Junior SKEPTIC

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# CONSPIRACY THEORIES

HELLO!

As the world continues the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic, we've learned that we're facing another enemy just as dangerous as the virus: a plague of misinformation!

Even while scientists, doctors, and nurses work around the clock to prevent illness and save lives, millions of others are being misled by stories they've heard about shadowy groups secretly scheming against society. False rumors about wicked conspiracies are as old as time. Some seem harmless. Others cost lives. Some rumors have even changed the course of history. How do conspiracy theories work? And what can we do about them?

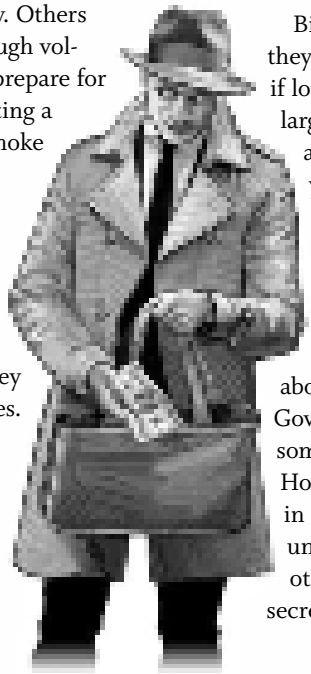
Let's find out!

## SECRETS AND PLOTS

Every day, all over the world, billions of people make plans. Some think up new ways to make money. Others decide to help people through volunteering or charity. Some prepare for emergencies, such as by getting a first aid kit or installing a smoke detector at home.

With all this planning going on, there are always a few scoundrels up to no good. Some people plot revenge against enemies, or scheme to steal stuff. And, they don't always plot by themselves.

When two or more people secretly plan to do something bad, we call this a "conspiracy." Most conspiracies are small. For example, a handful of thieves might secretly plan to rob a bank. They wouldn't tell many people about their plan because they don't want the police to find out.



Big conspiracies are more rare because they're more risky. It's hard to keep a secret if lots of people know about it. However, larger groups sometimes do try to get away with crooked schemes. In recent years, for example, a big car company secretly cheated on government tests to make it look as if their cars created less air pollution than they actually did. (They got caught.)

It's sensible to be a bit suspicious about the claims we hear. Governments, companies, and media sometimes try to mislead us. However, the truth often comes out in the end. Police and reporters uncover many conspiracies. In other cases, someone blabs the secret to the authorities.

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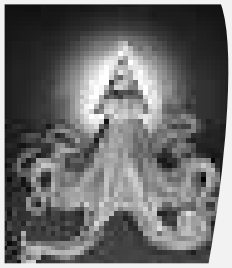


**This Issue's Cover** features a digital painting and collage by Daniel Loxton.



Junior SKEPTIC

# RECKLESS RUMORS

When real conspiracies are exposed, it's natural to ask, "What other plots might still be hidden?" It's easy to speculate—and it's easy to let our imaginations run away with us.

Our story today isn't about conspiracies that are proven or even suspected on the basis of good evidence. We're going to focus on conspiracies that people *imagine*. A "conspiracy theory" is an *unproven story or rumor* about a supposed conspiracy. A "conspiracy theorist" or "conspiracist" is someone who shares or believes such an unproven rumor.

The problem with rumors is that anyone can start one for any old reason. Most rumors aren't based on facts, but on imagination, guesswork, or even deliberate lies. (You've probably heard gossip at some point that you knew wasn't true.)

People have started unproven conspiracy rumors about practically any topic we could name. Here are a few actual examples. Maybe the world's governments are conspiring to conceal the existence of Bigfoot, or aliens, or the Flat Earth? Is our drinking water dosed with mind control drugs? Were the Moon landings fake? Could the President of the United States be a reptile disguised as a human? Is the Smithsonian covering up evidence that giants used to exist?

None of these stories have proven true. Just the opposite! There's zero good evidence for any of these claims, and most are provably false. Nevertheless, there are people who believe each one of these bizarre claims, and countless others besides.

### Beware the Squirrels?

It's easy to come up with conspiracy theories. After all, we don't need evidence to tell a tall tale. In fact, let's just make one up ourselves right now: the squirrels are plotting against us! They may look cute, but they're scheming to overthrow the humans and seize the global nut supply. Wake up, people! The squirrels are coming for us!

This silly notion could spread as a conspiracy theory if people suspected it might be true. (It isn't…unless the squirrels are *making* me say that?!) Curious people might start to look for "clues" or "evidence." Squirrels are pretty much just tiny little ninjas, aren't they? Their whole "cute and fuzzy" act seems awfully suspicious. We know they're obsessed with nuts. I've seen squirrels take nuts right out of people's hands! Besides, why would they hang out around humans so much if they weren't planning something? Why, the squirrel threat has been hiding in plain sight the whole time!

Today, countless millions of people believe conspiracy theories just as ridiculous as our squirrel story. According to psychologist Rob Brotherton's book *Suspicious Minds: Why We Believe Conspiracy Theories*, this is strangely normal. Everyone knows shady shenanigans are going on in the world. It's normal to have suspicions about what those shenanigans might be. When psychologists ask people to consider a list of several popular conspiracy theories, most people say they believe at least one. If we were to ask people to consider a much longer list, Brotherton suspects "we would find that pretty much everyone believes one conspiracy theory or another. We're all conspiracy theorists, at least some of the time."

### When Bad Things Happen

Conspiracy theories are usually intended to explain something that seems unusually bad and strange. We generally don't need special explanations when good things happen. Won a raffle? That's just luck. Good grades on your report card? Hard work and study!

We feel different when bad things happen. Catastrophes such as wars, pandemics, hurricanes, plane crashes, and terrorist attacks harm people who don't deserve it. We naturally want an explanation when we see something terrible and unfair. How did this happen? Who is responsible?

