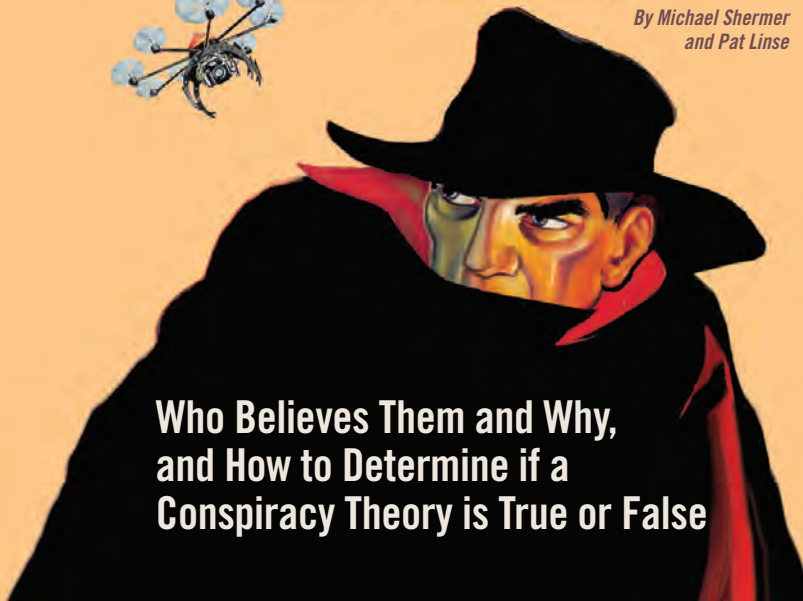


CONSPIRACY THEORIES

By Michael Shermer
and Pat Linse



Who Believes Them and Why,
and How to Determine if a
Conspiracy Theory is True or False

1 CONSPIRACIES— IT'S HARD TO BELIEVE JUST ONE

What Is a Conspiracy Theory And Why Do They Tend To Proliferate?

Why do people believe in conspiracy theories? According to the University of Kent psychologists Michael J. Wood, Karen M. Douglas, and Robbie M. Sutton in a paper entitled “Dead and Alive: Beliefs in Contradictory Conspiracy Theories,” a conspiracy theory is “a proposed plot by powerful people or organizations working together in secret to accomplish some (usually sinister) goal” that is “notoriously resistant to falsification,” and that has “new layers of conspiracy being added to rationalize each new piece of disconfirming evidence.” Once you believe that “one massive, sinister conspiracy could be successfully executed in near-perfect secrecy suggests that many such plots are possible.” With this cabalistic paradigm in place, conspiracies can become “the default explanation for any given event—a unitary, closed-off worldview in which beliefs come together in a mutually supportive network known as a monological belief system.”

For example, the authors of this study report that “a belief that a rogue cell of MI6 was responsible for [Princess] Diana’s death was correlated with belief in theories that HIV was created in a laboratory, that the moon landing was a hoax, and that governments are covering up the existence of aliens.” The effect continues even when the conspiracies contradict one another. For example, the more participants believed that Diana faked her own death, the more they believed that she was murdered.

They call this process global coherence: “Someone who believes in a significant number of conspiracy theories would naturally begin to see authorities as fundamentally deceptive, and new conspiracy theories would seem more plausible in light of that belief.” Thus, “conspiracy advocates’ dis-

trust of official narratives may be so strong that many alternative theories are simultaneously endorsed in spite of any contradictions between them.”



2 INGREDIENTS FOR CONSPIRATORIAL THINKING



Conspiracy theories connect the dots of random events into meaningful patterns (patternicity), and then infuse those patterns with intentional agency (agenticity). Add to this the confirmation bias (the tendency to look for and find confirmatory evidence for what we already believe) and the hindsight bias (after the fact explanation for what you already know happened), and we have the foundation for conspiratorial cognition. As Arthur Goldwag writes in his 2009 book, *Cults, Conspiracies, and Secret Societies*: “When something momentous happens, everything leading up to and away from the event seems momentous too. Even the most trivial detail seems to glow with significance.” Consider the JFK assassination.

“Knowing what we know now...film footage of Dealey Plaza from November 22, 1963, seems pregnant with enigmas and ironies—from the oddly ex-

pectant expressions on the faces of the onlookers on the grassy knoll in the instants before the shots were fired (What were they thinking?), to the play of shadows in the background (Could that flash up there on the overpass have been a gun barrel gleaming in the sun?). Each odd excrescence, every random lump in the visual texture seems suspicious.”

