

The View from the Bridge

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Thanks to Nick Must (in particular) and Garrick Alder for editorial and proof-reading assistance with this issue of Lobster.

Is this a conspiracy theory I see before me?

At the Cambridge Conspiracy and Democracy project, researchers are trying to quantify belief in conspiracy theories – apparently without much thinking about what a conspiracy theory actually is. On a recent blog on their site¹ Dr. Hugo Leal wrote:

‘Researchers also looked at a number of other popular conspiracy theories. Both Trump and Brexit voters were more likely to believe that climate change is a hoax, vaccines are harmful, and that a group of people “secretly control events and rule the world together”’.

The numbers who believe that climate change is a hoax, that there is a conspiracy of scientists to promote climate change theories *which they know to be false*, is declining, even in the Republican Party.² That it exists at all is explicable: the US coal and oil companies employed people to propagate that it was a hoax, and their views were reported seriously by right-wing US media, such as Fox News.

The vaccine story is completely different. Some people believe vaccines are potentially harmful. And in a small number of cases vaccines *are* harmful. No-one is arguing that they are completely benign. The argument has always been that the risk to a tiny number of individuals is justified by the wider positive effects of vaccination. So where are these vaccine conspiracy theories?

¹ <<https://tinyurl.com/ycdfe6ne>> or <<https://www.cam.ac.uk/research/news/brexit-and-trump-voters-more-likely-to-believe-in-conspiracy-theories-survey-study-shows>>

² See <<https://tinyurl.com/yc5848cg>> or <<http://oxfordre.com/climatescience/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228620.001.0001/acrefore-9780190228620-e-328>> which cites a 2013 study that found that 20% thought climate change was a hoax by scientists who wanted more government research money.

I asked Google and top of their list was 'A brief history of vaccine conspiracy theories'³ – in which there is an interesting account of the history of anti-vaccine thinking in the US, but a striking absence of conspiracy theories.

In the case of vaccines the use of 'conspiracy theory' is inappropriate. What is being described is people who do not accept the consensus view, who are sceptics. Indeed, 'A brief history of vaccine conspiracy theories' is subheaded 'Vaccine skepticism is as old as the idea of inoculation itself'.

Although the term 'conspiracy theory' has been traced back to the 19th century,⁴ its contemporary usage probably stems from the notorious 1967 memo from the CIA to all its assets advising them how to combat the critics of the Warren Commission Report by labelling their claims as 'conspiracy theories'.⁵ The Conspiracy and Democracy project people are in danger of following the line in that CIA memo: anything which challenges conventional views is a conspiracy theory.

Why are conspiracy theories increasingly popular? Some of us were asking this question twenty plus years ago. The answer then seemed obvious: the immediate cause was the world-wide popularity of the tv programme *The X-Files*, whose content included many conspiracy theories. The underlying reasons I discussed in a talk I gave in 1997.⁶

'In my view the the proliferation of conspiracy theories [in America] . . . is the result three things: the failing US empire; recent developments in reprographic and communication technologies; and the actual events in US political history since the sixties.

First the failing US empire. The American Dream is faltering. At best, real wage rates are no higher than they were twenty years ago for many of the working-class in America. For many they are lower. There are thousands of homeless people on the streets of all the big American cities. The gap between the top strata in the US and the bottom is wider than it has been since the war, and getting wider every year. In my view this is the predictable – and predicted – consequence of the infantile free market economic theories of the Reagan-Bush and Thatcher regimes; but whatever view is taken of the causes of this, things are not going

³ <<https://psmag.com/news/a-brief-history-of-vaccine-conspiracy-theories>>

⁴ See <<https://tinyurl.com/yc4m24mv>> or <<https://www.metabunk.org/debunked-the-cia-invented-the-term-conspiracy-theory-in-1967-with-memo-1035-960.t960/>>.

⁵ Full text at <<http://www.jfklancer.com/CIA.html>>.

That memo, 'Concerning Criticism of the Warren Report', included the line 'Conspiracy theories have frequently thrown suspicion on our organization, for example by falsely alleging that Lee Harvey Oswald worked for us.'

⁶ At the Edinburgh International Science Festival. This was reproduced in Robin Ramsay, *Politics and Paranoia* (Hove: Picnic Publishing, 2008).

according to plan for many white Americans, and they need to explain this to themselves.

