

Birthers, Truthers, and Buffs: The Paranoid Style

By Jefferson Flanders

The tone and tactics of the Birther movement—those who dispute Barack Obama’s American citizenship and consequently, his legitimacy as America’s 44th president—are eerily familiar. Birthers embody that mixture of “heated exaggeration, suspiciousness, and conspiratorial fantasy” that historian Richard Hofstadter indelibly called the “Paranoid Style in American Politics.”[\[1\]](#)

But before the liberal-left chortles too loudly about the GOP being in thrall to this ragtag group of right-wingers, it would do well to remember its own problems with conspiracy theorists. Truthers and Buffs are the liberal-left’s own variations on Birthers. Truthers, of course, claim that Bush administration neo-conservatives engineered the 9/11 attacks in 2001, while Buffs have long asserted US government complicity in the 1963 assassination of President Kennedy.[\[2\]](#) As Hofstadter rightly noted in this 1964 essay, “[M]ovements of suspicious discontent” are common to both ends of the political spectrum.[\[3\]](#)

Birthers began the Obama citizenship controversy in 2008 with a series of lawsuits challenging the Illinois senator’s eligibility to run for president, arguing that Obama had not proved he was a natural-born citizen as required by Article II, Section 1 of the Constitution. Both FactCheck.org and the *Chicago Tribune* quickly debunked the claim that Obama had been born in Kenya after reviewing Obama’s Hawaii certification of live birth; subsequently, the court challenges were dismissed by properly skeptical judges.[\[4\]](#)

Yet the Birthers refused to admit defeat. Indeed, like Truthers and Buffs before them, and in keeping with Hofstadter’s description of the Paranoid Style’s methodology, the curt dismissal of their claim mainly served to generate new theories. Now they argued that Obama’s release of the short-form certification of live birth was a ruse and a way of hiding his foreign origin. The long-form “vault birth certificate,” a document which includes the attending doctor’s name and hospital, and from which health officials prepare the shorter form, supposedly contained the real truth.

When Rush Limbaugh and CNN’s Lou Dobbs offered a national platform for these percolating allegations, the controversy achieved critical mass and became part of the daily news agenda. Left-leaning websites like Daily Kos and the Huffington Post mocked conservative Republicans who were slow to disavow Birthers because they feared alienating core supporters. Other liberal commentators chimed in by observing that Republicans’ receptivity to Birthers’ claims was proof that racist and nativist fears had captured the GOP. Seeking to accentuate the Republicans’ discomfort, Congressional

Democrats gleefully proposed a resolution proclaiming Hawaii as President Obama's birthplace, and it passed unanimously on July 27. A Daily Kos/Research 2000 poll released a few days later showed that only 42 percent of Republicans believed Obama had been born in the United States.[\[5\]](#)

Curiously, all this occurred even while many high-profile conservative pundits, like Michelle Malkin, Ann Coulter, Michael Medved, and Bill O'Reilly, who usually set the table for the right-wing, were branding Birther claims as ludicrous, and an unwelcome distraction from the debate over Obama's health care initiative.[\[6\]](#) Some conservatives blamed Democrats, aided and abetted by a ratings-hungry media, for stoking the controversy. James Kirchick of the New York *Daily News* argued that the impetus for coverage of the Birthers came from liberals ". . . bent on portraying their conservative opponents as extremists—and changing the subject to help a president under increasing scrutiny for the substance of his policies . . ." [\[7\]](#)

Certainly, the extent of mainstream media coverage of the Birther movement in July was surprising, considering how little credibility its leading proponents have. Lawyer and dentist Orly Taitz, author Jerome Corsi, lawyer Philip J. Berg, and perennial candidate Alan Keyes are notorious for advancing Paranoid Style-conspiracy theories. Berg, a former deputy attorney general of Pennsylvania, had filed an Obama eligibility lawsuit (dismissed) and a RICO lawsuit (dismissed) against President George W. Bush alleging his complicity in the 9/11 attacks. Corsi has embraced the 9/11 and the JFK assassination conspiracy theories and was co-author of the anti-John Kerry book *Unfit for Command*, one of the opening salvos in what became known as the Swiftboating of the Massachusetts senator. In April, Keyes publicly warned that the Obama administration would stage terror attacks in order to declare martial law and establish a police state.[\[8\]](#)

