy it finds. *The Da Vinci Code*’s heady mixture of fact, fiction, and conspiracy has led both Catholic and Protestant church leaders to worry that readers are unable to separate the spiritually and historically true from the fictional fantastic and may ultimately come to question their faith based on nothing more than paranoid fantasies about hidden secrets.¹⁷ This concern has extended beyond clerics. Summarizing her worries about the book’s potentially harmful influence, the critic Laura Miller declared in the Sunday *New York Times Book Review* that “[t]he only thing more powerful than a worldwide conspiracy, it seems, is our desire to believe in one.”¹⁸ Dan

Brown exacerbated such anxiety when he claimed, soon after the book's publication, that *The Da Vinci Code* was the product of significant historical research in credible sources and offered an educational experience as well as a pleasurable one.¹⁹ In fact, as a wary reader can easily learn through a Google search, most of Brown's sources (many of which he cites in the novel itself) make claims that have been thoroughly discredited. But, as Andrew Greeley noted in an interview on the *Today Show*, *The Da Vinci Code* ably exploits not only people's "love" of conspiracies but also the Church's lack of credibility, especially in the wake of its efforts to keep secret its clerical sex abuse scandals.²⁰

We Are All Conspiracy Theorists Now

These quite different conspiracies, one putatively based in fact and the other thoroughly fictional, one political and the other religious, one circulating within a relatively narrow public and the other a mass cultural phenomenon, share certain qualities. Each concerns an alleged truth hidden by and damaging to an existing order. Each presents a narrative of heroic investigation—an intrepid investigative reporter is punished for uncovering the truth in one, while the master interpreters of symbols and codes succeed in discovering and preserving the historical truth in the other. And at bottom, each suggests that although the underlying truth of a conspiracy remains hidden to the general public, anyone with enough fortitude and intelligence can find and properly interpret the evidence that the conspiracy makes available.

Similarly, accounts of "Dark Alliance" and *The Da Vinci Code* in the mainstream media and by authoritative commentators share certain characteristics. Besides identifying the inaccuracies in these texts, critics attempt to explain the texts' general appeal by identifying why

and how they captivate audiences. On the one hand, conspiracy stories are simple, understandable, and attractive to people seeking an explanation for their woes. Conspiracy theory is tempting, too, because it preys on believers' weaknesses, including their excessive distrust of or cynicism about powerful institutions, as well as their stupidity and irrationality. Conspiracy theory's ability to captivate in turn has significant effects: it causes people to believe in falsehoods, to trust duplicitous or unprincipled sources, and to become alienated from prevailing orthodoxies and institutions. Underlying these accounts is the sense that some essential aspect of conspiracy theory and conspiracy theorists is not merely wrong but *pathologically* wrong.

The pathology concept, which is most closely associated with the historian Richard Hofstadter's enormously influential characterization of conspiracy theory as an expression of the "paranoid style in American politics,"²¹ has dominated academic and intellectual approaches to political extremism and populist fear of conspiracy. Hofstadter described conspiracy theory as an alternative (though long-standing) element in American politics, one that operates at the margins but occasionally threatens the mainstream, consensus-driven operations of pluralist democracy. Although Hofstadter used the term "paranoid" analogically rather than in its clinical sense, by coupling it with the noun "style" he implied that conspiracy theory constitutes a malady or affliction that differs fundamentally from a healthy engagement in politics and surfaces in trivial and groundless claims made by marginal groups and individuals that can threaten the pluralist consensus of American democracy. He resolved the seemingly contradictory view that considers conspiracy theory as both marginal and pervasive by positing that the paranoid style always exists but dominates only occasionally and under certain conditions. Given conspiracy theory's apparent omnipresence and the crisis of legitimacy that worried commentators associate with it, the "paranoid style" concept can lead to an inherently frightening conclusion: in the

contemporary political culture, the dangerously, pathologically marginal has become mainstream—or at least afflicts some large, powerful segment of the population.

This book is premised on a contrary proposition: the prevalence of conspiracy theories is neither necessarily pernicious nor external to American politics and culture but instead an integral aspect of American, and perhaps modern and postmodern, life. Not simply an outlying “style” of American politics, conspiracy theory has always been a significant element of American political rhetoric, with wide-ranging, sometimes salutary effects.²² Populist concerns about the concentration of public and private power and of foreign control of domestic authority, for example, have long animated American political practice and governance.²³ These fears help to explain, for example, the tripartite, federal system of American government that dissipates power among coequal horizontal institutions in the executive, legislative, and judicial branches of the federal government, and overlapping vertical seats of power in federal and state governments. They also animate federal and state antitrust laws that seek to control and regulate the market power of private corporations. Populist fears of conspiracy have also played a remarkably productive role in American intellectual history. A secular Enlightenment rationality, theorizing and participating in intellectual and political revolutions and suspicious of authority, at once feared conspiracy and engaged in conspiratorial actions through writing and political and social action.²⁴ Doing so, revolutionary colonists perceived power and agency to reside in the hands of humans rather than within a divine entity, and inscribed a limited, secular state and protections for individual rights in the construction of the new American nation and its national identity—a state and identity that sought an end to elite, monarchical conspiracies even as the United States had itself been created by a revolutionary conspiracy.²⁵ Conspiracy theory is thus an aspect of the longstanding populist strain in American political culture—an especially intense

strain, to be sure, and one that can have violent, racist, and antidemocratic effects (as well as salutary and democracy-enhancing ones) on the political and social order, but a strain that is neither independent from nor necessarily threatening to the country's political institutions or political culture.²⁶

