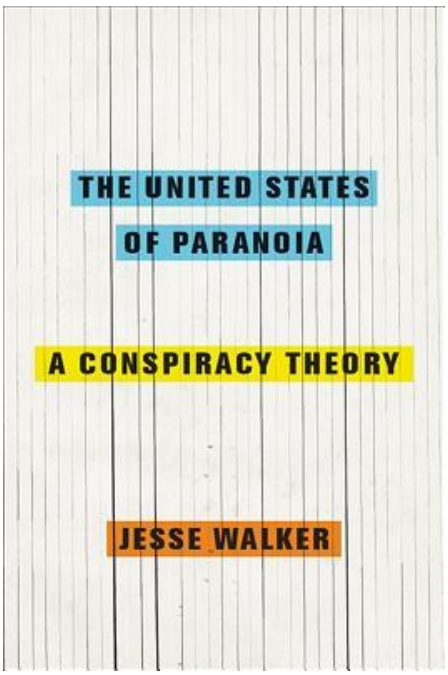

The United States of Paranoia: A Conspiracy Theory

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Jesse Walker's *The United States of Paranoia* presents a comprehensive history of conspiracy theories in American culture and politics, from the colonial era to the War on Terror.

The fear of intrigue and subversion doesn't exist only on the fringes of society, but has always been part of our national identity. When such tales takes hold, Walker argues, they reflect the anxieties and experiences of the people who believe them, even if they say nothing true about the objects of the theories themselves.

With intensive research and a deadpan sense of humor, Jesse Walker's *The United States of Paranoia* combines the rigor of real history with the punch of pulp fiction.

This edition includes primary-source documentation in the form of archival photographs, cartoons, and film stills selected by the author.

The United States of Paranoia: A Conspiracy Theory Details

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From Reader Review The United States of Paranoia: A Conspiracy Theory for online ebook

Joshua Buhs says

Not bad.

I was slow to pick up this book for two reasons. One, the cover is butt-ugly. Two, Jesse Walker is associated with that wretched hive of villainy and scum, Reason magazine.

Walker should feel good about writing the book. It was interesting. Overly long, theoretically flabby, confusingly organized, poorly laid out, and ultimately serving a political agenda, but worth a look-see.

Walker begins where he has to: with Richard Hofstadter's "The Paranoid Style in American Politics." On the surface, Walker wants to argue with Hofstadter that paranoia is not a minor trend in American cultural history, but part of the mainstream. More subtly, he wants to pick a fight over who is the most paranoid.

One his first point, he does well. Paranoia--and conspiracy thinking--is rife in American history. Walker divides conspiracy thinking into five types: conspiracies by outsiders, by insiders, by those above, by those above, and, finally, benevolent conspiracies. This division is interesting but doesn't quite rise to the level of "primary myths," as he calls them. The division is schematic and doesn't really shed a whole lot of light on conspiracies generally. Indeed, Walker spends too much time classifying the various conspiracies as either belonging to one or the other class (even as he acknowledges that they do overlap in real life). Thus the Molly Maguires were a paranoid vision of conspiracy from below--the poor Irish--and not from outside--no one thought that the conspiracy was based in Ireland.

The fussing over the categories reveals a reificatory imagination: there are types of conspiracies. There are red scares and brown scares. There is left and right. There are the 70s, the 80s, the 90s. And there is something known as 'folklore,' which is supposed to be a unique form of discourse, but the idea is never really developed. walker missed an opportunity here, given the way that folklorists have recently struggled with the definition of their own field, and the subject that they study, to expand his ideas and make them something more than a taxonomy.

After the introductory matter, Walker devotes one chapter each to his different conspiracy types. He is careful to note that belief in conspiracies--paranoia--did not necessarily mean those conspiracies actually existed--just that the ideas were prominent and drove, at least partially, social life. In each chapter, he traces different examples of his types from the country's beginning to current times.

There are some nuggets here, and I suppose each person who comes to the book will find his or her own favorite. Me, I liked his (brief) discussion of how the definition of a criminal conspiracy was influenced by fears of slave uprisings. There are lots of stories here, and Walker clearly did a lot of research. Mostly, these are handled judiciously.

The problem, such as it is: there is too much stuff. Walker piles example upon example upon example until we acquiesce to his main thesis: paranoia about conspiracies is a central feature of American society. Sometimes, too, he can overreach, so that every thing starts to look like a conspiracy--when he takes up the McMartin Preschool Case of the 1980s, his definition of conspiracy starts to become indistinguishable from any sort of moral panic.

His prose, too, is uneven, varying from scholarly, or almost scholarly, to jaunty and bloggish.

Having covered his five types, he then moves on to a second part of the book--and it is not entirely clear why this second part needs to exist at all, or be so large. He says these are modern examples, but his earlier chapters already brought the book up to date, or nearly so. It's confusing, and seemingly done just so Walker could expand on a few favorite stories. But I don't want to be churlish: the two best chapters are here, numbers 8 and 9, the first on a character named John Todd and the second on Operation Mindfuck. Another chapter is devoted to the conspiracy theories motivating the various Rambo stories, and another is on Watergate, which Walker seems to want to pose as some kind of watershed moment (pun unfortunate)--although he offers no good reason why. He implies that the mainstream media started taking 'conspiracies from above' seriously afterwards, at least for a short time, but that doesn't seem especially significant. The weight of his book would suggest otherwise: there have been plenty of conspiracies, real and imagined, so that Americans should be used to the genre by now. Perhaps it is because it is so close to our own time that it seems central.