Indeed, while de-legitimizing Obama greatly appeals to the far right, several prominent Birthers have only a tenuous connection with the Republican Party: Corsi is a member of the Constitution Party; Keyes ran for President on the America's Independent Party ticket; and Berg, a Democrat, supported Hillary Clinton's presidential candidacy in 2008.[\[9\]](#)

Elements of the Paranoid Style

From the start, Birthers' modus operandi has matched the classic Paranoid Style. Those elements include:

- The belief that powerful hidden forces conspire to shape events and/or seize power.

For Birthers, those hidden forces include the Obama White House, the governor of Hawaii, other Hawaii state officials and the news media. For the 9/11 Truthers, the grand conspiracy involved the White House, FAA, NORAD, the CIA, FBI, National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST), the Mossad, the mainstream media, and a host of

other enablers. But if the Truthers' scenario seems hopelessly complicated, it still takes a backseat to JFK assassination theories. They are fiendishly complex and implicate so many players (Cubans working for the CIA, Mafia hitmen, Texas right-wing oil men, the Federal Reserve, the KGB, Fidel Castro, Lyndon Johnson, J. Edgar Hoover, Richard Nixon, George H.W. Bush, etc.) that it's hard to keep track exactly who was supposed to have done what.

While conspiracies do exist, they generally involve small groups of dedicated people focused on a single, or discrete, action or outcome, viz., the conspiracy to cover-up the Watergate break-in. They can be kept secret although usually not for too long. What distinguishes real conspiracies from the Paranoid Style-conspiracy theories is simplicity. Real conspiracies conform to the principle of parsimony described in Occam's razor: the idea that "one should not increase, beyond what is necessary, the number of entities required to explain anything." A fundamental flaw in Paranoid Style-thinking is that it presupposes that large numbers of people will go along with illegal or immoral covert activities and remain silent.

- The rejection of evidence that doesn't match their preferred conspiracy theory and invention of evidence that does.

Since they believe they possess the hidden truth, conspiracy theorists will ignore, or will seek to discredit, whatever information surfaces to contradict their thesis. That Honolulu's two major newspapers carried birth notices for Barack Obama in August 1961; that state records show Obama was born on Oahu on August 4, 1961; and that the name of the attending obstetrician (Dr. Rodney T. West) has been reported doesn't faze Birthers—they argue these are fabrications meant to create a false record.[\[10\]](#)

Similarly, 9/11 Truthers have spent years attacking scientific studies that show how jetliners crashing into the World Trade Center towers led to their collapse. Instead, they cling fiercely to the idea that controlled demolition, not the actions of Al Qaeda terrorists, brought down the buildings as part of a "false flag" operation.[\[11\]](#) Meanwhile, the endless creativity of JFK Buffs is a testament to human imagination. For decades Abraham Zapruder's home movie of the assassination was thought to hold the key, and scoured for clues. Now, however, there is an entire "alterationist" school of thought that argues the film was doctored as part of the government's cover-up.[\[12\]](#)

- A focus on uncovering inconsistencies or errors in the official account, or discovering "incriminating" details that "prove" the conspiracy.

Conspiracy theorists often seize on the most arcane minutiae (the proverbial "smoking gun") in support of their preferred explanation. Thus, Birthers quickly focused on details from Obama's 1961 certification of live birth, hoping to brand it as a forgery. Why did it identify his father as an African, not as a Negro, unlike other certifications from the period? Why didn't it resemble other certificates from 1961? In response, Hawaiian health officials explained that Obama's father had chosen the African description for his

race, and the Obama's certification paperwork was consistent with other 1961 documents.[\[13\]](#) But that didn't matter.

