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Deadly Conspiracy Myths in History

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Conspiracies (clandestine plotting) and conspiracy theories (imaginary conspiracies) have been with us for a long, long time. They go back to the mists of ancient history and appear to be basic in the psyche of human beings. There have always been plotters, people engaged in secret activities for purposes of control, but even more, there have been theories about plotters that only come out of fevered imaginations, or are based on the flimsiest of evidence. Because we are creatures who appear to be programmed to find reasons underlying events, we seek cause and effect for events out of the ordinary. The phenomenon of conspiracy theories has played a significant role throughout history.

Among our most ancient ancestors, shamans were thought to have contact with the gods and spirits and could mediate with them for the well-being of their community. Anthropologists also tell us that our cave-dwelling ancestors held coming-of-age ceremonies in which they conspired to frighten and awe the young men by using masks and disguises of totem animals. This sort of conspiracy comes down to us today with adults telling children that there is a real Santa Clause who monitors their behavior—or that a real tooth fairy leaves money under their pillows in exchange for the loss of a baby tooth. These are benign conspiracies that we all accept. They have to do with childrearing.

However, conspiracy theories have a darker history. From pre-history until the 19th century, periodic plagues wracked communities and leaders were compelled to come up with an explanation that would seem credible to their people. Someone needed to be blamed for “angering the gods” and that person (or people) needed to be identified and punished so that the plague could be lifted. Two ancient stories illustrate this principle: Oedipus and King David. Oedipus was a ruler so diligent that he would follow truth wherever it led in his search for the sinner who had
angered the gods. When the sinner turned out to be himself, he put out his own eyes and relinquished the throne. Supposedly the plague abated.

King David in the Hebrew Scriptures conspired to remove the husband of a woman, Bathsheba, whom he wanted for himself. He sent Bathsheba’s husband to the front lines of battle where he died—and he then married the lady. A plague struck Jerusalem and everyone wanted to know who was to blame. The finger pointed to David, who confessed and repented (and lost the first baby he and Bathsheba had together). The plague abated.

Although neither of these stories can be connected to specific historic events, they illustrate a principle that our ancient ancestors took seriously—the essential need to determine a cause for a catastrophic event.

Volcanic eruptions that frightened people greatly were thought to be a conspiracy of an angry god, who could only be pacified by the sacrifice of something precious—usually a virgin maiden. She would be sacrificed, and (eventually), the volcanic eruptions would cease. The same was applied to floods, great storms, prolonged droughts, or spontaneous fires. Find the culprit (imagined) or sacrifice to the gods.

**The Role of Science.** From the dawning of the age of reason with its scientific revolution (17th century), educated people have accepted that catastrophic events have natural causes. Scientists have discovered microbes as the source of plagues and contagion as the medium of infection; weather cycles behind floods, fires, and droughts; the collision of tectonic plates responsible for earthquakes and tsunamis; and the action of magma responsible for volcanic eruptions. Modern medicine is only now looking at genetic factors in disease, which removes any aspect of blame from many illnesses. In addition, modern historians tend to see the complexities of history and do not seek simplistic explanations for past or present historic events.

Unfortunately, knowledge spreads slowly, and the vast majority of human beings alive still harbor the most primitive explanations for catastrophes—both natural or manmade. Conspiracies and Conspiracy Theories are both alive and flourishing in our world today, and both often have deadly consequences.

An American cleric, Jerry Falwell, supposedly educated in a society that believes in modern science and medicine, announced after America was attacked on 9/11/02 that this was God’s punishment for tolerating homosexuality. When there was an outcry, he apologized; but
earlier, he had similarly fingered AIDS as God’s punishment on homosexuals. His form of religion apparently loomed larger in his reasoning than his knowledge of modern science. And he was not alone in these outrageous views.

A few years ago, during a phase of serious flooding of the Mississippi River, congregations of the earnestly religious held hands and chanted prayers to God to stop the flooding. The same exercises were performed in California during periods of serious earthquake activity. For these people the fact that the floods retreat and earthquakes stop is proof that their activity is salutary.

