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American Pravda: How the CIA Invented "Conspiracy Theories"

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A year or two ago, I saw the much-touted science fiction film *Interstellar*, and although the plot wasn't any good, one early scene was quite amusing. For various reasons, the American government of the future claimed that our Moon Landings of the late 1960s had been faked, a trick aimed at winning the Cold War by bankrupting Russia into fruitless space efforts of its own. This inversion of historical reality was accepted as true by nearly everyone, and those few people who claimed that Neil Armstrong had indeed set foot on the Moon were universally ridiculed as "crazy conspiracy theorists." This seems a realistic portrayal of human nature to me.



Obviously, a large fraction of everything described by our government leaders or presented in the pages of our most respectable newspapers—from the 9/11 attacks to the most insignificant local case of petty urban corruption—could objectively be categorized as a "conspiracy theory" but such words are never applied. Instead, use of that highly loaded phrase is reserved for those theories, whether plausible or fanciful, that do not possess the endorsement stamp of establishmentarian approval.

Put another way, there are good "conspiracy theories" and bad "conspiracy theories," with the former being the ones promoted by pundits on mainstream television shows and hence never described as such. I've sometimes joked with people that if ownership and control of our television stations and other major media outlets suddenly changed, the new information regime would require only a few weeks of concerted effort to totally invert all of our most famous "conspiracy theories" in the minds of the gullible American public. The notion that nineteen Arabs armed with box-cutters hijacked several jetliners, easily evaded our NORAD air defenses, and reduced several landmark buildings to rubble would soon be universally ridiculed

as the most preposterous “conspiracy theory” ever to have gone straight from the comic books into the minds of the mentally ill, easily surpassing the absurd “lone gunman” theory of the JFK assassination.

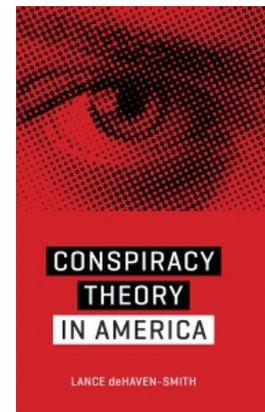
Even without such changes in media control, huge shifts in American public beliefs have frequently occurred in the recent past, merely on the basis of implied association. In the initial weeks and months following the 2001 attacks, every American media organ was enlisted to denounce and vilify Osama Bin Laden, the purported Islamicist master-mind, as our greatest national enemy, with his bearded visage endlessly appearing on television and in print, soon becoming one of the most recognizable faces in the world. But as the Bush Administration and its key media allies prepared a war against Iraq, the images of the Burning Towers were instead regularly juxtaposed with mustachioed photos of dictator Saddam Hussein, Bin Laden’s arch-enemy. As a consequence, by the time we attacked Iraq in 2003, polls revealed that some 70% of the American public[1] believed that Saddam was personally involved in the destruction of our World Trade Center. By that date I don’t doubt that many millions of patriotic but low-information Americans would have angrily denounced and vilified as a “crazy conspiracy theorist” anyone with the temerity to suggest that Saddam had *not* been behind 9/11, despite almost no one in authority having ever explicitly made such a fallacious claim.

These factors of media manipulation were very much in my mind a couple of years ago when I stumbled across a short but fascinating book published by the University of Texas academic press. The author of *Conspiracy Theory in America*[2] was Prof. Lance deHaven-Smith, a former president of the Florida Political Science Association.

Based on an important FOIA disclosure, the book’s headline revelation was that the CIA was very likely responsible for the widespread introduction of “conspiracy theory” as a term of political abuse, having orchestrated that development as a deliberate means of influencing public opinion.

During the mid-1960s there had been increasing public skepticism about the Warren Commission findings that a lone gunman, Lee Harvey Oswald, had been solely responsible for President Kennedy’s assassination, and growing suspicions that top-ranking American leaders had also been involved. So as a means of damage control, the CIA distributed a secret memo to all its field offices requesting that they enlist their media assets in efforts to ridicule and attack such critics as irrational supporters of “conspiracy theories.” Soon afterward, there suddenly appeared statements in the media making those exact points, with some of the wording, arguments, and patterns of usage closely matching those CIA guidelines. The result was a huge spike in the pejorative use of the phrase, which spread throughout the American media, with the residual impact continueing right down to the present day. Thus, there is considerable evidence in support of this particular “conspiracy theory” explaining the widespread appearance of attacks on “conspiracy theories” in the public media.

But although the CIA appears to have effectively manipulated public opinion in order to transform the phrase “conspiracy theory” into a powerful weapon of ideological combat, the author also describes how the necessary philosophical ground had actually been prepared a



couple of decades earlier. Around the time of the Second World War, an important shift in political theory caused a huge decline in the respectability of any "conspiratorial" explanation of historical events.

For decades prior to that conflict, one of our most prominent scholars and public intellectuals[3] had been historian Charles Beard[4], whose influential writings had heavily focused on the harmful role of various elite conspiracies in shaping American policy for the benefit of the few at the expense of the many, with his examples ranging from the earliest history of the United States down to the nation's entry into WWI. Obviously, researchers never claimed that all major historical events had hidden causes, but it was widely accepted that some of them did, and attempting to investigate those possibilities was deemed a perfectly acceptable academic enterprise.

