Introduction

HIGH-CRIME BLIND

Given its title, you might think *Conspiracy Theory in America* is simply another addition to the long list of books criticizing conspiracy theories. You probably expect the book to blame the popularity of these theories on some flaw in American culture or character. No doubt, you have encountered this view many times, not just in books and magazines but also on radio and television.

The argument that conspiracy beliefs reflect cultural weaknesses that are peculiarly American was first made by political scientist Richard Hofstadter, who, in a 1964 essay in *Harper's Magazine*, said popular conspiracy theories stem from the "paranoid style in American politics." [1] This was a year after the assassination of President Kennedy, but Hofstadter was not talking about that. He was referring to right-wing fears of communism in the McCarthy era. Other authors over the years have traced conspiracy beliefs to, among other character defects, Americans' racial prejudices, hostility toward immigrants, distrust of intellectuals, and anxieties about social change, concentrated wealth, and secularization.

In short, if you are at all familiar with the commentary on

conspiracy theories—and it would be hard not to be, given the media attention conspiracy deniers and debunkers attract—you are surely wondering what more could possibly be said on the topic. Actually, however, the answer is, quite a lot.

This is because most of the criticism directed at conspiracy beliefs is based on sentimentality about America's political leaders and institutions rather than on unbiased reasoning and objective observation. Most authors who criticize conspiracy theories not only disagree with the theories' factual claims, they find the ideas offensive. Among the most common conspiracy theories are allegations of U.S. government complicity in terrible crimes against the American people, crimes that include the assassination of President Kennedy and the terrorist attacks of 9/11. For conspiracy deniers, such allegations constitute outlandish slurs against America's leaders and political institutions, slurs that damage the nation's reputation and may encourage violence against U.S. officials at home and abroad.

This visceral reaction to conspiracy theories is understandable. However, it often results in blanket dismissals that treat all conspiracy theories as equally ludicrous and insulting. In fact, conspiracy beliefs vary widely in terms of their supporting evidence and plausibility. Some conspiratorial suspicions make sense and warrant investigation, while others do not. For example, suspicions that elements of the U.S. government somehow facilitated the assassination of President Kennedy range from the theory that the murder was approved by the vice president and other top leaders to the view that the government just slipped up by failing to monitor Lee Harvey Oswald's activities during Kennedy's visit to Dallas and then concealed this from the Warren Commission to protect the FBI's reputation. [2] Although the first suspicion has only modest evidentiary support (but might still be true), the second allegation about the FBI's failure to keep track of Oswald and then covering this up has been fully

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confirmed. [3, 4] This does not necessarily mean the Kennedy assassination was an "inside job," but it does cast doubt on the official account of the assassination as a crime that could not have been prevented, and it raises the possibility that the FBI's culpability was more extensive than has thus far been admitted. In any event, a common mistake made by conspiracy deniers is to lump together a hodgepodge of speculations about government intrigue, declare them all "conspiracy theories," and then, on the basis of the most improbable claims among them, argue that any and all unsubstantiated suspicions of elite political crimes are far-fetched fantasies destructive of public trust.

The literature's hasty dismissal of antigovernment suspicions is not merely an incidental attitude, a bias in the balance of opinion for and against various contested claims. To the contrary, objective observation and analysis have been foreclosed by the very terms employed to frame and conceptualize the subject matter. Most important in this loaded language is the phrase "conspiracy theory" itself, or more specifically the meaning attached to it in use and application.