Transcendental Conspiracists v. Empiricists

Transcendentalists believe that everything is interconnected and all events happen for a reason, while empiricists think that randomness and coincidence interact with the causal net of our world, and that belief depends on evidence for each individual claim. The problem for skepticism is that transcendentalism is intuitive and empiricism is not. Our propensity for patternicity and agenticity leads us naturally into the transcendental camp of those who see events in the world as unfolding according to a preplanned logic, whereas the empirical method of being skeptical until a claim is proven otherwise requires a concerted effort that most of us do not make.

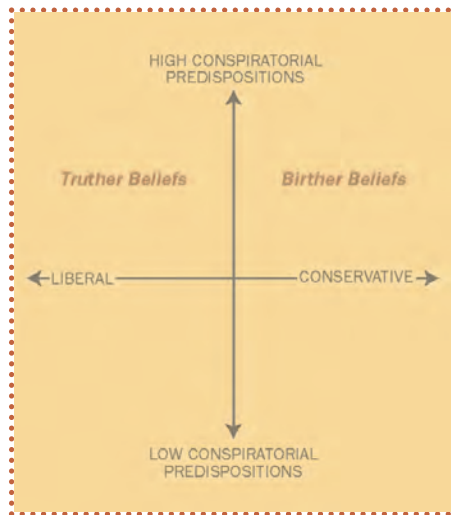
3 WHAT TRIGGERS BELIEF?

In their 2014 book *American Conspiracy Theories* the political scientists Joseph Uscinski and Joseph Parent conducted an extensive empirical study on conspiracy theories and found that “Conspiracy theorists are often caricatured as a small demographic composed primarily of middle-aged white male Internet enthusiasts who live in their mothers’ basements,” but that polls reveal that “conspiracy theories permeate all parts of American society and cut across gender, age, race, income, political affiliation, educational level, and occupational status.” They note that in laboratory experiments “researchers have found that inducing anxiety or loss of control triggers respondents to see nonexistent patterns and evoke conspiratorial explanations” and that in the real world “there is evidence that disasters (e.g., earthquakes) and other high-stress situations (e.g., job uncertainty) prompt people to concoct, embrace, and repeat conspiracy theories.” An analysis of tweets, for example, found that people were more likely to tweet about conspiracies surrounding the Fukushima nuclear power plant disaster in Japan the closer they were to it, and those who lived in New York City on 9/11 were more likely to believe that it was an “inside job”.



4 GROUP IDENTITY IS A FACTOR

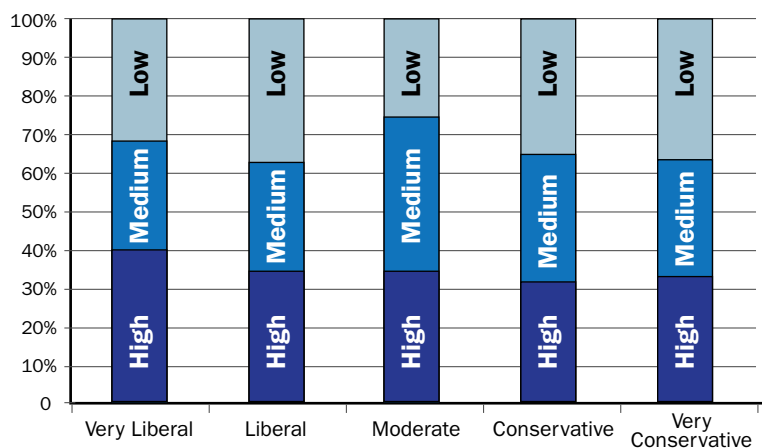
Group identity is also a factor. African Americans are more likely to believe that the CIA planted crack cocaine in inner-city black neighborhoods, created AIDS to kill blacks, and that the Jews control the media. By contrast, white Americans are more likely to believe that the government is conspiring to tax the rich in order to support welfare queens, to take away our guns and abolish the Second Amendment, and even that President Obama is setting up concentration camps for Americans who resist his socialist agenda. This figure from *American Conspiracy Theories* shows how this political dimension interacts with the propensity of people to believe (or not) conspiracy theories in general.



5 POLITICAL IDEOLOGIES

Political ideologies also play a role in conspiratorial belief, on both the left and the right equally, although each concocts different conspiracies at work. The left suspects that the media and political parties are pawns of the rich, while the right suspects academics and the liberal elite control the same institutions. Climate change conspiracy theories are endorsed primarily by those on the right, GMO conspiracy theories are embraced primarily by those on the left. A figure from *American Conspiracy Theories* shows very little difference between political orientation and conspiratorial predisposition. The specific conspiracy theories may vary, but not the levels of conspiratorial thinking.