However, Beard was a strong opponent of American entry into the Second World War, and he was marginalized in the years that followed, even prior to his death in 1948. Many younger public intellectuals of a similar bent also suffered the same fate, or were even purged from respectability and denied any access to the mainstream media. At the same time, the totally contrary perspectives of two European political philosophers, Karl Popper[5] and Leo Strauss[6], gradually gained ascendancy in American intellectual circles, and their ideas became dominant in public life.

Popper, the more widely influential, presented broad, largely theoretical objections to the very possibility of important conspiracies ever existing, suggesting that these would be implausibly difficult to implement given the fallibility of human agents; what might appear a conspiracy actually amounted to individual actors pursuing their narrow aims. Even more importantly, he regarded "conspiratorial beliefs" as an extremely dangerous social malady, a major contributing factor to the rise of Nazism and other deadly totalitarian ideologies. His own background as an individual of Jewish ancestry who had fled Austria in 1937 surely contributed to the depth of his feelings on these philosophical matters.

Meanwhile, Strauss, a founding figure in modern neo-conservative thought, was equally harsh in his attacks upon conspiracy analysis, but for polar-opposite reasons. In his mind, elite conspiracies were absolutely necessary and beneficial, a crucial social defense against anarchy or totalitarianism, but their effectiveness obviously depended upon keeping them hidden from the prying eyes of the ignorant masses. His main problem with "conspiracy theories" was not that they were always false, but they might often be true, and therefore their spread was potentially disruptive to the smooth functioning of society. So as a matter of self-defense, elites needed to actively suppress or otherwise undercut the unauthorized investigation of suspected conspiracies.

Even for most educated Americans, theorists such as Beard, Popper, and Strauss are probably no more than vague names mentioned in textbooks, and that was certainly true in my own case. But while the influence of Beard seems to have largely disappeared in elite circles, the same is hardly true of his rivals. Popper probably ranks as one of the founders of modern liberal thought, with an individual as politically influential as left-liberal financier George Soros claiming to be his intellectual disciple[7]. Meanwhile, the neo-conservative thinkers[8] who

have totally dominated the Republican Party and the Conservative Movement for the last couple of decades often proudly trace their ideas back to Strauss.

So, through a mixture of Popperian and Straussian thinking, the traditional American tendency to regard elite conspiracies as a real but harmful aspect of our society was gradually stigmatized as either paranoid or politically dangerous, laying the conditions for its exclusion from respectable discourse.

By 1964, this intellectual revolution had largely been completed, as indicated by the overwhelmingly positive reaction to the famous article by political scientist Richard Hofstadter critiquing the so-called "paranoid style" in American politics[9], which he denounced as the underlying cause of widespread popular belief in implausible conspiracy theories. To a considerable extent, he seemed to be attacking straw men, recounting and ridiculing the most outlandish conspiratorial beliefs, while seeming to ignore the ones that had been proven correct. For example, he described how some of the more hysterical anti-Communists claimed that tens of thousands of Red Chinese troops were hidden in Mexico, preparing an attack on San Diego, while he failed to even acknowledge that for years Communist spies had indeed served near the very top of the U.S. government. Not even the most conspiratorially minded individual suggests that all alleged conspiracies are true, merely that some of them might be.

Most of these shifts in public sentiment occurred before I was born or when I was a very young child, and my own views were shaped by the rather conventional media narratives that I absorbed. Hence, for nearly my entire life, I always automatically dismissed all of the so-called "conspiracy theories" as ridiculous, never once even considering that any of them might possibly be true.

To the extent that I ever thought about the matter, my reasoning was simple and based on what seemed like good, solid common sense. Any conspiracy responsible for some important public event must surely have many separate "moving parts" to it, whether actors or actions taken, let us say numbering at least 100 or more. Now given the imperfect nature of all attempts at concealment, it would surely be impossible for all of these to be kept entirely hidden. So even if a conspiracy were initially 95% successful in remaining undetected, five major clues would still be left in plain sight for investigators to find. And once the buzzing cloud of journalists noticed these, such blatant evidence of conspiracy would certainly attract an additional swarm of energetic investigators, tracing those items back to their origins, with more pieces gradually being uncovered until the entire cover-up likely collapsed. Even if not all the crucial facts were ever determined, at least the simple conclusion that there had indeed been some sort of conspiracy would quickly become established.

However, there was a tacit assumption in my reasoning, one that I have since decided was entirely false. Obviously, many potential conspiracies either involve powerful governmental officials or situations in which their disclosure would represent a source of considerable embarrassment to such individuals. But I had always assumed that even if government failed in its investigatory role, the dedicated bloodhounds of the Fourth Estate would invariably come through, tirelessly seeking truth, ratings, and Pulitzers. However, once I gradually began

realizing that the media was merely "Our American Pravda"[10] and perhaps had been so for decades, I suddenly recognized the flaw in my logic. If those five—or ten or twenty or fifty—initial clues were simply ignored by the media, whether through laziness, incompetence, or much less venial sins, then there would be absolutely nothing to prevent successful conspiracies from taking place and remaining undetected, perhaps even the most blatant and careless ones.