A Curious History

The term "conspiracy theory" did not exist as a phrase in everyday American conversation before 1964. The conspiracy-theory label entered the American lexicon of political speech as a catchall for criticisms of the Warren Commission's conclusion that President Kennedy was assassinated by a lone gunman with no assistance from, or foreknowledge by, any element of the United States government. Since then, the term's prevalence and range of application have exploded. In 1964, the year the Warren Commission issued its report, the *New York Times* published five stories in which "conspiracy theory" appeared. In recent years, the phrase has occurred in over 140 *New York Times* stories annually. A

Google search for the phrase (in 2012) yielded more than 21 million hits—triple the numbers for such common expressions as "abuse of power" and "war crime." On Amazon.com, the term is a book category that includes in excess of 1,300 titles. In addition to books on conspiracy theories of particular events, there are conspiracy-theory encyclopedias, photographic compendiums, website directories, and guides for researchers, skeptics, and debunkers.

Initially, conspiracy theories were not an object of ridicule and hostility. Today, however, the conspiracy-theory label is employed routinely to dismiss a wide range of antigovernment suspicions as symptoms of impaired thinking akin to superstition or mental illness. For example, in a massive book published in 2007 on the assassination of President Kennedy, former prosecutor Vincent Bugliosi says people who doubt the Warren Commission report are "as kooky as a three dollar bill in their beliefs and paranoia." [5 p. xv] Similarly, in his recently published book *Among the Truthers* (Harper's, 2011), Canadian journalist Jonathan Kay refers to 9/11 conspiracy theorists as "political paranoiacs" who have "lost their grip on the real world." [6 p. xix] Making a similar point, if more colorfully, in his popular book *Wingnuts*, journalist John Avlon refers to conspiracy believers as "moonbats," "Hatriots," "wingnuts," and the "Fright Wing." [7]

The same judgment is expressed in more measured terms by Cass Sunstein and Adrian Vermeule in a 2009 journal article on the "causes and cures" of conspiracy theories. [8] Sunstein is a Harvard law professor appointed by President Obama to head the Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs. He and Vermeule claim that once a person buys into them, conspiracy theories are resistant to debunking because they are "self-sealing." That is, because conspiracy theories attribute extraordinary powers to elites to orchestrate events, keep secrets, and avoid detection, the theories

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In a book on technology and public opinion, Sunstein argues further that conspiracy-theory groups and networks are proliferating because the highly decentralized form of mass communication made possible by the Internet is altering the character of public discourse. Whereas television and radio provide platforms for debating competing viewpoints on matters of widely shared interest, the Internet tends to segment discussion into a multitude of small groups, each focusing on a separate and distinct topic. Sunstein argues that this splintering of discourse encourages extremism because it allows proponents of false or one-sided beliefs to locate others with similar views while at the same time avoiding interaction with competing perspectives. In Sunstein's words, "The Internet produces a process of spontaneous creation of groups of like-minded types, fueling group polarization. People who would otherwise be loners, or isolated in their objections and concerns, congregate into social networks." [9 pp. 82–83] Sunstein acknowledges that this consequence of the Internet is unavoidable, but he says polarization can and should be mitigated by a combination of government action and voluntarily adopted norms. The objective, he says, should be to ensure that those who hold conspiracy theories "are exposed to credible counterarguments and are not living in an echo chamber of their own design." [9]

LIKE THIS IS A BAD THING?

In their law review article, Sunstein and Vermeule expand this idea and propose covert government action reminiscent of the FBI's efforts against the civil rights and antiwar movements in the 1960s. They consider a number of options for countering the influence of conspiracy theories, including public information campaigns, censorship, and fines for Internet service providers hosting conspiracy-theory websites. Ultimately rejecting those options as impractical

SUNSTEIN & VERMEULE COUGH ACTIONS AGAINST "CONSPIRACY THEORISTS" ?!

because they would attract attention and reinforce antigovernment suspicions, they call for a program of "cognitive infiltration" in which groups and networks popularizing conspiracy theories would be infiltrated and "disrupted."

A Flawed and Un-American Label

As these examples illustrate, conspiracy deniers assume that what qualifies as a conspiracy theory is self-evident. In their view, the phrase "conspiracy theory" as it is conventionally understood simply names this objectively identifiable phenomenon. Conspiracy theories are easy to spot because they posit secret plots that are too wacky to be taken seriously. Indeed, the theories are deemed so far-fetched they require no reply or rejoinder; they are objects of derision, not ideas for discussion. In short, while analyzing the psychological appeal of conspiracy beliefs and bemoaning their corrosive effects on public trust, conspiracy deniers have taken the conspiracy-theory concept itself for granted.

