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Conspiracy Theories: Attacks on Jefferson Set the Pattern

Patriots Awake! Before It's Too Late!
—T-shirt slogan (1995)

After most American disasters in this century—the [stock market crash of 1929](#), the [bombing of Pearl Harbor](#), the assassination of President [John F. Kennedy](#)—strange conspiracy theories have surfaced. The theories often sound the same: A small, evil elite group, with unbelievable power to coordinate a vast, secret conspiracy, is responsible for the disaster. So in the wake of the terrorist [bombing at Oklahoma City](#), it should come as no surprise that conspiracy theories are floating about.

Conspiracy theories did not start in this century. Some date back to the founding of the republic. One of the first even linked [Thomas Jefferson](#) to an evil web of conspirators.

During the presidential election campaign in 1800, Jefferson's Federalist opponents set out to inflame public opinion against him. The Federalists warned that Jefferson would lead the new nation into terror and tyranny. Jefferson was also accused of being anti-religion and making blasphemous remarks about Jesus.

Rumors spread that Jefferson was part of a world-wide conspiracy to destroy governments, private property, and Christianity. According to those believing in this conspiracy, Jefferson was in league with an elitist group of Europeans known as the Illuminati. The Illuminati supposedly infiltrated the government of [King Louis XVI](#) and brought about the bloody [French Revolution](#). Jefferson's enemies pointed out that he was the American ambassador to France in the years before the revolution. From this they leaped to the conclusion that he must have joined the Illuminati conspiracy at that time and was now plotting against democracy and religion in the United States.

While Jefferson believed in the ideals of equality and freedom of religion, he certainly was no terrorist or even an atheist. But the campaign to smear him as an Illuminati conspirator set the pattern for American conspiracy theories.

Conspiracy theories claim that some evil group is plotting to destroy our way of life. Most have remarkably similar characteristics. What are they, and how can we tell the difference between a real conspiracy and an imagined one?

The Mother of Conspiracy Theories

There really was an organization known as the Illuminati, and its members practiced secret rituals. It was founded in what is now Germany in 1776 by [Adam Weishaupt](#), a professor of religion. Weishaupt's followers were called the Illuminati because they considered themselves to be illuminated by the light of truth.

The 18th century in Europe has been called the [Enlightenment](#) or Age of Reason. Many thinkers at this time believed that the old social order should be replaced by new forms of government and religion based on human reason. The Illuminati fit into this way of thinking. They advocated that all monarchies, private property, established religions, and even the institution of marriage should be abolished to bring about true equality and goodness.

In 1780, the Illuminati began to merge their ideas with those of another society, the [Masons](#) (also known as the Freemasons). Masonic lodges had been around since the Middle Ages and were established throughout Europe and America. [Benjamin Franklin](#) and [George Washington](#) (but not Jefferson) were Masons. Despite their influence on Freemasonry, the Illuminati as a group fell apart in 1785 due to both internal conflicts and government repression.

When the French Revolution began a few years later, however, some people saw it as the evil handiwork of the Illuminati and their Masonic brothers. The fact that a former Illuminati leader visited Paris shortly after the outbreak of the revolution fed the belief that the secret organization was still in business conspiring to turn the world upside down.

In 1797, a Scottish professor of philosophy, John Robison, wrote a book titled, *Proofs of a Conspiracy against All the Religions and Governments of Europe, Carried on in Secret Meetings of Freemasons and Reading Societies*. Robison argued that an evil conspiracy fueled by Illuminati ideas and put into action by Freemasons brought France to her knees and now threatened the world. He warned, "the enemy is working among us."

Although Robison assembled numerous "proofs," he still had to depend on his readers to make a leap of faith that all his facts added up to a massive world-wide conspiracy. In reality, several conspiratorial groups did exist, which had been driven underground by repressive European governments. But Robison's single-minded conspiracy, which wormed its way into all parts of society, existed only in his imagination.

Robison's book spread word of the supposed Illuminati conspiracy to America. In 1798, New England ministers preached that the godless Illuminati elite already controlled Europe and were planning to take over the United States next. Two years later, during the presidential campaign of 1800, Federalists tried to tie Jefferson to the conspiracy. But he was elected anyway and went on to serve two terms without delivering the republic into the clutches of imaginary world conspirators.

Common Characteristics

The Illuminati conspiracy theory of Jefferson's time set the pattern for others that followed in American history. While the groups accused of plotting against America changed over the years, the characteristics of the theories claiming to expose them remained much the same.

During the 1820s, the Masons became the target of conspiracy theories. Long associated in the minds of some people with the Illuminati, the Masons were accused of disloyalty and secretly planning to destroy American democracy. Shortly afterward, large numbers of American protestants became convinced that the Catholics were hard at work trying to hand over control of the U.S. government to the pope in Rome. In the 1920s, Jews came under the spotlight of conspiracy theorists when automaker Henry Ford and others publicized the "[Protocols of the Elders of Zion](#)." This wholly fictional work was supposed to be the blueprint for the Jewish takeover of the world.

