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## The Intersection Between Conspiracy Theories and Paranoia in American Culture

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University of Southern Maine  
Portland, Maine

THE INTERSECTION BETWEEN CONSPIRACY THEORIES AND PARANOIA IN  
AMERICAN CULTURE

A Thesis  
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Honors Program Requirements

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## **Abstract**

This thesis traces the prominence of conspiracy theorizing and paranoia in American culture by examining the issues from a variety of angles and then focusing on the terrorist attacks of 9/11 as the primary case study. Through a critical analysis of the development of conspiratorial inclinations in the United States, the thesis argues that our nation's complacency with such behavior has made paranoia a defining aspect of American political culture. The thesis addresses how this came to be, as well as the general concepts of conspiracy and paranoia in three major ways. "The Intersection Between Conspiracy Theories and Paranoia in American Culture" provides an in-depth look at the relationship between conspiracy theorizing and paranoia, it discusses prominent cases over the course of U.S. history, and it focuses on our reactions to September 11th, 2001 as being the quintessential example of American paranoia and conspiracy theorizing. Both conspiracy theorizing and paranoid inclinations have continually increased their influence on political culture in the United States and as a result they have affected the way our foreign policy is handled, domestic issues are managed, and media is perceived.

## Chapter 1: Introduction

*Conspirare*, meaning breathe together, is a Latin word which implies both an intense connection and deep understanding<sup>1</sup>. Today, the word *conspiracy* attracts a wildly negative connotation in American society despite the fact that our culture is in many ways defined by it. A close look at the political history of the United States reveals that an ever present aura of paranoia – fueled by conspiratorial thinking – has grown increasingly dominant. This perpetual fear has been the driving force behind many of this country's major events, conspiracies, and actions throughout the past two and a half centuries. As a nation once admired for its founding principles of freedom, justice, and democracy it is alarming to see that the unintentional incorporation of negative characteristics into our political sphere has largely altered the defining traits associated with our society. America's obsession with potential danger has lead it to place its focus on the wrong issues, to violate fundamental rights, to make poor worldly decisions, and to inspire a culture of paranoia and conspiracy thinking. This attitude has become so synonymous with American culture that it is hard to deny that paranoia and distrust in politics define our society in a number of ways. Following centuries of evolvement, the quintessential example of American conspiracy theorizing and paranoia fostered itself in our nation's response to 9/11. This study investigates the progression of our aptitude towards paranoia and the eventual effect this has had on politics, people, and culture in the United States post-9/11.

Paranoia as a condition was not defined until the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, but the concept can be traced back to the Ancient Greek root words *para* and *nous* – respectively translating as

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<sup>1</sup> Knight, Peter. *Conspiracy Theories in American History: an Encyclopedia*. Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2003.

“changed” and “mind” or “reason.”<sup>2</sup> This translation of *paranous* suggests a lack of fluidity between what actually exists and what the mind perceives to be true. When such a disconnect is paired with a subconscious inclination to “change” or ignore reason, the modern notion of paranoia begins to take shape.

For centuries the transition from the Ancient Greek *paranous* to present day American paranoia evolved. Before there was paranoia, there was skepticism. Descartes, considered to be the father of modern philosophy, argued that there is nothing we cannot and should not doubt. Through his method of doubt, Descartes establishes a structure for questioning realities both outside the realm of reason as well as within.<sup>3</sup> His examinations of doubt and skepticism were further built upon throughout the 16<sup>th</sup>, 17<sup>th</sup>, and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries by renowned philosophers such as Nicolo Machiavelli, Thomas Hobbes, and Jean Jacques Rousseau. For example, *The Prince* by Machiavelli addresses the possibility of corruption, fear, and conspiracy in any nation run by a “prince” who is not held to a high esteem by his people. While *Leviathan* and *Du Contrat Social* (The Social Contract) by Hobbes and Rousseau, respectively, discuss the social contract theory and the natural rights of the people, each of the three philosophers tackled the notion of suspicion and subsequent reaction in the political sphere.

By the early 1800's the psychiatric definition of paranoia was established as “a mental condition characterized by delusions of persecution, unwarranted jealousy, or exaggerated self-importance, typically elaborated into an organized system. It may be an aspect of chronic personality disorder, of drug abuse, or of a serious condition such as schizophrenia in

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<sup>2</sup> Tony Elias, "Paranoia". In *Conspiracy Theories in American History*, edited by Peter Knight.

<sup>3</sup> Withers, R. (2008), Descartes' dreams.

which the person loses touch with reality.”<sup>4</sup> Symptoms include “projective thinking, hostility, suspicion, centrality, delusions, fear of the loss of autonomy, and grandiosity.”<sup>5</sup> Although still considered a “mental condition”, the interpretation of paranoia continued to change drastically over the past two centuries. Terms such as “paranoia” or “paranoid” are used much more loosely to provide an excuse or explanation for someone's reasoning concerning a particular matter. On a daily basis it is usually used as an insult implying highly irrational thinking, while in the political sphere it serves to discredit an occurrence, reaction, personal opinion, etc. With the correlation between “paranoia” and serious incurable mental problems constantly diminishing, the definition needs to be reexamined. The Encyclopedia of Postmodernism provides a much more modern interpretation of paranoia by defining it as “a condition of massive, anxious over-interpretation characterized by delusions of conspiracy.”<sup>6</sup> This connection between paranoia and conspiracy is what has driven present day social theorists and philosophers to use paranoia in order to explain “literary texts, social formations, and historical epochs.”<sup>7</sup> Authors such as Elias Canetti and Richard Hofstadter have written about the impact of paranoia on power and of power on paranoia.

In his 1962 book *Crowds and Power*, “Canetti describes paranoia as an ‘illness of power’ that can help to explain the nature of political power in general. Canetti establishes an equivalence between paranoids like Schreber and despots and rulers such as Adolph Hitler and

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<sup>4</sup> “paranoia”. Oxford Dictionaries.

<sup>5</sup> Elias, Tony. “Paranoia”. In *Conspiracy Theories in American History*, edited by Peter Knight.

<sup>6</sup> Paradis, Ken “Paranoia”. In *Encyclopedia of Postmodernism*, edited by Victor E. Taylor and Charles E. Winquist.

<sup>7</sup> Elias, Tony. “Paranoia”. In *Conspiracy Theories in American History*, edited by Peter Knight.



Genghis Khan.”<sup>8</sup> Hofstadter continues along the same lines in his famous essay, “The Paranoid Style in American Politics,” which outlines paranoia as a central part of American politics rather than a mental condition:

I call it the paranoid style simply because no other word adequately evokes the sense of heated exaggeration, suspiciousness, and conspiratorial fantasy that I have in mind. In using the expression 'paranoid style' I am not speaking in a clinical sense, but borrowing a clinical term for other purposes. I have neither the competence nor the desire to classify any figures of the past or present as certifiable lunatics. In fact, the idea of the paranoid style as a force in politics would have little contemporary relevance or historical value if it were applied only to men with profoundly disturbed minds. It is the use of paranoid modes of expression by more or less normal people that makes the phenomenon significant.<sup>9</sup>

Hofstadter examines the profound influence that paranoia has had on politics in the United States and reiterates Canetti's point that political power and paranoia are closely related. “Very often the enemy is held to possess some especially effective source of power: he controls the press; he has unlimited funds; he has a new secret for influencing the mind (brainwashing); he has a special technique for seduction (the Catholic confessional).”<sup>10</sup> Hofstadter explains that perceiving an enemy to hold extreme power is what leads to paranoia and in turn, paranoia leads to the belief that an enemy has an unreal amount of power. This vicious cycle is what has plagued American

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<sup>8</sup> Elias, Tony. "Paranoia". In *Conspiracy Theories in American History*, edited by Peter Knight.

<sup>9</sup> Hofstadter, Richard. "The Paranoid Style in American Politics."

<sup>10</sup> Hofstadter, Richard. "The Paranoid Style in American Politics."

politics and culture since the colonization of the New World, but especially since the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century.

By tracing conspiracy theorizing and paranoia throughout American history it becomes clear just how strong the relation between the two forces is. In certain instances our nation's political agendas have been altered based on paranoia, major cultural transitions have taken place because of existing conspiracy theories, and the entire structure of our political system post-9/11 is grounded on paranoid governing. We, the people of the United States both past and present, have cultivated and are continuing to cultivate a connection so deep that we no longer question its existence. In some ways we almost embrace it. Conspiracy theorizing allows us to provide answers to questions that are either too complex to fully understand or are too awful to accept. This evolution can be attributed to components such as the mindset of the original settlers, the interpretation of the U.S. Constitution, the actions of our leaders, the dominance of the media, and even the advantages and disadvantages of our geographic location. For over three and a half centuries these various factors have adjusted American political life in a way that has allowed for paranoia and conspiracy theorizing to rule our decision making process during times of uncertainty.

Such an inclination towards extreme general distrust, though not uniquely American, is certainly more prominent here than in any other country. Our fascination with, as well as our inclination to believe in, conspiracies is as intriguing as it is disturbing. My thesis will aim to explain how particular events in American history have provided a perfect breeding ground for further paranoia and conspiracy theorizing. In Chapter 2: An Overview of Paranoia and Conspiracy I look into conspiracies and paranoia in a general sense: How have both evolved?

Why are they relevant? And who do they influence? The 3rd chapter, A History of American Paranoia and Conspiracy Theorizing, instead presents a discourse through American history beginning with the first settlers. Understanding the levels of paranoia we are surrounded by today is only possible by exploring the growth that has taken place. I will illustrate how conspiracy theorizing began in the United States and then provide an account of the most significant examples over the last 350 years. This brings us to the 4th and 5th chapters, The Terrorist Attacks on September 11th, 2001 and 9/11 Case Study - An Analysis of the Nation's Reaction to the Terrorist Attacks, where I closely examine the September 11th, 2001 terrorist attacks and the subsequent response of our leaders and the public. My argument will provide support for why 9/11 is the quintessential example of our nation's degree of paranoia. Conspiracy theories and paranoia have held hands for a long time in American history, yet the 9/11 events have also equally managed to strengthen the relationship between the two.

Undoubtably one of the most horrific events to occur on U.S. soil, September 11th marks an epic turning point in American society. It not only directly altered the lives of countless individuals who lost family members and loved ones, it also changed the entire structure of our political system. The response of our governmental leaders, the media, and the general public each played a monumental role in the ultimate repercussions that the attack had on our nation. In Chapter 4 I take a look at September 11th as a whole; I will answer the who, what, when, where, and why, as well as address the decisions made immediately following the attack. I will expand on the issue in my Chapter 5 case study where I point out the way that fear, conspiracy theories and paranoia surrounding the 9/11 terrorist attacks have transformed the political segment of our society. This sparks questions such as what key changes occurred in our government after the

attacks? Was the War on Terror solely a product of our paranoia? And what should we have learned from this tragedy? I conclude by providing insight into my expectation of what this constant aura of fear means for the United States in both the short and long term future.

## **Chapter 2: An Overview of Paranoia and Conspiracy**

### **Conspiracy (Theories, Theorists, and Theorizing)**

Typing “conspiracy theory” into Google yields over one million search results. Just on the first page I can find information about the 1997 film titled “Conspiracy Theory,” read articles about conspiracy theories written within the past couple of days, and familiarize myself with “33 Conspiracy Theories That Turned Out To Be True, What Every Person Should Know.” Since I am truly interested in the definition of “conspiracy theory,” I refine my search to “define: conspiracy theory.” According to Google a conspiracy theory is “a belief that some covert but influential organization is responsible for a circumstance or event.”<sup>11</sup> This definition offers a simple, fairly unbiased assessment of what a conspiracy theory is. The issue is that a conspiracy theory is anything but simple - and it certainly do not lack controversy or prejudice - so why should its definition be? Urban Dictionary, an online dictionary open to the public to define pop-cultural slang words, offers an interesting take on the word. Within the first ten definitions (Urban Dictionary places them in order from most “liked” to least “liked”/most “disliked”) the following explanations of “conspiracy theory” are listed: “designation assigned by corporate media to any idea divergent of government script,” “two words which are uttered whenever anyone is getting too close to the truth,” and “a generally unsubstantiated claim - generally based

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<sup>11</sup> Google “define: conspiracy theory”.

on what is called an argument from ignorance, linking completely unrelated things, etc - that is usually considered to be against the well-being of the demographic of the conspiracy theorist. Almost always pushed by scientifically illiterate people, religious fundamentalists, the uneducated or misinformed, and - always - the paranoid.”<sup>12</sup> While none of those definitions are considered official or reputable by intellectual standards, they do spark some compelling questions. Why were a majority of the most “liked” definitions generally supportive of conspiracy theories, theorists, and theorizing? What role do media outlets, such as Urban Dictionary, play in perpetuating a conspiracy theorizing culture? And who endorses conspiracy theories and why?

This section, Conspiracy (Theories, Theorists, and Theorizing), of the chapter will answer the preceding questions, as well as present an in-depth analysis of the interplay between the three branches of conspiracy. Through a literature review a complete portrait of the where, why, who, how, and when of conspiracies is painted.

#### **A. The Transition From Absurdity to Normality**

Conspiracies, and especially conspiracy theorists, have long been dismissed for being outlandish, ill-informed, and for lacking credentials. It is just within, roughly, the last few decades that conspiracy theories have become so normalized that the general public no longer refutes them immediately; often times it is quite the contrary, these theories become so popular that they gain the support of a majority. For example, 80% of U.S. citizens believe that the government has more information about extraterrestrials than what is available to the public and more than half believe that there is some sort of conspiracy involved in the coverup of both the

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<sup>12</sup> Urban Dictionary. “conspiracy theory”.

JFK assassination and 9/11.<sup>13</sup> Stef Aupers in “‘Trust No One’: Modernization, Paranoia, and Conspiracy Culture” makes an excellent point; “this proliferation of conspiracy thinking in the West is both cause and consequence of its normalization: in contemporary culture, trusting authorities and believing ‘official’ stories formulated by the state, politicians, or the media are easily dismissed as a sign of naivety. Conspiracy theories do after all exist and the exposure of *real conspiracies* since the 1970s has strengthened the plausibility and credibility of even the most farfetched theory.”<sup>14</sup> What Aupers explains is the complete opposite of what was once the case. As Steve Clark writes about in “Conspiracy Theories and Conspiracy Theorizing,” almost all intellectuals used to consider conspiracy theories bogus, without question. This was partially based on a fear of being associated with anti-elitist and anti-intellectual Populists, who were known perpetrators of conspiracies theories in America, but it also had to do with the overall attitude towards skepticism during the late 19th century.<sup>15</sup> Generally rational and well-learned individuals were expected to be capable of resisting fallacious means of reasoning. Those who didn’t, and channelled their distrust in the form of conspiracy theorizing, were considered logically inferior.

In modern society, some of these stigmas still exists, but certainly not to the same extent. Conspiracy culture has evolved from “a deviant, exotic phenomenon to a mainstream narrative that has spread through the media and is increasingly normalized, institutionalized and

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<sup>13</sup> Stef Aupers, “‘Trust No One’: Modernization, Paranoia, and Conspiracy Culture.”

<sup>14</sup> Stef Aupers, “‘Trust No One’: Modernization, Paranoia, and Conspiracy Culture.”

<sup>15</sup> Steve Clark. “Conspiracy Theories and Theorizing.”

commercialized.”<sup>16</sup> As previously mentioned, the validity of some conspiracy theories - mainly the Watergate scandal of 1972 - catapulted conspiracy theorizing into a new realm of existence; one where conspiracy theories, no matter how outrageous, should be given some attention. The Watergate theory, in particular, made skepticism of the government seem less distasteful and it changed the focus of conspiracy theories from that point forward. Auper addresses this perfectly when she writes that conspiring “has shifted from paranoia about an exotic ‘Other’ standing ‘outside’ society to paranoia about modern society itself. Traditional conspiracy theories, produced before and around the 1950s, typically demonized Jews, Muslims, and communists as the conspirators - groups that were assumed to threaten society or disturb the boundaries between ‘Us’ and ‘Them.’”<sup>17</sup> During the late 1960’s and into the 1970’s, conspiracy culture began concentrating on powers within the institutions of our society. The primary targets of suspicion today tend to be the government, politicians, celebrities, and individuals/groups who possess extreme wealth or influence. Coincidentally this shift occurred around the same time that the media began catching on to the idea sharing major conspiracy theories with the general public as an alternative to the “official” story. The media has been the driving force behind the acceptance of conspiracies ever since.