TO DESTEST CONSPIRACY THEORISTS OUT OF HAND = UN-AMERICAN

This is remarkable, not to say shocking, because the concept is both fundamentally flawed and in direct conflict with American legal and political traditions. As a label for irrational political suspicions about secret plots by powerful people, the concept is obviously defective because political conspiracies in high office do, in fact, happen. Officials in the Nixon administration did conspire to steal the 1972 presidential election. [10] Officials in the Reagan White House did participate in a criminal scheme to sell arms to Iran and channel profits to the Contras, a rebel army in Nicaragua. [11] The Bush-Cheney administration did collude to mislead Congress and the public about the strength of its evidence for Iraqi weapons of mass destruction. [12] If some conspiracy theories are true, then it is nonsensical to dismiss all unsubstantiated suspicions of elite intrigue as false by definition.

PROVEN CONSPIRACIES

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it all the more surprising that most scholars and journalists have failed to notice that their use of the term to ridicule suspicions of elite political criminality betrays the civic ethos inherited from the nation's Founders. From the nation's beginning, Americans were fearful of secret plots by political insiders to subvert constitutional governance. Those who now dismiss conspiracy theories as groundless paranoia have apparently forgotten that *the United States was founded on a conspiracy theory*. The Declaration of Independence claimed that "a history of repeated injuries and usurpations" by King George proved the king was plotting to establish "an absolute tyranny over these states." Today, most Americans are familiar only with the Declaration's opening paragraphs about self-evident truths and inalienable rights, but if they were to read the rest of the document, they would see that it is devoted to detailing the abuses evincing the king's tyrannical design. Among the complaints listed are onerous taxation, fomenting slave rebellions and Indian uprisings, taxation without representation, and indifference to the colonies' complaints. The document's signers claimed it was this "design to reduce them under absolute despotism," not any or all of the abuses themselves, that gave them the right and the duty "to throw off such government, and to provide new guards for their future security."

The Founders considered political power a corrupting influence that makes political conspiracies against the people's interests and liberties almost inevitable. They repeatedly and explicitly called for popular vigilance against antidemocratic schemes in high office. Educated in classical political philosophy, they understood that one of the most important questions in Western political thought is how to prevent top leaders from abusing their powers to impose arbitrary rule, which the Founders referred to, appropriately, as "tyranny." Whereas Great Britain relied on common law to define the powers and procedures of its government, the

FOUNDERS - SUSPICIONS OF THOSE W/ POWERFUL POWER

FOUNDERS - CONCERNED W/ PREVENTING ABUSES OF POWER LEADING TO TYRANNY.

generation that established the American republic developed a written constitution to set clear limits on public officials. Nevertheless, they understood that all constitutions are vulnerable to subversion because ultimately they are interpreted and administered by public officials themselves. The Founders would view today's norms against conspiratorial suspicion as not only arrogant, but also dangerous and un-American.

OBTO NO INTERPRETATION - AS W/ COURTS OBFUSCATE WAR POWER CASES. YES!

The Founders would also be shocked that conspiracy deniers attack and ridicule *individuals* who voice conspiracy beliefs and yet ignore *institutional* purveyors of conspiratorial ideas even though the latter are the ideas that have proven truly dangerous in modern American history. Since at least the end of World War II, the citadel of theories alleging nefarious political conspiracies has been, not amateur investigators of the Kennedy assassination and other political crimes and tragedies, but the United States government. In the first three decades of the post–World War II era, U.S. officials asserted that communists were conspiring to take over the world, that the U.S. bureaucracy was riddled with Soviet spies, and that the civil rights and antiwar movements of the 1960s were creatures of Soviet influence. More recently, they have claimed that Iraq was complicit in 9/11, failed to dispose of its biological weapons, and attempted to purchase uranium in Niger so it could construct nuclear bombs. Although these ideas were untrue, they influenced millions of Americans, fomented social panic, fueled wars, and resulted in massive loss of life and destruction of property. If conspiracy deniers are so concerned about the dangers of conspiratorial suspicions in American politics and civic culture, why have they ignored the conspiracism of U.S. politicians?

