

**SUSPICIOUS MINDS: PEARL HARBOR,  
CONSPIRACY THEORIES, AND AMERICAN CULTURE**

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### **The Pearl Harbor Conspiracy Theories**

On the morning of December 7, 1941, the Japanese attacked the United States naval base at Pearl Harbor, killing 2,402 Americans, sending a shockwave across the surprised nation, collapsing the isolationist movement overnight, and leading the US into the most devastating war in history. The attack was one of the most monumental turning points in American history. President Franklin D. Roosevelt declared it “a date which will live in infamy.” The president could not have been more accurate in his statement yet at the time could never realize its full implications: that Pearl Harbor would become infamous not solely for the tragedy of the attack, but for the cloud of conspiracy theories—with FDR himself at their core—that would surround it. What gave rise to these theories? What made them so popular in the past and even today?

To analyze the historical events and answer these questions, one must first understand the details of the theories, along with the psychological and sociological basis of conspiracy thinking in general. This research gives insight into the logic behind the formation of conspiracy beliefs and the appeal of sharing them: the conscious and sub-conscious benefits that conspiracy thinking offers to the believer. Applying this knowledge to Pearl Harbor raises a number of revealing questions, and investigating them can teach us a lot about ourselves, our history, our culture, and the way we view our own government. The formation and popularity of the Pearl Harbor conspiracy theories was due to the nature of the attack and the strong feelings of chaos and powerlessness that followed in its wake, along with a general distrust of government that has long been ingrained in American culture.

Before delving into the psychology of conspiracy thinking or giving an analysis of the theories’ appeal, it is useful to understand the details of the Pearl Harbor conspiracy theories

themselves, along with the main arguments and points of controversy. This contextual information only scratches the surface (the examples provided are much more complex than they appear here) but it provides the necessary perspective to investigate the phenomenon of conspiracy thinking. The first and most prevalent is the “prior-knowledge” theory that President Roosevelt had foreknowledge of the Japanese plan to attack Pearl Harbor but kept it secret. According to the theory, he left the naval base unprepared in order to subvert the isolationist movement and gain public favor for war so that he could justify US intervention in World War II. A second conspiracy theory, often intertwined with the first, argues that in the years leading up to Pearl Harbor, FDR had been working to provoke the Japanese or the Germans to attack.

Ever since the massive death tolls of trench warfare in World War I, most Americans had favored an isolationist foreign policy, wanting to remain uninvolved in the affairs of Europe and the rest of the world. This sentiment grew even stronger following the outbreak of World War II; Americans did not want to get involved in another brutal and costly war. FDR was certainly aware of this, and in his 1940 campaign for re-election, he promised that he would not lead the country into war.<sup>1</sup> However, few historians would argue against the notion that this promise belied his true wishes: it is widely accepted that Roosevelt wanted to intervene in World War II. He had already started the process of re-armament of the Army and Navy and continued to provide money, weapons, and supplies to the allies through the Lend-Lease Act.<sup>2</sup> In a now-famous fireside chat in December of 1940, FDR publicly argued for greater American involvement in the war, describing his wish for America to become the “Arsenal of

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<sup>1</sup> “United States Presidential Election of 1940,” <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/1676944/UnitedStates-presidential-election-of-1940>.

<sup>2</sup> “Prelude to WW II: Isolationism, Refugee Policy and the Roosevelt Administration,” [http://www.eagleton.rutgers.edu/research/americanhistory/ap\\_ww2-prelude.php#prelude](http://www.eagleton.rutgers.edu/research/americanhistory/ap_ww2-prelude.php#prelude).

Democracy.”<sup>3</sup> The American populace, however, remained isolationist, and the president was attacked and labeled as a “warmonger” by anti-war groups such as the America First Committee.<sup>4</sup> Proponents of the Pearl Harbor conspiracy theories argue that Roosevelt knew the only way that he could gain favor for war would be if the US were struck first, which motivated him to provoke an attack, or to keep his knowledge of the Japanese attack plans secret.