The suspicion that conspiracies occur does not necessarily make one crazy or paranoid. Politics encourages conspiracy of one sort or another because successful governance frequently requires the privileges and advantages afforded by secrecy and the levers of instrumental power.²⁷ Secretly collaborative and even collusive behavior may enable political actors to achieve an agreed-upon end. Such conduct, of course, can be illegal or can seek to achieve illegal ends, but withholding information prior to (or even after) a decision is made or a compromise is reached can also serve as a legitimate administrative or governing strategy. Political opposition, in turn, attempts to take advantage of such actions by drawing attention to them and arguing that secrecy suggests corruption, perfidy, even treason. Governance and politics create situations in which multiple institutional entities struggle over limited power and resources, strategically engage in opaque and secretive behavior, and then strategically criticize their opponents' relative power, opacity, and secrecy in order to gain political and rhetorical advantage. The fact that complex, secret conspiracies *might* occur makes the evaluation of any somewhat plausible conspiracy theory exceedingly difficult, as no a priori grounds exist for distinguishing correct, or at least warranted, conspiracy theories from incorrect or unwarranted ones.²⁸ This indeterminacy inspires pitched rhetorical battles for political popularity and legitimacy, as conspiracy theory serves as a means to rally support (*We must fight against the secret, powerful interests that oppose us*) and to condemn opponents as part of a conspiracy (*They threaten our interests and way of life*); and, in turn, to delegitimize the opposition by branding *their* beliefs as paranoid (*If*

you believe that, you must be a conspiracy theorist). In this respect, both conspiracy *and* conspiracy theory frequently serve as political strategies, not pathologies.

Finally, and not unimportantly, significant illegal conspiracies *do* occur.²⁹ *The Da Vinci Code* and the conspiracy it alleges may be mostly fantasy, but it is a matter of historical record that the Reagan Administration illegally funded the Nicaraguan Contras, even if no clear proof exists of governmental complicity with Contra agents to supply cocaine to American dealers. Foreign covert actions that employ political assassinations and suborn subversion of democratic and revolutionary movements, as well as domestic policies of covert surveillance and “countersubversion” such as the FBI’s COINTELPRO program, have played important roles in twentieth-century history. The Jim Crow era of racial apartheid required covert, conspiratorial acts—indeed, given the history of both overt and secret state-sponsored racial subordination in America, African Americans frequently have a defensible claim that someone is out to get them.³⁰ Secretive alliances between private individuals and groups with shared class interests *do* enjoy control over seats of public and private power that is greater than their numbers would allow them in a purely representative, thoroughly accountable democratic state in which well-informed voters participate and knowledgeably vote. Given the history of conspiracy and the inequitable distribution of access to capital and political power, the notion that conspiracy theory necessarily expresses a political pathology ignores the fact that it can correctly identify present and historical wrongs.

To be sure, conspiracy theory is frequently wrong—and outrageously, even seemingly pathologically so, at times. Totalizing conspiracy theories frequently lack substantive proof, rely on dizzying leaps of logic, and oversimplify the political, economic, and social structures of power. Structural, institutionally-based inequities in the distribution of power, capital, and

resources, and the manipulation and abuse of state power to establish, maintain, and extend political control, do not constitute conspiracy in the sense that conspiracy theorists would describe (as some anomalous, apocalyptic moment within a heretofore perfect democratic republic). Rather, they constitute the political economic consequences of capitalism and an inevitably imperfect system of politics and governance. More dangerously, conspiracy theories can express—and in American history frequently have helped organize—virulent hostility to racial, ethnic, religious, sexual, or political Others.

Even if it *can* constitute a pathological threat to democracy, then, conspiracy theory does not necessarily do so. We may prefer a rational political discourse in which claims about the existence of a conspiracy require more empirical grounding than conspiracy theorists generally provide. We may also prefer a less divisive means to rally support and condemn opposition. But even if they could be widely accepted and implemented, such rational ideals are not the only elements of the political discourse we have. Conspiracy theory does not pose a threat from outside some healthy center of political engagement; rather, it is an historical and perhaps necessary part of capitalism and democracy.

At the same time, the presumption that conspiracy theory represents nothing more than pathology simplifies and flattens our understanding of popular political belief generally and conspiracy theory in particular. It presumes both that some pathology-free position exists and that the pathogen can be eradicated from individuals beset by it and a society infused with it. But an approach that defines conspiracy theory as a set of political beliefs that can be described within existing frameworks of political behavior and evaluated within normative schemas as extremist or pathological ultimately disappoints: it can do little more than map these activities and beliefs onto limited conceptions of rational or irrational actions. Equally important, the

pathology approach ignores conspiracy theory's internal tensions. In viewing the democratic order as a sham, conspiracy theory demonstrates antidemocratic tendencies; embedded within many conspiracy theories and their understanding of power, however, is a longing for a better, more transparent and representative elected government. Conspiracy theory rejects an existing political or social order, but does so in the belief that a better one is possible—one that, in some conspiracy theories, would be more democratic and more equitable.

