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# The Paranoid Style in an Age of Suspicion: Conspiracy Thinking and Official Rhetoric in Contemporary America

Chara Kay Van Horn  
*Georgia State University*

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THE PARANOID STYLE IN AN AGE OF SUSPICION:  
CONSPIRACY THINKING AND OFFICIAL RHETORIC IN CONTEMPORARY AMERICA

by

CHARA KAY VAN HORN

Under the Direction of James Darsey

ABSTRACT

The assassination of President John F. Kennedy in 1963 and the terrorist attacks of 9/11 are two events that scarred America and its people. In the aftermath of the assassination and the terrorist attacks, the American public was forced to sift through competing messages existing in the public sphere in order to make meaning out of the events. Although the American government, within a few days of both events, released who was ultimately responsible (Lee Harvey Oswald assassinated President Kennedy and Osama bin Laden and al Qaeda were responsible for 9/11), the people were still left with coming to terms for why such violence occurred.

In order to provide a frame from which the American people could view and understand the assassination and the terrorist attacks, two blue ribbon commissions were formed: the Warren Commission, which investigated the assassination of President Kennedy, and the 9/11 Commission, which investigated the terrorist attacks. Despite the reports' purposes, significant segments of the population questioned both Commissions' conclusions. In both instances, conspiratorial understandings of the events grew after the publication of the reports so that, in the case of the Warren Commission, most of the American public believe Oswald did not act alone and, in the case of the 9/11 Commission, there is growing belief that the government's failure to predict and prevent the terrorist attacks was the result of a governmental conspiracy. This dissertation seeks to understand why, in our current times, official discourses are unable to prevail over conspiracy theories.

This study proposes to illustrate the power of conspiracy discourse by examining it through the lens of official discourses that were designed, in part, to head-off conspiracy beliefs before they gained momentum within the American public. Such an inquiry will provide three main benefits: it will contribute to a more exacting understanding of the rhetorical power of conspiracy arguments in our times; it will provide insight into the relationship between official and conspiracy discourses (especially as they now exist); and, such a study has implications for determining the current direction of political life.

INDEX WORDS: Rhetoric, Conspiracy theory, Official discourse, Paranoid style, Authority, Indeterminacy

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CONSPIRACY THINKING AND OFFICIAL RHETORIC IN CONTEMPORARY AMERICA

by

CHARA KAY VAN HORN

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Georgia State University

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by

CHARA KAY VAN HORN

Committee Chair: James F. Darsey

Committee: David M. Cheshier

George Pullman

Carol K. Winkler

Marilyn J. Young

Electronic Version Approved:

Office of Graduate Studies

College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

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## DEDICATION

*In loving memory of my grandfather, Donald LeRoy Gooden (1924-2007), who never met a conspiracy theory he didn't like and who was the inspiration behind this dissertation; and for my grandmother, Mescal Lorraine Gooden, who was subject to the countless retellings of such conspiracy theories in my grandfather's effort to educate us all. You are deeply loved.*

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	v
CHAPTER	
1. FRACTIOUS FICTIONS: CONSPIRACY THEORY AND ITS EVOLUTIONARY EFFECT ON OFFICIAL DISCOURSE IN POSTMODERNITY	1
Worldwide and Historical Appeal of Conspiracy Thinking	1
Categorizing Conspiracy, Conspiracy Theory, and Conspiracists	8
Historical Treatment of Conspiracy Argument	10
Complicating the Context and Genesis of Conspiracy Argument	15
Loss of Authority, Indeterminacy, and the Conditions of Conspiracy	20
Uncertainty, Doubt, and Skepticism in the United States, post-WWII	26
Complicating Conceptions of Conspiracy	29
Uncovering the Genre and Crisis of Conspiracy	33
Chapter Overview	46
2. AUTHORITY, <i>ETHOS</i> , AND PARADOX: REFUTING CONSPIRACY IN THE <i>WARREN COMMISSION REPORT</i>	49
The Early '60s: A Center that Would Not Hold	51
Forming an Authoritative Body	55
Authority, Presumption, Invention, and the Burden of Proof	61
Establishing and Challenging Authority	64
Presumption, Authority, and Argument from Absence	72
Authority and Paradox	79
Authority by (Massive) Evidence	87
Authority by Internal Consistency	92

	viii
Conclusion	99
3. HIDDEN AGENCY: CONSPIRATORIAL CONTROL OVER THE SHAPING OF <i>THE 9/11 COMMISSION REPORT</i>	102
Considering Contexts	106
Regarding the Rhetorical Situation	114
Ghosts of Commissions Past and Hyper-Objectivity	123
Hyper-Objectivity, Massive Evidence, and the Technical Sphere	133
Argument from Absence	141
Portraying the Perfect Enemy	147
Conclusion	155
4. SUBSTANCE AND FORM: CONSPIRATORIAL MANIFESTATIONS IN OFFICIAL DISCOURSE	158
The Cultural Force and Power of Conspiracy Theories	160
The Hierarchical Function of Official Discourse in the Conspiracy Genre	161
Harnessing and Combating the Power of Conspiracy	165
Taking Back the Political from The Conspiratorial	169
NOTES	171
BIBLIOGRAPHY	201

CHAPTER 1  
FRACTIOUS FICTIONS: CONSPIRACY THEORY AND ITS  
EVOLUTIONARY EFFECT ON OFFICIAL DISCOURSE

*"It is, I think, an indisputable fact that Americans are, as Americans, the most self-conscious people in the world, and the most addicted to the belief that the other nations of the earth are in a conspiracy to under value them."*

—Henry James

*Worldwide and Historical Appeal of Conspiracy Thinking*

Conspiracies, or “the agreement of two or more persons to do an illegal act, or to do a lawful act by unlawful means,” have recurred throughout world history and have shaped and influenced political thought and action.<sup>1</sup> Catiline’s attempt to overthrow the Roman government in 63 BCE was chronicled by Cicero and served to influence Roman politics and historical thought. The Roman Catholic Church, during the Middle Ages, was involved in the Crusades and the Spanish Inquisition, which, as some scholars posit, marked the beginning of a millennium-long conspiracy to root out Jews and Muslims in the name of Christianity.<sup>2</sup> In addition to the bloodshed inspired by Christianity, the selling of indulgences and corrupt policies—which were, to some degree, designed to expand the power and influence of the Roman Catholic Church throughout Europe—were a driving force behind the Protestant Reformation. During the early years of the reign of Queen Elizabeth I of England (1570-1586), agents of the Church were implicated in at least four assassination attempts against the queen.<sup>3</sup> There are even those who argue that the advent of Christianity was itself a conspiracy.<sup>4</sup> With several significant historical

events being the result of conspiracies, it should come as no surprise that theories about conspiracies have also informed worldwide political thought and action.

Conspiracy theories, or “the theor[ies] that an event or phenomenon occurs as a result of a conspiracy between interested parties,” specifically as it pertains to “belief[s] that some covert but influential agency (typically political in motivation and oppressive in intent) is responsible for an unexplained event,” have similarly influenced political thought and action.<sup>5</sup> Fears about a secretive group, the Bavarian Illuminati, surfaced in Europe during the late eighteenth century and posited that the group was out to control the world.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, in the late nineteenth century, a pamphlet titled the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* circulated throughout Europe and detailed a secret plot being enacted by Jews to take over the world.<sup>7</sup> More modern conspiracy theories are as varied as Adolph Hitler’s belief that Jews were the cause of Germany’s moral decay and the widely held belief, rebutted most recently in an official inquest nearly eleven years after her tragic accident, that the death of Princess Diana was the result of a secret and concerted plot.

Though not a peculiarly American phenomenon, the United States has proved a hospitable climate for a wide array of conspiracy theories. American historian Bernard Bailyn argues that conspiracy beliefs inspired the events leading up to the American Revolution.<sup>8</sup> Following the Revolution, the American people engaged in a series of movements denouncing certain groups because of beliefs that these groups were attempting to take control of the new country. Jedidiah Morse sounded the alarm that the Bavarian Illuminati were attempting to infiltrate and control the new nation. Following closely on this fear was the kidnapping and murder of a Freemason who was set to expose the secret inner workings of the Masonic Order.<sup>9</sup> Religious movements with secretive underpinnings were particularly susceptible to alarmist claims. Anti-Mormon and anti-Catholic sentiments were especially virulent during the first half

of the nineteenth century, and a profound suspicion of secret religious sects continues to exist in the American populace.<sup>10</sup> The slave power conspiracy expressed beliefs that powerful slaveholders were trying to subvert and gain control over the North and emerging states.<sup>11</sup> By the twentieth century, suspicions with deep nineteenth-century roots about the Federal Reserve System were forwarded by such groups as the Grangers, and the fear of communist infiltration prompted the first Red Scare at the close of World War I. The 1940s featured fears that an alien other was invading the country in the form of an alleged UFO crash in Roswell, New Mexico.<sup>12</sup> The 1950s saw the rise of Senator Joseph McCarthy and claims, made by him and by others, that communists were again among us.<sup>13</sup> Other conspiracy theories include beliefs that the fluoridation of water is a mind-control plot implemented by the government and that the United Nations is attempting to implement a New World Order.<sup>14</sup> Although hardly an exhaustive list, these examples reveal conspiracy thinking to be a perennial feature of American history, occasionally significant enough to spur political reaction.

Cultural conditions in the time since World War II have proved to be a particularly ripe breeding ground for the propagation and dissemination of conspiracy theories. In the time since World War II, conspiracy theories have changed from pervasive fears that a cabal of alien others were attempting to infiltrate and subvert American culture and ideals to, as Peter Knight states, “a not entirely unfounded suspicion that the normal order of things itself amounts to a conspiracy.”<sup>15</sup> The mutation of conspiracy fears from a single identifiable enemy to a more amorphous and harder to define enemy now has conspiracy theories cast as “a reasonable assumption” on the part of a large segment of the American population instead of a “fringe belief” that is sometimes able to garner popular support and action.<sup>16</sup> Technological advances in communication, in particular, are credited with turning the conspiracy theory tide. The almost

unfettered access the American people have to fanzines such as “Paranoia,” which actively promote a conspiratorial understanding of current cultural, social, economic, and political conditions; media that capitalize on and popularize conspiracy beliefs with television shows and films such as the *X-Files* and Oliver Stone’s *JFK*; and the millions of Web pages devoted to forwarding beliefs, either in support or denial, of conspiracy claims build off one another, reinforcing a conspiratorial interpretation of events in the world.<sup>17</sup>

This “culture of conspiracy” casts a default suspicion toward institutions of power so that when these institutions “authorize” discourses to explain a situation or event, they are lodged, sometimes in direct opposition, against the information and various interpretations of the event, whether factual or not, existing within the public sphere.<sup>18</sup> Auditors are faced with an overwhelming amount of information from which to choose in order to form their beliefs, and this choice frequently rests on the question of whom to believe, the conspiratorial or the official; this is a peculiarly contemporary phenomenon.

Despite their current widespread popularity and belief, conspiracy theories and the rhetoric that accompanies them have received only modest attention from historians and even less from rhetoricians. What we do understand about conspiracy theories has been deeply influenced by psychological perspectives, which identify a political maladjustment in peoples—usually located on the political, social, and economic fringes—who use conspiracy claims as a means to gain notoriety or to force some sort of political action.<sup>19</sup> For instance, filmmaker Oliver Stone’s release of *JFK*, and the hype that surrounded it, spurred the National Archives to release hundreds of thousands of pages of previously sealed assassination records, and the work of Stanton Friedman, and others like him, has prompted the U.S. Air Force to reinvestigate the alleged UFO crash in Roswell at least twice.<sup>20</sup> Rhetoricians confronting conspiracy theories have

generally engaged in criticism designed to evaluate the theories by mapping the generic, argumentative, and narrative dimensions of such arguments.<sup>21</sup> What is common to both historical and rhetorical scholarship is the tendency to examine conspiracy theories as aberrant, misinformed, and overly simplistic, although there is a more recent recognition that belief in conspiracy is neither as marginal as once imagined, nor as misguided and paranoid as once presumed.<sup>22</sup>

Currently, conspiracy beliefs are a pervasive and powerful mode of thinking and many, from the most marginal to the most powerful, people in the country fall victim, at times, to conspiracy theory's seductive nature. Generally, identifying an argument as a conspiracy theory serves as a means of dismissal, setting the "theory" apart from the more reasoned, more believable explanations offered by social, economic, and political leaders. There is now recognition that a closer affinity than we have previously acknowledged exists between official and/or political discourses and their conspiratorial counterparts; in fact, the current relationship that exists is more dialogic than once believed.

Politicians have always had to respond to conspiracy claims when conspiracists were able to forward a prima facie case. When such a case is presented it creates a rhetorical exigence<sup>23</sup> that forces officials to address the claims, sometimes by passing legislation such as the Alien and Sedition Acts and, in other times, by focusing political campaigns on conspiracy fears. The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) was created specifically to combat the fear of a communist invasion following World War I.<sup>24</sup> In instances where politicians forwarded their own claims of conspiracy, as evidenced in discourses such as the Lincoln-Douglas Debates, politicians framed fears of conspiracy in ways that dismissed the more "irrational" beliefs as faulty while simultaneously forwarding an argument that laid out a more "reasonable" take on the issue at

hand.<sup>25</sup> Prior to World War II, once politicians took hold of the issue, or some sort of official action was taken to address conspiracy fears, generally the fears faded back to the periphery until a different alarm featuring a different enemy was sounded.<sup>26</sup> Now, however, conspiracy theories exist in a persistent battle between their version of reality and “official” or “authorized” discourses.

In our time, the ability of politicians and/or official discourses to maintain argumentative presumption when challenged by conspiracy narratives is severely diminished. The general skepticism leveled against economic, social, and political institutions and their discourses is, according to Knight, “inseparable from the culture of postmodernism ... [and] is very much in tune with a postmodern distrust of final narrative solutions.”<sup>27</sup> After all, Americans in large numbers “know,” contrary to claims set forth by the *Warren Commission Report*, that Lee Harvey Oswald did not act alone in the assassination of President Kennedy, and although we “know” Osama bin Laden was the master plotter behind the terrorist attacks of 9/11, a growing portion of the population believes that there are significant questions about the attacks that remain unanswered, despite the explanations propounded by the *9/11 Commission Report*. The uncertainty cast upon these two documents—the former embroiled in controversy for over forty years, and the latter the subject of increasingly more widespread doubt—indicates that regardless of the more “reasonable” explanations for occurrences offered by officials, those officials have been unable to forward arguments that quell conspiratorial beliefs about these events despite the “definitive” and “final” nature of the texts and despite being given almost limitless resources. Certainly the sheer force of the authority of the government is insufficient to carry the burden of proof.

What this suggests is that conspiracy theories have enormous power in our contemporary world. Conspiracy theories about significant historical, social, and cultural events often enter the public sphere prior to the release of an “official” response or interpretation. Official discourses, at least in recent years, have been unable to diminish beliefs that conspiracies were behind the events; indeed, in cases such as President Kennedy’s assassination and the terrorist attacks of 9/11, conspiratorial interpretations of events, although present before publication, continued to grow *after* the publication of the discourses. Central to this dissertation is understanding how conspiracy theories manifest their power by shaping official discourses in the conspiracy image, an image that allows conspiracy theories to grow after the release of official discourses.

Official discourse, like all discourse, is called forth by rhetorical exigencies.<sup>28</sup> Based on the situation, those who fashion official discourses are faced with the unenviable task of compiling and sifting through overwhelming amounts of evidence, including the depositions and testimony of witnesses from the most pedestrian of citizens to the most powerful leaders in the country. This is no easy task; not only must the official discourse provide a complete account of the events, it is also expected to ease the public’s fears and to provide a list of suggested comprehensive policy changes to keep such a tragic event from happening again. Moreover, the discourse must provide a story that competes with counter claims and charges surrounding the event, all of which are in circulation in the public sphere *before* the official discourse is formed. If, as I argue, official discourse is designed, in part, to dismiss, contradict, and head off conspiracy theories, then the inability for official discourse to prevail over conspiracy theories is hampered by the enormous agenda-setting capabilities exhibited by conspiracy theories.

In essence, conspiracy theories force official discourse into a dialogue wherein official discourse not only is incapable of prevailing over conspiracy beliefs, but in countering

conspiracy claims takes on some of the generic characteristics of conspiracy arguments. If conspiracy beliefs are powerful enough to force official discourse into a dialogue and are then capable of calling into question the veracity and believability of official discourse, then there are broad political implications that may be better understood by examining the nexus between official and conspiratorial discourses under our contemporary cultural, social, and economic conditions.

### *Categorizing Conspiracy, Conspiracy Theory, and Conspiracists*

Different valences of conspiracy research have emerged within the last few years, providing the public with a cornucopia of different synonyms for conspiracies, conspiracy theories, and conspiracists. None of these studies share a definition of conspiracy. Conspiracy comes from the Latin *conspire*, meaning to breathe together.<sup>29</sup> According to the *Oxford English Dictionary* (*OED*), the word “conspiracy” found its way into the English language in 1386 when Chaucer wrote of the conspiracy between Brutus and Cassius against Julius Caesar.<sup>30</sup> Conspiracy theory, however, did not find expression as a term until 1909 in *The American History Review*.<sup>31</sup>

The popular use of “conspiracy theory” as a term, however, would not be realized until 1952 when it was used by Karl Popper to designate “an explanation of a social phenomenon [that] consists in the discovery of the men or groups who are interested in the occurrence of” conspiracies.<sup>32</sup> More interesting, however, is the fact that the term “conspiracy theory” was not added to the *OED* until July 1997 when a supplemental issue of the dictionary was released.<sup>33</sup> As Alasdair Spark writes, recognition by the *OED* is a signal of the growing importance of conspiracy theories in the popular imagination, especially as they exist in the United States.<sup>34</sup> Even though the history of the term chronicles a growing recognition of the importance

conspiracy theories play in contemporary society, for the sake of clarity and expediency, it is necessary to define other key terms that relate to conspiracies and conspiracy theories.

Following the definitions of Jack Bratich and Michael Pfau, “conspiracism,” “conspiracy beliefs,” and “conspiracy fears” are the beliefs that conspiracies are “a driving force in history.”<sup>35</sup> “Conspiracists” and “conspiracy theorists” are those who believe in and conjure conspiracy theories.<sup>36</sup> “Conspirators” are those who are implicated in the conspiracy plot. “Conspiracy discourse” is an umbrella term that encapsulates the sum of persuasive texts and the “intertextual, ideological, political, and social context[s] within which these texts are produced and consumed.”<sup>37</sup> “Conspiracy narratives” and “conspiracy rhetoric” are the narrative/rhetorical accounts that posit that two or more people, for their own nefarious benefit, seek to control the way an event occurs to the detriment of others.<sup>38</sup> “Conspiracy arguments” are narrower in focus and pertain “to the logical or rational operations and techniques” used to forward conspiracists’ arguments.

In understanding the effects conspiracy theories have on official discourse, it is necessary that all of these terms be employed and interrogated. Official discourse is a part and product of the larger discursive arena into which it is born. This arena involves conspirators, conspiracists, conspiracy theories, conspiracy discourse, and conspiracy arguments, all of which play a part in shaping official discourse. In order to arrive at a thoughtful conclusion about the role conspiracy theories play in the shaping of official discourse, it is necessary to be aware of, and sensitive to, the above terms and their interrelationship.

### *Historical Treatment of Conspiracy Arguments*

Although conspiracy thinking and beliefs permeate world and American history, not much scholarly ink was spilled in pursuit of its study until the height of the Cold War, followed by an explosion of interest in the 1990s and into the new millennium. For instance, a basic search on “conspiracy theory” in the ProQuest database lists only eleven theses or dissertations written prior to 1990. Since 1990, however, over fifty theses and dissertations have directly dealt with the topic of conspiracy theory.<sup>39</sup> In their studies, historical and cultural scholars have typically used a psychological approach to analyze conspiracy beliefs, characterizing conspiratorial belief, itself, as a political disease. Virtually all of the existing scholarship aims at discrediting conspiracy theories, either by pointing out the inherent problems associated with a conspiracy culture, or by debunking the individual theories conspiracists introduce into the public sphere.<sup>40</sup> Even those scholars who take a more sympathetic approach, sometimes recognizing that there are very good reasons to believe in conspiracies, largely view conspiracy theories as problematic.<sup>41</sup>

No work has been more influential in discrediting conspiracy beliefs than Richard Hofstadter’s “The Paranoid Style in American Politics.”<sup>42</sup> Hofstadter wrote his invective against conspiracy theories in the aftermath of World War II when existentialist and psychological approaches to making meaning were not only en vogue in the scholarly community, but also in more popular venues such as newspapers and magazines.<sup>43</sup> The discovery of the horrors uncovered after the war that were promoted by extremist ideologies prompted a general hostility in the intellectual community directed against any form of extremist thought. The extremist views widely followed by significant segments of the population, forwarded by Joseph McCarthy in the 1950s and Barry Goldwater, Robert Welch and the John Birch Society in the

1960s, signaled alarms for the susceptibility of even a more pragmatic culture in the United States to fall victim to increasingly extremist and emotional views.<sup>44</sup> With a general hostility directed against extremist views of politics, Hofstadter identified what he termed as “an old and recurrent mode of expression in our public life which has frequently been linked with movements of suspicious discontent and whose content remains much the same even when it is adopted by men [sic] of distinctly different purposes.”<sup>45</sup> Hofstadter labeled the totalizing and apocalyptic expressions to which he was referring as “the paranoid style,” being careful to note that, although it was not a clinical pathology, such utterances were indicative of a political malaise existing in a *minority* of political movements.

The belief that the paranoid style was a political fringe phenomenon was expanded to encompass more than the radical right, which was Hofstadter’s primary concern. Scholars such as David Brion Davis, writing within a few years of Hofstadter, noted that virtually all counter-subversive movements, whether from the political right or left, contained elements of Hofstadter’s paranoid style.<sup>46</sup> Today, over forty years later, Hofstadter’s delineation of a “paranoid style” continues to be influential in scholarly and popular media. As Bratich observed, “Most serious contemporary analysts of conspiracy theories (on various points on the political spectrum) cite Hofstadter. In so doing, they use conspiracy theories as paradigmatic of the ‘paranoid style.’”<sup>47</sup> Current conceptions of those suffering from the delusions of conspiracy now range from the politically disaffected (e.g., African Americans) to the most powerful leaders in the country.<sup>48</sup> There continues to be a default assumption cast against conspiracy theories that automatically presumes them to be a type of “paranoid” pathology, sometimes blurring the line between the political and clinical pathologies.<sup>49</sup>

Those who view belief in conspiracy theories as a clinical delusion call to mind crackpots who cling to conspiratorial beliefs because of their mental incapacity for determining real from fictive causal events. Daniel Pipes compares belief in conspiracy to a “titillation,” or a “modish ... taste for puzzles and puzzlement.”<sup>50</sup> Regardless of a “modish” taste for conspiracy, Pipes emphasizes that belief in conspiracy is dangerous because it has the capability of becoming the way one “views life itself,” where one no longer can distinguish between fact and fiction. Robert Robins and Jerrold Post posit that when political leaders suffer from the paranoid style it can lead to hatred and result in a remarkable amount of bloodshed.<sup>51</sup> Conspiracy beliefs, for these scholars, are misguided, seductive, and dangerous and operate from a premise that there is a “proper” or “rational” way to view history and current situations, as opposed to an “improper” or “irrational” view.

Hofstadter, in particular, employed a “consensus” approach to historiographic study. Consensus historiography stemmed from the belief that the United States exhibited a rich and unique history marked by an ideological consensus among its people. It was generally believed that the American people were, on the whole, aspiring to middle-class values and beliefs. Those who argued against or challenged consensus beliefs were attempting to disrupt the remarkable continuity of the American experience.<sup>52</sup> Thus, those who forwarded discourse that reflected the paranoid style were malcontents, disenfranchised by the consensus view. As the study of history changed to reflect a growing recognition that the telling of history is ideological, marginalizing, and silencing of disparate voices in the polity, the metanarratives of history became problematic. Far too frequently those voices that were not part of the prevailing view of history and politics were left unexplored and unrecorded. Murray Edelman has pointed out that psychological frames have the effect of turning social problems into individual problems, and explanations based on

psychological pathology have the capacity to turn social problems into issues of individual maladjustment.<sup>53</sup> Historians began to posit that belief in conspiracy cannot solely be explained by a paranoid premise.

With the increasing recognition that a multiplicity of disparate voices has either been ignored or marginalized within the public sphere, that social problems are sometimes systemic and structural and cannot always be dismissed as individual psychopathology, scholars have recognized that conspiracy theories are not limited to the totalizing and apocalyptic frame set out by Hofstadter. There is a general recognition in the historical and cultural communities that the status of conspiracy theory in contemporary American society has fundamentally changed since Hofstadter first published his “paranoid” essay. Robert Goldberg states, “This period departs from the past in the regularity of the drumbeat, the multiplicity of messages and carriers, the number of believers, and the depth of immersion of popular culture in conspiracy thinking.”<sup>54</sup> Conspiracy theories, rather than being marginal beliefs held by a minority of people, are now a fundamental way a significant number of Americans view “how the world works.”<sup>55</sup> The *prima facie* belief in conspiracy gives rise to a whole host of types of conspiracy arguments. Various types of conspiracy theories exist within the public sphere, some simply attributing causal reasons to significant events, while others direct attention to a cabal of ne’er-do-wells who are attempting to destroy a way of life.<sup>56</sup> While those who followed Hofstadter focused on the latter type of conspiracy, most now focus on the former, recognizing that these types of conspiracy theories serve different purposes within the *polis*.

Historians and cultural scholars have approached this new take on conspiracy theories by using various interpretive frames by which to analyze conspiracy beliefs. Largely, scholars still rely on psychological explanations arguing that different peoples use conspiracy theories for

different functions. For example, marginal populations use conspiracy theories as a binding force with which to battle racism, sexism, and oppression.<sup>57</sup> Others are likely to use conspiracy theories as a means to gain autonomy and power as intermediaries between the people (e.g., labor unions) and large institutions of power.<sup>58</sup> Conspiracy theories represent a battle between competing ideological factions and give people a means by which to infuse their lives with meaning and significance.<sup>59</sup> Instead of automatically seeing pathology when looking on embittered people fighting against large systems of control, scholars are now inclined to recognize what George Marcus terms “paranoia within reason.”<sup>60</sup>

Popular belief in conspiracy no longer requires an alien “other” attempting to infiltrate and subvert the masses; the enemy to be combated is our own system of power.<sup>61</sup> While belief that an alien “other” is attempting to infiltrate and overtake the American government still exists and has been most recently exploited by fringe members of the Tea Party, a belief that the establishment itself is conspiring against the American people comes at the hands of uncovered instances of corporate and governmental malfeasance (e.g., Watergate, COINTELPRO, Iran-Contra, and Enron). Significant portions of the public now cast a cynical eye toward officials and their “authorized” versions of events. Knight explains, “In the eyes of many Americans, the only safe bet is that there *might well be* a conspiracy, for all the public at large know or are likely to ever know. The burden of proof is now reversed, such that the authorities must strenuously provide conclusive evidence that there has been no initial conspiracy or subsequent cover-up.”<sup>62</sup> Officials and their discourses must now not only “prove” what happened in significant events, but also must prove that the resulting event was not part of a larger conspiracy.

The questioning of official accounts of events through the medium of conspiracy theory signifies that conspiracy and official discourse exist within a dialogic relationship. Of particular

importance to this study is Bratich's observation that conspiracy theories are "a zone where politics and reason meet."<sup>63</sup> Not only do conspiracy theories cast suspicion and doubt onto institutions of power and the discourses they provide, but these same institutions view conspiracy theories as dangerous. Bratich argues that current political rationality views conspiracy theories as the *enemies*, the *threats* against democracy that need to be battled.<sup>64</sup> Conspiracy theories exist in a battle of one-upmanship with official discourse, and, as it currently stands, are threatening to become the way most of the population thinks about historical events.<sup>65</sup>

Although the historical and cultural studies of conspiracy theories still largely operate from a psychological standpoint, there is a growing recognition that conspiracy theories stand in direct opposition to their official counterparts. Conspiracies, rather than occasionally infecting political thought and action, are now more about a growing suspicion directed at institutions of power and are seen, by these same institutions, as an enemy that needs to be combated. If conspiracy theories are an enemy, then it stands to reason that official discourses that are designed to quell conspiracy beliefs should attempt to attack and root them out within the corpus of their texts. Rhetorical scholars, in particular, are concerned with, and uniquely situated to uncovering the suasive strength of conspiracy rhetoric and its interaction with official discourse.

### *Complicating the Context and Genesis of Conspiracy Argument*

Rhetorical examinations of conspiracies have largely reflected the trajectory set out by historians. The study of conspiracy within the rhetorical community has taken two primary paths: determining the rhetorical characteristics that make conspiracy theories particularly persuasive and evaluating individual conspiracy theories in an effort to expose their inherent argumentative problems. Although the rhetorical community has largely used its skills to delegitimize

conspiracy theories and beliefs, there is, as in the historical community, recognition that conspiracy theories cannot be solely identified as pathological. Conspiracy theories are now a staple of American politics and are forwarded by marginal and mainstream political actors alike.<sup>66</sup>

Initial forays by rhetoricians into the dark world of conspiracy built upon Hofstadter's characterization of paranoid discourse. Hofstadter argued that conspiracy discourse was marked by a "distorted style" contained within an "apocalyptic and absolutist framework."<sup>67</sup> The narrative of the conspiracy theory, according to Hofstadter, contained: 1) "a vast and sinister conspiracy, a gigantic and yet subtle machinery of influence set in motion to undermine and destroy a way of life"; 2) "the special significance that attaches to the figure of the renegade from the enemy cause"; and 3) "that quality of pedantry" in which conspiracists imitate the form, substance, and style of scholarly and legal arguments.<sup>68</sup> Through this emulation, conspiracists attempt to create *ethos*. Conspiracy theories, according to Hofstadter, begin with "certain moral commitments" and "judgments" that can be defended.<sup>69</sup> Conspiracists, when marshalling their evidence to make their cases for conspiracy, are subject to "leaps in logic" when tying together seemingly unrelated events, people, and practices into these theories.<sup>70</sup> Following Hofstadter's lead, Earl Creps determined that conspiracy theories comprised a unique rhetorical genre "composed of a deductive/causal substantive form, a massively documented/dramatic style, and a 'stressful' situation" that are bound together through the location of an evil force trying to subvert American ideals.<sup>71</sup> The location of evil allowed for a single, identifiable enemy to be combated, resulting in polarizing the audience between "Us," upholders of traditional American values and beliefs, and "Them," those who would destroy America and its way of life.<sup>72</sup> In

essence, Creps was articulating the signature elements of the narratives conspiracists weave in telling their tales of deceit and corruption.

Conspiracy theories begin with the anomalies of an event or events: the unanswered questions, the peculiarities of agents, the conflicting accounts among authorities. Conspiracists point to the anomalous information and argue that such anomalies are a “sign” that “something” corrupt is occurring.<sup>73</sup> These “signs” then get woven into a dramatic and polarizing narrative form. Narrative is, as Fran Mason asserts, “the main form of legitimating knowledge in conspiracy theory.”<sup>74</sup> The basic plot of the conspiracy narrative posits that someone or something is threatening to destroy a community or way of life. The audience is warned of this impending doom by a farsighted leader who amasses colossal amounts of evidence into a “singular plot” that draws from “the traditional logic of conventional popular narratives” (most notably the mystery), and ascribes causality and agency of the potential destruction to some malignant outside agent.<sup>75</sup> Indeed, “the primary burden of the conspiracy theorist,” according to James Darsey, “is to provide credible purpose as the preeminent element of motive” to the agent’s perceived desires.<sup>76</sup> Conspiracy narratives gain their persuasive appeal by melding the purpose guiding the agent (evil) with a dramatic form, what Burke calls a syllogistic progression. Burke states, “We call it syllogistic because, given certain things, certain things must follow.”<sup>77</sup> When the audience reaches the inevitable conclusion of the conspiracy, it faces the recognition that the only way the community can be saved is by purging itself of either the agent or the agency.

Conspiracy theories are plausible because of their ability to tap into the traditional values and beliefs of their audiences, and they are able to stay popular within the public sphere over long periods of time because of their ability to adapt to, and reflect, temporal and cultural conditions.<sup>78</sup> Conspiracy narratives allow for no ambiguities, no discrepancies, no coincidences;

everything within the conspiracy narrative has a purpose.<sup>79</sup> Indeed, the stories woven by conspiracists maintain an internal coherence so masterful, that, according to Darsey, traditional modes of evaluation, although helpful, are not accessible enough for the lay person to use to evaluate conspiracy claims. Rather, a more helpful and public way to evaluate conspiracy theories rests on a question of motive because, as Walter Fisher argued, even a lay public has the access and acuity to determine if the motives of the villain make sense.<sup>80</sup> While narrative may be the vessel through which conspiracy theories gain their legitimization, equally important are the argumentative techniques used within conspiracy narratives.

Perhaps the single most seductive element of the conspiracy argument is what David Zarefsky terms as its self-sealing nature.<sup>81</sup> Successful conspiracy arguments, according to Zarefsky, “shift the burden of proof onto opponents while minimizing its own burdens.”<sup>82</sup> Frequently, shifting the burden of proof onto those countering conspiracy claims includes using argument from absence. When a conspiracy charge is made, and a respondent counters by asserting that there is no conspiracy, then the response actually becomes proof that there is a conspiracy. Even if there is no response, the absence of a response becomes evidence that a vast and sinister conspiracy is brewing. As Brian Keeley notes, “conspiracy arguments are the only theories for which evidence *against* them is actually constructed as evidence in *favor* of them.”<sup>83</sup>

Darsey affirms:

Under normal circumstances, appearance demands presumption. One who claims that things are not as they appear to be assumes the burden of proof; a strong prima facie case is required before appearances need be seriously interrogated. Conspiracy argument exploits and reverses this normative presumption, making the lack of evidence into evidence transmogrifying surfaces from their pedestrian status as the most visible

outward manifestation of reality into veils and masks.<sup>84</sup>

Thus, the ability of conspiracy theories to use the absence of evidence as evidence allows for virtually anything to be subsumed into the conspiracy narrative.

The rhetorical hallmarks of conspiracy theories provide insight into the power such theories wield. However, rhetorical scholars have generally focused on, and analyzed, a singular conspiracy theory located within the public sphere in order to uncover the argumentative and narrative strategies conspiracists use in persuading their audiences. Such studies have tended to uncover the situational and contextual elements that make conspiracy theories more believable and then map out their inherent logical and narrative problems. I am more interested in the intersection that exists between conspiracy arguments and official discourse and what this intersection has to offer to our insight. Darsey alludes to an examination of this nexus when he calls for a restoration of public science.<sup>85</sup> The secrecy under which institutional agencies operate is often ascribed to a malign purpose. Sissela Bok argues secrecy, by its very nature, breeds distrust: it is an intentional concealment that “sets apart the secret from the non-secret, and of keepers of a secret from those excluded.”<sup>86</sup> In our increasingly secret world (be it related to political, scientific, or trade realms), there is a tendency to believe the worst rather than the best about what these “secretive” agencies are doing.

When a significant event happens, such as the terrorist attacks of 9/11, and a claim that is not immediately discreditable or compelling is made about the causes and culprits behind the event, there is a moment of suspension where auditors fall in between comprehension and incomprehension, the awful and the awe-full, what Darsey, borrowing from Tzvetan Todorov, describes as the fantastic. It is this space between meaning and meaninglessness that conspiracy theories fill, ascribing agency, purpose, and direction to otherwise senseless acts and effects.<sup>87</sup>

When an “official” explanation is forthcoming, it is already entering into a sphere of competition with conspiracy theories. When counter-narratives fill the voids left by an absence of official discourse, a kind of rhetorical back-peddling occurs on the part of officials. In other words, officials have to prove within the corpus of their discourse that there is no conspiracy rather than simply proving what happened, and the standards for proof are altered by the presence of conspiracy narratives. The legitimacy of conspiracy theories is expanded when the discourse offered fails to tell a story that “fits” the facts and is exacerbated when credible witnesses offer conflicting evidence and substantiate causal agency. In the absence of a compelling case on the part of officials, people find themselves choosing between stories that provide purpose and motive and other accounts that leave them open to interpretation and that seemingly defy belief.<sup>88</sup>

Why are conspiracy theories so able to force the hand of officials? Part of the answer lies with the loss of central authority and the indeterminacy of information that are, at least in part, a result of the conditions of postmodernity.

*Loss of Authority, Indeterminacy, and the Conditions of Conspiracy*

Scholars overwhelmingly posit that the proliferation of conspiracy theories in our time is a result of the loss of central authority and the rise of indeterminacy, both of which are a part of the postmodern condition. Postmodernity is a highly contested term, entailing a host of theoretical positions and criticisms. Generally, the term has been used to signal a period of time, although Barry Smart offers that it is more useful to think of it as a recognition that the promises of modernity—certainty, stability, security—“will remain unfulfilled.”<sup>89</sup> If the term is contested, so, too, is the issue of its precise genesis. There is a general consensus that postmodernity emerged

in the post-World War II world, and reached maturity, including finding its name, in the 1970s.<sup>90</sup> Regardless of the exact time of its emergence, the nascent characteristics of postmodernity were noticeable in the general turbulence that marked the 1950s and even more so the 1960s.

If postmodernity is a recognition of historical time, then postmodernism is the vehicle through which this recognition is made manifest. “Postmodernism” has been employed to signify a “style or genre” representing notions of fracture, “fragmentation, indeterminacy, and plurality” that combated the narrow, restrictive views of modernity.<sup>91</sup> Modernity, characterized as “positivistic, technocentric, and rationalistic,” according to David Harvey, “has been identified with the belief in linear progress, absolute truths, the rational planning of ideal social orders, and the standardization of knowledge and production.”<sup>92</sup> Political, social, and economic norms were based on universal and totalizing ideals that set the standard to which people were to aspire.<sup>93</sup> Those disenfranchised from the norms of political, social, and economic orders joined in a mutual struggle to attain access to the universal ideals in the public sphere. In contradistinction, postmodernity, is prefaced on the search for more individual meaning. Smart wrote, “The questioning of universals, of grounds, of foundations, and values, and the corollary, a recognition of cultural pluralism and fragmentation, of diversity and difference are widely acknowledged to be prominent features of the complex contemporary conditions we encounter.”<sup>94</sup> What has changed from modernity to postmodernity are not the ideas of universal concepts, such as equality, justice, and freedom, but, according to Simon Malpas, “their ‘ontological status’: their certainty, the means by which they are defined, justified, and defended.”<sup>95</sup> Universal standards take on new and disparate meanings among disparate peoples. A cacophony of voices enters into an endless struggle to determine their own ideals rather than having meanings defined for them by authorities.

The universalizing and totalizing metanarratives of history and politics are now recognized for their silencing and oppressive natures; the response is a proliferation of voices and methodological positions essentially decimating a unified frame from which to interpret meaning.<sup>96</sup> Meaning is now constructed based on the intertextual nature of information and communication; beginning from what we already know (or think we know) and the constant addition of information from ever more texts to meaning, diminishing the authority of singular texts in favor of the continual construction of meanings by individuals.<sup>97</sup> This multiplicity of voices blurs the line between truthful and factual information, and questions whom to trust and believe. There is no longer one fixed narrative that serves as a binding force for the people but multiple frames of reference, a condition that breeds uncertainty and anxiety, and also leads to a loss of authority and the indeterminacy of information.

Discursive authority lies with its effects, or what Bruce Lincoln has argued, “the conjuncture of the right speaker, the right speech and delivery, the right staging and props, the right time and place, and an audience whose historically and culturally conditioned expectations establish the parameters of what is judged ‘right’ in all these instances, in such a way as to produce attitudes of trust, respect, docility, acceptance, even reverence, in the audience.”<sup>98</sup> If discursive authority rests with the ability to render an audience silent on an issue, then in postmodernity generally, and with the state of conspiracy theories more specifically, authority is in serious trouble. No longer are authorities (whether executive or epistemic) able to offer their version of a story and have an audience docilely accept their interpretation.<sup>99</sup> Authorities no longer enjoy the presumption they were afforded in the past; official narratives are now just one among a cacophony and have the same burden as any narrative to *persuade* their audiences that they are offering the most complete, compelling, and consistent telling of events. If anything, this

burden is increased for official narratives in light of revelations of official scandals and abuses of power.

