

Conspiracy Denial in the U.S. Media

By Lance deHaven-Smith

Many American journalists appear to be locked into a peculiar way of thinking that makes them blind to signs of political criminality in high office. This mindset is characterized by an apparent inability to differentiate groundless accusations of elite political intrigue from legitimate concerns about the integrity of U.S. political leaders and institutions. For some reason, when it comes to popular suspicions of schemes involving the nation's political elites, many journalists in the United State make no distinctions. They categorize all such suspicions as "conspiracy theories," which they assume are not only untrue, but wacky and paranoid.

This is one of a number of cognitive distortions associated with the term "conspiracy theory" that I analyze in my new book, *Conspiracy Theory in America*. The book will be published on April 15 of this year by the University of Texas Press in a book series edited by Mark Crispin Miller. *Conspiracy Theory in America* explains that the conspiracy-theory label was popularized as a pejorative putdown by the CIA in a global propaganda program to attack critics of the Warren Commission's conclusion that President Kennedy was assassinated by a lone gunman with no government foreknowledge or assistance. The CIA campaign called on foreign media corporations and journalists to criticize "conspiracy theorists" and raise questions about their motives and judgments. Any and all criticisms of the lone-gunman account of the assassination were lumped together as "conspiracy theories," declared groundless and pernicious, and attributed to ulterior motives and the influence of communist propagandists.

Today, the conspiracy-theory label is widely used as a verbal defense mechanism by U.S. political elites to suppress mass suspicions that inevitably arise whenever shocking political crimes benefit top leaders or play into their agendas, especially when those same officials are in control of agencies responsible for preventing the events in question or for investigating them after they have occurred. It is only natural to be suspicious when a president and vice president bent on war in the Middle East are warned of impending terrorist attacks and yet fail to alert the American public or increase the readiness of the nation's armed forces. Why would Americans not expect answers when they are told that Arabs with poor piloting skills managed to hijack four planes, fly them across the eastern United States, somehow evade America's multilayered system of air defense, and then crash two of the planes into the Twin Towers in New York City and one into the Pentagon in Washington, DC? By the same token, it is only natural to question the motives of the president and vice president when they drag their feet on investigating this seemingly inexplicable defense failure and then, when the investigation is finally conducted, they insist on testifying together, in secret, and not under oath.

Indiscriminate condemnation of conspiracy beliefs is obviously misguided, because political conspiracies in high circles do, in fact, happen. Everyone knows that officials in the Nixon

administration conspired to steal the 1972 presidential election, that the Reagan White House engaged in a criminal scheme to sell arms to Iran and channel profits to the Contras (a rebel army in Nicaragua), and that the Bush-Cheney administration colluded to mislead Congress and the public about the strength of its evidence for Iraqi weapons of mass destruction. If some conspiracy theories are true, then it is nonsensical to dismiss all unsubstantiated suspicions of elite intrigue as false by definition.

And yet this is precisely how many American journalists proceed. Consider the public statements last year by Chuck Todd about the improbability of voting machines ever being rigged in U.S. elections. Todd is an NBC News reporter and analyst. According to Andrew Kreig at OpEdNews.com, Todd told a national meeting of state election officials that suspicions about voting machines being manipulated in the United States “stretched the bounds of reality.” Todd delivered a similar message in a tweet shortly before the 2012 presidential election, when he wrote, “The voting machine conspiracies belong in same category as the Trump birther garbage.”

In his tweet, Todd displays the hallmark symptom of conspiracy denial: he sees no difference between two very different suspicions. One involves schemes to steal elections by tampering with voting equipment, while the other is about President Obama’s status as a natural born citizen. These suspicions differ greatly in terms of their plausibility and evidentiary support. Doubts about President Obama’s eligibility for the presidency have been refuted by documents showing he was born in Hawaii. In contrast, there are a number of reasons to think that weaknesses in electronic voting machines and tabulators might be exploited to alter election outcomes, especially in presidential elections where the powers of the office and the money and energy invested in campaigns make the stakes so enormously high.

As an elections analyst for a national TV network, Todd surely knows that electronic voting and tabulation systems are quite vulnerable to being hacked. This was demonstrated in 2006 on electronic touch-screen voting machines by researchers at Princeton University. The researchers found that programs could be planted in the machines to flip votes from one candidate to another so that vote totals match the number of voters who sign in to cast ballots. The programs can be set to run only on Election Day and not earlier, when the machines are tested. The programs can also be configured to erase themselves at the end of the day so no trace is left of the electronic tampering. Also in 2006, the HBO Documentary *Hacking Democracy* showed that optical scan systems, which read and tabulate votes on paper ballots, are vulnerable to similar manipulation by programs that can be inserted on the machines’ portable memory cards.

Scholars began investigating the security of electronic voting systems in the first place because election returns in the 2004 presidential contest differed systematically from the exit polls in the most hotly contested states. Shortly after the election, Steven Freeman, a statistician at the University of Pennsylvania, posted a paper on the Internet analyzing the disparities. Freeman pointed out that the proportion of votes credited to Bush and Kerry differed from the split reported in the exit polls in ten out of eleven battleground states, and in every case Bush received

more votes than the exit polls indicated. It would not be surprising for election results to depart slightly from exit-poll findings in a single state, but it was astounding that they did so in ten states and that in each instance Bush's support was greater in the vote tabulations than in the exit interviews. Freeman calculated the odds of this happening by chance given the size of the samples for the exit polls and the magnitude of the differences between the vote tallies and the survey findings. He concluded that the odds were one in 250 million.

Chuck Todd's smug dismissal of legitimate concerns about voting system vulnerabilities was met with spontaneous applause from the assembly of state election officials. The audience responded appreciatively because Todd was endorsing powerful norms in the nation's political class against voicing suspicions of elite political criminality. These norms serve the interests of politicians and government officials by protecting them from public interrogation about troubling events, such as statistically improbable election returns, from which they or their political party may have benefitted. It is far easier to ridicule popular suspicions than to answer them with rigorous inquiries and prudent safeguards.

Many journalists appear to have been conditioned by public officials to conform to conspiracy-denying norms even though these norms contradict journalistic ethics, historical experience, and common sense. Journalists who offend political elites by investigating or merely repeating popular conspiracy beliefs risk losing access to the sources on which they depend for their reporting. Of course, the appropriate journalistic response to this governmental coercion is to expose it and find other sources. That was what Carl Bernstein and Bob Woodward did with Watergate, and it is still what Russ Baker, Seymour Hersh, Jane Mayer, James Risen, and other great journalists do.

But most run-of-the-mill reporters have embraced conspiracy denial, and for them it has become an emotionally charged, self-reinforcing belief system. The mindset is self-reinforcing in the sense that it engenders feelings of superiority and is dismissive of evidence. Ironically, conspiracy deniers think they are protecting civility and reason in public discourse, when in fact, by ridiculing reasonable concerns and appealing to elite prejudices, they are doing just the opposite.

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