

Chapter 1

Everything You Know Is Wrong

In This Chapter

- ▶ Believing the unbelievable: The age of conspiracy theories and secret societies
- ▶ Figuring out what's worth believing
- ▶ Touring the world, one conspiracy at a time

Journalist H. L. Mencken once said, “The most costly of all follies is to believe passionately in the palpably not true. It is the chief occupation of mankind.”

A conspiracy theory is the idea that someone, or a group of someones, acts secretly, with the goal of achieving power, wealth, influence, or other benefit. It can be as small as two petty thugs conspiring to stickup a liquor store, or as big as a group of revolutionaries conspiring to take over their country's government. Individuals, corporations, churches, politicians, military leaders, and entire governments can all be conspirators, in plots as evil as secretly developing nuclear weapons, as creepy as smuggling stolen human transplant organs, or as annoying as cornering the market on neighborhood \$4-coffee joints.

The conspiracy theory is absolutely inseparable from the secret society. They go together like Minneapolis and St. Paul. Face it: Everyone hates secrets. You didn't like it when the kids kept secrets from you in gym class, and you've never gotten over it. Neither have we.

Secret societies are the repositories of the hidden knowledge that spins the conspiracy theory. But the term *secret society* covers a lot of ground — everything from college fraternities and the lodge your grandpa belonged to, to the lesser known, powerful groups that stay out of the eyes of the press, like the Bilderbergers, the Council on Foreign Relations, and the legendary Illuminati (if they really exist at all).

This chapter begins the process of teaching you how to tell the truth from the manure, at least where conspiracy theories and secret societies are concerned. Throughout this book, we also set out to simplify what at least sounds staggeringly confusing. We clarify conspiracy theories that are coming at you from all sides nowadays on everything from the Mafia running the Vatican to

aliens landing in New Mexico (or is it the aliens in the Vatican and the Mafia in New Jersey?). Consider this chapter your warm-up exercise!

Living in the Age of Conspiracy Theories and Secret Societies

The popularity of the conspiracy theory as a way of explaining society and world events is a pretty recent phenomena, a product of the time since the French Revolution of 1789, which was the first real marriage of paranoia and the printing press. But it's just within the last 40 years that the philosophy of conspiracism has become like a wall of noise, an assault on the collective consciousness, and the most common way to explain complex world events. In many respects, conspiracies are a way of simplifying history into good and bad, right and wrong.

A *conspiracy theory* is a way of looking at a single event and postulating that maybe there's a lot more to it than can be seen on the surface, with darker forces behind the whole thing. *Conspiracism* expands on this, becoming an entire philosophy, as a way of viewing the world. For the professional *conspiracist*, a person who studies the conspiracies, there isn't much going on in the world that *doesn't* have darker forces behind it, from the price of a gallon of gasoline to the three ounces of hand lotion you can't ever seem to extract from the bottom of a 16-ounce bottle. Of course, in a way, even the term *conspiracism* is too respectable to apply to much of what is floating around the Internet and the tabloids these days. Since the middle of the last century, academic, postmodernist researchers have found it fashionable to refer to all psychological states and moods in German. It's a Sigmund Freud thing. Author Thom Burnett in the *Conspiracy Encyclopedia* (2005, Chamberlain Bros.) points out that the Germans have a great term, *Verschwörungsmythos*, which means *Conspiracy Myth*, and in many ways, it has lots to recommend it as a descriptive label.

"Perhaps the conspiracy world is an updated version of ancient myths," Burnett says, "where monsters and the gods of Olympus and Valhalla have been replaced by aliens and the Illuminati of Washington and Buckingham Palace." In other words, the new wave of jitters over conspiracies and secret societies has beaten up the *zeitgeist* with their *weltschmerz* over *weltpolitik* (the spirit of our times has had the crap kicked out of it by anxiety over global domination). See, we can do the German thing too. *Gesundheit*.

What makes the study of conspiracy theories and secret societies unusual is, when boiled down to their most common elements, the overwhelming majority have grown or been adapted from the same few original sources. Historian Daniel Pipes has said that almost all conspiracy theories have as their origin the same two boogeymen — Jews and secret societies, most notably the

Freemasons. They have simply been recycled and renamed, again and again, as events have transpired over the last 250 years.