## **B. The Role of the Media**

Conspiracy theories would not be commonplace in our society today if it were not for the media’s devotion to the cause. From books and movies, to twitter accounts and blogs, the multitude of information that can be accessed in the United States - and throughout most of the

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<sup>16</sup> Stef Aupers, “‘Trust No One’: Modernization, Paranoia, and Conspiracy Culture.”

<sup>17</sup> Stef Aupers, “‘Trust No One’: Modernization, Paranoia, and Conspiracy Culture.”

Western world - concerning conspiracy theories is incalculable. The internet has provided a hotbed for the development and expansion of conspiracy theories, while mainstream news sources spread the information like wildfire. Current forms of media allow more people to be reached than ever before and it offers a place for individuals with the same thoughts and inclinations to reinforce one another.

Conspiracy theories were once a product of too little information. Sunstein and Vermeule argue in “Conspiracy Theories: Causes and Cures” that when information is kept a secret, a tendency towards conspiracy theorizing is more justifiable; “in a closed society, secrets are far easier to keep, and distrust of official accounts makes a great deal of sense. In such societies, conspiracy theories are more likely to be true and harder to show to be false in light of available information.”<sup>18</sup> On the other hand, “if those [knowledge-producing] institutions are generally trustworthy, in part because they are embedded in an open society with a well-functioning marketplace of ideas and free flow of information, and if it is difficult to dupe many diverse institutions simultaneously (as the 9/11 conspiracy theories require), the conspiracy theories will usually be unjustified.”<sup>19</sup> This is where Sunstein and Vermeule make a fundamental mistake in their analysis. They argue that access to information directly translates to the quality of conspiracies in a particular society. Rather, the ironic problem we are faced with today is that there is too much information.

Media outlets grant unlimited access to an indefinite amount of data, information, and resources to anyone who wishes to take advantage. Of course, there are various barriers that

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<sup>18</sup> Sunstein, C.R. and Vermeule, A. “Conspiracy Theories: Causes and Cures.”

<sup>19</sup> Sunstein, C.R. and Vermeule, A. “Conspiracy Theories: Causes and Cures.”



some people may need to bypass (proximity to a functioning computer, for example), but the average citizen of the United States can find the answer to practically any question he or she has with the click of a button. While this information used to be limited to government websites, reputable sources, and online encyclopedias, that is no longer the case. It is now up to the user to decipher for him or herself whether the information they are receiving is to be considered fact, opinion, propaganda, or outright lie. The dilemma that this causes is that multiple individuals could place the same source in completely different categories. This is what Sunstein and Vermeule fail to acknowledge in their work; too much information can result in a conspiracy theory so intricate that the ordinary citizen may have trouble discerning fact from fiction. In the same way that too little information makes distrust and theorizing justifiable, too much information can easily produce the same outcome. The difference is that when there is too much information available to too many people, there is a wider audience of skeptics on both ends of the spectrum: those who doubt the conspiracy theorists and those who doubt the official story. This far-reaching divide is why conspiracy theories have become so mainstream and why the media places so much emphasis on them. They are, in many ways, impossible to completely refute, mainly because the people who believe in them will back them endlessly and with intense passion.

### **C. Who Are Conspiracy Theorists?**

The elementary answer to the question “who are conspiracy theorists?” would be: groups of people who come together in common support of an alternative explanation to an event or occurrence, also known as a conspiracy theory. But such a definition doesn't provide insight into who is prone to theorizing or what encourages conspiracy theorists to believe in the explanations

that they so adamantly defend. One extreme look at this is offered by Daniel Pipes in his article “Conspiracy: How the Paranoid Style Flourishes and Where It Comes From.” He views conspiracies and conspiracy theorists as malicious and destructive forces, which society should be very wary of; “conspirators are dangerous and detestable because they are underhanded and often pursue their goals in disguise, they represent unknown dangers and threats which only the exceptionally alert (and suspicious) can discern.”<sup>20</sup> Pipes continues by saying “the major appeal of conspiracy theories is that they simplify the world and the chains of causation, while providing emotionally satisfactory identifications and explanations of evil; they offer solutions to and explanations of seemingly intractable problems.”<sup>21</sup> Despite, Pipes’ rather acute look at conspiracy theorists he does have a point during his analysis of the appeal of the theories themselves. I would have even claimed that he hit the nail on the head were it not for his reference to “evil” at the end of his sentence. Even so, the argument that people tend to believe in conspiracy theories because they offer a narrative for a mind-blowing occurrence does ring true.

Conspiracy theorists, up through the Populist period, were primarily people who held a widespread apprehension of the ‘Other’ - as mentioned in section A of this chapter. The theorists often believed multiple conspiracy theories and relied on other skeptics to follow in their footsteps. These people were frequently labeled as such and in turn their positions on scholarly topics were usually considered invalid. Nowadays there is not a defined characteristic that links all conspiracy theorists. Increasingly, even the term conspiracy theorist is no longer applicable in the same sense that it used to be. “Conspiracy theorist” implies that a person is prone to placing

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<sup>20</sup> Daniel, Pipes. "Conspiracy: How the Paranoid Style Flourishes and Where it Comes from."

<sup>21</sup> Daniel, Pipes. "Conspiracy: How the Paranoid Style Flourishes and Where it Comes from."

their faith in more than one conspiracy theory. It is a label used to describe someone in a way that makes it part of their identity. In modern society that is no longer the case. More and more individuals claim to believe one or maybe two conspiracy theories, but completely denounce other ones of similar popularity, framework, and following. What this exhibits is that conspiracy theories no longer attract, or ultimately affect, only a small group of people; they have become so infiltrated in our society that in some way, shape, or form almost every individual perpetuates their existence. So, while most individual citizens may not fit the mold of a traditional conspiracy theorist, our entire society can most definitely be characterized as possessing conspiratorial predispositions.

Undoubtably, there are still extremists who can easily be classified as conspiracy theorists, but in the present day those individuals tend to be part of the select few who lack the information necessary to formulate plausible explanations. Sunstein and Vermeule bring this up when they examine how conspiracy theories arise and spread, they contend that “human beings lack personal or direct information; they must rely on what other people think. In some domains, people suffer from a ‘crippled epistemology,’ in the sense that they know very few things, and what they know is wrong. Many extremists fall into this category; their extremism stems not from irrationality, but from the fact that they have little (relevant) information, and their extremist view are supported by what little they know.”<sup>22</sup> These extremists are the breed of conspiracy theorists who threaten to repeatedly discredit all conspiracy theories with their often ridiculous, and equally impossible, assumptions about any given event. Their most crippling attribute is their refusal to abandon a particular conspiracy theory, despite the social gains that

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<sup>22</sup> Sunstein, C.R. and Vermeule, A. “Conspiracy Theories: Causes and Cures.”

could be made by doing so.<sup>23</sup> This incessant commitment often makes observers wonder: when is the appropriate time for a theory to be forgotten?

#### **D. The Expiration Date**

The expiration date of conspiracy theories is a difficult topic to tackle because “the problem with conspiracy theorists is that they usually seem loath to give up conspiracy theories.”<sup>24</sup> While, extreme conspiracy theorists are more likely to hold on tightly to the sanctity of their theories, it is a characteristic of most conspiracy theorists to defend the theories they support for as long as they can.<sup>25</sup> Steve Clark clearly outlines why conspiracy theories can remain relevant for years, sometimes decades, even after the event itself is no longer discussed:

Conspiracy theories invariably seem to be based on more evidence than their immediate rival, the non conspiratorial “received view.” This is because they explain all that the non conspiratorial received view explains - the apparent plausibility of the non conspiratorial received view is a consequence of the success of the cover story or cover-up, according to conspiracy theorist - and then go on to account for evidence that the received view is unable to explain.<sup>26</sup>

This is why the more intricate conspiracy theories will never die; there is no way to convince its believers that the conspiracy isn’t factual. The more evidence the received view presents, the more backlash they will receive from conspirators stating that the information is just part of a

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<sup>23</sup> Steve Clark. “Conspiracy Theories and Theorizing.”

<sup>24</sup> Steve Clark. “Conspiracy Theories and Theorizing.”

<sup>25</sup> Sunstein, C.R. and Vermeule, A. “Conspiracy Theories: Causes and Cures.”

<sup>26</sup> Steve Clark. “Conspiracy Theories and Theorizing.”

cover-up. On the other hand, if the received view lacks concrete evidence then it is proof that the received story is false. This is also the reason why (most) conspiracy theories pertain to highly intricate, and often perplexing, events such as the JFK assassination, the spread of HIV/AIDs, the attack on Pearl Harbor, and 9/11. Rarely would a conspiracy theorist bother dealing with an issue such as an election outcome or a natural disaster because they don't offer a particular group that can be blamed and they are usually accepted for what they are regardless of the outcome. As a result, conspiracy theories are difficult to debunk on a grand scale and remain current significantly longer than they should. The only way for a conspiracy theory to expire is for evidence to appear that is irrefutable or for people to completely lose interest in the subject. Usually, before either one of those instances occurs, the conspiracy theory has caused fairly compelling repercussions.

#### **E. Complications and Advantages of Conspiracies**

Conspiracy theories have side effects, both good and bad, depending on the issue the theory is tackling, the number of people it reaches, and the reaction of the government. Conspiracy theories inspire skepticism, which is a necessary part of a functioning democracy. Without some level of doubt those in power would be able to abuse their privileges without fear of backlash. The problem we currently have in the United States is that the level of distrust is so severe that it hinders our perceptions of reality and it prevents productivity.

The term conspiracy theory is so normalized that it is being attributed to issues, for example global warming, as an excuse for inaction. Politicians, almost solely GOP members, regularly state that the notion that global warming is caused by human behavior is just a conspiracy theory made up by left-leaning, environmentalist, tree huggers despite incredible

amounts of irrefutable scientific data proving otherwise. The phrase “conspiracy theory” allows global warming skeptics to defer from doing anything about the issue, thus perpetuating an extremely serious and time sensitive matter. Another example of the use of the word conspiracy to avoid further examination is Hillary Clinton’s response to the Monica Lewinsky scandal. When asked to comment on the sexual misconduct allegations Mrs. Clinton stated that they were just “a vast right-wing conspiracy.”<sup>27</sup> Her use of the word “conspiracy” aimed to discredit the legitimacy of the speculations, but instead it resulted in a strengthening of the validity of conspiratorial thinking.

## **Paranoia**

Paranoia has long been regarded as a medical condition which requires varying degrees of attention, but is offered no cure. While this definition still holds true, paranoia in the political sphere is less clinical. The word can be used to describe irrational feelings of fear that may not officially be considered a mentally debilitating issue. While the severity of paranoia as an illness is not to be undermined, it is important to understand that the term no longer relates solely to extreme and diagnosed cases. As Stef Aupers points out, paranoia has transitioned from a “label applied by psychologists and psychiatrists” to a “veritable sociological phenomenon.”<sup>28</sup> This change is in many ways parallel to the shift that conspiracy theories underwent in the mid 20th century; beginning as ignored notions having little influence, to being a defining part of American political society.

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<sup>27</sup> Daniel, Pipes. "Conspiracy: How the Paranoid Style Flourishes and Where it Comes from."

<sup>28</sup> Stef Aupers, “‘Trust No One’: Modernization, Paranoia, and Conspiracy Culture.”

The interdependence between paranoia and conspiracy theories has existed all along, but the relationship is stronger now than it has ever been before. The development, and increasing intricacy, of conspiracy theories has fueled levels of paranoia that are completely unprecedented. Simultaneously, the realization that instilling fear in others can lead to exceptional amounts of power has led to more skepticism and therefore more conspiracy theories. There are two main reasons for this vicious cycle: first, humans are intrigued by fear and are inclined to embrace it as long as they are not directly affected by its consequences; second those who generally cause widespread paranoia tend to be paranoid themselves, which means they are incapable of rational thinking. This pattern is something people have become accustomed to and rarely is the destructive nature of it questioned. But when an examination of our fascination with fear and the connection between the paranoi(er) and the paranoi(e) does take place some alarming conclusions surface.

#### **A. For the Love of Fear**

The use of fear to pressure people into behaving in a manner they would otherwise not be inclined to is no new phenomenon. It has been used by all backgrounds, social classes, and denominations for as long as the history books can tell. But coercion today is more complex and difficult to detect than it was in previous centuries. Whereas years ago influence could only be administered by those with whom one had contact, today there are countless platforms that can be used to penetrate someone's mind. Technology, and particularly the media, has transformed the way information is shared and interpreted. There is practically no boundary to the virtue of what one chooses to communicate to the rest of the cyber world and there is also no cap on the number of people that can be reached. For this reason, propaganda is rampant and our

intellectual ability to discern between fact and fiction is increasingly limited. This provides an ideal foundation for the breeding of omnipresent paranoia.

To grasp the implications of this link between politicians, the media, and the general public let's take a look at the recent case of the Ebola virus. As news of the Ebola viruses's horrible impact on the people of West Africa began to make headlines in the United States, people started panicking. Media sources were releasing articles, interviews, and reports with headlines such as "Ebola in the air? A nightmare that could happen,"<sup>29</sup> "Ebola: 'the ISIS of Biological Agents,'"<sup>30</sup> and "US scientists say uncertainties loom about Ebola's transmission, other key facts."<sup>31</sup> Scientists, doctors, and health organizations worked fervently to subdue the unnecessary fear that the media was instilling in the people of the United States, but the results were mixed. Members of the general public who believed the Ebola media hype started pressuring politicians to propose a vote to close off U.S. borders and they accused President Obama of not taking the proper measures to protect the citizens of the country. The incredible amount of misinformation about the risks, spread, and precautions surrounding Ebola resulted in health workers, returning from infected areas, being treated like ticking time bombs. In a number of instances people went as far as condoning a violation of a U.S. citizen's civil rights out of fear that the individual or individuals could infect the public with the virus; as was the case with Maine nurse Kaci Hickox, which quickly gained national attention.

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<sup>29</sup> Cohen, Elizabeth, and John Bonifield. "Ebola in the Air? A Nightmare That Could Happen."

<sup>30</sup> Hooton, Christopher. "'The Isis of Biological Agents?': CNN Is Asking the Stupid Ebola Questions."

<sup>31</sup> "US Scientists Say Uncertainties Loom about Ebola's Transmission, Other Key Facts." Fox News



The influence that the media had and continues to have on the degree of paranoia, and subsequent response, to a particular issue is both astounding and terrifying. To make matters worse, politicians take advantage of this fear to perpetuate their agendas. A number of Republican candidates used the public's confusion and paranoia concerning the Ebola virus to gain votes in the midterm elections. The candidates, and supporting campaign sponsors, released ads blaming Democrats for not securing borders, for not protecting their state's against threats, and for allowing Ebola and terrorists into the country.<sup>32</sup> Similarly, a liberal advocacy group attempted to appeal to voters by blaming the Ebola outbreak on Republican budget cuts which affected the CDC and NIH in an advertisement that concluded with the statement "Republican Cuts Kill."<sup>33</sup> This goes to show that no individual or group can be held exclusively accountable for the paranoid style we have become so accustomed to in the United States. The news sources we support, the movies we go to see, and the written works we purchase each play a role in determining what we will receive in the future.

I have presented the Ebola case as an isolated account, but the relationship between the media, the public, and our leaders remains relatively the same regardless of the topic at hand. This is not to imply that all media sources aim to instill fear in the public, that the entire population falls victim to the propaganda, or that most politicians take advantage of a vulnerable society, but the regularity of such occurrences cannot be ignored. The popularity of fear in American culture is a simple equation of supply and demand. What the general public continues

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<sup>32</sup> Talev, Margaret. "Ebola Spikes In Campaign Ads Ahead of Midterms."