Unfortunately, there aren't always satisfying answers. There's no one to blame for a natural disaster such as an earthquake. Other disasters arise from simple accidents or bad planning. And yet, "stuff happens" just doesn't feel like a good enough answer. Neither does "it was an accident" or "someone messed up."

We tend to feel that big events should have big causes. This psychological effect (called "proportionality bias") leads people to prefer more dramatic explanations for events that have bigger consequences. In a series of studies, researchers asked people to imagine emergencies such as a fire during an airplane flight, a disease outbreak in an office building, or an attempt to shoot the President. Participants were then asked to pick the most likely explanations for those events. When the story had a happy ending such as the plane landing safely, people preferred ordinary explanations such as an electrical malfunction. If the story ended in disaster, however, people preferred dramatic explanations such as a terrorist plot.

Real disasters often have ordinary explanations. For example, evidence shows that President John F. Kennedy was shot by one lone guy who just decided to do it. That explanation seems ridiculous to people who prefer to believe JFK conspiracy theories. It just *feels* wrong to think one random loser could change the course of history.

That's how rumors get started. As we'll see, people have been trying to explain disasters using conspiracy rumors for a very long time.

# REVOLUTIONARY RUMORS

Every period in history has genuine plots. For example, the ancient Roman Emperor Julius Caesar truly was murdered by a group of government officials who plotted together in secret. However, people throughout history have also believed false stories about imaginary conspiracies.

When a deadly disease epidemic broke out in the ancient Greek city of Athens, rumors claimed that Athens' enemies caused the sickness by poisoning the water supply. Similar claims were made centuries later during the medieval Black Death. As millions of Europeans sickened and died, someone started a rumor that Jewish people were causing the plague on purpose. According to this conspiracy theory, Europe's Jews were working together to secretly poison the wells. There was no truth to this conspiracy theory, but the rumor had terrible consequences. Violent mobs rose up in many cities and towns. They attacked Jewish neighborhoods and massacred the innocent families who lived there. Many thousands were murdered over a rumor that didn't even make sense. (Jewish people caught the plague, too. They also drank from the wells they were supposedly poisoning.)

In the Renaissance period, another conspiracy theory claimed that legions of Devil-worshipping witches were working together to destroy society. Authorities in many countries tried to hunt down these nonexistent conspirators. Thousands of innocent people were falsely accused of witchcraft, tortured, and then gruesomely executed. Many were burned alive. The witch hunting conspiracy theory targeted the most vulnerable people in society: women, the poor, the elderly, and the mentally ill.

Another conspiracy theory was born during the French Revolution, when hunger and poverty caused the people to overthrow the government and execute the king of France. The country descended into years of bloody violence. It was a period of madness and chaos, but conspiracy theorists thought there were hidden organizers lurking in the shadows. "Even the most horrid deeds perpetrated during the French Revolution, everything was foreseen and…premeditated," said one. The violence and pandemonium was engineered by a vast, hidden conspiracy whose aim was "not merely the destruction of the French monarch, but…the overthrow of society and religion itself." Who were these supposed puppet masters?

For some reason, conspiracy writers blamed a German philosophy club called the Order of the Illuminati. This club was a rather strange choice of villain, not least because it no longer existed. The Illuminati were idealistic philosophy fans who hoped to improve society using science and reason. The group was fairly small and harmless even before it disbanded. However, conspiracy writers invented an imaginary version of the Illuminati which was much bigger and more sinister than the real group ever was. According to the conspiracy theorists, the Illuminati only pretended to disband. The group was supposedly still working in secret to "overthrow every government, and make the world a general plunder and a wreck."