For example, if you take almost any conspiracy about the Jews from the 19th century, and erase “Jews” and substitute “military-industrial complex” or “neocons,” you find that very same theory in dozens of books and on hundreds of Web sites about the sinister forces behind the 9/11 “conspiracy.” In many ways, it shows a criminal lack of originality. On the other hand, conspiracists would claim, plots around the world and the evildoers who engage in them haven’t changed much over the centuries. They’ve only gotten more ambitious.

What’s Worth Scrutinizing, and What’s Not

Between books, the Internet, and cable television, the average American comes into contact with a lot of ideas that are no longer sifted through “established media.” A bigger and bigger chunk of these ideas challenges the status quo — the beliefs of stodgy academics and of society in general. Such thoughts also assert that organizations, from the government to the Illuminati (see Chapter 11), are in cahoots to make sure that no one yet knows the truth. But just because an appealing idea comes from the “alternative” media instead of the mouths of TV anchors or White House spokesmen doesn’t always make it true.



As professional conspiracists write book after book, raking in the money faster than they can count it, most care very little about the confusion and fear they leave behind. Internet Web-meisters who peddle this stuff care even less. But we care about it, a lot. Don’t fear — you can acquire the skills you need to digest it all and discern the information. In Chapter 2, in particular, we help you decide between information that’s worth paying attention to and information you should ignore, and why.

Connecting the dots

There’s a very important point about exploring conspiracy theories. It is not enough to just lay out facts or events, like dots on a page, and scream “aha!” at the mere “fact,” for example, that over 100 people “involved” in the assassination of John F. Kennedy are dead. “Involved” often meaning as little as they were standing in the crowd in Dallas. It’s been almost 40 years, and of the thousands of people peripherally involved in the case, it’s not a *big* shock for more than 100 of them to have died. Now, if 75 of them had been wrapped in plastic and duct tape and dumped into a Dallas reservoir, you might have something.

What is proof?

Abraham Lincoln was assassinated on April 14, 1865. Since about 24 hours afterwards, the world has been trying to find out the details about the conspiracy behind it. (And there *was* a conspiracy — for more on that, see Chapter 5.) Interest in the plot has come and gone over the years, most recently in the 2007 film *National Treasure II: The Book of Secrets*, which prominently featured the discovery of the missing pages of assassin John Wilkes Booth's diary. And there really *are* missing pages — historians just aren't sure why.

One of the hundreds of books we consulted during this project was a bit nostalgic — *The Lincoln Conspiracy* (Schick Sun Classic Books) by David Balsiger and Charles E. Sellier. (This book was parent to the Sunn Classics film of the same name that did remarkably well in theaters in 1977.)

Like most conspiracy books, *The Lincoln Conspiracy* has many footnotes and an impressively long bibliography. But, also like most conspiracy literature, it's a *circular citing* process, with conspiracists endlessly referring to one another's work (see Chapter 2 for more on this phenomenon). Despite their abundant cribbing from an earlier conspiracist work from the 1930s by an Austrian chemist named Otto Eisenschiml, the authors claimed to be the *only* investigators

in history who'd ever gotten the story of Lincoln's assassination right. They also seemed to have connected with an amazing number of documents to back up their version of events, papers, and diaries that had slipped past mere mortal historians.

The book's opening pages were touting these various miraculous discoveries, as well as the severe scientific methodology they had put to use in their quest. They claimed this was especially true of their discovery of the missing pages of Booth's diary, a set of documents "worth up to \$1 million dollars." Wow! But when you read on carefully, you come across the following astonishing statement:

The authors acquired a full transcript of the contents of the missing pages and had the contents evaluated by historical experts, but have not been able to acquire copies of the actual pages to authenticate the handwriting.

What these guys are saying is that they haven't even seen *copies* of the actual "million dollar" diary pages on which they've built just about the entire thesis of their book. It is this typical amateur detective work, backed up with hearsay, innuendo, and rumor that makes so many conspiracists so hard to take seriously.



