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Fringe Paranoia Goes Mainstream

Kathryn Olmsted

Even paranoids have real enemies, the poet Delmore Schwartz famously said. In the United States, the revelation of real government cover-ups has helped inspire conspiracy theories about the government. Unlike most examples of the "paranoid style" in U.S. history, many anti-government conspiracy theories since the 1960s have been based in fact. Over the last few decades, Americans have learned that U.S. officials lied about enemy attacks, read their communications, conspired with the mafia to kill foreign leaders, tested mind control drugs on innocent citizens, sold arms to terrorists, and spied on national heroes, among other things. If government officials were guilty of these actions, many theorists argued, who knew what other evil deeds they were plotting?

Although inspired by real events, modern anti-government theories have, however, become progressively more fantastical over time, especially once political opportunists realized that they could profit from spreading fear. The resulting erosion of trust in government has helped create a political atmosphere in which pundits and public officials promote "information wars" and "post-truth history," insisting that their followers should not trust anything they hear from liberals or the "lamestream media." Many Americans have moved beyond skepticism, which can be healthy for democracy, to a profoundly corrosive form of cynicism, which is harmful to political institutions.

There was a time in the not-too-distant past when most Americans had faith in their government. Just a little more than fifty years ago, according to the American National Election Studies poll, more than three-quarters of Americans trusted their government to do what was right most or all of the time.[1] At the height of the Cold War and the liberal consensus, most Americans believed that government officials had their best interests at heart and knew how to guarantee their security and welfare.

But then came a series of shocks. In the first of many revelations about the Vietnam War, the Senate Foreign Relations committee disclosed that the Johnson administration had misrepresented the attack on U.S. ships in the Gulf of Tonkin in 1964. Several best-selling books published in 1966 and 1967 suggested that the Warren Commission report, the official government investigation of the John F. Kennedy assassination, had covered up key aspects of the president's murder.[2] The Nixon administration provided a long series of examples of governmental abuses of power, beginning with the arrest of operatives from the Committee to Re-elect the President at the Democratic National Committee headquarters and ending with the release of the Watergate tapes, proving that the president himself had repeatedly lied, obstructed justice, and engaged in a massive cover-up.[3]

[1]"Public Trust in Government, 1958–2017," *Pew Research Center,* May 3, 2017, http://www.people-press.org/2017/05/03/public-trust-in-government-1958-2017/ (accessed Jan. 15, 2018). The American National Election Studies has been asking the same question since 1958.

[2]See Mark Lane, *Rush to Judgment* (New York, 1966); Edward Jay Epstein, *Inquest: The Warren Commission and the Establishment of Truth* (New York, 1966); and Josiah Thompson, *Six Seconds in Dallas: A Microstudy of the Kennedy Assassination* (New York, 1967).

[3]On Watergate, see Stanley Kutler, *Abuse of Power: The New Nixon Tapes* (New York, 1999); Jonathan Schell, *The Time of Illusion: An Historical and Reflective Account of the Nixon Era* (New York, 1976); and J. Anthony Lukas, *Nightmare: The Underside of the Nixon Years* (New York, 1988).

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After Watergate, several congressional committees began to investigate possible abuses and crimes by the nation's intelligence agencies. The most significant of these inquiries, a special committee headed by Senator Frank Church (D-ID), revealed that many American intelligence agents had violated U.S. laws and the nation's values under the veil of government secrecy in the name of national security. The Federal Bureau of Investigation had spied upon and harassed Martin Luther King, Jr.; the National Security Agency had read Americans' mail and telegrams; and the Central Intelligence Agency had worked with the mafia on at least eight bizarre (and unsuccessful) plots to poison, shoot, stab, and blow up Cuba's Fidel Castro. Other congressional investigations revealed the horrific details of CIA mind control experiments on unsuspecting American and Canadian citizens.[4]

The seemingly endless series of revelations about the secret government took a toll on Americans' trust. The number of Americans who believed in a conspiracy to kill President Kennedy soared from 31 percent after the release of the Warren Commission report in 1964 to 81 percent in 1976 after the release of the Church committee reports. By the 1990s, a majority of Kennedy assassination conspiracy theorists named the CIA as the main plotter—in other words, they blamed villains in their own government for his death.[5]

The Iran-Contra scandal further eroded Americans' trust in their leaders. Beginning in 1986, Americans learned that the Reagan administration had secretly and illegally helped the Contras in Nicaragua after Congress had passed a law explicitly forbidding such aid. At the same time, U.S. agents had covertly sold arms to the anti-American government of Iran to secure Iranian help in obtaining the release of American hostages held by terrorists in Lebanon. U.S. officials then took the profits from these secret, illegal arms deals and diverted them to the Contras.[6]