Believers in Pearl Harbor conspiracy theories cite a large volume and variety of information as evidence of FDR’s foreknowledge: intercepted messages, radio transmissions, warnings by various parties, statements by US officials, and even random coincidences. Conspiracy theorists commonly make various claims relating to how far along the US intelligence was in cracking Japanese codes in the months preceding Pearl Harbor. The facts are that the US was still unable to read the Imperial Japanese Navy’s code but had successfully cracked and was reading the highest security Japanese diplomatic code known as “Purple.”<sup>5</sup> Although this breakthrough would prove instrumental later in the war, these “Purple” transmissions carried very little relevant information about Japanese military plans until after the Pearl Harbor attack.<sup>6</sup> Perhaps the most famous piece of Pearl Harbor lore is known as the “bomb plot” message, which was sent by Japanese Naval Intelligence to their consulate in Honolulu on September 24, 1941 and decoded in Washington on October 9, almost two months before the attack.<sup>7</sup> The message (Figure 1) requested the locations of all American vessels stationed in Pearl Harbor based on a grid system but it was not shared with Rear Admiral Kimmel or Major General Short, the men in command at Pearl Harbor. For many believers this is “the smoking

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<sup>3</sup> “Franklin Delano Roosevelt: The Great Arsenal of Democracy,”

<http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/fdrarsenalofdemocracy.html>.

<sup>4</sup> “Prelude to WW II: Isolationism, Refugee Policy and the Roosevelt Administration,”

[http://www.eagleton.rutgers.edu/research/americanhistory/ap\\_ww2-prelude.php#prelude](http://www.eagleton.rutgers.edu/research/americanhistory/ap_ww2-prelude.php#prelude).

<sup>5</sup> “TimeLine of Purple in World War II,” <http://faculty.gvsu.edu/aboufade/web/enigma/Purple/Welcome.htm>.

<sup>6</sup> “TimeLine of Purple in World War II,”

<sup>7</sup> “Dorn Report Part Three: The Pearl Harbor Investigations,” last modified December 24<sup>th</sup>, 1996,

[http://www.ibiblio.org/pha/pha/dorn/dorn\\_3.html](http://www.ibiblio.org/pha/pha/dorn/dorn_3.html).

gun” that proves FDR withheld prior knowledge of the Japanese attack plans. Opponents of this theory argue that the implications of the message were simply not fully understood, for it made no mention of a date or an attack, and so the information was not passed along. It is important to realize that these were simply a few pieces of information among thousands of decoded messages and intelligence reports being analyzed by Navy and Army Intelligence. Furthermore, the sharing of information between the different branches of the military, and even the White House, was very poor at the time as there was no central organization in charge of coordinating the various intelligence divisions until 1942. Believers say the failure to pass along such important information was an intentional act of conspiracy, while an official National Security Agency report states that it was an unintentional result of incompetence and misjudgment.