Part I of this book summarizes, historicizes, and critiques the pathology approach to conspiracy theory. It closely reads Hofstadter's work and that of his contemporaries during the 1960s in chapter 1, and then traces the effects of that work in the more recent analysis of the militia movement, which during the mid-1990s was a leading proponent of conspiracy theories, in chapter 2. A reading of conspiracy theory that understands it merely as a form of pathological, marginal politics, Part I argues, is inevitably partial, although Hofstadter's attention to conspiracy theory's cultural practices and populist underpinnings offers a base upon which an alternative approach can build.

Part II offers one such alternative approach by presenting ways of understanding how conspiracy theory works within political culture—the constitutive cultural practices and signifying system through which the social and political order is communicated, reproduced, experienced, and explored—and to what effect.³¹ Understanding conspiracy theory as an aspect of popular political culture offers a symptomatic critique of conspiracy theory and a cultural analysis of the signifying practices of its endless circulation through countless cultural texts such as films, television, novels, fanzines, computer networks, and the like. If conspiracy theory is, in Christopher Hitchens's provocative terms, “the white noise which moves in to fill the vacuity of the official version,”³² then we must understand the noise of popular politics. In this regard, this

book is part of a larger project of scholars working within a range of humanistic disciplines that attempt to view conspiracy theory as a specifically cultural *and* political phenomenon and that, like Hofstadter in an earlier era (although to different normative ends), apply contemporary cultural and political theory to its analysis.³³

Chapters 3 and 4 argue that conspiracy theory operates as a cultural practice of interpretation and as a narrative form that circulate throughout political campaigns and movements, journalism, and popular culture. As I explain in chapter 3, in order to construct a conspiracy theory, a theorist must first reinterpret the meaning and significance of historical and current events as evidence of some hidden truth. Driven by a circular, inexhaustible desire for more information to prove a conspiracy's existence, this active, endless interpretive practice never arrives at a final, determinate answer—the conspiracy always remains identifiable but elusive and never entirely knowable. As an interpretive practice, conspiracy theory represents an impossible, almost utopian drive to seize and fetishize individual signs in order to place them within interpretive structures that unsuccessfully attempt to stop the signs' unlimited signification. This process ultimately directs the theorist's desire for political engagement toward a signifying regime of endless possibilities, where conspiracy reveals itself in every new piece of evidence. Like the heroes in *The Da Vinci Code* and those "Dark Alliance" readers who inferred a direct and systematic CIA–Contras–cocaine connection, the conspiracy theorist interprets and then draws links among disparate pieces of evidence—and in this practice finds conspiracy. In chapter 3, I illustrate this practice by analyzing some of the prominent theories that circulated about the Bill Clinton presidency.

Conspiracy theory's drive to interpret moves incessantly toward a narrative structure, one whose logic suggests an efficient coherence. This is the focus of chapter 4, which explains the

conspiracy narrative at the formal and narratological level through Oliver Stone's *JFK*, "The Gemstone File" (a famous conspiracy document that originally circulated in an abbreviated *Skeleton Key to the Gemstone File* during the 1970s), and the television series *The X-Files*. All of the messy details of contemporary and historical politics, conspiracy theory asserts, are merely effects caused by a single narrative agent (the CIA in "Dark Alliance," for example, and Opus Dei and the Catholic Church in *The Da Vinci Code*). This agent has some clear, rational motivation that the theorist has isolated. Further evidence of the conspiracy's existence and its inevitable progress towards completion emerges—or will emerge—with the passage of time. But this efficient coherence of agency, movement, and logic continually threatens to unravel, as the narrator/theorist/author attempts to manage the actual complexity of history. The resolution that a conspiracy theory ultimately offers appears at once procrustean, fitting complex events into a simple schema, and increasingly ramshackle as it attempts to accommodate a proliferation of complicated and conflicting data. More troubling still, the narrative faces the nearly impossible burden of finding an ending. A conclusion would call a halt to interpretation—conspiracy theory's key practice and source of pleasure—by suggesting either that the conspiracy has won or that it did not represent the existential threat it seemed to promise. Either ending is unsatisfactory: the former offers defeat by an enemy, while the latter suggests a formal defeat of what was clearly a lesser conspiratorial threat.

Chapter 5 turns to the question of how conspiracy theories are utilized by groups and individuals. Conspiracy theory offers certain satisfactions in its formal qualities and participatory practices, and in its fluid movement between politics and culture. Popular novels and games featuring conspiracy, even if tied to a singularly frightening revelation, constitute a form of play and enable a sense of pleasure in which participants can "experience" the rush and vertiginous

feelings associated with discovering conspiracy, and have the opportunity to create conspiracy narratives through imaginative interpretive efforts. These individual pleasures can lead an individual to find or to found a conspiracy community that engages in collective investigative and political action. Three examples of conspiracy communities discussed over the course of the book are the militia movement (described in chapter 2), the 9/11 “truth movement” (discussed in chapter 7, which concerns 9/11 conspiracy theories), and the subcultures of conspiracy theorists that became increasingly organized during the 1990s through fanzines, independent book publishing, and conferences, which are described in chapter 5.