During the early years of the Cold War, communists were viewed as a sinister force infiltrating every part of society from the movie industry to the U.S. State Department. While communists were certainly active in America, those who supported conspiracy theories exaggerated their importance. Take, for example, Senator [Joseph McCarthy](#), a leader of the hunt to find communists in the government. He said at the time:

How can we account for our present situation, unless we believe that men high in this government are concerting to deliver us to disaster? This must be the product of a great conspiracy, a conspiracy on a scale so immense as to dwarf any such previous venture in the history of man.

In 1991, Pat Robertson, a televangelist and former candidate for the Republican nomination for president, wrote a book titled *The New World Order*. Robertson reached back to the Illuminati to develop his conspiracy theory that today Wall Street and international bankers along with key corporate and political leaders like [Jimmy Carter](#) and [George Bush](#) are using the United Nations to do away with Christianity and American freedom. Robertson argues that events like the collapse of communism in Russia and the [Gulf War](#) were engineered to set the stage for a "totalitarian one-world government."

After the Oklahoma City bombing, private paramilitary groups, often calling themselves "militias," received a great deal of press attention. Many members of these groups really do seem to believe that the [United Nations](#) or other foreign forces are primed to invade the United States with the help of our own government. In the view of militia members, this explains why the federal government wants to take away their right to own firearms.

What do conspiracy theories have in common? Conspiracy theorists usually believe that our American way of life is threatened. They see lots of bad things happening abroad and at home. They become convinced that all can be explained by a single sinister plot. In most conspiracy theories, the plotters usually belong to an identifiable group that operates

in secrecy. Usually considered small in number, the conspirators are described as disciplined, single-minded, and all-powerful. They are also absolutely evil and must be opposed by the rest of us who are absolutely good. Time is running out, warn the conspiracy theory believers, and patriotic Americans must wake up now if the evil ones among us are to be defeated.

Over everything else, however, the most significant characteristic of conspiracy theories is that none of them has ever come close to becoming real. Jefferson did not abolish religion. The Catholic popes never wanted to rule the United States. The communists never took over the State Department. . . and so on.

Real vs. Imagined Conspiracies

In the real world, conspiracies do take place. Small groups of criminals and terrorists do plot murders, bank robberies, airplane hijackings, and bombings of buildings. Even political, business, and other groups often depend on secret meetings to plan strategy. These meetings could be considered "conspiracies." But the sort of imagined "take-over-the-world" conspiracies blamed on the Illuminati, Jews, international bankers, and others are believable only to those who want to believe in them.

Social scientists like Dieter Groh argue that history is far too complex to be controlled by a group of conspirators. History, they say, is unplannable, which contradicts the foundation of all imagined conspiracies.

Unlike prosecutors who must prove a criminal conspiracy beyond a reasonable doubt by following strict rules of evidence, conspiracy theorists are quick to jump to conclusions. Historian Richard Hofstadter has written that conspiracy buffs 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. It is like saying that the Illuminati believed in equality (true); Jefferson believed in equality (true); therefore, Jefferson was part of an Illuminati conspiracy to rule the world (this hardly follows).

These jumps in logic often take the form of classic logical fallacies. A common one seen in conspiracy theories is *post hoc ergo propter hoc* (Latin for "after this therefore because of this"). This fallacy concludes that X caused Y simply because X happened before Y. "About a minute before Jack fell down and broke his arm, a black cat crossed his path. Therefore the black cat caused his bad luck." Conspiracy literature thrives on this type of superstitious thinking. For example, "Three days after the four bankers met, the stock market fell 200 points. The bankers caused the market to crash so they could reap the profits."

Another fallacy common to conspiracy theories is the *slippery slope*. This argument predicts doom from a seemingly simple act. This act will lead to another, which inevitably leads to another, which spells doom. For example, "By letting the government register your car, you're aiding its plot to take over the world. Next you'll have to register where you go. Soon the government will plant a microchip in your forehead to keep track

of all your movements." Little proof is offered that one step will lead to another. Each step is simply "inevitable."

Those who see a conspiracy behind almost every act do not seem to follow logic or common sense. Historian Hofstadter calls this way of behaving the "paranoid style in American politics." He writes, "We are all sufferers from history, but the paranoid is a double sufferer, since he is afflicted not only by the real world, with the rest of us, but by his fantasies as well."

For Further Discussion and Writing

1. Who were the Illuminati, and why do you think Jefferson was accused of conspiring with them?
2. Why do you think large numbers of people throughout American history have believed in conspiracy theories?
3. What are the differences between real and imagined conspiracies?

For Further Information

"[The Paranoid Style of American Politics](#)": Historian Richard Hofstadter's essay on the "paranoid strain" in American politics, as reprinted in *Harper's Magazine* in 1964.