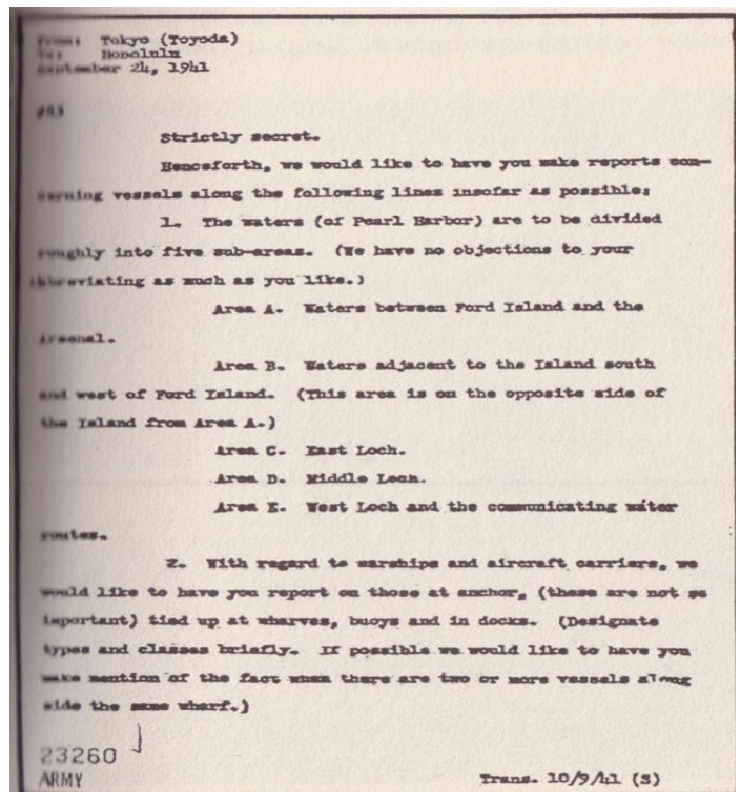


Figure 1: The “Bomb Plot” Message.  
Source: William P Litynski, “Prior Knowledge? A Historical Analysis of the ‘Surprise Mass Attack on Pearl Harbor’”

Pro-conspiracy articles commonly cite early warnings of an attack on Pearl Harbor given by a number of different nations and individuals only one of which can be verified. In January 1941, the Peruvian ambassador to Japan reported to the US embassy that the Japanese were considering a plan to attack Pearl Harbor in the event that relations with the US broke down. Naval intelligence did not consider the report credible since the source of the information was the ambassador's Japanese cook, and it was quickly dismissed.<sup>8</sup> Another facet of this pro-conspiracy argument is the fact that none of the US Pacific Fleet aircraft carriers were in Pearl Harbor on the day of the attack. The proposed reasoning is that they were the most valuable ships, and so they were intentionally ordered away to protect them from the attack. There are several flaws with this argument, the first of which is that one of the carriers was under orders to return to Pearl Harbor on December 6, the day before the attack but was slowed by bad weather. The second is that under US naval strategy at the time, battleships, not carriers, were considered to be the most important assets of the fleet.<sup>9</sup> It was, in fact, the attack on Pearl Harbor that demonstrated the effectiveness of aircraft carriers and forever altered US naval strategy. Similar conjectures of conspiracy are made about the firing by FDR of Admiral James Richardson in February 1941, for resisting orders to move the fleet to Pearl Harbor. The last major topic of contention is the claim that US ships detected radio traffic from the Japanese striking force as it headed towards Hawaii. Surviving Japanese officers, however, have since reported that there was no radio traffic to overhear because the radio transmitters in the ships and planes of the attack force had been physically disabled to ensure radio silence.<sup>10</sup> Believers argue that the

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<sup>8</sup> "The Pacific War Online Encyclopedia," [http://pwencycl.kgbudge.com/P/e/Pearl\\_Harbor.htm](http://pwencycl.kgbudge.com/P/e/Pearl_Harbor.htm).

<sup>9</sup> "United States Navy Aircraft Carriers December 07, 1941," [http://bluejacket.com/ww2\\_12-07-41\\_carriers.html](http://bluejacket.com/ww2_12-07-41_carriers.html).

<sup>10</sup> Robert J. Hanyok, "Catching the Fox Unaware: Japanese Radio Denial and Deception and the Attack on Pearl Harbor," *Naval War College Review* (Autumn 2008): 108.

accumulation of these early warnings, the bomb plot message, and countless other fragments too numerous to be detailed here made it clear to FDR that Pearl Harbor was at risk.