The loss of central authority, the loss of a fixed meaning ascribed to information has given rise to a multiplicity of interpretations within the public sphere. As Smart notes, “Central to the postmodern condition is the notion that the legitimation procedures of knowledge have been eroded, and that the assumption at the heart of legislative reason of the possibility and/or acceptability of deriving prescriptions from denotative statements is no longer sustainable.”<sup>100</sup> Most telling of Smart’s passage is the erosion of the belief in science. Intelligent design now challenges the more scientific position of evolution; the etiology of HIV/AIDS is hotly disputed; global warming deniers argue against scientific evidence of climate change; even whether there was a moon landing is subject to speculation from various segments of the public. In Jean-François Lyotard’s words, “the grand narrative” of science “has lost its credibility”; everything is now subject to competing interpretations.<sup>101</sup> New forms of media technology, especially the Internet, have diminished the ability to determine what is credible and what is incredible. The line between legitimate and illegitimate information has become increasingly blurred. Such an indeterminate climate has led to an enlargement of the public sphere which, Frederic Jameson asserts, “also results in an enormous enlargement of the idea of rationality itself, in what we are willing to ‘understand’ (but not endorse), as what we can no longer have removed from the visual record as ‘irrational’ or incomprehensible, unmotivated, insane or sick.”<sup>102</sup> Instead, more “legitimate” forms of knowledge are in direct competition with various interpretations afloat within the public sphere. The pothole of information offered by competing voices within the public sphere is a breeding ground for conspiracy thinking.

The polyphony of competing voices, bolstered by the ease of posting and “researching” information on the Internet, makes it increasingly difficult for the public to make informed decisions. Each post has its own theory, its own interpretation as to what happened and why. Exacerbating the competition among multitudinous voices is the cynical and suspicious attitude directed toward the government by large segments of the public, brought about by the clandestine and secret nature of some of its agencies as well as the uncovering of actual governmental conspiracies.<sup>103</sup> Amplified media coverage in the face of significant tragedies finds conspiracists capitalizing on the misstatements, inaccuracies, and inconsistencies of governmental officials in their statements to the press and in the testimony they provide in investigations, and then weaving those problems into their narratives as proof that not all is as it seems.

Conspiracy theories, which claim to know the “truth,” are not so different from official discourse. Indeed, like official discourse, conspiracy theories pose their adherence to “facticity, causality, coherence, and rationality.” What sets contemporary conspiracy theories apart from official discourse, according to Jodi Dean, is “suspicion.” Conspiracy narratives emphasize “that *something* has been withheld, that all the facts aren’t known, that what we see isn’t all there is. Conspiracy theory demands more information. Too humble to offer a totalizing account, [the] accumulated assertions [of conspiracy narratives] *remind us that we don’t know.*”<sup>104</sup> The multiplicity of competing information casts suspicion onto more “legitimate” forms of knowledge. Knight explains, “Conspiracy theories are a form of pop sociology cobbled together on the fly as people try to gain a handle on the complexities of social and economic causation in an era of rapid globalization. With the increasing overload of information from mutually competing sources, none of which seem entirely trustworthy, a hermeneutic of suspicion has

become a routine operating procedure.”<sup>105</sup> Belief in conspiracy becomes an almost necessary response to the multiplicity of information, especially with the lack of a suitable explanation. Even when an explanation is provided, enough questions are asked, enough “evidence” is brought to light, so as to cast doubt and suspicion onto the explanation. Any official discourse that comes into being after doubt and suspicion have been leveled against “legitimate” explanations has to at least attempt to assuage any existing doubts, which inherently alters the substance and form of official discourse.<sup>106</sup>

The leveling of the discursive playing field precipitated by the loss of central authority and the indeterminacy of information provides an opening for conspiracy theories to find increasing prominence and belief. Conspiracy theories challenge and question authority and capitalize on the strength of their own narratives, the inconsistencies of official accounts, and the proliferation of conflicting information. Conspiracy theories are a mode of constructing meaning in a rapidly changing and complex world. It is no longer automatically discrediting to label something a conspiracy theory; authorities must prove their positions, write compelling and believable accounts of events, and, ultimately, must get back in touch with their audiences if they want the support of the people. Yet the ability for officials to connect with the people is problematic because officials are no longer able to forward an affirmative argument simply providing the causes or reasons behind an event. Officials are forced into a defensive position brought on by claims of conspiracy existing prior to the crafting of an official response. For this reason it is necessary to examine the power of conspiracy beliefs through the lens of official discourse. If recent “authoritative” texts are any indication, then there is a real danger that conspiracy beliefs will usurp official explanations and become the preferred way of thinking.

*Uncertainty, Doubt, and Skepticism in the United States, post-WWII*

Prior to the publication of the *Warren Commission Report*, the American people placed a great deal of faith in the American government. According to the Pew Research Center, in 1958, the first year a poll testing public trust in government was conducted, nearly 73 percent of the American people trusted the federal government. That number increased to nearly 78 percent by 1963. By 1964, however, Americans' faith in their government was on a precipitous decline, dropping to 65 percent in 1966, down to 36 percent in 1974, and bottoming at a dismal 25 percent by 1979. In the last thirty years, there have been spikes and dips in the poll numbers, frequently corresponding with times of crises where faith in the government increased, and drops during economic times of crisis. Even so, Americans' faith in their government has not reached over 60 percent since 1969.<sup>107</sup> At least part of the reason for the decline of the American people's faith in government can be attributed to the eruption of revealed official scandals and abuses enacted by the federal government and its agents that date back to the 1940s.

The late 1940s and early 1950s saw a litany of Americans accused, and in some cases convicted, of espionage. The "Pumpkin Papers" seemingly confirmed accusations that Alger Hiss, a lawyer who worked for the New Deal policies of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt and was involved in coordinating the creation of the United Nations, was a Soviet spy in 1948.<sup>108</sup> The Hiss case, and Hiss's subsequent defense by Secretary of State Dean Acheson, prompted Congressman Richard Nixon and other Republicans to forward claims of subversion within the White House.<sup>109</sup> The Eisenhower administration's cover-up of a top-secret American U2 spy plane, shot down over Soviet air space on May 1, 1960, was one of the first instances where the secret machinations of the president were publicly revealed.<sup>110</sup> The election of President Kennedy in 1960 had its own allegations of conspiracy and cover-up. David Steigerwald admits

that Republican allegations that President Kennedy won the 1960 election through fraudulent votes facilitated by Chicago Mayor Richard Daley were not without merit.<sup>111</sup> Government involvement in scandals and conspiracies after World War II and up to the election of President Kennedy are at least nascent indicators of the loss of central authority, although the continued scandals and conspiracies would exacerbate the erosion of faith the American people had in their system of governance.

The assassinations of President Kennedy, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Robert Kennedy; the escalation of the war in Vietnam; and the increasing violence associated with the Civil Rights Movement and the student protests, all gave rise to a further cultural anxiety existing within the public sphere. In the early 1970s, the fears that the federal government was engaging in conspiracies against its own people were realized. The revelation of the secret domestic intelligence program of the FBI known as COINTELPRO provided the American public with proof that the FBI had engaged in illegal activities against the American people, including Martin Luther King, Jr.<sup>112</sup> “The Pentagon Papers,” stolen by State Department employee Daniel Ellsberg, provided evidence that the federal government had lied about U.S. involvement in Vietnam.<sup>113</sup> The Tuskegee Syphilis Experiments revealed that the United States government had intentionally withheld treatment from African American men infected with the disease to study its effects, even after penicillin was found to cure the disease.<sup>114</sup> The coup de grace to faith in American governance came with the uncovering of the Watergate scandal. President Nixon resigned in disgrace after it was revealed that he was intimately involved with illegal campaign activities in 1974.<sup>115</sup> The decline of the American people’s faith in their government, while not recognized prior to the assassination of President Kennedy, steadily declined until the Watergate

scandal erupted. The continued revelations of scandals and conspiracies enacted by the government furthered spurred the loss of central authority.

The 1980s and 1990s revealed another spate of governmental scandals. The Savings and Loan scandal saw American taxpayers shell out over \$150 billion to rescue over 700 failed institutions. Five U.S. senators were accused of corruption for illegally intervening in a regulatory investigation into the Lincoln Savings and Loan Association on behalf of Charles Keating, Jr.<sup>116</sup> The Iran-Contra Affair uncovered that the U.S. had illegally sold weapons to Iran, via Nicaragua, in exchange for American hostages held in Iran.<sup>117</sup> The 1990s saw President Clinton being investigated for alleged illegal activities involving a real estate company called the Whitewater Development Company. Out of the Whitewater investigation came allegations that President Clinton had had an affair with White House intern Monica Lewinsky, which the president denied. President Clinton was later impeached by the U.S. House of Representatives for perjury for lying about the affair under oath in 1998.<sup>118</sup> Finally, the presidency of George W. Bush was besieged by controversy. The collapse of Enron, warrantless wiretappings of American citizens' domestic telephone calls, the outing of CIA operative Valerie Plame, allegations that the U.S. was using torture as a means to interrogate terrorist suspects, the manufactured yellowcake uranium evidence prompting the War in Iraq, the loss or destruction of millions of emails from the White House, and claims that the dismissal of eleven federal prosecutors occurred because they prosecuted Republicans and not Democrats, all helped to engender uncertainty, even fear, within the public sphere.<sup>119</sup>

The American people, cognizant that they had been repeatedly lied to, even conspired against, by their government, lost faith in central authority. The inability to determine what is true and what is (conspiracy) theory becomes a question of interpretation because there is no one

authority the people can turn to for the truth. The loss of a fixed meaning, the loss of one authoritative way to view events, leads to the indeterminacy of information that further erodes authority and provides an ample breeding ground in which conspiracy theories become particularly salient in our contemporary society.

### *Complicating Conceptions of Conspiracy*

Two documents, in particular, are important for understanding the power of conspiracy beliefs in our time: *The Warren Commission Report* and *The 9/11 Commission Report*.<sup>120</sup> The most obvious significance of these two documents is that they represent discourses that were called into being as the official accounts of two tragic events in American history: the assassination of President John F. Kennedy and the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. Blue ribbon commissions created to investigate national tragedies are hardly new. Indeed, almost every national tragedy in our history has resulted in the formulation of a commission designed to investigate the causes of the event and possible courses of action the administration in power may take in order to assuage the public's concerns and fears.<sup>121</sup> What makes these two Commissions unique is the degree to which they were designed to limit belief in conspiracy theories forwarded as explanations for the two events.

To some degree, the members of both commissions were aware of the conspiracy beliefs permeating the public sphere prior to the completion of their reports. *The Warren Commission Report*, in its preface, notes that the "rumors and speculations" surrounding the death of President Kennedy dictated that they not only investigate the alleged conspiracies, but also dispel false rumors that had reached the public.<sup>122</sup> Thomas Kean and Lee Hamilton, the Chair and Vice Chair of the 9/11 Commission, were also acutely aware of the claims of conspiracy existing in

the public prior to the publication of the *9/11 Commission Report*. Kean and Hamilton, in their memoir about the Commission stated “September 11 has generated its own share of conspiracy theories ... These questions ranged from small to large, rational to irrational ... Some questions [the more irrational] we dealt with indirectly .... Other, more reasonable questions we dealt with directly.”<sup>123</sup> Significant in this passage is Kean’s and Hamilton’s acknowledgement that not only were they aware of conspiracy theories, but they directly confronted only those they deemed rational and only indirectly confronted those they defined as irrational. In recognizing that conspiracy theories were already in circulation, both commissions inadvertently acknowledge areas of conflict—conflict between the discourse they constructed and the conspiracy arguments they were attempting to dispel—within their texts. How both the commissions handled beliefs in conspiracies in their discourses gives insight into the rhetorical choices that were made in the course of compiling the responses.

In addition to being official discourse, the Warren and 9/11 Commission reports represent two of the most significant responses to conspiracy theories in our time; interestingly, the discourses that were shaped to combat these theories share some of the generic elements of conspiracy arguments. As the above statements from commissioners on both the Warren Commission and the 9/11 Commission indicate, these two reports were obligated to address certain issues because of public discourses already in circulation. Neither report had the luxury of simply setting out an affirmative case providing the official explanation of events. Both reports are defensive and refutative, the agenda being largely set by popular conspiracy discourse. Reconstructing the logic and reasoning in the reports is crucial in determining the interplay that exists between official discourse and conspiracy beliefs. The Warren and 9/11 Commission reports are public documents, and, as such, official memos, minutes of meetings,

and all other evidence not deemed a matter of national security are available, largely online. Moreover, members of both Commissions have written memoirs about the proceedings and the roles they played within them. Examination of the commission reports, in particular, and the discourses surrounding them, provides a wealth of information that provides perspective about the ways in which commissioners attempted to craft texts that spoke to the rhetorical exigencies of the events themselves, but also what they did to attempt to quell the tide of conspiracy.

The Warren and 9/11 Commission reports are significant for another reason—both are products of our contemporary era. These two reports represent two very different moments in our era: the *Warren Commission Report* was written while the loss of central authority was prepubescent, and the 9/11 Commission came into being after the loss of central authority was thoroughly entrenched. As Knight notes, President Kennedy’s assassination has been determined by many postmodern scholars, including Frederic Jameson and Jean Baudrillard, as “being on the cusp of a crisis of representation.”<sup>124</sup> However, Knight argues that the culture of conspiracy that has emerged, one that forwards a “causally coherent narrative about growing skepticism towards the authority of experts and the government,” finds its roots in the creation of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) in 1947 and the burgeoning intelligence community of the security state.<sup>125</sup> The erosion of the American people’s faith in their government, precipitated by the revelation of actual governmental conspiracies enacted by the government against the people, raises the awareness that “there is no certain way of knowing ... [what] is true ... [A] lingering suspicion always remains; nothing is ever quite as it seems; no ‘final report’ ever ensures that the case is truly closed.”<sup>126</sup> Examination of the Warren and 9/11 Commission reports, two texts existing at very different moments in our contemporary era, offers insight into the similarities and differences in the challenges the commissioners faced while composing their discourse.

Finally, the most significant attribute of both commissions' reports is the degree to which they have been unable to quell conspiracy beliefs. By many accounts, President Kennedy's assassination is the "mother lode" of all conspiracy theories with roughly 75 percent of the American public believing that Lee Harvey Oswald did not act alone.<sup>127</sup> However, the *9/11 Commission Report* itself is gaining ground as more people begin to question the report. A 2006 Zogby poll indicated that 42 percent of the population believed that the 9/11 Commission and the federal government were covering up significant evidence that points to the causes and reasons behind the 9/11 terrorist attacks, while only 48 percent believed there was no cover-up. In the same poll, 45 percent of the population believed that 9/11 should be reinvestigated while 47 percent believed it was a sound and thorough investigation.<sup>128</sup> In a Scripps Howard poll, over a third of the population believed that the United States government actually aided in the planning and implementation of the terrorist attacks of 9/11.<sup>129</sup> Although the 9/11 Commission was not plagued with the same degree of disbelief that existed for the Warren Commission, the fact that nearly half of those who were polled expressed doubt indicates there is a large degree of skepticism existing within the public sphere.

On the surface, it seems claims of conspiracy of both the murder of President Kennedy and the terrorist attacks of 9/11 follow current conceptions of conspiracy argument. A minority (although a significant minority) of the population during a time of social strain and anxiety were able to infect the larger public imagination with their suspicions. To some degree, both *The Warren Commission Report* and *The 9/11 Commission Report* had to anticipate some of the suspicions of conspiracists, and were thus drawn into a dialogue with conspiracy discourse. What is significant is that neither document has been able to significantly quell claims of conspiracy. In fact, over time, belief in conspiracy has grown rather than diminished. Why are conspiracy

theories able to force official discourse into a dialectical relationship? What does this dialectical relationship say about the conspiratorial contexts in which it was produced? What are the political implications that such relationships between conspiracy theories and official discourse have for the future? The answers lie within an examination of the power of conspiracy through the lens of official discourses.

### *Uncovering the Genre and Crisis of Conspiracy*

In order to explore the rhetorical power of conspiracy theories through the lens of official discourse, I employ a multi-methodological approach to study my texts, which recognizes the utility of drawing from a number of theoretical models that allow for the building of an artistic and insightful theory while adhering to scholarly rigor. Although the *Warren Commission Report* and the *9/11 Commission Report* are themselves worthy of study, a more compelling reason is understanding and exposing the intersection between these two texts and the conspiracy theories that informed them while recognizing that there are other forces at work in the make-up of the discourses. Notable scholars in the rhetorical community have used similar approaches in their works to build highly influential and provocative theories in rhetoric. Such scholars include James Darsey in *The Prophetic Tradition and Radical Rhetoric in America*, Michael Pfau in *The Political Style of Conspiracy: Chase, Sumner, and Lincoln*, and Stephen O'Leary in *Arguing the Apocalypse: A Theory of Millennial Rhetoric*.<sup>130</sup>

Of particular import to this study is Lloyd Bitzer's discussion of the rhetorical situation. Bitzer argues that discourse comes into being because of its rhetorical situation, which is "a natural context of persons, events, objects, relations, and an exigence which strongly invites utterance."<sup>131</sup> Bitzer explains that "an exigence is an imperfection marked by urgency; it is a

defect, an obstacle, something waiting to be done, a thing that is other than what it should be.”<sup>132</sup>

Put more simply, an exigence is something that demands explanation. Exigencies are explained by rhetorical audiences, which are those “capable of being influenced by discourse and of being mediators of change.”<sup>133</sup> Yet, audiences face constraints when constructing their discourses.

Constraints are elements that “have the power to constrain decision and action needed to modify the exigence” and consist “of persons, objects, events, and relations.”<sup>134</sup> The combination of exigence, audience, and constraints are constitutive of the rhetorical situation.

The tragic death of a young president and the terrorist attacks were certainly remarkable enough to call forth the creation of discourse to modify the public’s perceptions of the events. As a direct result, two independent bipartisan commissions were created to serve as the rhetorical audiences of the two tragedies. However, the exigencies of the assassination of President Kennedy and the terrorist attacks of 9/11 contained more than just the assassination and the attacks. The murder of Lee Harvey Oswald, President Kennedy’s alleged assassin, while in police custody complicated the exigencies of the assassination. Similarly, the subsequent invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq after the terrorist attacks added intricacy to the exigencies of the terrorist attacks. Uncovering the complexities of the rhetorical situations for both the Warren and 9/11 Commission reports required examining numerous texts including various media accounts, scholarly works, and the memoirs written by members of both Commissions. Within these texts I looked for clues that would lend insight into the rhetorical situation and how it influenced the shape of the Warren and 9/11 Commission reports. For instance, numerous scholars have posited that the Warren Commission was formed to specifically combat conspiracy beliefs that existed in the public sphere.<sup>135</sup> The formation of the 9/11 Commission was motivated, in part, by the very public lobbying of the 9/11 victims’ families. The complicated

exigencies that led to the creation of the Warren and 9/11 commissions, and the subsequent discourses both commissions created in response, were subject to other forces that helped to shape their missives.

In order to provide a “fitting” response to the assassination of President Kennedy and the terrorist attacks of 9/11, the Warren and 9/11 commissions had to address not only the rhetorical situations, but also the greater social and political contexts into which they entered. Determining the political, social, and historical contexts required examination of historical texts and media that recounted what was transpiring in the country before and during the investigations of both commissions. For instance, the Cuban Missile Crisis occurred just a year prior to the assassination of President Kennedy, and the Civil Rights Movement was in full swing at the time of the president’s death. The highly contested presidential election of 2000 created a highly partisan atmosphere in the public, and the collapse of Enron, just a month after the terrorist attacks, further fueled the doubt and uncertainty in the public in the wake of the attacks. The contexts into which each commission entered were marked by a high degree of uncertainty in the public sphere.

Conspiracy theories, as we have seen, are more likely to flourish during times of social strain. Conspiracy theories about the assassination and the terrorist attacks occurred almost immediately after the events. In the case of the Warren Commission, most of the public believed that President Kennedy’s death occurred at the hands of a conspiracy. The terrorist attacks were a conspiracy. Even so, theories about who was behind the attacks circulated within days. As time passed beliefs in conspiracy theories grew as more information came out about the intelligence failures of the FBI. Beliefs in conspiracy, for both commissions, inherently influenced their

discourses. Of particular concern was uncovering the different conspiracy theories in circulation in the public before the release of both commissions' reports.

A vast amount of literature exists on both the assassination of President Kennedy and the terrorist attacks of 9/11. In order to determine which conspiracy theories were in circulation prior to the publication of the *Warren Commission Report*, I relied on reading articles on the "Academic JFK Assassination Website," which provides an enormous amount of information on the assassination of President Kennedy and the controversy surrounding it. Significantly, the website provides pre-Warren Commission accounts of the assassination from the right, left, and center of the political spectrum.<sup>136</sup> On the website, Kenneth A. Rahn provides articles written in response to President Kennedy's death beginning on November 22, 1963, through September 27, 1964. The articles that were the most informative about the conspiracy theories that existed prior to the publication of the Warren Commission's report were written by Revilo P. Oliver, Martin Dies, Bertrand Russell, M. S. Arnoni, Jack Minnis and Staughton Lynd, Harold Feldman, Eric Norden, Victor Perlo, Leo Sauvage, and Mark Lane.<sup>137</sup> From the articles, five central concerns were raised by conspiracists: where the shots came from; the magic bullet and the problems the autopsy evidence posed; the lack of a discernible motive on the part of Oswald and his actions before and after the assassination; the underworld ties of Jack Ruby; and the possibility that agents of the government were complicit in the assassination.<sup>138</sup>

Seemingly limitless sources detailing the conspiracy theories in the public sphere prior to the release of the *9/11 Commission Report* similarly exist. For the sake of expediency, I limited my choice of texts. One of the most well-known and well-respected texts published before the 9/11 Commission's report is *The New Pearl Harbor* by David Ray Griffin.<sup>139</sup> Within, Griffin provides a compendium of some of the most popular conspiracy theories in circulation during the

aftermath of 9/11. While my analysis is largely dependent on Griffin, other sources were used to determine what conspiracy theories were circulating prior to the release of the Commission's report. Mathias Broeckers' *Conspiracies, Conspiracy Theories, and the Secrets of 9/11*, originally published in Germany in 2002, gave a more complete account of some of the conspiracy theories alluded to in Griffin's book.<sup>140</sup> Senator Bob Graham's book, *Intelligence Matters*, was also instructive in illuminating some of the conspiracy theories that gained force after the publication of Griffin's and Broeckers' books.<sup>141</sup> From the literature, there are four broad themes that they share and on which they base their theories of conspiracy: The reasons behind the decision of the U.S. to invade Iraq; the problems concerning the inability for the FAA and NORAD to effectively coordinate on 9/11; the mystery surrounding the flights of Saudi nationals who were allegedly allowed to leave the country before the airspace ban was lifted, the funding behind the terrorist attacks; and, the evidence that existed about Osama bin Laden's role in the terrorist attacks.

Understanding the rhetorical situations that instructed both texts was only part of the analysis. Genre criticism is an essential methodological tool for uncovering the interplay between conspiracy arguments and the substance of the Warren and 9/11 Commission reports. While I am not arguing that these two reports are representative of a rhetorical genre, others have argued that conspiracy theories do represent a generic classification.<sup>142</sup> The *Warren Commission Report* and the *9/11 Commission Report*, while being influenced by, and taking on significant substantive, stylistic, and situational characteristics of, the conspiracy genre, lack the signature element of conspiracy theories; their hermetically sealed nature. Both commissions' reports inherently served as an intermediary step in the formation of the archetypal conspiracy argument. In order to understand the degree to which both discourses were influenced by conspiracy

arguments, and how they, in turn, influenced conspiracy theories, it is necessary to approach both texts with generic sensitivity. Genre criticism provides a method that uncovers the individual features of a discourse that, when combined, characterize a rhetorical form. In this way, genre criticism allows for determining the degree to which discourses engage in dialogues with one another, shape and influence each other's texts.

Work in rhetorical criticism posits that genres are characterized by substantive, stylistic and situational constellations that make up these forms. "A genre," according to Karlyn Kohrs Campbell and Kathleen Hall Jamieson, "is a group of acts unified by a constellation of forms that recurs in each of its members. These forms, *in isolation*, appear in other discourses. What is distinctive about the acts in a genre is the recurrence of the forms *together* in isolation."<sup>143</sup> While individual forms attributed to conspiracy arguments may be found in other discourses, it is the pattern of the forms, taken together, that signify the conspiracy argument. Building on Campbell and Jamieson's classification of genre, Carolyn Miller argues that genres are dependent upon the situations from which they arise.<sup>144</sup> Miller asserts that genres are dependent on "typified rhetorical actions based in recurrent situations."<sup>145</sup> For Miller, genres should be classified based on "the actions [they are] used to accomplish."<sup>146</sup> Miller's conceptualization of genre is based on a hierarchy of meaning. Form and substance fuse to make up a genre, and then that genre serves as the substance of the next level of meaning. Context becomes an integral aspect of genre precisely because it influences the way acts are viewed and understood.<sup>147</sup> Both essays promote the idea that the recurrence of substance, form, and situation are necessary components in a given genre. Miller's work adds that the context must also be taken into consideration.

Genre criticism required a close reading of my primary texts in order to isolate the substantive and stylistic characteristics that fused together to construct the form of the argument

each commission employed. Reading the reports of both commissions through the lens of conspiratorial discourse provides insight into how both texts were influenced by the conspiracy theories in circulation in the public. Significantly, in combating claims of conspiracy, both commissions' discourses took on some of the generic characteristics of conspiracy arguments.

Conspiracy theories about the assassination of President Kennedy were never marginal beliefs.<sup>148</sup> Unlike Hofstadter's assertion that once conspiracy theories are addressed by authorities, they fade back into the periphery of society, conspiracy theories about the assassination continued to grow after the release of the *Warren Commission Report*.<sup>149</sup> The inability of the Warren Commission to successfully contain conspiracy theories is indicative that it was not able to maintain its discursive authority over conspiracy theories. Understanding why the Commission was incapable of maintaining its authority required an examination of the nexus between conspiracy theories and the Commission's report.

In my examination of the *Warren Commission Report*, I looked at rhetorical indications of authority, presumption and the burden of proof in concert with the argument from absence, the paradox of substance, the use of massive amounts of evidence, and internal consistency, which, as noted above, are generic elements of conspiracy arguments. Of central concern was examining how the Commission chose to handle claims that Oswald had a confederate in the assassination. In refuting claims that Lee Harvey Oswald was involved in a conspiracy plot, the Warren Commission directly confronted claims by attempting to negate them based on argument from absence. Argument from absence, according to Darsey, is constructed to imply that the absence of evidence is evidence for a proposition.<sup>150</sup> In negating claims that there was a conspiracy in place to assassinate the president, the absence of evidence of conspiracy becomes evidence that there was no conspiracy. It is a negative argument used in an attempt to shift the burden of proof

onto those who were making claims that there was a conspiracy. The Commission's decision to directly confront conspiracy claims, and its use of argument from absence to do so, is indicative that the Commission did not have argumentative presumption. If the Warren Commission had presumption, then, as Whately characterizes it, one need do nothing.<sup>151</sup> However, because the Warren Commission felt compelled to attack conspiracy beliefs by asserting that the absence of evidence of a conspiracy was evidence that there was no conspiracy, the Commission was, rhetorically, indicating that it lacked presumption over conspiracy theories.

In addition to uncovering how the Warren Commission handled claims that the assassination was the result of a conspiracy was determining how it managed claims that agents of the government, especially those employed by the FBI, CIA, and Secret Service, were involved in a conspiracy plot. The Warren Commission was put into a paradoxical position. On the one hand, the Commission was supposed to conduct an independent and thorough investigation. On the other hand, the Commission was dependent on the investigations of federal legal agencies implicated in conspiracy charges. Being forced into a paradox because of conspiracy claims is indicative that the Warren Commission, if it were to be believed, would have to make a case for its position. The Commission attempted to resolve its position through the use of the paradox of substance. A paradox of substance, according to Burke, is a declaration of what something is not in order to determine what something is.<sup>152</sup> Rhetorically, it was necessary to look at the language the Commission uses to explain its relationship with the federal legal agencies. The Commission's declaration of what its relationship was, based on Burke's characterization, is indicative of what it is not. In essence, it was necessary to look at how the Commission attempted to resolve the paradox of being dependent on and independent of federal investigative agencies.

The Commission took on other generic characteristics of conspiracy arguments. In attempting to overcome the lack of a discernible motive for Oswald's actions, the Commission faced a substantial task in piecing together something that would be creditable for the public to believe in explaining why Oswald shot the president. The Commission examined everything from Oswald's own writings, to reports from his childhood, to what information they could harvest from Oswald's time in the Soviet Union. However, there was no single tangible reason the Commission found to explain Oswald's action. As Hofstadter, Creps, Young, Launer, and Austin, and Dean note, conspiracists churn out massive amounts of tangentially related evidence in order to convince the audience of the soundness of their conclusions.<sup>153</sup> Instead of being an accumulation of the evidence that arrives at a sound conclusion, it is a desperate attempt to provide the audience with overabundant proof in order to overcome the doubt that exists about the conspiracist's conclusions."<sup>154</sup> In piecing together a motive for Oswald the Commission produced an overwhelming amount of tangentially related evidence in order to provide a creditable motive for the alleged assassin and is indicative that the Commission was attempting to overcome both its own, and the public's, doubt about why Oswald murdered the president.

Finally, it was necessary to uncover how the Commission attempted to overcome the problems the evidence of the location of the shots, the nature and location of the president's wounds, and the maneuverings the magic bullet posed. Significant contradictions existed among the evidence. Conflicting reports about the location and nature of the president's wounds existed between the doctors who attempted to save the president's life and the results of the autopsy report. The FBI report's discussion of the number and targets of the shots fired directly contradicted with the Commission's own explanation. In attempting to overcome the evidentiary inconsistencies, the Commission resorted to drafting an internally consistent narrative in order to

overcome the problems the evidence posed. Conspiracy arguments, according to Hofstadter, allow “no room for mistakes, failures, or ambiguities.”<sup>155</sup> The Commission went to great pains to resolve any contradictions that existed between the varying accounts of the evidence. No contradictions went unresolved, no ambiguities were left unexplained, all of the evidence the Commission ushered to present its case had to unequivocally back its conclusion.

Examination of the *9/11 Commission Report* was, in some ways, remarkably similar to that of the Warren Commission, and completely different in others. Like the Warren Commission, conspiracy theories were already in circulation within the public sphere before the formation of the Commission. And, like the Warren Commission, conspiracy theories have continued to flourish after the release of the 9/11 Commission’s report. The 9/11 Commission, unlike the Warren Commission, chose to handle conspiracy claims largely only indirectly rather than directly. In examining the 9/11 Commission Report at looked at the areas of contestation that existed between the conspiracy theories in the public and how the Commission handled those of areas of conflict within its text.

While the 9/11 Commission did only indirectly disputed conspiracy claims, it still took on some of the generic characteristics of conspiracy arguments. Specifically, the 9/11 Commission adopted the stance of the hyper-objective observer diagnosing the causes for the evils that were unleashed. In recounting the failures that befell the coordination of the country’s defenses, the Commission used massively documented technical information. Accounting for the financing of al Qaeda operatives and the flights of Saudi nationals from U.S. airspace saw the Commission adopting argument from absence to refute conspiratorial understandings. Finally, the Commission cast blame onto the shoulders of a single enemy cast into the role of the perfect enemy.

Conspiracists were overtly concerned with the reasons as to why the country invaded Iraq after 9/11. In examining the *9/11 Commission Report*, I looked at the Commission's explanation for the war and, noticeably absent was the Commission's conclusions as to why Iraq was invaded. Instead of taking on conspiracists claims, and rather than supporting the Bush administrations reasons for war, the Commission, instead, cast itself in the role of the hyper-objective observer. According to Hofstadter, the use of hyper-objectivity is a defensive move. Conspiracists, rather than attempting to persuade their audiences, simply relay the facts and let them speak for themselves.<sup>156</sup> In other words, hyper-objectivity is the absence of explanation for information that confronts the one's stance. The information that is provided neither confirms nor denies other positions, it only supports the position of the conspiracist.

While the linchpin in most 9/11 conspiracy theories centers on the War in Iraq, significant concerns were raised about the failures of the FAA and NORAD to effectively coordinate and prevent some of the damage. Conspiracists posited that the failures of the FAA and NORAD were the result of a stand-down order issued by those in the highest reaches of government and backed their claims by citing the protocols that were in existence between the agencies as well as pointing to the inaccurate testimony provided by the agencies' officials. In handling the failures of the FAA and NORAD to effectively coordinate, the Commission employs a massively documented myriad of technical details to back their conclusion that the failures of the FAA and NORAD stemmed from inexperience and a lack of information. Because technical information is not the result of carefully constructed, replicable experiments, the information can be carefully constructed to back anyone's position if argued correctly.<sup>157</sup> Conspiracists used the protocols to make their case, and the 9/11 Commission used them to make their case. In presenting its evidence, the 9/11 Commission provides an explanation of the

protocols of in dense, technical prose. Instead of explaining what the protocols mean, the Commission simply provides its evidence and arrives at its conclusion.

The Commission also had to account for the flights of the Saudi nationals who allegedly left the U.S. prior to the re-opening of national airspace and the financing behind al Qaeda. Conspiracists charged that the ability of the Saudi nationals to leave the country was evidence that the White House was involved in covering-up the real causes behind the terrorist attack. As Kean and Hamilton note, they chose to focus on the conspiracy theories about the Saudi nationals and the financing of al Qaeda operatives because examination of these two areas of contestation could provide insight into the operational maneuverings of the terrorists.<sup>158</sup> In confronting the evidence, however, the 9/11 Commission employs the absence of evidence as evidence that no conspiracy existed. As noted above, the use of absence of evidence as evidence that there is no conspiracy is an attempt to shift the burden of proof onto those who would contend otherwise. It is a negative argument used in an attempt to prove a proposition that cannot possibly proven.

The final conspiratorial strategy used by the 9/11 Commission was the construction of the perfect enemy. Conspiracists had long charged that the real culprit behind the terrorist attacks was the Bush administration. After all, how could anyone but a state power overcome the defenses of the country? Instead of lending such claims any credence, the Commission cast blame for the attacks solely onto the shoulders of Osama bin Laden and al Qaeda using a carefully constructed perfect enemy. Hofstadter argues that the perfect enemy holds almost mythical power, is infinitely cunning, can bend the will of history, and is motivated by evil.<sup>159</sup> Rhetorically, depictions of the enemy are dramatic in form and contain lurid imagery in order to impress on the audience the power the enemy possesses and the danger the audience is in.

The constellation of argument from absence, paradox of substance, massively documented evidence, and internal consistency is indicative that the Warren Commission, at least to a degree, participated within the genre of the conspiracy argument. Unlike mature conspiracy theories, the Warren Commission is unable to take on the signature element of the conspiracy genre, its self-sealing nature, because the discourse is a closed, fixed narrative. Similarly, the combination of the 9/11 Commission's use of hyper-objectivity, massively documented technical information, argument from absence, and the construction of the perfect enemy is indicative that it, too, participated within the conspiracy genre. And, like the Warren Commission the 9/11 Commission lacked the hermetically-sealed signature element of the conspiracy genre. The consonance of the substantive characteristics of the Warren and 9/11 Commission reports is indicative that both commission's arguments participated within the conspiracy genre.

The rhetorical sleight-of-hand conspiracy arguments employ make them a particularly slippery subject of study. Current conceptions of conspiracy offer that these tricky arguments are based on absences, are self-reinforcing, and are hermetically sealed. Rather than the previously diagnosed pathology, contemporary belief in conspiracy is indicative of a general suspicion of, and cynicism about, institutions of power. Official discourses enter the public sphere severely hampered by the loss of central authority and the indeterminacy of information, but also by the persuasive force of conspiracy beliefs. Official discourses are no longer able to simply advance affirmative arguments; they are forced to respond to the conspiracy discourses already existing within the public sphere, which enters the two disparate discourses into a dialogue. Official discourse is no longer in control of its own agenda and the intersection between conspiracy beliefs and official discourse is a battleground for legitimacy being waged through, on the one

hand, a discourse that is able to adapt to cultural and temporal changes, and on the other hand, a discourse that is fixed and static but is supposed to signify the “definitive” and “final” conclusion. The Warren and 9/11 Commissions’ reports, in particular, are examples of official discourse affected by pervasive belief in, and power of, conspiracy in our era.

The significance of this dissertation is threefold; most significantly, it contributes to a more precise and comprehensive understanding of the rhetorical power of conspiracy arguments in contemporary society, specifically by demonstrating how conspiracy narratives shape official narratives. Secondly, the study provides insight into the interaction of official discourses and conspiracy discourses (especially as they currently exist). Finally, such a study has implications for understanding the direction of political life under our current social and political conditions.

### *Chapter Overview*

Chapter two provides an analysis of the relationship between conspiracy beliefs and the discourse of the *Warren Commission Report*. I pay particular attention to instances where the Warren Commission directly, and indirectly, confronts both the conspiracy theories that were in circulation within the public sphere, and those that were reasonably expected to surface. These moments of conflict are instructive as to how the Warren Commission employs rhetorical techniques to construct its discursive authority, as well as its attempts to maintain its authority over conspiracy theories. Moreover, I examine the Warren Commission’s attempt to diminish beliefs in conspiracy theories reasonably expected to surface as a result of the Commission’s discourse. Specifically, I examine the Commission’s use of evidence in making its case for what would come to be termed by conspiracists as the magic bullet as well as its attempt to construct a compelling motive for the alleged assassin, Lee Harvey Oswald. A thorough examination of

situational cues, constraints, and the instances where the report diminishes its own authority gives insight into the agenda-setting capabilities of conspiracies and the inability of official discourse to handle these claims in our era.

Chapter three examines the *9/11 Commission Report*, my second case study. As with the *Warren Commission Report*, I focus on the relationship between conspiracy beliefs and the *9/11 Commission Report*, paying attention to the ways in which the discourse confronted conspiracy claims and how the 9/11 Commission dealt with these claims. Furthermore, the 9/11 Commission came into a time in which conspiracy theories had already reached a level of maturity unseen by the Warren Commission. While the Warren Commission had to anticipate how conspiracy theories would burgeon, many of the conspiracy theories the 9/11 Commission confronted had already displayed the trajectory of their arguments. The 9/11 Commission's rationale for, and how they ultimately dealt with these more mature conspiracy theories is particularly insightful, especially in the wake of the failures of the Warren Commission to contain similar conspiracy claims. Finally, the terrorist attacks were a conspiracy and, in some regards, there is a closer affinity between the discourse of the 9/11 Commission and those of conspiracy arguments, especially as they pertain to the characterization of the enemy.

Chapter four highlights the implications of this study. This dissertation is ultimately about the agenda setting power of conspiracies and the inability of official discourse to deal with these claims effectively. The loss of central authority and the indeterminacy of information have given rise to the power and belief in conspiracy theories. Roughly forty years exists between the exigencies calling the two texts of this study into being. The *9/11 Commission Report*, although called into being by different exigencies but with a similar purpose to the *Warren Commission Report*, built upon the strengths of the Warren Commission and attempted to alleviate any of its

weaknesses. There is a discernable difference between the ways both texts handled claims of conspiracy, but there are also remarkable similarities. The similarities and the differences between the two discourses are expanded upon. Finally, the chapter focuses on how conspiracy theories in our contemporary times affect governance. When conspiracy theories are unable to be quelled by official discourse, when conspiracy theories become the preferred way of significant segments of the public's understanding of the ways things are, then the ability for government officials to do anything for the public good, be it enacting healthcare reform, expanding social programs, or even attempting to cut taxes or create jobs, these attempts by officials can, and do, get labeled as a conspiracy against the people. The ability to effectively govern is seriously diminished because everything can be labeled, and be believed, as a conspiracy.