<sup>33</sup> Diamond, Jeremy, and Ashley Killough. "Liberal Group 'cuts' Midterm Ebola Ad Blaming GOP."

to demand, the media will supply, and those with the power to use it to reach their goals will do so.

We are engrossed by the fear of an ‘Other’ because we know we can’t be hurt by it, yet it provides a sense of excitement and something to debate. Topics such as disease, distant war, a secret government plan, and even terrorism instill a paranoia that is understandable, but not justifiable. Each of those issues does have the potential to impact certain individual’s lives at some point, making the paranoia understandable. But the minimal likelihood, paired with the usual misinformation that is the result of the paranoia, makes the response unjustifiable. When the feeling of fear is reasonable it is no longer considered paranoia, but in our society those lines have been blurred to the point where everyone who is fearful is considered paranoid and everyone who is paranoid is merely considered cautious. This brings us to the ironic relation between the paranoi(er) and the paranoi(e).

## **B. The Paranoi(er) vs. the Paranoi(e)**

In the sphere of paranoia there are two characters that are imperative to the prolongation of the system: the paranoi(er) and the paranoi(e). In other words, there needs to be an individual or group responsible for ingraining fear in others and there needs to be an individual or group that is receptive of that fear. Now the paradox that exists between the two is that the paranoi(er) is often a victim of paranoia him/herself, assuming the paranoi(er) is an individual. The reason behind this is that in order to push fear effectively onto others there must be some inkling of that fear within oneself.

One of the most notorious paranoi(er)s and conspiracy theorists of modern time is Adolf Hitler. His story is well-known and doesn’t require much introduction, so let’s examine why he

was so effective in achieving what he wanted. Hitler held very severe views towards certain branches of Germany's, and the world's, population - most notably the Jews. He became so entranced in his hatred of certain groups that he believed that they were responsible for World War I and Germany's poor economic situation at the time. This led to an unwarranted suspicion that these groups would threaten the wellbeing of Germany, and eventually all of Europe, if action wasn't taken to stop them. Hitler was known for being an excellent orator and when this was coupled with his relentless paranoia he became a force to be reckoned with. Initially he was able to convince thousands if not millions of people that his distrust of Jews, and other minority groups, was reasonable and credible. Many German citizens followed in his paranoid footsteps and thus marked the start of World War II. Of course, this is an overly simplified account of the events that took place leading up to the second World War, but the point remains that the paranoia of an individual, especially a powerful one, can have horrifying consequences when shared with a vast number of people.

Accordingly, the paranoi(e) is in some ways as much at fault as the paranoi(er) because when it comes down to it they both fell victim to the same misguidance. It's impossible to pinpoint exactly what causes an individual to be paranoid. Sometimes it's a prior experience or encounter, while other times it's cultural or societal factors that play a role. Unfortunately, in the 21st century it's easier to be content with such paranoia than ever before because mass communication allows for paranoi(e)'s to find refuge with other individuals who share their same fears. This is how paranoia manages to multiply so quickly, especially when the issue is picked up by mainstream media. Such comfortability with widespread paranoia has influenced a countless number of both major and minor events throughout our history. In the next chapter I

provide a discourse of these affairs and survey how paranoia and conspiracy theorizing have touched almost every moment of our presence on this soil.

### **Chapter 3: A History of American Paranoia and Conspiracy Theorizing**

#### **Introduction**

Conspiracy theorizing and an inclination toward paranoid thinking are not uniquely American phenomena. The root of both issues can be traced back centuries - as mentioned in chapter 1 - to a time well before North America was colonized by the Europeans. The measure that sets us apart from other regions of the world, and even from other Western countries, is the sheer magnitude of attention, supporters, and influence that both conspiracies and paranoia have in the United States. We may not be responsible for the development of paranoia and conspiratorial speculations, but we have perpetuated the two tendencies to unmatched extremes. By tracing the relationship between paranoia and conspiracy theories throughout American history the depth of their interconnectedness becomes more and more apparent.

American paranoia and fear of conspiracy began during the Colonial period when the English settlers first arrived in the New World. Initially, the settler's distrust was primarily directed towards the Natives – an understandable fear of the other – but rather quickly the colonists began suspecting “both neighbors and strangers of secret alliances and dangerous plots.”<sup>34</sup> This continued to evolve and by the late 17th century the first major event in American history perpetuated solely on the basis of extreme paranoia occurred. The Salem witch trials of

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<sup>34</sup> Knight, Peter. *Conspiracy Theories in American History: an Encyclopedia*. Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2003.

1662 swept through Massachusetts and the nearby colonies resulting in the execution of nearly 40 accused men and women.<sup>35</sup> As with many such bursts of sudden madness, the Salem witch trials came and went quickly. By the early and mid 18th century witches were a threat of the past. In New York, black slaves were becoming the new violators of peace and freedom. In March and April of 1741 a number of fires erupted in Manhattan.<sup>36</sup> Despite a complete lack of proof regarding how the fires started, the virtually immediate consensus among the citizens of New York was that the fires had been started by black slaves in hopes of burning down the city and wiping out the white population. The false conspiracies surrounding the 1741 fires were perpetuated by a single event that had occurred over 30 decades prior; in 1712 there had been a slave uprising that involved the use of arson to murder slave masters.<sup>37</sup> This minor correlation alone was enough evidence to lead to the arrests of almost 200 individuals and the hanging of slightly over 30.<sup>38</sup> Unfortunately, this unwarranted fear of black conspiracies in the United States continued on for over a century and has yet to completely disappear from American culture.

Following the mid 1700's the true culture of fear and paranoia in our political society began to develop as the fight for independence approached. Around the 1760's new acts and laws were established by British officials that lead the colonists to feel oppressed. As the colonist's

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<sup>35</sup> Walker, J. (2013, Sep 03). Let the Witches Burn; in a New Book, Jesse Walker Argues That Americans Have Always Been Suckers for a Good Conspiracy Theory. National Post.

<sup>36</sup> Shorto, Russell. "The Power of Fear." Nation 281, no. 17 (November 21, 2005): 37. Points of View Reference Center, EBSCOhost.

<sup>37</sup> Shorto, Russell. "The Power of Fear." Nation 281, no. 17 (November 21, 2005): 37. Points of View Reference Center, EBSCOhost.

<sup>38</sup> Shorto, Russell. "The Power of Fear." Nation 281, no. 17 (November 21, 2005): 37. Points of View Reference Center, EBSCOhost.

liberties were threatened, anti-British-government groups formed and theories about Great Britain's motives concerning the colonies started to spread like wild fire.<sup>39</sup> At this point, Americans had already developed a sense of exceptionalism which the British government seriously undermined when it attempted to regain complete control over the colonies. Infuriated and alarmed by these actions the colonists began a revolution that lead to American independence, the writing of our Constitution, the establishment of the Articles of Confederation, and subsequently the formation of the government we have today.

Understanding the fact that the United States was founded as a result of deeply rooted fear, against a higher overarching power, is key to comprehending our society's evolution throughout history. Even before our independence, but especially afterwards, Americans have exemplified an almost unparalleled level of paranoia. This paranoia is evident both within our country's borders as well as on an international scale.

The roughly 150 years between the foundation of our government and modern day America were complex and revolutionary. As a nation, we dealt with issues within our borders such as the introduction of new states, the legal status of slavery, radical upheavals in political power, the Great Depression, and so on. These events, along with countless others, spurred numerous conspiracy theories and surges of paranoia. Most notably, the 18th and 19th centuries saw the rise of the Illuminati and Freemasons, - in response to the increase in power and wealth within the United States - as well as a significant aura of skepticism toward abolitionists.<sup>40</sup> The

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<sup>39</sup> Knight, Peter. *Conspiracy Theories in American History: an Encyclopedia*. Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2003.

<sup>40</sup> Knight, Peter. *Conspiracy Theories in American History: an Encyclopedia*. Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2003.

19th century in particular was plagued by conspiracy theories surrounding slavery and freedmen, especially in the South, which spilled over into the 20th century with the continued presence of the Klu Klux Klan. Later on in the 20th century, African American distrust shifted from targeting fellow citizens and organized hate groups to being directed at the government. Some of the most prominent conspiracy theories of the 1900's stemmed from African American notions stating that the U.S. war on drugs and the HIV/AIDs pandemics were both government run plots against the black population.<sup>41</sup> Similarly, conspiracy theories about the Watergate scandal, the moon landing, and Roswell/UFO's were also either believed to be, or were actually proven, government conspiracies that gained a lot of nation wide attention.

The turn of the 20th century marked a time in American conspiracy theorizing where paranoia began to be concentrated on global events more prominently than it had before. Practically all of the conspiracy theories and instances of paranoia mentioned thus far have related strongly to events happening within the United States, with only minor impacts outside of the country. But with threats of the New World Order, the first World War, the attack on Pearl Harbor, and World War II, consuming a great portion of the 20th century the scope of conspiracy theories changed. The second World War in particular had deep consequences, both globally and in the United States, with endless outcomes, one of which was a new perception of paranoia.

The end of World War II marked the U.S. emergence as a hegemonic superpower. Our nation's relatively late involvement and geographical location meant that we made it out of the war practically unscathed compared to countries such as France, Germany, Poland, England,

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<sup>41</sup> Knight, Peter. *Conspiracy Theories in American History: an Encyclopedia*. Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2003.

Italy, Russia, and Japan. Our limited involvement allowed the United States to continue progressing militarily, economically, and politically, while most other nations had to focus on rebuilding. We also took this time to spread, and in some instances impose, our democratic views on countries that were previously lead by communists and fascists. By doing so the United States proved that its influence on the rest of the world relies on far more than just its military strength. At this point America had put itself in a self detrimental situation; it had achieved its unspoken goal of becoming the most powerful country in the world, but because of its paranoid nature it was unfit to take on this no longer shared role. America in general already suffered from extreme distrust of other nations so when it became the ultimate superpower that fear only heightened. The problem with being at the top of a hegemonic structure is that there is no where to go but down. The United States would either hold its position of power forever or, more likely than not, be surpassed by another nation at some point in time. It is the paranoia of this very occurrence that has driven virtually every major political decision this country has made over the past 60 or so years. It is the reason the United States spends about as much money on its military annually as the next 15 countries combined.<sup>42</sup> And it is the reason that the citizens of the United States were willing to give up basic rights and freedoms after the terrorist attacks of September 11<sup>th</sup> on the assumption that these were necessary steps in order for the government to “properly” fight the war on terror.

America's intense infatuation with the idea of there being constant internal and external threats against our nation, against our citizens, and even against particular individuals further promotes the culture of paranoia and conspiracy thinking that has become so overbearing in this

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<sup>42</sup> Shah, Anup. “World Military Spending.”



society. This characteristic has penetrated the core of our principles so deeply that it needs to be part of the way we define our political culture, regardless of how unflattering of a trait it is considered to be. While reactions to events throughout our history have enforced our aptitude for paranoia and conspiracy thinking, recently it has been the media that has taken this willingness to unparalleled levels. Over the past 50 years pop culture has completely mainstreamed notions of governmental distrust, fear, belief in conspiracies, and faith in paranoid thinking. Movies and TV shows thrill viewers by incorporating realistic conspiracy plots: All the President's Men (1976) won a number of academy awards including Best Picture<sup>43</sup>; The DaVinci Code (2006) is in the top 60 highest grossing movies of all time<sup>44</sup>; JFK (1991) is a renowned film based on the assassination of President John F. Kennedy<sup>45</sup>; and some of the most popular TV shows such as 24, Prison Break, and various episodes of Law and Order focus primarily on conspiracy theories. Documentaries about conspiracy theories have also gained huge momentum, with popular websites like Netflix making the streaming of these films free. At this point an aptitude for paranoia and conspiracy theorizing has infiltrated every aspect of American life. Colleges offer classes about it, U.S. politics is based on it, Hollywood is making millions off of it, and individuals in almost every realm of academics are analyzing it. Our fascination with, as well as our inclination to believe in, conspiracies is unique. In no other country could you expect to hear a conspiracy theory concerning practically every major event that has occurred over the last 300

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<sup>43</sup> "Awards." IMDb. Accessed January 31, 2015. [http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0074119/awards?ref\\_=tt\\_awd](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0074119/awards?ref_=tt_awd).

<sup>44</sup> "Box-Office Top 100 Films of All-Time." Box-Office Top 100 Films of All-Time. Accessed January 31, 2015. <http://www.filmsite.org/boxoffice.html>.

<sup>45</sup> "JFK." IMDb. Accessed January 31, 2015. <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0102138/>.

or so years, but in the U.S., you can.

Over the remainder of this chapter we will take a closer look at the specific conspiracy theories and instances of paranoia that have played a monumental role in shaping the way our nation ultimately reacted to the events on September 11th, 2001. Zoning in first on the 18th and 19th centuries together, and then concluding with the 20th century we will see exactly how the United States evolved into a nation with such strong inclinations toward paranoid thinking.

### **A. Mid 18th - Late 19th Centuries**

American conspiracy theories in the 18th and 19th century were relatively few in number, but played a large role in the advancement of theories later on. The prejudice the paranoia revealed, as well as the segments of society that the conspiracy theories targeted acted as a foundation for the future.

#### *Freemasonry 1730's - Present*

One of the earliest conspiracy theory's in the United States actually came from Europe and was primarily fueled by the Roman Catholic Church. The Church claimed that the Freemason's - a secretive organization comprised of exclusively wealthy and, generally, powerful males - aimed to sabotage the Church and its teachings.<sup>46</sup> Such theories began to circulate Europe in the late 1730's in response to other accusations of illegal coverups, skeptical political involvement, and anti-religious behavior within the Freemason Order. Despite such fervent opposition from the Church, the popularity of the organization grew both in Europe and

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<sup>46</sup> Knight, Peter. Conspiracy Theories in American History: an Encyclopedia. "Freemasonry." Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2003.

in the United States throughout the 1700's.<sup>47</sup>

The Order of Free and Accepted Masons opened its first chapter in North America in the 1730's and quickly gained members because of the social advantages that the order provided. Similarly to the chapters in Europe, the Freemason's in, what came to be, the United States were subject to significant scrutiny and distrust by the general public within a few decades of their establishment. By the late 18th century Freemasonry was featured as the center point of numerous conspiracy theories. Freemason activity drew considerable suspicion, especially when it pertained to the involvement of its members in politics. Peter Knight, in "Conspiracy Theories in American History: an Encyclopedia" points out that "the Masonic affiliation of many key players during the American Revolution led the order to identify itself, in the post-Revolutionary period, with the core values of the new Republic. At the 1793 dedication of the U.S. Capitol, for instance, President George Washington wore Masonic garb and performed a modified Masonic ritual during the ceremony, assisted by other Masonic brethren."<sup>48</sup> Many conspiracy theorists also stressed the idea that the Great Seal of the United States, specifically the all-seeing eye at the top of the pyramid, is a Masonic symbol which further proves the strong influence of the organization on the politics of that time.

Rather than hurt the image of Freemasonry, the notion that the order had an overarching leverage on politics, social policy, and post-Revolutionary affairs ended up attracting the upper levels of U.S. society. The middle and elite classes felt that the Mason's represented key

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<sup>47</sup> Knight, Peter. *Conspiracy Theories in American History: an Encyclopedia*. "Freemasonry." Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2003.

<sup>48</sup> Knight, Peter. *Conspiracy Theories in American History: an Encyclopedia*. "Freemasonry." Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2003.