These cases, of course, are relatively rare in the Western world, but are pretty much the norm in the superstitious lesser developed world—the majority of human beings today. In South Africa, a country with an uneducated majority, lightening strikes that annually set thatched roof villages afire are attributed to witches and people with the “evil eye.” These imagined culprits are sniffed out by shamans and are lynched. Most of the victims are the usual suspects—women.

Definitions. Conspiracy plots and conspiracy theories are part of human history but are surprisingly flourishing in a modern world that should be wiser than to believe the theories or be taken in by the conspiracies. I must begin this exploration with definitions, ground rules that I am using.

A conspiracy is a plot executed by a group in secret to do an unlawful act (ranging from bank robbery to unseating governments). There have always been conspiracies against those who have power, spurred by periods of major transformation or at times when leadership has questionable legitimacy (dictatorships, a weak king, unsuccessful war). Major social changes unleash such activities.

Conspiracy theories, however, are myths based on the flimsiest of evidence but which enjoy wide-spread belief. These are the focus of our paper. But first, some real conspiracies close to home.

Conspiracies

American Conspiracies. In the United States, there have been a few notable conspiracies, such as the assassination of President Lincoln, by which the conspirators hoped to undo the reconstruction of the South and halt the emancipation of the slaves. This conspiracy was more successful than we would like to think. President Lincoln’s death had dire consequences for the reconstruction of the South.

The Ku Klux Klan was another conspiracy, designed to terrorize
blacks, Jews, and Catholics. This secret society enjoyed a century or more run of terrorism, primarily impeding efforts to enfranchise black citizens in the south. When economic times are difficult, such organizations flourish, only to lose members when times improve or their secrecy is breached.

Both Nazi and Russian Communist conspiracies flourished in the 1930s, a time of economic stress in the world. The Nazi conspirators were rounded up at the beginning of World War II (members of the American-Nazi Bunds), but the hunt for Communists did not really begin in earnest until the beginning of the Cold War. The hunt and accusations were ultimately discredited because of the bombast of Senator Joseph McCarthy, whose methods were particularly careless and obnoxious. His motivation appeared to be a need to be reelected rather than real concern for his country.

Unfortunately, the threat of a Communist conspiracy (which was real) was downplayed by educated and liberal citizens who were attracted to Marxist rhetoric. However, many today still cling to the belief in the humane values that Marxism professed, rather than what it produced. The release of Soviet-era papers today must be providing much distress among those so deceived. The information is very damning.

Suspicion of government by those on the fringes of society dates back to the settling of the west. Conspiracies were attributed to Catholics, Jews, Chinese, etc., and with the Chinese (Yellow Peril), it triggered a disaster and long-lasting pogrom. Much of the persecution of post Civil War Blacks was the result of projection: Whites imagining that Blacks would do to them what they had done to Blacks.

The longest lasting American conspiracy myths had to do with the Robber Barons. It was believed that these millionaires were a conspiratorial cabal, and soon the myths interlocked with anti-Semitism. J.P Morgan was often thought to be a Jew, which he was not. These myths tied into the Rothschild myths in Europe, in which people actually believed that the Rothschilds ruled Europe and the world through manipulation of money—all clandestinely, of course.

A survey of conspiracy theories in American public life shows that these come disproportionately from two broad groups of people: the politically disaffected (right wing) and the culturally suspicious (Blacks and the radical left).

The American Black culture is rife with conspiracy theories, most of which are fevered imaginings. However, a few nasty events—such
as the unconscionable syphilis studies carried out in Tuskegee in the 1940s, lend fuel to all conspiracy theories. It is still widely believed (thanks to Soviet propaganda) that AIDS was deliberately launched on the Black race by the CIA. The same theory goes for the widespread use of narcotics in the Black community. There is also one popular soft drink that is supposedly manufactured by the Ku Klux Klan, surely a boon to the drink’s competition.

Other Conspiracies. Going back in history, the cult of the Assassins, begun by a Persian Shiite student in 1097 (The Old Man of the Mountain), unleashed a spate of assassinations of notables, both secular and clerical, over a period of 200 years.