Walker builds on the work--only lightly acknowledged--of political scientist Michael Barkun here in arguing that recent conspiracy theories have become a mixed bag--no longer from distinct traditions, but a melange, left and right, black and white borrowing from each other. Surprisingly, he does not cite Michael Saler, who has also noticed the turn toward the ironic imagination, nor Susan Faludi, who, before him, noted the way Indian Capture stories structured a lot of America's response to 9-11. [I was wrong: he does cite both Saler and Faludi.]

This section is not so satisfying. First, one wonders if the reason these recent conspiracy theories seem heterogenous is because he was so tidy early in the book classifying them into distinct taxa. Robert Anton Wilson is great, and I love the way his Operation Mindfuck is described, using the abundance of conspiracy theories against the conspiracists themselves. But the blending of these kind of ideas predate him by quite a wide margin--the occultists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century were happy to blend various conspiracies, too.

Second, I am not sure what the point is here, why this section is distinct.

Third, his political thesis, mostly subrosa to this point, comes to the fore and messes with the evidence. Walker disagrees with Hofstadter that conspiracy theories are mostly a phenomenon of the right: he wants to show that leftists are just as prone. And maybe that's the case, but--to start numbering again--the thesis fails on two points.

First, to get the balance he wants, Walker has to ignore some of the most recent conspiracy-mongering. He's only a few years older than me, and should have remembered it easily.

Walker says that the 1990s were another great time for conspiracy theories, comparable tot he 1970s, except that they came in the back door. Um, no. They came through the Wall Street Journal! The massive and unending amounts of conspiracy theories about the Clintons get only a short mention--short especially compared to an entire chapter on Rambo. Similarly, the conspiracy thinking that motivated the Bush administration to invent an "Axis of Evil" is dispatched in a footnote. Instead, the 1990s are marked (only) by paranoid (and incorrect) fears about right-wing militia--which were really a fairly ecumenical response to the government's overreach, Walker argues.

Showing that we are all conspiracists hints at the importance of libertarianism--Walker's chosen creed--although he never spells it out exactly. Still, he repeatedly makes the point that conspiracists, left and right,

hate the government: a secret longing, then, for a more libertarian approach.

The second problem with Walker's thesis is that his cultural analysis is unwedded to a consideration of political power. So, he wants to make McCarthy's Red Scare equivalent to the Brown Scare (fear of Fascists). But one was conducted by the state, the other not so much (somewhat--but not nearly so much). Or, he compares Mildred Edie Brady's articles about Willhelm Reich--which accused of him being at the center of a cult--with her being fired from her government job for supposedly being associated with communists. On the one hand, two articles, from the New Republic and Harpers, on the other, actual firing. These things are not equivalent.

Again, I am not trying to say there are not conspiracy theories on the left. But we cannot compare them to those on the right from the evidence in this book.

Finally, the pictures are often just black blobs which seem to have been dropped into the text. Sometimes they are related, sometimes they are not. There are no captions, and they are not set off, giving the book an amateurish feel.

Todd Stockslager says

Review title: "They're coming to get you, Barbara."

That classic line delivered in a desolate hilltop Western Pennsylvania cemetery leads into one of the most important movies of the 20th century. The sudden twist from cruel joke to the twisted reality of flesh-eating zombies signals a dystopian world where paranoia is not just normal, it is necessary for survival. In today's world, President Trump's "alternative facts" and the Internet's fake news have brought the paranoia indoors before we even knew we needed to board the windows.

Walker's surprisingly timely, strong, serious, and at the same time highly readable history documents the types and causes of conspiracy theories that throughout American history have driven its people (and governments) to paranoia. I had this book on my reading wish list for a couple of years before buying it in November 2016 during one of my forays deep into the stacks at Powell's in Portland, and certainly before I had any notion that Donald Trump would win the election or use the terminology he has made a part of the daily vocabulary. Neither this review nor the book it is based on is intended to imply that Donald Trump is either the source or the benefactor of any given conspiracy theory, but given the atmosphere of distrust to the point of paranoia of anything we see or read in the media today this book is very well worth reading and taking seriously for what it can tell us about conspiracy theories and how Americans react to them.

Walker's book is not just a list of conspiracy theories, although he hits the major ones--JFK's assassination, 9/11, the Illuminati--along the way to defining five categories of conspiracy theory into which all of the known variants can be shelved (some crossing multiple boundaries, of course) :

The Enemy Outside--enemies from across the border or across the sea who have it in for "us".
The Enemy Within--"villainous neighbors who can't easily be distinguished from friends."
The Enemy Below--fellow citizens who are distinctly "other" from "us" because of their race or beliefs or

social outcast status.
The Enemy Above--conspirators at the top of the social and governmental pyramid.
The Benevolent Conspiracy--"a secret force working behind the scenes to improve people's lives".

Walker makes it clear he is focusing on American history not because Americans as a group or a nation are more susceptible to conspiracy, but so he could keep his topic within the bounds of his expertise and his book within a manageable size for readers. He also makes clear that he is not identifying conspiracy theorists with any political party or persuasion, and in fact he covers examples that fall within his categories from every political angle imaginable.