American values and that association was a direct line towards power and exclusive social status. But as membership increased, so did opposition. The late 1820's and early 1830's spurred the first anti-Masonic movements.<sup>49</sup>

The movement began when William Morgan, a man who was in the process of writing an informative piece about Freemasonry, was murdered in 1826 with very little consequence to those responsible.<sup>50</sup> After this incident people further questioned the legitimacy of Freemasonry and openly expressed their worry about having a powerful, yet potentially corrupt organization be a part of such a new nation. This led to the immediate formation of the Anti-Masonic Party - the first major third party contender in U.S. politics - but by 1843 the party was completely dissolved.<sup>51</sup> However, a lack of a concrete political party opposing the Freemasons didn't prevent, and hasn't continued to prevent, conspiracy charges against the organization brought forth primarily by Christian groups such as the National Christian Association.

Even today Christian conspiracy theorists uphold the same notions that the Roman Catholic Church did centuries prior. The belief that Freemasons are satanic individuals, with plots to control various spheres of political and cultural life worldwide is still perpetuated by sects of society that have opposed the order fervently since the rise of its existence. They, the anti-Masonic's, blame the Freemasons for the New World Order, the assassination of John F.

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<sup>49</sup> Knight, Peter. *Conspiracy Theories in American History: an Encyclopedia*. "Freemasonry." Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2003.

<sup>50</sup> Knight, Peter. *Conspiracy Theories in American History: an Encyclopedia*. "Freemasonry." Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2003.

<sup>51</sup> Knight, Peter. *Conspiracy Theories in American History: an Encyclopedia*. "Freemasonry." Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2003.

Kennedy, the bombings in Oklahoma City, and even for the events on September 11th.<sup>52</sup> Experts argue that the wide-spread suspicion of Freemasonry perfectly reflects the paranoid style that has plagued the United States for as long as anyone can remember; particularly in regards to those with substantial power and/or wealth.<sup>53</sup>

*Illuminati late 1700's - Present*

The Illuminati is another trivial example of a secretive and mysterious organization made up of, supposedly, some of the world's most dominant individuals. Launched in May of 1776 by Dr. Adam Weishaupt, a professor of Canon Law at the University of Ingolstadt, the Order of the Illuminati was meant to become a “‘school of wisdom’ in which new ideas could be be freely taught, away from the prying eyes of priests and public officials.”<sup>54</sup> Loosely modeled after the Order of Free and Accepted Masons, the Illuminati, didn't experience the same surge in membership. Mostly active in Europe, the Illuminati, according to the “Conspiracy Theories in American History: an Encyclopedia” never went mainstream in the United States after the beginning of the 19th century.

Ironically in present day America talk of the Illuminati seems to be much more widespread then the mention of the Freemasons. Although conspiracies surrounding the Illuminati may not be as developed, it is a commonly held speculation that an Illuminati

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<sup>52</sup> Knight, Peter. Conspiracy Theories in American History: an Encyclopedia. “Freemasonry.” Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2003.

<sup>53</sup> Knight, Peter. Conspiracy Theories in American History: an Encyclopedia. “Illuminati.” Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2003.

<sup>54</sup> Knight, Peter. Conspiracy Theories in American History: an Encyclopedia. “Illuminati.” Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2003.

organization, or at least a New World Order - with speculated membership including past and present U.S. Presidents, politicians worldwide, leading pop culture figures, athletes, business leaders, and so on - does exist. The suspicion of their actions and motives is generally similar to the skepticism surrounding the Freemasons.

#### *Abolitionists and Slave Power 1830's - Civil War*

Two main conspiracy theories pertaining to slaves and the institution of slavery existed in the United States from roughly the 1830's through the Civil War. The first was geared at the abolitionists and perpetuated by southerners, while the second originated in the North and was directed at Southern slave owners.<sup>55</sup>

Tension between the North and the South had existed for decades prior to the Civil War. The battle originated as a land dispute because southern slave owners wanted to be able to expand their plantations to territories in other states, while northerners were afraid that if slavery expanded all of the available land would be bought by the already rich plantation owners, leaving none for the working class northerners. But rather quickly the basis of disagreement became focused on the institution of slavery. Abolitionists, individuals who fervently opposed slavery in the United States and wanted to see it abolished, began working together to shed light on the injustices occurring in the South. They did so by circulating newspapers, magazines, and pamphlets throughout the entire United States, as well as by writing countless petitions to Congress.<sup>56</sup> Almost immediately conspiracy theories erupted in the South. Slave owners argued

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<sup>55</sup> Knight, Peter. *Conspiracy Theories in American History: an Encyclopedia*. "Abolitionists." Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2003.

<sup>56</sup> Knight, Peter. *Conspiracy Theories in American History: an Encyclopedia*. "Abolitionists." Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2003.

that abolitionists were plotting to break up the Union by urging the disruption of the social order in the South. They believed that abolitionists were working undercover to overthrow the rule of Southern slave owners and blamed abolitionists for any slave rebellions that took place.<sup>57</sup>

By the early to mid 1830's laws were established in the South that made it illegal to write, publish, or distribute any information or publication that promoted the freedom of slaves.

Despite these laws abolitionists still sent out scores of such publications which only perpetuated the conspiracy theories against them.<sup>58</sup> Slave owners believed that these pieces of literature would result in a complete destruction of the South and therefore were regarded as critically as present day pornographic spam mail or letter bombs. Southerners looked at abolitionists as blasphemous human beings whose actions were comparable to those of conspiracy theory's most hated groups - witches, Communists, and Illuminati.<sup>59</sup>

On the opposing side of the spectrum there was the Slave Power conspiracy. Antislavery northerners feared that "a small group of southern slaveholders was conspiring to gain control of the federal government and use it to further southern slaveholding interests."<sup>60</sup> The proponents of this conspiracy used major political decisions such as the 3/5th's Compromise of 1787, the Missouri Compromise of 1820, the 1845 annexation of Texas, and the 1857 *Scott v. Sanford* case

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<sup>57</sup> Knight, Peter. Conspiracy Theories in American History: an Encyclopedia. "Abolitionists." Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2003.

<sup>58</sup> Knight, Peter. Conspiracy Theories in American History: an Encyclopedia. "Abolitionists." Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2003.

<sup>59</sup> Knight, Peter. Conspiracy Theories in American History: an Encyclopedia. "Abolitionists." Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2003.

<sup>60</sup> Knight, Peter. Conspiracy Theories in American History: an Encyclopedia. "Slave Power." Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2003.

to convince others that the South was indeed trying to strong arm the North.<sup>61</sup> Though there were no slaveowners who actually ended up assuming control of the government, the conspiracy theory that there was such a possibility became a very widely accepted one. Antislavery northerners believed that slavery in the South violated basic freedoms and justices granted in the U.S. Constitution, as a result they feared that if the South was willing to impose such restrictions on their slaves they would do the same to all Americans if given the opportunity.<sup>62</sup> At this point in time, roughly around the 1950's, paranoia of conspiracies in the United States already had an existing presence, so it's no surprise that the Slave Power conspiracy caught on so quickly.

#### *Klu Klux Klan 1860's - 1950's*

The Klu Klux Klan, a white supremacy advocacy organization, has been both the target, as well as the perpetuator of conspiracy theories. But for the sake of issues that I will touch upon later in this chapter and in my 9/11 case study, let's focus on the conspiracy theories that the Klu Klux Klan developed and spread.

After the Civil War the Reconstruction Amendments (the 14th, 15th, and 16th) were meant to integrate newly freed black men, women, and children into American society. This proved to be difficult both in the North and in the South, but while the North had a difficult time with it from a business perspective, many southerners opposed the legal equality of African Americans because they refused to dismiss the notion of white superiority. This divide between blacks and whites in the South sparked the rise of many organized and unorganized anti-black

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<sup>61</sup> Knight, Peter. *Conspiracy Theories in American History: an Encyclopedia*. "Slave Power." Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2003.

<sup>62</sup> Knight, Peter. *Conspiracy Theories in American History: an Encyclopedia*. "Slave Power." Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2003.



groups. The Klu Klux Klan, commonly referred to as the KKK, is the most notorious of such groups.

The KKK invoked conspiracies that black men aim to coerce white women into granting them undesired sexual favors, they presented black men as untamed animals and white women as helpless victims. They believed, and encouraged others to believe, that African Americans were inferior both in intelligence and overall being. They argued that the integration of blacks into American society threatened the future of our country, the safety of white children, and the well-being of the U.S. economy. This became a popular, and generally accepted, train of thought in the South and resulted in excessive and brutal violence against African Americans.

Following the end of the Reconstruction Era and through the start of the Jim Crow period, the KKK also began to channel its conspiratorial thinking towards other segments of society such as non-Protestants, immoral women, immigrants, the disabled, and other minorities. Although the fervor against these denominations never reached the same level as that directed towards the black population, the group and its followers did extend a significant amount of hate induced violence to populations across the country. The KKK was the first example of a hate group that used ignorance, paranoia, and conspiratorial thinking to spread its ideals across the country. Although today the KKK is widely condemned there were a significant number of years, particularly during the Jim Crow period in the South, during which the group experienced a relatively significant level of popularity and support. The actions of the KKK and its followers have had lasting impacts on race relations and race-related conspiratorial thinking in the United States even to this day.

## **B. 20th Century**

### *World War I*

World War I brought about an entirely new dynamic when it came to conspiracy theorizing. It was the first in a set of reoccurring instances in which a majority, or at least a large segment, of society believes that the U.S. government and its leaders manipulated American citizens in order to person special interests.<sup>63</sup> At the start of WWI most Americans were opposed to the United States getting involved. The general understanding was that the war was a European battle and that Germany did not pose an imminent enough threat for us to enter the war as well.

A couple of years into the war a shift occurred. The government began sending out pamphlets and posters that warned of German plots to conquer unsuspecting nations and President Wilson spoke openly about Germany's plan to "throw a belt of German military power and political control across the very center of Europe and beyond the Mediterranean into the heart of Asia."<sup>64</sup> Soon enough, the United States had entered the war to help its allies and fight for democracy. The issue that most American citizens had with the war - and what later turned into a widespread conspiracy - was the tactics used by the Wilson administration during the war to develop and retain support for the cause. The executive branch gained the authority to control the newspapers through the Espionage and Sedition Acts which made it illegal to criticize the

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<sup>63</sup> Olmsted, Kathryn S.. *Real Enemies : Conspiracy Theories and American Democracy, World War I To 9/11*. Cary, NC, USA: Oxford University Press, USA, 2008. ProQuest ebrary. Web. 2 February 2015.

<sup>64</sup> Olmsted, Kathryn S.. *Real Enemies : Conspiracy Theories and American Democracy, World War I To 9/11*. Cary, NC, USA: Oxford University Press, USA, 2008. ProQuest ebrary. Web. 2 February 2015.

war effort, the government, and the president.<sup>65</sup> This ultimately made opposition to the war punishable by law. During the war the government also took over the railroads, set wages, and reserved the right to draft its citizens into war.<sup>66</sup> This was the first comprehensive draft in U.S. history and a chief reason why the public began developing conspiracies about President Wilson's motives behind getting involved in World War I.

Throughout the next decade, the people of the United States grew increasingly angry over the government's manipulation of public opinion and its limitations of basic constitutional freedoms. This had a severe affect on the trust U.S. citizens were willing to place on their government and in many ways it fueled future instances of paranoia, mainly in times of war.

#### *African Americans - AIDS and the War on Drugs*

For historical reasons, as briefly touched upon in section 1 of this chapter, African Americans have had a difficult time trusting the U.S. government and the white community alike. As victims of slavery and racial segregation it comes as no surprise that the African American population, in general, has been the spark of some of the most active conspiracy theories of the 20th century. Though African American conspiracy theories have touched upon everything from the disproportionality of black soldiers being sent to fight American wars to racist restaurant owners serving black customers harmful food, the major conspiracies have focused on the government's use of biological weapons against the black community and the

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<sup>65</sup> Olmsted, Kathryn S.. *Real Enemies : Conspiracy Theories and American Democracy, World War I To 9/11*. Cary, NC, USA: Oxford University Press, USA, 2008. ProQuest ebrary. Web. 2 February 2015.

<sup>66</sup> Olmsted, Kathryn S.. *Real Enemies : Conspiracy Theories and American Democracy, World War I To 9/11*. Cary, NC, USA: Oxford University Press, USA, 2008. ProQuest ebrary. Web. 2 February 2015.

suppression of black leaders.<sup>67</sup>

An ever-present theme in African American conspiracies is the notion that the U.S. government aims to physically harm its black citizens. The two most pressing examples of this, according to African American conspiracy theorists, is that government agencies purposefully introduced crack cocaine into black neighborhoods in order to destroy their communities.<sup>68</sup> While the least drastic supporters of this theory believe that the authorities, rather than introducing the drug just failed to effectively react to the problem, there are a significantly greater number of individuals who argue that the launch of hard drugs in black communities was a well thought out plan by the U.S. government.

A similar theory to the one concerning cocaine in African American neighborhoods is the one focusing on the AIDS epidemic of the 1980's. While the disease was initially associated with the gay community, by the late 1980's statistics showed that African American heterosexuals had a much greater chance of being infected than white heterosexuals.<sup>69</sup> This led to a number of conspiracies that aimed to blame the government for the fast spread of AIDS as, supposedly, a method to limit the African American population. Some conspiracy theorists go as far as to say that the AIDS epidemic in black communities in the United States was just short of genocide.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Knight, Peter. *Conspiracy Theories in American History: an Encyclopedia*. "African Americans" Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2003.

<sup>68</sup> Knight, Peter. *Conspiracy Theories in American History: an Encyclopedia*. "African Americans" Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2003.

<sup>69</sup> "History of HIV & AIDS in the U.S.A." *History of HIV & AIDS in the U.S.A.* Accessed February 1, 2015. [http://www.avert.org/history-hiv-aids-usa.htm#footnote18\\_ma5mbmz](http://www.avert.org/history-hiv-aids-usa.htm#footnote18_ma5mbmz).

<sup>70</sup> Knight, Peter. *Conspiracy Theories in American History: an Encyclopedia*. "African Americans" Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2003.

This brings us to the final major African American conspiracy: the conviction that the black community has consistently been constrained politically either through the suspicious lack of powerful black leadership or through the murder of the relatively few prominent black figures that did prove to be influential. This mainly refers to the assassinations of Martin Luther King Jr., and Malcolm X, as well as the Rodney King beatings.<sup>71</sup> As a result of the preexisting racial divides, particularly when it came to violence against African Americans, there was a heightened level of paranoia pertaining to suppressing the black community through the use of force. Each of the three previously mentioned instances spurred feelings of deep animosity, skepticism, and fear among African Americans. It became the general consensus that the murders of Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X in the 1960s, and the beating of Rodney King in 1991 served as prime examples “of the violence that may befall blacks who seem to defy or challenge the system.”<sup>72</sup>

### *Pearl Harbor*

The skepticism and distrust of government that sparked conspiracy theories about WWI also played a remarkable role in paranoia about the attack on Pearl Harbor. Just as people had doubted President Wilson’s reasoning behind entering WWI, after the attack on Pearl Harbor theories began to circulate about the legitimacy of the situation and President Roosevelt’s role in

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<sup>71</sup> Knight, Peter. *Conspiracy Theories in American History: an Encyclopedia*. “African Americans” Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2003.

<sup>72</sup> Knight, Peter. *Conspiracy Theories in American History: an Encyclopedia*. “African Americans” Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2003.

it.<sup>73</sup> Anti-interventionists argued that President Roosevelt wanted to enter World War II to promote his own agenda and to transform America into a dictatorship. The Roosevelt critics “fumed at his official conspiracy theories about ‘enemies within our gates’; they suspected that he was using the newly expanded Federal Bureau of Investigation to spy on and intimidate loyal Americans who opposed his internationalist foreign policy.”<sup>74</sup> The most common conspiracy that made its way across America was the notion that the president had provoked the Japanese into attacking us and that he didn’t arm the commanders at Pearl Harbor on purpose so that he could easily convince the American people that entering World War II was the right thing to do.