During a period of rapid transformation in Europe, real conspiracies against the old order of governance were rife. The French and Russian revolutions were virtual conspiracy factories and Russia remains so to this very day. Political conspiracy theories were born 200 years ago during the French revolution. The two major revolutions that followed, Russian and Chinese (and a minor one, the Vietnamese), derived their philosophies from the French Revolution. Before each of these old regimes fell, the authorities violently pursued dissidents—turning benign ones into dangerous revolutionaries. Fear and determination to stamp out revolt went on throughout the 19th century and took on two distinct forms: fear of secret societies and fear of Jews. Over time, these fears included governments as well—today’s favorites being British, American, and Israeli.

The 19th century was also an era of terrorism that rivals our own. One conspiracy by Serbian terrorists actually triggered World War I, when the Crown Prince and Princess of the Austro-Hungarian Empire were murdered.

The Bolsheviks, who were one of the smaller groups conspiring to unseat the Tsar of Russia, succeeded in destroying all of their competitors and ruled over an enormous empire for 75 years. They began with a real conspiracy and then became great purveyors of conspiracy theories, which resulted in the deaths of millions. The greatest conspirators are always the best fabricators of false conspiracies, designed to serve their internal purposes.

The Nazis, less successful than the Marxists in terms of duration, were nonetheless lethal enough. They rose to power as a conspiracy against a struggling and weak democratic government in Germany and struggled against their rival conspirators, the Communists. Their conspiracy theories began with a confusing mix of Marxist and Jewish con-
spiracies, which they soon narrowed down to Jewish, with deadly con-
sequences. But it is interesting to note that they never gave up the secret
society phobia. After Jews, Freemasons were the second group to be
persecuted. They killed 76,000 out of 80,000 Freemasons in Europe.⁸

Although the Nazis and Tsarist Russia are long gone, their work
continues with almost verbatim anti-Jewish conspiracism across the
Muslim world today—even in such places as Malaysia, where few peo-
ple have ever met a Jew. Islamists cite the Nazis as the source for these
unquestioned theories, along with the Russian fraudulent document,
The Protocols of the Elders of Zion, which purports a Jewish plot for
world dominance. The European roots for these theories lends them
credibility with most Muslims.⁹

Conspiracy Theories

A Pattern of Targets. The targets of conspiracy theories fall into
four regular categories: Jews, Secret Societies, Catholics, and certain
governments.

• **Jews.** This ancient religious group was small and persecuted—
yet did not disappear. They were disbursed among many nations, giving
rise to the assumption that they knew each other and could work inter-
nationally. And their vigorous persecution by the early Christian
churches, both Catholic and Orthodox, provided fodder to the poor and
ignorant and distracted them from recognizing much closer sources of
their miseries.¹⁰

After Jewish emancipation in Europe with the advent of the
Enlightenment, this small and excluded minority began to thrive in
every discipline. Visibility as intelligentsia and in economics (the
Rothschilds, for example) gave rise to bitter conspiracism by way of
explanation. Theories ranged from accusing Jews of Marxist conspira-
cies to arch-capitalist conspiracies. That this small population could be
all things to all observers confounded the problem even more.

Today, Jews are the favorite target of Muslim conspiracy theories.
Arab nationalist struggles against the Ottoman Empire and later the
European colonizers picked up every anti-Jewish myth from Europe,
including even such discredited materials as the Protocols of the Elders
of Zion. Despite protests from abroad, the Egyptians produced a tele-
vised “drama” depicting the Jewish plot to rule the world, and cited the
Protocols as their unquestionable source.¹¹

• **Secret Societies.** Human societies have always had secret cults
because part of the thrill of belonging is the secrecy and mystery sur-
Cave-dwelling ancestors, those who painted the marvelous wall paintings at Lascaux, used secrecy, darkness and torchlight, masks and the paintings to initiate young men into their religious cult.

In ancient Greece and Rome, women had secret cults whose mysteries were instructive for girls. One Greek playwright got into trouble for trying to sneak into a women's secret festival so that he could write about their mysteries. Early Christianity was a secret society out of necessity; the Romans were trying to wipe them out. After Christianity triumphed in Rome, the authorities wiped out the Mythra Cult (a Persian mystery religion that was popular with the Roman military) and then went after the Jews, whom they claimed were as secretive as they had been during Roman persecution. Early Christianity was a secret society out of necessity; the Romans were trying to wipe them out. After Christianity triumphed in Rome, the authorities wiped out the Mythra Cult (a Persian mystery religion that was popular with the Roman military) and then went after the Jews, whom they claimed were as secretive as they had been during Roman persecution.