## CHAPTER 2

AUTHORITY, *ETHOS*, AND PARADOX:REFUTING CONSPIRACY IN THE *WARREN COMMISSION REPORT*

*"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. We decided long ago that the dangers of excessive and unwarranted concealment of pertinent facts far outweighed the dangers, which are cited to justify it."*

*—President John F. Kennedy*

Conspiracy theories about the assassination of President Kennedy circulated within the public sphere nearly as soon as the first bullet rang out on that ill-fated November day in Dallas. The events that continued to play out during that remarkable weekend—the capture and detention of Lee Harvey Oswald, the subsequent uncovering of Oswald's defection to the Soviet Union and his Cuban sympathies, and Oswald's murder by Jack Ruby—all led the country, its leaders, and, indeed, leaders throughout the world, to believe that the death of President Kennedy was the result of a conspiracy. Within a week of the assassination nearly 70 percent of the American public, including President Johnson and Jacqueline Kennedy, believed that the deaths of the president and Oswald were part of a conspiracy, despite the fact that the media latched onto what Barbie Zelizer termed the master narrative of the lone gunman.<sup>1</sup> Not surprisingly, given the Cold War context in which the assassination took place and the fact that the suspect, Oswald, had at one time defected to the Soviet Union, some of the first conspiracy theories

circulating within the public sphere posited that President Kennedy's assassination was the result of a vast Communist conspiracy.<sup>2</sup> The fear that a Communist conspiracy was in place to assassinate President Kennedy politicized the event and caused fear and anxiety within the public.

Several notable historians and cultural scholars assert that because so many people suspected a conspiracy, and because President Johnson believed that conspiracy beliefs left unchecked could lead to nuclear war, the President's Commission on the Assassination of President John F. Kennedy (which would become popularly known as the Warren Commission) was convened.<sup>3</sup> Thus, if the Warren Commission was convened, at least in part, to combat conspiracy beliefs, then it was incumbent upon the Warren Commission to respond to and investigate such claims.<sup>4</sup> The subsequent investigation of, and response to, conspiracy claims is indicative of a relationship between the Warren Commission and conspiracy theories that has either not been recognized or has remained largely unexplored, a relationship that existed *prior* to the compilation of the *Warren Commission Report*.<sup>5</sup>

The need to address conspiracy claims made it impossible for the Warren Commission to simply make an affirmative argument by laying out the case against Oswald in the assassination of President Kennedy, and telling the American people what happened, who was responsible, and why it occurred. The cultural force of conspiracy theories complicated the means by which the Commission could combat the very real fear that conspirators involved in the assassination were still at large. Rather than providing the American public with discourse with which it could relate, the Warren Commission attempted to contain belief in conspiracy by asserting its authority in making its case. This turn to authority also led to the excesses and peculiarities of the *Warren Commission Report*, and is what firmly grounds the report within the contemporary

social and cultural conditions, namely, the loss of central authority. As Alan Nadel explains, “The inability to produce a coherent narrative, because it is, and necessarily must be, duplicitous, amoral, and promiscuous,” lies with the loss of central authority that is no longer recognized as “monologic, theologic, and sexually domesticated.”<sup>6</sup> The attempt to reconstitute a monologic authority, as engendered in the metanarrative of the *Warren Commission Report*, I argue, was a direct result of the need to undermine belief in conspiracy, and it is this need that drew the *Warren Commission Report* into a dialogue with conspiracy theories and led to the rhetorical excesses in the text. In attempting to dispel conspiracy beliefs, the Warren Commission took an aggressive stance against conspiracy theories through argument from absence, the paradox of substance, the use of massive evidence, and the construction of an internally consistent narrative that used technical language which made the narrative inscrutable to the general American public. If conspiracy discourse is able to contort the official accounts of significant historical events, then the cultural force and argumentative power of conspiracy theories is revelatory of significant political and social implications, especially as they exist in our times.

### *The Early '60s: A Center That Would Not Hold*

The belief that President Kennedy was killed as a result of a Communist conspiracy was engendered in the pervasive fears of communism in the postwar world. After World War II, the United States emerged as the reigning military and political power in the world. The sole ability of the U.S. to harness the power of nuclear weaponry gave a tactical advantage to the political and militaristic moves of the country. Beliefs in American superiority permeated the cultural landscape, but, regardless of those beliefs, there was a sense of anxiety that also permeated society. The specter of communism loomed large over the U.S. As the horrors of Stalin’s purges

became more widely known, and as Stalin continued to occupy more and more political states and put them under his regime under what would become known as the Eastern Bloc, tensions between the U.S. and the Soviet Union grew. Tensions between the two powers mounted in postwar America, especially after it was learned that the Soviets had successfully detonated their first nuclear bomb in September 1949.<sup>7</sup> The loss of the monopoly the U.S. had over the nuclear arsenal fueled fear and anxiety, and, as a result, Stephen Whitfield argues, a new kind of Cold War warrior emerged consisting of a super-patriot who adopted draconian policies to contain not only the threat of communism from abroad, but the perceived fear of communism within the country.<sup>8</sup> Nadel explains that while the official foreign policy of the United States was one of containment, containment was also the rhetorical strategy used “to foreclose dissent, preempt dialogue, and preclude contradiction” among the American people.<sup>9</sup> This politicization of American culture, according to Whitfield, led to “the suffocation of liberty and the debasement of culture itself, frequently from Americans imposing repression on themselves.”<sup>10</sup> The super-patriots to which Whitfield alludes restricted freedoms and adopted the totalitarian “methods of their Communist enemies” in order to combat communism abroad and at home. Anyone who was perceived as being sympathetic to the Communist cause was inherently suspect in the hyper-sensitive postwar world.

Fears of Communism played out in the battle that was waged in the 1960 election between the Democratic candidate, Senator John F. Kennedy, and the Republican candidate, Vice President Richard M. Nixon. Both candidates renounced Communism as a matter of course. Nixon, in the 1952 campaign, had claimed “there’s one difference between Reds and Pinks. The Pinks want to socialize America. The Reds want to socialize the world and make Moscow the world capital.”<sup>11</sup> Nixon went further and identified “the progressive wing of the Democratic

Party” as Pinks.<sup>12</sup> Since Nixon’s anti-Communist stance was well known by the 1960 election, Whitfield asserts that suspicion was directed at Kennedy for potential Communist sympathies.<sup>13</sup> Kennedy fought such suspicions by arguing that the Republicans had allowed a missile gap between the U.S. and the Soviet Union, and that they had allowed Communism to invade too close to home on the island of Cuba.<sup>14</sup> Kennedy won the 1960 election in one of the narrowest margins in American history; his victory signaled a liberal re-awakening in the country and fueled communist fears on the political right.<sup>15</sup>

One of President Kennedy’s challenges was how to handle the problem of Communism. Just months after his inaugural address, President Kennedy would give the go-ahead for the top-secret invasion of Cuba, which had been in the works of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) since the previous year under the Eisenhower administration. The Bay of Pigs Invasion, as it became known, was a complete fiasco and dealt a crushing blow to President Kennedy and his administration. According to David Steigerwald, the aftermath of the invasion “won [Castro] an enormous propaganda victory, and Kennedy looked weak.”<sup>16</sup> Critics on the right claimed that President Kennedy’s involvement in the Bay of Pigs Invasion was, as Revilo P. Oliver wrote, a “disgrace . . . not merely by ignominious failure, but by the inhuman crime of having lured brave men into a trap and sent them to suffering and death.”<sup>17</sup> Rightist critics would even find cause to criticize President Kennedy’s handling of the Cuban Missile Crisis, which occurred a little over a year after the Bay of Pigs Invasion.

On October 16, 1962, U.S. intelligence revealed that the Soviet Union was building missile sites in Cuba and President Kennedy issued a demand to the Soviet premier, Nikita Khrushchev, for them to be dismantled. Six days after President Kennedy first learned of the missiles, he ordered the U.S. Navy to blockade Cuba and then went on television and announced

the crisis to the American people. The United States was on the brink of nuclear war with the Soviets. But President Kennedy's strategy worked and Premier Khrushchev "agreed to remove the missiles in exchange for Kennedy's promise that the United States would never invade Cuba" and, in a secret deal between the two world leaders, President Kennedy agreed to remove U.S. nuclear weapons from Turkey.<sup>18</sup> Both the Americans and the Soviets were able to claim victory over each other, and the Cuban Missile Crisis allowed President Kennedy to ease tensions with the Soviets.<sup>19</sup> The outcome of the crisis and the easing of tensions with the Soviets caused some to believe that President Kennedy was working "in close collaboration with Khrushchev ... [in order] to provide for several months a cover for the steady and rapid transfer of Soviet troops and Soviet weapons to Cuba for eventual use against us."<sup>20</sup>

President Kennedy's support of the Civil Rights Movement also spurred criticisms from the right. Marilyn Young argues that Robert Welch and the John Birch Society forwarded arguments that the method the communists might use to take over the United States included "fomenting ... internal civil strife in this country, with the Communists aiding their side in every way."<sup>21</sup> As Young argues, the John Birch Society's position, as it pertained to the Civil Rights Movement, was that the "racial turmoil" that was occurring "has been and is being fomented by Communists."<sup>22</sup> Thus, any aid that President Kennedy provided to the Civil Rights Movement, including federalizing the Mississippi National Guard and sending regular Army troops to force James Meredith's acceptance into the University of Mississippi, and the Kennedy administration's proposed legislation that would lead to the Civil Rights Act of 1964, could, and was, viewed as evidence of a Communist takeover by Welch and those who followed him.<sup>23</sup>

The early 1960s, plagued with fears of communism, fueled beliefs that the Communist hold on America was increasing. Actions by President Kennedy that were perceived as soft on

communism and his actions that backed the Civil Rights Movement served as proof for some of the pernicious Communist influence running rampant in the United States. As the 1960s would play out, the political left, too, would forward claims of a vast establishment conspiracy, but those only largely gained hold after the publication of the *Warren Commission Report*. Instead, the Warren Commission was thrust into an environment that was pervaded by fears of a Communist takeover and nascent fears of an establishment coup. In such an environment, it comes as no surprise that the explanation for the assassination of President Kennedy would generate so much skepticism.

#### *Forming an Authoritative Body*

Upon release of the news that President Kennedy had been shot, bedlam erupted. The people clamored for immediate information and the press tried to keep up with their demands. As reporters waited outside of Parkland Memorial Hospital, inaccurate accounts of the president's wounds, the number of shots fired, and even the premature announcement of the president's death occurred as the press endeavored to gain information and to understand how, and most especially why, such a young and vigorous man became the victim of an assassin's bullet.<sup>24</sup> Tension and misinformation mounted upon the arrest of Lee Harvey Oswald.

With Oswald's arrest, Dallas Police Headquarters became the scene of utter pandemonium. Reporters jammed into hallways and corridors, virtually blocking entrances and exits. The police were unable to control the flow of information, which resulted in fragments being reported and skewed.<sup>25</sup> Speculation abounded, and questions of conspiracy flooded newswires as well as television and radio broadcast accounts of the assassination, especially after it was learned that Oswald had attempted to renounce his U.S. citizenship in favor of the Soviet

Union and that he was a Cuban sympathizer.<sup>26</sup> Newspapers reported on Oswald's guilt, dropping the presumption of innocence, and while the world conveyed its shock and dismay over the events in Dallas, fear and tension climbed as people claimed President Kennedy's death had all of the earmarks of a government coup.<sup>27</sup>

Fear of a foreign conspiracy mounted when, fewer than forty-eight hours after the president's death, Oswald, in full view of the cameras of national news networks, was shot and killed while in police custody.<sup>28</sup> Fidel Castro and the Soviet Union claimed the assassination was part of a right-wing plot, and Castro blamed Mexico for implicating him in the murder of President Kennedy.<sup>29</sup> Others looked to the reputation of Dallas as a bastion of right-wing radicals; the liberal Adlai Stevenson had been the victim of an attack only a month earlier while visiting Dallas.<sup>30</sup> While the media was attempting to assert its narrative authority over the happenings in Dallas, blame and finger-pointing ensued as different legal agencies attempted to explain the events surrounding the president's assassination.

As the press fought for access to information, local, state, and federal investigative agencies lobbied for the authority to investigate the president's death. Initially, responsibility for conducting the investigation of the assassination fell under the purview of the Dallas police. After Oswald's death, the Dallas police issued a statement indicating they considered the case closed. However, leading Dallas and state officials sought to reassure the public that the importance of the case made it necessary for their investigation to continue. Texas Governor John Connally, also wounded from the shots that felled President Kennedy, called for a state inquiry. The Secret Service, worried about its reputation as the protector of the president, was quick to look at what went wrong. The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) launched its investigation immediately after it became known the president was shot. President Johnson

encouraged the FBI to continue its investigation after Oswald's death. The Department of Justice (DOJ) sent Assistant Attorney General Herbert J. Miller, Jr., to Dallas in an advisory capacity, despite the fact that the DOJ had no control over state and local investigations.<sup>31</sup> The uncertainty, questions, and claims of conspiracy circulating among the public, including beliefs that President Kennedy was killed as part of a Communist plot, that there was a connection between Oswald and Jack Ruby, that racists were the cause of the assassination, and that the bullet wound in President Kennedy's neck was an entrance wound, coupled with the various legal agencies posturing for the authority to investigate the assassination, necessitated that a unified and communal means be constructed by which the assassination would be investigated and understood.<sup>32</sup>

The exigencies of the assassination needed to be interpreted rhetorically; a coherent narrative that would give meaning to the event was called for. The chaotic flow of information surrounding the assassination, filled with as many facts as there were suspicions, and the posturing for authority to investigate the president's and Oswald's murders culminated in a climate filled with uncertainty about what had happened, who was responsible, why it had happened, and, more important, who was in charge. Uncertainty engenders fear and requires an explanation, one that reassures the public and simultaneously provides it with a means by which to interpret the situation.<sup>33</sup> In an effort to streamline information and to assuage the American public's, and indeed the international community's, fears and anxiety, Kennedy's successor, President Lyndon B. Johnson, called for a presidential inquiry into the events of President Kennedy's assassination and Oswald's murder.<sup>34</sup> *The New York Times* stated, "President Johnson has acted with wisdom and dispatch to clear up all the doubts surrounding President Kennedy's assassination and the cycle of horror it initiated."<sup>35</sup> This inquiry, as it became popularly known,

was the Warren Commission. Headed by Supreme Court Chief Justice Earl Warren, the seven-person Warren Commission brought a wealth of legal knowledge to the investigation of President Kennedy's death. The Warren Commission was to serve as the voice, the rhetorical audience, of the assassination.

Significant constraints were leveled against the Warren Commission before it even began its investigation, what Lloyd Bitzer, borrowing from Aristotle, refers to as artistic and inartistic.<sup>36</sup> Although the Commission was given broad legal powers, including subpoena and immunity powers, it lacked the funding and resources to conduct a completely independent investigation.<sup>37</sup> Furthermore, the Commission was constrained by time. On the one hand, the Commission was pressured by President Johnson to conduct its investigation quickly, pressure viewed by some as inspired by the upcoming 1964 presidential election. On the other hand, the members of the Commission were enormously busy men, dividing their time among such entities as the U.S. House of Representatives, the U.S. Senate, the U.S. Supreme Court, the World Bank, and their responsibilities to the Commission.<sup>38</sup>

In addition to time and responsibility constraints, the Commission faced significant problems with the evidence. The primary suspect, indeed the only suspect, in the assassination of the president was dead, which made it impossible for the Commission and the American people to reach closure through trial proceedings. Key elements of the investigation were completed (i.e., the collection of evidence at the scene and the autopsy of the president) before the Commission had an opportunity to take part in the investigation, or to direct any subsequent actions. Key pieces of evidence were overlooked, mishandled, or disappeared.<sup>39</sup> Secret Service agents, and other critical law enforcement officials, failed to secure the "scene" of the assassination with the first agents not returning until "approximately 20 to 25 minutes after the

shots were fired,” which opened up the possibility that witnesses were not detained to take their statements.<sup>40</sup> Governor Connally’s shirt was sent to the dry cleaners before being examined by forensic and ballistic experts; only two bullets were found (although the Commission repeatedly asserts that three shots were fired); the original notes taken during the autopsy of President Kennedy’s body were burned; x-rays of the president’s body went unexamined by the commissioners (allegedly to protect the privacy of the president and his family); and the autopsy report issued by the pathologists at Bethesda Naval Hospital directly conflicted with the autopsy report issued by the FBI, which was largely summarized by the press after its release to the Warren Commission.<sup>41</sup> Similarly, conflicting evidence existed between the FBI report on the assassination, which was released mere weeks after the assassination, and what the Warren Commission would forward to the public, which would pose problems that the Commission would have to overcome in its narrative.

Most significant, however, was the Commission’s dependence on the secretive and territorial federal legal agencies that were not only responsible for carrying out their own investigations of the assassination and on which reports the Commission would largely rely, but such agencies, especially the FBI, were implicated in conspiracy charges. Commissioner Gerald Ford, in his memoir on the Warren Commission, wrote that, just weeks after the Warren Commission convened for the first time, Texas Attorney General Waggoner Carr informed the Commission of an allegation that Oswald was an FBI informant.<sup>42</sup> The commissioners immediately met to determine what could be done to not only determine the veracity of the claim, but to also discuss how to proceed. According to Ford, Commissioner Allen Dulles, who was the former director of the CIA, stated, “This is a terribly hard thing to disprove.”<sup>43</sup> Moreover, Ford penned, “Mr. Boggs observed with some uneasiness, ‘What you do is make out

a problem, if this be true—make our problem utterly impossible, because you say this rumor can't be dissipated under any circumstance.”<sup>44</sup> The inability to disprove such allegations, according to Ford, weighed heavily on the Commission. Ford wrote, “These observations by Allen Dulles pinpointed the difficulty the Commission would face in dealing not only with the possibility that Oswald might be an FBI agent but also with all the myriad rumors that the imaginations of thousands of writers would create in the next thousand years. They dramatized the complexity of the Commission's charge.”<sup>45</sup> Ford's passage is important for three reasons. First, it demonstrates that the Commission was aware of the claims of conspiracy that were circulating within the public. Second, it alludes to the overwhelming burden the Commission would have in dispelling conspiracy beliefs. Finally, it demonstrates that the Commission was cognizant of conspiracy claims that would undoubtedly come to light in the ensuing months and years.

The Commission had to form a narrative that provided the American people with a coherent accounting of the assassination and the myriad information that addressed the rhetorical exigencies of the assassination, including the murder of Oswald, the conflicting news reports, and the claims of conspiracy.<sup>46</sup> Not only did the Warren Commission have to determine who was responsible for the deaths of President Kennedy and Oswald, they simultaneously had to overcome the serious constraints the evidence posed, and compete with other entities for authority over the investigation; and, as Ford illustrated in his memoir, at least one underlying reason for the discourse was to disprove conspiracy beliefs. Instead of simply telling the people who killed the president, the Warren Commission was forced into creating a discourse that, in Edward Jay Epstein's words, “restore[d] public confidence, dispel[led] rumors of foreign intrigue, and protect[ed] the national interest.”<sup>47</sup> In other words, the task of the Warren

Commission was to contain the claims of conspiracy, both those that existed and those that could be reasonably expected to arise. Attempting to dispel conspiracy beliefs forced the Commission to take on an enormous burden of proof and undermined the Commission's authority to narrate the events of the assassination of President Kennedy.

*Authority, Presumption, Invention, and the Burden of Proof*

The Warren Commission's reaction to, and subsequent dialogue with, conspiracy claims is dependent upon the interrelationship between authority, presumption, invention, and the burden of proof. The interplay among these elements inherently colors how the arguments within a discourse are constructed. In any argument, it is incumbent for opposing sides to determine where presumption and the burden of proof lie. Presumption, as Richard Whately characterizes it, is "such a *pre-occupation* of the ground, as implies that it must stand good till some sufficient reason is adduced against it; in short, that the *Burden of proof* lies on the side of him who would dispute it."<sup>48</sup> The question of which side carries presumption is the determining factor for how, in Whately's words, "the whole character of a discussion will often very much depend."<sup>49</sup> If one has presumption on his/her side, then the rhetor has the option of simply refuting the claims being brought against him/her. However, if it is the case that the rhetor is shouldering the burden of proof, then he/she must make an affirmative case, and must provide the audience with enough evidence that his/her position is viable. Generally, presumption resides with existing institutions and with the status quo, thus the burden of proof rests with the side that counters prevailing beliefs. If the goal in an argument is to change popular assumptions, it is necessary to shoulder the burden of proof, which means it is necessary to give the audience good reasons to give up its convictions in favor of a new attitude.<sup>50</sup>

The distinction between presumption and the burden of proof, however, is not static. Instead, the interplay between presumption and the burden of proof is dynamic; it changes according to what is being argued. Whately states, “It is to be observed, that a Presumption may be rebutted by an opposite Presumption, so as to shift the Burden of proof to the other side.”<sup>51</sup> It is within this counter-play between presumption and the burden of proof, claim and counter-claim, that the concepts of authority and invention enter into how a rhetor should, or could, characterize his/her arguments. While presumption and the burden of proof exist in a dynamic state, it is no stretch to say that authority usually maintains presumption, and, therefore, authority rests with the status quo, existing institutions, and the like. Whately states, “The person, Body, or book, in favour of whose decisions there is a certain Presumption, is said to have, so far, ‘Authority’: in the strict sense of the word. And a recognition of this kind of Authority,—an habitual Presumption in favour of such one’s decision or opinions—is usually called ‘Deference.’”<sup>52</sup> Whately’s characterization implies that audiences, in general, defer to authority, and audiences defer to authority because, as Lincoln asserts, audiences subject to authority operate under the assumption that authority has the ““capacity for reasoned elaboration.””<sup>53</sup>

Lincoln posits that authority has “the capacity to produce consequential speech, quelling doubts and winning the trust of the audiences whom they engage.”<sup>54</sup> The ability for authority to produce consequential speech leads Lincoln to unfold another type of authority, discursive authority, which comes from the effect discourse has on an audience. Lincoln explains, “Discursive authority is not so much an entity as it is (1) an effect; (2) the capacity for producing that effect; and (3) the commonly shared opinion that a given actor has the capacity for producing that effect.” When a speaker’s discourse has the effect of rendering an audience silent, then it is said to have discursive authority. When discursive authority is assured, it is not

necessary for authority to forward an argument. Instead, if authority is sufficiently satisfied that it is retaining presumption, and that the audience will be satisfied with authority's position, then all authority need do is provide the audience with assertions, or claims that it "knows" in order to effectively silence an audience.

Possessing discursive authority, however, does not mean that authority cannot be challenged. When assertions made by authority are challenged, according to Lincoln, it is changed in subtle, but significant, ways because "the relation of trust and acceptance characteristic of authority is suspended, at least temporarily, in that moment."<sup>55</sup> When assertions from authority are not enough to appease the audience's expectations, and authority must, instead, provide the audience with an argument, Lincoln states that, "it ceases to be authority for the moment and becomes (an attempt at) persuasion."<sup>56</sup> It is this site of conflict that serves as a determining factor in invention and inherently determines how a rhetor will argue his/her case.

Historically, rhetorical invention has been viewed as determining what to say and how to say it. But, according to Yameng Liu, determining what to say is just one task of the rhetor. Liu states, "Equally important, and probably more difficult, is defining and redefining her own rhetorical responsibilities in such a manner that she is justified, or, we may say, *authorized*, in saying what she has to say, stopping where she feels like stopping, and bypassing what she does not want to touch on."<sup>57</sup> Liu argues that determining where a rhetor is authorized to speak not only occurs prior to invention, but serves a different function than invention. Determining "[w]hether, where, when, and in what detail" is something rhetors deal with throughout the invention process.<sup>58</sup> Moreover, invention occurs at the site of conflict over who has authority. "To invent is, in this sense," according to Liu, "to pit one authority or presumption against one another, or against itself, for the achievement of a new, relatively stable alignment of 'reputable'

opinions.”<sup>59</sup> In essence, invention is dependent upon where the rhetor has, or is trying to establish, authority and colors how the argument will be carried forth.<sup>60</sup>

Presumably, if an entity such as the Warren Commission has presumption and authority, the Commission could simply lay out its case asserting what had happened, who had done it, and why it was done. Furthermore, if the Warren Commission retained authority and presumption, then it would have the option of choosing “whether, where, when and in what detail” to refute any counterarguments leveled against its discourse. If the Commission chose not to address claims of conspiracy, that is, if it believed it maintained its argumentative presumption, then addressing conspiracy claims would not be necessary. However, if the Commission believed that its presumption was being challenged, if it believed that conspiracy claims had an equal or greater presumption, then the Commission would be compelled to come out of its fortified position and attack those claims. The choices the Commission made in confronting conspiracy claims is indicative that it felt its authority and presumption were being challenged. Attacking conspiracy claims provided them with legitimization. Whether or how the Commission chose to confront claims of conspiracy is manifested within the corpus of the *Warren Commission Report* and is most noticeable in the Commission’s treatment of conspiracy theories.

### *Establishing and Challenging Authority*

Various claims of conspiracy existed in the public sphere prior to the release of the Commission’s report, claims that had the capability, if left unanswered, to undermine the Commission’s conclusions. While the media may have lauded the efforts of President Johnson to convene the Warren Commission, there were others who challenged not only President Johnson’s right to do so, but also questioned whether the Commission would uncover the “truth”

about the assassination. Critics on the right of the political spectrum argued that the truth of the assassination would never be known because of a vast and sinister Communist conspiracy. Critics on the left believed that the truth would not be uncovered because the real power behind the conspiracy would make sure that the “real” evidence would never come to light. Both the political right and left forwarded similar claims, although the villain behind the conspiracy differed between the accounts, and both challenged the authority of the Warren Commission, albeit in different ways.<sup>61</sup>

Critics on the political right claimed that the Warren Commission was an illegal act that attempted to hide the truth of a vast Communist conspiracy from the American people. For instance, Congressman Martin Dies, in the *American Opinion*, wrote:

What Constitutional authority is there for such a Presidential commission? Why was not the Committee on Un-American Activities, or the Senate Internal Security Subcommittee permitted to conduct the probe? And why did President Johnson ignore the proposal of a close personal friend of the President and a member of the Presidential commission, that a bipartisan Committee of Congress conduct the investigation? Why was it deemed necessary to establish a commission of dubious Constitutional authority—to say the least—handpicked by a President seeking reelection?<sup>62</sup>

Dies further iterated he doubted whether the Warren Commission would arrive at the truth because “there are strong and compelling political reasons, as well as present international factors, to influence this probe and prevent a full disclosure of all of the ugly facts that have been camouflaged for years but have now come to a climax in the assassination of President Kennedy.”<sup>63</sup> Similarly, Oliver wrote, “In a hasty and thus far successful attempt to thwart an investigation by legally constituted Authorities . . . an illegal and un-Constitutional ‘special

commission' was improvised with the obvious hope that it could be turned into a Soviet-style kangaroo court."<sup>64</sup> While the right expressed doubts, not only about the legality of President Johnson convening a commission, but also that the Warren Commission would uncover the truth, i.e., the Communist conspiracy to take over the United States, the political left also expressed doubts that the Warren Commission was capable of arriving at the truth and challenged the actions of the Commission.

Members of the political left believed that the Warren Commission would fail to uncover the truth because the powers that be, the secretive and territorial agencies of the federal government who were the real power in the Washington establishment, would make sure that the evidence the Commission received showed only what the power establishment desired. M.S. Aroni, in the *Minority of One*, wrote that the Warren Commission was "primarily intended as a whitewash, to convince the people that everyone has done his job and that no significant parts are missing from the jig-saw puzzle." Aroni asserted that the Commission would "primarily review evidence gathered by other investigative bodies." Such investigations would, according to Aroni, make any evidence "indiscernible" because "[t]he possibility can by no means be dismissed that important men in Washington do know the identity of the conspirators, or at least some of them, and that these conspirators are so powerful that prudence dictates that they not be identified in public."<sup>65</sup> Bertrand Russell similarly asked "*Why were all the members of the Warren Commission closely connected with the U.S. Government?*"<sup>66</sup> Even though the commissioners' ties to the government were damaging enough in Russell's mind, the conduct of the Commission "confirmed one's worst fears" about the veracity of the Commission's findings.<sup>67</sup>

In essence, the right was challenging the authority of the president to convene a commission (which was evidence of a conspiracy), while the left was challenging the verifiability of the information the Commission would receive and the veracity of its actions (which was evidence of a conspiracy). Both the right and left claimed that truth about the assassination would never come to light because of a vast and sinister conspiracy existing within the government.

The Warren Commission attempted to combat such claims by strenuously arguing that it had authority over the narrative of President Kennedy's assassination. Even in establishing its authority, however, the Commission faced challenges that had to be dealt with within the text and is indicative that the Commission was not wholly in charge of its own agenda, that its authority was being challenged by other forces. Historically, Lincoln tells us that authority is categorized into two types: executive and epistemic. Executive authority comes from those who are "in authority" and epistemic authority consists of those people who are "experts."<sup>68</sup> Because both forms of authority have the capacity to "produce consequential speech," it is necessary to demonstrate, through discourse, the type of authority the rhetor possesses. Both executive and epistemic authorities were retained by the Warren Commission in investigating and narrating the happenings of the assassination of President Kennedy.

The Warren Commission was empowered, was authorized, by President Johnson to narrate the happenings of President Kennedy's assassination and the subsequent murder of his alleged assassin, Lee Harvey Oswald. The Commission writes, "President Lyndon B. Johnson...created this Commission to investigate the assassination ... of John Fitzgerald Kennedy, the 35<sup>th</sup> President of the United States. The President directed the Commission to evaluate all of the facts and circumstances surrounding the assassination and the subsequent

killing of the alleged assassin and report its findings and conclusions to him.”<sup>69</sup> The Warren Commission, by way of executive authority, was given the right to tell the story of the assassination. Additionally, by way of being the investigative body, the Warren Commission also took on the mantle of epistemic authority.

In order to demonstrate its epistemic authority, the Commission underscores the legal and investigative expertise of the commissioners and its staff. For instance, the Commission states, “As Chairman of the Commission, President Johnson selected Earl Warren, Chief Justice of the United States, former Governor and Attorney General of the State of California.”<sup>70</sup> All of the commissioners are introduced along with their current titles, which enhances their executive authority through the mantle of their offices, or former offices, along with other information that might heighten their epistemic authority. The same tactic is used in introducing the Commission’s staff when it states, “The Commission has been aided by 14 assistant counsel with high professional qualifications ... This staff undertook the work of the Commission with a wealth of legal and investigative experience and a total dedication to the determination of the truth.”<sup>71</sup> In highlighting the credentials of the staff, the Commission was establishing its epistemic authority.

Through its executive and epistemic authority, the Warren Commission established its mandate to provide the American public with “consequential speech,” which has the capacity to “quell doubts and win the trust” of the American public in its narration of the assassination. To do so, the Commission stated that its objective was “to identify the person or persons responsible for both the assassination of President Kennedy and the killing of Oswald through an examination of the evidence,” “and [to] report its findings and conclusions to [President Johnson].”<sup>72</sup> The Commission further states, “The task has demanded unceasing appraisal of the

evidence by the individual members of the Commission in their effort to discover the whole truth.”<sup>73</sup> It was important for the Commission to set forth its epistemic authority in investigative matters to instill confidence in the audience that it had the capacity for reasoned elaboration. Indeed, the Commission was so concerned with establishing its epistemic authority that it framed its report as an extension of the guiding principles of the United States, “a country dedicated to the concepts of reasoned argument and peaceful political change” through the recognition of “the right of people everywhere to full and truthful knowledge.”<sup>74</sup> As a matter of course, the Warren Commission “endeavor[ed] to fulfill that right and to appraise this tragedy by the light of reason and the standard of fairness ... with a deep awareness of [its] responsibility to present to the American people an objective report of the facts relating to the assassination.”<sup>75</sup> The Commission was arguing that its report was an extension, not only of its own epistemic authority, but also the epistemic authority of the American people.

Given the executive and epistemic authorities of the Warren Commission, it should come as no surprise that the commissioners viewed their mandate as the singular, definitive, and final narrative of the assassination. The Commission states that it “viewed ... [its task] as an unequivocal Presidential mandate to conduct a thorough and independent investigation.”<sup>76</sup> The Commission’s method for arriving at its conclusion “necessarily differed from those of a court conducting a criminal trial of a defendant before it, since under our system there is no provision for a posthumous trial.”<sup>77</sup> As a result of its objective, and the necessary departure from criminal proceedings, “the Commission functioned neither as a court presiding over an adversary proceeding nor as a prosecutor determined to prove a case, but as a factfinding [sic] agency committed to the ascertainment of the truth.”<sup>78</sup> In essence, the Commission asserted that it was serving what Kenneth Burke classified as a subordinate of the scene from an essentially

materialist philosophical view.<sup>79</sup> In other words, the Commission claimed that it was simply providing unvarnished information, simply the facts of the president's and Oswald's deaths.

The Commission, however, had to address the fear that the president's murder was the result of a conspiracy. The opening paragraphs of the report build emotive intensity for the necessity of an independent investigation. "The subject of the Commission's inquiry was a chain of events which saddened and shocked the people of the United States and of the world ... In the United States and abroad, these events evoked universal demands for an explanation."<sup>80</sup>

Essentially, the Commission was attempting to tap into the grief of the nation in order to legitimize its existence, which is further iterated two paragraphs later. The Commission writes:

The events of these 2 days were witnessed with shock and disbelief by a Nation grieving the loss of its young leader ... Theories and speculations mounted regarding the assassination. In many instances, the intense public demand for facts was met by partial and frequently conflicting reports from Dallas and elsewhere. After Oswald's arrest and his denial of all guilt, public attention focused both on the extent of the evidence against him and the possibility of a conspiracy, domestic or foreign. His subsequent death heightened public interest and stimulated additional suspicions and rumors.<sup>81</sup>

While the Commission acknowledges that rumors and suspicions mounted as a consequence of the media frenzy that ensued in the wake of the assassination, the promise behind the Commission's prose is that it, in its subsequent pages, will reveal the answer to the mystery surrounding the assassination. It was aware of the fears gripping the public, but the Commission was committed to finding the truth.

Interestingly, while the Commission goes to great lengths to establish its authority, the emotional needs of the public center on addressing the fears that a conspiracy was responsible

for the death of President Kennedy. If the Commission felt it was maintaining its argumentative presumption, and if the Commission felt it was maintaining its discursive authority, then the choice by the Commission to address conspiracy fears would not be necessary. The fact that the Warren Commission felt compelled to address claims of conspiracy within its discourse is indicative that it felt that its presumption and authority was being challenged by other forces. The conflict between the authority of the Warren Commission to narrate the story of the assassination, and that of conspiracy theories, is indicative of the burdens the Commission was to bear throughout the corpus of the text. These sites of contestation are not only a challenge to authority, but are also the locations where the Warren Commission is drawn into a dialogue with conspiracy theories.

Walter Fisher contends that dialogues are not only a literary form, but (citing Martin Buber) are instances ““where each of the participants really has in mind the other or others in their present and particular being and turns to them with the intention of establishing a living mutual relationship between himself and them.””<sup>82</sup> While the Warren Commission may not have wanted to establish a dialogue, a relationship, between itself and conspiracy claims, its acknowledgement of “rumors and suspicions,” and its investigation of them, gives such claims a modicum of legitimacy. And, in creating a dialogue with conspiracy theories, it was important for the Commission to know what the counter-position was so that it could argue against it. Michael Billig argues, “The rhetorical approach emphasizes that any attitude is more than an expression in favour of a position: it is also implicitly or explicitly an argument against a counter-position. Thus, in order to understand an attitudinal position, one must know the counter-attitudinal position. This is especially relevant to the conspiracy theory of politics.”<sup>83</sup> Inherently, by being aware of, and attempting to combat claims of, conspiracy, the Warren Commission

established a dialogue with conspiracy arguments and, in doing so, took on some of the generic characteristics of the conspiracy narrative.

While the Commission went to great lengths to establish its authority to investigate the assassination of President Kennedy, the need for it to address conspiracy theories within the text is indicative of the erosion, however slight, of authority. Had the Commission had simple authority, then the need to address conspiracy claims would not have come into play. However, because conspiracy claims were already believed by a significant portion of the population, it was necessary for the Commission to address such claims. What is particularly salient is how, rhetorically, the Commission chose to respond and, equally important, where it believed it had presumption and where it was shouldering the burden of proof.

#### *Presumption, Authority, and Argument from Absence*

The interrelationship between presumption and authority is manifested in the Commission's use of argument from absence and serves as an indicator that not only is the Commission engaged in a dialogue with conspiracy arguments, but, in doing so, takes on the characteristics of conspiracy argument. Using argument from absence suggests that the Commission was attempting to negate beliefs in conspiracy by attempting to make conspiracy arguments shoulder the burden of proof, an indication that, at the very least, there were two entities, in Whately's words, vying for presumption—the Warren Commission and the status quo (or conspiracy arguments). The Commission attempted to win this presumptive war through its use of argument from absence.

The ability of proponents of conspiracy theories to shift the burden of proof onto their opponents has long been noted by rhetorical scholars and serves as one of conspiracy theories' most powerful tools.<sup>84</sup> David Zarefsky notes that, because conspiracy theories are virtually

impossible to prove or disprove, the side that wins—the conspiratorial side or the side arguing against a conspiracy—depends “upon who shoulders the burden of proof.”<sup>85</sup> Generally, when offering a claim, it is incumbent upon the proponents to provide a prima facie case to support their contention. Conspiracy theories, however, reverse this position. Conspiracists offer claims and then defy disputants to disprove such claims. Frequently, those countering conspiracy arguments are forced into arguing there is no conspiracy by asserting that there is no evidence to support the claims. In the logic of conspiracy arguments, however, the absence of evidence becomes evidence that there is a conspiracy afloat. The use of absence of evidence, then, allows for those making conspiracy claims to retain presumption. Whately states, “If you have the ‘Presumption’ on your side, and can but *refute* all the arguments brought against you, you have, for the present at least, gained a victory: but if you abandon this position, by suffering this Presumption to be forgotten, which is in fact *leaving out one of, perhaps, your strongest arguments*, you may appear to be making a feeble attack, instead of a triumphant defence.”<sup>86</sup> The Commission’s use of argument from absence to counter conspiracy claims is indicative that it was attempting to force the burden of proof onto the shoulders of conspiracists and assert its authority.

There was a very real fear within the public that the assassination of President Kennedy was the result of a conspiracy. Considering that the Warren Commission was, in part, convened in order to root out conspiracy claims, the Commission was forced to take on a double burden of proof—proving that Oswald was the lone assassin while simultaneously proving that there was no conspiracy. The Commission was placed into an untenable situation; it was forced to attempt to disprove claims of conspiracy, a task that is impossible. In its attempt to disprove conspiracy theories, the Commission resorted to the use of argument from absence.

The narrative of the Commission's report is bedeviled with places where argument from absence, rather than accumulation of evidence, is used to make the argument, although the most telling examples are contained within the chapter titled, "Investigation of Possible Conspiracy" and the Appendix titled "Speculations and Rumors."<sup>87</sup> The Commission asserts that most of the conspiracy claims brought to bear centered on four basic questions: "Was Lee Harvey Oswald really the assassin of the President; why did he do it; did he have any accomplices; and why did Ruby shoot Oswald?"<sup>88</sup> While most of the chapter is dedicated to the investigation of Oswald's background, including his time in the Soviet Union and his political activities once he returned to the United States, a significant amount of rhetorical energy centers on refuting the possibility of Oswald having a confederate in planning the assassination.

The Commission, in several instances, used argument from absence as a means to combat conspiracy claims. For instance, Oliver argued that Oswald might "have missed connections with some agent of the Conspiracy who was to transport him to the airport, and it may be significant that, when observed on the street, he was walking directly toward the apartment of the Jakob Rubenstein (alias Jack Ruby) who later silenced him."<sup>89</sup> The Commission countered such claims by asserting, "There is no evidence that Oswald and Ruby knew each other or had any relationship through a third party or parties. There is no evidence that Oswald knew where Ruby lived. Accordingly, there is neither evidence nor reason to believe that Oswald was on his way to Ruby's apartment when he was stopped by Tippit."<sup>90</sup> In essence, the Commission was not only negating claims that Oswald and Ruby knew each other, it was similarly negating beliefs that there was more to the conspiracy than simply the assassination, that Oswald, as a result of getting caught, had to be "taken out."