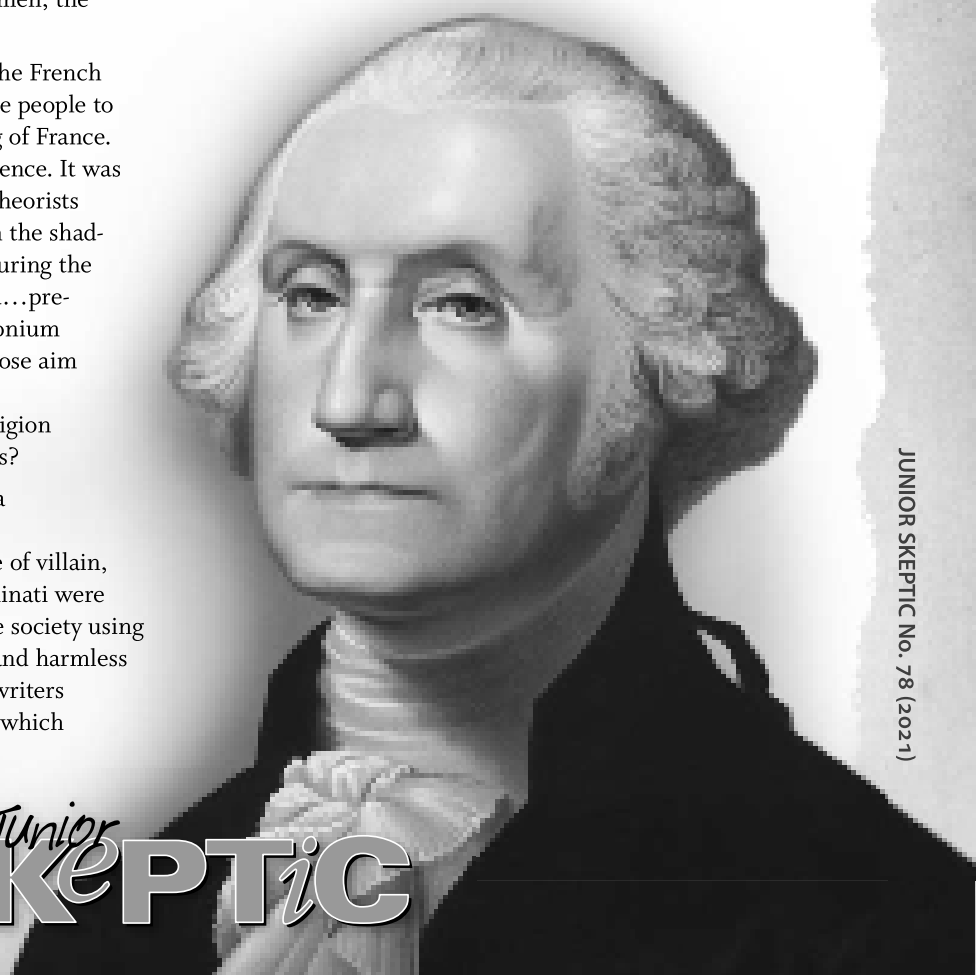
## Passion and Paranoia

Conspiracy theories have always been popular, all over the world. The United States is certainly no exception. In fact, conspiracy theories helped to inspire and shape the very birth of the nation. Rumors of evil conspiracies have influenced American society and politics ever since.

The American Revolution began after the King of England imposed new laws and taxes on the American colonies. Americans hated every one of those laws. But it wasn't just that the new laws were unpopular, or even that Americans wanted to rule themselves. They were also alarmed by a conspiracy theory. They saw the new laws as "glaring evidence of a fixed plan of the British administration to bring the whole continent into the most humiliating bondage."

In those days, many white Americans were willing to tolerate and profit from the enslavement of tens of thousands of African Americans. For example, Founding Fathers George Washington and Thomas Jefferson each owned many slaves. They knew what slavery looked like, and they were darned sure they didn't want to be treated like slaves themselves. And yet, according to a popular conspiracy theory, that's exactly what the British were plotting.

Boston revolutionary Samuel Adams claimed "the plan of



slavery seems nearly completed," and said action was needed to "save our country from impending ruin." He asked, "Is it not high time for the people of this country to declare whether they will be freemen or slaves?" If Americans didn't fight back, Washington said, the British would "make us as tame and abject slaves as the Blacks we rule over with such arbitrary sway." Jefferson agreed. Each insulting new law or tax from England could result simply from bad government decisions made from far away, or they could add up to evidence of a more sinister plan. "Single acts of tyranny may be ascribed to the accidental opinion of a day; but a series of oppressions…too plainly prove a deliberate and systematical plan of reducing us to slavery," Jefferson said. "We are threatened with absolute slavery," warned Alexander Hamilton. "The system of slavery, fabricated against America, cannot at this time be considered as the effect of inconsideration and rashness," Hamilton argued. "It is the offspring of mature deliberation. It has been fostered by time, and strengthened by every artifice human subtlety is capable of."

The Declaration of Independence listed a "long train of abuses" from England. The authors said these abuses proved there was an intentional "design" to inflict "absolute Despotism" and "absolute Tyranny over these States." It may be odd to think of the fathers of modern democracy as conspiracy theorists, but this was a classic example of "connecting the dots." The Founders looked at a series of individual events and interpreted them as a single pattern. They then leapt to the most dire possible conclusion to explain the pattern they perceived. They did not actually know what the king was thinking or what the English would do in the future—but they assumed the very worst. (The same thing was happening across the sea. King George III blamed the revolution on a "desperate conspiracy" that was "much promoted and encouraged" by unnamed traitors in England.)

### Conspiracy Nation

The American colonists won their independence and created the world's first modern constitutional democracy, the United States of America. The new country thrived and grew, improving over time toward a "more perfect union." But it never left conspiracy theories behind. From the dawn of independence to the present day, the U.S. has always wrestled with something historian Richard Hofstadter called "the paranoid style in American politics." Through every stage of the nation's history, people have promoted one conspiracy theory after another.

The Illuminati conspiracy theory soon jumped from France to the U.S. One preacher who feared the "United States might have caught the infection" sent one of the French Revolution conspiracy theory books to George Washington. The recently retired former President replied to say that he had "heard much of the nefarious and dangerous plan and doctrines of the Illuminati," but was too busy to read the book. However, Washington agreed that the "doctrines of the Illuminati" had spread to the United States, saying, "no one is more fully satisfied of this fact than I am." On the other hand, when Thomas Jefferson read one of the Illuminati conspiracy theory books, he dismissed the author's claims as the "ravings of a Bedlamite." (Bedlam was an infamous lunatic asylum in England.) Jefferson not only thought the conspiracy theory was nonsense, but also thought the original Illuminati club in Germany had some great ideas.

For a while, a network of men's social clubs called the Freemasons became America's favorite bogeymen. Later, people thought legions of undercover Jesuit priests were "prowling about all parts of the United States in every possible disguise," including "puppet show men, dancing masters, music teachers, peddlers of images and ornaments, barrel organ players, and similar practitioners." The hidden Jesuit invasion supposedly aimed to overthrow the country so it could be ruled by the Pope. There always seemed to be some vast and shadowy group plotting to destroy the country. At later times, people spread conspiracy theories about Jews, Communists, gay men and women, hidden Satanists, Muslims, and many others.

Some conspiracy theories are utterly bonkers. For example, a recent group called "QAnon" claims that celebrities and Democrats systematically torture kidnapped children in order to harvest a youth potion from their victims' blood. Other conspiracy theories are more realistic. For example, Americans have always worried that wealthy people and big business use their money to influence politicians and laws to their own advantage. That definitely does happen—but to what degree? Reasonable fears about powerful groups may become exaggerated into conspiracy theories. It's not always easy to know how much paranoia is reasonable.

