

Take-Home Midterm

Write an essay answering ONE of the following questions. Your answer should be typed, proofread, and clearly expressed, just as in a conventional paper. You should use the course materials as fully as you can, documenting your arguments with examples from the readings and lectures. You are not required to do any research beyond the assigned course readings and other materials accessed through the course website and blog. This test is “open book,” but you are forbidden to use any secondary sources beyond what has been assigned or recommended in the syllabus, website, or blog. You may also refer to the music and film clips seen or heard in class or through the website.

References and quotations should be cited properly using your word processor's endnote or footnote function. For citations to the textbooks listed on the syllabus, the author's last name, a shortened version of the title, and page numbers will suffice. Example: Barkun, *Culture of Conspiracy*, 56. For the books that are document collections or anthologies, you should also include the author and title of the specific document or chapter, if they are different from the book as a whole. You do not need to create a bibliography beyond what appears in your notes. Citations to web pages must include the URL of the specific page you are citing, not just the whole site's address.

There is no prescribed length, though more than 10-12 double-spaced pages or so would probably be excessive for undergraduates. 6-8 tightly-written, highly substantive pages might well be enough. Provide what you consider a thorough, well-supported answer. The essays are due in class on **Thursday, March 6**.

Essays will be graded primarily on the degree to which they reflect an accurate understanding and careful consideration of the course materials and concepts, including textbooks, reserve readings, web readings, visual materials, and lectures. The best answers will not simply regurgitate what was said in class, but will instead show an ability to deploy information and ideas from many different parts of the course, **especially the reading**, in support of a coherent argument. Please be specific and accurate, with regard to events, dates, names, and so on, but do not simply recite facts. Avoid lengthy quotations -- anybody can cut and paste from web pages -- but do make reference to specific events and people and texts. The most common pitfall with broad questions like these is the tendency to write overly vague and abstract answers that lack supporting evidence or proper textual/factual grounding.

1. Richard Hofstadter titled his influential essay on American conspiracy theory “The Paranoid Style in American Politics.” Do you feel that “paranoid style” is the best and most accurate term that could be used? Why or why not? Are modern conspiracy theories extreme responses to the real problems of our times or merely dangerous fantasies of disturbed minds? What function do conspiracy theories and other extreme fears seem to play in modern American society?
2. One might imagine that the widespread fears of conspiracy in American culture would have helped reduce the number of actual conspiracies mounted in the United States, by putting the people on their guard. Is this true? Have conspiracy theories performed as effective watchdogs against conspiracy, corruption, subversion, secrecy, and the excessive use of power, or have they had a different or even opposite effect? Why are conspiracy theories and other forms of (often misplaced) social-political fears so eagerly promoted, and by whom?
3. Once when I was checking out books on UFOs in Ellis Library, the guy at the circulation counter asked me the Big Question regarding the subject of this course: Why does modern America seem to be so prone to conspiracy theory and other forms of political fantasy and extreme distrust? What social and cultural and political forces seem to foster such fears? Construct your own answer to this question with reference (positive, negative, or in between) to the theories of at least two of the following authors: Richard Hofstadter, Mark Fenster, Chip Berlet, Timothy Melley, Patricia Turner, Frederic Jameson, Jodi Dean, Robert Goldberg, Peter Knight, Gordon S. Wood, David Brion Davis, Fran Mason, Corey Robin, Daniel Levitas, Gary Fine & Patricia Turner? You may also bring in another author from the assigned reading that I may have omitted.
4. What are the most serious logical flaws in most conspiracy theories and conspiratorial thinking, and what functions do they serve, both helpful and unhelpful, for believers? Provide several detailed examples from the reading and lectures.