The idea of a “conspiracy community” appears paradoxical for two reasons. First, conspiracy theory assumes a disabling vision of political power in which control is always elsewhere, and it suggests political engagement that is either vanguardist (e.g., a “truth movement” attempting to lead followers to action while dismissing outsiders as knowing or unwitting co-conspirators) or separatist (e.g., radical White Power and Christian Identity sects that remove themselves from society). Second, conspiracy theory suspects *everyone* of complicity with the conspiracy, making collective action quite different (if no one can be trusted, how safe or worthwhile is it to work with others?). At particular conjunctures, however, it enables the construction of a kind of secular, shadow intellectual collective that can organize—often in contentious and stumbling steps—social and political activity. It can also have important effects on major political parties, as in the tenuous association between the John Birch Society and parts of the Republican Party in the 1960s and the mobilization of the Christian Coalition on behalf of Republicans in the 1990s.³⁴ I consider individuals’ affective engagement in conspiracy theory and conspiracy theory’s potential as a focus of collective action in chapter 5, and return to

the concept of a conspiracy community again in chapter 7's description and analysis of the so-called truth movement formed by 9/11 conspiracy theorists.

Part III presents two case studies intended to illustrate more fully the ways of understanding conspiracy theory presented in part II. Chapter 6 analyzes a particular set of religious texts and practices that resemble and are closely tied to conspiracy theory: popular Christian eschatology that attempts to provide an accessible, comprehensible, and all-encompassing narrative frame to explain the apocalyptic, imminent return of Christ to a mass audience. In addition to constructing a narrative, popular eschatology provides a call for believers to interpret current events in relation to Scripture in order to know and celebrate the rapture and Christ's return. Although overtly spiritual, popular eschatology is implicitly political in its strong linking of a coming millennium to conservative political dogma specifically opposed to a presumed "secular humanist conspiracy." It also offers ardent political support for Zionism and a strong Jewish State of Israel, while holding anti-Semitic spiritual beliefs that characterize Jews who refuse to convert to true Christianity as being doomed to the Antichrist's seductive powers and the tribulation's apocalypse. Although distinct from more "secular" conspiracy theories—particularly in its perverse desire for the conspiracy's victory, in that such a victory would further ensure Christ's return—popular eschatology shares a number of interpretive practices and texts with secular conspiracy theorists, and at times forms overt alliances with them. As a set of interpretive practices and a master narrative that overlaps with and is quite similar to that of right-wing conspiracy theory, popular eschatology demonstrates the struggle over the meanings of history, the relation of history to the present, and the meanings and possibilities of the apocalyptic future.

Chapter 7 considers the dominant event and theories of the conspiratorial present: 9/11 and the “truth movement” that organizes and represents researchers and activists seeking to uncover the real story behind the terrorist attacks. During the mid-1990s, what Hitchens called the “white noise” of conspiracy theory came from three general directions and only incidentally found points of overlap: from radical conservative groups either affiliated with the militia movement, fundamentalist Protestantism, or a generalized hatred of Bill Clinton; from a shambolic conspiracy subculture that was not identifiable with any point on the political spectrum; and from a more inchoate aesthetic and narrative movement in popular culture to appropriate the conspiracy form and practice in films and television. Since September 11, 2001, however, otherwise diverse conspiracy theorists and their theories have focused on the events of that day, and their efforts allow for a snapshot of an historic moment in which their collective actions enter and attempt to challenge and change mainstream opinion and politics. Chapter 7 summarizes and analyzes these efforts, and extends the book’s focus in an additional direction: toward the state. The 9/11 Commission, created by Congress (against the White House’s wishes) to study the attacks, recognized that in order to establish its own legitimacy, it would need to distinguish itself from a previous independent commission established to study a famous, traumatic, and anomalous event—the Warren Commission, which investigated the assassination of President John F. Kennedy in 1963. Both the 9/11 Commission and the truth movement strategically responded to each other, the Commission by attempting to ignore conspiracy theorists while it addressed at least some of their concerns about government secrecy, and the truth movement by both dismissing the Commission as part of the conspiratorial state and expending significant energy responding to the Commission’s report substantive findings. The conflict between the 9/11 Commission and the truth movement thus raises but leaves unresolved

the issue of precisely how the state can respond to conspiracy theory as both a political challenge to its legitimacy and a set of cultural practices of interpretation and narration that proliferate in political and popular culture. The chapter closes with a discussion of the most popular and influential text of the 9/11 conspiracy community: the video documentary *Loose Change*. An effort to introduce conspiracy theory to a post-adolescent demographic via streaming video, *Loose Change* deploys all of the interpretive and narrative practices the book identifies, as well as the formal possibilities of digital video, in order to interpellate its audience as conspiracy theorists.

The Afterword seeks to confront the populist vein that runs through much of the popularization of American cultural studies with the most regressive and dangerous tendencies of populist politics, exemplified by the novel that has become a central cultural artifact of the contemporary American neo-Nazi movement, *The Turner Diaries*. A penultimate example of “resistance,” *The Turner Diaries* is a virulently fascist, racist, patriarchal, and anti-Semitic novel that presents a utopian future of white supremacy by misinterpreting and reimagining the past and the present. In order to theorize populism and evaluate its political valences, one must confront and challenge the most virulent tendencies of populism’s antagonism between “the people” and “the power bloc” without simply dismissing populism as *necessarily* racist and reactionary. This concern is not unique to the study of conspiracy theory but reverberates throughout the study of popular culture and the larger theoretical and political project of cultural studies—an issue that the Afterword considers as it thinks through the implications of recuperating, in a limited way, a political phenomenon as unstable as populism.

