

# What's Wrong with Conspiracy Theories?

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The public has been fed an endless stream of attacks upon *conspiracy theories*, which, we are told, are supposed to be *very bad* for human beings and other living things. But precisely why is almost never explained. And when you consider that our political parties and the mainstream media indulge themselves in conspiracy theories, such as the claim that [Russia interfered with the 2016 election](#) (otherwise Donald Trump could never have been elected) or, alternatively, that Dominion voting

machines were used to steal the election of 2020 (and otherwise could not have been defeated) are, in the first instance, promoted by the media (in spite of virtually no evidence at all) and, in the second, denied thereby ([in spite of massive supporting proof](#)). Both are conspiracy theories, where one appears to be true and the other appears to be false.

Since at least some conspiracy theories thus appear to be true, we need to be able to tell the difference. Even university professors have shown a decided aversion to conspiracy theories, buying into the stereotypical conception that the key characteristic of conspiracy theories is that they are unfalsifiable. [A “tip sheet” for one college](#), for example, makes the declaration that “The main problem with any particular conspiracy theory is not that it’s wrong, but that it’s inarguable; not that it’s false, but that it is *unfalsifiable*. Because it is unfalsifiable, a conspiracy theory is not provable or disprovable.” If that were true, it would certainly count against them, making them akin to theoretical affirmations about the existence of God (as a classic case) or the existence of a universal “Force” a la *Star Wars* (more contemporary). *But is it actually true?*

A study published in *Frontiers of Psychology*, [“What about Building 7?’ A social psychological study of online discussion of 9/11 conspiracy theories”](#) (8 July 2013), for example, suggests that those often characterized as “conspiracy theorists” are more skeptical of what they are told by the government (“official accounts”) than they are enamored of specific alternatives and are more open-minded in the interpretation of evidence. They are less inclined to defer to officials as authorities and more inclined to look at the evidence, which even hints that the study of alternative theories of events like 9/11 might be an effective method to teach critical thinking.

Since conspiracies only require two or more persons acting in concert to bring about an illegal end (and turns out to be the most widely prosecuted criminal offense in America), why should *conspiracy theories* be all-but-banned from public discourse? We know the criteria to employ in the evaluation of *scientific theories*, why should they not be evaluated by the same standards (or criteria of adequacy), [which classically include](#):

- (CA-1) *the clarity and precision of the language in which they are expressed;*

- (CA-2) *their scope of application for the purpose of explanation and prediction;*
- (CA-3) *their respective degrees of empirical support on the available evidence; or,*
- (CA-4) *the economy, elegance or simplicity with which they satisfy (CA-1) – (CA-3)?*

Since conspiracy theories are theories, why should they not be evaluated by the same criteria, where the testability of a theory depends (right off the bat) on the specificity of its language?

When Ilhan Omar (D-MN) made the observation, “Some people did something” (in relation to 9/11), for example, her remark qualifies as true but trivial. It cannot satisfy (CA-1) or (CA-2), much less (CA-3) or (CA-4). When The 9/11 Commission, by contrast, concludes that 19 Islamic terrorists commandeered four commercial carriers and attacked the World Trade Center and the Pentagon under the control of a guy in a cave in Afghanistan, however, the content and thereby the testability of what has been asserted increases substantially. The government, however, has not been disposed to revise its “official narrative”, even though a half-dozen or more of the 19 “suicide hijackers” turned up alive and well the following day and made contact with media in the UK, as David Ray Griffin observes by making his first argument in his magisterial study, [\*The 9/11 Commission Report: Omissions and Distortions\*](#) (2004). Even though we know the theory advanced by the commission therefore cannot be true, the government has remained unmoved.

And when consideration is given to Building 7 (WTC-7), for example—a 47-story building in the World Trade Center complex), which was not hit by any plane but came down in what has been characterized as a classic “controlled demolition”—it raises the specter of a “conspiracy theory”, even though its collapse has the characteristics of having been a controlled demolition—abrupt, complete, symmetrical collapse into its own footprint, leaving a debris pile equal to about 12% of the height of the original—where even the owner of the WTC, Larry Silverstein, confirmed to PBS that WTC-7 had been “pulled”. Nothing about this account violates any of (CA-1) – (CA-4).