### *Watergate*

Distrust of the government and its leadership was ramped throughout the 20th century. Much of it stemmed for sheer paranoia and had little or no legitimate backing behind it, but the Watergate scandal proved to be different. The term Watergate refers to a series of break-ins by officials from the CRP (Committee to Reelect the President) to the Democratic National Headquarters in the Watergate building in Washington, D.C.<sup>75</sup> These attempted robberies were approved by Nixon and on the second night, when the assailants got caught, the coverup began. To avoid embarrassment and possible impeachment, the Nixon administration tried to make the scandal go away by destructing evidence and eliminating the possibility of key witnesses

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<sup>73</sup> Olmsted, Kathryn S.. *Real Enemies : Conspiracy Theories and American Democracy, World War I To 9/11*. Cary, NC, USA: Oxford University Press, USA, 2008. ProQuest ebrary. Web.

<sup>74</sup> Olmsted, Kathryn S.. *Real Enemies : Conspiracy Theories and American Democracy, World War I To 9/11*. Cary, NC, USA: Oxford University Press, USA, 2008. ProQuest ebrary. Web.

<sup>75</sup> Knight, Peter. *Conspiracy Theories in American History: an Encyclopedia*. “Watergate” Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2003.

speaking out against the incident.<sup>76</sup>

When the American people did find out about what had happened at Watergate they were outraged. Public pressure resulted in President Nixon being served with an impeachment trial, which he avoided by resigning in August of 1974. Conspiracy theorists, especially, believed that Watergate proved how truly conniving and secretive the U.S. government is. It gave them ground to doubt and therefore investigate every other official story the government releases surrounding a controversial event or circumstance. Because this conspiracy theory - the idea that the Nixon administration illegally attempted to attain pertinent information from the Democratic Headquarters to increase Nixon's chances of being reelected - did prove to hold valor it increased the apprehension of the American people towards their own leadership.<sup>77</sup> While, what America needed was a trustworthy and reliable group of people to run this country and invoke a desire to be supportive of the government, the Nixon administration did just the opposite. This ignited such fervent suspicion of higher powers amongst the people of the United States that when the 21st century rolled around we were still dealing with the repercussions of Watergate.

### **C. 21st Century**

By the turn of the century conspiracy theories and paranoia in the United States had reached every corner of the nation and touched upon virtually every topic imaginable. Some theories proved to be true - Watergate - while most were just, and in some cases continued to be, products of hysteria, anxiety, and unnecessary fear. At the end of the Cold War America had

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<sup>76</sup> Knight, Peter. *Conspiracy Theories in American History: an Encyclopedia*. "Watergate" Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2003.

<sup>77</sup> Knight, Peter. *Conspiracy Theories in American History: an Encyclopedia*. "Watergate" Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2003.

emerged as the ruling hegemony and with that came a feeling of unparalleled might. This sense of American exceptionalism from a cultural, political, and especially military standpoint proved to be a major handicap when dealing with the events that the 21st century had in store.

On September 11th, 2001 the United States was struck with the most devastating tragedy to ever occur on our soil. That day we came together as a nation to support our fellow citizens, political leaders, and all those in any way affected by the day's events. What transpired in the weeks, months, and years to follow has shaped the way our country deals with imminent threats, its own people, and how it is viewed worldwide. The next two chapters will be a case study and analysis of how 9/11 was the quintessential example of the intersection of paranoia and conspiracy thinking in our society. I will examine the role that our leaders, the media, and the people of the United States played in influencing the outcomes of the events that transpired in the post-9/11 world.

## **Chapter 4: The Terrorist Attacks of September 11th, 2001**

### **Overview**

September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001 started out completely ordinary. The weather on the East coast was mild and the skies were cloudless – seemingly ideal air travel conditions for those heading to the airport. Millions of other Americans made their way to work, school, and other commitments without any indication of trouble. Employees at the World Trade Center complex in New York City were hard at work, action at the Pentagon was in full swing, and President George W. Bush



was in Florida preparing for a classroom visit at Booker Elementary School.<sup>78</sup> Airports throughout the United States had been busy for hours without any alarming security breaches or significant technical issues, but later that morning between the hours of 7:59 a.m. and 8:42 a.m. EST four hijacked planes departed from three major East coast airports and changed the course of American history forever.

Over a span of just over four hours a team of 19 Al Qaeda hijackers navigated through multiple airports, made their way through a number of security checkpoints, boarded their respective flights, and took control of the airplanes.<sup>79</sup> After years of planning and many months of intense preparations, Osama Bin Laden's "Planes Operation" was set in motion at 6:00 a.m. on September 11th, 2001, when two of the hijackers successfully boarded a flight from Portland, Maine to Boston, Massachusetts. The plane landed at Logan International Airport, as scheduled, as the remaining 17 hijackers were getting ready to board the planes involved in the 9/11 attacks.<sup>80</sup>

The first of these four planes was American Airlines Flight 11 which departed from Logan International Airport with 92 people on board. The plane was scheduled to land in Los Angeles later that day along with United Airlines Flight 175, also out of Logan International

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<sup>78</sup> Kean, Thomas H., and Lee H. Hamilton. *The 9/11 Commission Report*. Rep. National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States. Web. <<http://govinfo.library.unt.edu/911/report/911Report.pdf>>

<sup>79</sup> Kean, Thomas H., and Lee H. Hamilton. *The 9/11 Commission Report*. Rep. National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States. Web. <<http://govinfo.library.unt.edu/911/report/911Report.pdf>>

<sup>80</sup> Kean, Thomas H., and Lee H. Hamilton. *The 9/11 Commission Report*. Rep. National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States. Web. <<http://govinfo.library.unt.edu/911/report/911Report.pdf>>

Airport, and American Airlines Flight 77 out of Washington Dulles International Airport. The final flight involved with the 9/11 attacks was United Airlines Flight 93 scheduled to leave from Newark International Airport and arrive in San Francisco with 44 passengers on board.<sup>81</sup> The four planes had 265 people on board in total – 33 crew members, 213 passengers, and 19 terrorists.<sup>82</sup> None of the four planes reached their final destination.

At 8:46 a.m. American Airlines Flight 11 flew into the North Tower of the World Trade Center in New York City. Seventeen minutes later United Airlines Flight 175 slammed into the North Tower, leaving the two buildings burning and heavily damaged. Approximately half an hour after the second crash, American Airlines Flight 77 was flown straight into the Pentagon right outside of Washington, D.C.<sup>83</sup> Lastly, as a result of a passenger revolt, United Airlines Flight 93 crashed in Shanksville, Pennsylvania and was the only one to not reach its target.<sup>84</sup> It is assumed, but not confirmed, that the plane was supposed to hit either the White House or the Capitol Building. Just minutes before the crash of Flight 93, the South Tower had begun to

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<sup>81</sup> Wing, Nick. "September 11 Timeline: A Chronology Of The Key Events That Shaped 9/11." *The Huffington Post*. TheHuffingtonPost.com, 11 Sept. 2013. Web. 20 Feb. 2014. <[http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/09/11/september-11-timeline\\_n\\_3901837.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/09/11/september-11-timeline_n_3901837.html)>

<sup>82</sup> Shorto, Russell. "The Power of Fear." *Nation* 281, no. 17 (November 21, 2005): 37. Points of View Reference Center, EBSCOhost (accessed 28 Oct. 2013).

<sup>83</sup> United States. Federal Bureau of Investigation. *The Flights*. FBI. Web. 20 Feb. 2014. <<http://www.fbi.gov/about-us/ten-years-after-the-fbi-since-9-11/the-flights/>>

<sup>84</sup> Kean, Thomas H., and Lee H. Hamilton. *The 9/11 Commission Report*. Rep. National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States. Web. 20 Feb. 2014. <<http://govinfo.library.unt.edu/911/report/911Report.pdf>>

collapse and within 25 minutes was followed by the fall of the North Tower.<sup>85</sup> An attack of incomprehensible immensity had just unfolded in the blink of an eye, leaving everyone wondering: how? and why?

#### **A. The Hijacker's Journey from the Airport to the Target**

As a result of ineffective airport security measures, miscommunication between primary defense organizations, and unpreparedness of the U.S. military the terrorists were able to execute the attack, almost, in its entirety. The breakdown began during the screening process at every single airport from which the terrorists departed. At the time of the attack the system in place for identifying and keeping track of suspicious travelers was known as CAPPS (Computer Assisted Passenger Prescreening System). If flagged by the system, as 9 out of the 19 hijackers were, the only consequence was to load the passenger's luggage after he or she had already boarded the plane. This occurred during the check-in process at the Portland Jetport, Logan International, Washington Dulles International, and Newark International, without any further investigation. Aside from the CAPPS alert, many of the hijackers set off the metal detectors and were subject to a subsequent screening which they all passed. At no point did any airport security personnel report suspicious behavior and in addition, it was later discovered that none of the screeners were aware that some of hijackers had been flagged by CAPPS.

In just one, brief morning 19 men had managed to perform the most masterful breach of American aviation security this country has ever seen. The hijackers all passed through at least one metal detector, were cleared by advanced computer security systems, went virtually

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<sup>85</sup> Wing, Nick. "September 11 Timeline: A Chronology Of The Key Events That Shaped 9/11." *The Huffington Post*. TheHuffingtonPost.com, 11 Sept. 2013. Web. 20 Feb. 2014. <[http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/09/11/september-11-timeline\\_n\\_3901837.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/09/11/september-11-timeline_n_3901837.html)>

unnoticed by checkpoint staff at each of the airports, and were able to bring aboard the necessary objects to hijack four domestic flights without significant opposition. A post-9/11 investigation by the FAA (Federal Aviation Administration) revealed various discrepancies with the overall security procedures at the airports.<sup>86</sup> When a screening expert was asked to review the videotape of the hand-wanding process at the Washington Dulles International Airport he “found that the quality of the screener's work was “marginal at best” and that “the screener should have 'resolved' what set off the alarm,” which he did not do.”<sup>87</sup> Aside from the lack of competence exhibited by many of the airport security employees on the morning of September 11<sup>th</sup>, the security features at the airports themselves also contributed to the problem. While Washington Dulles Airport was fully equipped with closed-circuit television surveillance that allowed every action of the hijackers to be recorded, and then reassessed after 9/11, neither Logan Airport nor Newark Airport had the same level of surveillance.<sup>88</sup> As a result, “there is no documentary evidence to indicate when the hijackers passed through the checkpoint, what alarms may have been triggered, or what security procedures were administered.”<sup>89</sup> Whether or not having the

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<sup>86</sup> Kean, Thomas H., and Lee H. Hamilton. *The 9/11 Commission Report*. Rep. National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States. Web. 20 Feb. 2014. <<http://govinfo.library.unt.edu/911/report/911Report.pdf>>

<sup>87</sup> Kean, Thomas H., and Lee H. Hamilton. *The 9/11 Commission Report*. Rep. National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States. Web. 20 Feb. 2014. <<http://govinfo.library.unt.edu/911/report/911Report.pdf>>

<sup>88</sup> Kean, Thomas H., and Lee H. Hamilton. *The 9/11 Commission Report*. Rep. National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States. Web. 20 Feb. 2014. <<http://govinfo.library.unt.edu/911/report/911Report.pdf>>

<sup>89</sup> Kean, Thomas H., and Lee H. Hamilton. *The 9/11 Commission Report*. Rep. National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States. Web. 20 Feb. 2014. <<http://govinfo.library.unt.edu/911/report/911Report.pdf>>

proper security measures, and better trained screeners, in place at the time of the hijacking would have made a major difference in the outcome of events can be disputed either way; but the fact of the matter remains that during those three hours any sense of national security, which the citizens of the United States had been privileged with up until that day, was forever eliminated.

In addition to the mind blowing reality that 19 terrorists – 9 of whom had been selected by CAPPS and 2 of whom were singled out for extra scrutiny – were able to gain access to all of their targeted flights, the events that took place once the planes had already been seized are equally concerning. To this day much remains uncertain about how the actual takeover occurred. The FAA requires that the cockpit must remained closed and locked at all times, causing mixed speculation about the methods used by the hijackers in order to initially gain access.<sup>90</sup> Furthermore, the investigation by the 9/11 Commission Report members and staff revealed that there is no evidence that the hijackers who piloted the four planes had ever flown a commercial airplane prior to the morning of September 11<sup>th</sup>; even so, three out of the four hijacked planes reached their assumed final destinations.<sup>91</sup>

Regardless of the hijackers' piloting skills, the four aircrafts met no external opposition at any point during their time in the air. The Federal Aviation Agency (FAA), the North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD), and the U.S. military all either failed to communicate properly, did not follow necessary procedure, and/or reacted too slowly for any preventative

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<sup>90</sup> Kean, Thomas H., and Lee H. Hamilton. *The 9/11 Commission Report*. Rep. National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States. Web. 20 Feb. 2014. <<http://govinfo.library.unt.edu/911/report/911Report.pdf>>

<sup>91</sup> Kean, Thomas H., and Lee H. Hamilton. *The 9/11 Commission Report*. Rep. National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States. Web. 20 Feb. 2014. <<http://govinfo.library.unt.edu/911/report/911Report.pdf>>

actions to be performed. In the defense of those organizations, at the time of the attack the protocols for dealing with an airplane hijacking were not nearly proficient enough to respond to the plan the terrorists were performing. On September 11th, the safety of U.S. airspace depended primarily on the FAA and NORAD. The FAA was in charge of regulating “the safety and security of civil aviation,” meaning that air traffic controllers were expected to ensure that there was a safe distance between airborne aircraft.<sup>92</sup> In order to do so, the air traffic control centers located throughout the U.S. were responsible for tracking planes within their region by gathering signals emitted by the aircraft. If transponder or radio signals were lost, it would be the job of the controller to attempt to contact the aircraft itself, the company of the aircraft, and other airborne flights in the vicinity.<sup>93</sup> This was not done properly by FAA controllers on September 11th.

Similarly to the FAA, NORAD was also responsible for air safety around the United States, as well as Canada. When NORAD was established in the 1950’s the main goal was to protect the continent from any missiles or aircrafts coming from abroad. According to the 9/11 Commission Report, prior to September 11th the thought that the aircraft itself would be used as a missile had not been recognized. To complicate the situation even further, NORAD was under the impression that a commercial aircraft could only be shot down if the President or Secretary of Defense granted permission to do so. The hierarchical decision making process that NORAD had in place at the time of the terrorist attacks made it impossible to intercept the hijacked planes in

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<sup>92</sup> Kean, Thomas H., and Lee H. Hamilton. *The 9/11 Commission Report*. Rep. National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States. Web. 20 Feb. 2014. <<http://govinfo.library.unt.edu/911/report/911Report.pdf>>

<sup>93</sup> Kean, Thomas H., and Lee H. Hamilton. *The 9/11 Commission Report*. Rep. National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States. Web. 20 Feb. 2014. <<http://govinfo.library.unt.edu/911/report/911Report.pdf>>

time.

Between the two organizations there were protocols in place for what to do in the case of a hijacking. The issue was that the levels of notification and approval required in order to take action were so rigid that by the time the highest authorities had been reached it was far too late. For the protocols that were in place on September 11, 2001 to have been effective it was presumed that 1) “the hijacked aircraft would be readily identifiable and would not attempt to disappear,” 2) that “there would be time to address the problem through the appropriate FAA and NORAD chains of command” and 3) that “the hijacking would take the traditional form: that is, it would not be a suicide hijacking designed to convert the aircraft into a guided missile.” Seeing as not even one of those assumptions proved itself in reality, the FAA and NORAD were unable to do anything to stop the planes from reaching their targets. The miscommunication that occurred between the two agencies, as well as the airline companies, at the time of the events also prevented the U.S. military from being properly updated on how to respond.

There is no individual, group, or even organization that can be solely blamed for the lack of timely response to the attacks. The procedures that were in place had failed to anticipate a hijacking of such style and caliber. The attack was organized in a way that would have required immediate reaction and a complete understanding of the events as they were unfolding. Even the United States, the most powerful military nation in the world, was not prepared to brace itself against a terrorist attack of that sort. The hijackers had successfully completed their mission.