The Knights Templar, an order of fighting monks that protected pilgrims in the Holy Land during the Crusades, accumulated a great deal of money and power during those years. They were accused by the King of France and the Pope at the time of being a secret society plotting a takeover of Christianity and practicing horrific and sinful abominations. They were exterminated in a conspiratorial operation that was surely a forerunner of what the Inquisition was later to do. However, although long gone, the myth of the Knights Templar is still alive and well and clings to such much later secret societies as the Masons.

The Freemason Society was never a menace to anything other than the bigotry of the ancient regime of Europe. It had no army, no power, and no malice that anyone has been able to prove. Yet it was fiercely persecuted as late as the Nazi period, when numerous Masons were rounded up and killed in concentration camps.

The Rotary Club, a Masonic-like charitable organization that does not even have the secret ritual elements of the Masons, is on the death list of Al Qaeda and other violent Islamists who see conspiracy everywhere.

• National Government Secret Services. The governments that were most conspiratorial themselves are the perpetrators of invented conspiracy myths involving governments. Of course, there is a little truth in these accusations because every government, even the best of them, has secrets involved in national security. However, the myths spun by the likes of the Nazis, Marxists, and today Islamic governments, go after the "usual suspects."

• The British (why not the French, who never conspire, do they?)
The United States (although a country that finds it very difficult to maintain any sort of secrecy)

Israel (another country that cannot really keep secrets either, and also has a freewheeling press).

In the Middle East, a sparrow cannot fall from a tree without the CIA, MI-6, or Mossad being responsible. This implies helpless innocence on the part of their so-called victims. As Daniel Pipes (the leading scholar on the history of conspiracy theories) notes:

Conspracism colors the whole of Middle East politics. By filtering reality through a distorting prism, it fosters anti-Western, anti-Israeli, antidemocratic, antimoderate, and antimodern actions. At the same time, and almost paradoxically, it infuses the region’s peoples with a sense of passivity. The enemy looms larger than life, demonic, massively competent, and forever plotting.

The 20th century Conspiracy Industry—Russian Fomented.

The Soviets had a long history of this and used it during the Cold War. They planted false reports—e.g. that Americans were stealing Central American babies to use their body parts—which got Americans killed. They planted an enormous number of conspiracy myths which the Third World was only too ready to believe—but, alas, intellectuals who always had a soft spot for Marxism did too! Soviet conspiracy myths, along with the whole European library of such things, were transferred to the Muslim world, where they now live again.

The latest Russian myth is that the United States is designing an ethnically-specific disease intended for them. Such an invention would wipe us all out, of course, since there is no ethnic purity in the world; we are all a globalized mixture. How sad that Russian scientists could beat the US to space—yet cannot think through a myth this stupid.

Also not to be deterred by science, Arabs and their friends believe that the Israelis are working on a pathogen that would attack Arabs but not Jews. Since Arabs today (who think of themselves as anyone who speaks Arabic as their first language), have genes from everywhere, this pathogen would have to be able to read.

The Muslim world is obsessed by conspiricism today—probably stemming from a prevailing atmosphere of hopelessness and distrust. Arab leaders, when in trouble, always find “conspirators” inside or out. Saddam Hussein was a master at this, as was Nasser and the Assads, father and son, in Syria. When one hears about “conspiracies” all the time, it is natural to believe in them.
The other oddity in the late 20th century is that conspiricism, which used to be the specialty of the most unsophisticated political right-wing ("Joe Sixpack") minds has migrated to the sophisticated left—worldwide! The majority of believers in the Kennedy murder conspiracies and the 9/11 attack are no longer just the lunatics who believed that the UN is planning to take over America and are secretly using black helicopters. The obvious incompetence of the UN does not deter believers in this theory.

The 9/11 myths and their propagation.

The attack on the United States on September 11, 2001, was just one of many that preceded it, such as the attacks on the Marine Barracks in Lebanon, our African embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, and the USS Cole in port in Aden. The 9/11 attackers were 15 Saudi Arabs and four other Muslims from the Gulf. Osama Bin Laden himself proudly acknowledged the attack as the work financed and organized by Al Qaeda.