The Iran-Contra scandal revealed, in Senator Daniel Inouye's words, "a shadowy government with its own Air Force, its own Navy, its own fundraising mechanism, and the ability to pursue its own ideas of national interest, free from all checks and balances, and free from the law itself." Even after Watergate, the extent of the hypocrisy by Reagan officials stunned many citizens. "We're told by our leadership to be resolute against terrorism, yet they make deals," one writer told the *New York Times*. "People have lost trust in reality and they're looking for something else." Top officials of the U.S. government were not immune from speculation about potential conspiracies. When Bill Clinton became president in 1993, he asked a friend in the Justice Department to find the answers to two questions for him. "One, who killed JFK? And two, are there UFOs?"[7]

Following the 9/11 terrorist strikes, polls showed that Americans' trust in government surged for a brief time, but then slid to back to record low levels. Once again, anti-government conspiracy theories reflected a deep suspicion of the nation's leaders. Some fringe websites proposed 9/11 conspiracy theories from the day of the terrorist attacks. These theories gained more traction in 2003, after the U.S. invasion of Iraq, and after many Americans grew disillusioned about the George W. Bush administration's justification of the invasion. The failure to find weapons of mass destruction—and the Bush administration's many deceptions concerning the Iraq War—convinced some Americans that their own government was responsible for the

[4]On the Church committee, see Kathryn S. Olmsted, *Challenging the Secret Government: The Post-Watergate Investigations of the CIA and FBI* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1996); and Loch K. Johnson, *A Season of Inquiry: Congress and Intelligence* (Chicago, 1988). For the Church Committee reports, see Reports, U.S. Senate Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities, 94th Cong., 2nd sess., 1975–1976, http://www.aarclibrary.org/publib/contents/church/contents_church_reports.htm (accessed Jan. 15, 2018).

[5]Sheldon Appleton, "Trends: Assassinations," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 64, no. 4 (Winter 2000): 495–592, here 515.

[6]On Iran-Contra, see Theodore Draper, *A Very Thin Line: The Iran-Contra Affairs* (New York, 1991); and Daniel K. Inouye and Lee H. Hamilton, *Report of the Congressional Committees Investigating the Iran-Contra Affair*, abridged ed. (New York, 1988).

[7]Quotations in Kathryn S. Olmsted, *Real Enemies: Conspiracy Theories and American Democracy, World War I to 9/11* (New York, 2009), 179, 183, 173.

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9/11 strikes. By 2006, the five-year anniversary of the attacks, a Scripps-Howard poll showed that 36 percent of Americans believed that it was "somewhat likely" or "very likely" that federal officials had "either assisted in the 9/11 attacks or took no action to prevent them because they wanted the United States to go to war in the Middle East."[8]

In his classic essay on the paranoid style in American politics, Richard Hofstadter argued that conspiracy theories worked because their creators presented "convincing evidence for the most fantastic conclusions." The practitioners of the paranoid style would accumulate credible facts, and then persuade others to make the "big leap from the undeniable to the unbelievable." In the real government conspiracies of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, conspiracy theorists found many undeniable facts upon which to base their most implausible theories.[9]

The increase in the number and plausibility of anti-government conspiracy theories since the 1960s helps to explain the outcome of the 2016 election. Donald Trump owed his victory to many issues, including racism, hatred of immigrants, and economic inequality. But the erosion of Americans' trust in government is another factor. An inveterate conspiracy theorist like Trump could tap into many voters' senses of alienation and marginalization.

Trump began his campaign for the presidency with a conspiracy theory. In 2011, when the celebrity developer was considering challenging Obama's re-election bid, Trump cultivated a following on the far right by championing the canard that Obama had been born in Kenya and was ineligible to be president. Trump decided against a run in 2012, but continued to tout many different conspiracy theories over the next few years, including that Obama was a secret Muslim who would stage a false flag operation to win re-election, that climate change was a hoax perpetrated by the Chinese, and that the "autism epidemic" was caused by the "monster shot" (for measles, mumps, and rubella) given to toddlers. Trump told voters that they should not trust anything that federal officials said. President Obama, he claimed, was lying about the unemployment rate, the percentage of Americans covered by the Affordable Care Act, and the number of refugees in the United States. Most alarmingly, Trump declared that American democracy was in peril because Obama was planning to rig the 2016 presidential election for the Democrats, in part by counting the illegal votes of millions of undocumented immigrants.[10]

In the past, leaders in both parties and in the mainstream media would have quashed the candidacy of someone who advocated so many baseless conspiracy theories. But the gatekeepers of 2016 had much less power than before. Social media allowed ordinary citizens to spread unverified rumors at unprecedented speed. Voters—especially those on the right—could retreat into their filter bubbles and shut themselves off from information that contradicted their preconceived ideas. A *Columbia Journalism Review* study found that Democrats often shared stories from the mainstream media as well as from hyperpartisan blogs, while most Republicans lived in "an internally coherent, relatively insulated knowledge community, reinforcing the shared worldview of readers and shielding them from journalism that challenged it." These voters visited sites that repeated and embellished the same misleading anti-Hillary Clinton or pro-Trump stories. "This fluency with the core narrative," concluded the study's authors, "gives credence to the incredible."[11] In other words, it enabled Hofstadter's big leap.