Similarly, if other testimony existed that seemingly linked Oswald with a confederate, the Commission impugned the testimony of the witnesses by calling into question the credibility of the witnesses and the veracity of their claims. For instance, numerous claims were made implying a relationship between Oswald and Ruby. Far too frequently, no real evidence is given to support the Commission's stance. For instance, "Wilbryn Waldon (Robert) Litchfield II" claimed to have seen Ruby and Oswald together at the Carousel Club. The Commission responded to this claim by asserting that it "had substantial doubts concerning Litchfield's credibility" because he had failed to inform the Commission of "his observation until December 2, 1963," and he "had twice been convicted of offenses involving forged checks."<sup>91</sup> The Commission furthers its stance by proclaiming, "All assertions that Oswald was seen in the company of Ruby or anyone else at the Carousel Club have been investigated. None of them merits any credence."<sup>92</sup> A great deal of time is spent attempting to negate the Ruby-Oswald connection because of beliefs that the mafia was somehow involved in the assassination plot. In order to combat claims of a mafia motive behind the actions of Ruby, who is, as Eric Norden writes, "A petty hoodlum with ties to Chicago and Los Angeles gangs and a record of union racketeering," the Commission responds with, "There is no credible evidence that Jack Ruby was involved in the criminal underworld. Investigation disclosed that no one in either Chicago or Dallas who had any knowledge that Ruby was associated with any organized criminal activity."<sup>93</sup> The Commission is attempting to negate an organized crime angle by asserting that there was "no evidence to support" such claims.

The Commission concluded that Oswald acted alone in the assassination because it "found no evidence that anyone assisted Oswald in planning or carrying out the assassination," it "found no evidence that Oswald was involved with any persons or group in a conspiracy to

assassinate the president,” and it “found no evidence to show that Oswald was employed, persuaded, or encouraged by any foreign government to assassinate President Kennedy.”<sup>94</sup>

Because there was no evidence to support conspiracy claims, there was, by the Commission’s logic, no conspiracy. But, a negative argument, by definition, cannot be proven. Although hardly a representative sample, the prolific use of argument from absence by the Commission is being used as evidence to refute conspiracy claims, thus attempting to shift the burden of proof onto those who had raised conspiracy charges by attempting to cast doubt onto the evidence that was used to support beliefs in conspiracy.

The Commission similarly uses argument from absence to disabuse the American public of the belief that Oswald was acting under the direction of a foreign power. The Commission notes that there were allegations that Oswald “received aid from one or more persons or political groups, ranging from the far left to the far right of the political spectrum, or from a foreign government, usually either the Castro regime in Cuba or the Soviet Union.”<sup>95</sup> For instance, Dies asserts that Oswald’s communist beliefs are proof that he was operating under the direct commands of the Soviet Union because “Communists never commit political crimes except in obedience to orders of superiors.”<sup>96</sup> To back up his assertions, Dies offers an excerpt taken from “the first Report issued unanimously by the Dies Committee—composed of Democrats, Republicans, ‘Liberals,’ and conservatives.” The Dies Committee disclosed that “The Communists in the United States openly admit their allegiance to the Communist International at Moscow, and glory in the fact that they obey all the orders issued from there immediately and implicitly.” Furthermore, Dies adds, “The Communist International is dominated by the Russian Communist party and Soviet officials, and could not exist without the wholehearted support of the leaders of the Russian Communist party and the financial backing of the Soviet

Government.”<sup>97</sup> By Dies’ logic, the fact that Oswald had defected to the Soviet Union and was an avowed Marxist, which Dies asserts is synonymous with Communist, and because Communists never enact political crimes without express commands from the leaders in the Soviet Union, the only possible explanation was that the assassination of President Kennedy was the result of a Communist conspiracy.<sup>98</sup>

While the Commission acknowledges that there may have been a political motive behind Oswald’s actions, it does virtually everything within its power to liberate the audience beliefs that the USSR was involved in a conspiracy. For instance, the Commission asserts that Oswald “volunteered to give the Soviet officials any information that he had concerning Marine Corps operations, and intimated that he might know something of interest.”<sup>99</sup> However, the Commission immediately follows the passage by cautioning that “[n]o evidence had been found that they used him for any particular propaganda or other political informational purposes.”<sup>100</sup> Similarly, the Commission quotes Secretary of State Dean Rusk as saying, “I have seen no evidence that would indicate to me that the Soviet Union considered that it had an interest in the removal of President Kennedy or that it was in any way involved in the removal of President Kennedy.”<sup>101</sup> Secretary Rusk further iterated, “I have not seen or heard of any scrap of evidence indicating that the Soviet Union had any desire to eliminate President Kennedy nor in any way participate in any such event.” Secretary Rusk concludes by stating that “it [orchestrating the assassination of President Kennedy] would be an act of rashness and madness for Soviet Leaders to undertake such an action as an active policy. Because everything would have been put in jeopardy or at stake in connection with such an act. It has not been our impression that madness has characterized the actions of the Soviet leadership in recent years.”<sup>102</sup> The Commission used an absence of evidence, almost to the point of inanity, to reiterate the point that there was no

evidence to indicate there was a political conspiracy involving the USSR afloat. The overabundant use of phrases such as there “is no evidence” is indicative that there was doubt, suspicion, of a political conspiracy. The Commission further attempted to deflate beliefs in a political conspiracy by including Secretary Rusk’s characterization that such actions would be “rash” and “mad” on the part of the Soviets. Thus, the Commission was attempting to negate beliefs that there was a political conspiracy, but they were further attempting to prove that a political conspiracy would have been “mad” on the part of the Soviet Union.

The double burden of proof into which the Warren Commission was thrust, proving Oswald was the lone gunman and proving that there was no conspiracy, necessitated that the Commission alleviate any doubt that there was a conspiracy behind the assassination of the president. In essence, the Warren Commission was forced into disputing conspiracy claims by using the same type of argument conspiracists use to forward their own claims of conspiracy. The Commission’s use of argument from absence was an attempt to shift the burden of proof onto conspiracy charges in order to cast doubt upon the assertions of conspiracists, but conspiracy theories, by definition, refuse to shoulder the burden of proof. As Whately stated, when one is shouldering the burden of proof, then one must provide the audience with good reasons to give up its beliefs. Instead, the Warren Commission was simply providing the American public with negations of conspiracy claims; it was providing the audience with a set of assertions that there was no conspiracy instead of providing the audience with reasons. The logic the Commission used to arrive at its conclusion, that there was no conspiracy, was based on the absence of evidence that there was a conspiracy.

While arguments from absence are most notably used by conspiracy theorists, they are not isolated to conspiracy arguments. Darsey notes that such arguments may be made in haste,

desperation, or even disinformation.<sup>103</sup> Inherently, in order to assuage the conspiratorial fears and doubts of the audience, the Commission had to resort to using a defensive argument, a legislative strategy used by an entity that was not conducting a trial. Using the absence of evidence as evidence makes the argument become tautological, one that echoes the age-old debate between parents and their offspring that answers the question “why” with “because I said so” rather than an actual attempt to persuade the audience that there was no conspiracy. But, the absence of evidence as evidence is more than tautological; it is a paradox, and paradox is used to counter other conspiracy beliefs and to attempt to resolve the problem of authority.

### *Authority and Paradox*

The Warren Commission faced far more complex claims of conspiracy, ones that could not be simply refuted by the Commission through argument from absence or argument from authority. Instead, the Commission was forced into a paradox of substance because of its dubious relationships with the secretive and territorial agencies of the federal government. What made the relationship between the Warren Commission and federal agencies so problematic was that these agencies themselves were implicated in conspiracy claims to assassinate the president. As noted above, the Warren Commission was made aware of claims that Oswald was a paid informant of the FBI early in its investigation. The American people were similarly made aware of such claims. For instance, an article in *The Nation* asserted that the Warren Commission “*must* tell us if the FBI or any other government intelligence agency was in any way connected with the alleged assassin, Lee Harvey Oswald. At this moment, the possibility of such associations in the young man’s life is intolerably a subject for speculation.”<sup>104</sup> The Commission acknowledges that there were “[r]umors and speculations that Oswald was in some way associated or used by the

agencies of the U.S. Government ... Insinuations were [also] made that Oswald had been a CIA agent or has some relationship with the CIA.” In addition to the alleged relationship with the CIA, there were also allegations that Oswald was an operative for the FBI. The Commission notes that there was “[s]peculation that he [Oswald] had some working relationship with the FBI.”<sup>105</sup> Yet the Commission was utterly reliant on using these same agencies to investigate the assassination, thus setting up a paradox the Commission could not completely reconcile.

Burke notes that the “word ‘substance,’ used to designate what a thing *is*, derives from a word designating something that a thing is *not*.”<sup>106</sup> For Burke, this moment represents alchemy, where a rhetor is able to capitalize on the inability to resolve two incommensurate claims and exploit the situation for their own personal gains. Hark Paul Moore offers that the conjunction of the two opposing claims that form the paradox allow for a more “insightful truth” than either claim, separately, could produce.<sup>107</sup> What Burke and Moore are alluding to is that through an examination of what a proposition is stated to be, compared to what the competing proposition is stated not to be, we can uncover the actual relationship between the two propositions. What makes paradox so compelling in conspiracy theories, Darsey notes, is that “Paradox is a form of innuendo and ... lacks refutable substance; it is purely formal argument.”<sup>108</sup> One of the reasons paradox is so compelling for the conspiratorial argument is that it leads to what Jodi Dean identifies as the signature element of the modern conspiracy: suspicion.<sup>109</sup> Suspicion, according to Dean, serves to reinforce what we don’t know rather than clarifying what we do.<sup>110</sup> The most obvious place where the Warren Commission is drawn into a paradox is its treatment of the evidence provided by the FBI and other legal agencies.

The Commission had to make some interesting rhetorical maneuvers in order to make its case that the FBI or CIA were not involved in a conspiracy, and these moves led the Commission

into paradox. Rather than simply relying on the FBI, CIA, Secret Service and other agencies to conduct the investigation of the assassination, “The Commission concluded that the public interest in insuring [sic] that the truth was ascertained could not be met by merely accepting the reports or the analyses of Federal or State agencies ... [T]he premises and conclusions of those reports [were] critically reassessed.”<sup>111</sup> Instead of simply asserting that their investigation was independent and thorough, the Commission further amplifies its stance by stating it “directed requests to the 10 major departments of the Federal Government, 14 of its independent agencies or Commissions, and 4 congressional committees for all information relating to the assassination or the background and activities of Lee Harvey Oswald and Jack Ruby.”<sup>112</sup> The critical reexamination to which the Commission alluded consisted of examining the agencies’ reports, asking for all “underlying investigative materials,” and submitting “detailed requests for statements of witnesses and examinations of physical evidence.”<sup>113</sup> In essence, the Warren Commission examined the reports, determined if there were points of contention, asked for further information from the same agencies, and then had agents and directors of the agencies testify under oath.

The Warren Commission, however, could not completely conduct its own investigation, partially because it lacked the funding and resources necessary to accomplish such a feat, and partially because of the Director of the FBI, J. Edgar Hoover.<sup>114</sup> Instead, the Commission couched its dependence by asserting, “Because of the diligence, cooperation, and facilities of Federal investigative agencies, it was unnecessary for the Commission to employ investigators other than the members of the Commission’s legal staff.” The due diligence to which the Commission referred consisted of approximately 25,500 interviews conducted by the FBI along with 25,400 pages of text submitted in its subsequent reports and the 1,550 interviews

administered by the Secret Service and the 4,600 pages of information delivered to the Commission.<sup>115</sup> Certainly the sheer volume of information the agencies supplied was impressive. Still, in essence, the Warren Commission is praising the FBI, the Secret Service, and the CIA for their commitment to helping solve the murder of the president. Yet the Commission is forced to reiterate its recognition “that special measures were required whenever the facts or rumors called for an appraisal of the acts of the agencies themselves.” The fact that there were allegations that implicated the secretive and territorial agencies of the federal government as part of a larger conspiracy forced the Commission into a paradoxical position where, in order to conduct a complete investigation, it would have to investigate the same institutions that it was reliant on, partly because the scope of the Commission’s investigation necessitated that they investigate the conduct of the agents protecting the president and keeping tabs on Oswald and partly because no other investigative agencies had the access to the information the Commission desperately needed.

Conspiracy beliefs that federal legal agencies were involved in a conspiracy to assassinate President Kennedy was not the only paradoxical position into which the Commission was thrust; the Commission also faced a paradoxical position between the inner workings of the secretive agencies on which it relied and the public interest these agencies served. Edwin Black notes the paradox that institutions that inherently deal with lies, innuendo, and secrets are the same institutions that are frequently called upon to disclose the truth. Black states, “And so the paradox is, to put it crudely, that an institution bound to artifice is formed to yield disclosure. Drama puts fakery at the service of truth.”<sup>116</sup> Black’s observation needs only minor extension when dealing with secretive and territorial federal investigative agencies.

Secrecy, by its very nature, breeds distrust; it is an intentional concealment that represents a commodity, a privilege, one that is akin to mystery. Sissela Bok states, “To think something secret is already to envisage potential conflict between what insiders conceal and outsiders want to inspect or lay bare.”<sup>117</sup> Only those who have access understand the mystery because they have the benefit of full disclosure. In politics, secrets serve a hierarchical function. Black observed, “We must observe the general associations of the term ‘classified’ with ideas of having been contained, enclosed, encompassed within a category, placed in a class, ranked. We have but to extend these associations to the political sphere to see again a remarkable consonance between the idea of secrecy and the ideas of hierarchy.”<sup>118</sup> “Confidential,” “classified,” “eyes only” are all determinants of order and serve to regulate who gets to view what information while simultaneously protecting it from being seen by those unworthy.

The actions of FBI and CIA operatives are, themselves, secret, only open to those initiated, those worthy of inclusion. Yet through their actions they are attempting to ascertain the truth, the truth to serve the public interest. Having entities implicated in a conspiracy charge conducting significant portions of the investigation of the alleged conspiracy is, by its very nature, paradoxical. It stands to reason that if the FBI, CIA, and/or Secret Service were somehow involved in a conspiracy, then those agencies would be unlikely to provide evidence to the Warren Commission of their involvement.

The Commission not only had to try to reconcile the problems encountered in relying on the investigative prowess of entities implicated in conspiracy beliefs, they had to reconcile claims that measures that should have been taken to protect the president were not, or, even worse, that they were consciously neglected. For instance, Bertrand Russell wrote:

The President’s route for his drive through Dallas was widely known and was printed in

the Dallas *Morning News* on November 22. At the last minute the Secret Service changed a small part of their plans so that the President left Main Street and turned into Houston and Elm Streets. This alteration took the President past the book depository building from which it is alleged that Oswald shot him. How Oswald is supposed to have known of this change has never been explained. *Why was the President's route changed at the last minute to take him past Oswald's place of work?*<sup>119</sup>

What is significant about this claim is that it implies that the Secret Service consciously made the decision to take the motorcade past the place of employment of a known subversive. As Russell argues, Oswald was the first person identified on a list of twenty-three known subversives. Yet, while most of the known subversives on the list were followed, Oswald was left alone.<sup>120</sup> If Russell's assertions were true, that the Secret Service changed the motorcade route at the last minute to facilitate it passing the Book Depository in order to facilitate the assassination, then claims that Oswald was working in concert with governmental agencies in the assassination of the president could promote greater belief in a conspiracy.

To combat claims the Secret Service was negligent, or even that it willfully chose the route in order to facilitate the assassination, the Commission asserts that, "the route was not finally selected until November 18; it was announced in the press on November 19, only 3 days before the President's arrival. Based on the circumstances of Oswald's employment and the planning of the motorcade route, the Commission has concluded that Oswald's employment in the Depository is wholly unrelated to the President's trip to Dallas."<sup>121</sup> The fact that the Commission felt compelled to explain that the choice of the route was "wholly unrelated" to Oswald is an attempt to refute conspiracy charges. Furthermore, the Commission repeatedly asserts that the route was the most expedient and most logical route to maximize President

Kennedy's exposure to the public within the forty-five minutes allotted. The report states, "The police officials agreed that the route recommended by Sorrels was the proper one and did not express a belief that any other route might be better."<sup>122</sup> Additional testimony was added offering, "The route impressed the agents as a natural and desirable one" and "Selection of the motorcade route was ... entirely appropriate and based on such legitimate considerations as the origin and destination of the motorcade, the desired opportunity for the President to greet large numbers of people, and normal patterns of traffic."<sup>123</sup> While these statements seemingly underscore the logic used to arrive at the route of the motorcade, they are simultaneously attempting to quell conspiracy charges that the route was chosen to facilitate the assassination.

Additional moves to reaffirm that Secret Service agents were in compliance with their duties but were not complicit in a conspiracy include such observations that before, during, and after the assassination, agents were operating according to "standard procedure." For example, the Commission states, "No arrangements were made for police or building custodians to inspect buildings along the motorcade route since the Secret Service did not normally request or make such a check. Under *standard procedures*, the responsibility for watching the windows of buildings was shared by local police stationed along the route and Secret Service agents riding in the motorcade" (emphasis added). The Commission adds, "The agents in this car (the presidential follow-up car), under *standard procedure*, had instructions to watch the route for signs of trouble" (emphasis added).<sup>124</sup> Secret Service agents were also in compliance when they left behind the bubbletop frequently used to cover the open limousine because the weather was clear and sunny. The bubbletop was not bulletproof, so it would not have afforded any additional protection for President Kennedy.<sup>125</sup> Moreover, under President Kennedy's own instructions, he preferred that Secret Service agents not ride on the running boards of the presidential limousine

“except when necessary.”<sup>126</sup> By appealing to the standard, normal, and logical actions of the Secret Service, the Commission is attempting to allay suspicions that the route was changed in a last minute effort to facilitate the assassination and that the Secret Service was not part of a larger conspiracy to assassinate the president.

Relying on information provided to the Commission by entities implicated in conspiracy claims forced the Commission into a paradoxical position. On the one hand, the Commission was charged with investigating the assassination and stated that they investigated the “rumors and suspicions” alleging a possible conspiracy. On the other hand, the Commission relied on the investigations of federal legal agencies, agencies implicated in claims of conspiracy, for significant parts of their own investigation. If the FBI, CIA, or Secret Service were involved in a conspiracy, it is unlikely that those agencies would willingly disclose information that implicated them in the same conspiracy. What the Commission’s position indicates is that it was forced into an untenable situation by the conspiracy theories already in the public sphere, and that it was in a battle for discursive authority over the investigation. The Commission attempted to assuage the audience’s fears and doubts about the independence of its investigation by offering a series of assertions that spoke to the thoroughness of the investigation and the dedication of the agents of the FBI, CIA, and Secret Service. Yet, the Warren Commission was combating fear by appealing to *ethos*. It also underscores, however, that the Warren Commission believed that its authority would be enough to overcome the incommensurability between the its stated independence and its utter reliance. The tenuous hold the Commission had over discursive authority is further manifested in the attempt to determine a motive for President Kennedy’s alleged assassin.

*Authority by (Massive) Evidence*

One of the larger problems the Commission faced in its investigation and subsequent report was the lack of a discernible motive on Oswald's part. There was no manifesto uncovered revealing Oswald's reasons for murdering President Kennedy; there was no single event for which Oswald was seeking revenge by slaying the president. Instead, the Commission was forced to guess as to why Oswald would perform such a dastardly deed. As mentioned above, there were conspiracy theories in place that linked Oswald to a political motive to assassinate President Kennedy, but the Commission attempted to denigrate such claims by using argument from absence. In the Cold War world, where the world was divided between capitalists (us), and communists (them), a political motive to kill the president of the most powerful capitalist country carried considerable weight. Depicting Oswald as a profligate traitor would have been a simple and believable motive for the American public, but could also have served as a potential death knell for the relatively stable, albeit strained, relations that existed between the United States, the Soviet Union, and Cuba. In essence, the Warren Commission had to come up with a motive that could compete with the compelling and believable motives being forwarded by conspiracists such as Dies, leading the Commission to generate massive amounts of evidence to make its case, further demonstrating that it had to argue for authority rather than simply being vested with it.

The massive amount of evidence the Warren Commission uses to "convince" the audience of Oswald's motive not only mimics one of the major tools of conspiracists, it also indicates that the Commission felt the need to persuade the audience that such a mundane villain had a compelling enough motive to murder the president. Richard Hofstadter noted, "One of the most impressive things about paranoid literature is precisely the elaborate concern with demonstration it almost invariably shows ... The very fantastic character of its conclusions leads

to heroic strivings for ‘evidence’ to prove that the unbelievable is the only thing that can be believed.”<sup>127</sup> Earl Creps similarly demonstrated that conspiracy arguments present evidence en masse, overwhelming audiences with the sheer volume of information and making it virtually impossible for the audience to assess it all.<sup>128</sup> Creps states, “[T]he persuasive force of the conspiracy case is produced not by a single portion of testimony, but by simultaneous consideration of hundreds of pieces of evidence,” which are tangentially related and allow the conspiracist to, according to Marilyn Young, Michael Launer, and Curtis Austin, give the impression that the conspiracists know more than can be proven.<sup>129</sup> Jodi Dean, however, takes these observations a bit further when she notes that “conspiracy theory’s irreconcilable doubt [is what] generates massive amounts of evidence.”<sup>130</sup> Conspiracy theories contain massive amounts of evidence because, in Dean’s words, “conspiracy thinking is so uncertain that one is rarely fully convinced; instead, one becomes involved in a reiterative back-and-forth that mobilizes doubt and reassurance into a never-ending, never-reconciled account of possibility.”<sup>131</sup> One need only look at the massive amount of tangentially related evidence used to provide Oswald with a motive to illustrate the Commission’s own doubt and, therefore, uncertain authority.

The quest for the Warren Commission to determine a satisfactory motive behind Oswald’s actions that could compete with the political motives being forwarded by conspiracists forced the Commission to shoulder the burden of proof, indicating that the Commission, at least as far as motive was concerned, did not have discursive authority, that it was attempting to invent a motive that would resonate with the American public. In order to do so, the Commission had to provide the American people with a compelling reason why Oswald would do such an unspeakable act. In its attempt to determine Oswald’s motive, the Commission stated that it “considered many possible motives for the assassination, including those which might flow from

Oswald's commitment to Marxism or communism, the existence of some personal grievance, a desire to effect changes in the structure of society or simply to go down in history as a well publicized assassin."<sup>132</sup> While the Commission states that "[n]one of these possibilities satisfactorily explains Oswald's act if it is judged by the standards of reasonable men," the Commission attempts to discern a motive by linking Oswald's psychological and ideological states, which are peppered throughout the commission's report garnishing, everything from the narrative of the assassination to Oswald's alleged ties with Jack Ruby. Indeed, the Commission provides Oswald's biography in three separate places within its report.<sup>133</sup> Taken together, Oswald's psychology and his ideology (though only tangentially related) "and the many other factors which may have molded the character of Lee Harvey Oswald," states the Commission, "there emerged a man capable of assassinating President Kennedy."<sup>134</sup>

One of the other means by which the Commission teases out a possible motive for Oswald is through the use of psychoanalysis, even though the Commission could not "reach any definite conclusions as to whether or not he was 'sane' under prevailing legal standards."<sup>135</sup> By using reports garnered during Oswald's childhood, and interviewing those who knew him as an adult, the Commission used psychoanalysis to demonstrate that Oswald was an alienated and disaffected loner incapable of establishing any meaningful relationships. For instance, the Commission includes excerpts detailing the emotional neglect Oswald suffered at the hands of his mother coupled with the absence of a father figure and family life, which led psychologists from Oswald's troubled youth to diagnose him with "'personality pattern disturbance with schizoid features and passive-aggressive tendencies'" and to urge Mrs. Oswald to get Oswald the help he needed.<sup>136</sup> To reiterate its claims about Oswald's emotional problems, the Commission offered that Oswald was "'disturbed about disrobing in front of" other boys who resided with

him while at Youth House in New York and that he “slept with his mother” until he was nearly eleven.<sup>137</sup> Oswald, according to the Commission, attempted to compensate for his emotional neglect by virtue of a “‘vivid fantasy life’ turning around the topics of omnipotence and power, through which he tried to compensate for his present shortcomings and frustrations” and led him to believe he would be recognized as a “political prophet” and linked with other great historical leaders.<sup>138</sup> Similarly, the Commission notes that Oswald had “a severe inability to enter into relationships with other people.”<sup>139</sup> Oswald was “profoundly alienated from the world in which he lived. His life was characterized by isolation, frustration, and failure. He had very few, if any, close relationships with other people and he appeared to have great difficulty in finding a meaningful place in the world. He was never satisfied with anything.”<sup>140</sup> In essence, in order to combat conspiracy claims of a political motive the Warren Commission was attempting to assemble an overwhelming amount of evidence in order to paint Oswald as a kook, as a malcontent, as a man who was unwilling and incapable of forming any type of relationship.

Not only did the Commission generate a massive amount of evidence to characterize Oswald as a disaffected loner incapable of maintaining any kind of relationship, the Commission employed the same strategy to assert that Oswald was intensely dissatisfied with capitalism and with his adopted communist ideology. In order to support its claim, the Commission offered the testimony positing that “[s]ome of his [Oswald’s] acquaintances in Dallas and Forth Worth had the impression that Oswald was dissatisfied in having been given a menial job and not assigned to an institution of higher learning within the Soviet Union.”<sup>141</sup> The Commission’s inclusion of this testimony bridges Oswald’s beliefs in his own importance and his growing dissatisfaction with the Soviet Union. To further iterate Oswald’s dissatisfaction with Communism specifically, and the Soviet Union more generally, the Commission offers some of Oswald’s own writings.

For example, Oswald wrote “there can be no mediation between those systems [capitalism and communism] as they exist to-day [sic] and that person. He must be opposed to their basic foundations and representatives.”<sup>142</sup> Moreover, Oswald penned, “No man, having known, having lived under the Russian Communist and American capitalist system, could possibly make a choice between them, there is no choice, one offers oppression [sic] the other poverty. Both offer imperilistic [sic] injustice, tinted with two brands of slavery.”<sup>143</sup> Writings such as these led the Commission to conclude that “Oswald’s decided rejection of both capitalism and communism seemed to place him in a situation in which he could not live with satisfaction either in the United States or in the Soviet Union.”<sup>144</sup> Furthermore, in providing the audience with these writings, the Commission was reiterating Oswald’s disaffection with the world and also undermining the possibility that he was working for a foreign power. If Oswald was unable to form any lasting relationships and if he was unhappy with both communism and capitalism, then, by the Commission’s logic, Oswald was incapable of entering into a relationship with anyone to form a conspiracy, let alone to work on behalf of powers he hated.

In order to combat beliefs that Oswald was acting within a vast and sinister Communist conspiracy, the Warren Commission used the absence of evidence (noted above) coupled with the presentation of an overwhelming amount of evidence to pound home the idea that Oswald was a deeply troubled man whose intense dislike of the United States, his problems with authority, his proclivity for violence, and his desire to make his mark on history, taken together, made him capable of the assassination of President Kennedy. Yet, these reasons for Oswald’s behavior can only tangentially be related to the assassination. There is no direct link, no smoking gun, between Oswald and President Kennedy. Oswald, instead, was characterized as a scared, lonely, angry man, a portrayal that was not strong enough to withstand conspiracy claims that

more sinister, more evil, and more destructive forces were at large, although the Warren Commission did try, repeatedly. The incredible amount of rhetorical sweat the Commission exerts to provide Oswald with a motive is indicative of the Commission's own doubt about the motive and is an acknowledgement that it did not "know" the answer. The massive evidence garnered in support of the Commission's stance indicates that the Commission was attempting to persuade itself of the reasons for the assassination on November 22, 1963. The Commission's irreconcilable doubt, indicative of its increasing uncertainty about its discursive authority, continued to play out and is most notably exemplified in the tension between the Commission's own account of the assassination, and that of the FBI, especially as they pertain to a single disputed projectile.

#### *Authority by Internal Consistency*

Perhaps the greatest obstacle the Warren Commission had to overcome was the inconsistencies in testimony and evidence related to the number of shots fired and the location and nature of the president's wounds. For instance, *The New Republic* published a story that questioned:

- (1) How Lee Oswald, from a position behind and slightly to the right of President Kennedy, fired a shot which entered the President's neck just below the Adam's apple;
- (2) how Oswald, using a bolt-action rifle, fired three shots with deadly accuracy in five and one-half seconds at a target 75–100 yards away moving about 25 miles an hour;
- [and] (3) how the three shots could have produced four bullets.<sup>145</sup>

Questions such as these raised concerns that there was more than one gunman involved in the assassination because, if the president's neck wound was an entrance wound, then a second shooter would have had to have been involved.

Complicating the Commission's charge to tell the "truth" about the assassination of the president was evidence from the FBI report that directly conflicted with the Commission's. The FBI report concluded that three shots had been fired from Oswald's rifle, and that each of those three shots had found a target. However, during the Commission's investigation, evidence was found that either directly disputed the FBI's three shots/three hits scenario, or left open the possibility that a second shooter was involved, thereby leaving room for future conspiracy beliefs. If the Warren Commission's conclusion, that Lee Harvey Oswald acted alone, was to be believed, and if the Commission was to retain its discursive authority, then it had to reconcile any inconsistencies in the testimony pertaining to the number of shots fired, and the location and nature of the president's wounds; it also had to resolve any inconsistencies that existed between its report and that of the FBI's and disabuse any potential future notions that a second shooter was involved. This put the Warren Commission into the unenviable position of shouldering the burden of proof to make its case that its explanation of the shots was what happened because the position of the FBI was already widely circulated, and, therefore, had presumption.

The doubt existing between conflicting testimony and the position of the Warren Commission caused the Commission to overwhelm the audience with evidence to back its claims. The Commission had to assemble its "facts" into what Walter Fisher terms an internally coherent narrative in order to arrive at its conclusion.<sup>146</sup> In reconciling inconsistencies, the Commission's report, again, falls into the realm of the conspiracy argument. Hofstadter argues:

The typical procedure of the higher paranoid scholarship is to start with such defensible assumptions and with a careful accumulation of facts, or at least what appear to be facts, and to marshal these facts toward and overwhelming 'proof' of the particular conspiracy that is to be established. It is nothing if not coherent—in fact, the paranoid mentality is

far more coherent than the real world, since it leaves no room for mistakes, failures, or ambiguities.”<sup>147</sup>

In essence, Hofstadter is claiming that conspiracy theories attempt to display a pseudo-scholarly concern in marshalling evidence to back its claims. In putting forth such an argument, every piece of contradictory evidence, every discrepancy existing among witnesses, every potential source of conflict has to be discredited, omitted, or refuted, characteristics attributed to conspiracy narratives.

The single most disputed element in the entire *Warren Commission Report* centers on what critics have dubiously labeled the “magic” or “pristine” bullet. Conspiracy claims were made that there were at least four shots fired and the FBI’s position asserted that President Kennedy received two bullet wounds taken from two different shots and that Governor Connally was wounded from the third shot. Both conspiracy charges and the FBI’s report directly confronted the Commission’s assertion that the first shot, or the “magic” bullet, hit President Kennedy in the back, passed through his neck, hit Governor Connally in the back, “passed through his chest; tumbled through his wrist with very little exit velocity, leaving small metallic fragments from the rear portion of the bullet; punctured his left thigh after the bullet had lost virtually all of its velocity, and had fallen out of the thigh wound” where it ended up on a gurney in the corridor of Parkland Memorial Hospital with very little damage to the bullet.<sup>148</sup> The second shot, according to the Commission, was the fatal head wound received by the President. The third and final shot missed. Even though the Commission asserted that it was “not necessary to any essential findings to determine just which shot hit Governor Connally,” the Commission spent an enormous amount of time arguing that the “pristine” bullet was the same one that produced President Kennedy’s neck wound as well as the injuries Governor Connally

received.<sup>149</sup> The Commission, instead of simply asserting its case for the single bullet, goes through exacting detail as to how it arrived at its conclusion.

The Commission used several strategies to overcome the evidentiary inconsistencies. One of the most noticeable ways the Commission attempts to alleviate any doubt about its stance on the magic bullet is by clearing up any inconsistencies that existed in the testimony and evidence. For instance, the Commission attempted to mitigate inconsistencies that occurred between the doctors at Parkland Hospital who attended the president and those of the doctors who performed the autopsy on the president. The Commission offers, “Considerable confusion has arisen because of comments attributed to Dr. [Malcom] Perry concerning the nature of the neck wound. Immediately after the assassination, many people reached erroneous conclusions about the source of the shots because of Dr. Perry’s observations to the press.”<sup>150</sup> Dr. Perry, during the press conference to which the Commission alludes, stated that the neck wound suffered by President Kennedy “appeared to be one of entrance.”<sup>151</sup>

To clear up the misperception that the neck wound the President sustained was an entrance wound, the Commission disclosed the findings of the autopsy report stating that the neck wound was one of exit and located the back wound at “approximately 5 ½ inches (14 centimeters) from the tip of the right shoulder joint and approximately the same distance below the tip of the right mastoid process, the bony point immediately behind the ear.”<sup>152</sup> Furthermore, the Commission iterated:

The autopsy examination further disclosed that, after entering the President, the bullet passed between two large muscles, produced a contusion on the upper part of the pleural cavity (without penetrating that cavity), bruised the top portion of the right lung and ripped the wind pipe (trachea) in its path through the President’s neck. The examining

surgeons concluded that the wounds were caused by the bullet rather than the tracheotomy performed at Parkland Hospital.<sup>153</sup>

After revealing the autopsy findings, the Commission then disclosed the testimony of Dr. Perry. When asked, “Based on the appearance of the neck wound alone, could it have been either an entrance or an exit wound?” Dr. Perry answered, “It could have been either.” However, when asked to take into consideration the findings of the autopsy report, Dr. Perry stated, “A full jacketed bullet without deformation passing through the skin would leave a similar wound for an exit or an entrance wound and with the facts which you have made available and with these assumptions, I believe that it was an exit wound.”<sup>154</sup> The pattern the Commission used is consistent; the report stated that a potential controversy existed over the evidence or testimony pertaining to the magic bullet, provided the “real” findings, and then cleared up any inconsistencies in the testimony.

Clearing up inconsistencies is something the Warren Commission would have had to accomplish regardless of its task, and, in itself, is not enough corroboration to assert that its concerns over conspiracy beliefs caused it to produce so much evidence. But more insight is gleaned based on the nature of the evidence provided to the audience to prove that the same bullet did hit both President Kennedy and Governor Connally. Sophisticated recreations of the shots fired from the sniper’s nest in the Book Depository and simulations of the same caliber bullet and the assassin’s rifle were enacted to determine that not only was it possible to get three shots off with the necessary accuracy in the time allotted by the *Zapruder Film*, but that one bullet could cause so much damage and remain largely intact and unscathed.<sup>155</sup>

Recounting the recreations entails traversing through a myriad of details from the type of car and physical characteristics of the stand-ins, to the repositioning of cardboard boxes in the

Book Depository, which were explained as measures taken to recreate the scene of the assassination in order to determine precisely when the shots were fired and in how much time.<sup>156</sup>

To give an example, when discussing the minute examination of the *Zapruder Film* and the trajectory of the shots taken from the Texas Book Depository in relation to the film, the Commission argues:

The President's reaction is 'barely apparent' in frame 225, which is 15 frames or approximately eight-tenths second after frame 210, and a shot much more before 210 would assume a longer reaction time than was recalled by eyewitnesses at the scene ... A surveyor then placed his sighting equipment at the precise point of entry on the back of the President's neck, assuming that the President was struck at frame 210, and measured the angle to the end of the muzzle of the rifle positioned where it was believed to have been held by the assassin. That angle measured  $21^{\circ} 34'$ . From the same points of reference, the angle at frame 225 was measured at  $20^{\circ} 11'$ , giving an average angle of  $20^{\circ} 52' 30''$  from frame 210 to frame 225 ... That angle was consistent with the trajectory of a bullet passing through the President's neck and then striking Governor Connally's back.<sup>157</sup>

In essence, the Commission was attempting to quell doubts raised about whether one bullet could cause seven separate wounds based on from where the shot was fired. In doing so, the Commission is also refuting charges that the president's neck wound was one of entrance.

Similarly, the Commission provides testimony to "prove" that there were only three shots fired by providing the audience with as much detail as possible in order to "convince" the people that Oswald had ample time to carry out three shots. For instance, the Commission notes that "Examination of the Zapruder motion picture camera by the FBI established that 18.3 pictures or

frames were taken each second, and therefore, the timing of certain events could be calculated by allowing 1/18.3 seconds for the action depicted from one frame to the next.”<sup>158</sup> “Tests of the assassin’s rifle,” states the Commission, “disclosed that at least 2.3 seconds were required between shots.”<sup>159</sup> Based on the recreation of the assassination coupled with the examination of the *Zapruder Film*, the Commission concluded that “the evidence indicated that the President was not hit until at least frame 210 and that he was probably hit by frame 225.”<sup>160</sup> From yaw to trajectories, angles to velocity, frames to seconds, seconds to actions, the terms that the Commission used in presenting its “overwhelming” evidence that Lee Harvey Oswald was the lone gunman is indicative that the Warren Commission was not only attempting to refute conspiracy claims, but that it was also attempting to establish and maintain discursive authority through the use of precise, scientific information.

Questions raised about the location of the president’s wounds, the number of shots fired, and the time it would have taken to fire three shots forced the Commission to clear up any inconsistencies that existed in the evidence. Moreover, such questions, which would, if left unanswered, give credibility to claims that there was a second shooter involved in the assassination, forced the Commission to overwhelm the audience with evidence asserting its case. The massive amount of evidence the Commission uses to make its case against conspiracy is far too frequently built upon driving the audience to an inevitable conclusion based on not the argumentation contained within, but from sheer volume. If the Commission had simple authority, if it had presumption, then the need for it to argue in great detail as to why its interpretation of the “magic bullet” was correct would not exist. But, because of conflicting evidence and testimony and because the Commission could reasonably deduce that such a discrepancy could lead the American public to doubt the Commission’s findings and undermine its entire

investigation and report, the Commission had to prove a virtually unprovable position, which led the Commission into generating massive amounts of evidence in great scientific detail in order to reconcile the discrepancies and led to the Warren Commission's unbelievable conclusion.

### **Conclusion**

The peculiarities of the *Warren Commission Report* stem, at least in part, from the Commission's attempt to establish its monologic authority over the narrative of the assassination of President Kennedy. Most of the Commission's report focuses on proving that Oswald acted alone in the slaying of President Kennedy. However, the Commission was similarly forced into proving that there was no conspiracy in place to assassinate the president. In essence, the Commission was forced into a double burden of proof, a direct result of the wide belief that the assassination of the president and the subsequent murder of Oswald were the result of a conspiracy and thus entered into a dialogue with conspiracy theories. The Commission's need to address conspiracy claims is indicative that it was not wholly in charge of its own agenda or argumentative burdens. If the Warren Commission had possessed naked authority, then there would have been no need to prove that there was not a conspiracy. More troubling, however, was the Commission's inability to contain conspiracy beliefs about the assassination. In attempting to prove there was no conspiracy, the Commission's report took on some of the generic elements of conspiracy argument and participated within the conspiracy genre.

The Warren Commission, though not the characteristic conspiracy argument, participated within its genre by demonstrating the elements of argument from absence, paradox of substance, the generation of a massive amount of evidence, and an internally consistent narrative. While the Commission may have many of the constitutive elements of the conspiracy argument, the

foremost element of the conspiracy argument, its self-sealing ability, is noticeably absent from the Commission's arguments. The conspiracy theories present prior to the release of the *Warren Commission Report* largely consisted of queries, questions, and demands directed at the Commission. The Commission responded by addressing the conspiracy fears through using many of the same techniques the conspiracists, themselves, use in making their cases. However, conspiracy theories that came into being after the completion of the report did demonstrate the self-sealing attribute of the conspiracy argument.

While conspiracy theories about the assassination were never a marginal belief, after the completion of the *Warren Commission Report*, they were able to gain greater prominence in the public sphere. The first mainstream criticisms of the Warren Commission, i.e. Mark Lane's *Rush to Judgment*, and Edward Jay Epstein's *Inquest*, were not the full-blown conspiracy theories of the assassination; they were simply criticisms pointing out the flaws and inaccuracies of the report.<sup>161</sup> Even though the conspiracy theories about the assassination had yet to take on the signature self-sealing characteristic of the conspiracy argument, the early critics laid the foundation for such a task.