Finally, there is something very hypocritical about those who want to fix people who do not share their opinions. Sunstein and Vermeule say conspiracy believers need to have

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Naming the Taboo Topic

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their discussions disrupted, because they are dangerous. But what could be more dangerous than thinking it is acceptable to mess with someone else's thoughts? Sunstein and Vermeule's hypocrisy is breathtaking. They would have government conspiring against citizens who voice suspicions about government conspiracies, which is to say they would have government do precisely what they want citizens to stop saying the government does. How do Harvard law professors become snared in such Orwellian logic? One can only assume that there must be something bedeviling about the idea of conspiracy theory.

Naming the Taboo Topic

In what follows, I shall attempt to reorient analysis of the phenomenon that has been assigned the derisive label of "conspiracy theory." In a 2006 peer-reviewed journal article, I introduced the concept of State Crime against Democracy (SCAD) to displace the term "conspiracy theory." [13] I say *dis*place rather than *re*place because SCAD is not another name for conspiracy theory; it is a name for *the type of wrongdoing about which the conspiracy-theory label discourages us from speaking*. Basically, the term "conspiracy theory" is applied pejoratively to allegations of official wrongdoing that have not been substantiated by public officials themselves.

SCAD - GREAT TERM!

Deployed as a pejorative putdown, the label is a verbal defense mechanism used by political elites to suppress mass suspicions that inevitably arise when shocking political crimes benefit top leaders or play into their agendas, especially when those same officials are in control of agencies responsible for preventing the events in question or for investigating them after they have occurred. It is only natural to wonder about possible chicanery when a president and vice president bent on war in the Middle East are warned of

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impending terrorist attacks and yet fail to alert the American public or increase the readiness of the nation's armed forces. Why would Americans not expect answers when Arabs with poor piloting skills manage to hijack four planes, fly them across the eastern United States, somehow evade America's multilayered system of air defense, and then crash two of the planes into the Twin Towers in New York City and one into the Pentagon in Washington, DC? By the same token, it is only natural to question the motives of the president and vice president when they drag their feet on investigating this seemingly inexplicable defense failure and then, when the investigation is finally conducted, they insist on testifying together, in secret, and not under oath. Certainly, citizen distrust can be unwarranted and overwrought, but often citizen doubts make sense. Americans are not crazy to want answers when a president is assassinated by a lone gunman with mediocre shooting skills who manages to get off several lucky shots with an old bolt-action carbine that has a misaligned scope. Why would there not be doubts when an alleged assassin is apprehended, publicly claims he is just a patsy, is interrogated for two days but no one makes a recording or even takes notes, and he is then shot to death at point-blank range while in police custody *at police headquarters*?

AND BLDG. 7 COMES DOWN LIKE A PANCAKE.

AND THEN LEE RE BUSH AUTHORIZING CHENEY TO GIVE SHOOT-DOWN ORDER

BY A MAN W/ MAFIA CONNECTIONS!

Of course, some suspicions go too far. The idea that lizard-like aliens from space are secretly infiltrating top positions in government and business is ludicrous. However, the conspiracy-theory label makes fun of conspiratorial suspicions *in general*. Consequently, the label discourages Americans from registering doubts about their leaders' motives and actions *regardless of the circumstances*. Any suspicions that public officials conspired to cause a tragedy or allowed it to happen are dismissed without further discussion because, supposedly, public officials simply do not engage in conspiracies.