There are many videos and expert studies of the collapse of WTC-7 available on-line, which means that the recorded sequence of events can be reviewed again and again.

It leaves no doubt that, contrary to the [\*NIST Final Report on WTC-7\*](#) (2008), which attributes its collapse to the modest fires in the building and the loss of a major support column, this *was* a controlled demolition that fits the pattern of controlled demolitions around the world. Indeed, on 9/11, as it took place, Dan Rather was (perfectly accurately) reporting it as reminiscent of pictures we've seen "where a building was deliberately destroyed by well-placed dynamite to knock it down"

But if WTC-7, which was not hit by any airplane, was brought down by a controlled demolition, then what about WTC-1 and WTC-2, the North and South Twin Towers? According to [\*The 9/11 Commission Report\*](#) (2004), which is the official government account of 9/11, the World Trade Center was destroyed as part of an elaborate plot by 19 Islamic terrorists who commandeered 4 commercial carriers, which were used to attack the Pentagon and the World Trade Center. But, since a conspiracy only requires *two or more participants collaborating in the attempt to commit a crime*, the "official account" of 9/11 itself obviously qualifies as a "conspiracy theory". Once we look at the evidence, we find that we are confronted with alternative theories that differ in the causal mechanisms they posit, but where *both* alternatives qualify as "conspiracy theories".

### **Comparing Conspiracy Theories**

Once we acknowledge the obvious—that the "official account" of 9/11 is a conspiracy theory we are no longer able to avoid dealing with conspiracy theories, unless we avoid 9/11 altogether. That, indeed, appears to be the attitude of most philosophers of my acquaintance, who have no interest in evaluating alternatives or in assessing the adequacy of [\*The 9/11 Commission Report\*](#) (2004) itself. This stunning lack of intellectual curiosity might be rooted in the desire not to "fall down the rabbit hole", since there are disconcerting revelations upon revelations, once you take the bait and begin to scrutinize what we have been told. One fascinating tidbit, for example, is that Philip Zelikow, the Executive Director of the 9/11 Commission, had as his area of academic specialization, before entering government, the creation and maintenance of "public myths".

Another reason the study of 9/11 turns out to be philosophically interesting is that so much of the official account entails violations of laws of physics, of engineering and of aerodynamics. At Shankesville, PA, for example, where Flight 93 is alleged to have

crashed, there is a hole about 10'x20' but no signs of any crash having taken place by a Boeing 757 weighing over 100 tons with a 125' wingspan and tail standing 44' above the ground. As both the reporters first on the scene observed, the eerie aspect of the crash site was that, unlike other crash sites, *there were no signs that any plane had crashed there*, which invites **an inference to the best explanation**: *Which hypothesis is better supported: that a Boeing 757 really crashed there or that it did not?*

The situation at the Pentagon is even more intriguing, since not only is there no massive pile of aluminum debris—no bodies, no luggage, no wings, no tail, not even the engines (which are practically indestructible) were recovered at the time—but the official trajectory (of a Boeing 757 traveling over 400 mph skimming the ground and taking out a series of lampposts) turns out to be aerodynamically impossible. Because of the phenomenon known as “downdraft” (or “ground effect”), such a plane at that speed could not have come closer than 60' or even 80' of the ground, which is higher than the Pentagon at 71' is tall. Since violations of laws of nature are physically impossible, something must be wrong. *How could the official account possibly be true?*

Various accounts of scientific reasoning posit **a series of stages of inquiry**, beginning with one of *Puzzlement* (where something doesn't fit into our background knowledge and invites attention), *Speculation* (during which alternative possible explanations are articulated for consideration), *Adaptation* (where the strength of the relationship between those hypotheses and the available evidence is evaluated) and *Explanation* (where, when the evidence has “settled down”, the best supported of the alternatives may be accepted, in the tentative and fallible fashion of science). It ought to be apparent already that **the “official account” cannot be reconciled with available evidence**, where serious thinkers, I surmise, can excuse themselves only by ignoring 9/11 entirely.