You can see the change reflected in the US accounts of encounters with extra-terrestrials. In the 1950s, when the US empire was booming, and the average white American consumer was experiencing increasing material prosperity, the extra-terrestrials reportedly contacting the America citizen, were overwhelmingly benign. Now that the US empire is falling apart and sections of the big American cities are turning into war zones, the skies over America at night are apparently – apparently – bustling with Alien Rapists, beaming down into peoples' bedrooms to scoop them up and take them away for extended sessions of sexual abuse, forced copulation and experiments. In the 1950s white America had blue skies. Today they have dark skies.⁷

Surveys regularly report that only around 2% of adult Americans read books of any kind. As you discover when you visit the place, most American newspapers and magazines barely mention the outside world, and the primary source of information for most Americans is television. But most American television simply does not deal with real political and economic issues in enough depth for the average American citizen to understand something as complicated as the economic decline of a great power. The average American knows things are going wrong – but not why. Not only are the information and the concepts they need not readily available, they are handicapped in their ability to understand the world by the power of the American myth. America, after all, is the country of manifest destiny, bearing the shining torch of freedom and democracy, the land of the brave and the home of the free. Most importantly and most damaging, America is a country in which anyone can make it and become rich if they try hard enough. So deeply ingrained is this America myth, most Americans simply find it impossible to believe that there is something wrong with their economic and social system. But if the system is fine, and things are going wrong what is causing the problem? The answer is, of course, that things are going wrong because of the actions of . . . bad people. And not only must there be somebody to blame for their problems, they're doing it behind everybody's backs. This must be the case because most people can't see them doing it! The essence of the standard conspiracy theory is this: somebody's behind our troubles and behind the scenes.

Most conspiracy theories provide a simple explanation: things are going wrong because of X. Of course the X changes. Different groups are scapegoated. Since the 19th century the Freemasons, Catholics, and the

⁷ *Dark Skies* was the name of a 1996/7 spin-off from *The X-Files*. See <<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0115151/>>.

Jews have been blamed by significant sections of the American population; and there were great anti-communist witch-hunts after each World War. There are obvious similarities between today's conspiracy theories portraying America threatened by extraterrestrial aliens, and the post WW1 and WW2 scares that aliens – immigrants from Europe, with socialist beliefs, after WW1; a secret network of communist agents after WW2 – were threatening America. It is also striking that the recent explosion of stories about alien abductions and UFO flaps in America have coincided with the collapse of the great Red Menace.

Most conspiracy theories come from white people. There are some distinctively black conspiracy theories: enough for an American academic to write a book about them a couple of years ago. Currently a large section of African Americans appear to believe that the CIA was deliberately selling crack cocaine to them to finance the war against Nicaragua. But American conspiracy theories seem to be primarily a white phenomenon; and primarily a white male phenomenon (though there are some prominent women); and primarily a working-class or blue collar rather than middle- or upper-class male phenomenon. It may be simply that the middle-class is too educated to believe the crazier large-scale conspiracy theories, and the upper-class too close to real power to believe them.

The second factor in the rapid spread of conspiracy theories is technology. When I first became aware of US conspiracy theories in the 1970s, the type-generating Apple Mac and the FAX had not been invented, photocopiers were expensive machines which still used rolls of coated paper, and newspapers and magazines were still set in metal type. In those days the amateur publication looked like an amateur publication. It was simply too expensive to make it to look professional. These days about £500, maybe less, will buy second-hand computer kit with which it is possible to make your copy look like *The Times*, if you want to. And there are fax machines, cheap telephones and, most of all the Internet. Today, for a relatively small outlay, almost anybody can put their theories up on the Internet and wait for people to browse through them, pick them up and pass them on.⁸ Any old nonsense gets posted on the Net. To some extent the spread of conspiracy theories has been brought about by communication technology. Even I've got a Website.

The third, and I think most important factor is a shift that has taken place in our perception of the real world; behind conspiracy theories are real events. In 1963 conspiracy theorists as we now think of them were a tiny minority in both Britain and America whose views were rarely

⁸ This, obviously, was written before the development of social media and its instant distribution facility.

if ever reported in the mass media of the day. In 1964 an American journalist came to Britain and surveyed what he called in the title of the subsequent book, *The British Political Fringe*. On the far right he found the neo-nazis, Oswald Mosley, and the League of Empire Loyalists, a little group semi-detached from the right of the Tory Party. All of these groups believed in variants of the Jewish conspiracy theory; that is that the Jews controlled the world's financial system. But their combined membership was only a few thousand. In America at the same time there was the US Nazi Party, some racists groups in the southern states such as the States Rights Party, and the John Birch Society. The latter was most famous – or notorious – for the claim by its founder that President Eisenhower was a conscious agent of the communist conspiracy. Of these US groups the Birchers, as they were known, were the most significant with two congressmen who were associated with them.

