

Handout A

Conspiracy Theories Past and Present

Major unexpected events in history often intrigue people — the Kennedy assassinations, the crash of the Hindenberg, the bombing of Pearl Harbor. You can research these events in books, magazines, historical records, and on the internet. And for almost every such event you can find conspiracy theories. A conspiracy theory is the belief that some secret group (the conspiracy) is somehow controlling an event while trying to keep its power and influence hidden from society.

Consider the attacks on September 11, 2001. Almost immediately after the destruction of the north and south towers of the World Trade Center (WTC), conspiracy theories started to spread on the internet. The conspiracy theorists generally dispute the mainstream narrative of 9/11, which is that hijackers involved in the Al-Qaeda terrorist group took control of four passenger airliners and crashed three of them into the WTC towers and the Pentagon. The fourth crashed in Pennsylvania.

Those that promote 9/11 conspiracy theories came to be known as “truthers” (spreading the “truth” about 9/11). Truthers mainly claim that the U.S. government was involved or complicit in the attacks. Many claim that elements of the mainstream story of 9/11 are lies or elaborate hoaxes. Their claims typically include any of the following: The WTC buildings were professionally demolished; jet fuel cannot burn hot enough to melt the steel used in the WTC’s construction; a missile or military jet, not a passenger plane, hit the Pentagon; a missile hit United Airlines Flight 93 before it crashed in Pennsylvania; and American air defenses were told to “stand down” on the day of the attacks. Others go so far as to claim the Bush administration directly authorized the attacks or at least had prior knowledge of the destruction to come.

The truthers and other people who rally behind conspiracy theories offer no substantive proof for their claims. They do frequently offer anecdotal evidence from eyewitnesses and hearsay. Or they try to find flaws or inconsistencies in some aspect of the official investigation (“cherry-picking” data) and use that

to dismiss the official findings. Despite the weaknesses of its claims, the truther movement has become the most notable conspiracy of modern times and continues to maintain a strong online presence to this day.

The 9/11 truther conspiracy theories have much in common with conspiracy theories in general. They often go something like this: The official explanation for the event is wrong, and an elite group working for its own narrow interest caused the disaster — a school shooting, the death of a prominent person, even the loss of a war. The group holds great power and, by using it, can hide its guilt from the public, sometimes for decades. The group is often an agency of government, an organized crime syndicate, a shadowy political group, or an elite religious group. There is usually little or no real proof for the claim.

A Long Tradition

Many experts note the increase in conspiracy theories in recent years that are fueled by the internet and social media. But they are nothing new in American history.

A recurring conspiracy theory is that of the Illuminati. In the election of 1800, Thomas Jefferson's political enemies spread libelous charges claiming he was a member of a group called the Illuminati and, as such, was planning to abolish religion in America.

There really was an organization known as The Order of the Illuminati, founded in Bavaria (part of Germany) in 1776 by law professor Adam Weishaupt. The small group promoted ideas inspired by philosophers of the Enlightenment. They advocated the abolition of monarchies, established religion, private property, and marriage to bring about true equality and goodness. It's true that the Illuminati met clandestinely, but their secular ideas challenged the powerful Catholic Church in Bavaria. So Weishaupt saw secrecy as a necessity. After the Bavarian ruler outlawed secret societies (there were others) in 1785, the Illuminati drifted into obscurity.

Despite the apparent collapse of the historical Illuminati and the tireless debunking by historians, some conspiracy theorists still believe the Illuminati not only survived but gained worldwide power and influence. They believe the Illuminati are now shadowy elites trying to rule the globe in a “New World Order.” The Illuminati serve as a perpetual, explanatory suspect for events even today. For example, conspiracy theorists have accused singer Beyonce of being a member of the Illuminati, pointing out supposedly “devil-worshipping” details in online videos of her 2013 Super Bowl half-time performance.

The attempt to politically malign a presidential candidate with a conspiracy theory reappeared with the inception of the “birther” movement during the 2008 presidential race. These conspiracy theorists, or “birthers” as they are colloquially known, questioned the validity of Barack Obama’s citizenship — and thus his eligibility to run for president. Proponents of the conspiracy, including future president Donald Trump, falsely claimed Obama was born in Kenya, rather than Hawaii, and that he engineered a cover-up of that fact for many years.

Birthers demanded the publication of a birth certificate. Despite a pre-election release of an official Hawaiian birth certificate and the subsequent release of a long-form birth certificate in April 2011, birthers questioned the documents’ authenticity. Some still doubt Obama’s citizenship, even though he is no longer president.

Real Versus Imagined Conspiracies

In the real world, conspiracies do take place. In criminal law, a conspiracy takes place when two or more people combine for the purpose of doing an unlawful act or a lawful act by unlawful means. Small groups of criminals and terrorists do plot murders, bank robberies, airplane hijackings, bombings, and other crimes. People are charged, tried, and convicted of conspiracies on a regular basis. To win a conviction for criminal conspiracy, prosecutors must prove a case beyond a reasonable doubt by following strict rules of evidence.

