

**History 2420-1**  
**Conspiracy Theories & Conspiracies in U.S. History**  
**October 19, 2005**

## **Term Paper Assignment**

Each student will write a 6- to 10-page term paper evaluating and analyzing a conspiracy theory (broadly defined) he or she finds particularly intriguing, preferably one we have not spent much time on in class. One good strategy might be to focus on a particular example of a broader theory, such as a Satanism scare in a particular locality or one piece of the alien conspiracy lore (abductees or Area 51 or one of the UFO cults mentioned in the Barkun book). There are also a great many major and minor conspiracy fears that we have not mentioned or only touched on, such as the numerous other political assassinations and assassination attempts.

All conspiracy-related subjects are open, but students are required to discuss their paper topic with Prof. Pasley and get a written 1-2 paragraph proposal approved no later than **Thursday, November 10**. The proposals should describe your chosen topic, explain the reasons why it interests you, and list some sources you will use to explore it. You may come to discuss your ideas for a paper during office hours, over the phone (at 529-3163), via email, or even on the course 'blog. I will also be having extra office hours most Friday afternoons from here on out, and the Monday afternoon before the proposals are due. **Papers submitted without previously-approved proposals** will receive an automatic grade of "F."

This is intended to be a paper based on your own research and reading. You may use any of the course readings as sources, but you will also need to use AT LEAST 3 other sources (books, articles, or documents) from Ellis Library and/or the library databases. Most of you will also want to use the Internet, but be very careful to check the accuracy of what you find there and cite web pages by the full URL as previously explained in the take-home midterm instructions. Be sure to use not just materials supporting conspiracy beliefs but also either primary documents through which the conspiracy beliefs can be objectively evaluated, or skeptical sources, such as [CSICOP](#) (publisher of the *Skeptical Inquirer*), [Snopes.com](#) (the Urban Legends Reference Pages), or one of the "[skepticism](#)" or "AntiCrank" sites listed on [Crank dot net](#).

Papers should be double-spaced, with one-inch margins, printed in 12 pt. Times New Roman or a similar proportional font. They should clearly written and conform to the highest standards of college-level writing in terms of style, grammar, presentation, organization, and argument. Sources should be properly cited according to the *Chicago Manual of Style* or Kate Turabian's [A Manual for Writers of Term Papers, Theses, and Dissertations](#). Papers will be due at the beginning of class on **Thursday, December 1**. Late papers will graded down 10% (one full letter grade) for every weekday they are late.

This assignment is not to be used as your opportunity to make up the wildest theories that you can. Your paper should be highly factual, detailed, and analytical. The following questions should guide your research and writing:

- Who (especially what group of people) seems attracted to this theory?  
What political and/or or religious groups or ideologies seem to be associated with it?
- What, if any, actual evidence supports this theory? Is it plausible and logical in terms of the motivations, methods, and goals of the conspiracy that it imagines?
- What real-world concerns or fears, if any, seem to be embodied or projected in this set of beliefs?
- What ideological work or political function do these beliefs or fears perform for those who hold them?
- Does this conspiracy theory fit into any of the motifs we have discussed in class? Compare and contrast it with other similarly themed or targeted beliefs.

You do not necessarily have to answer all of these questions in your paper, but these are the questions you should be asking yourself as you research, organize, and write it. The end result should certainly address most of them.