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Some final words on what this book is *not*. It is not intended as an encyclopedia of conspiracy theories or as a compendium of the most logical explanations of the plots on which conspiracy theorists obsess, or as a thorough account of the range of communities of conspiracy theorists.³⁵ Each of these would be an enormously valuable contribution to current political debates and the study of contemporary social movements, but they are quite different projects from the one I have chosen. This book is intended, rather, as an analysis of the role of conspiracy theory in contemporary populism and political culture that attempts to provide both a theoretical and a political take on the cultural present. It is intentionally partial and provocative, and is meant to spur debate about the role of interpretive and narrative practices in popular politics, as well as about the relationship between the political discourses of the marginal and extreme, and the mainstream and dominant.

In addition, this book does not purport to identify one or a number of causes for conspiracy theory belief. Following the social science norm that the study of a particular phenomenon should isolate its cause, cognitive and social psychology suggest a number of sources for conspiracy belief: individuals prefer to associate complex, major causes with events that have substantial, significant or wide-ranging consequences; individuals' ability to reason is limited by a confirmation bias that accepts information consonant with existing beliefs and rejects information that would contradict those beliefs; the tendency to hold fast to an incorrect belief cripples individuals' ability and willingness to seek and process non-confirming information; proliferating rumors and speculation about conspiracy tend to induce a "conspiracy cascade" in which an increasing number of individuals are persuaded of the conspiracy's existence or plausibility; and group membership and participation can skew members' belief into

a more polarizing and extreme direction.³⁶ One experiment found that subjects were more likely to believe a conspiracy theory that explains the successful assassination of a president than one that explains an attempted but failed assassination attempt.³⁷ The ways our minds and behavior work both individually and socially, psychology tells us, causes conspiracy theory.

In a more awkward but occasionally just as certain fashion, humanities and qualitative social science scholarship performs the same rite of causal explanation but focuses almost entirely on larger historical and social causes for conspiracy theory. Thus, variably, conspiracy theory is described as being caused by the loss of postwar economic and geopolitical stability,³⁸ information overload and the concomitant loss in intellectual authority and expertise that allow people to sort the quality and veracity of truth claims based on that information,³⁹ the loss of individual agency and a resulting “agency panic,”⁴⁰ the crisis of life lived under the constant surveillance undertaken by the state and by corporate interests,⁴¹ and the ongoing identity crisis and cultural paranoia that are the result of postmodernity and late capitalism.⁴² I understand and appreciate this desire to identify and describe causes—in the first edition of this book, I engaged in the same diagnostic speculation. Much of my discussion in the current edition about interpretation, narrative, pleasure, and collective action presumes that the cultural practice of conspiracy theory is sufficiently attractive, satisfying, and related to everyday political and cultural life in contemporary America to sustain engagement. In this second edition, I have abandoned the explicit search for an underlying causal agent, however, and assume both that something cognitive *and* something cultural can help explain conspiracy theory, and that in this process of overdetermination, all of the identified causes play some role. But the search for a cause is both too easy and too difficult, given conspiracy theory’s pervasiveness and its overdetermination. It is longstanding in American (and human) history, and while it operates

distinctly in different cultures and historical periods, some of its basic forms and practices remain consistent. *Conspiracy Theories* focuses on the description and analysis of these forms and practices, on the assumption that understanding how conspiracy theory works offers insight into the narrow world of conspiracy theorists, as well as into the broader implications of conspiracy theories as they circulate throughout the entirety of American popular political culture.

Notes

1. This book is concerned almost exclusively with conspiracy theories in and about the United States. On conspiracy theories in the Middle East, see Jon W. Anderson, "Conspiracy Theories, Premature Entextualization, and Popular Political Analysis," *Arab Studies Journal* 4, no. 1 (1996): 96–102; Daniel Pipes, *The Hidden Hand: Middle East Fears of Conspiracy* (New York: Macmillan, 1996). Two essay collections offer comparative studies of conspiracy theory: *Transparency and Conspiracy: Ethnographies of Suspicion in the New World Order*, ed. Harry G. West and Todd Sanders (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003) and *Paranoia Within Reason: A Casebook on Conspiracy as Explanation*, ed. George E. Marcus (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999). Above all, these sources caution against broad, global claims about conspiracy theories and their effects in different nations and cultures, or assumptions that one event, like the death of Princess Diana, is interpreted as a conspiracy the same way in England as it is in Egypt (the home country of Diana's boyfriend, Dodi Fayed, who died along with her). Claire Birchall, "Conspiracy Theories and Academic Discourses: The Necessary Possibility of Popular (Over)interpretation," *Continuum: Journal of Media and Cultural Studies* 15, no. 1 (2001): 67–76, 72. As Charles Briggs has argued in a wonderful consideration of the challenge conspiracy theories pose for anthropologists, conspiracy theory is at once shared across cultures and emerges from within specific cultural, discursive, and political economic contexts. Charles L. Briggs, "Theorizing Modernity Conspiratorially: Science, Scale, and the Political Economy of Public Discourse in Explanations of a Cholera Epidemic," *American Ethnologist* 31, no. 2 (2004): 164–187.

2. The most recent example is Nicholas Lemann, "Paranoid Style: How Conspiracy Theories Become News," October 16, 2006, 96. Samples from the two-year period of 1995–97 include: on comic books, David Segal, "Pow! Wham! Take That, Uncle Sam: In Today's Comic Book Culture, the Arch-Villain Is the Government," *Washington Post*, December 11, 1995, C3; on movies and television shows, Michiko Kakutani, "Bound by Suspicion," *New York Times Magazine*, January 19, 1997, 16; Jeff Gammage, "JFK Killing Takes on Life of Its Own," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, November 24, 1996, E1; John Yemma, "A Penchant for Plots: Conspiracy Theories Are All the Rage in U.S.," *Boston Globe*, September 25, 1996, A1; and Mark Jenkins, "Devil with a Blue Suit On: Government and Authorities as Hollywood Heavies," *Washington Post*, May 14, 1995, G10. On the increasingly susceptible news media, see, for example, Kurt Andersen, "The Age of Unreason," *The New Yorker*, February 3, 1997, 40–43.