Such criminal conspiracies have taken place in American history. The Watergate scandal is the most notable, as it was a verified criminal conspiracy and cover-up, perpetrated by government officials on behalf of a sitting U.S. president, Richard Nixon. The break-in of Democratic National Committee offices in the Watergate Hotel on July 17, 1972, garnered such infamy that it inspired the ubiquitous use of the suffix “-gate” to informally denote scandalous conspiracy.

Some conspiracies are real criminal conspiracies while others are not. “Pizzagate” was a false conspiracy involving rumors on social media that a Washington, D.C., pizza restaurant was the base for a child-trafficking ring run by Hillary Clinton. One believer in Pizzagate came to the restaurant with a semi-automatic rifle to rescue the fictitious children but was arrested.

The late historian Richard Hofstadter wrote that conspiracy theorists usually make a “leap in imagination” from a series of facts to the assumption that they all fit together to prove that some evil group is about to take over or was responsible for some disaster. It is like arguing that the Illuminati believed in equality (true); Jefferson believed in equality (true); therefore, Jefferson was part of an Illuminati conspiracy to rule the world.

Sometimes, conspiracy theorists don’t even bother with facts. Instead, they propose a set of assumptions, treat the assumptions as facts, and then jump to conclusions. For example, many truthers make the assumption that 9/11 was too elaborate to have been done by 19 terrorist hijackers. Therefore, it must have been manufactured or orchestrated by a powerful government — like the United States. In truth, of course, events like 9/11 can be accomplished by terrorists who are able to find and act on opportunities. And there is no substantive proof to show that government officials deliberately staged or ordered 9/11 and similar tragedies.

These jumps in logic are logical fallacies. A logical fallacy is flawed reasoning. Using *anecdotal evidence* and *cherry-picking data* are two logical fallacies described above. Another common one in conspiracy

theories is the *false cause*. This fallacy concludes that X caused Y simply because X happened before Y. For example, many conspiracy theorists claim the Bush administration deliberately allowed 9/11 to happen as a pretext (deceptive reason) for the later U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, since 9/11 preceded 2003. Conspiracy theorists often rely on this fallacy to “prove” that 9/11 was an “inside job” used to undermine opposition to the future 2003 invasion.

Another fallacy common to conspiracy theories is the *slippery slope*. This fallacy asserts that if event A happens, then terrible events B, C, D, etc. will inevitably follow. Therefore, event A must be stopped. It is a popular fallacy among conspiracy theorists. For example, Alex Jones, the host of *Infowars*, is known for his boisterous rants that often employ the slippery-slope fallacy, among others. And his *Infowars* web site has millions of visits monthly.

Jones is known for his claim that the 2012 Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting was a “false flag” hoax in which children and school staff were never really murdered. He claimed that the parents of the children were “crisis actors” feigning outrage in order to rally public support for gun control. Further down the slippery slope, any parental demands for, say, a ban on semi-automatic rifles would quickly lead to a national ban on all firearms and the abolition of the Second Amendment. After that, America would be a fascist, dystopian hellscape.

In other words, in this fallacy, outrage over Sandy Hook (event A) will lead to nationwide totalitarianism (event Z). Therefore, Jones dismisses event A — even claiming it is a hoax — in order to warn against event Z.

How to Spot a Conspiracy Theory

By far the most common flaw in conspiracy theories is the failure of those who hold them to offer sufficient proof. If someone makes a claim, he or she has the burden to prove it. The more serious or extraordinary the claim, the more proof is required.

Instead of proof, however, conspiracy theorists often rely on the following techniques:

- **Mix facts with falsehoods.** Like most claims, even false ones, there are often some facts that support a conspiracy theory. As Watergate and other scandals have proven, the government is capable of conspiracy and cover-ups. This does not mean that everything the government does is a conspiracy or cover-up designed to hide crimes of elected officials or to bring about totalitarianism. Often, conspiracy theorists will use anecdotal evidence to mix facts with falsehoods.
- **Attack the established version of the facts, or “the official story.”** Lacking proof for their own conclusions, many conspiracy theorists focus on perceived flaws in established conclusions. For example, retired professor of theology David Ray Griffin has said that “the official story about 9/11 is a gigantic conspiracy theory that 19 Arab Muslims, under the guidance of Osama bin Laden, defeated the world's most sophisticated military defense system, and also [brought down] the World Trade Center” By characterizing the “official story” as a “giant conspiracy theory” and contrasting civilian hijackers with “the world’s most sophisticated military defense system,” Griffin casts doubt on the established version. He implies that that doubt itself is proof that the established version is false. This is known as the logical fallacy of *begging the question*, or stating a conclusion as an argument. He also uses the logical fallacy of *appealing to emotion*, or using highly charged emotional appeals instead of reasoned argument to support a claim. Griffin is appealing here to a common yet erroneous Islamophobic stereotype of Muslims — and ethnic stereotype of Arabs — as unsophisticated.
- **Claim the proof has been lost or destroyed.** To account for a conspiracy theory’s lack of proof, many will assume a cover-up to explain the mysterious loss of evidence. Some even argue that the loss of evidence itself proves a cover-up. When U.S. military officials deposited Osama bin Laden’s

body in the North Arabian Sea after his 2011 assassination by a Special Forces team, for example, some conspiracy theorists claimed that the lack of bin Laden's body proved he was still alive somewhere. These assertions ask us to imagine a cover-up that would involve dozens, sometimes hundreds of people or officials, all of whom somehow successfully keep the secret of the conspiracy over the span of years or decades. As many examples in history demonstrate, it is not so easy to control events, people, or information.

