

University of Missouri-Columbia
History 2420
Winter 2008
Lectures: T Th 3:30-4:45PM
Strickland (GCB) 204

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Conspiracy Theories and Conspiracies in U.S. History and Culture



"Saucer wreckage" in Roswell, 1947

Overview

From the Salem witch trials to the present-day obsessions with the JFK assassination, UFOs, and alleged misdeeds of the Clinton and Bush administrations, Americans have embraced conspiracy theories to explain mysterious events and wrenching social changes, sometimes with far-reaching results. The primary objective of the course is to help students deal more intelligently with the conspiratorial fears and political paranoia that pervade modern American culture, by placing them in a broad historical context and learning to subject them to rigorous logical and cultural analysis. We will also consider some real "conspiracies" (such as the details of the Lincoln assassination) that are considerably less well-known than the imaginary ones. This is intended to be a fun course, but please take note: I consider conspiracy theories a serious problem worthy of serious thought. People have died or gone to jail because others adopted wild beliefs such as that the government was implanting people with monitoring devices or that 1000s of children were being sacrificed in Satanic rituals. Indeed, the argument can be made that both Islamic terrorism and some of the more extreme American responses to it are based largely on conspiracy theories.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

Textbooks at University Bookstore

Cohn, Norman	<i>Warrant for Genocide: The Myth of the Jewish World Conspiracy and the Protocols of the Elders of Zion</i>
Dunbar, David & Brad Reagan, eds.	<i>Debunking 9/11 Myths: Why Conspiracy Theories Can't Stand Up to the Facts</i>
Fenster, Mark	<i>Conspiracy Theories: Secrecy and Power in American Culture</i>
Fine, Gary Alan and Patricia A. Turner	<i>Whispers on the Color Line: Rumor and Race in America</i>
Hoffer, Peter Charles	<i>The Devil's Disciples: Makers of the Salem Witchcraft Trials</i>
Levitas, Daniel	<i>The Terrorist Next Door: The Militia Movement and the Radical Right</i> (optional)
McConnachie, James and Robin Tudge, eds.	<i>Rough Guide to Conspiracy Theories</i>
Posner, Gerald	<i>Case Closed: Lee Harvey Oswald and the Assassination of JFK</i>
Wright, Lawrence	<i>Remembering Satan</i>

Other Readings will be posted on the course web site, and others will be placed on reserve at Ellis Library (as indicated below). Unless they are specifically labeled otherwise, these readings should be considered just as important and required as the books. In some cases, the online or reserve readings are *more* important. Students are responsible for checking the course web site and finding them.

Course Web Site

Course Home Page <http://conspiracy.pasleybrothers.com>

Instructor's Home Page <http://jeff.pasleybrothers.com>

"Area 214A," the course web site, will be an integral part of this course. In addition to constantly updated schedule information and notifications about the reading assignments (see below), students will be able to access lecture outlines, review sheets, and many of the course readings. Since I will be building the site as the semester progresses, students will be responsible for checking it at least weekly and for reading the materials posted there. Where possible, the online readings will be arranged so that you can access them directly from the main course web site. If asked for a username and password when accessing a reading, supply your usual PawPrint and password. If you are using an on-campus Internet connection, passwords should not be necessary.

The schedule updates and other useful or interesting information will be delivered through a blog that will appear on the main course home page as well as at <http://Area214A.blogspot.com>. The blog will also will allow students to ask questions and make comments on the lectures, readings, and other conspiracy-related topics. Free registration may be required to post comments, and in any case you should sign comments with your real name so I know you are a student in the course. Abusive comments, as well as anonymous and grossly off-topic comments, will be deleted.

"Pasleybrothers.com" is just the name I have given to my collection of web sites, housed on a private ISP rather the university servers. "Pasley.com" was taken, so I chose the domain name in honor of our two sons, Isaac and Owen, the latter of whom had just been born when I started at MU in 1999.

Examinations

There will be two major tests in this course: a take-home essay examination (6-12 typed pages) due at mid-semester and a cumulative written (blue-book) examination, consisting of identification and short answer questions, during the scheduled final exam period. The test questions will be based on both the lectures and the readings.

Missed tests can be made up only if the instructor is notified of your absence in advance or provided with

documentary evidence of **DIRE** medical or family emergency. Tests may not be made up or taken outside the normal class period for reasons of mere convenience, such as schedule conflicts with work or vacations or extracurricular activities. Special arrangements may be made, **in advance**, for those who may have to miss a test due to some long-planned and utterly unavoidable absence from Columbia.

