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Conspiracy Theories and the Enlightenment
Paul V.M. Flesher

Today, we usually view paranoid people as mentally unstable, particularly those who think "everyone" is out to get them. The more they talk about conspiracies and secret plots to kill them, overthrow the government, and so on, the more we think they should be committed to a mental institution as suffering from the disease of paranoid schizophrenia.

So it might surprise us to discover that many of our founding fathers in the decades surrounding the American Revolution believed a number of conspiracy theories. Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, Edmund Burke and others considered their ability to identify plots and conspiracies a sign of their enlightened intellect and keen insight into world affairs. They did not view such paranoid fantasies as irrational psychoses, but as rational explanations formed by their superior thinking abilities.

Although America's leaders saw conspiracy theories as the height of rationality, in retrospect, we can now see them as only one step removed from a religious view of the cosmos that saw both nature and human society under God's control.

During the early Reformation, from the 16th to the 17th centuries, Protestants believed the course of human society was under God's control. God had a Plan, a great design of salvation, and He implemented it through individuals, events, and other means. While people could see God's hand in local events, often working through individual leaders, the vast realm of human history beyond that was unknowable, part of the mysterious workings of the Divine.

When the Enlightenment arose in Europe and America in the 18th century, it removed God from His place as the controller of human actions and taught that human beings, not God, were in charge of their own society. This meant that there was no unknowable controlling hand of the Divine; instead, all could be understood by rational thought since everything stemmed from human actions.

The early Enlightenment may have dethroned God, but it did not get rid of the idea that events were controlled. If God did not control events, then humans did. That vast realm of unexplained human activity once thought to have been caused by God's implementation of His Plan was now seen as under the control of particular individuals or groups. From this belief, conspiracy theories and imagined

plots were only a short step, particularly when events stymied one's own plans and intentions.

The British actions in attempting to control their difficult American colonies in the 1760s and 1770s, for example, were seen by Thomas Jefferson as "a deliberate systematical plan for reducing us to slavery." As Jefferson and his compatriots sought political participation and representation in Britain, they saw British actions as a plot to deprive the colonists of any sort of self-rule.

Conspiracy theories often blamed foreign governments. The Americans blamed the British, the British blamed the French, the French blamed the British or the Germans, and so on. But often the blame went to religious groups. Masons, Templars, Jews and Catholics were often imagined as the supposed nefarious and secret opposition. Religious groups were useful, imaginary plotters for their supposed religious beliefs could account both for their secrecy (since there was no visible evidence of their conspiracy) and their allegiance to the leaders whose orders their members supposedly carried out.

By the 20th century, it became clear that no humans, whether individuals or groups, secret or not, could control the course of human events. Human society is simply too complex. Today, universities have numerous disciplines that study the variety of human activity ranging from anthropology to sociology and political science, from departments that study literature and language to those that address the traditional arts of painting, sculpture and music as well as the modern arts found in film, TV and the Internet. Despite decades of serious analysis, these approaches are only beginning to chart the complexities of human action and interaction.

The personalized investigation of "who did it?" may play on the nightly news shows, but the more important question of "how did it happen?" requires sustained study from a variety of perspectives and methods. The conspiracy theory as an encompassing mode of explanation has fallen from its intellectual pinnacle and has largely been relegated to the asylum.

This essay draws from Gordon Wood's 1982 essay, "Conspiracy and the Paranoid Style: Causality and Deceit in the Eighteenth Century" in *The William and Mary Quarterly*.