"Behind the ostensible government sits enthroned an invisible government owing no allegiance and acknowledging no responsibility to the people," claimed Theodore Roosevelt. He said there was an "unholy alliance between corrupt business and corrupt politics" that he wanted to stamp out. Woodrow Wilson was equally worried about the "control over the government exercised by Big Business." He claimed that an "invisible empire has been set up above the forms of democracy." According to Wilson,

> *Some of the biggest men in the United States, in the field of commerce and manufacture, are afraid of somebody, are afraid of something. They know that there is a power somewhere so organized, so subtle, so watchful, so interlocked, so complete, so pervasive, that they had better not speak above their breath when they speak in condemnation of it.*

(There was some truth to these concerns. Presidents Roosevelt and Wilson governed at a time when big companies were especially powerful and poorly regulated.)

# INVISIBLE INVASION?

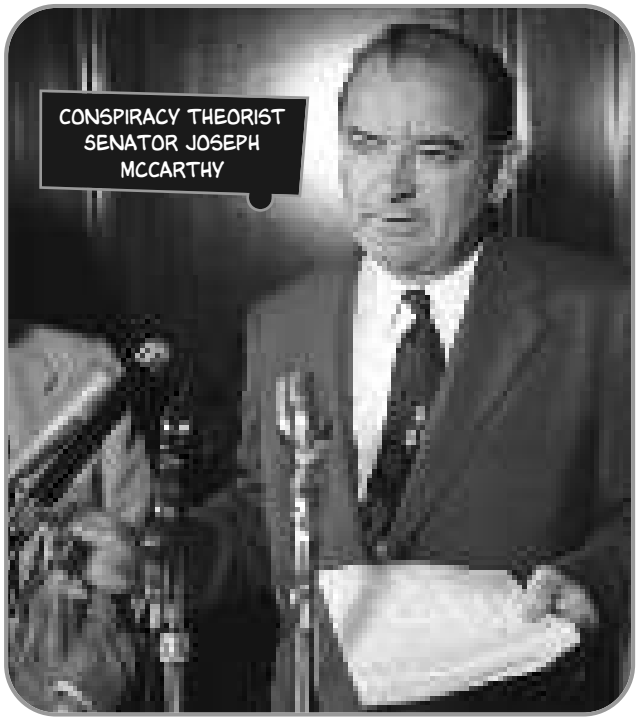



Image by Thomas O'Halloran. U.S. News & World Report Magazine Collection of the Library of Congress

The late 1940s and early 1950s must be among the most paranoid periods in U.S. history. After World War II, the U.S. entered the "Cold War"—a period of intense political rivalry between the United States and the powerful Soviet Union (a Communist mega-state ruled by Russia). Both nations built mighty military forces to protect against the other. However, neither nation could risk going to war because they both had thousands of nuclear bombs. Instead, they both spied on each other's every move.

The genuine threat of Soviet spies soon led to a dangerous conspiracy theory: according to a Republican Senator named Joseph McCarthy, Communist agents had already infiltrated and taken over the U.S. government! These "men high in this Government are concerting to deliver us to disaster," McCarthy claimed. The country was invisibly under attack by a "great conspiracy, a conspiracy on a scale so immense as to dwarf any previous such venture in the history of man." Even President Eisenhower was a "dedicated, conscious agent of the Communist conspiracy," McCarthy claimed. The conspirators would not rest until America was defeated by "Soviet intrigue from within and Russian military might from without."

This conspiracy theory is remembered today as the "Red Scare." People feared there were secret Communists ("Reds") lurking everywhere throughout society. McCarthy accused numerous people in the government and military of being Communists, and claimed there were countless more. In Congress, the House Committee on Un-American Activities accused hundreds of artists and actors. They were then "blacklisted" from working in Hollywood, including silent film star Charlie Chaplin. Thousands of government employees were accused, harassed, and fired from their jobs after false accusations of Communism.

Eventually people realized that the conspiracy theory had gotten completely out of control. McCarthy and his allies were accusing people without any evidence. It was all "hooey," said former President Truman. He explained that "witch hunters in the House and Senate are charging things that do not exist." According to Truman, the Committee on Un-American Activities was the "most un-American thing in the country today."

McCarthy was disgraced for his bullying and exaggerations. In a famous confrontation, a lawyer for the U.S. Army stood up to McCarthy, saying, "You've done enough. Have you no sense of decency, sir, at long last? Have you left no sense of decency?" The Senate voted to officially "censure" McCarthy for his reckless behavior.

### Conspiracy to Spread Conspiracy Theories?

Things got even weirder after McCarthy. In the late 50s and 60s, Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) agents used bizarre sneaky tactics to harass Communists, feminists, hippie protestors, civil rights groups, and anyone else who seemed "subversive" (troublemaking). The FBI not only tracked and spied on countless such groups, but also tried to disrupt them using targeted disinformation. They planted false news stories to make groups look bad. They infiltrated groups, then spread rumors that other members might be FBI infiltrators. Their goal was to make activists so paranoid that they would turn against each other. As author Jesse Walker explains in his book *The United States of Paranoia*, this FBI program "functioned as a conspiracy to defeat subversive conspiracies by convincing the alleged subversives that they were being conspired against."

The program was revealed to the public when a group of activists conspired to turn the tables. They broke into an FBI office, stole a bunch of files, and then turned some of those files over to newspaper reporters. A U.S. Senate committee then investigated the FBI and other intelligence agencies. "The Government has often undertaken the secret surveillance of citizens on the basis of their political beliefs, even when those beliefs posed no threat of violence or illegal acts," the Senate committee found. Government agents "violated or ignored the law over long periods of time" and used countless dirty tricks, including microphone "bugging" without warrants, breaking and entering, and illegally opening people's mail. "Unsavory and vicious tactics have been employed—including anonymous attempts to break up marriages, disrupt meetings, ostracize persons from their professions, and provoke target groups into rivalries that might result in deaths." Yikes!