## **B. Al Qaeda’s Justification of Terrorism Through Religious Interpretation**

Immediately following the attacks, speculations about who was to blame for the horrific act began circling. President Bush, when addressing the nation, had stated that we were entering

a “War on Terror,” but no further explanation was presented. Within two days of the attacks top U.S. officials, including the President, Vice President, Secretary of Defense, Secretary of State, and military generals, were privately discussing how to deal with al Qaeda specifically.<sup>94</sup> This meant that based on prior intelligence information the American government had on the organization and the terrorists themselves, a connection between 9/11 and al Qaeda was drawn almost immediately. About two weeks after the U.S. government had internally confirmed that al Qaeda was indeed responsible for the attack, the information was finally public.

To many the statement that al Qaeda was in charge of 9/11 came as no surprise, but understanding the true ideological motive behind the attack proved to be significantly more difficult. Unlike enemies whose actions aim to gain something, - land, resources, monetary compensation, governmental authority, etc - al Qaeda’s attack provided them with nothing tangible or substantive. Rather, the organization and particularly its two main leaders at the time of the attack, Osama Bin Laden and Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, expressed Islamic fundamentalist notions as justification for the attack. Citing direct quotes from the Qu’ran, Bin Laden argued that it is his role, and the job of all Muslims, to fight against those who fail to follow the rules of God and his messenger.<sup>95</sup> This train of thought is one that is shared by a majority of Muslims, but the extremity to which the practice of “fighting against” is taken to is what varies drastically throughout the Muslim world. Whereas many Muslims reject those who

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<sup>94</sup> Kean, Thomas H., and Lee H. Hamilton. *The 9/11 Commission Report*. Rep. National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States. Web. 20 Feb. 2014. <<http://govinfo.library.unt.edu/911/report/911Report.pdf>>

<sup>95</sup> Kean, Thomas H., and Lee H. Hamilton. *The 9/11 Commission Report*. Rep. National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States. Web. 20 Feb. 2014. <<http://govinfo.library.unt.edu/911/report/911Report.pdf>>



defy the laws of Islam - often referred to as infidels - through a conscious distancing from the nonbeliever, there is only a select segment of Islamists willing to kill or die for the cause.<sup>96</sup>

As the divide between Islamic and Western cultures has developed throughout the late 20th and early 21st centuries, the complexity of the conflict has increased as well. The practice of Islam is rooted in the expectation that the Qu'ran shall be followed to the highest attainable degree. The religion offers virtually no flexibility in its interpretation of what is right and what is wrong, meaning every action an individual engages in will either lead them one step closer to heaven or one step closer to hell.<sup>97</sup> As a result, while other religions have continued to experience a modernizing transitional period, Islamists have devoted an incredible amount of resources and energy to ensure that Muslim laws, customs, and traditions do not change. This, in a drastically simplified manner, brings us to just one aspect of why the United States was targeted by a group such as al Qaeda.

Other than our nation's unwanted physical presence in the Middle East and our wildly opposing political views, we became al Qaeda's mission because they viewed our country as a threat to their religious ideals. These ideals are so ingrained in every aspect of Islamic life, that it is not difficult to find individuals willing to go to great lengths to preserve them - i.e. Osama Bin Laden, Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, and the other members of al Qaeda. In a 1998 interview, Bin Laden made evident his fervent opposition towards Americans when he stated that "it is far better for anyone to kill a single American soldier than to squander his efforts on other activities.

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<sup>96</sup> Ali, Ayaan. *Infidel*. New York: Free Press, 2007.

<sup>97</sup> Ali, Ayaan. *Infidel*. New York: Free Press, 2007.

We believe that the worst thieves in the world today and the worst terrorists are Americans.”<sup>98</sup>

While most Muslims may share a similarly unfavorable view of Western culture and particularly of the United States, there are very few people willing to take the steps that al Qaeda did on September 11th. The hijackers believed that killing American people, innocent or not, was God’s will and that it would be their one way ticket to heaven<sup>99</sup>; which is the sole aspiration of virtually every devote Muslim.<sup>100</sup> Using political, cultural, and primarily religious reasons as a justification, al Qaeda organized, executed, and later proudly took credit for an attack of truly vile proportions.

### **C. Impact and Response**

September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001 marked the deadliest day on American soil not caused by a natural disaster, since the Civil War Battle of Antietam almost 140 years prior.<sup>101</sup> Within the first few hours of the attacks the death toll was nearing 2,500 people.<sup>102</sup> Not a single individual on the four hijacked flights survived the crashes of that morning; all 19 terrorists, 33 crew members,

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<sup>98</sup> Kean, Thomas H., and Lee H. Hamilton. *The 9/11 Commission Report*. Rep. National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States. Web. 20 Feb. 2014. <<http://govinfo.library.unt.edu/911/report/911Report.pdf>>

<sup>99</sup> Kean, Thomas H., and Lee H. Hamilton. *The 9/11 Commission Report*. Rep. National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States. Web. 20 Feb. 2014. <<http://govinfo.library.unt.edu/911/report/911Report.pdf>>

<sup>100</sup> Ali, Ayaan. *Infidel*. New York: Free Press, 2007.

<sup>101</sup> White, Matthew. "Worst American This or That." *Twentieth Century Atlas*. N.p., Dec. 2010. Web. 08 Mar. 2014. <<http://necrometrics.com/warsusa.htm>>.

<sup>102</sup> Wing, Nick. "September 11 Timeline: A Chronology Of The Key Events That Shaped 9/11." *The Huffington Post*. TheHuffingtonPost.com, 11 Sept. 2013. Web. 20 Feb. 2014. <[http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/09/11/september-11-timeline\\_n\\_3901837.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/09/11/september-11-timeline_n_3901837.html)>

and 213 passengers died either in the air or immediately upon impact.<sup>103</sup> The casualties on the ground were even greater. As a result of the initial crashes and subsequent collapses of the North and South Towers, the total confirmed deaths at the World Trade Center site – excluding the flight victims – added up to roughly 2,600 people.<sup>104</sup> That day New York City lost 23 police officers, 34 port authority officials, 343 firefighters, and countless World Trade Center employees, civilians, and local heroes.<sup>105</sup> At the Pentagon in Washington, D.C. the death toll climbed to 122 people after the crash, in addition to the 64 individuals who died on the plane; while in Pennsylvania the only deaths were the 33 passengers, 7 crew members, and 4 terrorists on United Airlines Flight 93, thanks to the incredible efforts made to regain control of the hijacked flight.<sup>106</sup> The final number of people killed on, or as a result of injuries sustained on, September 11<sup>th</sup> is reported to be 2,977 (2,996 if the hijackers are being considered).<sup>107</sup> Despite these horribly high numbers, the attacks had a much deeper impact than the death toll suggests. Aside from the thousands of individuals who endured the death of a partner or spouse and the even greater number of children who lost a parent, it is estimated that approximately 150,000

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<sup>103</sup> United States. Federal Bureau of Investigation. *The Flights*. FBI. Web. 20 Feb. 2014. <<http://www.fbi.gov/about-us/ten-years-after-the-fbi-since-9-11/the-flights/>>

<sup>104</sup> "September 11 Anniversary Fast Facts." *CNN*. Cable News Network, 11 Sept. 2213. Web. 05 Mar. 2014. <<http://www.cnn.com/2013/07/27/us/september-11-anniversary-fast-facts/>>

<sup>105</sup> "September 11 Anniversary Fast Facts." *CNN*. Cable News Network, 11 Sept. 2213. Web. 05 Mar. 2014. <<http://www.cnn.com/2013/07/27/us/september-11-anniversary-fast-facts/>>

<sup>106</sup> "September 11 Anniversary Fast Facts." *CNN*. Cable News Network, 11 Sept. 2213. Web. 05 Mar. 2014. <<http://www.cnn.com/2013/07/27/us/september-11-anniversary-fast-facts/>>

<sup>107</sup> "FAQ About 9/11." *911memorial.org*. National September 11 Memorial and Museum, Web. 06 Mar. 2014. <<http://www.911memorial.org/faq-about-911>>

jobs were lost as a result of the attacks, 300 NYC firefighters had to go on medical leave for respiratory problems in 2002, and over 400,000 New Yorkers suffered from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder as a result of 9/11.<sup>108</sup> These staggering numbers leave little to the imagination. There is no doubt that the attacks turned the United States upside down, leaving our country disoriented, shocked, and searching for answers.

From the moment it became clear that the nation was under attack we looked to our leaders for reassurance and clarity. On the morning of September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001 President George W. Bush was in Sarasota, Florida for a prescheduled visit at Booker Elementary School.<sup>109</sup> He was first informed about the terrorist attacks at 8:50 a.m. just prior to entering the classroom. In an interview with National Geographic, for the 10 year anniversary of 9/11, former President Bush recalled that when he received news of the first official crash he did not realize that the country was under attack, rather he remembered thinking "man, the weather was bad or something extraordinary happened to the pilot."<sup>110</sup> It was not until 9:05, while sitting in on a 2<sup>nd</sup> grade reading lesson, that President Bush became fully aware of the severity of the situation. After being approached for the second time by White House Chief of Staff Andrew Card with information about another plane hitting the World Trade Center complex, the President finally

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<sup>108</sup> "September 11 by Numbers." *September 11 by Numbers*. New York Magazine, n.d. Web. 07 Mar. 2014. <<http://nymag.com/news/articles/wtc/1year/numbers.htm>>

<sup>109</sup> Kean, Thomas H., and Lee H. Hamilton. *The 9/11 Commission Report*. Rep. National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States. Web. 20 Feb. 2014. <<http://govinfo.library.unt.edu/911/report/911Report.pdf>>

<sup>110</sup> Wing, Nick. "September 11 Timeline: A Chronology Of The Key Events That Shaped 9/11." *The Huffington Post*. TheHuffingtonPost.com, 11 Sept. 2013. Web. 20 Feb. 2014. <[http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/09/11/september-11-timeline\\_n\\_3901837.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/09/11/september-11-timeline_n_3901837.html)>

decided to take action.<sup>111</sup> At 9:31 a.m. President Bush made his first public address during which he formally referred to the tragedy “as an apparent terrorist attack on our country” and continued by assuring the nation that all resources of the federal government were going to be allocated towards helping the victims and their families. He wrapped up the less than two minute speech by stating that “terrorism against our nation will not stand” and to join him in a moment of silence. The President addressed the country two more times that day; once at 1:04 p.m. for two minutes and fifteen seconds and again at 8:03 p.m. for four minutes and thirty seconds.<sup>112</sup>

Despite his efforts to keep the public updated – on the current state of affairs and on his personal insight regarding the attacks – President Bush drew a lot of criticism for his lack of emotion and slow reaction to the news of the attacks. The televised video footage, as well as photographs, of President Bush's blank stare as Andrew Card informed him that a subsequent passenger jet had struck the World Trade Center caused an immediate media frenzy; to this day it is one of the most recognizable images of that morning. The President defended his reaction by saying "I immediately focused on the children, and the contrast between the attack and the innocence of children... I made the decision not to jump up immediately and leave the classroom. I didn't want to rattle the kids. I wanted to project a sense of calm."<sup>113</sup>

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<sup>111</sup> Wing, Nick. "September 11 Timeline: A Chronology Of The Key Events That Shaped 9/11." *The Huffington Post*. TheHuffingtonPost.com, 11 Sept. 2013. Web. 20 Feb. 2014. <[http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/09/11/september-11-timeline\\_n\\_3901837.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/09/11/september-11-timeline_n_3901837.html)>

<sup>112</sup> Wing, Nick. "September 11 Timeline: A Chronology Of The Key Events That Shaped 9/11." *The Huffington Post*. TheHuffingtonPost.com, 11 Sept. 2013. Web. 20 Feb. 2014. <[http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/09/11/september-11-timeline\\_n\\_3901837.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/09/11/september-11-timeline_n_3901837.html)>

<sup>113</sup> Siegel, Elyse. "George W. Bush Explains Slow Reaction To September 11 Attacks." *The Huffington Post*. TheHuffingtonPost.com, 29 July 2011. Web. 09 Mar. 2014. <[http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/07/29/george-w-bush-9-11\\_n\\_913056.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/07/29/george-w-bush-9-11_n_913056.html)>.

Regardless of the reasoning behind his initial response, it is his actions in the days, months, and years following the attacks that truly had the greatest impact on the United States, its people, and the world as a whole. The partial focus of the next chapter, and the most important evidence to understand about this tragedy, is that the behavior of our leaders during the beginning of the post – 9/11 era completely determined the magnitude of consequences our nation would have to deal with as a result of the attacks. Our leaders were responsible for: determining who was to blame for these attacks, taking the appropriate response to such knowledge, developing new laws, agencies, and security systems in order to prevent another 9/11, and setting a precedent for handling future terrorist attacks. While some of these tasks were taken care of successfully, a great majority of them are still being paid for and will continue to trouble future generations.

It can be safely assumed that there is not a single person who was in the United States at the time of the terrorist attacks that was not in some way greatly affected by the tragedy. People in every part of the country, and even all over the world, lost loved ones – children, parents, friends, relatives, and coworkers – or personally knew someone who did. Others watched while their work places, homes, entire lives, and city went up in a cloud of ash, smoke, and debris. For those of us fortunate enough to not have known any of the victims, we still carry the burden of our memories. Every person I have ever spoken to about September 11<sup>th</sup> can recall precisely what they were doing on that morning, how and from whom they found out about the attacks, and the unexplainable emotions that were experienced as the reality of the situation sunk in. The images shown on television of the planes crashing into the World Trade Centers, the Pentagon, and the field in Pennsylvania are eternally ingrained in the hearts and minds of Americans

everywhere. Even 14 years after the attacks the repercussions of that day are consistently and obviously affecting American governmental decisions, the wellbeing of U.S. citizens, and the future of our nation. A change – of any caliber – to a country's political operations, cultural functioning, and global standing is to be expected after an event of such magnitude and lack of precedent, but what the United States endured in every sphere of its existence after 9/11 could not have been predicted. The conspiracy theories that began to circulate following the 9/11 attacks, fueled by the responses of our leader's, the media, and the American people, have shaped the way the United States deals with both internal and external threats. The following chapter explains how paranoia and conspiracy theorizing evolved following the attacks and aims to clarify the repercussions of those behaviors on our society.

## **Chapter 5: 9/11 Case Study - An Analysis of the Nation's Reaction to the Terrorist Attacks**

### **Introduction**

September 11th, 2001 and the days, months, and years that followed proved to be an incredibly grueling test of our nation's ability to act appropriately, in a timely manner, and in a way that would best serve our citizens, while setting a worldwide precedent. A terrorist attack of such grandeur and with so many casualties was a novelty in the 21st century and whether we care to admit it or not, our response to the tragedy was analyzed incredibly closely by every other nation around the globe. The actions of our government officials, citizens, military, and the media all played a key role in the long lasting implications of our counteraction following the 9/11 attacks.

Even to this day, almost 14 years later, it is still frowned upon to harshly criticize the role

of any particular party in its response to 9/11. As we have come to learn over the course of this thesis, the extreme behaviors exhibited by a large majority of Americans can in many ways be attributed to the paranoid culture of avid distrust and widespread conspiracy theorizing that has been festering for centuries. Therefore, despite the fact that certain individuals had significantly more influential roles in the outcome than did others, the problem as a whole should be mainly attributed to the societal inclinations that have long been in the making. Nevertheless, had the leadership in the White House at the time been different I have no doubt that my analysis of the situation following 9/11 would vary incredibly. Rather than pointing fingers, my case study will aim to analyze the role of both our leaders and the people in order to prove that 9/11 is indeed the quintessential example of paranoia and conspiracy theorizing in the discourse of American history.

While paranoia and conspiracy thinking had clearly been prevalent in our society long before 9/11, that day they weren't just aspects of it, they dominated it. This shift initially occurred as a result of the actions U.S. leaders took in response to September 11<sup>th</sup>. Their toxic mental mindset then trickled down through the rest of American society and ultimately left this country in an extremely unstable condition.