In fact, I would extend this notion to a general principle. Substantial control of the media is almost always an absolute prerequisite for any successful conspiracy, the greater the degree of control the better. So when weighing the plausibility of any conspiracy, the first matter to investigate is who controls the local media and to what extent.

Let us consider a simple thought-experiment. For various reasons these days, the entire American media is extraordinarily hostile to Russia, certainly much more so than it ever was toward the Communist Soviet Union during the 1970s and 1980s. Hence I would argue that the likelihood of any large-scale Russian conspiracy taking place within the operative zone of those media organs is virtually nil. Indeed, we are constantly bombarded with stories of alleged Russian conspiracies that appear to be "false positives," dire allegations seemingly having little factual basis or actually being totally ridiculous. Meanwhile, even the crudest sort of *anti-Russian* conspiracy might easily occur without receiving any serious mainstream media notice or investigation.

This argument may be more than purely hypothetical. A crucial turning point in America's renewed Cold War against Russia was the passage of the 2012 Magnitsky Act by Congress, punitively targeting various supposedly corrupt Russian officials for their alleged involvement in the illegal persecution and death of an employee of Bill Browder, an American hedge-fund manager with large Russian holdings. However, there's actually quite a bit of evidence[11] that it was Browder himself who was actually the mastermind and beneficiary of the gigantic corruption scheme, while his employee was planning to testify against him and was therefore fearful of his life for that reason. Naturally, the American media has provided scarcely a single mention of these remarkable revelations regarding what might amount to a gigantic Magnitsky Hoax[12] of geopolitical significance.

To some extent the creation of the Internet and the vast proliferation of alternative media outlets, including my own small webzine[13], have somewhat altered this depressing picture. So it is hardly surprising that a very substantial fraction of the discussion dominating these Samizdat-like publications concerns exactly those subjects regularly condemned as "crazy conspiracy theories" by our mainstream media organs. Such unfiltered speculation must surely be a source of considerable irritation and worry to government officials who have long relied upon the complicity of their tame media organs to allow their serious misdeeds to pass unnoticed and unpunished. Indeed, several years ago a senior Obama Administration official[14] argued that the free discussion of various "conspiracy theories" on the Internet was so potentially harmful that government agents should be recruited to "cognitively infiltrate" and disrupt them, essentially proposing a high-tech version of the highly controversial Cointelpro[15] operations undertaken by J. Edgar Hoover's FBI.

Until just a few years ago I'd scarcely even heard of Charles Beard, once ranked among the towering figures of 20th century American intellectual life[16]. But the more I've discovered the

number of serious crimes and disasters that have completely escaped substantial media scrutiny, the more I wonder what other matters may still remain hidden. So perhaps Beard was correct all along in recognizing the respectability of "conspiracy theories," and we should return to his traditional American way of thinking, notwithstanding endless conspiratorial propaganda campaigns by the CIA and others to persuade us that we should dismiss such notions without any serious consideration.

For Further Reading:

- [Our American Pravda](#)[17]
- [American Pravda: Was General Patton Assassinated?](#)[18]
- [American Pravda: Alexander Cockburn and the British Spies](#)[19]
- [John McCain: When "Tokyo Rose" Ran for President](#)[20]
- [The Good Fortune of Mr. Browder?](#)[21] – Israel Shamir
- [The Magnitsky Hoax?](#)[22] – Philip Giraldi

Source References

[1] 70% of the American public =>

http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/washington/2003-09-06-poll-iraq_x.htm

[2] Conspiracy Theory in America => <https://www.amazon.com/Conspiracy-Theory-America-Discovering/dp/0292757697/>

[3] one of our most prominent scholars and public intellectuals =>

<http://www.unz.org/Author/BeardCharlesA/>

[4] Charles Beard => https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charles_A._Beard

[5] Karl Popper => https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Karl_Popper

[6] Leo Strauss => https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Leo_Strauss

[7] George Soros claiming to be his intellectual disciple =>

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Open_society#Criticism

[8] neo-conservative thinkers =>

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Neoconservatism#Leo_Strauss_and_his_students

[9] the so-called "paranoid style" in American politics =>

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Paranoid_Style_in_American_Politics

[10] "Our American Pravda" => <http://www.unz.com/article/our-american-pravda/>

[11] quite a bit of evidence => <http://www.unz.com/ishamir/the-good-fortune-of-mr-browder/>

[12] Magnitsky Hoax => <http://www.unz.com/article/the-magnitsky-hoax/>

- [13] my own small webzine => <http://www.unz.com/masthead/#mission-statement>
- [14] a senior Obama Administration official =>
http://www.salon.com/2010/01/15/sunstein_2/
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- [21] The Good Fortune of Mr. Browder? => <http://www.unz.com/ishamir/the-good-fortune-of-mr-browder/>
- [22] The Magnitsky Hoax? => <http://www.unz.com/article/the-magnitsky-hoax/>