After the first part of the book where he lays out the definitions of the five categories, in the second part he moves on to discussions of some well known conspiracies to show how they fit the categories. And particularly when he talks about the citizens militia movements of the 1990s, he talks about some very surprising bedfellows as far Left and far Right, white supremacist and black separatist, groups and theories sometimes shared training materials, ideas, even venues and events. And in the fertile period of the 1960s through the 1980s he describes how ironic skeptics created mocking satire of conspiracies that were adopted or attacked by true believers as true conspiracies, feeding into a growing melange of paranoia where it became nearly impossible to separate fact from insanity. Then when undercover US government agents from the FBI, BATF, CIA and "other agencies" got involved spreading misinformation or entrapment attempts based on techniques honed to ferret out "Reds" in the 1920s, German spies in the 1930s, Communists in the 1950s, and Klansmen in the 1960s, the web of lies, deception, and conspiracy got so thick that paranoia seemed the only sane approach. And Walker describes a couple of those who approached the field as skeptics hoping to mine the topic for irony but got in so deep they actually started believed their own jokes.

One very timely point that Walker makes clear through explicit statement and through the examples he uses is that conspiracy theories are not the exclusive property of those on the fringes of society because of their race or religion or supposed lack of intelligence. He gives many examples of beliefs expressed from the highest and most respected members of the US government and "mainstream" media that fit one or more of his conspiratorial categories even though these respected voices never labeled or expected their beliefs to be labeled as such. This kind of demonizing of people by class or characteristic or creed by government and thought leaders (backed by very real police and military force) without credence or evidence has fed directly into the backlash against these leaders to the extent that we have to put quotes around the term mainstream when it is used to describe the media, and that we have a president whose false statements he labels as "alternative truths" but are accepted as truth by a segment of the population because of their justified distrust of some of the voices they hear and read.

And the key qualifier in that last sentence is "some of". How do we know when what we read or hear is truth? It is easy to be critical of "mainstream" sources these days, but when that term meant news and information vetted and edited for accuracy and context, weren't we in a better position to accept it as "real" truth, not the alternative kind--i.e. lies? It's the difference between the Encyclopedia Brittanica and Wikipedia. We certainly expect and accept that the edited Encyclopedia is more authoritative, but we just as certainly behave as if Wikipedia is "good enough" because it is often the first source we go to for information. And it is just a short slippery slide from "good enough" to the games our minds play trying to find patterns in the data that don't really exist there, a common pattern Walker identifies in conspiracy theories, like second shooters on the grassy knoll or images of Satan on the World Trade Center towers on 9/11. It is in those false patterns where the conspiracy theories live. After all, even if zombies were real, they wouldn't really be coming to get you, would they, Barbara?

Kevin Kelsey says

An excellent examination of the lifecycle and evolution of conspiracies--real or imagined--throughout United States history. It illustrates how our paranoias and favorite conspiracies often say much more about ourselves than we realize.

Mike says

DISCLAIMER: I'm only halfway through this book. I would have finished it already, but I'm having difficulty motivating myself to turn the pages.
Needless to say, I'm having a hard time with this book. It's not that the information the author presents isn't interesting, because it really is. It's not that I have a hard time with history. On the contrary, I love history. Mostly it's because the writing is amateurish and formulaic. I have no doubt that the author is an excellent academic, but I'm not convinced that he's really much of a writer.
I take issue with the author's heavy-handed naming of various styles of conspiracy theory. I take issue with the author's subsequent magisterial capitalization of each aforementioned style. I take issue with the author's prodigious use of the capitalized phrases he has coined. Also, I take issue with the smug use of the phrase "Or that's the story, anyway", his lack of syntactical variation, his complete lack of dramatic arch, etc. etc. etc.
Perhaps the issue is the book's identity crisis. It seems the author couldn't decide if he wanted to write in the whimsical style of a popular history author like Sarah Vowell, the authoritative style of an eminent history author like Charles C. Mann, or the dry computative style of an academic journal. The end result comes off sophomoric and arogant, like the thesis of a middling third-year history major.

Bella says

I've finally decided life is too short to spend my time reading bad books like this. My time is worth more. I am worth more. I don't want to read anymore academic books by scholars who can't write.

Scott Rhee says

Conspiracy (n) 1.the act of conspiring. 2. an evil, unlawful, treacherous, or surreptitious plan formulated in secret by two or more persons; plot. 3. a combination of persons for a secret, unlawful, or evil purpose 4. Law. an agreement by two or more persons to commit a crime, fraud, or other wrongful act. 5. any concurrence in action; combination in bringing about a given result. (Dictionary.com)

Paranoia (n) 1. Psychiatry. a mental disorder characterized by systematized delusions and the projection of personal conflicts, which are ascribed to the supposed hostility of others, sometimes progressing to disturbances of consciousness and aggressive acts believed to be performed in self-defense or as a mission. 2. baseless or excessive suspicion of the motives of others. (Dictionary.com)

I admit, I'm a bit of a conspiracy theorist. I have a hard time believing that Lee Harvey Oswald acted alone, I'm fairly certain that a shadow government run by the Koch Bros.---who may or may not be a part of the Illuminati---is bent on world domination, and I have a sneaking suspicion that malevolent extraterrestrials have infiltrated the highest levels of government in an attempt to slowly steal our natural resources (air, water, marijuana) via a perfect storm of environmentally destructive policies, higher taxes, and indoctrination of our nation's youth with anti-science curriculum. I can't prove it, but I'm willing to bet that Ted Cruz is to blame for a lot of it, too.