The point we are making is that a box full of random dots is meaningless. To be a true theory worth considering, the dots have to be connected. And to be taken seriously, a conspiracy theory has to connect those dots convincingly and with some irrefutable proof.



Benjamin Franklin once said, "Three may keep a secret when two are dead." When you're confronted by a conspiracy that requires the military or the government or literally *thousands* of covert insiders around the world to keep a Very Big Secret for tens, or hundreds, of years, and just one lone "courageous" warrior steps forward with an outlandish tale that no one else backs up, it's time to turn on your alarm system again. Courage could be vanity, and honesty merely accusation or sour grapes or revenge.

Being skeptical about speculative thinking

Most theories, from the Kennedy assassination to Jesus-having-a-wife books, share the title of “alternative” histories, or “speculative” works. The word *speculative* is the key point here. Because once people start speculating, it becomes your job, to a great degree, to speculate, as well.

For example, in the mental gymnastics of the folks who love to tell you that ancient space aliens were responsible for the Egyptian Sphinx, or that the huge carvings called the Nazca Lines in Peru had to have been done by someone able to fly over the countryside, there’s just a wisp of contempt for that most amazing of all tools, the human mind. There’s an attitude that ancient man was just too, well, primitive (for primitive, read *stupid*) to have been able to build something on that scale.

The same sort of “speculative” thinking goes into more modern creations, like crop circles (see Chapter 7). Admittedly, many crop circles are astonishing as well as dramatic. But are they the watermarks of alien spaceships or superior extraterrestrial technology? All that’s required to make a crop circle is a two-by-four and a rudimentary understanding of mathematics and geometry. Just as we were writing this chapter, a “crop circle” was discovered in New Jersey in the shape of a swastika. Somehow we doubt it was a message left to us from visitors from Alpha Centauri.

The Conspiracism World Tour

Where conspiracy theories are concerned, there’s nothing particularly weird about our own time when you take a look back at history. Consider, for example, these items from the early years of U.S. history:

- ✓ George Washington, a Freemason, was edgy about the possible infiltration of the Illuminati (see Chapter 11) during his presidency.
- ✓ Many people believed Thomas Jefferson was secretly a member of the Illuminati.
- ✓ After killing former Secretary of the Treasury Alexander Hamilton in a duel, Vice President Aaron Burr really did hatch a conspiracy to wrestle control of the western territories away from the U.S. so he could be king of a new empire in the West (see Chapter 17).
- ✓ Economists and people nervous about financial dealings on a global scale have been shoveling grim and prophetic jeremiads about the privately owned Federal Reserve Bank, since its very creation, as being a hotbed of chicanery controlled by capitalist titans.
- ✓ The assassination of Abraham Lincoln (Chapter 5) resulted in a nationwide search for conspirators, both real and imagined, a lot of whom were hanged.

But, while there have been conspiracists throughout history, the 20th century seems to have been the biggest incubator for them. As we show you in the next sections, the 20th century was a particularly intense period that led to clammy hands over secret societies, coverups, and intrigues.

The birth of 20th-century U.S. conspiracism

During World War II, the U.S. government routinely hid secret missions and programs (along with military failures) as part of the war effort. It was vital to keep the national mood focused on winning. And the general belief of Americans was that government secrecy was a good thing: “Loose lips sink ships.” Secrecy was patriotic. The government and the military were *supposed* to be keeping secrets.

After the war, the U.S. engaged in a nuclear stare-down with the Soviets, who were devouring countries all over Eastern Europe and had sworn to get around to us eventually. The stakes were very high.

Most Americans don’t know how close the U.S. came to getting nuked by the Axis powers during WWII, when a sub with a dirty nuclear bomb, a joint German-Japanese endeavor, was literally on its way to San Francisco when the war ended. Then, less than five years after the explosion of the atomic bombs over Japan, Soviet scientists had their own full-blown nuclear bombs, and much of the technology had been stolen from U.S. laboratories and developed in Russia by former Nazi scientists.

While the notorious House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) and the bombastic Senator Joe McCarthy made headlines in the 1950s peering under the sheets for Commies in Hollywood, ferreting out the deep political thoughts of Gary Cooper, the truth was that there really *were* Communist agents across the United States, funding subversive anti-American groups, spying on military and scientific installations, and infiltrating U.S. intelligence organizations like the CIA.