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both of whom are professors at Boise State University, have studied the use of the conspiracy-theory label as a putdown. At the beginning of a peer-reviewed 2007 article on the subject, they point out how the label works rhetorically:

> If I call you a conspiracy theorist, it matters little whether you have actually claimed that a conspiracy exists or whether you have simply raised an issue that I would rather avoid . . . I twist the machinery of interaction so that you, not I, are now called to account. In fact, I have done even more. By labeling you, I strategically exclude you from the sphere where public speech, debate, and conflict occur. [14 p. 127]

HUSTING & ORR ON THE CT TERM AS A PUTDOWN

Husting and Orr go on to explain that the accusation of conspiracy theory discredits any explanations offered for specific social or historical events "regardless of the quality or quantity of evidence." The label has this discrediting, end-of-argument effect because conspiracy theories have come to be seen as mere suspicions with no basis in fact, not as reasonable inferences from circumstances and evidence about matters of great importance.

In contrast, the SCAD construct does not refer to a type of *allegation* or *suspicion*; it refers to a special type of transgression: *an attack from within on the political system's organizing principles*. For these extremely grave crimes, America's Founders used the term "high crime" and included in this category treason and "conspiracies against the people's liberties." SCADs, high crimes, and antidemocratic conspiracies can also be called "elite political crimes" and "elite political criminality." The SCAD construct is intended, not to supersede traditional terminology or monopolize conceptualization of this phenomenon, but rather to add a descriptive term that captures, with some specificity, the long-recognized

SCAD

ELITE POLITICAL CRIMES

SUBVERSION OF DEMOCRACY BY THOSE ENTRUSTED TO UPHOLD IT.

potential for representative democracy to be subverted by people on the inside—the very people who have been entrusted to uphold the constitutional order.

UNDERMINING NORMAL SOVEREIGNTY

SCADs are defined as concerted actions or inactions by government insiders intended to manipulate democratic processes and undermine popular sovereignty. [13] Examples of SCADs that have been officially proven include the Watergate break-in and cover-up; [10, 15–17] the illegal arms sales and covert operations in Iran-Contra [11, 18]; and the effort to discredit Joseph Wilson by revealing his wife's status as an intelligence agent. [19, 20]

EXAMPLES OF PROVEN SCADS

ALSO CRIMES EXPOSED BY CHURCH COMM., GULF OF TONKIN LIES, WMD + OTHER LIES LEADING TO IRAQ WAR, CONTRA WAR IN NICARAGUA, MEDICAL + ASTH. TESTING BY CIA + MILITARY, + MORE!

Many other political crimes in which involvement by high officials is reasonably suspected have gone uninvestigated or have been investigated only superficially. They are included in SCAD studies even when the evidence of state complicity is contested, because excluding them would mean accepting the judgment of individuals and institutions whose rectitude and culpability are at issue. The nature of the subject matter is such that official inquiries, if they are conducted at all, are usually compromised by conflicts of interest. Hence the evidence must be evaluated independently on its merits, and decisions must be made on a case-by-case basis about which events are most likely elite political crimes. Of course, as Husting and Orr point out, engaging the evidence is precisely what the pejorative conspiracy-theory putdown is deployed rhetorically to avoid.

SCAD THREATEN DEMOCRACY ITSELF

SCADs constitute a special type of political criminality. Unlike bribery, kickbacks, bid-rigging, and other, more mundane forms of political corruption, which tend to be isolated and to affect only pockets of government activity, SCADs have the potential to subvert political institutions and entire governments or branches of government. Committed at the highest levels of public office, they are crimes that threaten democracy itself. Clearly, such crimes and the circumstances that allow or encourage them warrant scientific study, both to

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better understand elite politics and to identify institutional vulnerabilities that can be corrected to make antidemocratic conspiracies less likely and less likely to succeed. Hence, one would have expected elite political crime, like white-collar crime, hate crime, and racketeering, to have been singled out for research and theorizing by social scientists long ago.