Predispositions Toward Conspiratorial Thinking by Political Orientation



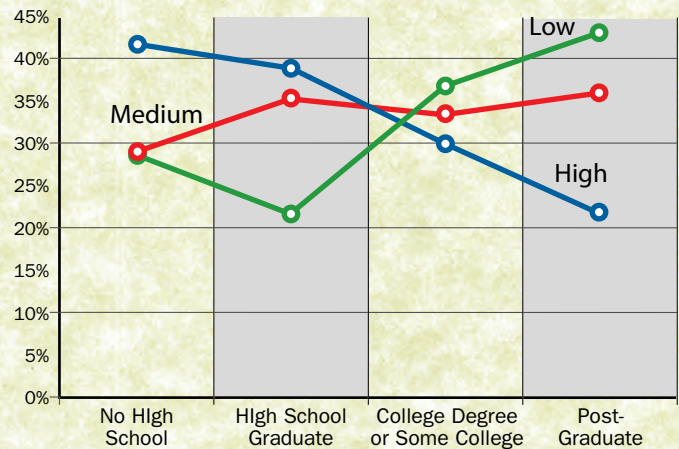
6 EDUCATION MAKES SOME DIFFERENCE

Another interesting finding by Uscinski and Parent is that education makes some difference in reducing conspiratorial thinking, but not as much as we might hope it would. This figure shows what they discovered across the educational spectrum. Even at the post-graduate level more than 1 in 5 Americans show a high predisposition for conspiratorial belief.

References:

American Conspiracy Theories by Joseph Uscinski & Joseph Parent.
Cults, Conspiracies, and Secret Societies by Arthur Goldwag.
 "Dead and Alive: Beliefs in Contradictory Conspiracy Theories,"
 by Michael J. Wood, Karen M. Douglas, and Robbie M. Sutton.

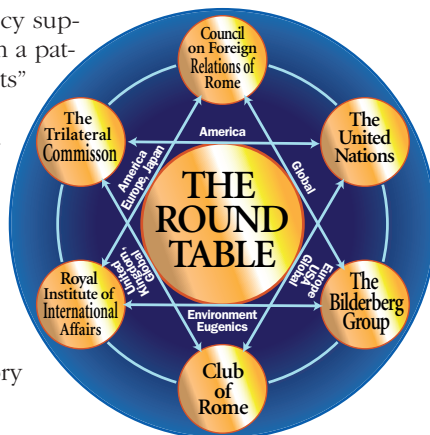
Predispositions Toward Conspiratorial Thinking by Education Level



7 TOP TEN WAYS TO TEST CONSPIRACIES

Some conspiracy theories are true, some false. How can one tell the difference? **The more the conspiracy theory manifests the following characteristics, the less likely it is to be true.**

1. Proof of the conspiracy supposedly emerges from a pattern of “connecting the dots” between events that need not be causally connected. When no evidence supports these connections except the allegation of the conspiracy, or when the evidence fits equally well to other causal connections—or to randomness—the conspiracy theory is likely false.

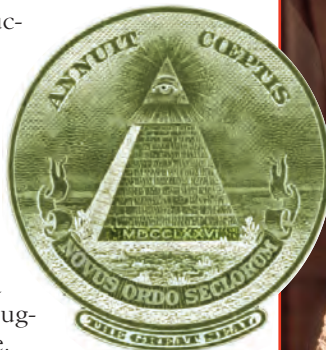


2. The agents behind the pattern of the conspiracy would need nearly superhuman power to pull it off. Most of the time in most circumstances, people are not nearly so powerful as we think they are.

3. The conspiracy is complex and its successful completion demands a large number of elements.

4. The conspiracy involves large numbers of people who would all need to keep silent about their secrets.

5. The conspiracy encompasses some grandiose ambition for control over a nation, economy or political system. If it suggests world domination, it's probably false.



6. The conspiracy theory ratchets up from small events that might be true to much larger events that have much lower probabilities of being true.

7. The conspiracy theory assigns portentous and sinister meanings to what are most likely random and insignificant events.

8. The theory tends to commingle facts and speculations without distinguishing between the two and without assigning degrees of probability or of factuality.

9. The theorist is extremely and indiscriminately suspicious of any and all government agencies or private organizations.

10. The conspiracy theorist refuses to consider alternative explanations, rejecting all disconfirming evidence for his theory and blatantly seeking only confirmatory evidence.