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3. In a 2000 article, Jodi Dean found numerous instances, dating back to the mid-1990s, in which commentators linked conspiracy theory to the Internet. Jodi Dean, "Webs of Conspiracy," in *The World Wide Web and Contemporary Cultural Theory*, ed. Andrew Herman and Thomas Swiss (New York: Routledge, 2000), 61–76. More recent examples include Carl M. Cannon, "Surviving the Information Age," *The National Journal*, June 30, 2007; Jim Dwyer, "U.S. Counters 9/11 Theories Of Conspiracy," *New York Times*, September 2, 2006 B-1; Nancy Jo Sales, "Click Here for Conspiracy," *Vanity Fair*, August 2006, 112. The simplistic argument that the Internet creates and preys upon stupidity is a quite different point, I should note, from the more compelling and persuasive argument that the structure of networked computers is analogous and functions like a conspiracy. See Peter Krapp, "Terror and Play, or What Was Hacktivism?" *Grey Room* 21 (Fall 2005): 70–93.
 4. The three articles appeared on the front page of the *Mercury News* on consecutive days, from August 18–20, 1996. Webb later expanded them into a book, *Dark Alliance* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 1998).
 5. The most thorough account of these stories and the controversy that ensued appears in Nick Schou, *Kill the Messenger: How the CIA's Crack-Cocaine Controversy Destroyed Gary Webb* (New York: Nation Books, 2006). See also Daniel Hellinger, "Paranoia, Conspiracy, and Hegemony in American Politics," in *Transparency and Conspiracy*, ed. West and Sanders (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2003), 204–232, 212–15.
 6. Schou, *Kill the Messenger*, 127–47. Most telling is an article by Peter Kornbluh, an analyst at the National Security Archive and expert on American involvement in Central America, whose 1997 *Columbia Journalism Review* article both supported the general outlines of Webb's series and criticized its overstatements and insufficient supporting evidence. Peter Kornbluh, "The Storm over 'Dark Alliance,'" *Columbia Journalism Review* 35 (January–February 1997): 33. Perhaps the least substantiated claim in the articles was the extent to which the distribution chain Webb described in fact initiated and controlled the crack epidemic. This claim did not, however, concern the explosive issue of the CIA's knowledge of the relationship between Contras and drug dealing per se—merely the extent of its effects.
 7. These general points were conceded even by some of Webb's most vociferous critics in the media. See Jeffrey A. Hall, "Aligning Darkness with Conspiracy Theory: The Discursive Effects of African American Interest in Gary Webb's 'Dark Alliance,'" *The Howard Journal of Communications* 17 (2006): 205, 211. Some of these conclusions had been reached in the late 1980s following an investigation by the Senate Subcommittee on Terrorism, Narcotics, and International Operations, whose report, *Drugs, Law Enforcement and Foreign Policy* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1989), noted links between the Contras and drug dealing. On the role of Oliver North in drug trafficking on behalf of the Contras, see "The Oliver North File: His Diaries, E-Mail, and Memos on the Kerry Report, Contras and Drugs, National Security Archive Electronic Briefing Book No. 113, February 26, 2004, available at <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB113/> [last accessed June 4, 2007].
 8. The CIA's mid-2007 release of parts of its "family jewels," redacted documents covering parts of the CIA's secret, illegal operations conducted before 1973, represents an exception that proves the rule, insofar as critics have alleged the collection was both underwhelming and intended as a distraction from current controversies in which the CIA was embroiled. Mark Mazzetti and Tim

Weiner, "Files on Illegal Spying Show C.I.A. Skeletons From Cold War," *New York Times*, June 27, 2007.

9. See, generally, Hall, "Aligning Darkness with Conspiracy." The most significant articles critical of Webb were Roberto Suro and Walter Pincus, "The CIA and Crack: Evidence is Lacking of Alleged Plot," *Washington Post*, October 4, 1996, A1; Timothy Golden, "Pivotal Figures of Newspaper Series May Be Only Bit Players," *New York Times*, October 21, 1996, A14; and a three-part series entitled "The Cocaine Trail" that appeared on the front page of the *Los Angeles Times* from October 20–22, 1996. For a recounting of how those stories were assigned and edited, as well as some second-guessing of their critical tone, see Schou, *Killing the Messenger*, chap. 8.

10. Webb's career and life spiraled downward, and he committed suicide in 2004. Nick Schou's biography of Webb, while largely sympathetic, notes Webb's strengths and shortcomings as a reporter, as well as his frustrated and occasionally stubborn response to the criticism he received from other reporters and from his own newspaper. Schou, *Kill the Messenger*.

11. Jack E. White, "Crack, Contras, and Cyberspace," *Time Magazine*, September 30, 1996, 16. Michael Kazin, "Conspiracy Theories: The Paranoid Streak in American History," *Los Angeles Times*, October 27, 1996, M2; Timothy Golden, "Though Evidence Is Thin, Tale of C.I.A. and Drugs Has a Life of Its Own," *New York Times*, October 21, 1996, A14.