However, because powerful norms discourage Americans from questioning the integrity of their top leaders, and because anyone who raises such questions is likely to be seen as a "conspiracy theorist" who may be mentally unbalanced, the topic has been almost completely ignored by scholars. Social scientists have studied various forms of state crime, but in almost every case the potential for public officials in liberal democracies to subvert democratic institutions has been disregarded. [21; for an exception, see 22] Political science research on Watergate, Iran-Contra, and other U.S. political scandals has sidestepped questions about state criminality by studying the use of congressional investigations and independent prosecutors as political tactics in partisan competition. [23]

It is routine police protocol to look for patterns in burglaries, bank robberies, car thefts, and other crimes, and to use any patterns that are discovered as clues to the perpetrators' identity and the vulnerabilities to crime that are being exploited. This method of crime analysis is shown repeatedly in crime shows on TV. It is Criminology 101. There is no excuse for most Americans, much less criminal investigators, journalists, and other professionals, to fail to apply this method to assassinations, election fiascos, defense failures, and other suspicious events that shape national political priorities.

Why do we compartmentalize crimes involving political elites while doing just the opposite with the crimes of ordinary people? At least two factors discourage us from connecting the dots in elite political criminality. One is the term "conspiracy theory," which is applied to crimes that have major political consequences but not to other crimes. The conspiracy-theory phrase encourages cognitive compartmentalization because the phrase is not meant to apply to interconnected crimes. In American public discourse, multiple crimes planned and committed by a single group are generally called "organized crime," not conspiracies. The term "conspiracy" is reserved for plots surrounding one major criminal objective and for the networks that come together for that purpose. The Mafia is not a conspiracy; it is an orga-

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nization. A conspiracy theory about the assassination of President Kennedy is implicitly a theory about a temporary combination of plotters, not an enduring assassination squad or lethal criminal organization. Therefore, even if we think the assassination of John Kennedy was a conspiracy, and we think the assassination of Robert Kennedy was a conspiracy, we are nevertheless unlikely to see the two as connected, because the conspiracy concept envisions them as isolated, self-contained schemes.

The second factor impeding us from drawing connections between political crimes involving political elites is that looking for connections requires being suspicious to begin with, and yet being suspicious of political elites violates norms that are embodied in the pejorative connotations of the conspiracy-theory label. As shown by our speech habits and observation tendencies about assassinations, disputed elections, and terrorist attacks, we are averse to talking about such events as connected in any way.

This aversion is learned. Americans know that voicing suspicions about political elites will make them objects of hostility and derision. The verbal slaps vary, but they are difficult to counter because they usually abuse reason. For example, in using the conspiracy-theory label as a putdown, conspiracy deniers imply that *official accounts* of troubling events are something altogether much more solid than *conspiratorial suspicions*—as if official accounts are in some sense without speculation or presuppositions. In fact, however, conspiracy deniers and debunkers are relying on an unstated theory of their own—a very questionable theory. In the post-WWII era, official investigations have attributed assassinations, election fiascos, defense failures, and other suspicious events to such unpredictable, idiosyncratic forces as lone gunmen, antiquated voting equipment, bureaucratic bumbling, innocent mistakes, and, in the case of 9/11 (to quote the 9/11 Commission, p. 339), a "failure of imagi-

nation." In effect, official accounts of suspicious events have answered *conspiracy* theories with *coincidence* theories.

Far from being more factual and plausible than theories positing political crimes and intrigues, coincidence theories become less and less plausible as coincidences pile up, which they have been doing for decades in the U.S. It is like flipping a coin ten times and it always falls on heads. In general, as SCADs and suspected SCADs pile up, the odds of coincidence drop rapidly. The Bush-Cheney ticket winning in one or two states despite exit polls indicating they had lost could have been the result of random variations in exit poll samples. When the same thing happens in state after state; when the difference between exit polls and election returns almost always favors the same candidates, the odds of this being by chance alone are astronomically low. [26] This does not necessarily mean the elections were stolen, but it does mean something caused the election returns to differ from how voters said they voted.