The arguments and actions cited as proof of FDR's attempts to provoke war are also numerous. Three of the central points include FDR's decision to cut off oil to Japan, the de-facto naval war he had escalated with Germany, and a memo written by Lieutenant Commander Arthur McCollum. In July 1941, FDR cut off the export of US oil to Japan. Conspiracy theorists argue that this was an attempt to starve Japan of oil, thus driving the nation to attack the US, which had previously supplied 80 percent of Japan's oil.<sup>11</sup> Opponents argue that cutting the supply of oil, a crucial necessity for waging war, was simply the logical move given that the US opposed the Japanese invasion of China. Another of FDR's pre-war policies, the "shoot on sight" order that US Navy ships were to fire on German ships and submarines, has also come under scrutiny as an attempt to provoke war. The order was given in response to the attack of the *USS Greer* by a German U-boat off the coast of Greenland in September 1941. FDR reported that "the German submarine fired first upon this American destroyer without warning, and with deliberate design to sink her," but failed to mention that the *USS Greer* had deliberately followed the sub after being informed of its presence by a British plane which had just attacked the German vessel.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, naval intelligence informed the president that they could not be sure the submarine was aware of the nationality of the ship at which it was firing.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Irvine H. Anderson Jr, "The 1941 De Facto Embargo on Oil to Japan: A Bureaucratic Reflex," *The Pacific Historical Review* 44 (1975): 201.

<sup>12</sup> Doris Kearns Goodwin, *No Ordinary Time: Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt: The Home Front in World War II* (New York: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 1994), 277–278.

<sup>13</sup> Goodwin, *No Ordinary Time*, 277–278.

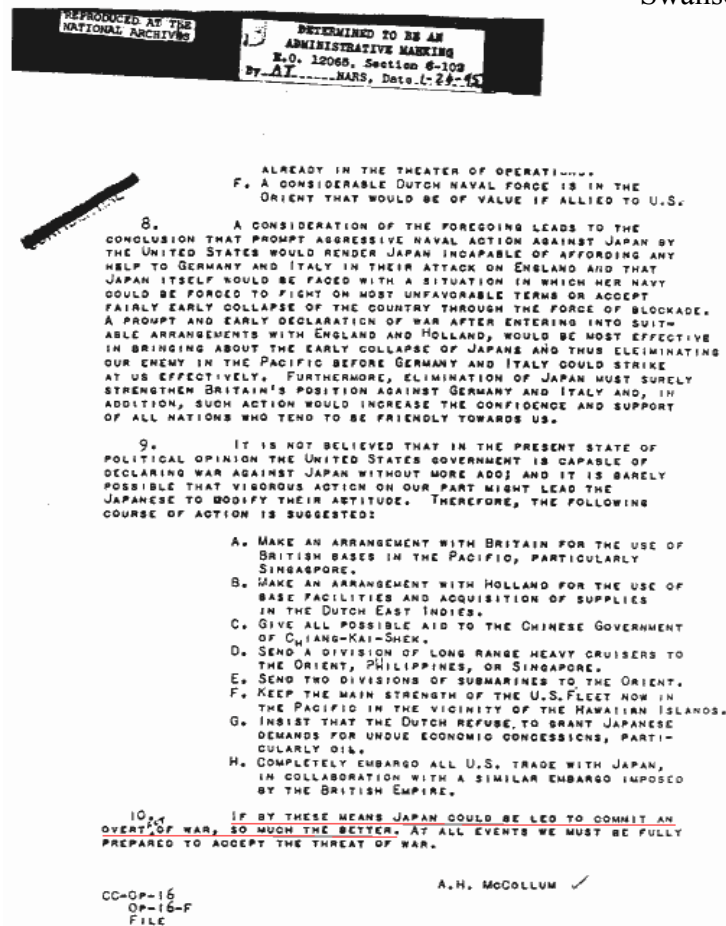


Figure 2: The Arthur McCollum Memo (Source: "McCollum Memo Page 4," Wikimedia Commons )