12. Daniel Pipes, *Conspiracy: How the Paranoid Style Flourishes and Where It Comes from* (New York: Free Press, 1997), 2–7.

13. Dan Brown, *The Da Vinci Code* (New York: Doubleday, 2003). Parenthetical page references in the text refer to this work.

14. Dan Burstein, "In the Netherworld of Conspiracies," *US News & World Report*, December 15, 2004; James Verini, "You're Not Just Imagining It; A Wave of Paranoia Is Engulfing Books and Films; in Fact, Conspiracy's Cool," *Los Angeles Times*, August 29, 2004, E-10.

15. New York: Pocket Books, 2000.

16. Carol Memmott, "Publishers Try to Crack *Da Vinci Code*," *USA Today*, March 17, 2005, 1D; Mike Thomas, "*Da Vinci* Has Spawned a New Publishing Genre," *Chicago Sun Times*, May 19, 2006, 56; Renee Tawa, "Deep into the 'Code'; Talks, Tours and 'Da Vinci' Follow-up Books Serve a Renaissance of Interest in Art and Religion," *Los Angeles Times*, March 19, 2004, E-1.

17. Gwen Florio, "Controversial *Da Vinci Code* Sparking Fire at Grassroots Level," *Denver Post*, February 18, 2004, F-01; Laurie Goodstein, "Defenders of Christianity Rebut *The Da Vinci Code*," *New York Times*, April 27, 2004, 22; Mary Carole McCauley, "Code Read: Just What Is It about *The Da Vinci Code* That People Find So Compelling?" *The Baltimore Sun*, October 25, 2004, 1C; Jerome Weeks, "Not Everyone Thrilled About *Da Vinci Code*," *Dallas Morning News*, January 16, 2004, 19A.

18. Laura Miller, "The *Da Vinci* Con," *New York Times Sunday Book Review*, February 22, 2004, 23.

19. Frank Wilson, "Accuracy of Best-Selling *Da Vinci Code* Comes Under Fire," *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, August 31, 2003, B-5.

20. *Today Show*, April 28, 2004 (interview with Matt Lauer). See also John Christensen, "*Da Vinci Code* Enticing But Flawed," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, May 6, 2006, 3B, which described the book's story as "an expression of our native distrust of authority, especially heavy-handed authority."

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21. Hofstadter's work on this subject was collected in *The Paranoid Style in American Politics* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1966). I discuss this work extensively in chapter 1.
22. What follows condenses the historical work of, among others, Bernard Bailyn and Gordon Wood. Bernard Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1967); Robert S. Levine, *Conspiracy and Romance* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989); Forrest McDonald, *Novus Ordo Seclorum: The Intellectual Origins of the Constitution* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1985); Pauline Maier, *American Scripture: Making the Declaration of Independence* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997); Gordon S. Wood, "Conspiracy and the Paranoid Style: Causality and Deceit in the Eighteenth Century," *William and Mary Quarterly* 39 (1982): 411. A more recent case study is Markus Hünemörder, "The Society of the Cincinnati: Conspiracy Theory in the Early American Republic," *German Historical Institute Bulletin* 31 (2002): 65.
23. My use of the terms "populism" and "populist" in this context is not intended to refer to any specific historic movement that identified itself as "Populist," whether in the late-nineteenth-century United States or twentieth-century Latin America (such as, for example, in Argentina under Peron). Rather, I refer to populism both in its more abstract and general meaning within political and social theory and as a tendency of political movements within a mass democracy to present themselves and their claims as representing "the people" in opposition to the controlling forces of the power bloc. I develop this notion and make this distinction further in chapters 1 and 2. To clarify my use of these different terms in the text, I will capitalize "Populist" when I am referring to a specific historical movement.
24. Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, trans. Thomas Burger (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1989), 35. This same claim was recently made by a conservative philosopher who decried the hermeneutic of suspicion that arose from aspects of the Enlightenment tradition and blamed it for belief in conspiracy theory. Edward Feser, "We the Sheeple? Why Conspiracy Theories Persist," *Tech Central Station Daily*, <http://www.tcsdaily.com/article.aspx?id=092006B>, posted September 20, 2006 [last accessed September 1, 2007].
25. This was the case not only for the new American republic. As Amos Hofman has shown, the fear of conspiracy was prevalent during the revolutionary and post-revolutionary era in France among those who were both behind and against the revolution. The Jacobins feared a monarchical conspiracy that would secretly sway public opinion and upend their revolutionary struggles, while antirevolutionary conservatives, like the author and priest Augustin Barruel, were equally convinced that the success of *philosophes* such as Voltaire and Rousseau came from the Jacobins' manipulation of mass opinion and ability to disguise their true motives. In short, all parties in revolutionary France were conspiracy theorists *and* they all considered the key conflict in what was then emerging as modern politics to be the struggle between those who claimed to advance the true interests of France (whether defined as the monarchy or the revolution) and the conspiratorial order against whom they were fighting. Amos Hofman, "Opinion, Illusion, and the Illusion of Opinion: Barruel's Theory of Conspiracy," *Eighteenth Century Studies* 27, no. 1 (1993): 27–60.
26. Richard O. Curry and Thomas M. Brown, "Introduction," in *Conspiracy: The Fear of Subversion in American History*, ed. Curry and Brown (New York: Holt Rinehart & Winston, Inc., 1972), x.