Papers

Students will write a 6- to 10-page term paper in this course, following an assignment that will be posted on the course web site in a few weeks. There will be a wide range of choice in the paper topics, but each student will need to discuss their paper topic with Prof. Pasley and have a written 1-2 paragraph proposal approved at least 3 weeks in advance of the due date. Papers on topics that have not been proposed and approved in advance will not be read. Papers should be double-spaced, with one-inch margins, printed in 12 pt. Times New Roman or a similar proportional font. Sources should be properly cited according to the Chicago Manual of Style. Papers will be due at the beginning of class on the due date listed in the schedule below. Late papers will graded down 10% (one full letter grade) for every weekday they are late.

GRADING

Paper	30%
Mid-Term	30%
Final	40%

GRADING SCALE will be on a standard percentage scale, not formally "curved": A=93-100%, A-=90-92%, B+=87-89%, B=83-86%, B-=80-82%, C+=77-79%, C=73-76%, C-=70-72%, D+=67-69%, D=63-66%, D-=60-62%, F=59% or below.

The **GRADER** assigned to this course is **Marlin Barber** (email: mcbkrf@mizzou.edu) Marlin will be grading most or all of the tests and some of the term papers in this course. Policy questions about grading or the assignments are best directed to Prof. Pasley, but Will will also be available to help. He will be in class each day, and will also be holding office hours. Marlin's office hours and other contact information will be posted soon on the course blog. His office is located in the basement of Read Hall, the History Department building on Hitt St.

POLICIES

BE RESPECTFUL, FORBEARING, AND REASONABLE

This course covers a number of unusual and touchy subjects, and explores a wide range of extreme ideas and fringe beliefs with distorted, invented, or non-existent factual bases. It is important to read and listen carefully to everything in this course, and always keep a level head, distinguishing between assertions of fact and assertions of what some people believe to be fact. We will be analyzing any number of dangerous, offensive, or ridiculous ideas, and all of us, students, graders, and instructor alike, need to be careful not to confuse analysis of such ideas with advocacy of them. In other words, no one should jump to the conclusion that a reading, lecture, or fellow student's comment actually supports an offensive idea. (Of course, many primary source readings in this course really do advocate offensive ideas – that's why we are studying them.) For instance, do not assume that a lecture explaining the many conspiracy theories concerning the Catholic Church indicates that the instructor or author

hates Catholics or Catholicism.

Students who actually subscribe to some of the extreme beliefs covered by this course should be warned that their convictions are likely to be challenged here. **While nobody in this course will be graded or otherwise treated differently on the basis of their political and religious beliefs, students should understand that their written work and verbal comments will be held to the highest academic standards of accuracy, evidence, and logic.** Students should not expect to be able to spin their own conspiracy theories, propound their personal religious creeds, or promote hateful ideas like anti-Semitism and racism without being held accountable for errors of fact and logic they will inevitably commit in doing so. While everyone involved in the course (instructors and students) is free to express their political and religious opinions when they are relevant to the issues being discussed, in this academic setting we are also under the obligation of backing those opinions up with sensible arguments and reliable evidence. I do not shy away from the political implications of whatever topic I happen to be teaching, and I welcome students to challenge anything I say, but they should do so with the expectation of being respectfully challenged themselves in return. Such rational give-and-take is the very basis of academic discussion, just as it ought to be the basis of political debate, despite what you may hear on cable TV and the radio.

As long as every one behaves, writes, and speaks in a respectful, forbearing, and reasonable manner, as is almost always the case with this course, things should go smoothly. Students who willfully and persistently express themselves in a disrespectful, hateful, or unreasonable manner will be asked to leave the course and should expect to see their grade suffer if they do not.

SHUT UP AND BE NICE! (Behavior during class periods) One of the most depressing aspects of teaching large classes is having to worry about crowd control. This should not be a problem at the college level but often is just the same. Please remember that this is a classroom, not a basketball game, high school pep rally, or movie night at the state prison. Loud, disruptive, inconsiderate, or inappropriate behavior of any kind will not be tolerated. Do not talk or make other loud distracting noises while a lecture is going on or someone else is trying to ask a question. Since it is not always possible for an instructor to hear or see everything that is going in a large classroom at any given time, please alert me or the grader after class if another student near you is making too much noise or otherwise behaving inappropriately.

A related issue is punctuality. Arrive on time and try not to be disruptive if you must come a few minutes late. Do not come at all if you are going to be significantly late. Official class time is the instructor's watch. Do not set yours 10 minutes fast and then start packing up your things to go before class is dismissed. Be patient. If you do not feel like listening to a lecture on a particular day, I would rather you stay home than come to class and not listen.