Epstein and Lane pointed out the most troubling areas of the Commission's report, which cast doubt onto the veracity of the findings within, and fueled fear within the public that, at the very least, the Warren Commission had covered up salient information about the assassination.<sup>162</sup> As Knight and Kurtz point out, the controversies that surrounded the Commission's report after its publication centered on where the shots came from, the magic bullet and the problems the autopsy evidence posed, the lack of a discernible motive on the part of Oswald, the underworld ties of Jack Ruby, and the possibility that agents of the government were complicit in the assassination.<sup>163</sup> Significantly, all of the areas of contestation focused upon after the completion

of the *Warren Commission Report* were present before its completion and are the same areas where the Commission took on some of the characteristics of the conspiracy argument. In essence, the narrative of the Commission was influenced by conspiracy claims, and then served to inform later conspiracy theories. As more evidence was uncovered, as more questions were raised, conspiracists were able to point to the areas of contestation between conspiracy theories and the Warren Commission and make a compelling case that there was a conspiracy in the assassination of President Kennedy. In essence, the Warren Commission was unable to prevail over conspiracy theories because it was an integral step in the development and maturity of the conspiracy theories about the assassination.

The Warren Commission participated within the conspiracy genre both by way of addressing conspiracy claims while simultaneously adopting some of the substantive elements of the conspiratorial form, and by serving as a necessary informational step in the maturity of the conspiracy arguments about the assassination. It was not until after the release of the *Warren Commission Report* that the conspiracy theories about the assassination took on their self-sealing form. Conspiracists were able to point to the absence of evidence, the inscrutable prose, the lack of a discernible motive on the part of Oswald, along with new information that came to light after the investigation, and tie their theories into compelling narratives rife with victims, villains, and a dramatic plot. In taking on conspiracy theories, the Warren Commission inherently resigned itself to falling victim to the supremely more seductive and flexible conspiracy argument. It is difficult, if not impossible, to refute a conspiracy, and agents of the government are inherently constrained in what they can reveal. The inability to disclose all of the information available allows for an opening for conspiracy theories because there will always be something that has yet to be revealed.

## CHAPTER 3

HIDDEN AGENCY: CONSPIRATORIAL CONTROL  
OVER THE SHAPING OF *THE 9/11 COMMISSION REPORT*

*Let us never tolerate outrageous conspiracy theories concerning the attacks of September the eleventh; malicious lies that attempt to shift the blame away from the terrorists, themselves away from the guilty.*

*—President George W. Bush*

September 11, 2001, at 8:46 a.m. Eastern Daylight Time, American Airlines flight 11 crashed into the North Tower of the World Trade Center in New York City. The first reports of the crash were sketchy. While some reports openly wondered if the aircraft was a commuter or private plane and if pilot error caused the aircraft to hit the North Tower, others speculated whether the crash might have been an act of terrorism; those speculations were effectively silenced when a second plane, United Airlines flight 175, crashed into the South Tower of the World Trade Center at 9:03. There was no longer any doubt; the United States was witnessing the largest terrorist attack in its history. As the country watched in horror, two more planes would crash: American Airlines flight 77, which crashed into the Pentagon at 9:37, and United Airlines flight 93, which crashed outside of Shanksville, Pennsylvania, at 10:03. In addition to the hijacked aircraft, the nation watched the majestic buildings of the twin towers crumble to the ground, with the South Tower falling at 9:59 and the North Tower at 10:28. Thousands of people

died, and that day, which would colloquially come to be known as 9/11, left an indelible mark on the American psyche.

In the aftermath of the terrorist attacks, President George W. Bush, speaking from Barksdale Air Force Base, Louisiana, reassured the American people that the “full resources of the federal government [were] working to assist local authorities to save lives and to help the victims of [the] attacks.” The president affirmed that “The United States will hunt down and punish those responsible for these cowardly acts.”<sup>1</sup> Later that same day, President Bush asserted that “America was targeted for attack because we're the brightest beacon for freedom and opportunity in the world. And no one will keep that light from shining. Today, our nation saw evil—the very worst of human nature—and we responded with the best of America.”<sup>2</sup> Although the president reassured the public that the culprits of 9/11 would be punished in the following days, the White House was remarkably silent on the formulation of a commission to investigate the flaws in America’s defenses, a surprising move considering that virtually all national tragedies have had the benefit of independent commissions to investigate how the tragedies occurred and how they could be prevented in the future.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, it would take over fourteen months for a commission to be formed to investigate the terrorist attacks.

The securities in place to protect the American people failed at all levels of the federal government on and before 9/11. Our intelligence agencies were unable to assemble enough information on the perpetrators and the plot of 9/11 to disrupt them before their deeds were carried out in New York, Washington, D.C., and Pennsylvania. Our security in the skies was compromised by insufficient security measures at airports and while aloft. Our military was unable, once the hijackings occurred, to prevent any of the death and destruction. For the world’s only superpower, for the world’s mightiest and most technologically advanced military, for the

world's greatest economic power, the ability of a ragtag group of terrorists to topple the towers at the center of the global capital and to damage the epicenter of the U.S. military defied belief and required explanation. While the American people were told by government officials, rather quickly, that the failures of U.S. intelligence stemmed from a lack of interagency communication and collaboration, the remarkably long time it took to convene the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, which would come to be known as the 9/11 Commission, and the years that elapsed between the terrorist attacks and the release of the Commission's final report, left an explanatory void, one conspiracists were able to capitalize on to spin their own tales of deceit and corruption.

In the nearly three years that elapsed between the terrorist attacks and the issuance of *The 9/11 Commission Report: Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States (9/11 Commission Report)*, a deluge of alternative theories arose as to what happened on 9/11 and why. Theories spouted by the political right insisted that, at the very least, President Bill Clinton had had the opportunity to kill Osama bin Laden but chose not to, while others argued the attacks were planned and carried out by Israeli agents.<sup>4</sup> The conspiracy theories that garnered the most support, however, were the product of the political left. Such theories asserted that the Bush administration either had prior knowledge of the terrorist attacks and chose to let them happen, or that it was active in the planning and implementation of the attacks so that it would have an excuse to invade, and then gain greater control of, the oil-rich Middle East.<sup>5</sup> The hesitancy of the White House to back a bipartisan independent commission, the War in Iraq, scandals such as Abu Ghraib and the outing of CIA operative Valerie Plame, and other information that came to light before and during the 9/11 Commission's investigation exacerbated the situation and created a climate ripe for conspiracy theories.

Conspiracy theorists pointed to all of the peculiarities surrounding the terrorist attacks and the actions of the Bush administration and claimed that not all was as it seemed. Even those without a conspiratorial bent were at a loss to explain the oddities of the actions of the Bush administration and the failures of the U.S. intelligence agencies and the military in protecting the American people. In the absence of a compelling explanation for such failures, conspiracy theories were able to gain a foothold in the public sphere. It is this uncertainty, this indeterminacy of information, this inscrutability of human motivations that makes conspiracy theories so popular and powerful.

As the body of conspiracy claims grew, and as the public outcry for an investigation into the terrorist attacks increased, the need to form an independent bipartisan commission was finally realized. Haunted by the failures of past commissions to contain conspiracy theories, the *9/11 Commission Report*, I argue, was shaped in part by the number of conspiracy theories burgeoning within the public sphere and implicating the federal government as complicit in the terrorist attacks. The 9/11 Commission, in combating conspiracy beliefs, adopted elements of the conspiracy argument in shaping its discourse, including the hyper-objective stance of an observer diagnosing the problems associated with the military response to the terrorist attacks on 9/11. Similarly, the Commission ascertained the reasons behind the inability of the federal intelligence agencies to effectively gather, share, and prevent the terrorist attacks. The hyper-objective stance the Commission adopted was a defensive move, designed to prevent the Commission's discourse from being drawn into conspiracy debates. When the Commission could not completely sidestep claims of conspiracy, it adopted the use of argument from absence in order to cast the burden of proof onto conspiracists. Ultimately, the Commission's approach left it able to cast blame for the

terrorist attacks onto a cabal of terrorists, led by, in Peter Knight's words, an "enemy" portrayed "as completely alien, inhuman, all-powerful, and, above all, evil."<sup>6</sup>

### *Considering Contexts*

Understanding the proliferation of conspiracy theories within the public sphere following 9/11, and the conspiracy theories with which the 9/11 Commission would eventually grapple, requires careful consideration of the greater social and political climates between the times of the terrorist attacks and the release of the *9/11 Commission Report*. The environment into which the *9/11 Commission Report* was propagated was rife with indeterminacy precipitated by the actions of the Bush White House and the greater social and political climates, all of which gave rise to alternative theories of the events of 9/11 within the public. It is no great secret that the United States was deeply politically divided prior to the terrorist attacks. The presidential election in 2000, which resulted in the Supreme Court declaring the winner of the election, cast a pall over the presidency of George W. Bush. Embittered leftists claimed that President Bush won the election because of the machinations of a conspiracy. It was simply too convenient that the contested votes, which would eventually result in the Supreme Court's decision, were in Florida, the same state where the president's brother, Jeb, was governor.<sup>7</sup>

While such sentiments may have gained play in the public for a while, after the terrorist attacks they were effectively silenced. As is common during times of crisis, the American people rallied around the flag and backed the president. President Bush was able to maintain remarkable control over how the country responded to, and interpreted, the terrorist attacks for several months after 9/11. However, this control began to wane with a series of disclosures indicating that U.S. intelligence agencies possessed far more information about the terrorist attacks than

was first disclosed, the linking of the terrorist attacks to Iraq and the resultant invasion of Iraq, and a series of revealed scandals and perceived acts of retribution for defying President Bush's authority, all of which left an opening for the proliferation of alternative explanations of 9/11.

The control President Bush exerted over the narrative of 9/11 was exhibited, at least in part, during the series of speeches he gave in the aftermath. In a speech delivered to a joint session of Congress on September 20, 2001, President Bush addressed the American people and identified those who were ultimately responsible for the terrorist attacks. Stating that "loosely affiliated terrorist organizations known as al Qaeda," and its leader, "a person named Osama bin Laden," were to blame, the president went on to assert that "The leadership of al Qaeda has great influence in Afghanistan and supports the Taliban regime in controlling most of that country."<sup>8</sup> The President then leveled a series of demands to the Taliban in Afghanistan warning that, "These demands are not open to negotiation or discussion. The Taliban must act, and act immediately." If the Taliban did not "hand over the terrorists . . . , then they [would] share in their fate." "You are either with us," stated President Bush, "or you are with the terrorists."<sup>9</sup>

Herbert Simons argues that the "short-term effectiveness" of the "basic melodramatic binaries" used in "[t]he president's post-9/11 rhetoric . . . conferred enormous power upon the president, which he has been able to use not just to persuade, but also to intimidate, coerce, and control," most notably as the binaries under which "the 'war on terror' was launched."<sup>10</sup> President Bush's post-9/11 rhetoric, asserts Simons, was able to "gain control over the terms and limits of permissible debate."<sup>11</sup> Within a year, however, the president began to lose interpretive control over the terrorist attacks with the revealed information that the FBI, CIA, and the White House knew far more about the impending attacks than was first disclosed.

Troubling disclosures revealed by the media in the spring of 2002 raised concerns about how much the Bush administration and the FBI knew prior to September 11 about the possibility of a terrorist attack. In May 2002, the media revealed that weeks prior to the attacks FBI agents in Phoenix and Minneapolis had forwarded intelligence memos to the FBI about the behaviors of “Middle Eastern men” at flight schools in their respective cities, reports that were effectively ignored. FBI agents in Phoenix, concerned about the actions of some Middle Eastern men who “attended civil aviation colleges and universities in the state of Arizona,” sent a memo to the Counterterrorism Division at FBI Headquarters warning that the actions of such men might be indicative “of the possibility of a coordinated effort by Osama bin Laden to send students to the United States” to attend such schools. The memo suggested that the FBI should discuss the memo with the CIA and other intelligence agencies and that the FBI “should consider securing authority to obtain visa information on persons seeking to attend flight schools.”<sup>12</sup> It was also revealed that FBI agents in Minneapolis had arrested a French citizen, Zacarias Moussau, nearly a month before the terrorist attacks. Although agents in Minneapolis requested a “Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act” (FISA) warrant to search Moussau’s belongings, “FBI lawyers,” according to David Kohn, “decided they would not even try to get a warrant.”<sup>13</sup> When agents searched Moussau’s computer after 9/11, it was revealed that Moussau was intimately involved in the terrorist plot. Even more troubling was the fact that French authorities had Moussau on an international terrorist watch list as early as 1999, information that CBS News said French officials made available to the FBI.<sup>14</sup> At the very least, the disclosures that the FBI had warnings about suspected terrorists in the months prior to 9/11 raised questions as to whether 9/11 could have been prevented.

The FBI was not the only entity that raised questions about what was known, or should have been known, about the impending terrorist attacks. Within days of the disclosures of the missed opportunities at the FBI, President Bush also came under fire after it was revealed that he had received an intelligence briefing from the CIA about the possibility of Bin Laden planning to hijack airplanes in the U.S.<sup>15</sup> The White House, while admitting that President Bush had received such a briefing, stated “that the warnings did not contemplate the possibility that the hijackers would turn the planes into guided missiles for a terrorist attack.”<sup>16</sup> CBS News reported, however, that a 1999 analysis “prepared for U.S. intelligence warned that Osama bin Laden's terrorists could hijack an airliner and fly it into government buildings like the Pentagon.”<sup>17</sup> Again, the White House acknowledged that the president knew of the 1999 analysis, but countered by asserting that “the document did not contain direct intelligence pointing toward a specific plot but rather included assessments about how terrorists might strike.”<sup>18</sup> CBS further noted that “Former CIA Deputy Director John Gannon, who was chairman of the National Intelligence Council when the report was written, said officials long have known a suicide hijacking was a threat.”<sup>19</sup> Gannon stated, “If you ask anybody could terrorists convert a plane into a missile, nobody would have ruled that out.”

The combination of the missed opportunities by the FBI and the disclosure that the CIA had not only warned the president that Bin Laden was “determined to strike” in the United States, but that intelligence analysis suggested that Bin Laden and al Qaeda might hijack planes, fill them with explosives, and fly them into the Pentagon or the White House launched the first salvo against the Bush administration’s iron-fisted control over the narrative of the terrorist attacks. Congressional leaders began to raise concerns that the government had far more foreknowledge about the terrorist attacks than was first believed. The Minority Leader,

Representative Richard Gephardt, stated, “I think what we have to do now is to find out what the president, what the White House knew about the events leading up to 9/11, when they knew it and, most importantly, what was done about it at that time.”<sup>20</sup> CBS reported that “Sen. Charles Grassley, a senior member of the Senate Judiciary and Finance Committee, demanded the CIA inspector general investigate the report, which he called ‘one of the most alarming indicators and warning signs of the terrorist plot of Sept. 11.’”<sup>21</sup> Similarly, “Senator Richard C. Shelby of Alabama, the ranking Republican on the Senate Intelligence Committee, said the intelligence information should have spurred action.”<sup>22</sup> With Congressional leaders of both parties alarmed at the intelligence failures of the FBI and CIA, and with the added knowledge that the president had been warned of an impending attack, renewed cries for an independent investigation into the terrorist attacks began to mount. Questions about the government’s knowledge and subsequent actions persisted and were further fueled by the War in Iraq.

As early as the State of the Union Address in 2002, the Bush administration began linking the 9/11 terrorist attacks to Saddam Hussein and Iraq.<sup>23</sup> The rhetorical maneuverings of the president and his administration would have over 60 percent of the American public believing that Saddam Hussein was somehow involved in the attacks of 9/11.<sup>24</sup> On March 20, 2003, the United States, the United Kingdom, and some of their allies began the invasion of Iraq under the guise that Saddam Hussein possessed weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) that could be used against the United States. In essence, the Bush administration constructed a conspiracy argument in order to gain support to combat a conspiracy theory. The U.S. was engaged in another war despite the fact that Osama bin Laden had yet to be captured and things in Afghanistan were anything but stable.<sup>25</sup> By May 1, 2003, when President Bush, on the deck of the USS Abraham Lincoln, declared that major combat operations in Iraq had ended, no WMDs

had been uncovered.<sup>26</sup> While the War in Iraq continued to rage, and while the rhetorical reasons for war continued to change, larger segments of the public began questioning why the U.S. was in Iraq, questions that gained momentum with revealed scandals in relation to the War on Terror and continued to tear apart the remarkable unity that had existed among the public after the terrorist attacks.

Joseph Wilson, former ambassador to Gabon under President George H. W. Bush and former head of African Affairs at the National Security Council under President Bill Clinton, wrote an editorial in *The New York Times* on July 6, 2003. Wilson had been chosen by the CIA to travel to Niger and investigate whether there was any foundation to the claims that Saddam Hussein had attempted to purchase any uranium in the country.<sup>27</sup> In his piece, Wilson concluded that the Bush Administration “had manipulated intelligence on Saddam Hussein’s weapons programs” to justify the invasion of Iraq.<sup>28</sup> Wilson’s comments were particularly damaging because they implied the Bush administration had knowingly lied in making its case for invading Iraq, which pointed to a conspiracy on the part of the Bush administration.

Kathryn Olmsted argues that members of the Bush administration immediately began denouncing Wilson “as an attention-seeker, a liar, and a beneficiary of nepotism.”<sup>29</sup> On July 14, just eight days after Wilson’s editorial, Robert Novak of the *Chicago Sun Times* “outed” Valerie Plame, Wilson’s wife, as an operative for the CIA and implied that Plame had arranged for Wilson’s trip to Niger.<sup>30</sup> In essence, the Novak article argued against conspiracy claims by implying that there was a different conspiracy. This information, provided to Novak by senior officials in the Bush White House, launched a maelstrom in Washington.<sup>31</sup> More important, however, is the doubt it cast on the reasons the United States entered into the war in Iraq; Wilson’s disclosure gave conspiracists fuel for their charges that the Bush administration had, at

the very least, ignored intelligence about the impending terrorist attacks so that it could pursue its own agenda in the Middle East.

The Plame affair, however, was not the only scandal connected to the War in Iraq. In April 2004, pictures taken at Abu Ghraib prison, a U.S.-controlled detention facility in Iraq, documented the sexual humiliation of inmates by American soldiers. The acts of abuse were bad enough, but they were amplified by images of U.S. soldiers grinning and giving a “thumbs up.” Exacerbating the scandal were allegations that the abuse was encouraged by military intelligence officers.<sup>32</sup> Editorials in *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* voiced concerns that the U.S. military, in particular, and the Bush administration more generally, were running roughshod over the Geneva Convention and that Congress should assert its authority.<sup>33</sup> *The New York Times* added that the abuse witnessed at Abu Ghraib was a result “of a morally dubious culture of legal expediency and a disregard for normal behavior fostered at the top of this [the Bush] administration. It is part of the price the nation must pay for President Bush’s decision to take the extraordinary mandate to fight terrorism that he was granted by a grieving nation after 9/11 and apply it without justification to Iraq.”<sup>34</sup> At best, the scandals surrounding Abu Ghraib diminished the notion that the War in Iraq was a noble pursuit; at worst, such actions caused speculation in the public sphere about what was really happening and how much control the Bush administration had over what had occurred, and would continue to occur.

The continued revelation of information about what and how much was known before 9/11, coupled with the War in Iraq and the scandals involving the outing of Plame and the prisoner abuses at Abu Ghraib, led to a climate filled with indeterminacy. On the one hand, the Bush administration was implicated in secretive and conspiratorial activities by the media and members of the FBI. On the other hand, those who were uncovering the secretive dealings of the

Bush administration were being accused of engaging in secretive and conspiratorial activities by the Bush administration. In essence, the American people were left with no real means to determine which of the competing stories was true; the climate was marked with scandal and the information indeterminate. Once “scandal,” according to Mark Fenster, moves from “an event [to] a structure of feeling, legitimacy can no longer be produced through normal channels.”<sup>35</sup> The public is left with questions that can never be satisfactorily addressed because there is no way to determine who is telling the truth.

Conspiracy theories were able to take root because of the continual revelation of information and the inability to ascribe a fixed meaning to the actions of the Bush administration and other governmental agents and agencies. The discovery that the intelligence agencies had far more knowledge about an impending attack than was first revealed, the War in Iraq, Abu Ghraib, and the Plame affair exacerbated public concerns. The continued actions of the Bush administration, which pushed through legislation in the name of the War on Terror “ranging from corporate tax giveaways, fast-track trade negotiating authority, and the enhancement of the surveillance state, to raiding the Social Security trust fund and weakening environmental laws,” aided in the growth of conspiracy theories, in Michael Niman’s words, “like dandelions on a suburban lawn.”<sup>36</sup> Even for those without a conspiratorial bent, the greater social and political contexts had, at the very least, raised serious doubts and concerns about the Bush administration and created a highly partisan atmosphere. Such concerns would continue to flourish with the Bush administration’s stonewalling of an investigation into the 9/11 attacks.

*Regarding the Rhetorical Situation*

The exigencies in the wake of the terrorist attacks, coupled with the persistent rumors and conspiracy theories, were remarkable enough to call for the creation of a Blue Ribbon Commission. The United States had seen terrorist attacks before, both instigated and carried out by foreign and domestic terrorists, but none of the scope and degree that 9/11 wrought, and the public needed a means by which to view and make sense of the events.<sup>37</sup> Generally, commissions are convened to investigate the policy concerns of the administration in power and have included everything from employment to education reform.<sup>38</sup> In the face of national tragedies, however, commissions are typically assembled to provide the American people with the perception that the president and Congress are doing something to account for the tragedy and are frequently a means, according to Kenneth Kitts, to “defuse crises, deflect criticism, and maintain the initiative in national security decisionmaking [sic].”<sup>39</sup>

Congressional leaders launched the idea of forming an independent commission within days of the terrorist attacks. Legislation authorizing an investigation into the terrorist attacks was introduced and discussed on the floors of the House and Senate no fewer than seven times between September 12, 2001 and September 18, 2002.<sup>40</sup> The attempts by legislators to bring about a commission and the delays they encountered can largely be attributed to squabbling that occurred between Congressional Democrats and Republicans. To a large degree, President Bush lacked political capital until 9/11. After the terrorist attacks, however, President Bush gained the backing of the American people and Republicans wanted to ensure that the president and other Republican leaders were not unduly assigned blame. Democrats, on the other hand, wanted to protect the legacy of President Bill Clinton.<sup>41</sup> *The New York Times*, anonymously quoting a member of Congress, reported that “Democrats were trying to stop going back too far into what

President Clinton did or did not do, or his functionaries. The Republicans tried to stop Bush and his functionaries from having to take any bullets for what they did in the run-up to 9/11.”<sup>42</sup> As questions mounted as to how much the president, the FBI, and the CIA knew prior to the attacks, Congressional leaders began renewing their interests in an independent investigation, a desire that was, in part, further fueled by the very public demands of the families of the victims of 9/11.

The victims’ families had long supported the notion of an independent commission to investigate the terrorist attacks. In the summer of 2002, during a rally held outside the Capitol designed to drum up support for an independent investigation into the terrorist attacks, Kristen Breitweiser, the widow of one of the 9/11 victims, told the *Washington Post*, “Our call for an independent commission has nothing to do with politics. ... It has everything to do with seeking answers that we so rightly deserve.”<sup>43</sup> Even though Congress did institute a Joint Commission to investigate the intelligence failures of 9/11, Stephen Push, who headed the organization Families of September 11, stated, “We still need an independent commission that would have a broader mandate to look at all of the elements of Sept. 11.”<sup>44</sup> Similarly, Kathy Ashton recounted to *Newsweek*, “Look at all of the investigations that have been held to examine the Enron collapse, a financial thing ... Why, eight months later, are we not investigating the mass murder of 3,000 human beings on American soil by an enemy of the United States that was enabled to carry out this mass murder because many agencies in this country dropped the ball.”<sup>45</sup>

The increased demand from members of Congress as well as the increasing public demands of the families of the victims of 9/11 covered by a sympathetic media was an indication that the president’s narrative control over 9/11 was waning. As Michael Hirsh and Michael Isikoff wrote, “Once upon a time, a stern word from George W. Bush on the war on terror would have been enough. But this time the Democrats, and even Republicans like Richard Shelby and

John McCain, weren't buying the Teflon patriotism."<sup>46</sup> With the growing demand for an independent commission, President Bush conceded that he would "cooperate with an investigation if it's done the right way."<sup>47</sup>

President Bush and Vice President Cheney had publicly argued that a commission "would divert time and attention from the war on terror," "waste resources," and "'tie-up' key administrators." Vice President Cheney also argued that a commission would increase the risk that sensitive U.S. intelligence information would be leaked during the course of the investigation.<sup>48</sup> In line with the concerns of the president and vice president, and in line with the Bush administration's desire to control as much of the 9/11 narrative as possible, the legislation authorizing the commission was remarkably narrow in scope.

In order for President Bush to provide support for an independent commission to interrogate the terrorist attacks, it was stipulated in the legislation that a commission subpoena required the backing of both the chair and vice chair and a minimum of four of the other eight commissioners. Such requirements assured that subpoenaed information would not be a matter of partisan interests.<sup>49</sup> Furthermore, the legislation required that "unnecessary duplication" of investigations be avoided. In other words, the 9/11 Commission had to base its investigation on the findings and conclusions of previous investigations into the terrorist attacks unless these prior investigations were deemed insufficient or if they failed to investigate some "area the commission deemed pertinent."<sup>50</sup> Added to the narrow scope of the commission was a grossly inadequate \$3 million allotted to the Commission to conduct its investigation and a demand that its investigation be completed by May 2004.<sup>51</sup> On November 27, 2002, over fourteen months after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, President Bush signed the legislation creating the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States. The legislation called for a ten-person

committee with the chair being chosen by the president and the vice chair by the Democratic leaders in the Senate and House of Representatives.<sup>52</sup>

While the Bush administration was forced into acquiescing to public demands to back the creation of an independent commission, the president still attempted to control the Commission's investigation into 9/11, a move that would lead to questions about what the president was trying to hide and why. In what was seen as an attempt to control the investigation of the commission, President Bush's initial choice to chair the commission was former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger. The choice of Dr. Kissinger was controversial from the onset. Editorials sprang up commenting on Dr. Kissinger's secretive and duplicitous nature. Some of those editorials posited that President Bush's selection was an attempt to block the 9/11 Commission from uncovering anything potentially damaging to the president and the intelligence agencies. Maureen Dowd of *The New York Times* wrote, "If you want to get to the bottom of something, you don't appoint Henry Kissinger. If you want to keep others from getting to the bottom of something, you appoint Henry Kissinger."<sup>53</sup> Not all of the editorials about the choice of Dr. Kissinger were so obviously negative; William Safire argued that there was no one better to uncover the problems plaguing the intelligence agencies than one of the people who was instrumental in bringing them about.<sup>54</sup> The choice of Dr. Kissinger fueled beliefs, especially on the political left, that the president was less than serious about finding the truth and more concerned about covering up his own misdeeds.<sup>55</sup> After a contentious two weeks, ones where the families of the victims' of 9/11 demanded that Kissinger turn over the names of all his clients to ensure that there were no conflicts of interest, Kissinger resigned from the Commission.<sup>56</sup> The president's choice for chair of the Commission then fell to Thomas H. Kean, former Republican governor of New Jersey and

president of Drew University, while the Democratic leadership chose former House member Lee Hamilton as the vice-chair of the Commission.<sup>57</sup>

Even with the acceptance of Kean and Hamilton serving as chair and vice-chair of the Commission, significant doubts were raised about the independent nature of the Commission. To fill the role of executive director of the Commission, Kean and Hamilton appointed Philip Zelikow. The choice of Zelikow was controversial from the outset. Having co-authored a book with National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice, and having served on the transition team of the George W. Bush White House, conspiracists argued that the Commission, with Zelikow at its helm, was doomed to be a whitewash.<sup>58</sup> Conspiracists were not the only ones uncomfortable with Zelikow's appointment. According to Philip Shenon, "many of the 9/11 families" saw Zelikow as a White House "mole" who had been put in place "to make sure that George Bush and especially [his] close friend Condoleezza Rice were protected from too much scrutiny, particularly over the seeming failure of the White House to act on dire terrorist threats in the months before September 11."<sup>59</sup> Zelikow's perceived role as a mole was just one of the many problems conspiracists and the 9/11 families would have with the Bush White House.

Doubts about the White House's commitment to investigating the terrorist attacks continued to swirl within the public sphere and were bolstered by insufficient access to information. In a battle that would play out in a media storm, when asked by the 9/11 Commission to supply it with access to the highly classified Presidential Daily Briefings (PDBs) of both the Bush and Clinton White Houses, the Bush White House summarily denied the Commission access. After months of negotiations and the threat of a subpoena, the White House finally agreed that members of the Commission could view the documents, but with very stringent conditions. Philip Shenon of *The New York Times* wrote that "under the accord two

members ... of the commission would have access to the full library of daily briefings prepared in the Bush and Clinton administrations and that two other members would be allowed to read just the copies of the briefings that the White House deemed relevant to the inquiry.”<sup>60</sup> Some members of the Commission, as well as members of the victims’ families, found such restrictions too empowering for the White House. *The Washington Post* reported that Max Cleland and Timothy Roemer stated “that the arrangement gives too much power to the White House to withhold information.”<sup>61</sup> The same article stated that family members of the victims of 9/11 “condemned the agreement, arguing that ‘all 10 commissioners should have full, unfettered and unrestricted access to all evidence’ related to the attacks. ‘As it now stands, a limited number of commissioners will have restricted access to a limited number of PDB documents,’ ... [which] ‘will prevent a full uncovering of the truth and is unacceptable.’”<sup>62</sup> The Commission’s quest for access to information, however, was not over.

*Newsweek* reported that the White House was contemplating invoking “executive privilege over key documents relating to the attacks in order to keep them out of the hands of investigators for” the 9/11 Commission.<sup>63</sup> Members of the Commission were frequently denied access to classified information, even if they were part of the team that had assembled the information. For instance, according to Mark Isikoff and Mark Hosenball of *Newsweek*, “former democratic [sic] congressman” Timothy Roemer was denied access “to read transcripts of three days of closed hearings that had been held [in the fall of 2002] by the House and Senate Intelligence Committees—hearings that Roemer ... had actually participated in.”<sup>64</sup> Isikoff and Hosenball further reported that before members of the Commission were allowed access to classified material, White House lawyers would “review” the material for “privileged” information.<sup>65</sup> In another peculiar move, the White House refused to allow members of the

Commission to review the notes they took on the PDBs they had reviewed, which prompted the Commission to threaten to subpoena the White House for a second time.<sup>66</sup> While the Commission did gain access to the information it sought, it was not until after a very lengthy and very public battle. Similar moves would be used to deny the Commission access to top Cabinet officials in the Bush White House, including the president himself.

Questions arose as to whether the Commission was receiving the level of cooperation from government officials necessary for a full investigation. Interviews with members of the president's Cabinet, such as National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice, were severely restricted. For example, Kitts argues that when Rice met with the Commission, the meeting was conducted in private; was considered "voluntary;" and was classified as a "meeting" instead of an interview; Rice was not placed under oath; there was an imposed time limit; and there was a limit on the number of commissioners and/or commission staff who were allowed to be present for the "meeting."<sup>67</sup> When the commission requested that Rice testify in public and under oath, the request was denied outright with the White House arguing that providing "formal testimony was a matter of constitutional principle and that to do so could erode the separation of powers between the executive branch and Congress."<sup>68</sup> However, after the public testimony of Richard Clarke (former counterterrorism chief in the administrations of Presidents George H. W. Bush, Bill Clinton, and George W. Bush), where he leveled a searing public indictment against the George W. Bush administration for what he claimed was its lax attention to the threat Bin Laden and al Qaeda posed, the White House reversed its decision and allowed Rice to testify.<sup>69</sup> As an article from *The New York Times* stated, the "credibility" of the Bush administration and its handling of the terrorist threat rested on the testimony of Rice.<sup>70</sup> The Commission's work, however, could not be viewed as complete without the testimony of President Bush.

When asked by the Commission to meet with them, President Bush at first only agreed to be questioned by Kean and Hamilton. After Clarke's riveting testimony and after it was made known that President Clinton had agreed to meet with the Commission, the White House changed its stance. The president would meet with the entire Commission if he were allowed to make a joint appearance with Vice President Cheney, and if the commission only took notes and did not record what was said during the interview. Furthermore, the Commission was required to put, in writing, that it would not ask for any public testimony from the president or vice president, and that neither the president nor the vice president would testify under oath.<sup>71</sup> The chair of the Commission, Kean, told *The New York Times* that the White House's reversal "seemed [like] a good compromise 'in exchange for getting all 10 commissioners to be able to ask any questions they wanted to.'"<sup>72</sup>

For each constraint leveled against the Commission, Kean and Hamilton engaged in a public fight in order to gain access to information, funding, time, and officials. As Kean and Hamilton note, when they met an obstacle, they would take their case to members of Congress, the media, the families of the victims, and to the executive branch.<sup>73</sup> In making their fights with the Bush administration public, the Commission exposed the Bush administration's repeated and continual derision for an independent investigation into the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Even though the Commission was eventually given enough funding to conduct its investigation, more time in which to conduct it, and access to information and key White House officials, there was still the sense that the Commission had, in the words of Kean and Hamilton, been "set up to fail."<sup>74</sup>

The hesitancy of the White House to convene a commission, the severe restrictions it leveled against the Commission, and its continued stonewalling of information had already inflamed suspicion among certain segments of the public. If President Bush had nothing to hide,

so the logic went, then why was he attempting to do everything in his power to prevent the 9/11 Commission from conducting a thorough investigation? Such questions, taken together with the indeterminacy of the social and political contexts, provided conspiracy theorists ample fodder for their musings. Conspiracists posited that the only logical explanations for the actions and scandals of the Bush administration, in concert with the War on Terror and the continued stonewalling of the 9/11 Commission, was that the Bush administration either knew more about the terrorist attacks than it first let on but effectively ignored the information so that it would have an excuse to invade, and thus gain greater control over, the oil-rich Middle East, or that the Bush administration was complicit in the planning and implementation of the terrorist attacks. Indeed, David Ray Griffin, in his book *The New Pearl Harbor*, offers a twenty-four part argument positing that the Bush administration was complicit in the attacks.<sup>75</sup>

The official discourse the 9/11 Commission crafted in response to the exigencies of the terrorist attacks had to address the rhetorical situation from which it was created, including the constraints leveled against it during its investigation and the broader social and political climates into which it was thrust. The political climate included the growing alternative explanations for the terrorist attacks making the rounds in the public sphere. Ultimately, the Commission had to craft a narrative that assuaged any doubts the public had about the completeness of the Commission's investigation, accounted for the exigencies of the terrorist attacks, accounted for the failures of the government to protect the public, united the public against a common enemy, and dispelled any fears of governmental involvement, a task that had the Commission adopting some of the narrative and rhetorical strategies used by conspiracy theories.

*Ghosts of Commissions Past and Hyper-Objectivity*

On July 22, 2004, nearly three full years after the terrorist attacks, the 9/11 Commission issued its final report “to the president of the United States, to the United States Congress, and the American people;” the report served as the official perspective from which the terrorist attacks of 9/11 were to be viewed.<sup>76</sup> The response from the press was overwhelmingly positive. Citing the openness and honesty of the Commission, the press concluded that the 9/11 Commission had conducted a fair, thorough, and open investigation into the horrors of 9/11.<sup>77</sup> Not only was the content of the report lauded, but the Commission’s report was so celebrated that it became a finalist for the National Book Award in 2004, a feat no other federal commission can claim.<sup>78</sup> Despite the celebratory atmosphere in which the *9/11 Commission Report* was received, the Commission’s prose attempted to accomplish far more than its stated purpose, “to provide the fullest possible account of the events surrounding 9/11 and to identify lessons learned.”<sup>79</sup> The 9/11 Commission, haunted by the failure of past commissions to contain conspiracy theories, adopted a hyper-objective stance in order to keep the Commission out of the fray of the conspiracy theories already in existence, as well as those that would come to light, a technique conspiracy theorists employ to defend themselves from counter-attacks.

Members of the 9/11 Commission were certainly aware of the conspiracy theories circulating within the public sphere. Kean and Hamilton noted that the Commission received “emails, letters, pamphlets, articles, books, videotapes, and Web site addresses from conspiracy theorists” throughout their investigation.<sup>80</sup> Moreover, Kean and Hamilton acknowledged that, “In public forums or on call-in television and radio shows, we often confronted questions about one conspiracy theory or another. Before and after our public hearings, it was common for somebody to approach us and demand to know why we weren’t taking questions about one theory or

another.”<sup>81</sup> These theories, according to Kean and Hamilton, “ranged from small to large, rational to irrational.”<sup>82</sup> Explicit within this statement is the division between what Kean and Hamilton deemed as “rational” conspiracy theories, and those that were considered “irrational.”

Kean and Hamilton argued that the more “irrational” theories were ones that questioned whether “the U.S. government [had] foreknowledge of the attacks,” or if “the military issue[d] a ‘stand-down’ order on 9/11 to allow the attacks to take place.”<sup>83</sup> Kean and Hamilton conceded that the 9/11 Commission “talked ... about how to deal with such theories;” what is particularly noteworthy is Kean’s and Hamilton’s acknowledgement that “we established core principles for our inquiry in part to avoid the kinds of conspiracy theorizing that have followed in the wake of other inquiries.”<sup>84</sup> Two Commissions, in particular, were “cautionary tales” on what to avoid when devising the *9/11 Commission Report*: the Roberts Commission, which investigated the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, and the Warren Commission, which investigated the assassination of President John F. Kennedy.<sup>85</sup>

The Roberts Commission, and the conspiracy theories surrounding it, provided a cautionary tale about the role of partisanship in writing a report. Kean and Hamilton noted that, “There are still ... theories that the United States or the United Kingdom had foreknowledge of the Pearl Harbor attack,” but these theories were able to flourish, stated Kean and Hamilton, partially because, “Neither the Roberts Commission nor the subsequent congressional inquiry into Pearl Harbor in 1946 provided an authoritative account of the Japanese attack on Hawaii.”<sup>86</sup> Instead, Kean and Hamilton wrote, “the Pearl Harbor inquiries were seen as partisan—intent on finding individuals to blame, and not looking at the flaws across the government that had enabled the attack to take place.”<sup>87</sup> Moreover, the Roberts Commission “looked at the attack from only one side: ours. The other half of the story—the Japanese intent, planning, and execution of the

strike—was ignored.”<sup>88</sup> Assigning partisan blame and failing to address Japan’s side of the story inevitably led to the doubt and rumors circulating within the public about what was, and was not, known before the Japanese attack.

The 9/11 Commission, however, found its most cautionary tale from the workings of the Warren Commission. Kean and Hamilton wrote, “There is of course a veritable industry around the question of who killed John F. Kennedy.”<sup>89</sup> “For decades,” Kean and Hamilton stated, “the Warren Commission’s findings have been poked and prodded by conspiracy theorists, in large measure because the commission is not perceived as having full access to the most secretive material in the government.”<sup>90</sup> In addition to not having access to all of the available evidence, the Warren Commission “convinced” Kean and Hamilton “of the need to clearly reference our sources.”<sup>91</sup> The ability for conspiracy theories touting that President Kennedy was killed at the hands of a conspiracy rather than the lone gunman Lee Harvey Oswald to gain prominence occurred, in part, because the Warren Commission failed to look at all of the evidence and because it failed to provide the American people with easy access to the evidence. “To avoid such accusations,” stated Kean and Hamilton, “we had to be able to stand up in front of the American people and say, ‘We have asked for everything that has to do with the 9/11 story, and have seen everything that we asked for.’”<sup>92</sup> Furthermore, Kean and Hamilton asserted that “[S]ecrecy is a precursor to cynicism and conspiracy theories. . . . We wanted to give an authoritative account of 9/11; we did not want to give fodder to the conspiracy theorists who could question why we were undertaking our investigation in secret.”<sup>93</sup> Taken together, Kean and Hamilton asserted that if the 9/11 Commission were to combat conspiracy claims, it could not make the mistakes of assigning partisan blame, failing to see and to clearly reference all of its evidence, or operating in secret. The fact that the 9/11 Commission discussed, and then

implemented, methods specifically designed to avoid the conspiracy theories that float in the wakes of commissions past, is an affirmative acknowledgement of the power of conspiracy theories to shape the agenda of official discourse.