- **Assert personal incredulity.** The logical fallacy of *personal incredulity* is the assertion that if I do not know how something happened, then it must be false. For example, the “chemtrail” conspiracy claims the puffy streaks that planes sometimes leave in the sky are actually evidence of a government plot to control the weather or spread airborne drugs designed to tranquilize the masses. In reality, the wispy clouds emitted by planes are just water-condensation trails called contrails. They form because jet exhaust contains some water vapor that cools at cold, high altitudes. Contrails are usually small ice crystals, giving them a kind of “glow” in sunlight. But if someone does not understand how ice crystals can form in jet exhaust, it can be tempting for that person to instead imagine that contrails are mysterious — even sinister. And a government conspiracy might be an easy explanation.
- **Use only information that confirms bias.** Virtually all of us are guilty of confirmation bias to some degree. That means we favor information that confirms our beliefs. And it is not surprising that we may feel uncomfortable when facts contradict our beliefs, and even our prejudices. But conspiracy theorists tend to show strong confirmation bias and immediately dismiss contradictory facts as lies or misinformation. This explains how birthers could question the authenticity of Barack Obama's long-form birth certificate. It was a fact that contradicted their belief that he was lying about his citizenship.
- **Make the cynical appeal.** Many conspiracy theorists ask us to believe that the world is irreparably corrupt. They charge that those who are not convinced by their theories are just being naïve or, worse, are involved in the conspiracy itself.

The biggest flaw of most conspiracy theories is that none of them ever seems to pan out. Jefferson did not abolish religion in the United States. After 200 years, the Illuminati have failed to achieve world government. And Barack Obama was born in Hawaii.

Writing & Discussion

1. The late astronomer Carl Sagan said, "Extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence." How extraordinary are the claims of the conspiracy theories described in the article? And how extraordinary is the evidence for those claims?
2. Have you heard or read about any of the stories mentioned in the article (for example, "chemtrails")? If so, what were your sources? How trustworthy do you consider those sources to be?
3. What is a logical fallacy? Cite at least three mentioned in the article in your answer.
4. Why do you think people believe in conspiracy theories? Cite at least three examples from the article to support your answer.

Handout B

Conspiracy Busters

Directions: You are a researcher at a secret government agency that investigates conspiracy theories to determine whether they have validity. You and your partners have been assigned the task of evaluating the following letter and writing a report to give to the agency director. Follow these steps:

1. Carefully review the letter below, which has been received by the agency. You will have to decide if the letter contains a theory that (a) your agency should *pursue* (investigate immediately), (b) *file* (store for a future investigation when more information comes to light), or (c) *discard* (do not investigate now or in the future because it is too incredible).
2. After reading the letter below, review the section "How to Spot a Conspiracy Theory" in the reading **Conspiracy Theories Past and Present** to help guide your analysis.

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN:

My name is John Krebs, M.D. I am about to publish an e-book called *Weather Warfare and Energy Weapons*. It contains the results of 10 years of research during which I uncovered a plot of enormous danger to the nation. It involves members of the Deep State within the Pentagon, the National Security Agency, and other federal agencies. The Deep State consists of unelected government officials who act outside the rule of law. In a nutshell, these groups are working together to create high-tech weapons using microwaves to impose mind control on American political dissenters, and to change the climate of the United States. Here are just a few of the facts:

- The Department of Defense has funded research into microwave development for decades.
- Thousands of American citizens have complained of microwave monitoring, including mind control attempts and other symptoms such as increased anxiety and fatigue while using microwave ovens. Many political protesters have complained of similar symptoms after encounters with riot police.
- Budco Industries installed a microwave sending station on the coast of South Carolina just before the appearance of Hurricane Florence in 2018.
- The United States Air Force has been experimenting with a microwave "heat ray" for breaking up violent crowds. The Air Force has also published research on weapons to create "artificial weather."
- Files proving the conspiracy had been collected by a government employee with high-level security clearance who goes by the code-name "V." V's files were destroyed in a fire of mysterious origin, which "fire investigators" called an "accident." Fortunately, V has a photographic memory and shares this information and warnings about new "weather weapons" and the Deep State in online forums.

Handout C

Agency Report Form 7-22A

As a group, discuss and fill out the following report. Be prepared to present your report to the director.

1. Researchers Submitting this Report: (Names)

2. Era Involved (Check One) Historical____ Contemporary____

3. Reasons this conspiracy theory may be invalid: (Provide at least two examples):

4. Logical Problems Noted: (Provide at least two examples):

5. Recommendations (Check One) Pursue____ File____ Discard____

(Provide Reasons)

Exit Slip: What Is a Conspiracy Theory?

Name:

Date:

Three things I learned from today's lesson:

1)

2)

3)

Two things from today's lesson I want to know more about:

1)

2)

One question I still have about conspiracy theories:

1)