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27. In an important rejoinder to the historical work of Bernard Bailyn, Gordon Wood, and others (cited in note 22 above), Ed White argues that the organizational struggles that marked the early Republic era, which included political battles and chicanery during the drafting of the constitution, make clear that the fear of conspiracy was more than simply an intellectual or ideological discourse but a very real concern. Ed White, "The Value of Conspiracy Theory," *American Literary History* 14 (2002): 1.
28. Brian L. Keeley, "Of Conspiracy Theories," *Journal of Philosophy* 96, no. 3 (1999): 109–26; Charles Pigden, "Popper Revisited, or What Is Wrong With Conspiracy Theories?" *Philosophy of the Social Sciences* 25 (1993): 3–34.
29. Jeffrey M. Bale, "Political Paranoia v. Political Realism: On Distinguishing between Bogus Conspiracy Theories and Genuine Conspiratorial Politics," *Patterns of Prejudice* 41, no. 1 (2007): 45–60. Bale appears not to have noticed that I made this point quite clearly the first edition of this book as well—as have many of the others he briskly dismisses in a long footnote.
30. Regina Austin, "Beyond Black Demons and White Devils: Antiblack Conspiracy Theorizing and the Black Public Sphere," *Florida State University Law Review* 22 (spring 1995): 1021; Michael Eric Dyson, "Haunted by Conspiracy," *New York Times*, January 27, 1995, A15; Peter Knight, *Conspiracy Culture* (London: Routledge, 2000), chap. 4.
31. Raymond Williams, *The Sociology of Culture* (New York: Schocken Books, 1989), 12–13. Elsewhere, I have discussed the importance of developing a theory of symbolic politics and political culture. See Mark Fenster, "Murray Edelman: Polemicist of Public Ignorance," *Critical Review* 17 (2005): 366.
32. Christopher Hitchens, "On the Imagination of Conspiracy," in his *For the Sake of Argument* (London: Verso, 1993), 14.
33. Placed within the fields that they represent, a non-exhaustive list of these books includes: American studies and cultural studies (Knight, *Conspiracy Culture*; Peter Knight ed., *Conspiracy Nation* [New York: New York University Press, 2002]); anthropology (George Marcus, ed., *Paranoia Within Reason* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999]; West and Sanders, eds., *Transparency and Conspiracy*); literary studies (Timothy Melley, *Empire of Conspiracy* [Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2000]; Patrick O'Donnell, *Latent Destinies: Cultural Paranoia and Contemporary U.S. Narrative* [Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2000]); and political theory (Jodi Dean, *Publicity's Secret* [Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2002]).
34. On the John Birch Society's relationship to Barry Goldwater and the Republican Party in the early 1960s, see Sara Diamond, *Roads to Dominion: Right-Wing Movements and Political Power in the United States* (New York: Guilford Press, 1995), 62–65, and Charles J. Stewart, "The Master Conspiracy of the John Birch Society: From Communism to the New World Order," *Western Journal of Communication* 66, no. 4 (fall 2002): 424–47. On the relationship between the Christian Coalition and the Republican Party, see Sara Diamond, "The Christian Right Seeks Dominion," in Chip Berlet, ed., *Eyes Right!: Challenging the Right Wing Backlash* (Boston: South End Press, 1995), 44–49.
35. An excellent overview of conspiracy theories in American history is Robert Alan Goldberg's *Enemies Within: The Culture of Conspiracy in Modern America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001); see also Peter Knight's edited academic encyclopedia *Conspiracy Theories in American History: An Encyclopedia* (Santa Barbara, Calif.: ABC-CLIO, 2003). Other, more popular books that take an encyclopedic approach to the topic include Jonathan Vankin and John Whalen, *80 Greatest Conspiracies of All Time* (New York: Citadel Press, 2004); Robert Anton

Wilson, with Miriam Joan Hill, *Everything Is Under Control: Conspiracies, Cults, and Cover-Ups* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1998); and George Johnson, *Architects of Fear* (Los Angeles: Jeremy P. Tarcher, 1983).

36. Steve Clarke, "Conspiracy Theories and Conspiracy Theorizing," *Philosophy of the Social Sciences* 32, no. 2 (2002): 131–50, 143–44; Patrick Leman, "The Born Conspiracy," *New Scientist*, July 14, 2007, 35; Cass R. Sunstein and Adrian Vermeule, "Conspiracy Theories," (January 15, 2008), Harvard Public Law Working Paper No. 08-03, available at SSRN: <http://ssrn.com/abstract=1084585> [last visited April 5, 2008].

37. Clark McCauley and S. Jacques, "The Popularity of Conspiracy Theories of Presidential Assassination: A Bayesian Analysis," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 37, no. 5 (1979): 637–44.

38. Michael Barkun, *A Culture of Conspiracy* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2003), 62–64; Knight, *Conspiracy Culture*, 40–41.

39. Jodi Dean, *Aliens in America* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1998), 6–8, 60, 109; Albert A. Harrison and James Moulton Thomas, "The Kennedy Assassination, Unidentified Flying Objects, and Other Conspiracies: Psychological and Organizational Factors in the Perception of 'Cover-up,'" *Systems Research and Behavioral Science* 14 (1997): 113; Knight, *Conspiracy Culture*, 25–26.

40. Melley, *Empire of Conspiracy*, 7–25.

41. Knight, *Conspiracy Culture*, 35.

42. O'Donnell, *Latent Destinies*, 12–14.