The shift began in the 1960s. And no wonder. American history since the 60s has been a long succession of assassinations and conspiracies. The three most important left of centre politicians, the Kennedy brothers and Martin Luther King, were assassinated – none of them by the assassin identified by the authorities. Some of the leadership of the Black Panthers was murdered – and it was revealed a decade later, largely as a result of a conspiracy by the FBI. Then came Watergate and the various revelations trailing in its wake of widespread surveillance and covert operations by the FBI and the CIA. And there was the war in Vietnam. After 1980 began the various intelligence, military, and financial scandals – conspiracies – of the Reagan-Bush era, of which the secret financing of the war against the Nicaraguan government by illegally selling arms to Iran was just the most prominent. In other words, from the assassinations of the 1960's through to Iran-Contra and the other Reagan-Bush horrors in the 1980s, events have revealed major governmental conspiracies which have made it impossible for the powers-that-be to maintain the line that such things just don't happen.

Fifty years of secrecy, lies, media manipulation and covert operations are coming back to bite the legs of the elite managers of American society and politics. A large number of US citizens no longer believe government statements about anything; and a significant minority believe the federal government capable of any calumny, up to and including planning to brainwash its citizenry, detonating the bomb in Oklahoma to give itself a pretext for pushing draconian anti-terrorism laws through Congress, and even organising a secret conspiracy with extraterrestrial beings begun in the late 1940s.'

Mind control

The Black Vault website has recently added at least 1500 pages of declassified documents from the CIA's MK Ultra program.⁹ The *Daily Mail* spotted a document in that collection which described inserting electrodes into dogs' skulls to manipulate their behaviour.¹⁰ It is but a relatively small step from there to trying it out on humans – as was done to Robert Naeslund in Sweden a few years later. Odds must be good that this was MK Ultra outsourced to one of the CIA's allies.

Not even close. No cigar.

Reviewing Rory Cormac's book in the previous issue¹¹ reminded me that I had an earlier book of his (co-authored with Richard Aldrich) that I hadn't read: *The Black Door: Spies, Secret Intelligence and British Prime Ministers*.¹² This is noteworthy because its academic authors take on the parapolitics of the Wilson and Thatcher years. Of course I turned immediately to their account of 1974-76, the so-called 'Wilson plots' episode. While they do a decent job, sketching in the 'private armies' events, rumours of coups and machinations by the likes of Brian Crozier, they fail the Colin Wallace test.¹³ There is no reference to Information Policy, IRD in Northern Ireland, or Paul Foot's book *Who Framed Colin Wallace?* They do, however, quote former Northern Ireland Minister, Merlyn Rees, speaking in 1993, on the existence of a 'dirty tricks campaign in Northern Ireland . . . included a list of politicians of all parties'. I wondered what had been removed from the quote and looked it up. The full quote is below; the deleted words have been italicised:

'With regard to Northern Ireland, I discovered that the "dirty tricks" campaign in Northern Ireland – *I possess the papers now though I did not have them at the time* – included a list of politicians in all parties. They are listed under the headings of sex, politics and finance. It is the most

⁹ <<https://www.theblackvault.com/documentarchive/cia-mkultra-collection/#behavioral>>

¹⁰ <<https://tinyurl.com/y7Irrrew>> or <<https://www.dailymail.co.uk/sciencetech/article-6487023/CIA-used-mind-control-experiments-dogs-humans-1960s.html>>

¹¹ <<https://www.lobster-magazine.co.uk/free/lobster76/lob76-disrupt-and-deny.pdf>>

¹² London: Collins, 2016

¹³ For anyone new to this material, a sense of its complexity can be got from reading just one of the many House of Commons statements on this subject by the late Tam Dalyell MP. Try <<https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm198990/cmhansrd/1990-07-12/Debate-20.html>>.