The CIA's Conspiracy-Theory Conspiracy

If political conspiracies in high office do, in fact, happen; if it is therefore unreasonable to assume conspiracy theories are, by definition, harebrained and paranoid; if the Declaration of Independence is a conspiracy theory; if the United States was founded on a conspiracy theory that alleged King George was plotting to take away the colonists' rights; if the conspiracy-theory label makes it difficult to see connections between political crimes that, in fact, may be connected; if, because it ridicules suspicion, the conspiracy-theory label is inconsistent with the traditional American ethos of vigilance against conspiracies in high office; if, in summary, the conspiracy-theory label blinkers perceptions, silos thinking, and is un-American and unreasonable, *how did the label come to be used so widely to begin with?*

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Most Americans will be shocked to learn that *the conspiracy-theory label was popularized as a pejorative term by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) in a propaganda program initiated in 1967*. [28] This program was directed at criticisms of the Warren Commission's report. The propaganda campaign called on media corporations and journalists to criticize "conspiracy theorists" and raise questions about their motives and judgments. The CIA told its contacts that "parts of the conspiracy talk appear to be deliberately generated by Communist propagandists." In the shadows of McCarthyism and the Cold War, this warning about communist influence was delivered simultaneously to hundreds of well-positioned members of the press in a global CIA propaganda network, infusing the conspiracy-theory label with powerfully negative associations.

The Rest of the Book

Conspiracy Theory in America is about the transformation of America's civic culture from the Founders' hard-nosed realism about elite political intrigue to today's blanket condemnation of conspiracy beliefs as ludicrous by definition. This cultural reversal did not occur spontaneously; it was planned and orchestrated by the government itself. The impetus for the change originated in obscure debates in political philosophy during World War II, and in the secret world of espionage and intrigue that has become a permanent threat at the heart of American government. The conspiracy-theory label intentionally suppresses discussion of the issue of where, if at all, secrecy, domestic surveillance, and government propaganda campaigns fit in American democracy.

The rest of the book is divided into six chapters, each of which focuses on a particular aspect of, or premise about, conspiracy belief that is particularly important to the restoration of our anti-tyranny sensibilities but has been

overlooked in the conspiracy-theory literature, public discourse, or both.

Chapter 1 highlights the decisive role played by unstated and untested conventional beliefs in determining what counts as a conspiracy theory in the pejorative sense of the term. It turns out that, in the hands of conspiracy deniers, what counts as a conspiracy theory depends, not, as the label suggests, on an allegation's form and subject matter as a hypothesis about a secret plot, but on its relation to conventional beliefs about the motives and integrity of political elites. Conspiracy theories about the Mafia in America or politicians in Russia are fine; the same theories directed at U.S. politicians are supposedly ludicrous and paranoid.

Chapter 2 challenges the widely shared view that representative democracy depends on public trust and civility, both of which conspiracy theories supposedly erode. The chapter focuses on the important role the Founders believed is played in representative democracy by distrust—citizen distrust of their elected officials, and officials' distrust of one another. The chapter examines the role of conspiratorial suspicions in the political science of the Founders and in the application of that science to the U.S. Constitution and to nineteenth- and twentieth-century political reforms. Suspicion is written into and energizes the constitutional system of checks and balances, which displays the Founders' method of dividing and separating powers, dispersing vetoes, and requiring cooperation for authoritative action. The chapter concludes with a discussion of how the legal concept of conspiracy was applied for the first time to governments and political organizations in the Nuremberg war crimes trials, which, in part, were intended to instruct the German people about their responsibility as citizens in a parliamentary democracy to be constantly vigilant against efforts in high office to expand, extend, and consolidate power.