All I really ask is that students exercise some basic common sense and good manners towards everyone else involved in the course, including other students, the section leaders, and the instructor. If that happens, all will be well; otherwise, I reserve the right to eject or bar any disruptive person from the room.

ATTENDANCE at class meetings is required, but we will not formally take attendance unless it becomes necessary because of chronic absenteeism. We reserve the right to begin taking attendance at any time, if absenteeism appears to be a problem. Do not assume you will be able to do well in the course if you miss half the lectures and pull the outlines off the website later. Experience has shown that the outlines, even with the readings, are not enough. The outlines are meant as a guide to where we are in the lecture, not a substitute for the notes you should be taking.

ACADEMIC DISHONESTY will not be tolerated in this course. Any student who cheats on a test or submits written work that is not his or her own ("plagiarism") will fail the course and be reported to the appropriate university authorities. All students are, and should consider themselves, bound by the university regulations on Academic Discipline and Student Conduct that can be found in the "M-Book" at <http://web.missouri.edu/~mbookwww/> .

Students should be aware that plagiarism and cheating can take more subtle forms than simply copying another student's paper or a published work verbatim. Paraphrasing, rewriting, or borrowing ideas without giving credit are also considered academic dishonesty. It goes without saying that submitting papers downloaded, purchased, or commissioned over the Internet or through any other means other than composing the text yourself, is strictly forbidden.

Keep in mind that plagiarism is usually very easy to catch. Most college students just do not write as well or in as sophisticated a manner as the professional published authors whose works are typically plagiarized. This is especially true for students who may be most tempted to plagiarize because of poor writing skills, test performance, or class attendance. Papers and tests that are very dramatically different in style than a student's other work or diverge widely from an assignment or paper proposal without explanation will be carefully scrutinized. Grades for any suspicious work will be withheld until a full investigation can be conducted, even if it takes until after the semester is over.

Notice for Students with Disabilities or Serious Medical Problems

If you need accommodations because of a disability, if you have emergency medical information to share with me, or if you need special arrangements in case the building must be evacuated, please inform me immediately. See me after class, or at my office (214A Read Hall) during the office hours listed on the front of this syllabus, or email me at PasleyJ@missouri.edu. To request academic accommodations (for example, a notetaker), students must also register with the Office of Disability Services, (<http://disabilityservices.missouri.edu>), S5 Memorial Union, 882-4696. It is the campus office responsible for reviewing documentation provided by students requesting academic accommodations, and for accommodations planning in cooperation with students and instructors, as needed and consistent with course requirements. For other MU resources for students with disabilities, click on "Disability Resources" on the MU homepage.

Statement on Intellectual Pluralism (mandated by the Missouri State Legislature)

The University community welcomes intellectual diversity and respects student rights. Students who have questions concerning the quality of instruction in this class may address concerns to either the Departmental Chair or Divisional leader or Director of the Office of Students Rights and Responsibilities (<http://osrr.missouri.edu/>). All undergraduate students will have the opportunity to submit an anonymous evaluation of the instructor(s) at the end of the course.

LECTURE TOPICS AND READING ASSIGNMENTS

Explanation: This course tends to move at a variable rate, so instead of an exact lecture schedule, the following grid gives the topics to be covered and the associated reading assignments. You should start with the first set of readings and proceed through them as get to the associated lecture topics, as announced in class and on the website. The goal is to get to at least topic 15 by the end of semester, but our actual progress may be a little more or less. Test dates and assignment due dates are firm, and given in a separate grid at the end. Readings marked "reserve" are available from the circulation desk in Ellis library. One of the books, James McConnachie and Robin Tudge, eds., *Rough Guide to Conspiracy Theories*, is only occasionally assigned below, but students should consider themselves responsible for reading the relevant entries for every topic we deal with during the semester, as we come to them. The *Rough Guide* also has some very help bibliographic material that should help many people get started with their term papers.