Yet for a variety of reasons, the facts have been ignored by those who want to replace a real Conspiracy with a Conspiracy Myth. This nonsense originated in France, cooked up by a flamboyant anarchist who rushed to publish a book spelling out the conspiracy. The Internet has picked it up since then, with many variations, and the majority of Muslims around the world have also bought into this, despite their initial pride in Osama Bin Laden’s cleverness. These are the issues:

- **Arabs could not have done this!** It had to be either the CIA or the Israelis—or both. The implication here is that they must then believe that Arabs are neither smart enough nor vicious enough to have done this. How many more decapitations on TV or suicide bombings would they need to change their minds? And if the terrorists in the planes were not Arabs, where did the US government find American or Israeli agents willing to commit suicide/murder?

- **The George W. Bush administration did this to suspend democratic institutions and set up a fascist state.** The problem with this view is that this president is also considered stupid. How then could he have engineered such a thing? And how could a president who, in 2001, was so green and so disinterested in international issues design and pull off such a caper? And where is the fascist state that this attack triggered?

- **The Jews were all warned by phone the night before not to**
go to work on 9/11. Implication: Israelis did it so that we would hate Arabs. The problem with this is the list of the dead. Ten percent of those working in the towers were Jewish—and ten percent of the dead were Jews. Who stayed home from work?

- **The Technology doesn’t compute.** This one was tricky because there were countless claims that what happened was a façade, a claim made by people with no engineering knowledge. They further claimed that the towers imploded because they had been secretly wired for demolition beforehand. There were also claims that there was no airplane involved in the attack on the Pentagon. It was a missile, they say, despite eyewitnesses to the plant hitting.

- **Popular Mechanics,** one of this country’s oldest science magazines, examined every one of these claims and discounted them on the basis of good engineering. However, the conspiracy theorists claim that Popular Mechanics is a front for the CIA. This venerable magazine has been around well before the CIA was even a glint in the eye of President Eisenhower.

The US State Department also has an office of Mythbusting that has examined these claims. (By the way, when a gasoline truck caught fire on a California freeway network recently, the steel buckled and the roads collapsed in moments—exactly as the airplane fuel turned the Towers’ steel structure into spaghetti and the buildings pancaked down.)

**Conclusions**

It is incumbent upon us, as critical thinkers, to ask certain questions when these conspiracy theories come up:

- **What is the ratio of real conspiracies to conspiracy myths?** The ratio does not favor conspiracies. Be skeptical.

- **Motivation of the conspirator — are there contradictions?** For example, Jews have been regularly tarred with being international bankers and simultaneously Marxists. There has never been a central authority or papacy for Jews. There has never been a uniformity of opinion among Jews either—which is a source for many ironic Jewish jokes.

- **Could the US government conspire to kill 3,000 of its own people to set up a fascist state?** Where is the precedent in US history for such a conspiracy? And if they had succeeded in setting up a fascist state, why are conspiracy theorists permit-
ted to publish without any being locked up in prison or assassinated?

- How many of us have historic understanding of events? We need to remember that ordinary minds tend to dislike complexity, chance, or unexplainable catastrophe. Before we knew about microbes, we believed that plagues were punishments of the gods. A simple explanation is never as much fun as a conspiracy myth. Let the buyer beware.

End Notes


3 Steven D. Levitt and Stephen J. Dubner, Freakonomics: A Rogue Economist Explores the Hidden Side of Everything, William Morrow, 2005, Chapter 2.]

4 Pipes, Conspiracy, p. 76

5 Ibid, pp 2-3.


7 Pipes, Conspiracy, p. xi.]

8 Ibid., p. 101


10 Norman Cohn, Warrant for Genocide: The Myth of the Jewish World Conspiracy and the Protocols of the Elders of Zion (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1967. This book is a classic of this genre.


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15 See http://terroristwatch.tripod.com/al_qaeda_manual_1.htm for translation of the Al Qaeda manual in which they cite Rotary and other international organizations as a western plot against Islam.


20 Thierry Meyssan, L’Effroyable imposture (9/11: The Big Lie).