And here we have the key to why some prominent “conspiracy theorists” are relatively easy targets of public attack. Alex Jones, the paradigm of the category, often does excellent work in drawing attention to puzzling cases where what we are learning does not fit into our background knowledge and understanding. And he's equally good at speculating about possible alternative explanations. But he does not have the aptitude or the ability to carry their investigation further, where sorting out the difference between authentic and fabricated evidence can play a crucial role. At the Pentagon, for example, a key piece of fuselage from a Boeing 757 (which the

media has frequently cited) did not come from Flight 77 but [from an earlier crash near Cali, Columbia, in 1995](#), where the salvage was done by an Israeli firm and then planted on the lawn that day as “proof” a plane had crashed there.

### **Are JFK conspiracy theories unfalsifiable?**

Lest it be thought that 9/11 may be the exception, let's consider another familiar case, that of the assassination of the 35<sup>th</sup> President of the United States, John F. Kennedy, as a second. If it turns out that conspiracy theories here are unfalsifiable, then perhaps the admonition against taking them seriously has some foundation, in fact. But that does not appear to be true here, either. In criminal investigations, homicide detectives apply multiple criteria of motive, means and opportunity to identify and narrow the list of suspects. Among the most familiar theories about the assassination of JFK, for example, are alternative hypotheses positing (h1) that it was done by Fidel Castro, (h2) that it was done by the Mafia, (h3) that it was done by the KGB; and (h4), alas, that it was done by the CIA. *Are these theories testable? Are they unfalsifiable?*

On the “official account”, Lee Oswald fired three “lucky shots” and killed JFK while wounding John Connally, the Governor of Texas. Suppose the alleged assassin had been an expert shot; the Mannlicher-Carcano he is said to have used was an appropriate choice for the purpose; the backyard photos showing Oswald holding a rifle wearing a belt and holster with the revolver with which he is said to have shot Officer J.D. Tippit (and holding two communist newspapers) was authentic—and the “lone assassin” theory just might have merit. In a single package, the version published on the cover of *Life* magazine subtly conveys that this guy had the motive (as a communist), the means (rifle and handgun) and (presumably) opportunity (by working in the Texas School Book Depository—and encountering Officer Tippit, while he made his escape).

But what if it turns out that Oswald was a mediocre shot; that the weapon he is alleged to have used was a World War II carbine known as “the humanitarian rifle” for never harming anyone on purpose; that there were four versions of the backyard photographs, where his face and expression remain exactly the same across different poses taken at different times; that the chin on the subject in the photos is a block chin, not Oswald's tapered chin; that there is an insert line between the chin and the

lower lip; that the fingers of his right hand are cut off and that the shell casings found at the site of the Tippit shooting by the first officer on the scene had been ejected from (one or more) automatics, not from a revolver, such as he possessed?

Although most philosophers might not know, Oswald was a mediocre shot; the weapon was a ridiculous choice for an assassination; the shell casings found at the scene by the first officer to arrive had been ejected by (one or more) automatics; and the backyard photos were staged, where experts even appear to have identified the stand-in for Oswald, who was Roscoe White, a Dallas Police Officer with ties to the CIA. One student, Jack White, used the newspapers in the photo, the dimensions of which are known, as an internal measure of the height of the man in the photos, who, it turns out, is either too short at 5'6" to be the 5'10" Oswald or, which is more likely, the photos were introduced a bit too large when the photos were manufactured.

### **The JFK Assassination Literature**

From a philosophical point of view, the facts matter less than that the hypothesis that Oswald was framed as the "lone gunman" appears to be empirically testable. Indeed, recent research has confirmed the opinion of Harold Weisberg and of Jim Garrison that a figure in the doorway of the Texas School Book Depository was not his co-worker, Billy Lovelady, as the government proclaims, but Lee Oswald himself, just as he had explained to Will Fritz, the homicide detective who interrogated him, when asked where he had been during the shooting, namely: "out with Bill Shelley in front", where Bill Shelley was one of his supervisors in the book depository. And this has been confirmed not only by studies of the height, weight, build and clothing of the two alternatives but by recent superposition of their images in the famous "Altgens6" photograph.