Paranoid? You bet. I live by one simple axiom: *If you think you're too paranoid, then you ain't paranoid enough…*

Paranoia comes naturally, though. I am a citizen of the United States of America, possibly one of the most paranoid countries in the world. Well, if not the most paranoid, then the one with greatest number of off-the-wall and kooky paranoid conspiracy theories. We've honed paranoia down to a science. We're extremely good at it.

Our nation's history is a colorful and frenzied state of paranoia. Jesse Walker, in his book "The United States of Paranoia: A Conspiracy Theory", joyously documents the many wonderful, weird, and (in some cases) tragic examples of American paranoia, from our early Puritan settlers to the Founding Fathers to the Civil War to the Cold War to our paranoid present.

Honestly, somewhere in our Constitution or that Declaration of Independence we so cherish, it should be stated that we are a people founded on the paranoid belief that someone is always out to get us, whether it is from foreign shores, outer space, hell, or even within our own borders. We are equal opportunity paranoids.

According to Walker, conspiracies can be broken down into four types: Enemy Outside, Enemy Within, Enemy Below, and Enemy Above. A fifth category, Benevolent Conspiracies, is worth mentioning briefly but actually kind of boring. Angels and/or good-natured Extraterrestrials stepping in to try and help humanity may make for cute Hallmark movies or documentaries on one of those Christian cable networks, but they don't make for good conspiracy theories. We like our conspiracies bloody and mean.

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"Indians were the first people to stand in American history as emblems of disorder, civilized breakdown, and alien control... The series of Red scares that have swept the country since the 1870s have roots in original red scares"---Michael Paul Rogin

The Enemy Outside Conspiracy is the quintessential evil "Them" of the "Us vs. Them" scenario. This has been around probably since man first started walking on two legs and huddling in tribes. The tribe you belonged to was good. Those tribes in the hills and in the neighboring valleys were bad.

To the early American pilgrims, the red-skinned inhabitants of the New World were an Enemy Outside. They were the evil "Them" lurking in the woods, ready to snatch your children, and as the U.S. grew and set up a government, this fear became policy. Wars raged between U.S. soldiers and Native American warriors for centuries until 1877, which is considered the year the white man finally broke the red man.

Native Americans weren't the only Enemy Outside during the early years of this country. Catholics were viewed with just as much fear and disdain as Indians, and the state of Maryland, which was originally set up as a Catholic state, suffered a violent revolution in the late 17th century. (Yes, a revolution. In this country!) Protestants formed an army and seized the Maryland State House, deposed the Catholic governor and

leaders, and banned Catholicism. So much for freedom of religion. (To be fair, this took place almost a century before our Founding Fathers wisely decided to make it a rule not to establish any religion or deny the worship of any religion.)

Enemies Outside have since appeared in many guises throughout our history, whether in the form of Irish, Italian, Swedish, German, or Jewish immigrants. (Okay, just about every European immigrant has been vilified at some point in our history.) During World War II, we even built concentration camps for Japanese-Americans. (Yes, concentration camps. In this country!) It's safe to say that today's Enemy Outside is Muslim and Arabic.

According to Walker, "The Enemy Outside isn't defined by any particular origin; he's defined by the fact that you think he's out there trying to come in. The details vary at different times and places, but several characteristics recur. There is the image of the world outside your gates as an unfriendly wilderness where evil forces dwell. There is the proclivity to see these forces as a centralized conspiracy guided by a puppet master or a small cabal. There is fear of the border zone where cultures mix, the suspicion that aliens at home are agents of a foreign power, and the fear that your community might be remade in the enemy's image. And there is the tendency to see this conflict in terms of a grand, apocalyptic struggle---if not literally against Satan, then against something deeply evil. (p. 35)"

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"There's only one thing I need to know?/Whose side are you on?/?Whose side are you on??/Well, there's only one thing I need to know?/Whose side, whose side, whose side?" ---Paul Simon, "Paranoia Blues"

Sometimes, the enemies of our conspiracy fears don't come from outside. Sometimes the enemies are internal. Sometimes they are right next door. Sometimes they are sleeping next to us.

The Salem Witch Trials were a perfect example of the Enemy Within Conspiracy. Neighbors accused neighbors, spouses accused spouses, parents accused children, children accused parents. The brilliance was that none of the accusations could be substantiated or proved. These were, after all, witches. They could work magic and sorcery to eliminate evidence. They could even alter people's memories. Best just to kill them. Worry about it later. Which is, essentially, what happened.

Strangely enough (but not really), many of our nation's Enemy Within Conspiracies have to do with religion. Mormons, for example, were treated so badly and ostracized so much, that the group as a whole was sent packing out west, to Utah. Ironic, too, that many of Mormonism's own dogmatic principles are founded on paranoid conspiracy theories. Apparently, they really *were* out to get the Mormons.

While certainly not as violent, the McCarthy-era anti-Communist fervor that swept the country was eerily similar to the Salem Witch Trials, if only in spirit. No one was burned at the stake (to Joseph McCarthy's chagrin, I'm sure), but thousands of people lost jobs, families, and reputations. Sometimes for simply having attended a pro-Communist rally ten years before.

The Enemy Within has, of course, been with us for as long as the Enemy Outside has been with us. I'm sure early cavemen wondered about their neighbors and suspected their own cave-woman and cave-children of not being completely kosher.