# IMAGINING ENEMIES

It may seem as though we're living in an "age of conspiracy theories." They've been in the news a lot recently, but conspiracy theories have always been popular. When researchers analyzed a century of letters to *The New York Times*, the number of conspiracy theory letters remained about the same from decade to decade. Specific claims go in and out of fashion, but Americans are always suspicious of somebody.

*The United States of Paranoia* describes "primal myths" of conspiracy theories, including four types of perceived threat:

> *One is the Enemy Outside, who plots outside the community's gates, and one is the Enemy Within, comprising villainous neighbors who can't easily be distinguished from friends. There is the Enemy Above, hiding at the top of the social pyramid, and there is the Enemy Below, lurking at the bottom.*

The first fear is simply that outside enemies are planning some sort of attack. For example, Puritans feared that Native American groups would join together to attack settlements. Senator McCarthy's Communist infiltrators were imaginary Enemies Within. The QAnon belief that famous celebrities, politicians, and rich people are all working together in an evil cabal is an Enemy Above story. Historical fears of slave uprisings were fears of an Enemy Below.

### The Sameness of Conspiracy Stories

Conspiracy theories differ in details, but in some ways they're all much the same. Hofstadter summed things up like this: "The central image is that of a vast and sinister conspiracy, a gigantic and yet subtle machinery of influence set in motion to undermine and destroy a way of life." Conspiracy theorists don't just "see conspiracies or plots here and there in history," but a "'vast' or 'gigantic' conspiracy as the motive force in historical events. History *is* a conspiracy, set in motion by demonic forces of almost transcendent power"—which must be opposed at all costs.

### Too Big and Too Evil

Conspiracy theorists imagine unrealistically huge conspiracies in which *all* of the media and *all* of the government are somehow controlled by Satanists (or whoever else the bad guys are supposed to be). The whole world is an illusion designed to conceal our evil puppet masters while they work their wicked deeds.

Real life conspiracies are usually small. They usually also have some sort of understandable motive. Thieves plot to steal valuables. Corrupt businesses scheme to dodge taxes. Terrorists plan to harm and frighten a more powerful enemy. Criminals usually have some reason for their crimes, and some excuse to justify doing them. It's rare for criminals to think of themselves as evil people.

By contrast, the villains imagined by conspiracy theories do cartoonishly evil things simply because they are evil. For instance, the chemtrails conspiracy theory imagines that the entire global airline industry is a gigantic scheme to poison the planet. Another clear example is the "Satanic Panic" conspiracy theory. During the 1980s and 90s, popular stories claimed that America had been infiltrated by a network of hidden Satanic cults. People imagined there were thousands or even millions of Devil-worshipers working to undermine society. The Satanists would supposedly gather in secret to hold ghastly rituals of torture and human sacrifice, then return to normal jobs. No one could know if their teacher, doctor, or Congressman was a secret Satanist.

This creepy Enemy Within story turned out to be completely made up. There were no hidden Satanic cults. Reporters and law enforcement investigated these claims and found nothing. However, the false rumors created a genuine threat. Frightened people began to turn on their neighbors. Many innocent Americans were falsely accused of being Satanic criminals. Sadly, some were unjustly imprisoned for completely imaginary crimes.

### It's Hard to Keep Secrets

Conspiracy story villains are also superhumanly competent. Somehow they're able to control the media and rule the world without leaving any trace of solid evidence. How exactly could that work? How could they prevent thousands of people from ever revealing the plot?

In reality, people are bad at keeping secrets. When we know something juicy, we're tempted to gossip or brag. If we see something terrible happening, our conscience urges us to tell someone. We may also reveal secrets by accident, such as leaving documents where others might see them.

These are major problems for government spy agencies such as the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). These large organizations work incredibly hard to keep national secrets under wraps. However, they don't always succeed. How could they? There's always a risk that someone will blab or "leak" state secrets. "Whistleblowing" leaks are especially likely when secrets seem sinister to the people who know them. In 2013, for instance, one U.S. intelligence worker came to believe that the government was spying on too many U.S. citizens. He decided to blow the whistle by showing secret documents to news reporters.

Stories about vast evil conspiracies are not realistic. When many people know a secret, the secret usually gets out. That's especially true for nasty secrets. For example, many planned terror attacks have been prevented because the terrorists' friends or family members decided to warn the police. Now imagine: what would you do if you learned that someone was conducting human sacrifices or poisoning the sky? Wouldn't you tell someone? I would!

## WATCHING FOR WEIRDNESS

Conspiracy theories are really just "What if…?" stories. ("What if world leaders are space lizards in human disguise?") By definition they're unproven speculations. If they were proven we wouldn't call them "conspiracy theories" any more. We'd call them "scandals" or "crimes" or some such. Moreover, conspiracy theories are designed to *stay* unproven. They're built to resist either proof or disproof.

It's impossible to prove an untrue conspiracy theory. You can't find solid evidence for an imaginary plot! But isn't this also what we would see if an all powerful conspiracy were expertly covering up all evidence of their activities? Conspiracy theorists interpret "no solid evidence" as proof that the conspiracy actually exists! This makes conspiracies nearly impossible to disprove. Missing evidence must have been covered up by the conspiracy; evidence against the conspiracy must have been fake information planted to cover their tracks.

But if conspiracy theories aren't based on evidence, why would anyone believe one in the first place? Part of the answer is something called "anomaly hunting." This is just a fancy way to say "going out of your way to look for stuff that seems weird."