Conspiracy theories, at least in part, were able to force the Commission into adopting a hyper-objective stance. The hyper-objectivity of the Commission reflects Hofstadter's concern with the pedantic nature of conspiracy discourse. Hofstadter wrote, "The plausibility of the paranoid style ... lies, in good measure, in this appearance of the most careful, conscientious, and seemingly coherent application to detail, the laborious accumulation of what can be taken as convincing evidence for the most fantastic conclusions."<sup>94</sup> Frequently, according to Hofstadter, the evidence conspiracists amass is not an attempt to convince those hostile to their claims, rather, according to Hofstadter, such actions are defensive rather than offensive. Hofstadter wrote that the evidence a conspiracist procures "protects him from having to attend to disturbing considerations that do not fortify his ideas. He has all of the evidence he needs; he is not a receiver, he is a transmitter."<sup>95</sup> In essence, the 9/11 Commission crafted a hyper-objective narrative to defend itself against the conspiracy theories about 9/11.

The discourse of the *9/11 Commission Report* largely echoes the musings of Kean and Hamilton. The Commission noted, "We have come together with unity and purpose because our nation demands it. September 11, 2001, was a day of unprecedented shock and suffering in the history of the United States. The nation was unprepared. How did this happen, and how can we avoid such tragedy again?"<sup>96</sup> "We have sought," stated the Commission, "to be independent, impartial, thorough, and nonpartisan."<sup>97</sup> To provide force for its assertions, the 9/11 Commission was not simply able to put together a report where a majority of the Commissioners reached their conclusions; it had to be unanimous. In providing a document where "five Republicans and five

Democrats chosen by elected leaders from our nation's capital at a time of great partisan division" presented their findings "without dissent," the Commission was offering a document that did not speak to the right or left of the political spectrum (both of which had their own theories about 9/11), but was rather making an argument against politics itself.<sup>98</sup> Unanimity also necessitated that the Commission forgo blame. The Commission noted, "Our aim has not been to assign individual blame. Our aim has been to provide the fullest possible account of the events surrounding 9/11 and to identify lessons learned."<sup>99</sup> In asserting that it was providing a nonpartisan unanimous report that did not assign blame for the causes of the terrorist attacks, the Commission was applying what it learned from the problems associated with the *Roberts Commission Report* and was, as Hofstadter noted, making a defensive attempt to combat the conspiracy theories surrounding the terrorist attacks and to stifle dissenting opinions as to what really occurred on that awful day.

The Commission could not simply rely on forgoing blame and providing the American people with a unanimous report; it also, if it were to avoid the mistakes made by the Warren Commission, had to make a case for the openness and thoroughness of its investigation. To this end, the Commission stated that it "endeavored to provide the most complete account [it could] of the events of September 11" by sharing "as much of the investigation with the American people" as possible, holding "19 days of hearings," taking "public testimony from 160 witnesses," and maintaining a discourse project on the Web so that the audience could track the progress of the Commission's recommendations.<sup>100</sup> What was divulged to the Commission was laid bare for the public to see. But the Commission also had to make a case for the thoroughness of its investigation. The Commission stated, "In pursuing our mandate, we have reviewed more than 2.5 million pages of documents and interviewed more than 1,200 individuals in ten

countries. This included nearly every senior official from the current and previous administrations who had responsibility for topics covered in our mandate.”<sup>101</sup> In addition to the myriad documents read and the endless people interviewed, the Commission’s report contains over 100 pages of endnotes, a testament, at the very least, to the “elaborate concern with demonstration” to which Hofstadter alluded. Again, the Commission’s adherence to openness and thoroughness is a defensive move to counteract any claims of conspiracy. The core principles of forgoing partisan blame and demonstrating the thoroughness of its investigation served as defensive tactics against conspiracy claims, and ultimately shaped the form of the Commission’s narrative, but the Commission’s adherence to hyper-objectivity and its need to defend itself against claims of conspiracy also determined the form of other arguments the Commission encountered within the bulk of its discourse.

One of the most illustrative ways the Commission’s adherence to hyper-objectivity determined the form of its text pertained to the War in Iraq. On the one hand, the Bush administration made its case for the War in Iraq by implying that Saddam Hussein and Iraq were involved in the terrorist attacks of 9/11. Carol Winkler noted that, while making the case against Iraq, the Bush administration linked the known personal ties of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi to Osama bin Laden, and Zarqawi’s presence in Iraq, as evidence that, if the United States were to be free from future terrorist attacks, it would have to adopt a “blend of defensive and preventive measures.” The Bush administration, according to Winkler, “made the U.S. move on Iraq a portion of the war that began with the attacks of 9/11.”<sup>102</sup> In essence, the Bush administration linked seemingly disparate pieces of evidence into a narrative that, while not explicitly stating that Hussein was involved in the terrorist attacks, implied that he and Iraq were involved. A conspiracy narrative was constructed in order to legitimize invading Iraq.

On the other hand, conspiracists claimed that the Bush administration's penchant for the War in Iraq was evidence of its complicity in the terrorist attacks. The War in Iraq was the linchpin for conspiracists' claims that the Bush administration was, at the very least, using the terrorist attacks as an excuse to promote its hyper-agenda in the Middle East. Citing a letter written in 1998 to President Bill Clinton from the Project for a New American Century (PNAC), and signed by some of the soon-to-be top leaders within the Bush administration, conspiracists pointed to the central thesis of the letter, which indicated the United States needed to rid Iraq of its despot leader, Saddam Hussein, and implement a hyper-aggressive foreign policy in the Middle East. The letter implored President Clinton "to take the necessary steps, including military steps, to protect our vital interests in the Gulf ... American policy cannot continue to be crippled by a misguided insistence on unanimity in the U.N. Security Council."<sup>103</sup> However, the letter stated that the American people would never support such actions unless a tragic event, such as Pearl Harbor, occurred. In a bit of serendipity for advocates of PNAC, the terrorist attacks of 9/11 occurred and gave the Bush administration an excuse to invade Afghanistan and Iraq. The War in Iraq, coupled with the desires of PNAC, were "proof" of the Bush administration's complicity in the terrorist attacks.<sup>104</sup>

Taken together, the Commission faced a conundrum. If Saddam Hussein and Iraq were involved in the terrorist attacks, then it would be required to investigate such ties. But, if there were no ties between Iraq and 9/11, then the pretense under which the U.S. invaded Iraq would be invalidated. In order to avoid being drawn into the debate between the competing conspiracies, Kean and Hamilton asserted that they were "the 9/11 Commission, not the Iraq War Commission."<sup>105</sup> Regardless of the desire to stay out of the Iraq debate raging within the public, the Commission was forced to deal with the question of Iraq because "the subject came up

repeatedly throughout our hearings and our work.” In essence, the cultural force of conspiracies involving the War in Iraq required the Commission to address the issue. In order to maintain its hyper-objective stance, the 9/11 Commission confirmed, at least to some degree, claims on both sides of the conspiracy debate without passing judgment about the information the Commission provided.

The Commission gave the Bush administration purchase for its arguments for the War in Iraq when it acknowledged that there were ties between Osama bin Laden, al Qaeda and Iraq. For instance, the Commission noted that as early as 1991, “Bin Ladin was ... willing to explore cooperation with Iraq.”<sup>106</sup> While there was not much contact between Hussein and bin Laden for years, after bin Laden publicly announced his fatwa against the United States in 1998, in March of that year, “al Qaeda members reportedly went to Iraq to meet with Iraqi intelligence.”<sup>107</sup> Furthermore, the following July “an Iraqi delegation traveled to Afghanistan to meet first with the Taliban and then with bin Ladin.”<sup>108</sup> “Similar meetings between Iraqi officials and Bin Ladin or his aides,” stated the Commission, “may have occurred in 1999 during a period of some reported strains with the Taliban. According to the reporting, Iraqi officials offered Bin Ladin a safe haven in Iraq.”<sup>109</sup> The Commission further indicated that the reports it examined “described friendly contacts [between Iraq and al Qaeda] and indicate some common themes to both sides’ hatred of the United States.”<sup>110</sup> By identifying that there were “friendly ties” between Bin Laden and Hussein, the Commission was providing support for the Bush administration’s reasons for invading Iraq. In essence, the Commission was arming itself against attack from the Bush administration. Had the 9/11 Commission not uncovered ties between Iraq and al Qaeda, then it would have been susceptible to acts of retribution as evidenced by the White House’s treatment

of Joseph Wilson. At the same time, however, the 9/11 Commission also gave further fuel to conspiracy claims.

The Commission was careful to note, “To date we have seen no evidence that these earlier contacts ever developed into a collaborative operational relationship. Nor have we seen evidence indicating that Iraq cooperated with al Qaeda in developing or carrying out any attacks against the United States.”<sup>111</sup> In adding the caveat that there “was no evidence” that Iraq and al Qaeda worked in concert to plan and implement 9/11, the Commission provided evidence to conspiracists that the Bush administration lied its way into war in order to implement its agenda in the Middle East. The Commission furthered such beliefs when it noted the actions and beliefs of the Bush administration in the immediate aftermath of the terrorist attacks. According to the Commission, Richard Clarke testified that “on the evening of September 12, President Bush told him and some of his staff to explore the possible Iraqi links to 9/11 ... While he believed the details of Clarke’s account to be incorrect, President Bush acknowledged that he might well have spoken to Clarke at some point, asking him about Iraq.”<sup>112</sup> Similarly, the Commission wrote that Donald Rumsfeld “thought the U.S. response should consider a wide range of options and possibilities. The secretary said his instinct was to hit Saddam Hussein at the same time—not only Bin Ladin.”<sup>113</sup> Indeed, the Commission acknowledged that several Bush administration officials, especially Paul Wolfowitz, argued in favor of attacking Iraq if “there was even a 10 percent chance that Saddam Hussein was behind the 9/11 attack.”<sup>114</sup> By providing evidence that members of the Bush administration were very concerned about the possibility that Iraq was somehow involved in the 9/11 attacks, and that they were arguing for an immediate attack, the 9/11 Commission provided conspiracy theorists with “proof” that, at the very least, the Bush administration used 9/11 as an excuse to invade Iraq and implement its hyper-agenda in the

Middle East, or, even worse, that the Bush administration was complicit in the planning and implementation of the terrorist attacks. Again, the 9/11 Commission was defending itself against attacks from conspiracists, ones who could impugn the veracity of the Commission's findings for failing to investigate the Bush administration's desire to invade Iraq.

As an independent bipartisan investigation into the terrorist attacks, it stands to reason that the 9/11 Commission would act as an objective observer. But, as Richard Posner wrote, the Commission's determination to have unanimity among all of the commissioners "encourages just the kind of herd thinking now being blamed for that other recent intelligence failure—the belief that Saddam Hussein possessed weapons of mass destruction."<sup>115</sup> "Unanimity," Posner furthers, "deprives decision makers of a full range of alternatives ... The premium placed on unanimity undermines the commission's [sic] conclusion that everybody in sight was to blame for the failure to prevent the 9/11 attacks."<sup>116</sup> Moreover, unanimity required that the Commission cast blame equally on both the Bush and Clinton administrations, "whatever the members actually believe." Compromises may also have had to be made in order to achieve a unanimous report. In essence, the desire for complete unity casts the Commission into the realm of the hyper-objective. The lack of dissenting opinions, while giving the perception of unity, was more of a smokescreen to hide the "real" considerations the Commission would have to attend to if it were to allow for dissent among its ranks, and dissenting opinions would open the Commission up for attack from all segments of the conspiracy debate raging in the public sphere.

In forgoing partisan blame, demonstrating the thoroughness of its investigation, and subscribing to hyper-objectivity, the Commission cast itself in the role of a transmitter of information. The Commission relayed the information and let the facts speak for themselves. In using defensive techniques designed to allay conspiracy charges, the Commission, in

Hofstadter's words, is protected from "having to attend to disturbing considerations that" did not "fortify" the Commission's "ideas."<sup>117</sup> The Commission was using an element of conspiracy argument to protect itself from being drawn into conspiracy. The use of hyper-objectivity allowed the Commission to sidestep the issue of motive on the part of the Bush administration's decision to invade Iraq. In so doing, however, it leaves the question of motive, especially as it pertains to the War in Iraq, open. The 9/11 Commission also had to explain the failures of other actors within the 9/11 drama, namely those on the part of the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) and the North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD).

*Hyper-Objectivity, Massive Evidence, and the Technical Sphere*

One of the more popular and troubling claims leveled by conspiracists was that a stand-down order was issued to NORAD on 9/11. To make their case, conspiracists cited the protocols existing between the FAA and NORAD, the public testimony given by FAA and NORAD officials, and the conflicting evidence provided by members of the Bush Cabinet and other high-ranking officials during their public testimony as to when a shoot-down order was given, and even whether a shoot-down order required the coordination of the president and the Secretary of Defense.<sup>118</sup> Lending credence to conspiracists' arguments were the observations that the evidence provided by FAA and NORAD officials suggested there was ample time, based on the time the reports of the four hijacked flights were received, for scrambled jets to intercept the planes well before they crashed into the World Trade Center, the Pentagon, and a field in Pennsylvania.<sup>119</sup> Even Kean and Hamilton admitted that had "the military had the amount of time they said they did ... and had scrambled their jets, it was hard to figure how they failed to shoot down at least one of the planes."<sup>120</sup> Such inconsistencies provided conspiracists with

“evidence” that not only was there prior knowledge of the 9/11 attacks, but that they were willfully allowed to happen.<sup>121</sup> For instance, Griffin argues that the evidence that “U.S. political and military leaders made misleading and even false statements about their response to the hijackings,” coupled with the evidence that “the presently accepted official account ... was invented some days after 9/11” were proof that “the attacks of 9/11 could not have succeeded without an order from the highest level of government to suspend normal operating procedures for response to hijackings.”<sup>122</sup>

In order to combat claims of conspiracy, while simultaneously addressing the anomalies among the varying accounts of what happened on 9/11, the Commission chose to use the hyper-objectivity of technical information in concert with a massive amount of evidence to back its claims. Hyper-objectivity, as indicated above, is a defensive move used to protect conspiracists from having to consider information that does not support their contentions. Hyper-objectivity simply relays facts and information; there is no interpretation of the information, no explanation of terms, and no resolution between seemingly contradictory information. By adopting the tenets of hyper-objectivity and by using technical information that obscured the understanding of a lay public, the Commission was suggesting, according to Fenster, that “because it happened this way according to this evidence, it could not have happened any other way.”<sup>123</sup>

Conspiracists also have a tendency, according to Earl Creps, to provide evidence for their claims by presenting it “en masse.”<sup>124</sup> Frequently, Creps contends, conspiracists assemble a “huge quantity of data ... simply to give the impression of ‘overwhelming’ proof for a specific contention.”<sup>125</sup> The hyper-objectivity and massive evidence the Commission uses in explaining the failures of the FAA and NORAD to effectively coordinate on 9/11 to prevent at least some of the death and destruction falls, also, into another realm where conspiratorial imaginations run

rampant, that of the technical sphere. According to James Darsey, technical, or scientific, information has long purported itself to be the “objective” truth. When experts in technical fields fail to offer a solidified, univocal front based on carefully constructed, replicated experiments, and when there are competing interests using the same technical information to back their own interpretations of what the information means, technical information loses its presumptive objectivity and can be seen as the workings of a cabal of conspirators “plotting to have their way with the world.”<sup>126</sup> One need only look at the debates over climate change to see how the role of “objective” information can be skewed to support those who support beliefs in climate change, vs. those who vociferously deny climate change, to see Darsey’s point. In the same vein, conspiracy theorists used the conflicting testimony of FAA and NORAD officials as proof of a conspiracy, while the Commission was put into the position of refuting conspiracy charges using the same information.

Understanding what went wrong in coordinating the United States’ defenses on 9/11 required careful reading of the densely technical prose used to explain the multiple procedures and actions of the various agents and agencies of the federal government on 9/11. For instance, the Commission argued, “The protocols for the FAA to obtain military assistance from NORAD required multiple levels of notification and approval at the highest levels of government.”<sup>127</sup> The protocols existing between the FAA and NORAD in hijacking situations on and before 9/11 “assumed that the aircraft pilot would notify the controller via radio or by ‘squawking’ a transponder code of ‘7500.’”<sup>128</sup> Once a “hijack was confirmed, ... the hijack coordinator on duty [was] to contact the Pentagon’s National Military Command Center (NMCC).”<sup>129</sup> The hijack coordinator would then ask for “a military escort aircraft to follow the flight, report anything unusual, and aid search and rescue in the event of an emergency.”<sup>130</sup> From there, “The NMCC

would ... seek approval from the Office of the Secretary of Defense to provide military assistance.”<sup>131</sup> Once approval was granted, the orders “would be transmitted down NORAD’s chain of command.”<sup>132</sup> Even with approval for military assistance, “the protocols did not contemplate an intercept.”<sup>133</sup> Instead, the protocols “assumed the fighter escort would be discreet, ‘vectored to a position five miles directly behind the hijacked aircraft,’ where it could perform its mission to monitor the aircraft’s flight path.”<sup>134</sup> But then the Commission acknowledges that, “[b]efore 9/11, a shoot-down order had to be issued by the National Command Authority, consisting of the President and the Secretary of Defense.”<sup>135</sup>

Providing the audience with the details of the protocols between the FAA and NORAD required the audience to sift through an overwhelming amount of information to understand the prescribed procedures. Moreover, such a move also gives the impression that the Commission was simply laying out the “facts” for the audience to consider. There is no interpretation, simply information; the audience is left to draw its own conclusions. For instance, the audience is left to determine what a discreet vectored position means. Presumably, it means that the scrambled jet is hidden from the aircraft it is tracking, but the technical nature of the information obfuscates what the protocols mean. The lack of a closed, fixed meaning is also located in the discussion between an interception and a shoot-down order. On the one hand, the Commission states that the protocols “did not contemplate an intercept” of a hijacked aircraft. On the other hand, the Commission admits that a shoot-down order had to be given by the National Command Authority. While the two claims are not commensurate with one another, an interception and a shoot-down are not the same thing; for a lay public unschooled in the vagaries of military command the two claims seem to contradict one another. If the protocols did not contemplate an intercept, then, for an inexpert audience it might seem odd that there are protocols for a shoot-

down. After all, shooting down an aircraft is the ultimate form of interception. Moreover, the audience is left to interpret whether a shoot-down order had to be agreed upon by both the president and the Secretary of Defense, or just one of them. The lack of a stable meaning ascribed to the protocols leaves the meaning behind them obscure and mysterious.

The mystery of technical information, argues Darsey, is “the result of the immediate illegibility and recondite nature of the objects of scientific inquiry, the exclusiveness of its methods for comprehending those objects, and the obscurity and density of the manner in which findings are reported.”<sup>136</sup> While the protocols existing between NORAD and the FAA are not scientific, they are technical in that full comprehension of the protocols requires that the audience be versed in aviation and militaristic terms and commands. As Chaim Perleman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca wrote, “technical terms, which are supposed to be as univocal as possible in the context of the discipline, in fact summarize an aggregate of acquired knowledge, rules, and conventions. Because he is not familiar with these, the layman completely fails to understand these terms, as technical terms. Entry into a specialized group requires initiation.”<sup>137</sup> Without possessing the necessary technical vocabulary to navigate the Commission’s explanation, coupled with the Commission’s thick description of the protocols, the audience is left with a baffling array of information, which it cannot wholly connect. Instead, for conspiracists, the Commission’s explanation becomes a bit of legerdemain, an obfuscation of the facts and circumstances surrounding the terrorist attacks.<sup>138</sup>

Even with the Commission’s attempt to objectively relay the protocols between the FAA and NORAD, the Commission could not completely maintain its objective stance when explaining why the FAA failed to follow protocols on 9/11, or why NORAD officials made inaccurate statements during their public testimony. Instead, the Commission had to ascribe a

reason, a motive, for the failures of FAA and NORAD to effectively coordinate on 9/11. As Darsey stated, “The primary burden of the conspiracy theorist is to provide credible purpose as the preeminent element of motive. The unity of the conspiracy is grounded in the unity of purpose that drives it.”<sup>139</sup> Motive, even in the technical sphere, must, according to Darsey, be a purpose recognizable from and consonant with purposes we have experienced to be possible in everyday life.<sup>140</sup> The motive has to make sense; it has to resonate with the audience in order for it to be believed. Generally, evil is isolated as the motive force propelling the conspiracy forward, whether the evil is compelled by greed or the desire for power.<sup>141</sup> Indeed, as has been noted, conspiracists argued NORAD failed to perform its duty to protect the United States because a stand-down order had been issued by the Bush administration. Yet, the 9/11 Commission, if it were going to effectively dodge the conspiracy bullet of motive, had to devise a motive that would satisfy the public’s desire, in Fenster’s words, “to make sense of the historical agent behind the events” and that would effectively combat conspiracy claims.<sup>142</sup>

In explaining the failures of the FAA and NORAD to follow protocol on 9/11, the Commission offers, “NORAD and the FAA were unprepared for the type of attacks launched against the United States on September 11, 2001. They struggled, under difficult circumstances, to improvise a homeland defense against an unprecedented challenge they had never before encountered and had never trained to meet.”<sup>143</sup> Similarly, the Commission stated, “The defense of U.S. airspace on 9/11 was not conducted in accord with preexisting training and protocols. It was improvised by civilians who had never handled a hijacked aircraft that attempted to disappear, and by a military unprepared for the transformation of commercial aircraft into weapons of mass destruction.”<sup>144</sup> Ultimately, the Commission was offering that the strenuous situation that 9/11 posed, coupled with a lack of experience and a lack of imagination, were the

reasons, the motive, behind the FAA and NORAD's failures to follow protocol. The rather weak motive the Commission used to explain the failures to follow protocol was an attempt to refute conspiracy claims.

In essence, the Commission was attempting to provide the simple motive of inexperience and human failing to explain why the FAA and NORAD failed to prevent any of the death and destruction on 9/11 (what conspiracists have dubiously labeled an "incompetence" theory) and to combat beliefs that the Bush administration had issued a stand-down order. Zarefsky argues that when there is simple motive to explain evil, then conspiracy beliefs will not get much play within the public sphere.<sup>145</sup> To illustrate his point, Zarefsky wrote, "It is far easier to explain the attack on Pearl Harbor by reference to faulty intelligence than to a conspiracy in Washington to drag the nation into war."<sup>146</sup> Simple motives, however, are only successful if they exist in a relatively stable climate. In an indeterminate climate, the likelihood that the public will attend to a motive of evil that resolves the ambiguity existing within the public sphere is greatly increased.<sup>147</sup>

Plagued by the failure of other commissions to avoid being drawn into conspiracy theories, the 9/11 Commission used the strategy of hyper-objectivity to keep its discourse from falling into the realm of conspiracy theories. In so doing, however, the 9/11 Commission was using a tactic exploited by conspiracy theorists. In setting itself up as the objective observer, much like a physician providing a patient with a diagnosis, the Commission could point to the problems associated with the defenses in place in the United States on and before 9/11 without having to address the troubling problems of an evil motive. Instead, the motives behind the War in Iraq and the improper execution of protocol between the FAA and NORAD are either left unexamined, or are ascribed to the simple motive of human failing. The "facts" are left for the

audience to interpret. Failing to address the ambiguities and anomalies of the failures for the FAA and NORAD to effectively coordinate the defenses of the United States creates a sense of mystery, of obscurity, and of doubt. If the greatest military power in the world is unable to prevent hijacked commercial aircraft from causing death and destruction because of human failing, then what does that say about the country's preparedness in facing an attack from a foreign military power? The question of motive, then, becomes obscure, secret, and mysterious, a problem that is exacerbated with the use of technical information. The inadequacies of motive provided by the Commission further create an indeterminate climate where conspiracy theories flourish.

If the question of secrecy or mystery hinges upon the question of motive in the technical sphere, then the Commission's failure to address motive, coupled with the use of technical information, further obfuscates and mystifies what actually happened on 9/11 and why. The audience is left with a mystery, something that has yet to be determined, has yet to be solved to the satisfaction of the audience. The Commission's lack of a full explanation leaves open the possibility of multiple interpretations of what transpired on 9/11, interpretations that provide fuller explanations, however erroneous, of what happened and why. The audience is provided with reasons that resonate and provide them with a creditable motive, reasons that tap into the fears of the public. When held in sharp relief against conspiracists' claims that the evil machinations of the Bush administration were the cause of the terrorist attacks, the Commission's objective stance, its determination to provide the unvarnished truth, fails to provide a satisfactory narrative fix for the terrorist attacks. Furthermore, the failure of the Commission to refute conspiracy claims becomes, in the logic of conspiracy theory, an admission of guilt, an acknowledgement that there is something behind the curtain that is too

nefarious for the Commission to acknowledge. Even with the Commission's attempt to prevent itself from being drawn into the fray of conspiracy arguments, the Commission does attempt to deal with some of what it deemed "rational" conspiracy theories.

### *Argument from Absence*

Conspiracists raised questions about the relationship among the Bush, bin Laden, and Saudi royal families and implied that the relationship among the three families was suspicious.<sup>148</sup> The questions raised by Griffin and others posited that "the failure to capture bin Laden may be connected with the close relations between the Saudi royals, the bin Laden family, and the Bush administration."<sup>149</sup> These same questions led some to believe that the Bush administration was actively seeking to impede a full investigation into the 9/11 terrorist attacks, which, conspiracists claimed, was evidence of the government's duplicity.<sup>150</sup> To add force to their claims, conspiracists argued that flights loaded with Saudi nationals and members of the Bin Laden family left the country prior to the reopening of U.S. airspace. Considering that most of the terrorists hailed from Saudi Arabia, and considering that members of the Bin Laden family, who may or may not have contact with their infamous relative, were able to allegedly leave the United States before U.S. airspace reopened and without being fully vetted by the intelligence agencies, conspiracists argued that the Saudi flights "could have been made possible only through political intervention from the White House."<sup>151</sup> These flights, conspiracists posed, served as proof of governmental complicity in the 9/11 terrorist attacks. The White House, it was argued, was shielding Saudi Arabia from the close scrutiny that may have resulted if the public became aware of just how cozy the Bush administration was with state sponsors of terrorists.<sup>152</sup> The Commission, in attempting to dispel beliefs that there was a conspiracy in place on 9/11,

used the conspiracy technique of argument from absence, a technique, as I noted in chapter two, used to shift the burden onto the conspiracy theorists and away from the Commission.

The 9/11 Commission explicitly took on the claims of the Saudi flights when it states, “Three questions have arisen with respect to the departure of Saudi nationals from the United States in the immediate aftermath of 9/11: (1) Did any flights of Saudi nationals take place before national airspace was reopened on September 13, 2001? (2) Was there any political intervention to facilitate the departure of Saudi nationals? (3) Did the FBI screen Saudi nationals thoroughly before their departure?”<sup>153</sup> “[W]e found no evidence,” stated the Commission, “that any flights of Saudi nationals, domestic or international, took place before the reopening of national airspace on the morning of September 13, 2001.”<sup>154</sup> “To the contrary,” stated the Commission, “every flight we have identified occurred after national airspace opened.”<sup>155</sup> Furthermore, the Commission iterated, “[W]e found no evidence of political intervention. We found no evidence that anyone at the White House above the level of Richard Clarke participated in a decision on the departure of Saudi nationals. ... None of the officials we interviewed recalled any intervention or direction on this matter from any political appointee.”<sup>156</sup> Even though, according to the Commission, “White House Chief of Staff Andrew Card remembered someone telling him about the Saudi request shortly after 9/11, he said he had not talked to the Saudis and did not ask anyone to do anything about it.”<sup>157</sup> Moreover, the commission added, “None of the officials we interviewed recalled any intervention or direction on this matter from any political appointee.”<sup>158</sup>

In using statements such as, “we found no evidence,” the Commission is not only making an explicit appeal that no one from the Bush administration made the operational decision to allow the Saudi flights to leave the United States, but is also shifting the burden of proof onto

conspiracists in order to put them in the position of having to “prove” their case. But the use of the absence of evidence is doing something else; it is implicitly asserting that the absence of evidence is proof that there was no complicity on the part of the White House. If the White House was not aiding Saudi flights to leave the country, then there was no complicity on the part of the White House. If there was no complicity, then the White House had nothing to hide about its relations with the Saudi royal and bin Laden families.

In addition to the alleged problems with the Saudi flights, claims were leveled against the Saudi Arabian government and the Saudi royal family asserting that they had wittingly and unwittingly funded the operations of al Qaeda. Senator Bob Graham implied that there was a conspiracy to obstruct finding out the truth about possible sources of financing for al Qaeda operatives in the United States. Senator Graham, who co-chaired the Joint Inquiry, argued that the entire twenty-seven pages of the Joint Inquiry Report pertaining to the Saudi government and its financing of the 9/11 terrorists; was redacted from public view “for reasons other than national security.”<sup>159</sup> It was alleged in Senator Graham’s book, *Intelligence Matters*, that some of al Qaeda’s funding for the terrorist attacks came from members of the Saudi government and the Saudi royal family. Senator Graham revealed that two of the alleged hijackers—Nawaf al Hazmi and Khalid al Mihdhar—were “friendly” with an FBI informant while living in San Diego and Hazmi even rented a room from the informant.<sup>160</sup> Furthermore, Senator Graham implied that Omar al Bayoumi, a suspected Saudi spy and a well-known acquaintance of Hazmi and Mihdhar, seemingly funded the two terror suspects from income garnered from a “ghost job” with Ercan, “a contractor of the Saudi government.”<sup>161</sup>

The Saudi government, however, was not the only Saudi entity Senator Graham implicated in funding Hazmi and Mihdhar. Saudi Princess Haifa al Faisal, wife of Prince Bandar

bin Sultan, the Saudi ambassador to the United States, was alleged to have funneled money to terrorists, albeit unknowingly. As Senator Graham explains, Princess Haifa was sending checks in the amounts of “\$2,000 and \$3,000 a month” to a Saudi woman (the wife of Osama Bassnan and alleged friend of Bayoumi) in need of thyroid surgery. However, the checks being sent by Princess Haifa to Bassnan’s wife were being signed “over to a woman named Manal Bajadr—the wife of Omar al-Bayoumi.”<sup>162</sup> Such revelations led Senator Graham to conclude that, “It looked suspiciously like another back-door way of channeling money to al-Hazmi and al-Mihdhar.<sup>163</sup> At the very least, Senator Graham was implying that the Saudi government and members of the Saudi royal family were funneling money to terrorists under the noses of the FBI. But Senator Graham took these observations further by stating that he believed that 9/11 was “an avoidable tragedy” and that the White House orchestrated a “cover-up ... to protect not only the agencies that had failed but also America’s relationship with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.”<sup>164</sup> If Graham’s assertions were true, then they could cause a serious political firestorm in Washington, especially considering that conspiracists had already charged that the Bush administration’s ties to the bin Laden and Saudi royal families had impeded a full investigation into the terrorist attacks. The Commission set out to refute claims that a foreign government, especially Saudi Arabia, had any part in funding the 9/11 terrorists by refuting conspiracy claims with a conspiracy tactic.

The Commission wrote, “Saudi Arabia has long been considered the primary source of al Qaeda funding, but we have found no evidence that the Saudi government as an institution or senior Saudi officials individually funded the organization. (This conclusion does not exclude the likelihood that charities with significant Saudi government sponsorship diverted funds to al Qaeda.)”<sup>165</sup> Here the Commission is using the absence of evidence to make a fine distinction:

while there was likely money given by the Saudi government for charitable purposes that was then given to al Qaeda, the Commission is asserting that neither the Saudi government, nor any of its “senior” officials, were aware of such financial distributions. Similarly, in refuting charges that Princess Haifa either knowingly, or unwittingly, helped to fund terrorist activities, the Commission asserts in an endnote, “We have found no evidence that Saudi Princess Haifa al Faisal provided any funds to the conspiracy, either directly or indirectly.”<sup>166</sup> In essence, the 9/11 Commission is using the absence of evidence to combat conspiracy claims that the Saudi government and the Saudi royal family were involved in any terrorist funding.

Finally, the 9/11 Commission used the absence of evidence to refute claims that Bayoumi helped to finance the terrorist attacks. “Our investigation” wrote the Commission, “has found no credible evidence that any person in the United States gave the hijackers substantial financial assistance. Similarly, we have seen no evidence that any foreign government—or any foreign government official—supplied any funding.”<sup>167</sup> These statements directly refute the claims that Bayoumi wittingly helped to fund Hazmi and Mihdhar, and that Bayoumi was a Saudi spy. By definition, spies are government agents. If Bayoumi was a Saudi spy, and if he was funding al Qaeda operatives, then it left open the possibility that the Saudi government was funding terrorists. The Commission, in arguing that Bayoumi was not a spy based on an absence of evidence, was attempting to make Senator Graham’s conspiracy charges suspect. They were fighting conspiracy claims with a conspiracy tactic. It becomes the conspiracist’s burden to prove that Bayoumi did finance Hazmi and Mihdhar, and that Bayoumi was a Saudi spy. As a general rule, it is almost impossible to prove that someone is a spy unless, of course, the government of the suspected spy acknowledges the person’s agent status.

There are a few implications that can be garnered from the Commission's use of argument from absence. The Commission could simply be telling the unvarnished truth. Everything said in the Commission's report could simply be stating the facts as they were found; there was no evidence of anything untoward. The Commission could be obfuscating some of the information, banking on the fact that proving Bayoumi not only funded al Qaeda members, but that he was also a Saudi spy, would be impossible without complete access to the information. The Commission could simply be intentionally concealing the truth for altruistic reasons. If the assertions made by Senator Graham are true, then they are pretty damning evidence of the role Saudi Arabia played in the terrorist attacks. Considering that Saudi Arabia is one of the United States' most staunch allies in the Middle East, and considering the U.S. was already involved in costly and politically polarizing wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, then the Commission could have simply been protecting American interests by not casting blame on yet another suspect. The Commission could have been intentionally concealing information for a more malign purpose, namely that the Bush administration was complicit in preventing a full investigation of the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Finally, the Commission simply may just not know.

The use of the absence of evidence by the Commission is used as evidence that neither the Saudi government nor the Saudi royal family were involved in a conspiracy to finance terrorism. Considering that the evidence the Commission used to back its claims was redacted from public view, and considering that the co-chair of the Joint Inquiry is one of the key players in making allegations implicating the Saudi government in financing terrorism, a game of "We say" "They say" is being employed. Who ultimately will be believed will be dependent on who has been able to successfully force the opponent into shouldering the burden of proof. As the logic of conspiracy theories goes, the Commission's use of absence serves as "proof" that there

was no conspiracy, but conspiracists can then take the absence to make the claim that the absence is actually evidence of a conspiracy. What is certain is that the use of argument of absence by the Commission, instead of laying the facts bare for the audience to comprehend, adds to the indeterminacy of what happened and why.

With the Commission's use of hyper-objectivity to combat "irrational" claims of conspiracy, and its use of argument from absence to combat the more "rational" conspiracy theories, the Commission then turned to casting sole blame onto Osama bin Laden and al Qaeda. In so doing, the Commission employed some of the more signature elements of Hofstadter's paranoid style.

### *Portraying the Perfect Enemy*

Conspiracists posit that bin Laden and al Qaeda could only have been successful on 9/11 through the complicity of the federal government. Citing evidence that the U.S. provided material and financial backing of the mujahedeen in Afghanistan, in which bin Laden participated, conspiracists argued that bin Laden was a product, and thus a puppet, of the U.S. government. For instance, Matthias Broeckers, who published the book, *Verschwörungen, Verschwörungstheorien, und die Geheimnisse des 11.9*, in Germany in 2002, posited that bin Laden's ties to the CIA during the Afghani mujahedeen and the existing ties between the Bush and bin Laden families are evidence of governmental complicity in the 9/11 attacks.<sup>168</sup> While the 9/11 Commission freely admitted that the United States funneled money through Pakistan to support the Afghani mujahedeen, it denied that bin Laden received any substantial U.S.-backed training or financial support. The Commission stated, "Bin Ladin and his comrades had their own sources of support and training, and they received little or no assistance from the United

States.”<sup>169</sup> While this statement serves as an express denial that the United States was somehow responsible for the power and abilities of bin Laden, what is particularly interesting is the Commission’s subsequent portrayal of bin Laden as the perfect enemy described by Hofstadter, which bolsters the Commission’s assertion that bin Laden was not aided in any meaningful way by the U.S., but also implies that bin Laden’s overriding hatred of the United States made it impossible for him to act in concert with his most hated enemy. In essence, the Commission employed one of the most signature elements of the conspiracy narrative in order to combat claims of a governmental conspiracy, the construction of the perfect enemy.

“The enemy,” according to Hofstadter, “is clearly delineated: he is the perfect model of malice, a kind of amoral superman: sinister, ubiquitous, powerful, cruel, sensual, luxury-loving.”<sup>170</sup> Hofstadter further notes that the enemy “is a free, active, demonic agent.” The enemy conspiracists paint, in essence, is the personification of evil. One of the ways the Commission characterizes the demonic nature of bin Laden and al Qaeda is through the use of archetypal metaphor to explain the motive force—evil—driving bin Laden and al Qaeda.<sup>171</sup> For instance, the Commission explained that bin Laden had a unique appeal in the Middle East because, while other Islamic extremists focused their attention on destroying Israel, bin Laden believed that “[t]hey had not taken on what he called ‘the head of the snake,’” the United States.<sup>172</sup> The Commission reiterated bin Laden’s use of the “head of the snake” metaphor by noting that after bin Laden was expelled from Sudan, “He was ready to strike at ‘the head of the snake.’”<sup>173</sup> Finally, the Commission drove home the point when it stated, “Bin Ladin and Islamist terrorists mean exactly what they say: to them America is the font of all evil, the ‘head of the snake,’ and it must be converted or destroyed.”<sup>174</sup>

The metaphoric use of the snake to depict evil is one of the most consistent and lasting metaphors used throughout history. Symbolically, the snake represents the seduction of evil; Eve was seduced by the snake to eat the forbidden apple in the Garden of Eden, which was the cause of humanity's fall from God's grace. In quoting bin Laden using "the head of the snake" as his metaphoric representation of the United States, the Commission was accomplishing three goals. First, the Commission is highlighting the evil motive driving bin Laden and al Qaeda. Bin Laden's belief that the U.S. is evil incarnate drives his overarching desires to destroy the United States and all Americans. Second, because the Commission was writing to a largely American audience, bin Laden's depiction of the U.S. as the "head of the snake" served to divide the American people and its government from the evil machinations of bin Laden and his cohorts. The Commission was dividing the "innocent" United States from the "evil" bin Laden. As Darsey notes, "[c]onspiracy argument sets a secretive and malign purpose against a noble and true one, or at least an innocent one."<sup>175</sup> While many Americans will agree that the American government has many faults, most would not credit that the government, or its people, as the font of all evil. Finally, in dividing the United States and its people from bin Laden and his belief in America's inherent evil, the Commission was, rhetorically, turning the evil back onto bin Laden. Bin Laden is driven by evil, thus he is evil.

To further promote bin Laden's evil and demonic nature, the Commission went on to note that, bin Laden "claim[ed] that America had declared war against God and his messenger, they called for the murder of any American, anywhere on earth, as the 'individual duty for every Muslim who can do it in any country in which it is possible to do it.'"<sup>176</sup> Bin Laden, according to the Commission, further stated, "'We believe that the worst thieves in the world today and the worst terrorists are the Americans. Nothing could stop you except perhaps retaliation in kind. We

do not have to differentiate between military or civilian. As far as we are concerned, they are all targets.”<sup>177</sup> Similarly, “Bin Laden has stated flatly, ‘Our fight against these governments is not separate from our fight against you.’”<sup>178</sup> In an interview with ABC in May 1998, bin Laden, according to the Commission, claimed, “It was more important for Muslims to kill Americans than to kill other infidels.”<sup>179</sup> Bin Laden believes, quoted the Commission, that “‘It is far better for anyone to kill a single American soldier than to squander his efforts on other activities.’”<sup>180</sup>

The Commission’s use of the above passages is telling; all Americans, be they government agents, American soldiers, or civilians, are targets of bin Laden and al Qaeda. The most important activity for bin Laden and his minions is to kill Americans, but not just kill them, “murder” them. Using the word “murder” brings up images of the cold-blooded killer, one who does not kill in a rage, out of jealousy, or even in self-defense, but in a cold, calculating, purposeful act, an act compelled by evil. The foreign enemy, who is so obviously driven by evil, who so obviously hates America and all Americans, would not engage in a conspiracy with its arch enemy, the United States government, to achieve its means.