A more recent point of contention is the memo by Arthur McCollum (Figure 2), which was not declassified until 1994, 53 years after the attack on Pearl Harbor. In his book *Day of Deceit: The Truth about FDR and Pearl Harbor*, Robert Stinnett claims that the McCollum memo illustrates Roosevelt's intent to provoke war. An oft quoted passage of the memo reads: "It is not believed that in the present state of political opinion the United States government is capable of declaring war against Japan without more ado... if by these means Japan could be led to commit an overt act of war, so much the better." <sup>14</sup> This appears incriminating, but opponents of Stinnett dismiss these accusations for a number of reasons. First, although McCollum worked

<sup>14</sup> Arthur H. McCollum, *Estimate of the Situation in the Pacific and Recommendations for Action by the United States*, 1940, [http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/McCollum\\_memoandum](http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/McCollum_memoandum).



for the Office of Naval Intelligence, there is no proof that the President ever saw the memo or even knew of its existence. Second, critics argue that the memo actually detailed a strategy to avoid war, not provoke it. Military historian Conrad Crane of the US Army War College, in his review of Stinnett's book, writes that, "a close reading shows that [the memo's] recommendations were supposed to deter and contain Japan," and that it contained "an offhand remark that an overt Japanese act of war would make it easier to garner public support for actions against Japan, but the document's intent was not to ensure that event happened."<sup>15</sup>

In the days leading up to the attack on Pearl Harbor, it is clear that FDR and others knew war was imminent, and many expected Japan to strike. Critics argue they had no strong indications as to where the attack would take place and presumed it would be the Philippines.<sup>16</sup> Believers, however, argue that there was ample information known to Washington and FDR that pointed to a probable attack on Pearl Harbor. It is indisputable that there was indeed information, such as the "bomb plot" message and the Peruvian ambassadors' warning, that identified Pearl Harbor as a potential site of attack, but it is easy to pick these out in hindsight. Critics argue that the relative importance of this information was low, since it was not nearly revealing enough to justify strong conviction of a probable attack on Pearl Harbor. As a whole, the arsenal of alleged evidence fails to prove, or even provide reasonable conjecture, that FDR had prior knowledge of the attack. Most importantly, none of the conspiracy literature can provide an explanation as to why the successful defense of Pearl Harbor would not be grounds enough for FDR to justify war. Many critics argue that this discrepancy pokes a gaping hole in the "prior-knowledge" conspiracy theory. Arguments for the conspiracy theory that FDR had been working to provoke

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<sup>15</sup> Conrad C. Crane, review of *Day of Deceit: The Truth About FDR and Pearl Harbor*, by Robert Stinnett, *Parameters (US Army War College)*, Spring 2001, <http://www.carlisle.army.mil/usawc/parameters/Articles/01spring/sprrev.htm>.

<sup>16</sup> Tom Johnson, "What Every Cryptologist Should Know about Pearl Harbor", *Cryptologic Quarterly Vol 6 No. 2 (1987, declassified 2007)*: 62.

an attack are much more reasonable and the proposed logic more sound. The evidence provided is certainly not conclusive enough to prove the claims, but the belief is not as radical as the “prior-knowledge” conspiracy theory. Over the years many documents regarding the attack on Pearl Harbor have been declassified under the Freedom of Information Act, and it is possible that clarifying information will be uncovered in the future, but it is likely we will never know the entire truth, and the debates will never be settled.

### **Rationalizing Conspiracy**

No matter how much we analyze these theories, we cannot learn the truth. We can, however, learn about ourselves. But we first need to study the psychology of conspiracy thinking and understand the research on how such theories form and why people choose to believe them. It is often hypothesized that believers suffer from some widespread form of paranoid illness, as conspiracy thinking and paranoia both share symptomatic feelings of persecution and suspicion. There are a number of flaws in this theory. In his book on conspiracy theories, Jovan Byford explains that “even though paranoid ideation and conspiratorial beliefs appear to share a number of common features... a closer comparison reveals a number of crucial differences that are often overlooked.”<sup>17</sup> First, a key component of paranoid thought is the *personal nature* of the perceived threat, the feeling that the individual is being directly targeted, whereas in conspiracy theories the target of the conspiracy is rarely the individual believer.<sup>18</sup> Second, individuals suffering from paranoid delusions experience fear so strong that they are usually terrorized into isolation and withdrawal, and although fear is a common emotion in conspiracy theories, it elicits a very different psychological response. For conspiracy believers, the fear they experience very rarely results in withdrawal; instead it drives them to resist, fight, and spread the word in what

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<sup>17</sup> Jovan Byford, *Conspiracy Theories: A Critical Introduction* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 123.