Walker writes, "If the Enemy Within is the most dreamlike and fantastic of America's primal conspiracy

myths, it is also the most homely and prosaic. The suspicions that haunt our day-to-day lives usually feature our families, neighbors, and coworkers, even if we don't believe they're puppets of a Satanic cabal. Think back to New England's earlier witchcraft cases, before the frenzy of 1692 broke out: petty feuds fueled by gossip and bad blood. A large-scale, Salem-style mania may seem bizarre to us, but the day-to-day misgivings that led Americans to cry witch shouldn't seem so strange at all. (p.55)"

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"Rumors flew about that black bands, numbering in the scores, even hundreds, were fanning out in all directions. Messengers galloped hither and yon to warn villages of approaching rebels. Invariably the rumors proved false---but no matter, an explanation was ready to hand. Black informers, it always turned out, had luckily alerted the white people to their impending doom, days or just hours beforehand, and the ringleaders were now safely in jail, the others having melted into the shadows. Yet everyone was warned to stay vigilant, no matter how normally the slaves were behaving in the quarters and fields." ---Bertram Wyatt-Brown

It's safe to say that slavery is a horrible thing. It is, however, not so safe to say that slavery in this country was particularly horrible. Some conservative historical revisionists would like us to believe that our nation's brand of slavery wasn't that terrible, that our slaves were treated much better than others, that our slaves were pretty happy and satisfied with their station in life.

Of course, that is bullshit. No amount of sugarcoating or whitewashing our history will wipe away the stain of slavery. Our nation's treatment of black people was (and, arguably, still is) atrocious.

A large part of the reason is because black people, in the minds of many racists, are inferior people, subhuman, not really entitled to the same rights and respect as those above them, namely white people. The Civil War may have ended slavery, but the racism that spawned that evil institution never really went away. It existed in the Klu Klux Klan, the Jim Crow laws, the attempts at segregation. It exists today on our city streets and in our prisons, where a disproportionate number of black people are beaten, shot at, and imprisoned.

During the years of slavery, Enemy Below conspiracies constantly entertained the minds of white people. Always fearful of a violent slave uprising, whites were quick to dole out punishments and harsh treatment to their slaves for perceived attempts at gaining their freedom.

Of course, black people haven't always been the only target of Enemy Below conspiracies in this country. The upper class has always had a fear of the lower class, white or black. It's the "Haves" vs. the "Have-nots", and it hasn't changed. The wealthy classes in this country still like to think that poor people are fomenting "class warfare" and "hatred of the rich". And yet, it's the wealthy who continually lobby politicians to pass laws that hurt the poor and help the rich. So, who's fomenting class warfare?

Granted, us poor people like to entertain our own conspiracy theories about the rich, which brings us to the fourth type of conspiracy, the Enemy Above.

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"I always feel like somebody's watching me..." ---Rockwell, "Somebody's Watching Me"

We've all occasionally felt it: a nagging feeling that no matter what we do, the outcome will always be the

same, that someone or something---call it what you like: Fate, God, Satan, Extraterrestrials, Ted Cruz---is pulling the strings, and we are all just puppets.

Walker calls this the Enemy Above conspiracy. There have been many manifestations of the Enemy Above throughout history, perhaps the most notorious and persistent one being the Illuminati, a secret society of powerful men (generally thought to be part of the Brotherhood of Masons) who are conspiring to take over the world and to create a vast slave workforce---namely us.

Of course, it's not just the Illuminati who want to control us. There's multinational corporations, the Koch Bros., George Soros, Big Oil, NASA, Big Pharm, FEMA.

Basically, any large institution is a potential Enemy Above. The problem with these Enemy Above theories, according to Walker is that they "are the most disreputable sort of conspiracy narrative, since they challenge rather than reinforce the social order. In the media, the phrase "conspiracy theory" is often used as though it refers *only* to Enemy Above stories. You needn't even invoke a conspiracy to earn the conspiracy-theorist tag, as long as you entertain suspicions about the people in charge. (p.131)"

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"I'm kind of a paranoiac in reverse. I suspect people of plotting to make me happy."---J.D. Salinger

Remember the Angel craze in the '90s? Angels were everywhere. Movie theaters were saturated with movies about angels: fallen angels ("Wings of Desire"), rogue angels ("The Prophecy"), drunk angels ("Michael"), and Nicholas Cage ("City of Angels"). Bookstores had entire shelves devoted to books about angels. Weekly, TV viewers had the pleasure of being "Touched by an Angel".

Granted, there has been a craze for angels forever, not just the '90s. Perhaps it's a need that people have, especially with all the negative conspiracies floating around out there. People need to know that someone is ultimately looking out for them.

Benevolent conspiracies are the fifth type of conspiracy theory. Like the Enemy Above conspiracies, the force acting upon us emanates from on high, but these forces don't want to hurt us or enslave. On the contrary, these benevolent forces want to help us, individually and as a whole.

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"The Cold War was supposed to end in a nuclear inferno that killed everyone. It wasn't supposed to just have the air go out of it. And a deferred eschaton has unusual power. Culturally, we spent decades expecting that we were all going to die. The reprieve didn't suddenly make everyone less pessimistic. It just turned that pessimism inward."---Philip Sandifer

The second part of Walker's book is a detailed look at modern-day conspiracies, our contemporary fears. Some of these conspiracies aren't even theories. Take Watergate, for example: an event that brought to light the fact that even our President may have it in for us.

Paranoia reached an all-time high in the post-Watergate years, naturally. It had been building long before that, though, thanks to Cold War fears of nuclear proliferation and the Doomsday clock perpetually hovering around a minute to midnight.