#### **A. The Leaders and Our Government**

As can be expected during any crisis situation, people will look up to those who are in charge. These individuals, especially if they have been elected specifically to perform a task that ensures the safety of others, have an incredible responsibility to those whom they are supposed to assist. Unfortunately, at the time of September 11th the White House did not have the right people to handle al Qaeda's attack. The first of many complications was the fact that the U.S.'s



top officials were not remotely prepared for an event of this sort. “The Bush White House could have demanded an instant review of how they had been so badly surprised, as Franklin Delano Roosevelt did after the attack on Pearl Harbor, and the results would not have been flattering. But instead of trying to learn from what had essentially been a colossal bureaucratic failure, combined with inattention and a lack of political will at the top, the Bush White House deferred the focus elsewhere.”<sup>114</sup> By taking such steps, the Bush White House could have minimized some of the instant fear and disbelief that charged a number of the decisions made shortly following the attack.

The second issue arose when President Bush and Vice President Cheney realized that a number of regulations, laws, and unspoken agreements stood between them and the actions they wanted to take in retaliation for the attacks. “There was too much international law, too many civil liberties, too many constraints on the President's war powers, too many rights for defendants, and too many rules against lethal covert actions. There was also too much openness and too much meddling by Congress and the press.”<sup>115</sup> Instead of accepting the restraints as a necessary part of the American political system established in order to maintain an equilibrium between all three branches of government, Bush and Cheney decided that their personal agendas were more important. Almost immediately following the attacks Vice President Cheney began meeting in secret with some of the country’s best-trained lawyers to come up with legal justification for the unprecedented expansion of the government’s powers during its war on

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<sup>114</sup> Mayer, Jane. *The Dark Side: The Inside Story of How the War on Terror Turned into a War on American Ideals*. New York: Doubleday, 2008. Print.

<sup>115</sup> Mayer, Jane. *The Dark Side: The Inside Story of How the War on Terror Turned into a War on American Ideals*. New York: Doubleday, 2008. Print.

terrorism: “As part of that process, for the first time in its history, the United States sanctioned government officials to physically and psychologically torment U.S.-held captive, making torture the official law of the land in all but name. The lawyers also authorized other previously illegal practices,”<sup>116</sup> none of which the President or Vice President were ever held legally responsible for. The third, and most relative, issue became prominent when the outcome of combining the first two problems – the Bush administration's lack of preparation and their subsequent eagerness to act quickly – became apparent. Due to the absence of precedent in this situation, President Bush had no idea how to respond. He had the whole world watching and waiting for his next move; he felt that he had to act swiftly, but the pressure coupled with a scarcity of information lead him to make a multitude of poor choices.

The third problem was that one of the first characteristics to evolve as a defining part of the Bush administration's decision making process was paranoia. As we have seen through the discourse of American history, rarely does paranoia lead to a positive outcome. Instead, it tends to cloud judgement and lead to dangerous situations, as was the case with abolitionists and slaves in the 19th century, with the late 20th century War on Drugs, and with McCarthyism throughout the 1900's. It is almost always looked back on with huge regret, but considering the greater part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century had been consumed by conspiracy theorizing, questioning reality, and a newly learned aptitude to trust no one, it hardly comes as a surprise that the Bush administration followed in those very same footsteps. It has been openly addressed - both by officials who worked in the White House, as well as by personnel who held positions that granted access to

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<sup>116</sup> Mayer, Jane. *The Dark Side: The Inside Story of How the War on Terror Turned into a War on American Ideals*. New York: Doubleday, 2008. Print.

vital intelligence files shortly after the terrorist attacks - that a constant sense of looming danger dominated the upper rankings of the Bush Administration to such a degree that the impact was noticeable even within the first few months after the 9/11. The head of the Terrorist Threats Sub-Group of the National Security Council, Roger Cressy, recalled that “They thought they were going to get hit again. They convinced themselves that they were facing a ticking time bomb.”<sup>117</sup> The paranoia of being subsequently attacked is what made the decision making powers of President Bush and Vice President Cheney so dangerous. Neither one of them was capable of making rational decisions while in a state of complete shock, fear, and emotional imbalance, but nobody stopped them. Why not? Because at that point in time the same paranoia that our leaders were consumed by was already beginning to spread across the United States like wildfire. The media quickly mainstreamed conspiratorial messages and propaganda in every possible manner; as we have seen the media do on a regular basis since then. Based on what was being presented, people began to believe the worst. The public assumed that another attack was bound to happen, that this time it would end with an even greater number of casualties, and that the only way to prevent it was to fully support the actions of the American leaders.

When faced with a tragedy as monumental as the terrorist attacks, it is natural for the people of a nation to seek guidance from the perceived leaders. No president had ever experienced approval ratings as high as George W. Bush did following 9/11. This wasn't because he took the proper course of action and secured the future safety of our country in the best manner possible. Instead, this was because the United States needed to reach an unprecedented

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<sup>117</sup> Mayer, Jane. *The Dark Side: The Inside Story of How the War on Terror Turned into a War on American Ideals*. New York: Doubleday, 2008. Print.

level of unity – for our own personal reassurance – and the way to do that was to support the man in charge of our country in its weakest moment. The togetherness of the American people was extremely impressive following the attacks. For a very brief moment we were able to prove to ourselves and to the world that, figuratively speaking, what didn't kill us only made us stronger. But what did this short-lived increase in perceived national strength cost us?

From a political standpoint, we stood by the actions of our leaders like never before. The general public's support was so overwhelming, in fact, that we literally allowed the executive branch and everyone under its command to do whatever they deemed fit with little or no consequence. Even though most of their actions were kept top-secret for years, once they were exposed the backlash they experienced was minor compared to what previous U.S. leaders had faced when their secret scandals became public knowledge. At the time, the citizens of the United States believed they were being patriotic by supporting their leaders in every way possible. Looking back, it has become evident that our cohesiveness didn't truly bring the entire country any closer together. Instead, it gave off an illusion of togetherness when in reality the fear of another attack left the American people as vulnerable to their own leader, as the whole country was to its enemies. Ironically, unlike Al Qaeda who only took advantage of our weaknesses once, President Bush took advantage of the public's paranoid state of mind over and over and over again. The paranoia and conspiracy thinking that the Bush administration had hyped up so intensely following the attacks ended up being the one thing that prevented the American people from thinking rationally about the effects the Executive's actions would have on our country's future.

## **B. The People and the Conspiracy Theories**

The reactions of the American people ended up being similar to that of Bush administration's. The main difference being that the paranoia had significantly different outcomes. While, the leader's of our nation made long-lasting political decisions that crippled our foreign relations, caused a major crash of the U.S. economy, and catapulted us into a series of wars that we are still fighting, the fear of the people was translated mainly into conspiracy theorizing.

One of the most interesting aspects of America's 9/11 conspiracy theorizing is that it has followed the pattern of decline from strong initial national unity to massive distrust of the government. By examining the most prominent 9/11 conspiracy theories over the last 13 years it becomes evident how significant of a role public opinion has played on the dominance of certain conspiracies. Or conversely, how the dominance of certain conspiracy theories has influenced the public's opinion of our government.

Countless conspiracy theories began circulating media outlets instantly after the attacks and although there were some immediate skeptics of the "official" story most people supported the evidence released by the Bush administration without question. As previously mentioned, President Bush had unreal approval ratings in the months following September 11th. While a poll taken by Gallup from September 7th to September 10th revealed that only 51% of American's approved of how the President was performing his job, by mid September this number had instantly jumped to 86% and didn't drop below 80% until the beginning of March 2012.<sup>118</sup> Such

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<sup>118</sup> "Presidential Approval Ratings -- George W. Bush." *Gallup.com*. Gallup, n.d. Web. 10 Mar. 2014. <<http://www.gallup.com/poll/116500/presidential-approval-ratings-george-bush.aspx>>.

loyal support for the President was, in many ways, in tune with the nature of the prominent conspiracy theories at the time. One of the first major rumors to gain momentary popularity was the notion that the Israeli secret service had warned all of the Jews working at or near the World Trade Center in New York to skip work on the day of the attack. This implied that not only did the Israeli government know about the terrorist attacks ahead of time, but that it was also responsible for them.<sup>119</sup> Despite having significant support throughout Arab nations, this conspiracy theory was fairly quickly disproved in the United States and never even reached the West coast.<sup>120</sup> A second major theory that developed early on, but also lost support as time passed, was the belief that “inside” traders knew ahead of time that the attacks were going to take place and profited millions of dollars by purchasing put options on both American Airlines and United Airlines.<sup>121</sup> An article written not even a month after 9/11 by Michael Ruppert, a well-known conspiracy theorist, discussed both the suspicious trades themselves, as well as the supposed central role played by the CIA and Deutsche Bank – the largest bank in Europe. Although his article, and other articles on the topic, claim to have undeniable proof of the scam even Mr. Ruppert acknowledges that this conspiracy theory has been “uniformly ignored by the

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<sup>119</sup> “The 4,000 Jews Rumor.” *usinfo.state.gov*. US Department of State, 14 Jan. 2005. Web. 12 March 2014. <<http://web.archive.org/web/20070213233137/http://usinfo.state.gov/media/Archive/2005/Jan/14-260933.html>>

<sup>120</sup> Stahl, Jeremy. ““9/11 Truth” Movement: How Alex Jones and Michael Ruppert Founded It.” *Slate.com*. Slate Magazine, 6 Sept. 2011. Web. 12 Mar. 2014. <[http://www.slate.com/articles/news\\_and\\_politics/trutherism/2011/09/where\\_did\\_911\\_conspiracies\\_come\\_from.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/trutherism/2011/09/where_did_911_conspiracies_come_from.html)>.

<sup>121</sup> Ruppert, Michael. “Suppressed Details of Criminal Insider Trading Lead Directly into the CIA’s Highest Ranks.” *Globalresearch.ca*. Center for Research on Globalisation, 9 Oct. 2001. Web. 13 Mar. 2014. <<http://globalresearch.ca/articles/RUP110A.html>>.

mainstream U.S. media.”<sup>122</sup>

The web is overloaded with hundreds, if not thousands, of conspiracy theories where the blame is placed on religious groups, other governments, various agencies, organizations, and individuals. Some theories disappeared as briskly as they developed, while others are still regularly discussed to this day. The defining difference between the early rumors that never caught on and the later ones which have caused disruption in the public's trust of the American government can be identified by looking at how and when the given conspiracies began.

In order to build a case, conspiracy theorists need to discover a discrepancy in the “official story”; once this discrepancy is solidified they must analyze all other possibilities, use deductive reasoning, and come up with a believable solution that explains absolutely every detail of what they are disputing. If even the slightest component of the new theory isn't viable then the conspiracy theorist has not properly done his or her job. Right after the attacks conspiracy theorists began to come up with answers to questions that were too complex to address so immediately. They presented “facts” without understanding the details of the situation, but they also provided brief clarity in a time of utter confusion which is why people were willing to listen. Many of the conspiracies lacked consistency and were significantly underdeveloped, but because people preferred hearing the wrong answer over no answer at all the conspiracies gained popularity. Over the months following the attacks, as more information about what happened on the morning of September 11th became public knowledge and as the reactions of our leaders were becoming clearer, the nature of the conspiracy theories changed. While fingers were

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<sup>122</sup> Ruppert, Michael. "Suppressed Details of Criminal Insider Trading Lead Directly into the CIA's Highest Ranks." *Globalresearch.ca*. Center for Research on Globalisation, 9 Oct. 2001. Web. 13 Mar. 2014. <<http://globalresearch.ca/articles/RUP110A.html>>.

initially being pointed at outside sources, these early theories lost relevance and three new prominent views on the 9/11 attacks formed. People began to do something that had only been done on such a large scale one other time in American history: they questioned the involvement of the government in the killing of American citizens. In 1941 when the Japanese attacked the U.S. Pacific Fleet at Pearl Harbor rumors began to circulate that President Roosevelt purposely withheld information about the attack from his military commanders in Hawaii in hopes of using the “sneak” attack as leverage to convince the American people to support U.S. involvement in World War II.<sup>123</sup> No sound evidence was ever discovered to prove the speculations, but nonetheless the conspiracy theory gained noteworthy support throughout the entire United States. It remained unparalleled in its following until late 2003 when talk of President Bush's and Vice President Cheney's involvement in the 9/11 attacks became mainstream news. Polls conducted by the New York Times and CBS from May of 2002 through October of 2006 revealed remarkable shifts in the public's opinion about whether or not the Bush Administration was telling the truth about the attacks. In the mid-May 2002 survey only 8% of respondents marked that the Bush administration was “mostly lying” about what they knew prior to September 11th, 2001 about possible terrorist attacks on the United States, while 21% believed that they were “telling the truth.”<sup>124</sup> By early October 2006 the number of people who thought that the government was “mostly lying” had reached 28%, the number of people who stood by the official story had shrunk to 16%, and those who thought the administration was “hiding something” was at 53%.

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<sup>123</sup> United States. FDR Library. *FDR and Pearl Harbor*. N.p.: n.p., n.d. FDR Library. Web. 12 Mar. 2014. <<http://www.fdrlibrary.marist.edu/archives/pdfs/pearlharbor.pdf>>.

<sup>124</sup> “Poll.” *web.archive.org*. New York Times and CBS News. 5-8 October 2006. Web. 12 March 2014. <[http://web.archive.org/web/20061019004641/http://www.angus-reid.com/admin/collateral/pdfs/polls/NYT\\_October2k6.pdf](http://web.archive.org/web/20061019004641/http://www.angus-reid.com/admin/collateral/pdfs/polls/NYT_October2k6.pdf)>.



Within 5 years of the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon roughly 80% of American's believed that there was at least some inconsistencies with the story released by the U.S. government.<sup>125</sup>

The conspiracy theories that spread during that time perfectly reflect the steady decrease of trust as exhibited by the polls. The most extreme theory to develop, similar to the Pearl Harbor conspiracy, was that the Bush administration and other high ranking officials coordinated the attacks in order to invade the Middle East, reestablish the United States as a global hegemony, provide the President with complete authority over policy making, and pump incredible amounts of money into defense spending. Conspiracy theorists state that the North and South Towers of the WTC complex collapsed as the result of a controlled demolition and that the “plane” that crashed into the Pentagon was actually a missile. They believe that the scheme was orchestrated predominantly by leaders within the Bush administration, the CIA, and the FBI.<sup>126</sup> As support for the war in Iraq declined and disapproval of President Bush escalated, the acceptance of this conspiracy theory rose.<sup>127</sup> When the 9/11 Commission report was finally released on July 22nd of 2004 the information in it was practically irrelevant<sup>128</sup>; the report was extremely overdue and

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<sup>125</sup> “Poll.” *web.archive.org*. New York Times and CBS News. 5-8 October 2006. Web. 12 March 2014. <[http://web.archive.org/web/20061019004641/http://www.angus-reid.com/admin/collateral/pdfs/polls/ NYT\\_October2k6.pdf](http://web.archive.org/web/20061019004641/http://www.angus-reid.com/admin/collateral/pdfs/polls/ NYT_October2k6.pdf)>.

<sup>126</sup> “Questions about the 9/11 Attacks? 9/11 Truth Movement” *911Truth.org*. 9/11 Truth, n.d. Web. 14 Mar. 2014. <<http://www.911truth.org/>>.

<sup>127</sup> Stahl, Jeremy. “9/11 Conspiracism: How the Iraq War Contributed to Its Rise.” *Slate.com*. Slate Magazine, 6 Sept. 2011. Web. 13 Mar. 2014. <[http://www.slate.com/articles/news\\_and\\_politics/trutherism/2011/09/the\\_rise\\_of\\_truth.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/trutherism/2011/09/the_rise_of_truth.html)>.

<sup>128</sup> “National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States.” *National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States.*, n.d. Web. 11 Mar. 2014. <<http://www.9-11commission.gov/>>.

those who refused to accept the government's story had made up their mind's long before its release. The 9/11 Truth Movement – the coalition of people who reject the facts presented in the official September 11th investigation – continued to gain support across the United States, and even the world, as more articles, documentaries, websites, books, and seminars became accessible to the public. Interest in alternative theories grew and paranoia continued to be an underlying factor in the opinions of many.