Reality doesn't always make a good story. The real world is full of accidents, mistakes, random happenings, coincidences, unexplained facts, idiotic decisions, and many other messy bits. The factual record about an event may seem inadequate or incomplete—and weird. Often there are odd bits left over. Conspiracy theories offer explanations for the weird left over bits. As Hofstadter explained, a conspiracy theory can sound "far more coherent than the real world, since it leaves no room for mistakes, failures, or ambiguities." Brotherton agrees, "conspiracy theories can look stronger than official stories by sheer virtue of completeness."

Consider an event such as 9/11. After much investigation, we can say for a fact that a small group of 19 terrorists hijacked passenger jets and crashed them into the World Trade Center buildings and the Pentagon. Their attack killed thousands of people. This then led to wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, which caused many more deaths.

That's what happened. However, those facts may not feel satisfying. After all, this was the worst attack ever to take place on U.S. soil. It destroyed major landmarks, started wars, and changed the course of history. It's hard for some people to believe that so few criminals could cause so much damage. Conspiracy theorists assume there must be more to the story.

Which brings us back to anomaly hunting. Very often, conspiracy rumors start with someone's intuition that something just doesn't look quite right. In the case of 9/11, the plane that struck the Pentagon left a smaller hole than some viewers expected to see. This led conspiracists to imagine that the building was hit by a missile instead of a plane. However, many witnesses saw the plane approach and crash into the building. The wings knocked over lampposts on the way in. Experts and emergency workers recovered and photographed airplane wreckage. It was definitely a plane crash.

In New York City, raging fires from two more 9/11 plane crashes caused the World Trade Center buildings to suddenly and rapidly collapse. It's extremely rare for tall buildings to fall down. Television viewers had no idea how a collapsing skyscraper *should* look, but some felt the World Trade Center video footage looked "wrong" in some way. False rumors began to claim that a hidden conspiracy blew up the buildings with explosives. Experts and investigators said that was nonsense. The rumors spread anyway.

Once conspiracy theorists made up their minds that a missile hit the Pentagon or explosives brought down the World Trade Center, they took for granted that the "official story" must be a cover up. Then they kept hunting for more weird details. Anything even slightly odd was interpreted as "evidence" of a supposed government conspiracy.

This is a surefire recipe to cook up a big, heaping pile of baloney. Instead of asking "does this look weird to me, a random person who knows nothing about this subject," conspiracy theorists would be better off asking, "what do most experts think?"

A useful example is the conspiracy theory that the Apollo Moon landings were faked here on Earth. There isn't a scrap of evidence to suggest that this rumor is true. Instead, "Moon hoax" conspiracy theorists look at film footage and photographs from the surface of the Moon and use their intuition to hunt for anomalies. If something looks weird *to them*, they call that evidence that the Moon landings never happened.

For example, some ask why there are no stars visible in the photographs of astronauts on the Moon. Their intuition tells them they should see stars if the photos were taken in outer space. However, anyone who knows photography could tell them their intuition is wrong. The exposure for the photos on the moon was set for the astronauts' brightly lit white space suits. By comparison, stars are far too dim to appear in the same photos. If the camera lens was opened long enough to show the dim stars in the background, the astronauts would be overexposed and appear as blinding white blobs.

# CONSPIRACY BELIEVERS

Conspiracy theories are unproven rumors built on guesswork and intuition. Their unrealistic stories typically require believers to ignore a lot of good evidence. For example, it's not possible to believe in the Flat Earth without also believing that every photograph from space is a fake, every space flight is a hoax, and every astronaut is a liar. That's a huge leap.

Why do people fall for such weird stuff? As we've learned, we're all prone to conspiracy thinking. Everyone wonders what shady dealings might be going on behind the scenes. Most people are open to at least one conspiracy theory.

At the same time, it is also true that circumstance and personality can make people more or less inclined to adopt conspiracy beliefs. One person might merely toy with one of the more realistic conspiracy theories; another person might "fall down the rabbit hole" of fanatical belief in a bunch of the most outlandish claims. What makes the difference?

## Conspiracy Minded

It does seem that some people are more "conspiracy minded" than other people. This may be partly explained by a tendency to think events are more often intentional than accidental. In one study, researchers asked people to read ambiguous sentences such as "She kicked the dog" or "The boy popped the balloon." Participants were then asked to imagine what happened and decide whether it happened on purpose or by accident. Those who most often felt that the sentences described actions people did on purpose were also more likely to believe conspiracy theories.

Other studies have shown that conspiracy believers tend to have certain attitudes and personality traits, such as less trust for the people around them. As Brotherton summarizes the research, "people who believe conspiracy theories strongly tend to be a little more hostile, cynical, defiant of authority, anxious, and disagreeable than people who dismiss conspiracy theories."

Another factor is openness to unconventional ideas. Conspiracy believers are more likely to also believe superstitions (such as unlucky black cats), paranormal claims (such as ghosts), and pseudoscience claims (such as the debunked myth that vaccines cause autism). At the same time, a tendency toward "black and white" thinking also seems to play a role. In one study, people who agreed with the statement "Politics is ultimately a struggle between good and evil" were more likely to believe conspiracy theories.

People who feel *generally* that something fishy is going on or "they" are concealing the truth are more likely to believe *any* specific conspiracy claim—even if it's a claim that researchers just made up from scratch. The more strongly a person believes one conspiracy story, the more likely they are to strongly believe others. As Brotherton explains, "the details of the theories don't seem to matter much. If you know a person's attitude toward one conspiracy theory, you can predict his or her attitudes toward other conspiracy theories with a fair degree of certainty, even when there is no obvious connection between the theories."