Truthers, meanwhile, have focused on videos of the World Trade Center attack and subsequent collapse of the buildings, claiming to find visual evidence of missiles or high energy weapons or puffs of smoke from demolition charges. Some even assert the planes weren't real, but projected holograms.[\[14\]](#) And then there are those supposed shots from the grassy knoll . . . phantom gunmen firing bullets that magically disappeared.

- An often-sophisticated use of the media to spread the word. The Internet has allowed the real-time viral connection of like-minded conspiracy buffs.

Birthers initially turned to radical Right websites like WorldNetDaily (WND) and Prison Planet.com (which is run by serial conspiracy-monger Alex Jones), and to sympathetic right-wing talk show hosts like Rush Limbaugh, Michael Savage, Lars Larson, Bob Grant, and G. Gordon Liddy (now there's someone who knows about conspiracies!).[\[15\]](#) They moved up the media food chain to cable news with Lou Dobbs and CNN, prompting MSNBC and Fox News to cover the Birthers. The networks and elite newspapers followed, making the Obama citizenship "debate" a national, if not global, story.

The 9/11 Truthers have employed books, websites, seminars, and a popular YouTube video, "[Loose Change](#)," to hawk their vision of an "inside job." Still, the model for injecting conspiracy theories into the mainstream started with the JFK Buffs.[\[16\]](#) Beginning with [Mark Lane](#)'s carnival barker-like lectures in 1964, thousands of books, articles, newsletters, conferences, films, and seminars have kept the conspiracy flame burning. Nothing, perhaps, has been so powerful, however, as [Oliver Stone](#)'s muddled 1991 film JFK. It proved to be a breakthrough, in that it encouraged a whole new generation which had not experienced the event to doubt the conclusions of the Warren Commission that Lee Harvey Oswald was Kennedy's lone assassin.[\[17\]](#)

- The enlistment of mainstream political and cultural figures to lend credibility.

Birthers gained momentum, and air time, when they attracted the attention of CNN's Lou Dobbs, and, to a lesser extent, Sean Hannity of Fox News. Some conservative Republican politicians apparently let their dislike of Obama and his policies overcome their better judgment: Senator Richard Shelby of Alabama and Representative Roy Blunt of Missouri reportedly questioned Obama's citizenship, although both later claimed they had been misquoted. Congressman Bill Posey (R-Florida) introduced a bill that would require future presidential candidates to produce original birth certificates, and quickly attracted some 10 Republican co-sponsors. It was denounced, accurately, as pandering to Birthers.[\[18\]](#)

Truthers have had well-known enablers as well. A few prominent politicians, including former governors Howard Dean (D-Vermont) and Jesse Ventura (I-Minnesota), and former Representative Cynthia McKinney (D-Georgia) have repeated Truther memes,

along with such celebrity lightweights as Charlie Sheen, Rosie O'Donnell, Sean Penn, Willie Nelson, and Mark Cuban. An assortment of left-wing academics, including Princeton professor emeritus Richard A. Falk, and even some former Republican government appointees (Paul Craig Roberts, Assistant Secretary of the Treasury under President Reagan, and Morgan Reynolds, a former Labor Department economist in the George H.W. Bush administration) have also piped in.^[19]

How and why do prominent public figures allow themselves to be quoted in support of conspiracy theories? In some cases they aren't particularly well-informed, or aren't properly skeptical, or they allow ideology to overwhelm common logic. With politicians, it's also fair to say they would rather humor constituents than alienate, or level with them. Some may think they are simply being provocative. Some, sadly, appear to be delusional—Morgan Reynolds, for example, has insisted that jetliners were not involved in any of the 9/11 attacks.^[20] In any case, they give cover to the promoters of these noxious theories, allowing them to be injected into American political discourse. Acceptance of conspiracy theories makes healthy political debate difficult, if not impossible. It creates an atmosphere of enmity and suspicion. It encourages the growth of extremism, since—to take the 9/11 “inside job” theory as an example—a government that would murder its own people can hardly be trusted on anything, could it?