Terrorism was also a fairly new fear. Plane hijackings, bombings, kidnappings: it almost made you want to hole up in your house and wait for the nuclear bombs to drop.

Then, sometime in the ‘80s, a new conspiracy began to brew: Satanism. Across the country, strange rituals were being performed, horrible acts were being committed, mostly by teenagers, although adults were clearly free to join. Everyone knew, too, that it was the drugs and that heavy metal music that caused it. It was the Satanic messages one heard when one played “Stairway to Heaven” backwards on the record player. Literally hundreds of thousands of teenagers were succumbing to Satan’s whims, and ritual animal and even baby sacrifice was at an all-time high.

Except it wasn’t.

The Satanic ritual hysteria was perpetuated by people with active imaginations and those who just wanted to fuck with people’s minds.

Of course, fucking with people’s minds is exactly what conspiracy theorists love to do. Never mind that there may be some truth to the conspiracy.

Conspiracy theorists love to convince us that a secret shadow government within the U.S. government choreographed and staged the 9/11 bombings of the World Trade Center. It’s clear to see on the videos on Youtube.

Oh, and conspiracy theorists also love to convince us that the Newtown Massacre didn’t really happen, that those poor kids and teachers didn’t really die. It was all staged by the media.

Maybe conspiracy theories are necessary for some people to process really horrible events. It’s a way of convincing one’s self that life can’t be that horrific.

Pareidolic apophenia is, according to Walker, the mental process of projecting patterns onto data and perceiving those patterns in meaningful ways. This is what occurs in the brain when people see images of Jesus Christ or the Virgin Mary in clouds, tree trunks, oatmeal, etc. It’s what enables some to hear satanic messages when one plays a Beatles album backwards. It’s what helps to create images in your brain when looking at Rorschach inkblot tests. It is, essentially, a necessary process that aids in the development of our selves, by engaging in the sensory overload that is life and finding the information we need to survive.

Walker seems to think that conspiracy theories are a coping mechanism for some people. He writes, “Human beings have a knack not just for finding patterns in chaos but for constructing stories to make sense of events, especially events that scare us... But when building a narrative you can fall into a trap, one where a combination of confirmation bias and serendipity blinds you to the ways your enticing story might fail to describe the world. (p. 337)”

David Beckett says

I’ve never met Jesse Walker; I did not receive a free review copy of this book from the author, from Harper-Collins, from the Tri-Lateral Commission, or from anyone. I became aware of Walker in his station as plenipotentiary at REASON, the ardently libertarian publication (and foundation) espousing “Free Minds and

Free Markets.” Even those, and there are many, who disagree with Reason’s philosophical principles call it one of the most intelligent and best-researched political magazines available today. Walker numbers among Reason’s ablest investigators and most articulate writers. His preeminent expertise in a mélange of obscure topics, including the birth, growth, and maturation of underground or “pirate” radio, is widely acknowledged. Walker’s recent work, The United States of Paranoia: A Conspiracy Theory, examines the intricate history of American conspiracies and conspiracy theorists. While many academics ignore these forces, Walker explores ways in which they have helped shape our society. Despite the scattering of complaints and sour notes posted online, most readers (87% of goodreads) find *The United States of Paranoia* a creditable and witty rumination on a compelling and provocative theme. A few myopic reactionaries and paternalistic statists would dismiss all Reason editors and columnists (and even readers) as reckless, Transhumanist pro-gay anarchists, or libertine, leather-jacket-wearing, pot-puffing decadents, or atheist, capitalist radicals hell-bent on hedonistic dissipation. I’d call such *ad hominem* overgeneralizations & half-truths patently unfair. At its core, Reason defends personal liberty, autonomy, and tolerance for those who profess unpopular opinions and/or live idiosyncratic lives. Even if one disagrees with Reason, posting a venomous review of *The United States of Paranoia* (and/or disregarding its valid insights solely because of the author’s perceived politics) illuminates little beyond one’s own reflexive bias. As did 14 other Amazon reviewers, I rated *The United States of Paranoia* 5 stars. Without requiring, coercing, or insisting, I will encourage my students to obtain a copy of this text when next I teach a seminar on contemporary North American culture.

Hadrian says

In 1964, Richard Hofstadter penned the essay, "The Paranoid Style in American Politics" on the origins and spread of conspiracy theories in response to the rise of the Goldwater faction of Republicans and the John Birth Society. He viewed it largely as part of an apocalyptic minority among extreme right-wingers, who construct ostentatious fantasies about their majority opponents, often in times of economic crisis. Sound familiar?

Walker explicitly states that Hofstadter did not go far enough. His book also emphasizes the role of conspiracy in American history, but says that they also happened in more prosperous times, and that that all sides of the political spectrum are not immune to them.

He sorts American conspiracies into five broad types, but notes that conspiracies could often encompass many of these at once. They are:
1) The 'enemy below', where repressed underclasses have secret claims to power or influence abroad, and are thus working to undermine the present social order. Ex.: Germans and Jews in the early 20th century, or almost all immigrant groups, for that matter.
2) The 'enemy within', where a group attempts to infiltrate American society undetected and begin an uprising against it. Ex.: Mormons, Communists.
3) The 'beast below', a fear of mob violence. Ex.: slave rebellions, false motives behind race riots.
4) The 'enemy above', where secret societies have extreme political influence or control. Ex.: Freemasons, the Catholic Church, world-government.
5) 'Conspiracies of angels', where good things mysterious happen, ostensibly as part of 'God's plan'.