Unlike most previous situations in American history, that were also plagued with paranoia and conspiracy theorizing, attention surrounding 9/11 grew as time passed. Rather than experiencing a huge initial surge of “dependable” conspiracies, as was the case with Pearl Harbor, 9/11 conspiracies took time to catch on and become acceptable. At first people were too overwhelmed to question the government and those who did experienced serious backlash. But as time passed, the paranoia of American citizens shifted from focusing on the possibility of another attack to the realization that our own government was hurting its people. As a nation we allowed ourselves to be manipulated by our leaders in the name of “national security.” For years following the attacks we believed that that was the only way to stay safe. We, in general, supported our President when he chose to invade Iraq as part of his War on Terror and we didn't protest when our civil liberties were being taken away because we were inspired to believe that everything the Bush administration was doing was in our best interest and for our safety. But as years went by and it became clear that our constant fear of an imminent attack was fairly unjustified, Americans began to turn their paranoia to a much closer culprit. Our own leaders had motivated us to believe in them and their actions. They used their own paranoia to perpetuate those same thoughts in the minds of their citizens; unfortunately for them, it was the paranoid

state of mind which they enforced that ended up turning against them. This resulted in a general aptitude of turning to conspiracy theories for answers regardless of whether or not one would consider themselves a conspiracy theorist. That is why September 11th, 2001 was the culminating event of all previous American conspiracy theories: it drew in people that had never believed a single conspiracy theory until that point and it inspired such severe distrust of the government that every political move since that day has been scrutinized for its legitimacy.

### **C. Lasting Implications**

The disturbing cost of our post-9/11 behavior wasn't just reflected through our lack of political well-being. From a financial standpoint, the United States evolved quite significantly after the terrorist attacks. In 2000 the United States was spending slightly over 350 billion dollars of the federal budget on defense and security. By 2011 that number had more than doubled with approximately 720 billion dollars being spent in one fiscal year, accounting for 20% of that year's overall budget.<sup>129</sup> In comparison, the government allocated a mere 2% of the budget for education and 7% on benefits for federal retirees and veterans.<sup>130</sup> So are we really stronger and safer today than we were before 9/11? Are we focusing our resources on the correct aspects of society? Or is the fear of another terrorist attack preventing our nation from growing in the areas that actually matter?

The terrorist attacks of September 11<sup>th</sup> proved that no matter how untouchable a nation may seem there is no guarantee for its safety. For that reason it is advisable to remain cautious

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<sup>129</sup> Plumer, Brad. "America's Staggering Defense Budget in Charts." *Washingtonpost.com*. The Washington Post, 7 Jan. 2013. Web. 15 Dec. 2013.

<sup>130</sup> Plumer, Brad. "America's Staggering Defense Budget in Charts." *Washingtonpost.com*. The Washington Post, 7 Jan. 2013. Web. 15 Dec. 2013.

and never underestimate a possible opponent, but the United States has taken that notion to the absolute extreme. Since 9/11 the leaders of our nation have been expected to focus the maximum amount of energy, money, and resources on homeland security. It has been more than a decade since the attacks and we still have trouble coping with the fact that we can never be 100% free of danger. Rather than accepting this and focusing on other equally pressing issues, our society has escalated its paranoia to such a degree that any mention of considerably cutting defense spending causes utter chaos in the political sphere. As a society we have grown to treasure security above all other aspects of life and regrettably – since September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001 – it has made us our own worst enemy. The increase in paranoid thinking that stemmed from our leaders, trickled down to the citizens, and sparked countless anti-government conspiracy theories, is the same fear that has prevented our nation from securing the safety of the American people within our borders, from making international political progress, from improving our education system, and from increasing the centralization of the government. This goes to show that even though directly following the attacks what didn't kill us did make us stronger, in the long run the only aspect of that “strength” that still remains intact is our military power. Our sense of national unity has declined significantly, countrywide patriotism occurs only in small fleeting bursts, and our willingness to rely on the federal government is limited.

## **Chapter 6: Conclusion**

Conspiracy theorizing and paranoid inclinations have plagued American society since the rise of the 13 colonies, but never to the extent that they do today. The 21st century marked a turning point in our nation's ability to think rationally and as a result we have incurred incredible

social, fiscal, and general costs that are unlikely to be reverted. The structure, management, and authority of the executive branch of the United States government have altered significantly, and mainly in a negative manner, since September 11th, 2001. People's reactions to relatively minor threats that have occurred over the last fourteen years have been marked by an unprecedented degree of dramatization and paranoia. Our economy is just beginning to recover from the detrimental affects of an unnecessary "War on Terror," not to mention the lives that were sacrificed and the international respect that was lost as a result of war. Furthermore, any international human rights progress that the U.S. made prior to 9/11 is in many ways void as a result of our brutal torture of both guilty and innocent suspects during the "War on Terror." Whether these significant changes would have occurred regardless of the September 11th terrorist attacks is difficult to say, but there is no doubt that our response, in the very least, perpetuated the transition to a state of full-blown paranoia.

The degree of insecurity and skepticism that we have reached today has been bubbling under the surface for centuries, but it wasn't until after 9/11 that one could comfortably reference our predisposition to these attributes as a defining characteristic of American society. This is the reason that the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 and our subsequent reactions are indeed the most quintessential example of conspiracy theorizing and paranoia throughout the discourse of U.S. history. Despite what the nation had to overcome in the time shortly following the attack, the true test of America's resilience lies ahead. In order to ensure that our future actions don't spawn similar consequences, we must recognize the interrelation between conspiracy theories and paranoia, and understand the results that such a connection can lead to.

Frank Underwood, in the Netflix series *House of Cards*, perfectly outlines one of the primary issues of the presidency in his advice to the fictional President Garrett Walker in his statement “this office breeds paranoia, don’t give into it.” An executive branch marked by paranoia is no new phenomenon - this, of course, was one of the reasons why President Nixon authorized the break-in at the Democratic National Committee headquarters prior to his upcoming election - but the extent to which it influences U.S. politics and policies has increased since 9/11. Many argue that the balance created by the Constitution is no longer relevant as the powers reserved for the president have expanded drastically over the last fourteen years. It is standard that in times of war the executive branch is granted considerable action-taking autonomy, but typically once the imminent threat has dissolved this authority is severely scaled back and equality amongst the three branches of government returns. The difference that has grown more apparent since the start of the “War on Terror” is that this high degree of overarching power does not seem to be decreasing by any means. A strong executive branch, although not necessarily a negative aspect of a political system, can only be effective if the position is not abused and if it is met with relative cooperation from both the people and the representatives in Congress. This is not the case in the United States at the moment.

The American people are skeptical of “big government,” which is an idea that has been worked into their minds by the leaders in Congress, and when coupled with a dominating executive branch it has resulted in a completely stagnant government. The U.S. Congress has been less productive over the last fourteen years than at any other point in time, with only about

two to four percent of laws introduced per year actually being enacted.<sup>131</sup> While this lack of progress cannot necessarily be directly correlated to the events that transpired following 9/11, I do argue that the shift in attitude toward the executive branch, along with the heightened authority held by the president, have changed the political dynamic of our government enough that it can no longer be expected to function at the degree of cohesiveness that it did prior to September 11th. If the intense stigma between the legislative, executive, and judicial branches and the citizens of the United States does not diminish, the prospect of reinstating a progressive and promising political system is bleak. To ensure a future that truly benefits the American people a condition of limited paranoia and a desire to cooperate would need to develop once again - a combination that has not existed in decades.

Reversing the current trend of continually increasing levels of paranoia could in fact minimize many of the consequences that the U.S. has had to deal with as a result of September 11th, but the same is not necessarily true for the international implications our actions caused. This is particularly evident when examining our human rights violations when dealing with prisoners of war. The Geneva Convention, arguably one of the most highly regarded international treaties, sought to define the rules of war by differentiating between combatants and noncombatants, outlining the appropriate use of weapons, and discussing the use of torture. It was signed in 1949 in response to the atrocities of World War II and the United States military has long prided itself on its honest upholding of the treaty. In addition, in 1994 the United States ratified the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or

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<sup>131</sup> "Statistics and Historical Comparison." GovTrack.us. Accessed April 13, 2015. <<https://www.govtrack.us/congress/bills/statistics>.>

Punishment which defines the meaning of torture and aims to establish global norms for acceptable and unacceptable treatment of humans.<sup>132</sup> Within days of the 9/11 terrorist attacks President Bush and Vice President Cheney began meeting with top U.S. legal advisors to push for a reinterpretation of these international treaties.<sup>133</sup> Their ultimate goal was to avoid prosecution if the tactics they authorized in the “War on Terror” were found to be in violation of either the Geneva Convention or the Convention against Torture.

As the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan developed - neither of which were authorized by the United Nation’s Security Council and were thus technically illegal - allegations about the torture of U.S. detainees began to make headlines. High ranking U.S. government officials, in collaboration with the Central Intelligence Agency (C.I.A.), authorized interrogation techniques that far surpassed what the Geneva Convention, the Convention on Torture, and the federal War Crimes Act of 1996 would constitute as acceptable.<sup>134</sup> This drew significant opposition even from those in the Bush Administration’s inner most circle, such as Secretary of State Colin L. Powell who warned that ignoring the Conventions would “reverse over a century of U.S. policy and practice... undermine the protections of the laws of war for our troops...” and “undermine public support among critical allies.”<sup>135</sup> Despite these words of caution from Colin Powell, as

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<sup>132</sup> "Convention against Torture." Convention Against Torture. Accessed April 20, 2015. <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/CAT.aspx>.

<sup>133</sup> Mayer, Jane. *The Dark Side: The Inside Story of How the War on Terror Turned into a War on American Ideals*. New York: Doubleday, 2008. Print.

<sup>134</sup> Lewis, Neil. "A Guide to the Memos on Torture." The New York Times. Accessed April 20, 2015. <[http://www.nytimes.com/ref/international/24MEMO-GUIDE.html?\\_r=0.>](http://www.nytimes.com/ref/international/24MEMO-GUIDE.html?_r=0.>)

<sup>135</sup> Lewis, Neil. "A Guide to the Memos on Torture." The New York Times. Accessed April 20, 2015. <[http://www.nytimes.com/ref/international/24MEMO-GUIDE.html?\\_r=0.>](http://www.nytimes.com/ref/international/24MEMO-GUIDE.html?_r=0.>)



well as from a number of other foreign policy experts, the Bush Administration and the C.I.A. went ahead with their plan to deal with suspected terrorists in a grotesque and law-bending manner. These actions have not only put American soldiers in danger of being treated in an equally horrific way if captured as prisoners-of-war, but they have also severely tainted our nation's already questionable reputation in regards to military intervention. This goes to show that the consequences of a paranoid and unprepared Administration reach far beyond creating distress within our borders. The longterm repercussions have proven to be costly in every sense of the word; nearly three times as many Americans lost their lives fighting the inexcusable wars in Iraq and Afghanistan as compared to the terrorist attack of 9/11,<sup>136</sup> financially these two wars significantly contributed to the 2008 economic crisis,<sup>137</sup> and our position as a global superpower no longer exists.

For better or for worse, the result of our response to 9/11 brought about countless shifts throughout the United States and abroad. While these changes were arguably inevitable given our nation's longterm relationship with conspiracy theorizing and paranoia, it is undeniable that 9/11 catapulted us towards an extreme far too quickly. Throughout American history the people of this nation have tangoed with conspiracy theorizing, which has fueled our aptitude towards paranoid thinking. While in some instances our skepticism has had a positive effect - i.e. the divulging of facts surrounding the Watergate scandal and the publication of the C.I.A Torture Report - in most instances our paranoia is to blame for our negative actions. This begs the

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<sup>136</sup> "Casualties: Afghanistan and Iraq." CNN. April 27, 2015. Accessed April 27, 2015. <<http://www.cnn.com/SPECIALS/war.casualties/>>

<sup>137</sup> Bilmes, Linda J., and Joseph E. Stiglitz. "America's Costly War Machine." Los Angeles Times. Los Angeles Times, 18 Sept. 2011. Web. 17 July 2015.

question, how do we move forward? And, as a nation, do we understand the implications that paranoia and conspiracy theorizing have on our society?

Throughout this thesis I touched upon the evolution of American paranoia and conspiracy theorizing over the last four centuries, I addressed the mistakes our nation has made, and I pointed out the impact that our actions have had on our political and social spheres. It is important now to understand how we can take this knowledge and use it to make a prediction for the future. As I dove further into my research it became apparent that the aptitude towards paranoia and conspiracy theorizing has consistently been increasing, especially since the beginning of the 20th century, at a rate that does not indicate any signs of slowing down. This statement is supported by a survey outlined in “Media Use, Social Structure, and Belief in 9/11 Conspiracy Theories” which analyzed the connection between media use and belief in conspiracy theories about the September 11 terrorist attacks. The survey revealed that there does indeed exist an increasingly strong relationship between the “paranoid style” and conspiracy theorizing in the United States, particularly following 9/11. The survey also solidified the notion that members of groups that typically hold less political power - lower social classes, racial minorities, women, and young adults - are more likely to believe in at least one of the conspiracy theories than individuals who are thought of, or think of themselves, as politically powerful and influential.<sup>138</sup> This brings us back to the point that Hofstadter was making in “The Paranoid Style in American Politics” when he discussed the irony of the politically weak perceiving an enemy

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<sup>138</sup> Stempel, Carl, Thomas Hargrove, and Guido H. Stempel III. 2007. "MEDIA USE, SOCIAL STRUCTURE, AND BELIEF IN 9/11 CONSPIRACY THEORIES." *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* 84, no. 2: 353-372. *Communication & Mass Media Complete*, EBSCOhost.

as holding extreme power, thus leading to paranoia, while that paranoia only increases and then leads to the belief that an enemy has an exceptional amount of power.<sup>139</sup>

If our political actions do not cease to be so strongly influenced by the paranoid condition of our society we will continue to incur external costs that we cannot afford. At this time I remain hesitant about being optimistic in regards to the potential of experiencing a shift away from our current levels of skepticism. We have normalized the existence of conspiracies and have triggered a bond so deep between conspiratorial thinking and paranoia that we no longer question its influence. The most worrisome characteristic of this reality is that as global threats shift away from state actors to independent groups and organizations, our nation's ability to analyze potential danger is just as underdeveloped as it was in 2001. This means that our nation's response, if anything drastic were to happen, would more likely than not be rather similar in style to our handling of the terrorist attack aftermath.

Rather than remain complacent with the events that took place in the years following 9/11, the citizens of the United States must first make strides towards righting the wrongs that were committed and second, must work actively to ensure that paranoia and conspiracy theorizing no longer play such an influential role in our nation's politics. The individuals who violated international human rights laws in the name of the "War on Terror" should be held legally accountable; representatives in Congress should always be expected to only support justifiable military actions, regardless of a supposed need to act urgently; media outlets that perpetuate the spread of sensational and baseless information should not be receiving even close to the amount of support they currently do; and the general public should make it a priority to be

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<sup>139</sup> Hofstadter, Richard. "The Paranoid Style in American Politics."

educated about relevant, pressing issues to prevent another situation where we allow our leaders to make equally uninformed decisions for us because we, as an entire nation, are unable to differentiate between fact and fiction, paranoia and rationality.

The problem, as obvious as it may be, is that an entire society rarely does what is in its “best” interest. Each individual holds a different perception of what constitutes the proper course of action and as a result the suggestions I have presented will inspire a different image in each reader’s mind. Thus, I conclude with the following suggestion: recognize the importance of shying away from paranoia and conspiratorial thinking, while still maintaining a healthy level of skepticism. *Reasonable doubt* leads to truth seeking, *paranoia* leads to misunderstanding, misinformation, and mistakes. After spending a decade and a half rebuilding from a single tragedy, the United States cannot afford to fall victim to its own paranoid inclinations again. If we do indeed manage to sever the interrelationship between conspiracy theorizing and paranoia, let us hope that it occurs before we are threatened with another event as quintessentially altering as the terrorist attack of 9/11.

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