What Lies Ahead

Will Birthers' conspiracy theories have any shelf life? It's likely that the “Obama as alien usurper” meme will retain its power for many on the extreme Right, and an Obama re-election campaign in 2012 will surely cause the eligibility controversy to re-surface. White House spokesman Robert Gibbs is correct when he observes that nothing will convince Birthers of Obama's legitimacy.^[21] “It is useless to attempt to reason a man out of a thing he was never reasoned into,” as Jonathan Swift once observed.

Then, too, many vocal proponents will be looking to profit from the cottage industry of books, videos, seminars, and public appearances that are endemic to any good conspiracy theory. Still, Birthers can be marginalized and their fraudulent claims discredited even in the eyes of conservative Republicans doubtful about Obama. When these theories are recycled, transparency and repeated debunking are the keys. And better editorial judgment by news executives would also help—they should do nothing to lengthen the Birthers' proverbial 15 minutes.

President Obama should follow the lead of his predecessors, George W. Bush and Bill Clinton, and release more of his personal records.^[22] Access to the US government's files on the assassination was vital to disproving some JFK assassination theories, and the 9/11 Commission report and NIST studies on the World Trade Center attacks have sucked much, though not all, of the air out of the 9/11 Truth Movement.

When it comes to the Paranoid Style, sunshine is the best disinfectant.

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[1] Richard Hofstadter, "[The Paranoid Style in American Politics](#)," *Harper's Magazine*, November 1964. The "Birthers" nickname is a play on the popular tag for another group of conspiracy theorists, the 9/11 "Truth Movement," who have become known as the "Truthers." Calvin Trillin popularized the term "assassination buffs" in a 10 June 1967 *New Yorker* article, "[The Buffs](#)."

[2] Jonah Goldberg, "[Birthers of a Nation & The Paranoid Style of American Liberalism](#)," National Review Online, 5 August 2009.

[3] Hofstadter, "[The Paranoid Style](#)," November 1964. Hofstadter argued that groups shut out of political process (often because of their extremism) resort to the Paranoid Style: "Having no access to political bargaining or the making of decisions, they find their original conception that the world of power is sinister and malicious fully confirmed."

[4] "[Born in the USA: The Truth About Obama's Birth Certificate](#)," [FactCheck.org](#), 1 November 2008; James Janega, "[Obama Birth Certificate Rumor Debunked](#)," *Chicago Tribune*, 30 October 2008.

[5] "[Daily Kos/Research 2000 Poll, 27-30 July 2009](#)," [DailyKos](#).

[6] Alex Koppleman, "[The Right Bails on the Birthers](#)," *Salon*, 28 July 2009.

[7] James Kirchick, "[Liberals' Birther Obsession: It's the Left-Wing, Not the GOP, That's Pumping Up the Story](#)," *Daily News*, 5 August 2009.

[8] Paul Joseph Watson, "[Alan Keyes: Government Will Stage Terror, Declare Martial Law](#)," [PrisonPlanet](#), 21 April 2009.

[9] On Corsi, see Kenneth P. Vogel, "[Wild Theories of 'Obama Nation' Author](#)," [Politico](#), 13 August 2008. On Keyes, see [America's Independent Party](#) website. On Berg, see Jennifer Haberkorn, "[Lawsuit Questions Obama's Eligibility for Office](#)," *Washington Times*, 28 August 2008.

[10] For the identification of Dr. West, see Paula Veoll, "[Teacher from Kenmore Recalls Obama Was a Focused Student](#)," *The Buffalo News*, 20 January 2009.