Another – longer and better – academic reevaluation of 'the Wilson plots' is Jon Moran's 'Conspiracy and Contemporary History: Revisiting MI5 and the Wilson Plot[s]' at <<https://ira.le.ac.uk/bitstream/2381/29016/7/MoranHaroldWilson.pdf>>.

illiterate rubbish that I have ever read, even worse than that found in some of our national newspapers. It was quite extraordinary. A psych-ops operation was run against politicians in the south and politicians in Northern Ireland. It is no way to win the battle of Northern Ireland, let alone to get involved in politics here.’¹⁴

Rees was speaking in the House of Lords in 1993, three years after the government had admitted that Wallace did have a psy-ops role in Northern Ireland. And these ‘papers’ Rees possessed are obviously Colin Wallace’s handwritten notes for *Clockwork Orange 2*.¹⁵ The authors immediately follow the Rees quote with this:

‘Like that of Peter Wright, the evidence from Wallace has been partly discredited. He was forced out of the Ministry of Defence in 1975, and later imprisoned for the manslaughter of a colleague’s husband. Although the conviction was quashed, *leading to rumours* that Wallace was framed, his reputation never recovered’ (p. 324). (emphasis added)

No examples of his evidence being ‘discredited’ are offered and I have no idea to what they are referring. In his 1989 *Who Framed Colin Wallace?*, the late Paul Foot showed that Wallace had been framed, *seven years before* his conviction was quashed, not after it. As for his reputation, as soon as the Thatcher government admitted in 1990 that Wallace had been telling the truth about his psy-ops role – hitherto officially denied – the sections of the major media which were aware of the Wallace story simply assumed that he had been telling the truth about everything – as did Merlyn Rees, by the sounds of it. For example, the BBC began using part of a film that BBC2’s *Newsnight* had made about Wallace in 1986, while he was still in prison. This had been pulled just before broadcast by the then Deputy Director of the BBC, Alan Protheroe.¹⁶ Prior to 1990 the BBC were denying the film even existed. Nothing of what Wallace has been talking and writing about for almost 40 years has been rebutted and he – and Fred Holroyd – have become go-to sources for the media on Northern Ireland in the 1970s.

Having marginalised and misrepresented Wallace’s evidence of an MI5 conspiracy against Wilson, on p. 327 the authors conclude ‘there is certainly no evidence confirming that an *organised* MI5 conspiracy against Wilson existed.’ (emphasis added) What role does the word ‘organised’ have in that

¹⁴ <<https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/lords/1993/dec/09/intelligence-services-bill-hl>>

¹⁵ Those hand-written notes and copies of some of the anti-Labour forgeries from this period are reproduced at the end of Paul Foot’s *Who Framed Colin Wallace?* (London: Macmillan, 1989).

¹⁶ Protheroe was also an information officer with the Territorial Army, specialising in media-military relations, and presumably had a good idea of what Wallace and Information Policy had been doing in Northern Ireland.

sentence? As opposed to a disorganised, unorganised conspiracy? Perhaps they mean official but, for some reason, don't want to use the word.

The authors refer to the Barrie Penrose and Roger Courtiour book, *The Pencourt File*, which began with interviews given to them by Harold Wilson just after he resigned as prime minister in 1976. But the authors have missed – or have omitted – the fact that in 2006, during a BBC documentary on 'the Wilson plots', Barrie Penrose said that in 1976 Harold Wilson had steered him and Roger Courtiour towards Colin Wallace but they had not contacted him.¹⁷ This gives rise to an interesting 'what if?' What if Penrose and Courtiour *had* contacted Wallace in 1976/7 and been told then the things that didn't begin to emerge until a decade later? It is just possible that we might have avoided Mrs Thatcher. . . .

So who told Harold Wilson about Colin Wallace? Probably SIS chief, Maurice Oldfield, whom Wilson was seeing occasionally in this period.

Here comes 5G

Despite a fair bit of evidence showing that the microwave radiation associated with mobile phones does produce cancers,¹⁸ there was no significant campaign against the introduction of 4G (fourth generation) – just a few Jeremiahs on the sidelines. Now 5G approaches – bigger, and better and faster and more powerful. But it will require bigger and more numerous transmitters, producing more powerful radiation. This time the alarm bells have begun to ring rather early.¹⁹ Of course, nothing will stop it. The lobbying power of the big electronics companies will overwhelm whatever medical protests there are.

A nice man?

Considering his roles in the American military-intelligence system, the

¹⁷ The documentary concerned was discussed at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/4789060.stm> and a somewhat poor copy of the programme is available on YouTube at <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oG6FR03BqIQ>> [specifically the section from 00:56:33 - 01:00:30]. This shows Wilson trying to steer Penrose and Courtier towards 'a Ministry of Defence press officer'. Wallace also confirms he knew Courtier 'from my time in Northern Ireland' and would, thus, have felt confident to brief them as necessary.