After describing these types, Walker then moves to a few sketches of the present nature of these conspiracies. Curiously enough, he found evidence of FBI attempts to manufacture vague conspiracies in attempts to split subversive in the 1950s and 60s. His approach is by no means exhaustive, but it is brisk and compelling. In one chapter, he describes attempts to pin Jared Lee Loughner as a right-wing maniac

influenced by Sarah Palin's proclamation to 'target' senators as a literal threat. Instead, his most discernible influence is tellingly enough, other conspiracy theorists, including the movie Zeitgeist. He moves on to militias, the 'birther movement' of the tea party, and the John Birch Society.

One of the best chapters is one about parody and literature which draw on conspiracy theories. One example is Philip K. Dick, who used scifi tropes to pick at the nature of reality. Another is the created religion of Discordianism and the works of Robert Anton Wilson, which were lampoonings of conspiracy theories. There are brief allusions to Orson Welles' War of the Worlds (again played up by a media frenzy), but also Invasion of the Body Snatchers.

Walker is excellent at compiling a brief history of conspiracy, but it is harder to find any causes. He of course takes an impartial tone, refusing to comment on the validity of any of these theories. No doubt small groups of people have secretly decided on malicious actions to hurt the world, but some of these theories assume so much about human capacity and make so strong assumptions that they are dismissed out of hand, and try to read into our actions when there is instead only staggering incompetence.

What causes these conspiracies? Is it just human fallibility, or the tendency of the media to rush out news stories before they can get the facts? Companies justifying their draconic policies to their loyal customers? Is it a biological need for a tribal enemy? Or inventions needed to justify national security? Probably one or all of these. His personal view is that it is part of the same process that makes us see faces in toast or smoke clouds (and indeed he posts a picture of a face imagined out of the rising smoke clouds of 9/11). It is an instinct to make order and explanations for chaos, even if there is only the chaos of our own acts.

If you want a bemused narrative of oddities in a breezy style, here's a good place to start. I could not seriously recommend this as an academic analysis, but at least it has a neat compilation of facts.

Sean A. says

Compulsively readable, thoroughly documented history of the universal motivations for the most far out conspiracy theories. The mainstream is not rational and the fringe is not so extreme after all.
There's a little conspiracy theorist in all of us.

Byron Edgington says

Here we have a book that appears to be about conspiracies, cabals, mysterious omens, prestidigitation and the uniquely American tendency to attach evil, exotic and/or nefarious meanings to every event. I say seems to discuss this, because upon finishing this book a reader may have one of two reactions, depending on one's political, religious, spiritual or existential bent. One, the book is a historical treatise on the aforementioned sinister forces that weave their way through American life, and have since pre-colonial days--The Salem Witch Trials, secret societies and early paranoid groups. Two, that the state of American education, then and now, is sadly lacking in its ability to simply teach people to think for themselves. Mr. Walker, to his credit, avoids critique of the various conspiracy theories. He cites them as arriving either from above, below, within or without, but backs away from open criticism of the ongoing motivations of their adherents. His pursuit is almost journalistic in its reporting on and unpacking the various conspiracies and their originators. For anyone interested in the genesis and plausible reason for longevity of everything from the aforementioned

Witch Trials, to the never-ending Kennedy Assassination theories, this book is for you. From Macarthyism, to 9/11 and subsequent anthrax scares, Ruby Ridge, Waco and on and on, Americans seem to demand some alternate explanation for what happens to us, a perplexing obsession with hidden meanings and opaque 'truth.' And those diversions into mystery often take us places where truth, for the seeker, becomes exactly the opposite of what was first reported, thus conjuring a new, more attractive plot. The book's only shortcoming may be that the author failed to include the one truly plausible reason many of those conspiracy buffs and purveyors promoted their crackpot theories, and that is the other oh so American habit of commodifying everything for monetary gain. If one is so inclined, there may well be evil lurking in the $$$ sign as well, but if a theory fills one's pockets, then it's worth promoting. Nonetheless, The U.S. of Paranoia is a satisfying study of why people choose to believe the sinister over the apparent, and why paranoia seems to be a national sport.
Byron Edgington, author of The Sky Behind Me, a Memoir of Flying and Life

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Rob says

Overall, this is a very good book. Its strength lies in its demonstration that the conspiracy theory is not a modern paranoia, but a constant throughout American history (and, presumably, human history, though that is beyond the scope of the book), and further demonstrates that those paranoias are just as often held by elites and not just common folks. It is an excellent catalog of paranoias throughout American history, but too often it just mentions insights about these paranoias in passing and doesn't take the time to fully develop the implications. Sometimes, the cataloging can get a bit wearying.

The book is at its strongest when dealing with historical eras. It has some significant failings when it gets closer to the present day. The Watergate chapter is especially superficial. With more recent decades, Walker, an editor for the libertarian *Reason* magazine, is so dedicated to his thesis that modern conspiracy movements are a synthesis of all parts of the political spectrum and so eager to absolve the right-wing for its reputation for extremism that he glosses over the excesses of the militia movement. He buys into their own propaganda about being merely against government thuggery and gives them pretty much a pass on race, despite amply documentation regarding their racism. Nowhere to be found is a mention of the Turner Diaries. He also gives right-wing politicians a pass. In sections about earlier decades, he highlights the elites who peddle conspiracies, but in the 90s he thunders against Democrats blaming the GOP for extremism, taking the mendacious Dick Morris at face value that Clinton was engaged in deliberate McCarthyism, and totally ignoring GOP politicians like Steve Stockman and Helen Chenoweth-Hage who peddled their own conspiracies about Waco and black helicopters. And not a single word about anti-gun control conspiracy theories that have dominated right-wing discourse in the last few decades.