The Communist Party of the United States was no independent organization of starry-eyed idealists. By the 1970s they were receiving \$3 million a year from the Soviet Union and had aided the Soviet Secret Police (KGB) throughout the 1940s and '50s in recruiting spies.

High-profile spying trials, such as the trials of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg and Alger Hiss (who were, in spite of claims to the contrary, all guilty of Soviet espionage), kept Americans looking *outward* for conspiracies. But that was about to change, drastically, and the threat to our way of life suddenly seemed to be from within.

JFK on secrecy

One of the most commonly printed quotes about secrecy and secret societies in the U.S. was made by President John F. Kennedy in 1961. It is frequently used by conspiracists to show that Americans distrust secret societies:

The very word “secrecy” is repugnant in a free and open society; and we are as a people inherently and historically opposed to secret societies, to secret oaths and to secret proceedings.

Of course, like any sound bite, the part that gets left out is that Kennedy was actually giving a Cold War–era speech *in favor* of secrecy. He was asking a ballroom filled with newspaper publishers to keep their mouths shut about U.S. government activities and to not print anything in their papers that might give “our enemies” an advantage. On the one hand, he blasted the Soviet Union for controlling its press with an iron hand. On the other hand, he sounded pretty envious of their power to do it.

The psychedelic '70s: Conspiracism peaks

To understand the explosion of conspiracism that has happened over the last four decades, you need to understand just a little of why the 1970s were the turning point.

While famous conspiracies were alleged in the deaths of Marilyn Monroe and John F. Kennedy in the early 1960s, most sociologists hang the modern growth and acceptance of conspiracy theories on the Vietnam War era and the Watergate-related events under President Richard Nixon. The government was starting to get caught engaging in old-fashioned, WWII-type secrecy to cover up military blunders in Cuba under President Kennedy and in Vietnam under President Lyndon Johnson.

Distrust peaked during the second term of Richard Nixon, stoked by his own infamous antagonism over the press and what he regarded as “subversive elements.”

The Pentagon Papers

In 1971, *The New York Times* published a stack of reports leaked from the Defense Department, famously known as *The Pentagon Papers*. The top-secret reports were written in 1967 and outlined how the Johnson administration secretly expanded the Vietnam War, while lying to the public and pretending to seek strategic advice from diplomats, as well as engaging in “false flag” operations — staged raids supposedly from the Viet Cong.

The revelations came three years after Johnson had left office, but they helped turn the tide of public opinion against the war. This bitterness only worsened under his successor, Richard Nixon.

None dare call it conspiracy

Gary Allen and Larry Abraham's 1971 book, *None Dare Call It Conspiracy*, was a watermark for conspiracy "literature." Closely associated with the right-wing John Birch Society, they trace world events, from the Russian Revolution up through the Nixon administration and purport that history has been controlled by an elite cabal of international bankers.

This was the book that put the Council on Foreign Relations and the Bilderbergers on the

conspiracists' map (see Chapter 15). All the suspects that have dominated the genre ever since were collected in this book — the Illuminati, the Freemasons, Jewish bankers, Cecil Rhodes, and the Rockefellers. It also raises the alarm over the printing of worthless paper money, fears over gun control, and puppet presidential candidates who are the willing stooges of the New World Order regardless of party affiliation.

In search of . . . conspiracies

After the Watergate scandals erupted in 1973, the general consensus of a once-trusting American public changed, drastically. The nation had seen their president spying on the opposition party and lying about it, and the military engaging in maneuvering war to their own ends. The vice president and the attorney general had been proven to be liars and crooks. The Vietnam War limped to an end, and U.S. troops were pulled out without achieving victory — the first loss of a war in American history. Suddenly, and sadly, the *Leave It To Beaver* TV universe of only 15 years before seemed absurd to a newly cynical nation.



Influenced by this almost universal sense of suspicion, the 1970s saw an explosion of books, movies, and TV shows about conspiracies. The first books about the purported UFO crash at Roswell, New Mexico, in 1946 appeared in the mid-1970s (see Chapter 7), 30 years after the fact. The filmmakers at Sunn Classic Pictures were raking it in with over a dozen conspiracist films in that decade.

