

Course Syllabus

Description: this course takes a close look at conspiracy theories in American history—some recent, some from the more distant past. Our learning objectives include examining a.) the evidence and logic used to argue for different theories; b.) the forces and events that give rise to them; c.) the identities of those who support various theories; d.) the methods used to promote and disseminate conspiracy theories, and; e.) the uses to which these theories are sometimes put. We will also take a look at the theories scholars have offered to explain the prevalence of conspiracy theories in modern American culture (theories about theories!!)

This course is guided by two basic assumptions. The first is that conspiracy theories are just that—theories, not statements of fact. Nor are they the same as scientific theories which are subject to testing and revision. As history students we must distinguish between factually-established cases of conspiracy such as the Burr Conspiracy and the Watergate Cover-up from unproven conspiracies including Kennedy assassination theories and improvable conspiracies such as those involving alien life forms and UFOs. It is important to keep these distinctions in mind. While occasional lighthearted indulgence in our pet theories is encouraged and will enliven the class, students will not be allowed to use this course as a forum for promoting their conspiracy beliefs.

The second assumption is that even though conspiracy theories often involve ludicrous, sinister, or grossly-exaggerated explanations of the course of human events, they are still important for us to understand. They often express serious underlying tensions, prejudices, and apprehensions on the part of those who hold them. Understanding these tensions is more than an academic exercise. As the Oklahoma City bombing tragically demonstrated, conspiracy theories can motivate people to undertake harmful actions. Even in less harmful cases, conspiracy theorizing has serious implications for the functioning of democratic society. We need to understand how conspiracy theories influence not only how people see the world, but how they act in it.

Administrative Information:

Course meeting time and place: June 21 to July 28, Monday and Wednesday, 1-4 pm. Brothers College (BC) 118.

Instructor contact info: Prof. Wyatt Evans, wevans@drew.edu. Since it is summertime, I won't be in my office much. If you want to meet with me, contact me and we'll set up a time.

Cell phones, texting, etc.: please silence your communication devices and refrain from texting. If I see you texting for extended periods of time, I will give you one friendly warning. After that, you will receive no credit for participation for the class session.

Academic integrity: all students are required to abide by the academic regulations of the College of Liberal Arts and Drew University. Plagiarism especially will not be tolerated. Students suspected of plagiarism will be reported to the Dean of the College. If upon investigation plagiarism is confirmed, the

student will receive no credit for the assignment in question and may be failed for the course depending upon the severity of the incident.

Academic accommodations: students requiring accommodations for lectures, testing, or completing course assignments and possessing the necessary certification from the Office of Educational Services should contact the instructor as soon as the course begins. It is the student's responsibility to make arrangements with the instructor one week prior to scheduled tests or quizzes to ensure proper accommodations are made. The Office of Educational Services is directed by Ms. Allyson Leddy (aleddy@drew.edu) and located in BC-114.

Course Requirements:

Attendance and participation-	20%
Barkun Response Paper -	10%
Logic Exercise-	10%
JFK Response Paper-	15%
Class Conspiracy Project	15%
Olmsted Response Paper -	15%
Final Exam-	15%

Books:

You are required to purchase or otherwise obtain these books. Your exams and written assignments will be based upon them. I have kept the book list limited and relatively cheap, but can't teach the course if you don't read the books!

Michael Barkun. *A Culture of Conspiracy: Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary America*. University of California Press, 2006. ISBN 978-0520248120. \$ 17.05 (Paperback)

David Brion Davis. *The Fear of Conspiracy: Images of Un-American Subversion from the Revolution to the Present*. Cornell University Press, 2008 [1971]. ISBN 978-0801491139. (Paperback) \$ 24.95. This is a reprint of the earlier edition which you can find used for a cheaper price.

Kathryn Olmsted. *Real Enemies: Conspiracy Theories and American Democracy, World War I to 9/11*. Oxford University Press, 2009. ISBN 978-0195183535. \$ 19.77 (Hardcover).

Tentative Class Schedule:

Wk	Date	Topic/Activity	Readings/Assignments Due
1	6/21	Introduction	
	6/23	Contemporary theories	Barkun, Chapters 1-2.
2	6/28	UFOs and the Millennium: the "big picture" of contemporary theories	Barkun Response Paper due ; Barkun, 3-11.
	6/30	Evidence and logic in conspiracy theory	Hofstadter, "The Paranoid Style," in Davis; class exercise (bring Davis to class)
3	7/5	Evidence and logic in conspiracy theory.	Logic exercise due. Davis, selections.
	7/7	<i>JFK</i> : presidential assassination theories.	Davis, selections.
4	7/12	The historical trajectory of conspiracy thinking in America.	JFK Response Paper due ; Davis, selections.
	7/14	The historical trajectory of conspiracy thinking in America.	Olmsted, Chapters 1-3.
5	7/19	<i>Conspiracy Theory</i> ; the legitimate bases of conspiracy theorizing in modern America?	Olmsted Response Paper due. Olmsted, Chapters 4-10.
	7/21	Group conspiracy project	In class. Web resources.
6	7/26	Group presentations	Individual project write-ups due.
	7/28	Final Exam and course summary	

Details on assignments:

For all assignments—you will be graded on the quality of your writing, the quality of your ideas, and your demonstrated knowledge of the course materials.

1. Response papers: 3-page, 750 to 1,000 word essay discussing the text and addressing a question or point put to you in class by the instructor on the reading. Bibliography not required.
2. Logic exercise: 3-page analysis of the evidence and logic used in a conspiracy text to be selected by you. You will summarize the nature of the evidence presented, comment on its deficiencies and strengths. You will also analyze the logic used by the theorist(s) in making their argument with special attention to the logical fallacies we will discuss in class.
3. Class Conspiracy Project: Working in groups, you will pick a conspiracy theory website of your choice and analyze it for the components (learning objectives) listed at the beginning of this syllabus. For maximum credit, pick a conspiracy text not covered by the authors read in class. Each group member should also turn in a **3-page summary** describing the conspiracy theory and website, its relationship to similar theories, and a short analysis for each of the components listed above.