The Commission did not just rest its case on painting bin Laden as evil; it further offered that bin Laden possesses remarkable foresight and is particularly powerful and cunning. Conspiracists frequently construct an enemy so cunning, powerful, and resourceful that major historical events are attributed to the enemy’s malice. The enemy, Hofstadter warns, “wills, indeed he manufactures, the mechanism of history himself, or deflects the normal course of history in an evil way. He makes crises, starts runs on banks, causes depressions, manufactures disasters, and then enjoys and profits from the misery he has produced.”<sup>181</sup> “Very often,” according to Hofstadter, “the enemy is held to possess some especially effective source of power,” whether it be the ability to control the press, to manage news, to obtain unlimited

money, or even by “gaining a stranglehold on the educational system.”<sup>182</sup> The Commission’s depictions of bin Laden, true to Hofstadter’s formula, portray bin Laden as a demonic agent who is particularly powerful and cunning.

Possessing an uncanny ability to predict what was needed in the future for him to lay out his odious plans, bin Laden was able to recruit and train volunteers for al Qaeda by capitalizing on a system of resistance that was started in the midst of the Cold War and set in place to provide support to the Afghani mujahedeen. The Commission explained that the success of the mujahedeen in Afghanistan was dependent on an “increasingly complex, almost worldwide organization,” which “included a financial support network that came to be known as the ‘Golden Chain.’”<sup>183</sup> “Bin Ladin,” according to the Commission, “understood better than most of the volunteers [participating in the mujahedeen] the extent to which the continuation and eventual success of the jihad in Afghanistan depended” on this network.<sup>184</sup> The “Golden Chain” was “put together mainly by financiers in Saudi Arabia and the Persian Gulf states. Donations flowed through charities or other nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). Bin Ladin and the ‘Afghan Arabs’ drew largely on funds raised by this network, whose agents roamed world markets to buy arms and supplies for the mujahedeen, or ‘holy warriors.’”<sup>185</sup>

But the importance of the “Golden Chain” did not simply rely on financial support. “Mosques, schools, and boardinghouses” according to the Commission, “served as recruiting stations in many parts of the world, including the United States. Some were set up by Islamic extremists or their financial backers. Bin Ladin had an important part in this activity. He and the cleric Azzam had joined in creating a ‘Bureau of Services’ (Mektab al Khindmat, or MAK), which channeled recruits into Afghanistan.”<sup>186</sup> The Commission notes that:

Bin Ladin and Azzam agreed that the organization successfully created for Afghanistan should not be allowed to dissolve. They established what they called a base or foundation (al Qaeda) as a potential general headquarters for future jihad ... This organization's structure included as its operating arms an intelligence component, a military committee, a political committee, and a committee in charge of media affairs and propaganda. It also had an Advisory Council (Shura) made up of bin Ladin's inner circle.<sup>187</sup>

As the above passages indicate, bin Laden had a preternatural sagacity in recognizing the importance of the "Golden Chain," not only for the success of the Afghani mujahedeen, but also in foreseeing how this operational network could be used to fund bin Laden's jihad against the United States. Moreover, because bin Laden was intimately involved in receiving funds from the "Golden Chain," and because bin Laden was able to recruit members for al Qaeda from the mosques and boarding schools that were part of the operational system, including ones in the United States, bin Laden is accorded an almost mythical power.

The Commission's explanation of bin Laden's use of the "Golden Chain" and his subsequent development of al Qaeda also served to promote the idea of bin Laden's remarkable organizational skills. Bin Laden's development of an organization that had an "intelligence component, a military committee, a political committee, and a committee in charge of media affairs and propaganda" mirrors the structure and function of a mini-government. Gathering intelligence, exploring military options, determining political actions, and coordinating and supplying the media with its propaganda all serve as evidence of bin Laden's extraordinary power and speak to his ability to affect history "in an evil way." The Commission, however, did not simply bolster bin Laden's demonic image by highlighting his evil drive, his foresight, and

his power, it also highlighted the remarkable cunning of bin Laden and al Qaeda in being able to defeat the systems of protection the United States government had in place.

The Commission noted that, in order to be successful on 9/11, al Qaeda's leaders likely "reflected on what they needed to do in order to organize and conduct a complex international terrorist operation to inflict catastrophic harm."<sup>188</sup> One such requirement, and one where the Commission's description bolstered the cunning of bin Laden and al Qaeda, was "an intelligence effort to gather required information and form assessments of enemy strengths and weaknesses."<sup>189</sup> For instance, the Commission noted that al Qaeda operatives used "flight simulator computer games ... that featured hijackings," read "flight schedules to determine which flights would be in the air at the same time in different parts of the world," and used "the game software to increase their familiarity with aircraft models and functions, and to highlight the gaps in cabin security."<sup>190</sup> Similarly, operatives "were told to watch the cabin doors at takeoff and landing, to observe whether the captain went to the lavatory during the flight, and to note whether the flight attendants brought food into the cockpit."<sup>191</sup> In addition to casing security on airplanes, an al Qaeda operative tested the "security by carrying a box cutter in his toiletries kit onto [a] flight." Even though "security officials searched his carry-on bag and even opened the toiletries kit, ... [they] just glanced at the contents and let him pass."<sup>192</sup> Furthermore, the same operative "waited until most of the first-class passengers were dozing, then got up and removed the kit from his carry-on. None of the flight attendants took notice."<sup>193</sup>

Al Qaeda's intelligence also included understanding the visa requirements for the different countries where al Qaeda operatives were being sent. The Commission recounted that al Qaeda operatives "visited travel agents to learn visa requirements for Asian countries."<sup>194</sup> Malaysia, in particular, was considered a safe place for al Qaeda operatives to pass through

because “its government did not require citizens of Saudi Arabia or other Gulf states to have visas” and “Malaysian security was reputed to be lax when it came to Islamist jihadists.”<sup>195</sup> Because it was recognized that “individuals with Saudi passports could travel much more easily ... particularly to the United States” than individuals from other countries, al Qaeda operatives used “Saudi passports to conceal their prior travels to and from Pakistan” in order to travel from Malaysia to the United States without raising undue concern.<sup>196</sup>

While not an exhaustive list of the means bin Laden and al Qaeda used to overcome the security in place to protect, not only people in the United States, but those in other countries as well, the above passages illustrate the sophistication, the cunning, the foresight, and the dedication it took in order for bin Laden and al Qaeda to unleash the terror of 9/11 on the United States, and, indeed, the rest of the world. In the Commission’s own words, the enemy “is sophisticated, patient, disciplined, and lethal.”<sup>197</sup> In describing bin Laden as being possessed by an evil agenda with an overriding desire to destroy America and Americans by demonic means as well as having the capability and foresight of organizing al Qaeda to carry out these aims, the Commission put bin Laden in the role of the perfect enemy. The Commission painted a picture of ruthless al Qaeda operatives who were under the control of their master and served his every wish and whim. Such a portrayal was an effort to not only heighten the danger the United States faces from the enemy, but to also stress that such an enemy will try any and all means to destroy America and Americans. If the singular plot behind the enemy is to destroy the United States, then the likelihood that bin Laden would willingly enter into a conspiracy with governmental leaders becomes a laughable enterprise.

## Conclusion

Conspiracy theories exhibited enormous control over the form and substance of the *9/11 Commission Report*. Haunted by the failure of other commissions to keep themselves from being drawn into the fray of conspiracy argument, and driven by the conspiracy theories already circulating in the public sphere, the Commission cast itself as an objective observer laying the facts of 9/11 bare for the audience to consider. In so doing, the Commission was allowed to ignore troublesome information that failed to fall within its perceived realm of consideration. Even when the Commission did address what it deemed to be more “rational” conspiracy theories, the Commission employed the use of argument from absence in order to prove there was no conspiracy involving the U.S. or any foreign government. Instead, blame is cast upon a single, foreign, perpetrator driven by an evil desire to destroy the United States. The enemy, bin Laden, was so powerful, so cunning and resourceful, that he and his demonic agents were able to overcome the security in place to protect the United States because of “inadequate policies and procedures” that failed to take into consideration the threat non-state-supported terrorists posed to the United States. While the narrative the Commission employs to explain the motive force surrounding the terrorists and their evil leader is compelling, the Commission’s use of hyper-objectivity to explain the anomalies surrounding the terrorist attacks is far less so and sets the Commission up to be drawn into conspiracy discourse for years to come.

The strategies the Commission employed inherently serve as a forming ground for ever more conspiracy theories. Conspiracy theories, according to Clare Birchall, are an almost “necessary” result of indeterminacy. Birchall asserted that “conspiracy theories ... are possible precisely because the type of interpretation or reading privileged by the mainstream press and traditional academic discourses will always leave a remainder, a remainder that returns to

destabilize the assumptions upon which the reading implicitly relies.”<sup>198</sup> Evidence provided to support claims in official discourses serves as a foundation for further speculation because questions left unanswered and information that is either ignored or distorted raise doubt, uncertainty, and speculation. As counter-narratives about an event such as 9/11 grow, Birchall insisted that such narratives will ultimately “affect the general structure and meanings of that story and who is entitled to interpret it.”<sup>199</sup>

In its use of hyper-objectivity in order to prevent itself from being drawn into the fray of conspiracy theories, the Commission inherently set its discourse up to fail against the more satisfying and closed narratives conspiracy theories offered. In providing the facts of the terrorist attacks, the Commission failed to address the emotional needs of the audience and left the audience to determine its own motives as to why the United States invaded Iraq. The audience also was left to determine why FAA and NORAD officials provided inaccurate evidence during their public testimony. Furthermore, the audience was left to wade through the Commission’s highly technical and dense explanations of the failures of the military to effectively coordinate a defense on 9/11. Such descriptions have fueled further questions, further remainders, because the audience was not properly initiated into the technical language necessary to engage the discourse. The information thus becomes secret and mysterious and questions continue to circle around what the discourse means.

The only place in the narrative where the Commission did interpret the information, did provide the audience with an emotional appeal was in its assertions that bin Laden and al Qaeda are not done committing acts of terrorism against the U.S. “Drawing on a long tradition of extreme intolerance within one stream of Islam,” stated the Commission, a “stream that is motivated by religion and does not distinguish politics from religion” provides for a distorted

view of the world where the United States is seen as the font of all evil.<sup>200</sup> “It is not a position with which Americans can bargain or negotiate. With it there is no common ground—not even respect for life—on which to begin a dialogue. It can only be destroyed or utterly isolated.”<sup>201</sup> In these passages the Commission provided the audience with a motive, a reason to take heed of its advice. We are in an all-out apocalyptic battle and failure means our own destruction. In essence, the Commission was fomenting the same kind of apocalyptic fear that conspiracists use in the narratives of their texts, but it only did so in its chapter of recommendations. Other fears, fears that the government is incapable of protecting its people, that the government is lying to its people, were never addressed.

In essence, the Commission’s desire to not engage conspiracy theories by adopting a hyper-objective stance provided conspiracy theories with proof that the Commission was engaging in a cover-up, and when it did engage conspiracy theories, the Commission’s use of absence of evidence was, to conspiracy theorists, evidence of a cover-up. All told, the remarkable flexibility of conspiracy theories, and their power within indeterminate climates, speaks to the remarkable power of conspiracy theories, in our current times, to influence the form and substance of official discourse. Official discourse, in other words, is put into an untenable position, one where it cannot hope to prevail over the more closed, fixed, and ultimately satisfying narrative that conspiracy theories offer because government agents can never completely satisfy the argumentative burdens that conspiracy theories demand.

## CHAPTER 4

## SUBSTANCE AND FORM:

## CONSPIRATORIAL MANIFESTATIONS IN OFFICIAL DISCOURSE

*The world has become one big grassy knoll,  
crawling with lone gunmen  
who think they're the Warren Commission.*

—Ken MacLeod

Conspiracy theories are becoming an increasingly significant mode of interpretation for understanding the causes behind historical events. Scholars have pointed to the eruption of conspiracy beliefs that continue to grow and expand in our contemporary world as proof that the U.S. is becoming more paranoid and more besieged by conspiracy beliefs.<sup>1</sup> The expansion of conspiracy beliefs among the American people is a result, posit scholars, of the loss of central authority and the rise of the indeterminacy of information.<sup>2</sup> In the wake of revelations of actual conspiracies enacted by the government against its people, in the wake of revelations of government and corporate malfeasance, belief in conspiracy is no longer a purely paranoid assumption. Labeling a belief as a conspiracy theory serves as a dismissal of its premises. But the persistence and prominence of conspiracy theories is indicative that conspiracy theories are not so easily marginalized and dispelled by simply dismissing their messages and their appeal.

At the heart of this study is the determination of how conspiracy theories shape and influence official discourse. It has been widely acknowledged that conspiracy theories enter into

a dialogue with official discourse; what has not been examined is the degree to which conspiracy theories influence the substance of official discourse. Conspiracy theories come into being almost immediately after a significant historical event occurs. From Sarah Palin's pronouncement that President Obama wanted to impose "death panels" as part of the health care bill, to the leaking of thousands of classified military documents on the War in Afghanistan which indicate that "the Taliban are stronger than at any time since 2001," to beliefs that President Obama is a closet Muslim and that he, along with his administration, is attempting to impose Sharia law in the United States, conspiracy theories are the wellspring of doubt, uncertainty, and anxiety within the American public.<sup>3</sup> When conspiracy claims become strong enough, when they elicit enough doubt to effectively prohibit the government from enacting legislation, diminish public support of overseas war efforts, or even provoke people to violently target places of worship because of their fears that an alien religion is trying to usurp the American way of life, it becomes incumbent upon officials to address the issues.<sup>4</sup> The ways in which officials respond to fears, to anxieties, to claims of conspiracy within the public sphere are instrumental in perfecting the maturity of conspiracy theories.

The examination of two blue ribbon commissions and their reports from two deeply moments in our contemporary era has uncovered a wealth of information about the power of conspiracy theories in our time. The *Warren Commission Report* and the *9/11 Commission Report*, though released to the public roughly forty years apart from one another, show remarkable differences and remarkable similarities.

*The Cultural Force and Power of Conspiracy Theories*

The cultural force and power of conspiracy theories lies, in a large degree, with the loss of central authority and the indeterminacy of information.<sup>5</sup> Since 1960, and even before, a litany of scandals and abuses of power have discredited the normally presumptive position authority holds. Peter Knight observed that in the face of revealed scandals and conspiracies committed by the government against its own people, conspiracy theories implicating the government of wrongdoing are now a default assumption on the part of large contingents of the American public.<sup>6</sup> That loss of central authority thus gives rise to the indeterminacy of information. In our time, when a globally significant historical event occurs, a deluge of information is immediately available within the public through the media, especially through the Internet.

Competing sources, ones vying for the authority to narrate the happenings of such events, quickly forward their own interpretations of what happened, who did it, and why it occurred. While the more fantastic, the more conspiratorial beliefs may not be immediately creditable to segments of the public, as more information is released, and as more conflicting evidence and testimony is uncovered, the public has to make a series of choices as to whom or what to believe, a task that, at least since the early 1960s, has been made more and more untenable.<sup>7</sup> As Knight indicates:

Whether we like it or not, all of us now live in a world in which there is a vast amount of information but none of it is ever complete: there is always one more theory to consider, one more expert opinion to consult, not helped by the possibility that the ultimate consequences of any event threaten to mushroom outwards into a chain reaction of cause and effect. And with so many different, and often incommensurable, sources of

information, there seems to be no higher authority to which we can appeal in order to get to the ultimate truth.<sup>8</sup>

The inability to appeal to a higher authority, the inability to find a higher truth, makes any information that is provided suspect. Instead, the public has to sift through all of the competing sources in order to determine its own truth. But the continual revelation of information never provides the public with a stable meaning. Instead, information is constantly being changed, challenged, and compounded. It is not possible to have anything but indeterminacy with such unstable meaning, and it is almost certain that conspiracy theories will continue to grow, and to be believed. The continued growth of conspiracy theories, and their ability to force officials to attack their premises, is revelatory of the power conspiracy theories have over the form of official discourse.

### *The Hierarchical Function of Official Discourse in the Conspiracy Genre*

Official discourse plays an integral role in the development of the conspiracy argument. The battle lines are drawn between the conspiratorial and the official as soon as conspiracy claims gain enough cultural force within the public sphere to prompt a response. In confronting conspiracy claims, official discourse takes on a double burden of proof- providing the American public with an argument about what happened, who did it, and why, while simultaneously having to argue that the government was not involved in a conspiracy plot. It is during its attempt to “prove” that there was no conspiracy that official discourse takes on some of the substantive and stylistic characteristics of conspiracy theories because it is in those areas of conflict that exist between the conspiratorial and the authoritative arguments where officials have to strive to make

their cases. Official discourse, in confronting claims of conspiracy, provides a necessary step in the conspiracy genre.

The Warren Commission, overtly concerned with the problems that popular conspiracy theories could impose on the social and political stability in the country, attempted to root out conspiracy theories by directly confronting them. Conspiracists on the political left, prior to the release of the Commission's report, raised a series of questions they believed the Commission should answer to dispel the uncertainty surrounding the assassination President Kennedy, especially concerns about "establishment" connections to Oswald. Conspiracists on the political right, however, believed that the assassination of President Kennedy was a result of a vast Communist conspiracy that had been in the works for years. What is shared by the conspiracy theories on both the left and right is the belief that the government was being usurped by dark and powerful forces, forces that would keep the Warren Commission from being able to tell the truth of the assassination.<sup>9</sup> In confronting claims of conspiracy, the Warren Commission mirrored some of the substantive and stylistic hallmarks of conspiracy arguments, namely the strategies of argument from absence, the paradox of substance, overwhelming the audience with massive evidence, and internal consistency.

Like the Warren Commission, the 9/11 Commission, too, was concerned with the cultural force and power conspiracy theories wielded within the public realm. Within days of the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, conspiracists on the right argued that a vast Jewish conspiracy was the cause behind 9/11. It took a bit longer for the political left's conspiracy theories to flourish, but, when they did, such theories posed that the terrorist attacks were, at the very least, allowed to happen in order to provide an excuse to invade the Middle East and gain control over the oil-rich region. Unlike the Warren Commission, the 9/11 Commission largely attacked conspiracy claims

indirectly by adopting a hyper-objective stance that disallowed anything but unanimity in its conclusions. Furthermore, the Commission used massively documented technical information that prohibited the audience from fully engaging in the information. When the Commission did directly confront conspiracy theories, it used argument from absence in order to contradict conspiracy claims. Finally, however, the 9/11 Commission, instead of addressing the American public's fears, cast blame onto a supremely powerful foreign enemy imbued with evil. In essence, the 9/11 Commission was using a conspiracy argument to combat conspiracy claims.

If we look at the salient characteristics used by both commissions in their attempts to combat the conspiracy tide, we see a remarkable consistency with the forms they used. Both asserted they were addressing the evidence from a materialist standpoint; they were simply laying bare the facts of the assassination and the terrorist attacks. Both resorted to the use of technical information that was left largely up to the audience to decipher meaning from its dense prose. Both forwarded massively documented arguments to the American public. And both used argument from absence in an attempt to disprove conspiracy claims. When compared to the substantive, stylistic, and situational characteristics of conspiracy arguments, there is a remarkable consonance between conspiracy arguments and the two commission reports. However, just because official discourse and conspiracy arguments have similar forms does not mean that both commissions participated within the conspiracy genre. Even though there is “a constellation of forms,” to borrow from Campbell and Jamieson, what is missing from official discourse that exists in that of official discourse is the signature element of the conspiracy argument; its “self-sealing” nature.

Conspiracy theories become self-sealing because of their interaction with official discourse. Initial conspiracy theories, such as those from Bertrand Russell and David Ray

Griffin, propose a series of questions, of queries, of concerns that they feel must be answered by official discourse. Yet, when confronting the evidence put forth in the commissions' reports, conspiracists are able to look to the "authoritative texts," the government's "truth" about the event, and are then able to interrogate the evidence for its contradictions. Any questions that go unanswered, any perceived distortions of the evidence, any bit of information that does not "ring true" with conspiracists' understanding of an event becomes further proof that there was a conspiracy. In essence, official discourse provides the hierarchical function necessary for conspiracy theories to gain their signature self-sealing nature. Official discourse confronts the conspiratorial and then the conspiratorial confronts the official. In this way, both official and conspiratorial are reactionary modes of discourse; both are attempting to uncover the "truth," but the conspiratorial is dependent upon the official to arrive at its next level of meaning.

Official discourse plays into the hands of the conspiratorial. Any time a conspiracy theory is confronted by officials, conspiracists can take the result of the clash of ideas and use it as evidence that a conspiracy exists. Conspiracy theories, unlike their official counterparts, are not constrained by the conventions of their offices, the rules of evidence, and the restrictions imposed on them by the powers that be in telling their stories. Furthermore, because of their mutability, conspiracy theories are able to easily adapt to the emotional needs of their audiences. Official discourse does not have the luxury of mutability; it is supposed to serve as the definitive and final narrative of an event. Once it is completed, it is forever consigned to the annals of history unless a new investigation is opened. Even still, conspiracy theories are able to continually renew their claims because new information inevitably comes to light. As more documents become declassified, as more information about the secret dealings of the government

comes to light, conspiracy theories have the opportunity to continually assert or reassert their arguments while official discourse remains largely fixed and stagnant.

Conspiracy theories' cultural force now allows for conspiratorial understandings of significant historical events to gain presumptive power in the face of tragedy. Authority is no longer able to set the permissive terms of argument, choosing what to argue and how to argue it. Instead, authority finds itself vying for authority over other modes of discourse, including the conspiratorial. The burden of proof falls onto the shoulders of authority to not only make its case, but to simultaneously prove that there was no conspiracy on the part of the government.<sup>10</sup> In essence, authority has to come out of its fortified position and attempt to make an argument against conspiracy claims, what Whately said can be viewed as a feeble attack. In confronting conspiracy beliefs, the official discourse becomes integral in the development of the conspiratorial and functions within the genre of the conspiracy argument, and, in this sense, is doomed to fail in containing conspiracy claims. If official discourse participates within the conspiratorial genre, and if official discourse is incapable of prevailing over conspiracy theories as a result, then it is revelatory of significant implications within political life.

### *Harnessing and Combating the Power of Conspiracy*

With more people believing in conspiracy, and being seduced by conspiracy arguments, the ability to have reasonable public debate is seriously diminished. Instead of entering a marketplace of ideas where thoughts can be reasonably argued, the public is entering a growing era of suspiciousness, unreasonableness, and disparity. With so many disparate voices resounding within the public sphere, and with conspiracy beliefs becoming more prominent, the ability of conspiracy beliefs to infect public and political life is at an all-time high. Everything

done in the name of governing, in the name of the public good, is now suspect. While labeling something done for the good of the public has always been suspect in the minds of some, such as the fluoridation of water, the regularity of the belief that works being done in the name of the public good is a part of a greater conspiracy to dupe the masses is now at a critical force. If conspiracy theories are so easily believed, and if politicians, eager to maintain, and gain, power in their respective parties continually attempt to harness the power of conspiracy beliefs in order to mobilize support, then the public may fall victim to an endless, cyclical battle where the fury of the fringe in political life is able to dictate the agenda of government.

Governance, instead of being about the greatest good for the greatest number of people, may be doomed to the endless array of conspiracy beliefs fueled by special interests, what Jürgen Habermas termed “opinion management.”<sup>11</sup> Habermas argues that “systematically creating news events or exploiting events that attract attention” by focusing on “human interest topics,” and by then dramatically presenting “facts and calculated stereotypes,” allows for “a ‘reorientation’ of public opinion by the formation of new authorities or symbols which will have acceptance.”<sup>12</sup> Politicians as well as others who actively promote conspiratorial understandings of the current social, economic, and political situations, are able to tap into the very real fears of many Americans in these troubled times. By grabbing onto some of the most outrageous fears, such as U.S. Representative Michele Bachmann’s beliefs that we are moving to a single world currency where China would be able to exert significant influence, or that expanding Americorps programs is an attempt by the government to brainwash the nation’s youths, conspiracy advocates are able to exploit the very real fears that the government is going bankrupt and will become subject to the wishes and whims of China, or that the government is increasingly trying to control the lives of the American people.<sup>13</sup>

Take the conspiracy theory that President Obama is not a U.S. citizen. The Obama campaign provided a digital copy of his birth certificate in June 2008 to quell fears about his authenticity as a naturally born U.S. citizen. Conspiracists were then able to respond to the digital copy as a fake, offering that the failure to release the original document was evidence that candidate Obama was not a citizen.<sup>14</sup> In essence, the fears prompted a response, the response fueled further fears and provided conspiracists the ability to make their theories self-sealing, and attacks against such claims has prompted beliefs about the foreign birth of the president to rise to an alarming 18 percent in public opinion polling.<sup>15</sup> Part of the reason for the rise in conspiracy beliefs about the president's birth certificate stemmed, at least in part, from the actions of politicians in their attempts to cull support for their candidacies in the 2010 midterm elections by tapping into the fears of the electorate. Instead of attacking vitriolic conspiracy beliefs about President Obama, some Republican candidates fueled further beliefs because they never expressly asserted their denial. Instead, candidates according to Jonathan Alter, provided "coded message[s]" that gave people "permission to consider" conspiratorial understandings about the president.<sup>16</sup> In essence, Republican candidates tapped into the fears of those with marginal beliefs in order to garner support for their candidacies.

Members of the media, politicians, and others who came out and attacked the conspiracy claims frequently did so in a counterproductive way. In countering conspiracists' charges, it is not enough for officials to simply provide the audience with "facts and figures" and hope that they "will inevitably lead ... to the right conclusions."<sup>17</sup> Officials, in responding to conspiracies, frequently relay the facts and denigrate what is being said and who is saying it. In doing so, however, officials are not only failing to respond to the emotional fears of the people, fears that are not completely unfounded, but they are also engaging in the ad hominem fallacy and thus

appear condescending, arrogant, and out of touch with the people.<sup>18</sup> Such responses put conspiracists in a defensive mode. In attacking the fears and beliefs of conspiracists, officials are actually adding to the prominence of conspiracy theories, largely because they are failing to connect on an emotional level with the audience. Forwarding an argument requires all three of Aristotle's artistic proofs: *ethos*, *pathos*, and *logos*. Far too frequently, officials have relied entirely too much on their credibility and their reasoning to set forth their positions; however, credibility and reasoning are no longer enough to ensure a docile public because of the loss of central authority.

Capitalizing on conspiracy fears in order to promote an agenda makes contemporary political life fraught with problems. Every belief, every fear, every conspiracy, every mistruth becomes fair game if it resonates with a public and can be exploited to forward an interest. Using conspiracy beliefs to garner support a frightening trend. In a society where a battle is being fought between the conspiratorial and the official, particularly in a society where the official is steadily losing ground to alternative explanations for events and occurrences, what gets determined as true and what gets labeled as conspiratorial may largely be determined by who is able to mobilize the most support for their version of reality. This polyphony of authority is dangerous because, as Hannah Arendt argued, "The rule by nobody is not necessarily no-rule; it may indeed, under certain circumstances, even turn out to be one of its cruelest and most tyrannical versions."<sup>19</sup> When officials use conspiracy beliefs to promote their own agendas, their opponents are then put into the unenviable position of having to defend themselves against such attacks, a quest that becomes almost impossible. Instead, the current political climate threatens to become one where the side who can mobilize the support of those with the most conspiratorial understanding of what is occurring in the political, social, and economic realms will gain power,

thus begetting a continuous back-and-forth struggle among segments of the disenfranchised looking for a way to have some modicum of control over their lives.

*Taking Back the Political from the Conspiratorial*

Scholars have posited that the only way to stem the belief in conspiracy is by enforcing greater transparency of government.<sup>20</sup> While greater transparency would certainly help, it is far more complicated than simply laying bare the vaults of government information. The government would also have to abstain from conspiring against its people. The manufactured evidence to promote the War in Iraq; the disclosures on Wikileaks that not all is going as well as thought in Afghanistan and the conviction of politicians such as Representative Charlie Rangel for ethics abuses and former House Majority Leader Tom Delay for conspiracy to commit fraud, provide the public with ample reason to believe that what is transpiring within the country is a series of conspiracies against the people. Numerous reasons exist as to why conspiracy theories flourish, and not least of which are the actual conspiracies that have been enacted. The umbrella of secrecy under which several government agents and agencies operate only provides further fuel for the problem, but the root of the problem stems from the loss of central authority precipitated by the scandals and abuses of the government.

Parrying the influence of conspiracy theories also requires that officials, whether political, academic, or other, tap into the emotions that underlie conspiracy beliefs. It is all too common for politicians, for academics, and for that the median to diagnose the problems of conspiracy thinking; yet, in doing so, these same officials hold themselves above the fray. That attitude perpetuates beliefs that officials are elitist, and out of touch with the real fears of Americans. Conspiracy theories typically start with factual information and marshal evidence

forward to an inevitable conclusion. All too frequently, officials miss the very real fears—the *pathos*—of the situation. Officials have to be able to connect in a more emotional way. Even though conspiracy fears may not be rational, they remain deeply real to the people who are experiencing them, and officials need to be able to understand the fears and rebut them in a way that resonates with the people. Leaders have to be able to rebut conspiracy claims with a combination of solid argumentation based on logic and reasoning, along with patience, kindness, and compassion. In essence, we need to be able to find common ground between the official and the conspiratorial.

Unless we can find common ground, unless we are willing to unveil the secrecy of the government, and unless we can restore public trust, we are doomed, at least as it stands now, to engage in a cyclical battle of wills between the disenfranchised and the establishment, a battle in which members of the establishment knowingly participate.

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## Notes

### NOTES TO CHAPTER 1

<sup>1</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 2000).

<sup>2</sup> Daniel Pipes, *Conspiracy: How the Paranoid Style Flourishes and Where It Comes From* (New York: The Free Press, 1997), 52-9; Robert S. Robins and Jerrold M. Post, *Political Paranoia: The Psychopolitics of Hatred* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 167-69.

<sup>3</sup> C. Northcote Parkinson, *Gunpowder, Treason and Plot* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1977), 10, 14-19, 34.

<sup>4</sup> Kenneth Schortgen, Jr. "The Possibility of Christianity as a Conspiracy," Helium, Inc., <http://www.helium.com/items/131775-the-possibility-of-christianity-as-a-conspiracy>.

<sup>5</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 2000).

<sup>6</sup> Pipes, *Conspiracy: How the Paranoid Style Flourishes*, 62-6.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 84-9. See also: Marouf Hasian, Jr. "Understanding the Power of Conspiratorial Rhetoric: A Case Study of the Protocols of the Elders." *Communication Studies* 48, no. 3 (1997).

<sup>8</sup> Bernard Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1967). See especially "A Note on Conspiracy," 144-159.

<sup>9</sup> Robert Alan Goldberg, *Enemies Within: The Culture of Conspiracy in Modern America* (New Haven: Yale University, 2001), 6-9.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 5-22.

<sup>11</sup> David Brion Davis, *The Slave Power Conspiracy and the Paranoid Style*, The Walter Lynwood Fleming Lectures in Southern History; (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1970), 3-31; Goldberg, *Enemies Within: The Culture of Conspiracy in Modern America*, 9-11; Michael Pfau, *The Political Style of Conspiracy: Chase, Sumner, and Lincoln*, Rhetoric and Public Affairs Series; (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2005), 3, 72, 165-66.

<sup>12</sup> Goldberg, *Enemies Within: The Culture of Conspiracy in Modern America*, 189-231.

<sup>13</sup> James Darsey, *The Prophetic Tradition and Radical Rhetoric in America* (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 128-50; David Brion Davis, *The Fear of Conspiracy: Images of Un-American Subversion from the Revolution to the Present* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1971), 304-9; Goldberg, *Enemies Within: The Culture of Conspiracy in Modern America*, 1-25; Richard Hofstadter, "The Paranoid Style in American Politics," in *The Paranoid Style in American Politics and Other Essays* (New York: Knopf, 1965), 26-7.

<sup>14</sup> Hofstadter, "The Paranoid Style in American Politics," 5-6; Pipes, *Conspiracy: How the Paranoid Style Flourishes*, 7-9.

<sup>15</sup> Peter Knight, *Conspiracy Culture: From Kennedy to the X Files* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 3.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>17</sup> Goldberg, *Enemies Within: The Culture of Conspiracy in Modern America*, 242-51.

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<sup>18</sup> Knight, *Conspiracy Culture: From Kennedy to the X Files*, 23-75.

<sup>19</sup> See: Hofstadter, "The Paranoid Style in American Politics"; Mark Fenster, *Conspiracy Theories: Secrecy and Power in American Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999); Goldberg, *Enemies Within: The Culture of Conspiracy in Modern America*; Pfau, *The Political Style of Conspiracy: Chase, Sumner, and Lincoln*,

<sup>20</sup> Goldberg, *Enemies Within: The Culture of Conspiracy in Modern America*, 142.

<sup>21</sup> Earl Creps mapped the generic elements of conspiracy arguments by examining the Red Scare and Mark Lane's book, *Rush to Judgment*. Marilyn Young, Michael Launer, and Curtis Austin discuss the argumentative problems associated with David Pearson's article, "K. A. L. 007, What the U.S. Knew and When we Knew It." David Zarefsky, expanding upon Creps, examined the situational characteristics that make conspiracy theories believable and further discussed some essential argumentative characteristics of the conspiracy argument by examining the Lincoln-Douglas Debates. See: Earl George Creps, III, "The Conspiracy Argument as Rhetorical Genre" (unpublished Dissertation, Northwestern University, 1980); Marilyn J. Young, Michael K. Launer, and Curtis C. Austin, "The Need for Evaluative Criteria: Conspiracy Argument Revisited," *Argumentation & Advocacy* 26 (1990); David Zarefsky, "Conspiracy Arguments in the Lincoln-Douglas Debates," *Journal of the American Forensic Association* 21 (1984).

<sup>22</sup> Knight, *Conspiracy Culture: From Kennedy to the X Files*; Fenster, *Conspiracy Theories: Secrecy and Power in American Culture*; Jack Z. Bratich, *Conspiracy Panics: Political Rationality and Popular Culture* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2008); James Darsey, "A Conspiracy of Science," *Western Journal of Communication* 66, no. 4 (2002); Shane Miller, "Conspiracy Theories: Public Arguments as Coded Social Critiques: A Rhetorical Analysis of the TWA Flight 800 Conspiracy Theories," *Argumentation and Advocacy* 39 (2002).

<sup>23</sup> Lloyd F. Bitzer, "The Rhetorical Situation," in *Readings in Rhetorical Criticism*, ed. Carl Burgchardt (State College, PA: Strata Publishing, Inc., 2000), for a definition of a rhetorical exigence, see 63-4.

<sup>24</sup> Goldberg, *Enemies Within: The Culture of Conspiracy in Modern America*, 1-25.

<sup>25</sup> Pfau, *The Political Style of Conspiracy: Chase, Sumner, and Lincoln*, 42.

<sup>26</sup> Goldberg, *Enemies Within: The Culture of Conspiracy in Modern America*, x, 1-25; Hofstadter, "The Paranoid Style in American Politics," 38-9; Pfau, *The Political Style of Conspiracy: Chase, Sumner, and Lincoln*, 14-15.

<sup>27</sup> Knight, *Conspiracy Culture: From Kennedy to the X Files*, 116.

<sup>28</sup> Bitzer, "The Rhetorical Situation," 63-4. It should be noted that the idea of the rhetorical situation is not static. Indeed, Richard Vatz argues that that, contrary to Bitzer, "No situation can have a nature independent of the rhetoric with which he [sic] chooses to characterize it." In essence, the resultant discourse of a rhetoric situation is not only responding to the situation, but is also characterizing, creating, and defining the situation. See: Richard E. Vatz, "The Myth of the Rhetorical Situation," *Philosophy & Rhetoric* 6, no. 3 (1973), 154, 158.

<sup>29</sup> James Darsey, "A Conspiracy of Science," *Western Journal of Communication* 66, no. 4 (2002), .

<sup>30</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 2000).

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*; Bratich, *Conspiracy Panics: Political Rationality and Popular Culture*; Alasdair Spark, "Conspiracy Thinking and Conspiracy Studying," (1998), <http://www2.winchester.ac.uk/ccr/resources/essays/thinkstudy.htm>.

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<sup>34</sup> Bratich, *Conspiracy Panics: Political Rationality and Popular Culture*; Spark, "Conspiracy Thinking and Conspiracy Studying."

<sup>35</sup> Bratich, *Conspiracy Panics: Political Rationality and Popular Culture*, 4; Michael Pfau, *The Political Style of Conspiracy: Chase, Sumner, and Lincoln*, Rhetoric and Public Affairs Series; (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2005), 2.

<sup>36</sup> Pfau, *The Political Style of Conspiracy: Chase, Sumner, and Lincoln*.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 2-3.

<sup>38</sup> Bratich, *Conspiracy Panics: Political Rationality and Popular Culture*, 5; Pfau, *The Political Style of Conspiracy: Chase, Sumner, and Lincoln*, 2.

<sup>39</sup> I performed a simple search on the ProQuest Theses and Dissertations Database using the term "conspiracy theories" in order to make this determination.

<sup>40</sup> Hofstadter, "The Paranoid Style in American Politics"; Davis, *The Slave Power Conspiracy and the Paranoid Style*; Pipes, *Conspiracy: How the Paranoid Style Flourishes and Where It Comes From*; Robins and Post, *Political Paranoia: The Psychopolitics of Hatred*.

<sup>41</sup> Fenster, *Conspiracy Theories: Secrecy and Power in American Culture*; Goldberg, *Enemies Within: The Culture of Conspiracy in Modern America*; Knight, *Conspiracy Culture: From Kennedy to the X Files*.

<sup>42</sup> Hofstadter, "The Paranoid Style in American Politics"; Thomas Goodnight and John Poulakos, "Conspiracy Rhetoric: From Pragmatism to Fantasy in Public Discourse," *Western Journal of Speech Communication* 45, no. 4 (1981).

<sup>43</sup> Darsey, *The Prophetic Tradition and Radical Rhetoric in America*, 132.

<sup>44</sup> For a particularly insightful and pointed criticism of Hofstadter's methodological approach to conspiracy arguments see Fenster, *Conspiracy Theories: Secrecy and Power in American Culture*, 3-21.

<sup>45</sup> Hofstadter, "The Paranoid Style in American Politics," 6.

<sup>46</sup> Davis, *The Slave Power Conspiracy and the Paranoid Style*, 3-31.

<sup>47</sup> Bratich, *Conspiracy Panics: Political Rationality and Popular Culture* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2008), 4.

<sup>48</sup> Pipes, *Conspiracy: How the Paranoid Style Flourishes and Where It Comes From*, 2-14.

<sup>49</sup> Bratich, *Conspiracy Panics: Political Rationality and Popular Culture*, 4-5; Fenster, *Conspiracy Theories: Secrecy and Power in American Culture*, xi; Goldberg, *Enemies Within: The Culture of Conspiracy in Modern America*, xi-xii; Knight, *Conspiracy Culture: From Kennedy to the X Files*, 6-9.

<sup>50</sup> Pipes, *Conspiracy: How the Paranoid Style Flourishes and Where It Comes From*, 14.

<sup>51</sup> Robins and Post, *Political Paranoia: The Psychopolitics of Hatred*, 302-3.

<sup>52</sup> Fenster, *Conspiracy Theories: Secrecy and Power in American Culture*, 3-21; Gary Gerstle, "Race and Myth of the Liberal Consensus," *The Journal of American History* 82, no. 2 (1995); Colin Gordon, "Crafting a Usable Past: Consensus, Ideology, and Historians of the American Revolution," *William and Mary Quarterly* 46, no. 4 (1989); John Higham, "Beyond Consensus: The Historian as Moral Critic," *The American Historical Review* 67, no. 3 (1962); ———, "Changing Paradigms: The Collapse of Consensus History," *The Journal of American History* 76,

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no. 2 (1989); Dwight W. Hoover, "Some Comments on Recent United States Historiography," *American Quarterly* 17, no. 2, Part 2: Supplement (1965).