You do not have to be familiar with the extensive conspiracy literature by authors including (to cite only some of the most famous) Mark Lane, [\*Rush to Judgment\*](#) (1966); Josiah Thompson, [\*Six Seconds in Dallas\*](#) (1967), David S. Lifton, [\*Best Evidence\*](#) (1980), Jim Marrs, [\*Crossfire\*](#) (1989), Robert J. Groden, [\*The Killing of a President\*](#) (1994) and [\*The Search for Lee Harvey Oswald\*](#) (1995), Noel Twyman, [\*Bloody Treason\*](#) (1997), and Douglas Horne, [\*Inside the Assassination Records Review Board\*](#) (5 volumes, 2009), on the conspiracy side of the ledger, and others, such as Vince Bugliosi, [\*Reclaiming History\*](#) (2007), which runs

around 1500 pages in defending [\*The Warren Commission Report\*](#) (1964), which was said to have been supported by 26 volumes of evidence—until you take a closer look, as Sylvia Meager, [\*Accessories after the Fact\*](#) (1992), did, demonstrating that the contents of those 26 volumes contradicts the 888-page summary.

It turns out that *conspiracy* (to commit burglary, to commit fraud, to commit murder and so on) is the most widely prosecuted crime in the United States. Conspiracies only require two or more individuals to act in concert to commit a crime. Once you know that JFK was hit at least four times—once in the back from behind; once in the throat from in front; and at least twice in the head (from behind and from the right/front), after the driver, William Greer, had brought the limousine to a halt to make sure he would be killed—the case for conspiracy is beyond doubt. See, for example, the studies of the medical evidence by David W. Mantik, M.D., Ph.D., who is board qualified in radiation oncology and discovered the autopsy X-rays were altered to patch a fist-sized blow out at the back of the head, which had been widely reported by the physicians at Parkland Hospital, where the body was taken, and the leading JFK medical expert in the world.

See David W. Mantik, [\*John F. Kennedy's Head Wounds: A Final Synthesis—and a New Analysis of the Harper Fragment\*](#) (2015). Most philosophers are not even aware that, on the day of the assassination, two wounds were repeatedly reported over the national networks: *a shot to the throat*, which Malcolm Perry, M.D., explained to the press during a conference following the announcement of death, was a wound of entrance (where the bullet was coming at him), and *a shot to the right temple*, which blow out the back of his head, a report attributed to Admiral George G. Burkley, the president's personal physician, and reported by Malcolm Kilduff, Acting Press Secretary, who said it was a simple matter of a bullet through the head while pointing to his right temple, while announcing the death. Indeed, Frank McGee, who was a keen analyst, that day on NBC, when reports that the shooter has been above and behind began to surface, astutely remarked, "*This is incongruous. How can the man have been shot from in front from behind?*"

### **Ramifications for Public Policy**

That, of course, was the conundrum that the Warren Commission had to resolve: how to make the case for a lone assassin, when there was evidence in the public

domain that JFK had been shot from several directions in a brief span of time. It was a gargantuan challenge, where they were not entirely successful, since wide swaths of the public to this day doubt that Lee Oswald acted alone. Many, myself among them, believe that distrust in the American government dates from the deception perpetrated on the American public about the assassination of JFK, where so many were listening to their radios and glued to their television and learned with their own ears and eyes that he had been shot in the throat *from in front* and that he had been shot in the right temple *from the right/front*. Frank McGee had it right: *How can the man have been shot from in front from behind?* Yet the government insists on “the lone gunman” to this day.