Topics

1. Introduction: The Conspiracy Industry

2. Understanding Conspiracy Theory: The "Paranoid Style" and the "Culture of Fear"

3. Understanding Conspiracy Theory: Common Motifs in the 9/11 Controversy

4. Real Conspiracies vs. Their Conspiracy Theory Images: The Example of the CIA

5. Conspiracy Theory Today: Religion, Race, and Social Change

6. Conspiracy Theory Today: Evangelical Religion, the Family, and the Devil

7. Conspiracy Theory and History: UFOs and Aliens

8. JFK: Assassination in Context

Reading

- Knight, ed., *Conspiracy Nation*, introduction, chap. 6, 10 (reserve)
- Fenster, *Conspiracy Theories*, chaps. 4, 5, 7, 8
- Internet readings – see blog
- Movie rental suggestion: *Capricorn One*; *Men in Black*; *X-Files: Fight the Future* (or just several episodes)

- Richard Hofstadter, "The Paranoid Style in American Politics" (web)
- Knight, ed., *Conspiracy Nation*, chaps. 2, 3 (reserve)
- Jeffrey L. Pasley, "Conspiracy Theory and American Exceptionalism from the Revolution to Roswell"(web)
- Fenster, *Conspiracy Theories*, chaps. 1,2, 3
- Movie rental suggestions: *Dr. Strangelove*; *The Manchurian Candidate* (1962); *Point of Order!*; *Bowling for Columbine*; *Why We Fight*
 - Dunbar & Reagan, *Debunking 9/11 Myths*
 - Internet readings – see blog
- Rough Guide to Conspiracy Theories*, relevant entries, especially under "Warplay"
- Movie rental suggestions: *Loose Change* or any of several other conspiracy-oriented documentaries currently circulating (see blog); *Fahrenheit 9/11*

- Robert Alan Goldberg, *Enemies Within: The Culture of Conspiracy in Modern America*, Ch. 2 (reserve)
- Rough Guide to Conspiracy Theories*, relevant entries, especially under "Assassinations and Downfalls"

- Knight, ed., *Conspiracy Nation*, chaps. 7, 8 (reserve)
- Levitas, *The Terrorist Next Door* (optional)
- Fine and Turner, *Whispers on the Color Line*
 - Goldberg, *Enemies Within*, ch. 5
 - Internet readings – see blog
- Movie rental suggestions: *Betrayed*, *Malcolm X*
 - Fenster, *Conspiracy Theories*, chap. 6
 - Goldberg, *Enemies Within*, ch. 3 (reserve)
 - Wright, *Remembering Satan*
- Nancy L. Schultz, ed., *Fear Itself*, pp. 430-440 (reserve)
- Movie rental suggestions: *The Exorcist*, *Hell House*, *Jesus Camp*

- Knight, ed., *Conspiracy Nation*, chaps. 4, 5 (reserve)
- Marvin Kottmeyer, "The Saucer Error" (web)
- Goldberg, *Enemies Within*, Ch. 6 (reserve)
- Schultz, ed., *Fear Itself*, pp. 411-29 (reserve)
- Internet readings – see blog
- Movie rental suggestions: *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*; *The Day the Earth Stood Still*; *War of the Worlds* (1950s); *Invaders from Mars*; *Earth vs. the Flying Saucers*; *Close Encounters*; *Roswell*; *Communion*
 - Posner, *Case Closed*
- **Movie rental assignment:** Oliver Stone's *JFK* ; or *Executive Action*

Topics

9. JFK: History of the Conspiracy Theories

10. Witchcraft: The First American Conspiracy Theory

11. Conspiracy Nation: Conspiracy Theory and the Origins of the American Republic

12. Competing Conspiracy Theories in the New American Nation (Illuminati and other subversives)

13. The Politics of Conspiracy Theory in the Age of Jackson (Antimasonry and Anti-Catholicism)

14. Conspiracy Theories North and South: The Civil War Era

15. Antisemitism and Antisemitic Conspiracy Theory from the "New" Immigration to Holocaust Denial

If time permits . . .