<sup>53</sup> Murray Edelman, *Political Language: Words That Succeed and Policies That Fail*, Institute for Research on Poverty Monograph Series (New York: Academic Press, 1977), 28-9.

<sup>54</sup> Goldberg, *Enemies Within: The Culture of Conspiracy in Modern America*, xii.

<sup>55</sup> Knight, *Conspiracy Culture: From Kennedy to the X Files*, 2.

<sup>56</sup> Michael Barkun, "A Culture of Conspiracy: Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary America," (University of California Press), 6; Daniel Hellinger, "Paranoia, Conspiracy, and Hegemony in American Politics," in *Transparency and Secrecy*, ed. Harry G. West and Todd Sanders (Durham, North Carolina and London: Duke University Press, 2003); Pipes, *Conspiracy: How the Paranoid Style Flourishes and Where It Comes From*, 20-36.

<sup>57</sup> Anita M. Waters, "Conspiracy Theories as Ethnologies: Explanation and Intention in African American Political Culture," *Journal of Black Studies* 28, no. 1 (1997).

<sup>58</sup> Timothy Melley, *Empire of Conspiracy: The Culture of Paranoia in Postwar America* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2000), 7-16; ———, "Agency Panic and the Culture of Conspiracy," in *Conspiracy Nation: The Politics of Paranoia in Postwar America*, ed. Peter Knight (New York: New York University Press, 2002).

<sup>59</sup> Fenster, *Conspiracy Theories: Secrecy and Power in American Culture*, 62-74.

<sup>60</sup> George E. Marcus, "Introduction: The Paranoid Style Now," in *Paranoia within Reason: A Casebook on Conspiracy as Explanation*, ed. George E. Marcus (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1999), 2.

<sup>61</sup> Bratich, *Conspiracy Panics: Political Rationality and Popular Culture*, 14-19; Goldberg, *Enemies Within: The Culture of Conspiracy in Modern America*, 21; Knight, *Conspiracy Culture: From Kennedy to the X Files*, 32-5.

<sup>62</sup> Knight, *Conspiracy Culture: From Kennedy to the X Files*, 27.

<sup>63</sup> Bratich, *Conspiracy Panics: Political Rationality and Popular Culture*, 14.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 11-12.

<sup>65</sup> Goldberg, *Enemies Within: The Culture of Conspiracy in Modern America*, 240.

<sup>66</sup> Pfau, *The Political Style of Conspiracy: Chase, Sumner, and Lincoln*; Marilyn J. Young, Michael K. Launer, and Curtis C. Austin, "The Need for Evaluative Criteria: Conspiracy Argument Revisited"; David Zarefsky, "Conspiracy Arguments in the Lincoln-Douglas Debates."

<sup>67</sup> Hofstadter, "The Paranoid Style in American Politics," 6, 17.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 29, 34-5.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>71</sup> Earl George Creps, III, "The Conspiracy Argument as Rhetorical Genre" (unpublished Dissertation, Northwestern University, 1980), 207.

<sup>72</sup> Creps, "The Conspiracy Argument as Rhetorical Genre," 35.

<sup>73</sup> Young, Launer, and Austin, "The Need for Evaluative Criteria: Conspiracy Argument Revisited."; Zarefsky, "Conspiracy Arguments in the Lincoln-Douglas Debates."

<sup>74</sup> Fran Mason, "A Poor Person's Cognitive Mapping," in *Conspiracy Nation: The Politics of Paranoia in Postwar America*, ed. Peter Knight (New York: New York University Press, 2002), 43.

<sup>75</sup> Although most scholars of conspiracy theories recognize this overarching plot, there are minor disparities between each. For example, Fenster conflates the conspiracy narratives located in fictional prose with what he terms "historical" conspiracy narratives. Dean, in particular, takes issue with Fenster's stance noting that Fenster fails to take into account the different perspectives of the "author and the audience,"...and that "the perspective of the author is not that of the narrator or protagonist." Despite these differences, there is a basic consensus as to what the conspiracy plot entails. See: Creps, "The Conspiracy Argument as Rhetorical Genre."; Darsey, "A Conspiracy of Science."; Dean, "If Anything Is Possible," 94; Fenster, *Conspiracy Theories: Secrecy and Power in American Culture*; Robert Alan Goldberg, *Enemies Within: The Culture of Conspiracy in Modern America* (New Haven: Yale University, 2001); Hofstadter, "The Paranoid Style in American Politics."; Miller, "Conspiracy Theories: Public Arguments as Coded Social Critiques: A Rhetorical Analysis of the TWA Flight 800 Conspiracy Theories."; Pfau, *The Political Style of Conspiracy: Chase, Sumner, and Lincoln*; Daniel Pipes, *Conspiracy: How the Paranoid Style Flourishes and Where It Comes From* (New York: The Free Press, 1997); Young, Launer, and Austin, "The Need for Evaluative Criteria: Conspiracy Argument Revisited."; Zarefsky, "Conspiracy Arguments in the Lincoln-Douglas Debates."; Steven R. Goldzweig, "Theo-Political Conspiracy Rhetoric in the Wanderer" *The Journal of Communication and Religion* 14 (1991).

<sup>76</sup> Darsey, "A Conspiracy of Science," 486.

<sup>77</sup> Kenneth Burke, *Counter-Statement*, [2d ] ed. (Los Altos: Calif., Hermes Publications, 1953), 124. See also: Darsey, "A Conspiracy of Science."; Young, Launer, and Austin, "The Need for Evaluative Criteria: Conspiracy Argument Revisited."

<sup>78</sup> Leland M. Griffin, "The Rhetorical Structure of the Antimasonic Movement," in *Readings in Rhetorical Criticism*, ed. Carl R. Burgchardt (State College, PA: Strata Publishing, Inc., 2000); Hasian, Jr. "Understanding the Power of Conspiratorial Rhetoric: A Case Study of the Protocols of the Elders," 98; Stewart, "The Master Conspiracy of the John Birch Society," 42-3; Young, Launer, and Austin, "The Need for Evaluative Criteria: Conspiracy Argument Revisited," 90.

<sup>79</sup> Hofstadter, "The Paranoid Style in American Politics," 36.

<sup>80</sup> Darsey, "A Conspiracy of Science," 486; Walter Fisher, *Human Communication as Narration: Toward a Philosophy of Reason, Value, and Action* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1987), 8.

<sup>81</sup> Earl George Creps, III, "The Conspiracy Argument as Rhetorical Genre" (unpublished Dissertation, Northwestern University, 1980); David Zarefsky, "Conspiracy Arguments in the Lincoln-Douglas Debates," *Journal of the American Forensic Association* 21(1984).

<sup>82</sup> Zarefsky, "Conspiracy Arguments in the Lincoln-Douglas Debates," 73.

<sup>83</sup> Brian L. Keeley, "Of Conspiracy Theories," *The Journal of Philosophy* 96, no. 3 (1999), 120.

<sup>84</sup> Darsey, "A Conspiracy of Science," 470.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 486.

<sup>86</sup> Sissela Bok, *Secrets: On the Ethics of Concealment and Revelation* (New York: Vintage Books, A division of Random House, Inc., 1989), 6.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*

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- <sup>88</sup> Shane Miller, "Conspiracy Theories: Public Arguments as Coded Social Critiques: A Rhetorical Analysis of the TWA Flight 800 Conspiracy Theories," 41-2.
- <sup>89</sup> Barry Smart, *Postmodernity*, ed. Peter Hamilton, Key Ideas (London, New York: Routledge, 1993), 27.
- <sup>90</sup> David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1990), 39-42; Simon Malpas, *The Postmodern*, ed. John Drakakis, The New Critical Idiom (London, New York: Routledge, 2005), 5; Smart, *Postmodernity*, 18-19.
- <sup>91</sup> Malpas, *The Postmodern*, 5, 9.
- <sup>92</sup> Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1990), 9.
- <sup>93</sup> Steven Best and Douglas Kellner, ed. *The Postmodern Turn, Critical Perspectives* (New York: The Guilford Press, 1997), 271.
- <sup>94</sup> Smart, *Postmodernity*, ed. Peter Hamilton, Key Ideas (London, New York: Routledge, 1993), 117.
- <sup>95</sup> Malpas, *The Postmodern*, ed. John Drakakis, The New Critical Idiom (London, New York: Routledge, 2005), 129.
- <sup>96</sup> Smart, *Postmodernity*, 50-51.
- <sup>97</sup> Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change*, 49-51.
- <sup>98</sup> Bruce Lincoln, *Authority: Construction and Corrosion* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 11.
- <sup>99</sup> Lincoln argues that authority rests in executive and epistemic capacities. Executive authorities include political, military, and religious authorities. In essence, authority, in some capacity, has been bestowed upon these actors. Epistemic authorities rest with one's authority on a subject of knowledge and include such people as scholars, and medical and technical professionals. See, *Ibid.*, 3-4.
- <sup>100</sup> Smart, *Postmodernity*, ed. Peter Hamilton, Key Ideas (London, New York: Routledge, 1993), 119.
- <sup>101</sup> Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 37.
- <sup>102</sup> Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism: Or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, ed. Frederic Jameson Stanley Fish, *Post-Contemporary Interventions* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991), 354.
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NOTES TO CHAPTER 2

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<sup>10</sup> Whitfield, *The Culture of the Cold War*, 11-12.

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<sup>13</sup> Whitfield, Stephen. *The Culture of The Cold War* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991), 208-209

<sup>14</sup> Ibid; Farber, *The Age of Great Dreams: America in the 1960s*, 25-31, 209.

<sup>15</sup> Oliver, "Marxmanship in Dallas."

<sup>16</sup> Steigerwald, *The Sixties and the End of Modern America*, 12.

<sup>17</sup> Oliver, "Marxmanship in Dallas."

<sup>18</sup> Farber, *The Age of Great Dreams: America in the 1960s*, 43. See also: Steigerwald, *The Sixties and the End of Modern America*, 13.

<sup>19</sup> Steigerwald, *The Sixties and the End of Modern America*, 13; Farber, *The Age of Great Dreams: America in the 1960s*, 43-47.

<sup>20</sup> Oliver, "Marxmanship in Dallas."

<sup>21</sup> Marilyn Janet Young, "The Conspiracy Theory of History as Radical Argument: Students for a Democratic Society and the John Birch Society" (Dissertation, University of Pittsburgh, 1974).

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<sup>23</sup> Steigerwald, *The Sixties and the End of Modern America*, 15-19.

<sup>24</sup> Zelizer, *Covering the Body: The Kennedy Assassination, the Media, and the Shaping of Collective Memory*, 51-57.

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<sup>27</sup> "Mrs. Nhu Recalls Saigon Coup in a Message to Mrs. Kennedy," *New York Times (1857-Current file)* 1963; Hill, "Leftist Accused," *New York Times (1857-Current file)*; Donald Janson, "The Dallas Mystery," *New York Times (1857-Current file)* 1963.

<sup>28</sup> Goldberg, *Enemies Within: The Culture of Conspiracy in Modern America*; Janson, "The Dallas Mystery."; Cabell Phillips, "Johnson Pledges Facts in Killings," *New York Times (1857-Current file)* 1963; Zelizer, *Covering the Body: The Kennedy Assassination, the Media, and the Shaping of Collective Memory*.

<sup>29</sup> "Cuba Attributes Murder to 'Right'," *New York Times (1857-Current file)* 1963; Henry Raymond, "Havana Accuses Mexico of 'Plot'," *New York Times (1857-Current file)* 1963.

<sup>30</sup> "Dallas Asks Why It Happend; Worry over 'Image' Is Voiced," *New York Times (1857-Current file)* 1963; Goldberg, *Enemies Within: The Culture of Conspiracy in Modern America*; Zelizer, *Covering the Body: The Kennedy Assassination, the Media, and the Shaping of Collective Memory*.

<sup>31</sup> "Texas Is Planning a Public Hearing," *New York Times (1857-Current file)* 1963; Belair Felix, Jr., "Secret Service Faces Changes in Its Procedures as a Result of the Assassination," *New York Times (1857-Current file)* 1963; Anthony Lewis, "Johnson Spurs Oswald Inquiry," *New York Times (1857-Current file)* 1963; Phillips, "Johnson Pledges Facts in Killings."

<sup>32</sup> In the rhetorical community, scholars, beginning with Theodore Windt, argue that crisis rhetoric is *created* by the President. Bonnie Dow argues, however, that there are some instances where crisis situations are perceived by the public before being addressed by the President as in the case of KAL 007 flight that was shot down by the Soviet Union. Jim Kuypers later argues that the President did actually make an utterance on the part of KAL 007 and disputes Dow's contention. Nonetheless, in the case of the assassination of President Kennedy, President Johnson could not be the person who directed the American public's beliefs about the assassination precisely because he was the direct beneficiary of the assassination. President Johnson, rather, vested his authority onto the Warren Commission to determine the frame by which the public viewed the assassination. See: Bonnie J. Dow, "The Function of Epideictic and Deliberative Strategies in Presidential Crisis Rhetoric," *Western Journal of Speech Communication: WJSC* 53, no. 3 (1989); Jim A. Kuypers, *Presidential Crisis Rhetoric and the Press in the Post-Cold War World*, ed. Jr. Robert E. Denton, Praeger Series in Political Communication (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1997); Ritter, "Lyndon B. Johnson's Crisis Rhetoric after the Assassination of John F. Kennedy: Securing Legitimacy and Leadership." For articles on the conflicting evidence and claims of conspiracy circulating within the public within days of the assassination see: Middleton, Drew, "Paris is Disquieted by Thought of the U.S. as

Lawless," *New York Times* (1923-Current File), (November 23, 1963), 12; "Mrs. Nhu Recalls Saigon Coup In a Message to Mrs. Kennedy" *New York Times* (1923-Current File), November 25, 1963; "U.S. Communists Condemn Killing: Call It Action of Madman or 'Enemy of Democracy,'" *New York Times* (1923-Current File) November 24, 1963; Wicker, Tom, "Gov. Connally Shot; Mrs. Kennedy Safe: President Is Struck Down by a Rifle Shot From Building on Motorcade Route- Johnson, Riding Behind, Is Unhurt," *New York Times* (1923-Current File), November 23, 1963.

<sup>33</sup> Bitzer, "The Rhetorical Situation."

<sup>34</sup> Kurt Ritter, "Lyndon B. Johnson's Crisis Rhetoric after the Assassination of John F. Kennedy: Securing Legitimacy and Leadership," in *The Modern Presidency and Crisis Rhetoric*, ed. Amos Kiewe, *Praeger Series in Political Communication* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1994).

<sup>35</sup> "Presidential Inquiries Left Marks on History," *New York Times* (1857-Current file) 1963; "The Assassination Inquiry," *New York Times* (1857-Current file) 1963.

<sup>36</sup> Bitzer, "The Rhetorical Situation."; Jim A. Kuypers, "Of Mighty Mice and Meek Men: Contextual Reconstruction of the Iranian Airbus Shootdown."

<sup>37</sup> Epstein, *Inquest: The Warren Commission and the Establishment of Truth*; Goldberg, *Enemies Within: The Culture of Conspiracy in Modern America*; Knight, *Conspiracy Culture: From Kennedy to the X Files*, ———, "The Kennedy Assassination."; Kurtz, *Crime of the Century: The Kennedy Assassination from a Historian's Perspective*; ———, *The JFK Assassination Debates: Lone Gunman Versus Conspiracy*; McKnight, *Breach of Trust: How the Warren Commission Failed the Nation and Why*.

<sup>38</sup> Epstein, *Inquest: The Warren Commission and the Establishment of Truth*; Goldberg, *Enemies Within: The Culture of Conspiracy in Modern America*; Knight, *Conspiracy Culture: From Kennedy to the X Files*, ———, "The Kennedy Assassination."; Kurtz, *The JFK Assassination Debates: Lone Gunman Versus Conspiracy*, Mark Lane, *Rush to Judgment; a Critique of the Warren Commission's Inquiry into the Murders of President John F. Kennedy, Officer J.D. Tippit, and Lee Harvey Oswald*, [1st ]. ed. (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1966), McKnight, *Breach of Trust: How the Warren Commission Failed the Nation and Why*, Meagher, *Accessories after the Fact: The Warren Commission, the Authorities, and the Report*, Gerald Posner, *Case Closed: Lee Harvey Oswald and the Assassination of JFK* (New York: Anchor Books: A Division of Random House, Inc., 1993, 2003).

<sup>39</sup> Epstein, *Inquest: The Warren Commission and the Establishment of Truth*, 55-68; Goldberg, *Enemies Within: The Culture of Conspiracy in Modern America*; Kurtz, *The JFK Assassination Debates: Lone Gunman Versus Conspiracy*, ix-lxii; Zelizer, *Covering the Body: The Kennedy Assassination, the Media, and the Shaping of Collective Memory*, 106-16; Knight, "The Kennedy Assassination," 42-58; Kurtz, *Crime of the Century: The Kennedy Assassination from a Historian's Perspective*, 23-50; McKnight, *Breach of Trust: How the Warren Commission Failed the Nation and Why*, 108-246; Posner, *Case Closed: Lee Harvey Oswald and the Assassination of JFK*, 407-10; *Report of the Select Committee on Assassinations, U.S. House of Representatives, Ninety-Fifth Congress, Second Session: Findings and Recommendations*, House Report - 95th Congress, 2d Session ; No. 95-1828, Pt. 2; Variation: United States.; Congress.; House.; Report ;; No. 95-1828, Pt. 2. (Ipswich, MA: Mary Ferrell Foundation-Press, 2007), 41-63.

<sup>40</sup> *The Warren Commission Report: Report of the President's Commission on the Assassination of President John F. Kennedy*. p. 52

<sup>41</sup> Epstein, *Inquest: The Warren Commission and the Establishment of Truth*, 55-68; Goldberg, *Enemies Within: The Culture of Conspiracy in Modern America*, Kurtz, *The JFK Assassination Debates: Lone Gunman Versus Conspiracy*, ix-lxii; Zelizer, *Covering the Body: The Kennedy Assassination, the Media, and the Shaping of Collective Memory*, 106-16; Knight, "The Kennedy Assassination," 42-58; Kurtz, *Crime of the Century: The Kennedy Assassination from a Historian's Perspective*, 23-50; McKnight, *Breach of Trust: How the Warren Commission Failed the Nation and Why*, 108-246; Posner, *Case Closed: Lee Harvey Oswald and the Assassination*

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Gerald R. Ford with John R. Stiles, *Portrait of the Assassin* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1965), 22.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Michael Pfau argues that in instances where politicians are forced to respond to conspiracy claims, politicians dismiss such beliefs while simultaneously promoting their own conspiracy theory. Although the Warren Commission Report is, at least at face value, an anti-conspiracy narrative, it still retains many of the elements to which Pfau alludes. See: Michael Pfau, *The Political Style of Conspiracy: Chase, Sumner, and Lincoln*, Rhetoric and Public Affairs Series; (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2005). See also: Dow, "The Function of Epideictic and Deliberative Strategies in Presidential Crisis Rhetoric."; Marilyn J. Young, Jim A. Kuypers, Michael K. Launer, "Of Mighty Mice and Meek Men: Contextual Reconstruction of the Iranian Airbus Shootdown," *Southern Communication Journal* 59, no. 4 (1994); and Michael K. Launer Marilyn J. Young, "Kal 007 and the Superpowers: An International Argument," *The Quarterly Journal of Speech* 74, no. 1 (1988).

<sup>47</sup> Epstein, *Inquest: The Warren Commission and the Establishment of Truth*, 30; Goldberg, *Enemies Within: The Culture of Conspiracy in Modern America*, 112; Knight, "The Kennedy Assassination."; Kurtz, *The JFK Assassination Debates: Lone Gunman Versus Conspiracy*, 223.

<sup>48</sup> James L. Golden and Edward P.J Corbett, comp. ed., *The Rhetoric of Blair, Campbell, and Whately* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1968), 342.

<sup>49</sup> James L. Golden, & Edward P. J. Corbett, ed. *The Rhetoric of Blair, Campbell, and Whately*, 343.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 344.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 351.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 346-7.

<sup>53</sup> Bruce Lincoln, *Authority: Construction and Corrosion* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 5-6.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Yameng Liu, "Authority, Presumption, and Invention," *Philosophy & Rhetoric* 30, no. 4 (1997), 421.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 425.

<sup>60</sup> Liu argues that the necessity of authority to establish itself during the invention process negates Lincoln's definition of discursive authority. See: Ibid.

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- <sup>72</sup> Philip Shenon & Elisabeth Bumiller, "Bush Allows Rice to Testify on 9/11 in a Public Session," *The New York Times*, March 31, 2004.
- <sup>73</sup> Kean, *Without Precedent: The Inside Story of the 9/11 Commission*, 45-6.
- <sup>74</sup> Kean, *Without Precedent: The Inside Story of the 9/11 Commission*, 27, 43-7.

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<sup>75</sup> It should be noted that I rely extensively on Griffin's book to locate the different conspiracy theories circulating within the public sphere on and before the *9/11 Commission Report* was published. Literally thousands of sources could be used to demonstrate the proliferation of conspiracy theories within the public sphere, however, because Griffin is one of the more prominent members of the 9/11 Truth Movement, and because his book was published at roughly the same time as the Commission's report, I use it as a primer for locating the conspiracy theories with which the Commission had contact. See: David Ray Griffin, *The New Pearl Harbor: Disturbing Questions About the Bush Administration and 9/11* (Olive Branch Press, 2004), 132-4.

<sup>76</sup> "The 9/11 Commission Report: Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States. Corp Author(S): National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States," Norton.

<sup>77</sup> Fenster, *Conspiracy Theories*, 235-6.

<sup>78</sup> The National Book Foundation provides a list of winners and finalists on its website. See: "National Book Foundation," <http://www.nationalbook.org/>. See also: Kim Phillips-Fein, "The 9/11 Commission Report," *Radical History Review*, no. 97 (2007); Craig A. Warren, "'It Reads Like a Novel': The 9/11 Commission Report and the American Reading Public," *Journal of American Studies* 41, no. 3 (2007); Richard A. Posner, "The 9/11 Report: A Dissent," *The New York Times*, August 29, 2004.

<sup>79</sup> "The 9/11 Commission Report: Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States. Corp Author(S): National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States," xvi.

<sup>80</sup> Kean, *Without Precedent: The Inside Story of the 9/11 Commission*, 253.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 252.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 253.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 37.

<sup>95</sup> Hofstadter, "The Paranoid Style in American Politics," 38.

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<sup>96</sup> "The 9/11 Commission Report: Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States. Corp Author(S): National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States," xv-xvi.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, xv.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, xv; Frank Furedi argues that by adhering to a centrist dogma, the conflicts that exist in politics, rather than being defined by clear political right and left issues, are left with conflicts between the two camps that are arbitrary in nature. What results are single issue campaigns that cannot be easily divided between the right and the left. See, Frank Furedi, *Politics of Fear: Beyond Left and Right* (London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2005), 68-9.

<sup>99</sup> "The 9/11 Commission Report: Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States. Corp Author(S): National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States," xvi.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, xv-xvii.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, xv.

<sup>102</sup> Carol Winkler, "Parallels in Preemptive War Rhetoric: Reagan on Libya; Bush 43 on Iraq," *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* 10, no. 2 (2007), 323.

<sup>103</sup> Cited in Griffin, *The New Pearl Harbor: Disturbing Questions About the Bush Administration and 9/11*, 93.

<sup>104</sup> Griffin, *The New Pearl Harbor: Disturbing Questions About the Bush Administration and 9/11*, 95-6; Olmsted, *Real Enemies: Conspiracy Theories and American Democracy, World War I to 9/11*, 227-8.

<sup>105</sup> Kean, *Without Precedent: The Inside Story of the 9/11 Commission*, 61.

<sup>106</sup> "The 9/11 Commission Report: Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States. Corp Author(S): National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States," 61.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, 66.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, 334.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, 334-5.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, 335-6.

<sup>115</sup> Richard A. Posner, "The 9/11 Report: A Dissent," *The New York Times*, August 29 2004.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>117</sup> Hofstadter, "The Paranoid Style in American Politics," 38.

<sup>118</sup> Griffin, *The New Pearl Harbor: Disturbing Questions About the Bush Administration and 9/11*, 3-48.

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<sup>119</sup> Ibid., 3-55. See also: Nafeez Mosaddeq Ahmed, *The War on Freedom: How and Why America Was Attacked September 11, 2001* (Joshua Tree, CA: Tree of Life Publications, 2002); David Ray Griffin, *The 9/11 Commission Report: Omissions and Distortions* (Olive Branch Press, 2004); David Ray Griffin, "9/11: The Myth and the Reality," in *The 9/11 Conspiracy: The Scamming of America*, ed. James H. Fetzer (Peru, IL: Catfeet Press, 2007); Lance, *Cover Up: What the Government Is Still Hiding About the War on Terror*; Scott, *The Road to 9/11: Wealth, Empire, and the Future of America*; Paul Thompson, "Complete 9/11 Timeline," Center for Grassroots Oversight, [http://www.historycommons.org/project.jsp?project=911\\_project](http://www.historycommons.org/project.jsp?project=911_project).

<sup>120</sup> Kean, *Without Precedent: The Inside Story of the 9/11 Commission*, 259.

<sup>121</sup> Conspiracy theories that claim 9/11 was allowed to happen are commonly referred to as LIHOP, or let it happen on purpose, theories. See: Bratich, *Conspiracy Panics: Political Rationality and Popular Culture*; Olmsted, *Real Enemies: Conspiracy Theories and American Democracy, World War I to 9/11*.

<sup>122</sup> Griffin, *The New Pearl Harbor: Disturbing Questions About the Bush Administration and 9/11*, 132.

<sup>123</sup> Fenster, *Conspiracy Theories: Secrecy and Power in American Culture*, 266.

<sup>124</sup> Earl George Creps, III, "The Conspiracy Argument as Rhetorical Genre" (Dissertation, Northwestern University, 1980), 43.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid., 43.

<sup>126</sup> James Darsey, "A Conspiracy of Science," *Western Journal of Communication* 66, no. 4 (2002), 476-7.

<sup>127</sup> "The 9/11 Commission Report: Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States. Corp Author(S): National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States," 17.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid., 17-18.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid.

<sup>136</sup> Darsey, "A Conspiracy of Science," 474.

<sup>137</sup> Chaïm Olbrechts-Tyteca Lucie Perelman and author joint, *The New Rhetoric: A Treatise on Argumentation Uniform Title: Traité De L'argumentation. English* (Notre Dame: [Ind.] University of Notre Dame Press, 1969), 99.

<sup>138</sup> David Ray Griffin argues that the 9/11 Commission's explanation of the FAA and NORAD's response on 9/11 intentionally distorted and omitted evidence in order to exonerate the FAA and NORAD of any failures and to dispute claims that there was a stand down order issued by the military. See: David Ray Griffin, *The 9/11 Commission Report: Omissions and Distortions* (Northampton, MA: Olive Branch Press, 2005), 139-275.

<sup>139</sup> Darsey, "A Conspiracy of Science," 486.

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<sup>140</sup> Ibid., 487.

<sup>141</sup> Creps, "The Conspiracy Argument as Rhetorical Genre," 34-7.

<sup>142</sup> Fenster, *Conspiracy Theories: Secrecy and Power in American Culture*, 121.

<sup>143</sup> "The 9/11 Commission Report: Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States. Corp Author(S): National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States," 45.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>145</sup> Zarefsky, "Conspiracy Arguments in the Lincoln Douglas Debates," 71.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid., 71-2.

<sup>148</sup> Michael Moore et al., *Fahrenheit 9/11* (Culver City, Calif.: Columbia TriStar Home Entertainment, 2004), Visual Material.

<sup>149</sup> Griffin, *The New Pearl Harbor: Disturbing Questions About the Bush Administration and 9/11*, 79.

<sup>150</sup> Griffin, *The New Pearl Harbor: Disturbing Questions About the Bush Administration and 9/11*, 77-87; Moore et al., *Fahrenheit 9/11*.

<sup>151</sup> Griffin, *The 9/11 Commission Report: Omissions and Distortions*, 71.

<sup>152</sup> ———, *The New Pearl Harbor: Disturbing Questions About the Bush Administration and 9/11*, 77-80; Moore et al., *Fahrenheit 9/11*.

<sup>153</sup> "The 9/11 Commission Report: Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States. Corp Author(S): National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States," 329.

<sup>154</sup> Ibid.

<sup>155</sup> Ibid.

<sup>156</sup> Ibid.

<sup>157</sup> Ibid.

<sup>158</sup> Ibid.

<sup>159</sup> Griffin, *The 9/11 Commission Report: Omissions and Distortions*, 67.

<sup>160</sup> Graham, *Intelligence Matters: The CIA, the FBI, Saudi Arabia, and the Failure of America's War on Terror*, 160-1. See also: Griffin, *The 9/11 Commission Report: Omissions and Distortions*, 65-70; Olmsted, *Real Enemies: Conspiracy Theories and American Democracy, World War I to 9/11*, 212-13.

<sup>161</sup> Graham, *Intelligence Matters: The CIA, the FBI, Saudi Arabia, and the Failure of America's War on Terror*, 168.

<sup>162</sup> Ibid.

<sup>163</sup> Ibid., 168. See also: Griffin, *The 9/11 Commission Report: Omissions and Distortions*, 65-70; Olmsted, *Real Enemies: Conspiracy Theories and American Democracy, World War I to 9/11*, 212-13.

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<sup>164</sup> Ibid., x.

<sup>165</sup> "The 9/11 Commission Report: Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States. Corp Author(S): National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States," 171.

<sup>166</sup> Ibid., [492n122]. See also: Griffin, *The 9/11 Commission Report: Omissions and Distortions*, 69.

<sup>167</sup> "The 9/11 Commission Report: Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States. Corp Author(S): National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States," 172.

<sup>168</sup> Mathias Broeckers, *Conspiracies, Conspiracy Theories, and the Secrets of 9/11*, trans. Simona de Logu & John Leonard (Joshua Tree, CA: Progressive Press, 2006), 55-57.

<sup>169</sup> "The 9/11 Commission Report: Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States. Corp Author(S): National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States," 56.

<sup>170</sup> Hofstadter, "The Paranoid Style in American Politics," 31-2.

<sup>171</sup> Archetypal metaphors, according to Michael Osborn, are "especially relevant in rhetorical discourse," "immune to changes wrought by time," "grounded in prominent figures of experience... which are inescapably salient in human consciousness," and their appeal are "contingent upon [their] embodiment of basic human motivations." The combination of the universality of archetypal metaphor and basic human motivations make them particularly persuasive precisely because they reach, and resonate with, large audiences. See: Michael Osborn, "Archetypal Metaphor in Rhetoric: The Light-Dark Family," in *Readings in Rhetorical Criticism*, ed. Carl Burgchardt (State College, PA: Strata, 2000), 338-9.

<sup>172</sup> "The 9/11 Commission Report: Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States. Corp Author(S): National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States," 54.

<sup>173</sup> Ibid., 67.

<sup>174</sup> Ibid., 362.

<sup>175</sup> Darsey, "A Conspiracy of Science," 486.

<sup>176</sup> "The 9/11 Commission Report: Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States," 47.

<sup>177</sup> Ibid.

<sup>178</sup> Ibid., 51.

<sup>179</sup> Ibid., 47.

<sup>180</sup> Ibid.

<sup>181</sup> Ibid.

<sup>182</sup> Ibid.

<sup>183</sup> Ibid., 55.

<sup>184</sup> Ibid.

<sup>185</sup> Ibid.

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<sup>186</sup> Ibid., 55-6.

<sup>187</sup> Ibid.

<sup>188</sup> Ibid., 172.

<sup>189</sup> Ibid., 173.

<sup>190</sup> Ibid., 157-8.

<sup>191</sup> Ibid., 158.

<sup>192</sup> Ibid., 158-9.

<sup>193</sup> Ibid., 159.

<sup>194</sup> Ibid., 158.

<sup>195</sup> Ibid.

<sup>196</sup> Ibid.

<sup>197</sup> Ibid., xvi.

<sup>198</sup> Birchall, "Conspiracy Theories and Academic Discourses: The Necessary Possibility of Popular (over)Interpretation," 73.

<sup>199</sup> Ibid.

<sup>200</sup> "The 9/11 Commission Report: Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States," 362.

<sup>201</sup> Ibid.

#### NOTES TO CHAPTER 4

<sup>1</sup> Knight, *Conspiracy Culture: From Kennedy to the X Files.*, 2-3.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Sarah Palin, "Obama and the Bureaucratization of Health Care: The President's Proposals Would Give Unelected Officials Life-and-Death Rationing Powers," *The Wall Street Journal*(September 8, 2009), <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052970203440104574400581157986024.html>; Carlotta Gall C. J. Chivers, Andrew W. Lehren, Mark Mazzetti, Jane Perlez, and Eric Schmitt, with contributions from Jacob Harris and Alan McLean. , "View Is Bleaker Than Official Portrayal of War in Afghanistan," *The New York Times*(July 25, 2010), <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/07/26/world/asia/26warlogs.html>; "Hannity Advances Dubious Claim That Koh "Advocates Sharia Law in America",," *Media Matters for America*(September 10, 2009), <http://mediamatters.org/research/200909100040>.

<sup>4</sup> Stephanie Toone, "Feds Investigate Fire at Murfreesboro Mosque Site," *The Tennessean*(August 29, 2010), <http://www.tennessean.com/article/20100829/NEWS01/8290365/Feds-investigate-fire-at-Murfreesboro-mosque-site>.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

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<sup>6</sup> Knight, *Conspiracy Culture: From Kennedy to the X Files.*, 27.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Peter Knight, "Introduction: A Nation of Conspiracy Theorists," in *Conspiracy Nation: The Politics of Paranoia in Postwar America*, ed. Peter Knight (New York: New York University Press, 2002), 11. See also: Darsey, "A Conspiracy of Science.", 477.

<sup>9</sup> Jack Minnis and Staughton Lynd, "Seeds of Doubt," *The New Republic*(1963), [http://www.kenrahn.com/jfk/the\\_critics/Lynd/Seeds\\_of\\_doubt.html](http://www.kenrahn.com/jfk/the_critics/Lynd/Seeds_of_doubt.html) ; Revilo P. Oliver, "Marxmanship in Dallas," *American Opinion* VII, no. 2 (1964), [http://www.kenrahn.com/jfk/the\\_critics/oliver/Marxmanship\\_in\\_Dallas.html](http://www.kenrahn.com/jfk/the_critics/oliver/Marxmanship_in_Dallas.html) ; Leo Sauvage, "The Oswald Affair," *Commentary*(March 1964), [http://www.kenrahn.com/jfk/The\\_critics/Sauvage/The\\_Oswald\\_Affair/Oswald\\_Affair.html](http://www.kenrahn.com/jfk/The_critics/Sauvage/The_Oswald_Affair/Oswald_Affair.html); Harold Feldman, "Oswald and the Fbi," *The Nation*(January 27, 1964), [http://www.kenrahn.com/jfk/History/WC\\_Period/pre-wcr\\_reactions\\_to\\_assassination/Pre-WCR\\_reactions\\_by\\_the\\_left/Oswald\\_and\\_FBI/Oswald\\_and\\_FBI.html](http://www.kenrahn.com/jfk/History/WC_Period/pre-wcr_reactions_to_assassination/Pre-WCR_reactions_by_the_left/Oswald_and_FBI/Oswald_and_FBI.html); Mark Lane, "Oswald Innocent? A Lawyer's Brief," *National Guardian*(December 1963), [http://www.kenrahn.com/jfk/The\\_critics/Lane/Natl-Guardian/Natl\\_Guardian.html](http://www.kenrahn.com/jfk/The_critics/Lane/Natl-Guardian/Natl_Guardian.html); Victor Perlo, "Assassin or Fall Guy?," *New Times*, no. 38 (September 23, 1964), [http://www.kenrahn.com/jfk/History/WC\\_Period/New\\_Times/1964-38\\_Assassin\\_or\\_fall\\_guy.html](http://www.kenrahn.com/jfk/History/WC_Period/New_Times/1964-38_Assassin_or_fall_guy.html); Bertrand Russell, "16 Questions on the Assassination," *Minority of One*(September 6, 1964), [http://www.kenrahn.com/jfk/The\\_critics/Russell/Sixteen\\_questions\\_Russell.html](http://www.kenrahn.com/jfk/The_critics/Russell/Sixteen_questions_Russell.html); Eric Norden, "The Death of a President," *Minority of One*(January 1964), [http://www.kenrahn.com/jfk/History/WC\\_Period/pre-wcr\\_reactions\\_to\\_assassination/Pre-WCR\\_reactions\\_by\\_the\\_left/Death\\_of\\_a\\_president-Norden.html](http://www.kenrahn.com/jfk/History/WC_Period/pre-wcr_reactions_to_assassination/Pre-WCR_reactions_by_the_left/Death_of_a_president-Norden.html); M. S. Arnoni, "Who Killed Whom and Why? Dark Thoughts About Dark Events," *Minority of One*(January 1964), [http://www.kenrahn.com/jfk/History/WC\\_Period/pre-wcr\\_reactions\\_to\\_assassination/Pre-WCR\\_reactions\\_by\\_the\\_left/Who\\_killed\\_whom\\_Arnoni.html](http://www.kenrahn.com/jfk/History/WC_Period/pre-wcr_reactions_to_assassination/Pre-WCR_reactions_by_the_left/Who_killed_whom_Arnoni.html); Martin Dies, "Assassination and Its Aftermath," *American Opinion* VII, no. 3 (March 3, 1964), [http://www.kenrahn.com/jfk/History/WC\\_Period/pre-wcr\\_reactions\\_to\\_assassination/pre-wcr\\_reactions\\_by\\_the\\_right/Assassination\\_and\\_aftermath\\_Dies.html](http://www.kenrahn.com/jfk/History/WC_Period/pre-wcr_reactions_to_assassination/pre-wcr_reactions_by_the_right/Assassination_and_aftermath_Dies.html).

<sup>10</sup> Knight, *Conspiracy Culture: From Kennedy to the X Files.*, 27.

<sup>11</sup> Jurgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger with the assistance of Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge, MA: MIT University Press, 1998), 193.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Nick Baumann, "Breaking News: Rep. Michele Bachmann (R-Crazytown) Still Crazy," *Mother Jones*(April 6, 2009), <http://motherjones.com/mojo/2009/04/breaking-news-rep-michele-bachmann-r-crazytown-still-crazy>.

<sup>14</sup> "Born in the U.S.A.," *FactCheck.org*(August 21, 2008), [http://www.factcheck.org/elections-2008/born\\_in\\_the\\_usa.html](http://www.factcheck.org/elections-2008/born_in_the_usa.html).

<sup>15</sup> Jonathan Alter, "Obama the Alien Threat," *Newsweek*, August 28 2010; Emi Kolawole, "Lawmakers and the 'Birther'/Muslim Myths (Updated)," *The Washington Post*(2010), <http://voices.washingtonpost.com/44/2010/08/lawmakers-who-push-the-birther.html>; Dalia Sussman and Marina Stefan, "Obama and the 'Birthers' in the Latest Poll," *The New York Times*(2010), <http://thecaucus.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/04/21/obama-and-the-birthers-in-the-latest-poll/>.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Debora MacKenzie, "How to Be a Denialist," *New Scientist* 206, no. 2760 (May 15, 2010).

<sup>18</sup> Michael Fitzpatrick, "Don't Mention the D-Word," *New Scientist* 206, no. 2760 (May 15, 2010). MacKenzie, "How to Be a Denialist."

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<sup>19</sup> Hannah Arendt, "The Public and the Private Realm," in *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 40.

<sup>20</sup> Robert Alan Goldberg, *Enemies Within : The Culture of Conspiracy in Modern America* (New Haven: Yale University, 2001); Daniel Hellinger, "Paranoia, Conspiracy, and Hegemony in American Politics," in *Transparency and Conspiracy: Ethnographies of Suspicion in the New World Order*, ed. Harry G. West and Todd Sanders (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003); Kathryn S. Olmsted, *Real Enemies: Conspiracy Theories and American Democracy, World War I to 9/11* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

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