The strongest sections: The section on Native Americans stood out for me, but that might be perhaps the idea of connecting it to conspiracy paranoia was fresh to me. Walker also excels describing the hucksterism of John Todd, who peddled conspiracies about Satanism and the Illuminati to gullible Christians in the 80s, and the conspiracy satirists like Paul Krassner and Robert Anton Wilson, whom Walker clearly appears to identify with, or at least admire.

Pavol Hardos says

Excellent. A history of United States as told through its tales of fear and paranoia. Often unnerving,

occasionally hilarious, always fascinating, Walker takes us on a sweeping ride through the history - from the Indian wars to the Birther movement. One main takeaway from the book is that conspiratorial ideation is much more prevalent then we might think and Walker does a great job of explaining and categorizing various forms of paranoid thinking. He makes a forceful case for recognizing that paranoid style of thinking is not limited to the fringes and does not belong solely to one part of the political spectrum, but can be found almost anywhere, from a militia bunker in the woods, to the halls of government and media.

Sean Owen says

Paranoia in American culture is a topic worthy of a lengthy book. If one were writing such a book in the current political moment it would feel impossible to finish. You'd feel like you got to a good stopping point only to have the latest piece of paranoia pop up on the news. Unfortunately "The United States of Paranoia" isn't up to the task. Walker struggles with his early American history and reaches for little read and sometimes unpublished manuscripts in attempts to shows strains of American culture. What's worst is his insistence on labeling everything. There can't just be a indication of paranoia it must fall into one of his big 3 labeled and capitalized categories of above, below and within. Within those categories he further categorizes things whenever the opportunity presents itself like with red scares and brown scares. I'd love to see a more capable writer take on the subject.

Grady says

Examining the American obsession with conspiracy theories

Jesse Walker holds a curious mirror up to us in this complex and fascinating book about conspiracy theories that daily make the headlines in the media and indicate a sustainable past history of how Americans fear secret cabals. It is an interesting and entertaining investigation of the core of paranoid thinking that has its beginnings centuries ago and persists to the present.

As Walker dissects our history he explains how we Americans have heard so many stories describing Nazis, communists and homosexuals nefariously and secretly trying to take over our government, our minds and our bodies to the extent that we began to see them everywhere. ‘In an earlier era, we feared murderous slaves and libidinous Native American kidnappers. And more recently: UFOs and satanic nursery schools. This is a book about America's demons. Many of those demons are imaginary, but all of them have truths to tell us. A conspiracy story that catches on becomes a form of folklore. It says something true about the anxieties and experiences of the people who believe and repeat it …’

‘Americans fear mobs: They are the dark force lurking inside "Enemy Below" conspiracy theories, a "primal myths". Over time, blacks, immigrant laborers and Jewish radicals have all been the protagonists in imagined "Enemy Below" conspiracy theories. A mythical group of black intellectuals called "The Organization" was said to be behind the 1965 Watts riots.’

Walker is willing to attack the sacred cows of the right and left with equal amounts of intelligence and flair. He is a tireless and thorough researcher. He takes on subjects as disparate as the hysteria that followed Orson Welles’ radio broadcast ‘The War of the Worlds’, the controversy of the Kennedy assassination, the findings when Osama Ben Laden was captured, etc. He also states an obvious fact many skeptics are unwilling to

accept: Behind just about every conspiracy theory there is also, more often than not, a grain of truth. As a writer Walker is erudite yet immensely readable. He quotes such phrases as ‘semiotically aroused’: ‘To be "semiotically aroused" is to fall under the influence of signs and symbols. A few weeks after the 9/11 attacks, the constant broadcast of images of Islamic extremists caused such a spell to overcome several otherwise rational people in Tyler, Texas. An object made with wires and duct tape was found in a mailbox. Believing it was a weapon of mass destruction, the authorities called in the bomb squad. An entire neighborhood was evacuated. The object turned out to be an 8-year-old boy's homemade flashlight, built for his science class.’

This book proves to be both provocative and entertaining, and the manner in which the reader absorbs it depends on the intellectual and emotional construct of each reader. It is a fascinating new work.

Grady Harp

Peter Mcloughlin says

Jesse Walker a writer for the Libertarian skeptic magazine Reason has put together a book on political paranoia in American politics. Unlike Richard Hofstadter "the Paranoid Style in American Politics" Walker doesn't merely focus on paranoia as a phenomenon of the fringe but instead practiced by the centrist mainstream as well throughout American history. He outlines the five forms conspiracy theories take (enemy from outside, enemy as neighbor, enemy from below, enemy from above, and benign conspiracies). He goes on to spend half the book on conspiracy theories since the 1970s and the watershed of Watergate. I like walkers values of skepticism he brings to the subject of conspiracy theories in American politics even if I don't share his libertarian world view. This is a valuable treatment on the centrality of paranoia in politics even if I feel he scrutinizes the left more heavily than warranted. It is also a fun read. Like reading Umberto Eco's Foucault's Pendulum if he decided to write about American history instead of fiction.