16. The War of the Worlds and the World Between the Wars: The 1930s Beginnings of Modern Paranoia

Reading

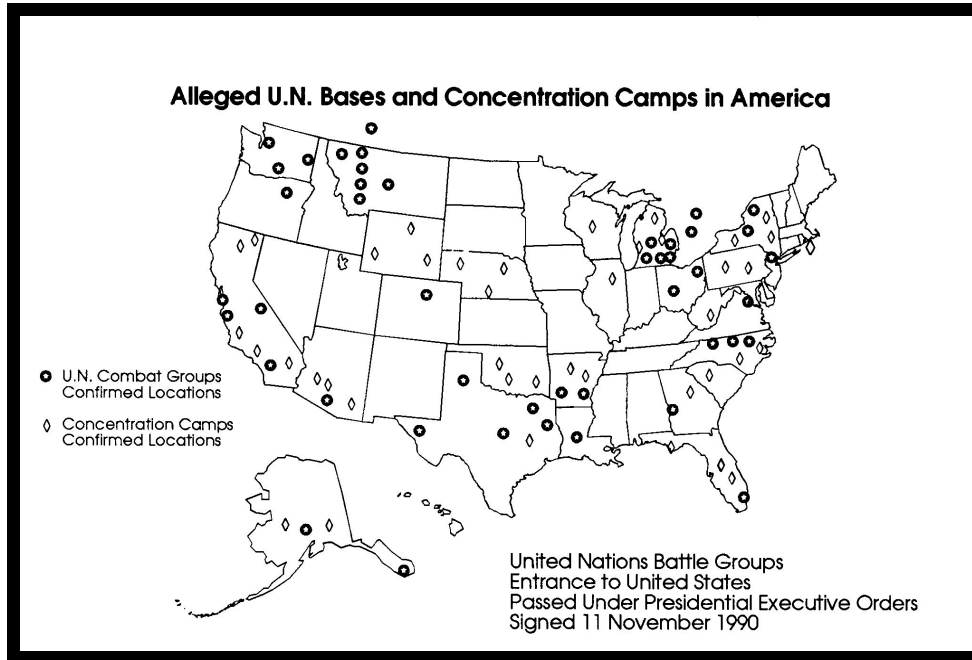
- Goldberg, *Enemies Within*, Ch. 4 (reserve)
- David B. Davis, ed., *Fear of Conspiracy* (reserve), pp.341-54
 - Calvin Trillin, "The Buffs" (web site)
 - Selected documents (web site)
- Movie rental suggestions: *Seven Days in May*; *The Parallax View*; *Winter Kills*; *Blow-Out*; *Nixon*
 - Hoffer, *The Devil's Disciples*
 - Selected documents (web)
- Movie rental suggestions: *The Crucible*; *The Devils*
- Bernard Bailyn, *Ideological Origins of the American Revolution*, pp. 22-159 (reserve)
 - The Declaration of Independence and selected documents (web)
- Gordon S. Wood, "Conspiracy and the Paranoid Style: Causality and Deceit in the Eighteenth Century" (web)
 - Davis, ed., *Fear of Conspiracy* (reserve), pp. 23-34
 - Marshall Smelser, "The Federalist Period as an Age of Passion" (web)
- Pasley, Articles from Knight, ed., *Conspiracy Theories in American History: An Encyclopedia*: "Alien and Sedition Acts," "Jedidiah Morse," "Illuminati," "Meriwether Lewis" (web)
 - Davis, ed., *Fear of Conspiracy* (reserve), pp. 35-65
 - Selected documents (web)
- Pasley, Articles from Knight, ed., *Conspiracy Theories in American History: An Encyclopedia*: "Andrew Jackson," "Maria Monk" (web)
- David Brion Davis, "Some Themes of Countersubversion: An Analysis of Anti-Masonic, Anti-Catholic, and Anti-Mormon Literature" (web)
 - Davis, ed., *Fear of Conspiracy* (reserve), pp. 66-99
 - Schultz, ed., *Fear Itself*, pp. 93-118 (reserve)
- Pasley, Articles from Knight, ed., *Conspiracy Theories in American History: An Encyclopedia*: "Abolitionists" (web)
- David B. Davis, *The Slave Power Conspiracy and the Paranoid Style* (reserve)
 - Davis, ed., *Fear of Conspiracy* (reserve), pp. 102-48
 - Cohn, *Warrant for Genocide*
 - Selected documents (web)
- Movie rental suggestions: *Protocols of Zion*, *The Wannsee Conference*, *Mr. Death*
 - Davis, ed., *Fear of Conspiracy* (reserve), pp. 249-89
 - Schultz, ed., *Fear Itself*, pp. 313-25 (reserve)
- Gen. Smedley D. Butler, Testimony before House Special Committee on Un-American Activities, pp. 8-20 (web)
 - Speech by Father Charles Coughlin (audio- web)
 - Gen. Smedley D. Butler, "War is a Racket" (web)

Topics

17. Reds, Red Scares, and the Rise of the National Security State

Reading

- Goldberg, *Enemies Within*, Ch. 2 (reserve)
- Davis, ed., *Fear of Conspiracy* (reserve), pp. 289-341
- Schultz, ed., *Fear Itself*, pp. 253-300 (reserve)
- Hofstadter, *Paranoid Style in American Politics*, Chaps. 2-4 (reserve)



A Conspiracy Theorist's Map of UN Invasion and Takeover of U.S.

TEST AND DUE DATES

Thursday, March 6 (in class)

Friday, March 21, 5pm

Thursday, May 1 (in class)

Tuesday, May 13, 8-10am

TAKE-HOME MID-TERM DUE

Deadline for approval of term paper topics

TERM PAPERS DUE

FINAL EXAM