

Five Best Books on the Conspiracy Mindset

These works help untangle the mysterious popularity of conspiracy theories

By Max Holland

1. [*The Paranoid Style in American Politics*](#)

By Richard Hofstadter, Knopf, 1965

First conceived as a university lecture, Richard Hofstadter's seminal essay—the title work in this collection—remains the place to begin any discussion of conspiracy theories. “Heated exaggeration, suspiciousness, and conspiratorial fantasy” are hallmarks of the paranoid style, writes Hofstadter (1916-70). To paranoia's purveyors, “history is a conspiracy, set in motion by demonic forces of almost transcendent power.” Hofstadter was writing about extreme right-wing groups, such as the John Birch Society, that flourished in the early 1960s. It's a pity that he is not here to analyze today's extreme leftists who promote the line that the Bush administration was behind the 9/11 terror attacks.

2. [*Enemies Within*](#)

By Robert Alan Goldberg, Yale, 2001

Of the nearly dozen books that have been published in the past decade about the rise of conspiracism, historian Robert Alan Goldberg's *Enemies Within* is unrivaled. He explores five conspiracy theories that have gained popularity in the past half-century: the cover-up of a UFO incident in Roswell, New Mexico; the plot against black America; the rise of the anti-Christ; the establishment of the New World Order; and, of course, the assassination of JFK. Goldberg expertly illuminates the political and social conditions that have allowed conspiracy-mongers, once consigned to the lunatic fringe, to creep into the mainstream.

3. [*The Lincoln Murder Conspiracies*](#)

By William Hanchett, University of Illinois, 1983

To understand conspiratorial thinking, it is instructive to study how explanations for a historical event evolve over time. No work is more useful in this regard than William Hanchett's *The Lincoln Murder Conspiracies*. Lincoln's assassination was, of course, part of a real conspiracy aimed at decapitating the federal government. Most of the schemers were caught and executed. But the chief mover, John Wilkes Booth, was killed before he could be arrested, denying the country the catharsis of a courtroom drama and a

definitive account of what occurred. Thus competing theories about the assassination began to appear. By tracing them during the century following Lincoln's death, Hanchett illustrates an immutable truth: Ultimately, conspiracy theories tell us more about their authors and about human nature than they do about the event itself.

4. [*Praise From a Future Generation*](#)

By John Kelin, Wings Press, 2007

This work deserves to be read—but not for the purpose the author intended. According to John Kelin, a few hardy souls in the late 1960s dared speak truth to power and turned the American public against the government's "unacceptable" [Warren Report of 1964](#) investigating JFK's assassination. The real history is more complicated, and large chunks of it are missing from this book. You will not learn from Kelin, for instance, that Mark Lane—a New York lawyer who was Lee Harvey Oswald's self-appointed chief defender—was [secretly subsidized by the KGB](#). Yet because Kelin draws heavily from primary sources—mostly private letters between "assassination buffs," as writer Calvin Trillin dubbed them back then—this book is a fascinating portrait of how conspiracy theories about JFK's death were nurtured mostly by liberals desperate to find an alternate explanation for the murder of President Kennedy by an avowed Marxist.

5. [*Presidential Commissions & National Security*](#)

By Kenneth Kitts, Lynne Rienner, 2006

When a monumental event occurs that transcends the power of the courts to uncover the truth, the US government turns to special commissions—most recently for the [investigation into the 9/11 terror attacks](#). The findings are usually well received, but over time the authority of these efforts often wanes. In *Presidential Commissions & National Security*, Kenneth Kitts shows why [federal panels are imperfect](#) and why they often inadvertently spur the conspiracy thinking they are designed to minimize. The Roberts Commission report on Pearl Harbor, for instance, begot countless books alleging that President Roosevelt knew in advance about the attack. No matter how lofty their aims, Kitts says, government-commission reports are inevitably [political documents](#) and will come to be seen as such.