In an e-mail to me about this on 17 December 2018 Colin Wallace wrote: 'Barrie [Penrose] did tell me that although Wilson mentioned me by name when he and Roger Courtiour met with him, they became sidetracked by other aspects of the story and failed to contact me.'

¹⁸ See, for example, <<https://tinyurl.com/yb2hepak>> or <<https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/new-studies-link-cell-phone-radiation-with-cancer/>>.

¹⁹ See <<https://tinyurl.com/y95j4ov5>> or <<https://www.salon.com/2018/12/03/why-public-health-experts-are-worried-about-5g-the-next-generation-of-cell-network/>>. Search for '5G danger' on YouTube.

outpouring of affection and nostalgia for George H W Bush at the time of his death and funeral was nauseating. Succinct summaries of the Bush horrors can be found at Truthout²⁰ and Consortiumnews.²¹

So routine is Uncle Sam's global violence, it can be difficult to hang on to the sense of outrage that it should produce. Every once in a while I stumble across a report which brings me up short again. This is the most recent to do so.

'Throughout the Second Indochina War (1964-1973) more than 580,000 bombing missions (or a bombing mission every 8 minutes, 24 hours a day, for 9 years) and wide ranging ground battles, led to over 2 million tons of ordnance being dropped on Laos. Over 270 million cluster munitions were used, of which there are an estimated 80 million malfunctioned [sic] and remained live and buried in the Lao landscape after the war's end.'²²

80 *million* unexploded cluster bombs

This is the system to which George H W Bush devoted much of his adult life. Never mind 'What a decent guy he was (in comparison to Trump)' which we got from the mainstream media in the Anglosphere. Like all the other senior administrators of the American military-intelligence system, Bush was a mass murderer.

Annie Machon

Regular readers of these pages will have noticed that my focus these days is rarely on the British intelligence and security complex. To try and keep minimally informed of what is going on in those fields, among the sites I look at is that of former MI5 officer Annie Machon.²³ She spoke at Hull University a couple of years ago after a showing of the film about the NSA whistle-blower, William Binney, *A Good American*.²⁴ She was rather impressive: intelligent, confident and articulate. In the predictably stodgy Q and A which followed – the predominantly student audience had almost nothing to say or ask – I lobbed her a question about the House of Commons Intelligence and Security Committee which allowed her to run a number of well-rehearsed points of her thesis about the spooks and democracy. Machon is still fighting the good fight.

²⁰ <<https://truthout.org/articles/i-will-not-speak-kindly-of-the-dead-bush-was-detestable/>>

²¹ <<https://consortiumnews.com/2018/12/05/the-bushes-death-squads/>>

²² <<http://www.nra.gov/la/uxoproblem.html>> Yes, that clunky sentence is in the original.

²³ <<https://anniemachon.ch>>

²⁴ Now on Youtube at <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=666wsDcoNrU>>.

Prescience

In 2011 retiring Republican pol Mike Lofgren wrote this:

'It should have been evident to clear-eyed observers that the Republican Party is becoming less and less like a traditional political party in a representative democracy and becoming more like an apocalyptic cult, or one of the intensely ideological authoritarian parties of 20th century Europe.'²⁵

Militarising the weather

In 'Weather weapons: the dark world of environmental warfare' in *Lobster* 62,²⁶ T. J. Coles described in great detail US military attempts to 'own the weather'. Now it has been reported that China and Russia are going down the same path in joint operations.²⁷ Given their ostensible military and political rivalry, these joint operations by China and Russia are striking.

²⁵ Mike Lofgren, 'Goodbye to All That: Reflections of a GOP Operative Who Left the Cult' <<https://tinyurl.com/y8w7g7z9>> or <<https://truthout.org/articles/goodbye-to-all-that-reflections-of-a-gop-operative-who-left-the-cult/>>

²⁶ <<https://www.lobster-magazine.co.uk/free/lobster62/lob62-weather-wars.pdf>>

²⁷ 'China And Russia Have Run Controversial Experiments That Modified Earth's Atmosphere' at <<https://tinyurl.com/ybe3z775>> or <<https://www.sciencealert.com/china-and-russia-conducted-controversial-experiments-that-modified-earth-s-atmosphere>>