[8]Ibid., 1.

[9]Richard Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics and Other Essays* (Cambridge, MA, 1996), 37–8.

[10]"58 Donald Trump Conspiracy Theories (and Counting!)," Alternet.org, May 30, 2016, http://www.alternet.org/right-wing/58-donald-trump-conspiracy-theories-and-counting-definitive-trump-conspiracy-guide; "The Long, Sordid Antivaccine History of Donald Trump," Scienceblogs.com, September 15, 2015, http://scienceblogs.com/insolence/2015/09/15/the-long-sordid-antivaccine-history-of-donald-trump/; "Trump: 'I'm Afraid the Election's Going to Be Rigged,'" CNN, August 2, 2016, http://www.cnn.com/2016/08/01/politics/donald-trump-election-2016-rigged/, all accessed Jan. 15, 2018.

[11]Yochai Benkler, Robert Faris, Hal Roberts, and Ethan Zuckerman, "Study: Breitbart-Led Right-Wing Media Ecosystem Altered Broader Media Agenda," *Columbia Journalism Review*, Mar. 3, 2017, https://www.cjr.org/analysis/breitbart-media-trump-harvard-study.php (accessed Jan. 15, 2018).

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The career of Alex Jones best illustrates the mainstreaming of anti-government conspiracism. A charismatic Texan with a gift for making political outrage seem entertaining, Jones began his career as a news commentator in the 1990s on public access television in Austin. His improvised rants mixing right-wing and left-wing fears of government overreach won him a large fan base, and he moved to conservative talk-radio in 1996. In 2001, Jones pivoted from denouncing alleged conspiracies in the Clinton administration to those in the George W. Bush administration. He called his website *InfoWars*, because he saw himself as leading a war against the mainstream media to give true information to the American people.

Though he had a dedicated following before 2009, Jones's popularity really began to surge when Obama won the presidency. Jones cleverly inserted Obama into longstanding American conspiracy narratives about elite rulers. Just two months after the new president took his oath of office, Jones released a YouTube video called "The Obama Deception" that claimed that American presidents since John F. Kennedy were tools of the "New World Order." Obama, like the others, had been put in the White House by this global elite so that he could serve as their stooge. Millions of people watched the video online, and Jones's fan base mushroomed along with right-wing fears of the president. After Obama won re-election, *InfoWars* began promoting even more conspiracy theories, including, most notoriously, that the massacre of twenty children and six adults at Sandy Hook Elementary School was a government hoax designed to take Americans' guns.[12]

In an appearance on Jones's show in December 2015, Trump said that Jones's reputation was "amazing" and promised not to let him down.[13] Later, after the election, the president-elect called Jones and thanked his viewers for helping him win.[14] Indeed, Jones might have helped motivate alienated rural voters who rarely participated in elections to vote for Trump. Jones claimed that President Trump often adopted the arguments that Jones spouted on *InfoWars*. "I put a video out, a message to Trump," Jones told journalist Jon Ronson. "And then two days later he lays out the case. It's like sending up the Bat Signal."[15]

The message of Trump and Jones—that you cannot trust the establishment leaders of either party or the legacy media—resonated with so many Americans because of the revelations of real government conspiracies since the 1960s and the consequent erosion of trust in public officials. As distrust and conspiracism became mainstreamed, figures like Alex Jones moved from the paranoid fringe to advising those at the center of power.

Kathryn Olmsted is a professor of history at the University of California, Davis. She is the author of four books: *Right Out of California: The 1930s and the Big Business Roots of Modern Conservatism* (2015); *Real Enemies: Conspiracy Theories and American Democracy, World War I to 9/11* (2009); *Red Spy Queen: A Biography of Elizabeth Bentley* (2002); and *Challenging the Secret Government: The Post-Watergate Investigations of the CIA and FBI* (1996). She has also co-edited a book on the history of the Central Intelligence Agency and published several journal articles and book chapters on conspiracy theories, government secrecy, espionage, counterintelligence, and anticommunism.

[12]Charlie Warzel, "Alex Jones Will Never Stop Being Alex Jones," *Buzzfeed News*, May 3, 2017, https://www.buzzfeed.com/charliewarzel/alex-jones-will-never-stop-being-alex-jones?utm_term=.dfL2JaZWx#.tdyxONVwE (accessed Jan. 15, 2018).

[13]"Alex Jones & Donald Trump Bombshell Full Interview," YouTube video, 33:33, posted by "The Alex Jones Channel," Dec. 2, 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FJqLAleEnKw (accessed Jan. 15, 2018).

[14]Eric Hananoki, "A Guide to Donald Trump's Relationship with Alex Jones," *Media Matters for America*, May 3, 2017, https://www.mediamatters.org/research/2017/05/03/guide-donald-trump-s-relationship-alex-jones/216263 (accessed Jan. 15, 2018).

[15]Jon Ronson, *The Elephant in the Room: A Journey into the Trump Campaign and the "Alt-Right"* (e-book, 2016), loc. 717.

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