That's even true for claims that completely contradict each other. In one study, for example, researchers asked people to consider various conspiracy claims about Britain's Princess Diana, who died in a car accident in 1997. Those who agreed with the claim that she faked her own death were also more likely to agree with the claim that she was assassinated by secret agents!

## Conspiracies and Stress

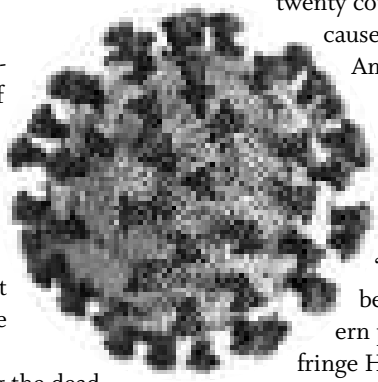
Personality makes a difference, but it's not the whole story. It turns out that *people are more open to conspiracy theories when they feel scared and powerless*. For example, members of minority groups who are more likely to experience poverty and discrimination also tend to have higher levels of conspiracy beliefs. Researchers have found that people are more likely to believe conspiracy theories when they feel less control over their own lives. Those who agree with statements such as "most public officials are not interested in the average" person are more likely to turn to conspiracy thinking. In fact, people are more likely to accept conspiracy claims if they're merely *reminded* of threats they can't always control, such as "whether I am exposed to a disease" or "whether my family members suffer or not."

In some ways this isn't surprising. People don't need stories of hidden forces of evil when everything seems awesome. On the other hand, imagining hidden enemies can help people make sense of life's unfair dangers and difficulties. Most people can't do much about huge impersonal forces like the economy, global warming, or racism. It feels better to concentrate on a specific enemy (even an imagined one). After all, people can hope to understand and outsmart an enemy, or perhaps even defeat them.

Knowing that, it should be no surprise that false conspiracy rumors tend to spread like wildfire during pandemics. Contagious diseases cause fear and uncertainty. Disease dangers and safety measures both make people feel they have less control over their own lives. Unfortunately, spreading false conspiracy rumors during a pandemic such as COVID-19 can have deadly consequences—and make the pandemic even worse.

## DEADLY DELUSIONS

As I write this story, the world is struggling to fight COVID-19—the worst pandemic in a century. This coronavirus has killed more people in the United States than any other nation on Earth. Almost a half million Americans have perished so far.



Shockingly, millions of people are spreading false conspiracy rumors in the middle of this global emergency. Some conspiracists claim the virus is a "hoax." Some claim that lifesaving masks are part of a "gigantic Satanic ritual initiation" intended for "evil and control." Still others claim that COVID vaccines are unsafe, don't work, or are a plot to inject people with tracking devices. These false rumors make it much harder to fight COVID. Pandemic misinformation is among the deadliest dangers on Earth right now.

At the same time, the U.S. is still reeling from the January 6, 2021, attack on the Capitol Building in Washington, DC. Thousands of QAnon conspiracy believers and other Donald Trump supporters believed a false conspiracy claim that the Presidential election was "stolen" by crooked Democrats. The violent mob invaded the building to overturn the election and perhaps murder government officials such as the Vice President. Congress and the Senate were forced to flee. Several people were killed in the attack. Conspiracy claims have clearly become a serious threat to the country's democratic system of government.

Are conspiracy theories always so dangerous? Well, no—until they are. Conspiracy theories are always present in society. Most seem relatively harmless most of the time. For example, the beliefs that NASA is covering up the truth of a Flat Earth or the Smithsonian is concealing the existence of giant humans are just kind of kooky. These weird beliefs may harm believers by isolating them or exposing them to ridicule, but they don't usually lead to violence.

However, many other conspiracy theories have proven extremely dangerous. There are numerous cases of conspiracy theories causing widespread loss of life. For example, belief in a conspiracy of wicked witches led to the torture and murder of countless women in Europe (and some in America during the Salem witch trials). The rumor that Jews caused the Black Death led to the massacre of thousands of innocent men, women, and children.

During the 1920s and 30s, the Nazi dictator Adolf Hitler promoted a false conspiracy theory that Jews were plotting to take over the world. This was a lie supported by a completely fake hoaxed document, but it led to the horror of the Holocaust—the systematic murder of six million Jews and other minorities.

Conspiracy theories about medicine also have a deadly history. In 2003, a religious leader in Nigeria started a rumor that the polio vaccine was a plot to infect African people with AIDS and prevent them from having babies. This rumor scared people enough to stop taking vaccines. The result was an outbreak of polio that paralyzed 5,000 people across twenty countries. Other false anti-vaccine rumors have caused outbreaks of preventable diseases in North America and Europe.

False claims about the HIV virus offer another tragic case of conspiracy theories that turned deadly. In 1999–2000, South Africa's President Mbeki claimed there was a CIA "conspiracy to promote" the scientific "view that HIV causes AIDS." Mbeki did not believe the science. He complained that "modern propaganda machines" were trying to silence fringe HIV conspiracy theorists. Worse, his government restricted HIV patients from getting lifesaving medicines that Mbeki called "toxic." Experts estimated that decision cost 330,000 lives by 2008—and infected tens of thousands of newborn babies with HIV.

### The Power of Stories

Imaginary conspiracies can't hurt anyone. *Stories* about imaginary conspiracies can harm a lot of people.

Conspiracies make great stories. They show up in fiction all the time. Think of the sinister Hydra agents who infiltrated Shield in the Marvel Cinematic Universe movies, for example. Plot twist! Lots of people treat conspiracy theories as little more than an intellectual game. It's fun to play with conspiracy ideas, puzzle out clues, and seek out hidden knowledge. For some folks, conspiracy theories are a hobby that brings them together with others who share their interests. But when a conspiracy theory grows in a person's heart and mind, it can become more than an entertaining story. It can become myth. A myth is a story with the power to change someone's life, fill them with purpose, and compel them to action.