[11] On the 9/11 Truth Movement and conspiracy theories, see Jefferson Flanders, "[Confronting Reality: Occam's Razor and the 9/11 'Truth Movement'](#)," [jeffersonflanders.com](#), September 2008.

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[12] Assassination buffs [Jack White](#) and [James Fetzer](#) are two of the leading proponents of the “alterationist” faction, which is a fairly recent phenomenon and considered disreputable even within the larger “research community.” Not uncoincidentally, White and Fetzer also attached themselves to the “[911 Scholars for Truth](#)” organization, one of the earliest conspiratorial groups formed in the wake of September 11.

[13] “[Born in the USA: The Truth About Obama’s Birth Certificate](#),” 1 November 2008. FactCheck.org’s investigation debunked the forgery claims:

“We received responses to some of our questions from the Hawaii Department of Health. They couldn’t tell us anything about their security paper, but they did answer another frequently-raised question: why is Obama’s father’s race listed as ‘African’? Kurt Tsue at the DOH told us that father’s race and mother’s race are supplied by the parents, and that ‘we accept what the parents self identify themselves to be.’ We consider it reasonable to believe that Barack Obama, Sr., would have thought of and reported himself as ‘African.’ It’s certainly not the slam dunk some readers have made it out to be.

When we asked about the security borders, which look different from some other examples of Hawaii certifications of live birth, Kurt said, ‘The borders are generated each time a certified copy is printed. A citation located on the bottom left hand corner of the certificate indicates which date the form was revised.’ He also confirmed that the information in the short form birth certificate is sufficient to prove citizenship for ‘all reasonable purposes.’”

See also Dan Nakaso, “[Hawaii Officials Confirm Obama’s Original Birth Certificate Still Exists](#),” *Honolulu Advertiser*, 28 July 2009.

[14] Jim Dwyer, “[2 US Reports Seek to Counter Conspiracy Theories About 9/11](#),” *New York Times*, 2 September 2006; Brendan O’Neill, “[Meet the No Planers](#),” *New Statesman*, 11 September 2006.

[15] On WND’s role in promoting the Obama citizenship controversy, see Terry Krepel, “[Joseph Farah’s Birther Factory](#),” *Huffington Post*, 7 August 2009, and Brian Seltzer, “[On Television and Radio, Talk of Obama’s Citizenship](#),” *nytimes.com*, 24 July 2009.

[16] See, for example, Alan Feuer, “[500 Conspiracy Buffs Meet to Seek the Truth of 9/11](#),” *New York Times*, 5 June 2006.

[17] For a discussion of the JFK conspiracy theory network, see Gavin Esler, “[JFK: The Simple Truth](#),” BBC News, 22 November 2003.

[18] Gabriel Winant, “[The Birthers in Congress](#),” *Salon*, 28 July 2009.

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[19] On Dean, see Timothy Noah, "[Whopper: Howard Dean](#)," *Slate*, 13 December 2003. See also "[Celebrity 9/11 Conspiracy Club Still Growing](#)," *Washington Times*, 6 March 2008.

[20] Morgan Reynolds, "[Revisiting the WTC Building Collapses, Part I](#)," [9-11 Research.com](#), 12 July 2005.

[21] Helene Cooper, "[Gibbs Slams the Birthers: Obama's a Citizen](#)," [nytimes.com](#), 27 July 2007.

[22] Bill Clinton and George W. Bush had much more extensive vetting of their personal histories during their political careers. They released more personal information during their campaigns (medical history, military records, college grades, etc.) than has Obama. As Andrew C. McCarthy pointed out July 30 in the National Review Online ("[Suborned in the USA](#)"), Obama has resisted releasing basic information about his past. McCarthy concludes: "What's wrong with saying, to a president who promised unprecedented 'transparency': Give us all the raw data and we'll figure it out for ourselves?" *The Atlantic's* Andrew Sullivan and *Salon's* Camille Paglia have urged Obama to release his long-form birth certificate.