Chapter 3 shows that the intellectual foundations for the

shift to conspiracy denial were laid during
World War II. In the early decades of the t
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tists was Charles Beard, who was famous
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Chapter 4 explicates the assumptions
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shift to conspiracy denial were laid during and shortly after World War II. In the early decades of the twentieth century, one of the nation's leading historians and political scientists was Charles Beard, who was famous for exposing elite schemes to sew advantages for the wealthy into the U.S. Constitution. In the shadow of the world war, however, two European political philosophers—Karl Popper and Leo Strauss—placed much of the blame for totalitarianism, World War II, and the Holocaust on forms of conspiratorial theorizing that fueled social prejudice and undermined respect for authority. As Popper and Strauss' ideas entered universities and influenced teaching and research, conspiracy theories of all kinds came to be lumped together and condemned, including plausible suspicions of crimes in high office.

Chapter 4 explicates the assumptions and implications of the CIA propaganda program that spread the terms "conspiracy theory" and "conspiracy theorist" and gave them pejorative connotations. The label's use and connotations are tracked in the *New York Times* and *Time* magazine. Evidence is presented that connects specific negative connotations of the conspiracy-theory label directly to the CIA program.

Chapter 5 turns to theory and research on State Crimes against Democracy (SCADs) in the United States. SCAD research is introduced alongside examples in the history of science where scientific discoveries have overcome mistaken but seemingly irrefutable perceptions, such as the perception that the earth is stationary rather than spinning on its axis. The analysis of SCADs highlights a number of commonalities in SCAD targets, timing, tactics, and policy consequences. These patterns were previously unrecognized because of compartmentalization in people's perceptions of high crime. The SCAD patterns point to military and military-industrial interests as likely suspects in SCADs that foment social panic, encourage militarism, and are associated with wars. SCAD timing, targets, and policy consequences also suggest

that the capabilities of national security agencies are being drawn into U.S. domestic politics by the White House. The chapter concludes by applying lessons from SCAD research to 9/11 and the anthrax letter attacks, raising questions about possible U.S. foreknowledge, the language of the war on terror, and the connection between the name "9/11" and the U.S. telephone number for emergencies (9-1-1).

Chapter 6 considers the possibilities for strengthening popular sovereignty and the rule of law in American democracy. The proliferation of SCADs in the post–World War II era is attributed to several related factors, chief among them the political class's growing sense that both the Constitution and the people are impediments to policies needed to protect the nation in an age of weapons of mass destruction and ruthless enemies. Also important is the popular view, seldom acknowledged publicly but seemingly widely shared, that occasional government crimes are acceptable if they help keep America safe. These ideas are shown to be naïve and mistaken in assuming that liberty and democracy can endure when enjoyed partially. SCADs are not occasional deviations from popular sovereignty; they start wars, steal elections, shift the nation's direction, and foment fear and hatred. The chapter recommends statutory reforms to encourage aggressive investigations of high crimes and allow independent law enforcement professionals to do their jobs. In large part this is what goes missing when top leaders appoint blue ribbon panels and investigative commissions. When it comes to SCADs, the people who insist that the laws and rules be enforced are frontline personnel.

1

THE CONSPIRACY THEORY LABEL

The Rosetta Stone for understanding
use of the conspiracy-theory label
tion of President John F. Kennedy.
theory label took form and gained meaning
several years (or longer) in the context of e
one of the world's leading experts in psych
to deflect accusations that officials at the
American government were complicit in
der. Although the Warren Commission did
phrase, it referred repeatedly to the "issu
"questions of conspiracy," and similar con
focused its inquiry on whether Lee Harvey
acting on his own or instead had receive
compact phrasing, "conspiracy theory,"
as a name pushed by the CIA for any and
rejected the official account that Kennedy
a "lone gunman."

The CIA's campaign to popularize the
theory" and make conspiracy belief a targ
hostility must be credited, unfortunately
of the most successful propaganda initia