8 TESTING 9/11 CONSPIRACY CLAIMS

9/11 conspiracy theories are based on a number of testable claims. SKEPTIC magazine consulted demolition expert Brent Blanchard, Director of Field Operations for Protec Documentation Services, a company that documents large building demolitions worldwide, to answer 9 specific claims about 9/11:

Claim #1: The towers collapsed exactly like controlled demolitions.

Protec: No they did not. The key to any demolition investigation is in finding out the “where”—the actual point at which the building failed. All photographic evidence shows World Trade Center buildings 1 and 2 failed at the point of impact. Actual implosion demolitions always start with the bottom floors. Photo evidence shows the lower floors of WTC 1 and 2 were intact until destroyed from above.

Claim #2: But they fell straight down into their own footprint.

Protec: They did not. They followed the path of least resistance and there was a lot of resistance. Buildings of 20 stories or more do not topple over like trees or reinforced towers or smokestacks. Imploding demolitions fall into a footprint because lower stories are removed first. WTC debris was forced out away from the building as the falling mass encountered intact floors.

Claim #3: Explosive charges are seen shooting from several floors just prior to collapse.

Protec: No, air and debris can be seen being violently ejected from the building—a natural and predictable effect of rapid structure collapse.

Claim #4: Steel-frame buildings do not collapse due to fire.

Protec: Many steel-framed buildings have collapsed due to fire.

Claim #5: Witnesses heard explosions.

Protec: All Seismic evidence from many independent sources on 9/11 showed none of the sudden vibration spikes that result

from explosive detonations.

Claim #6: Heat generating explosives (thermite?) melted steel at Ground Zero.

Protec: To a man [and woman], demolition workers do not report encountering molten steel, cut beams or any evidence of explosions. Claims of detected traces of thermitite are inconclusive.

Claim #7: Ground Zero debris—particularly the large steel columns—were quickly shipped overseas to prevent scrutiny.

Protec: Not according to those who handled the steel. The chain of procession is clearly documented, first at Ground Zero by Protec and later at the Fresh Kills site by Yannuzzi Demolition. The time frame (months) before it was shipped to China was normal.

Claim #8: WTC7 was intentionally “pulled down” with explosives. The building owner himself was quoted as saying he decided to “pull it.”

Protec: Building owners do not have authority over emergency personal at a disaster scene. We have never heard “pull it” used to refer to an explosive demolition. Demolition explosive experts anticipated the collapse of WTC7, and also witnessed it from a few hundred feet away and no one heard detonations.

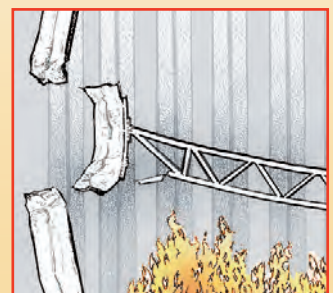
Claim #9: There is evidence that explosives were used.

Protec: Most of our comments apply to the differences between what people actually saw on 9/11 and what they should have seen had explosives been present. The hundreds of men and women who worked to remove debris from Ground Zero were some of the country’s most experienced and respected demolition veterans. They processed the experience and expertise to recognize evidence of controlled demolition if it existed. None of these people has come forward with suspicions that explosives were used.

9 SINGLE FACTS v. CONVERGENCE

The belief that a handful of unexplained anomalies can undermine a well-established theory lies at the heart of all conspiratorial thinking and is easily refuted by noting that beliefs and theories are not built on single facts alone, but on a convergence of evidence from multiple lines of inquiry. All of the “evidence” for a 9/11 conspiracy falls under the rubric of this fallacy.

For example, according to 911research.wtc7.net, steel melts at a temperature of 2,777 ° Fahrenheit, but jet fuel burns at only 1,517 °F. No melted steel, no collapsed towers. “The planes did not bring those towers down; bombs did,” says abovetopsecret.com. Wrong. In an article in the *Journal of the Minerals, Metals, and Materials Society*, M.I.T. engineering professor Dr. Thomas Eager explains why: steel loses 50% of its strength at 1,200°F; 90,000 liters of jet fuel ignited other combustible materials such as rugs, curtains, furniture, and paper, which continued burning after the jet fuel was exhausted, raising temperatures above 1,400 °F and spreading the fire throughout the building; temperature differentials of hundreds of degrees across single steel horizontal trusses caused them to sag, straining and then breaking the angle clips that held them to the vertical columns; once one truss failed, others failed, and when one floor collapsed (along with the ten stories above it) onto the next floor below, that floor then gave way, creating a pancaking effect that triggered the collapse of the 500,000-ton building.



Photos of the exterior walls of the WTC towers just before they collapsed on 9/11 showed the buckling caused by sagging fire-weakened trusses and support columns.