During the past two decades, the scientific studies of the assassination have been undertaken by experts in different fields, including a world authority on the human brain (who was also an expert on wound ballistics), several Ph.D.’s (one of whom is also an M.D.) and a physician who was present in Trauma Room #1 when JFK’s moribund body was brought to Parkland Hospital and who, two days later, was responsible for the care and treatment of his alleged assassin. [\*Assassination Science\*](#) (1998), [\*Murder in Dealey Plaza\*](#) (2000) and [\*The Great Zapruder Film Hoax\*](#) (2003), for example, have been described by Vincent Bugliosi, [\*Reclaiming History\*](#) (2007), as the only “exclusively scientific” volumes ever published on the assassination, where Douglas Horne, [\*Inside the Assassination Records Review Board\*](#) (2005), extends that tradition with five more.

The discovery of more than 15 indications of Secret Service complicity in setting him up for the hit; that the body was altered and the autopsy X-rays were changed; and that the home movies of the assassination were massively edited to conceal the true causes of death provide evidence that falsifies (h1) that was done by Fidel Castro, (h2) that it was done by the Mafia and (h3) that it was done by the KGB. None of them could have exerted control over the Secret Service, the autopsy at Bethesda, or the home movies, including the Zapruder film, which was in the custody of the Secret Service. Which means not only are JFK conspiracy theories empirically testable but multiple among them have already been falsified. (h4), of course, remains under consideration in all of its manifestations, [\*including the indispensable collusion of LBJ and the FBI.\*](#)

What matters here, however, is not the specifics of “who dunnit” but that the situation with regard to conspiracy theories is not at all as popular belief would have it. Not only are they not unfalsifiable, but the application of scientific reasoning has produced significant results, which have led to the identification of the probable perps. Philosophy—though teaching logic, critical thinking and scientific reasoning—has much to contribute to the public good. There is nothing wrong with “conspiracy theories” that warrants their neglect by philosophers. On the contrary because most students have a keen interest in knowing the truth about JFK, 9/11 and a host of other politically significant but controversial events, there is a wealth of material to work with if faculty, philosophers, especially, would come down from their ivory tower and engage with real world events.

A striking illustration of the difference it makes for public affairs may be found in the attacks upon [Marjorie Taylor Greene](#) (R-GA), whom the Democrats (as the majority party) removed from her committee assignments because she was raising too many issues that they did not want to address (about Sandy Hook, Parkland, Las Vegas, CA wildfires and more). Having done research on all of these, I composed an assessment, where it turns out that, on every one of the issues about which she was being attacked, [Marjorie Taylor Greene was either clearly in the right or supported by the weight of the evidence](#). Most of her assertions, of course, qualified (in the mind of her critics) as conspiracy theories; but if they paused to consider the evidence with regard to each of them, they would have been impressed *provided only they had an open mind*.

And there’s the rub. As James Files, [who may or may not have been behind the picket fence on the grassy knoll](#) informed me, “When the government commits a lie, it’s stuck with it!”, which of course resonates with the failure of the government to change its position (about the 19 Islamic hijackers on 9/11 or Lee Oswald as the lone, demented gunman on 22 November 1963). Which means, in turn, that the government is not operating on the basis of principles of science or of rationality, where the discovery of new evidence or alternative hypotheses may require that we reject hypotheses we previously accepted, accept hypotheses we previously rejected and leave others in suspense. The government operates as an authoritarian source of (politically infallible) knowledge, where to admit mistakes would weaken its grip on the body politic that it governs.

And, reflecting upon the treatment of Marjorie Taylor Greene (R-GA), it struck me like a silver bullet: [Conspiracy theorists are investigating crimes: No wonder they want to silence us!](#) The government was involved in the assassination of JFK; the government was involved in 9/11; the government was involved in [Sandy Hook, Parkland and Las Vegas, too!](#) Think of the genius of it all: the perps themselves are in the position of dictating to the public who is credible and who is not when it comes to investigating crimes in which the government itself is complicit! It turns out, therefore, the answer to the question we ask, *What's wrong with conspiracy theories?*, could not be more obvious once they are properly understood. We should all be conspiracy theorists! The nation can only benefit from sorting out true conspiracy theories from false.

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