

The Effect of Conspiracy Theories on the Central Intelligence Agency

Written by Kathryn Olmsted

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KATHRYN OLMSTED, JAN 12 2014

In 1975, Senator Frank Church's mailbag overflowed with letters from concerned citizens. As the Idaho Democrat led a special investigation of possible abuses and crimes committed by America's intelligence agencies, many people wrote to urge him to look into other possible government conspiracies. Some asked him to examine allegations that the CIA might have tried to assassinate foreign rulers. Others wanted him to find out if the agency had acquired special technology from aliens and was using it to control them through their television sets.

These letters in Church's papers, which I found while researching *Challenging the Secret Government*, taught me an important lesson. It's very difficult to evaluate the plausibility of conspiracy theories about US secret agencies because these agencies have, in fact, plotted and engaged in real and sometimes outlandish conspiracies. As a result, it requires some investigation to determine that some allegations about current CIA mind control programs are *theories*, but equally dubious-sounding projects – for instance, the CIA's plot to kill Fidel Castro with an exploding seashell — are documented *facts*.

Moreover, it's important to remember that it's not only people on the fringes of American politics who spread these theories. A "conspiracy theory" is the belief that two or more people have colluded in secret to do something illegal or improper. Using this broad definition, we can see that conspiracy theories are sometimes propagated by officials at the very center of the U.S. government – and these "official" conspiracy theories can be just as harmful to the CIA and other secret agencies as the unofficial kind.

If we compare the "unofficial" conspiracy theories inspired by the Church committee to the "official" conspiracy theories about the 9/11 attacks, we can see the dangers posed by both kinds. In each case, the CIA tried to protect its reputation and its power by refuting the theories – and in each case, it discovered that they can be hard to disprove.

Rogue Elephants and Rogue Agents

The CIA first became the target of conspiracy theories in the late 1960s when many Americans began to question the official government finding of a lone gunman in the John Kennedy assassination. In a then-secret memo of 1967, an agency official expressed dismay that conspiracy theories about the assassination endangered "the whole reputation of the U.S. government" and had "frequently thrown suspicion on our organization." He recommended using the agency's "propaganda assets" to refute the critics' arguments.

Despite the CIA's best efforts, the percentage of Americans who believed that the U.S. government routinely conspired to subvert the Constitution continued to grow in the late 1960s and 1970s, especially after the Church committee began its work. Tasked with uncovering any additional secret government plots after Watergate, the committee spent 15 months investigating the darkest secrets of the early Cold War. Church and his committee documented at least eight CIA-sponsored plots on Castro's life as well as assassination plots against other foreign leaders. It also published official reports on the FBI's spying on civil rights leaders, including Martin Luther King Jr.; the CIA's illegal domestic surveillance operation known as Operation CHAOS; and early versions of NSA

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surveillance programs. At the same time, other congressional committees exposed the CIA's drug testing programs and explored possible US government involvement in the John Kennedy and King assassinations. In a memorable phrase, Church suggested that the CIA had never received presidential approval for its worst abuses and had acted like a "rogue elephant on a rampage."

As Congress revealed the CIA's drug plots and its illegal surveillance programs, some Americans came to suspect that there were other, as yet undisclosed government conspiracies waiting to be discovered. Senator Church received handwritten letters from people around the country who wanted him to investigate allegations ranging from the CIA's hidden role in Watergate to its spiking of the New York City water supply with mind control drugs. A similar suspicion of federal secret agencies showed up in popular culture, with films like *Three Days of the Condor* valorizing rogue agents who sought to hurt the agency by exposing its covert actions. At the end of the movie, a CIA official tells a renegade former analyst that his disclosures will harm the agency. "I hope so," he replies. The filmmakers assumed that the audience would sympathize with the hero's decision to blow the whistle on real CIA conspiracies and help ensure it could never conspire against democracy again.

And yet, though the committee's disclosures frightened Americans and heightened their distrust of government, the Church investigation — and the conspiracy theories that it inspired — led to few real reforms. Most members of Congress lost their appetite for serious restrictions on US secret agencies by the late 1970s. The only substantive reform to come out of the Church investigation was the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act of 1978 — and even that limit was evaded after 9/11.

How could the revelation of so many abuses of power produce so few results? In part, it's because officials within the administration of President Gerald Ford outwitted and outmaneuvered the would-be reformers. In particular, the president's deputy chief of staff, a young man from Wyoming named Dick Cheney, was clever at figuring out ways to discredit the reformers. Believing that the Ford administration was experiencing "the nadir of the modern presidency in terms of authority and legitimacy," Cheney wanted to help the CIA to avoid any real limits. He helped set up a secret group within the White House to work on countering the investigators and reclaiming presidential power from Congress.

Fixing the Intelligence to Fit the Policy

Thirty years later, Cheney, now vice president, began suggesting other conspiracy theories — this time White House-endorsed official theories about the 9/11 attacks. Unlike the members of the 9/11 Truth movement, Cheney, of course, posited no U.S. government involvement. Instead, he proposed a theory that served his foreign policy goals: that Saddam Hussein might have conspired with Al Qaeda to carry out the attacks.

In the months following the terrorist assaults on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, Cheney built his case for a possible conspiracy involving Saddam Hussein and Osama bin Laden. In December 2001, he announced that it had been "pretty well confirmed" that Mohammed Atta, one of the hijackers, had met with an Iraqi intelligence agent in Prague before the attacks. Cheney suggested that al Qaeda might still be working with Saddam Hussein, who, the vice president said, had been accumulating more weapons of mass destruction. Cheney's language became increasingly definitive over the course of the next year. By March 2002, he said that the alleged meeting between Atta and Iraqi intelligence had "in fact" occurred. By September, he said there had been not just one but "a number of contacts" between the Iraqis and the hijackers before the attacks.

Many US intelligence agents strongly disagreed with the vice president about this alleged connection between al Qaeda and Iraq. Paul Pillar, the CIA's top Middle East specialist, wrote in 2006 that the agency "never offered any analysis that supported the notion of an alliance between Saddam and al Qaeda." But White House officials continued to make and encourage these false assumptions.

When CIA analysts refused to confirm his conspiracy theory, Cheney simply tried to go around them and cut them out of the loop. As Seymour Hersh revealed in an important *New Yorker* article in 2003, the administration began "stovepiping" the raw intelligence about the 9/11 attacks directly to defense department analysts who were more

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receptive to the administration's conspiracy theory. In this way, the White House's official conspiracy theories succeeded in marginalizing the CIA. Good intelligence was disregarded, and bad policy – the invasion of Iraq – was the result.

Conclusion

Conspiracy theories are simple ways of telling complicated stories, and they are seldom conducive to good policy-making. Throughout the last forty years, conspiracy theories have harmed the reputation and reduced the power of U.S. government secret agencies, especially the CIA.

CIA authorities are aware of the dangers of conspiracy theories, as the 1967 memo about Kennedy conspiracy theories demonstrates. But Agency officials, and scholars of intelligence, should remember that conspiracy theories spread by government officials can sometimes be just as harmful as the ones spread by anti-government activists.

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