Even television got into the act, and the series *In Search Of . . .* covered similar topics, narrated by the most trusted, logical, and world-famous scientist of our time, *Star Trek*'s Mr. Spock (Leonard Nimoy). It was the generation that grew up with these influences that went on to create shows like *The X-Files* in the 1990s and to fashion for conspiracism an aura of brave and indefatigable truth in the face of powerful, dangerous enemies.

Conspiracy theories aren't limited to the USA!

America doesn't have the corner on the paranoia market when it comes to distrust of secret groups and the creation of conspiracy theories. Take a taste off the international menu:

- ✓ Canada has its own Roswell (see Chapter 7), called Shag Harbor.
- ✓ Israel has its own Kennedy assassination (see Chapter 5) in the killing of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin.
- ✓ The British believe that everyone from Princess Diana to UN weapons inspector David Kelly was murdered by the government.
- ✓ The Italians have their own Bilderbergers (see Chapter 15) in their Club of Rome.
- ✓ The French believe that the Freemasons (see Chapter 9) are behind *everything*.
- ✓ Throughout Central Asia and in parts of South America it is commonly believed that children are stolen from orphanages to harvest their internal organs for sale to the highest bidders in a bizarre medical "black market." Variations of the tale in India claim "thousands" of stolen human kidneys are shipped each year to rich patients in the Middle East.
- ✓ In some Islamic nations, conspiracy theories about Jews poisoning kids' bubble gum or tainting vaccines get printed on the front page of major metropolitan newspapers (see Chapter 6).

Such nervousness does seem to flourish best in democracies and free societies. Tyrants, fascist dictatorships, and totalitarian regimes lock down all information sources because they really *are* controlled by internal conspiracies and secret government agencies.

Writer Christopher Hitchens calls conspiracy theories "the exhaust fumes of democracy," and that's as good a phrase as any. It's the bad part of the free use of information, and that's the *abuse* of information.

A Word About Skepticism

There's an old bit of bumper sticker philosophy that says "just because you're paranoid doesn't mean they're not out to get you." In a post-9/11 world, conspiracies don't seem to be so far-fetched anymore. This real-life conspiracy played itself out on our TV screens. The result was the death of thousands of

innocent civilians, and in the aftermath, everyone saw terrorist madman Osama Bin Laden take credit for it and the evidence unfold of the planning by his suicidal henchmen.

Then the conspiracy theorists stepped in and told everyone not to believe the evidence or common sense. The 9/11 conspiracy books started to come out, and dark hints of conspiracy showed up on various TV and radio commentaries. Somehow, right under our noses, the entire tone of the debate had changed.

In the world of the conspiracy theorist, loose bands of like-minded terrorists like Al-Qaeda can't possibly be smart enough, rich enough, devious enough, organized enough, or big enough to pull off such an attack, right? Besides, who's Al-Qaeda, anyway? No one had ever heard of them.

Many people thought someone else *must* be behind the 9/11 attacks, someone in the wings, someone bigger, someone pulling the strings as part of a vast, worldwide plan for global "control." So, according to the conspiracy theorists, why waste the most dramatic event of the century on a bunch of terrorists armed with 89-cent box cutters or on their handlers hiding out in a cave half a world away? It had to have really been the CIA. Or the president. Or the military-industrial complex. Or the Freemasons. Or the reptilian aliens of the ancient Babylonian Bloodline. . . .

Of course, there really *are* conspiracies out there. It's just human nature, the same human nature Chapter 3 discusses, that yearns to form secret societies. It's also human nature that some bully boy in Iraq, some artist in Vienna, or some revolutionary in Chile believes that he was destined to rule the biggest chunk of the world he can lay his hands on, or at least enthrall masses of adoring followers. In the hands of a dictator, conspiracies are great for blinding people while you grab power. It's like pointing and shouting, "Look over *there!*" while you steal all the poker chips. Yet, all the real conspiracies in the world may not have the potential for damage to culture that lies in believing that *everything* is a conspiracy. It's not a healthy world view.