The danger is that conspiracy theories can "radicalize" people into extreme behavior. They may break the law or even use violence against their perceived enemies. "Since what is at stake is always a conflict between absolute good and absolute evil," Hofstadter explained, "the quality needed is not a willingness to compromise but the will to fight things out to a finish. Nothing but complete victory will do." This is what happened to the rioters who took over the Capitol Building. They believed that a violent uprising was the only way to save America from an imaginary conspiracy. It isn't surprising that they were willing to fight and even kill. "Since the enemy is thought of as being totally evil and totally unappeasable, he must be totally eliminated," Hofstadter warned almost 60 years ago.

Image by Alissa Eckert, MSMI; Dan Higgins, MAMS

# ESCAPING THE RABBIT HOLE

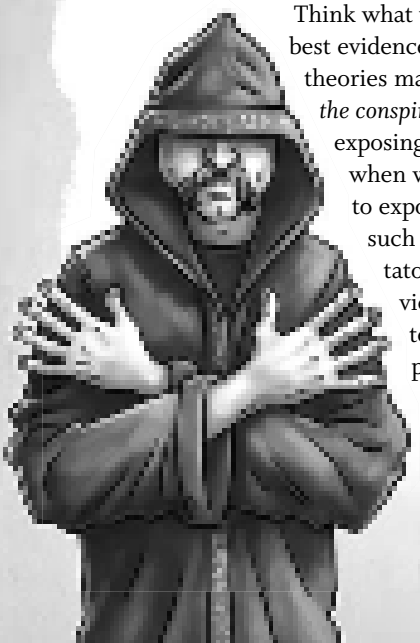
Conspiracy claims are everywhere these days. People share countless conspiracy claims on social media. Irresponsible media stars promote conspiracy claims on TV, radio, and YouTube. Some political leaders spread conspiracy lies they know perfectly well to be false.

Conspiracy stories are dangerous during a pandemic. People need to trust health authorities and take precautions to protect their families and communities. But how can society fight back against *stories?*

The first step is to not to fall for baloney yourself. Don't believe every story you hear. Don't pass along rumors or share stuff without checking them out first. If someone tells you something, check their sources. Then Google a few reputable sources and see what they have to say.

Conspiracy theorists love to claim you can't trust mainstream news. For example, President Trump claimed that most major news sources were not only "fake news" but the "enemy of the people." The truth is that reputable news media are generally very accurate. Newspapers such as the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times* are very reliable, as are TV news networks such as CNN and the BBC. Big news organizations work hard to get the facts right. When they do make a mistake, they correct it. (If they don't, competing news organizations will catch their mistake and make them look foolish.)

When you hear conspiracy theory claims, remember what we've learned. Claims that a vast evil conspiracy secretly rules the world and controls all media aren't realistic. Real conspiracies tend to get exposed if they're too big or too nasty. The truth is that countless thousands of powerful people, groups, and nations want different things. If one country is up to no good, its enemies will try to expose them. If one rich person tries to influence news or politics in one direction, another will try to push in the opposite direction. It's true that powerful interests constantly try to convince us of things—but they're not all working together to convince us of the *same* things.



Think what would happen if they were. The best evidence against "evil cabal" conspiracy theories may be that *nothing ever happens to the conspiracy theorists* who are supposedly exposing their secrets. What happens when whistleblowers or journalists try to expose powerful real conspirators such as mafia gangsters or corrupt dictatorships? Ruthless criminals use violence to silence witnesses, protect their secrets, and maintain power. If the United States were secretly ruled by Satanic murderers, as QAnon believers claim, would it be safe to blab about it on YouTube? Probably not!

## How to Help

What are we to do about the people who've already fallen way down the conspiracy theory rabbit hole? Millions of people continue to spread conspiracy theories about the election or COVID-19. There are countless families divided by a relative's devotion to the QAnon conspiracy theory (which claims that Trump and the military will soon save the country from a cabal of secret Satanic overlords). Other families are worried about loved ones who ignore COVID safety because they believe a coronavirus conspiracy story.

If you know someone who has been misled by conspiracy claims, I have some good news. People grow and learn over time. Many conspiracy believers will figure things out eventually. Some can be helped along by someone who cares for them and treats them with patience and respect.

One excellent resource is conspiracy skeptic Mick West's 2018 book *Escaping the Rabbit Hole: How to Debunk Conspiracy Theories Using Facts, Logic, and Respect*. West recommends three simple tools to help a conspiracy believer in your life:

1. *Maintain an effective dialogue;*
2. *Supply useful information;*
3. *Give it time.*

It isn't easy for anyone to change a deeply held belief. It's next to impossible if everyone they talk to shares that belief. The first step, West says, is just to have genuine conversations. Be someone they can trust to discuss ideas. Show each other that good, intelligent, sensible people can believe different things and still be nice to each other.

Try to find common ground, West suggests. Don't start by challenging their core beliefs. Try talking about a different conspiracy theory they don't find convincing, or some part of their favorite theory that they're on the fence about.

Have you ever had to admit you believed something silly or did something wrong? It takes personal courage, and sometimes support. Serious conspiracy believers invest a lot of time, thought, and emotion into their ideas. As one former believer told West, "part of the problem with getting out is just embarrassment, and you need the guts to get past that and actually look at the information." If you want to help, don't make them feel worse. "Don't mock them. That will worsen the situation, it will make the person feel even more isolated and have trust issues," advised another former believer.

Fighting COVID and strengthening democracy are big jobs. Misinformation only makes them harder. Social media companies are now trying to slow the spread of conspiracy stories and take down bogus claims. Journalists do their part by reporting the facts. We can do our part too!