<sup>18</sup> Byford, *Conspiracy Theories*, 124.

Byford describes as a “kind of naïve optimism about the ultimate vulnerability of the evil forces” at play.<sup>19</sup> Lastly, paranoia is a product of idiosyncratic thought, meaning the individual’s belief is not shared and is instead considered irrational and implausible by all others. “What makes a belief a ‘delusion’,” Byford explains, “is not its content per se, but rather, its complete lack of social currency or validation from at least a proportion of the outside world.”<sup>20</sup> As will be detailed shortly, idiosyncratic thought has no place in conspiracy thinking, in which a community of shared belief is a central theme. Although at first it may seem convenient and natural to dismiss all conspiracy believers as suffering from paranoia, this is clearly not the correct approach. The real psychology of conspiracy thinking is much more complex.

Conspiracy thinking cannot be explained as a psychological disorder; it is instead best viewed as the culmination of many rationalization processes in a normally functioning mind. One such process that underlies most conspiracy theories is what psychologists call the “fundamental attribution error,” by which people subconsciously prefer to attribute the cause of events to “the actions, dispositions, or intentions of the actors involved,” rather than situational factors that may supersede the behavior of these specific individuals.<sup>21</sup> This bias toward personal attribution over situational attribution is commonplace in western culture.<sup>22</sup> In a similar phenomenon, to explain monumental or history-altering events, people are biased to seek causes of equal magnitude. In his research, Byford references a 1979 study “using a scenario describing a hypothetical presidential assassination,” which found that “participants were more likely to attribute the event to a conspiracy if the assassination attempt results in death, compared to a

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<sup>19</sup> Byford, *Conspiracy Theories*, 124.

<sup>20</sup> Byford, *Conspiracy Theories*, 125.

<sup>21</sup> Byford, *Conspiracy Theories*, 132.

<sup>22</sup> Byford, *Conspiracy Theories*, 132.

less-dramatic scenario in which the shooter misses his target.”<sup>23</sup> These findings help explain why conspiracy theories commonly form around disasters, murders, wars, and other significant historical events.

Psychologists have had difficulty pinning conspiracy beliefs upon certain demographics. Conspiracy theories are not linked to gender, education level, or occupation.<sup>24</sup> However there is a revealing correlation between belief in one conspiracy theory and beliefs in other, even unrelated, conspiracy theories. In fact, researchers at the University of Kent have found this to be true even if the theories are directly contradictory.<sup>25</sup> This predisposition to believe in multiple, even unrelated, conspiracies suggests a common mindset among believers that makes them susceptible to conspiracy thinking in general, rather than a strong emotional connection to an event, object, group, or individual, that would make them susceptible to a single specific conspiracy theory.

Many different researchers have identified this common mindset among believers as a feeling of powerlessness and a need for a sense of order and control, each of which can be alleviated via belief in conspiracy theories. This concept is well explained by Robert Goldberg in his book *Enemies Within* in which he describes conspiracy thinking as “an antidote to powerlessness. It lifts the despair of vulnerability and arms believers with the knowledge to understand and defeat the enemy.”<sup>26</sup> Whether these subscribers truly try to “defeat the enemy” is unimportant. The key, Goldberg adds, is in “their sense of revitalization in discovering the truth.”<sup>27</sup> Belief gives the individual hope and purpose, helping to relieve the feelings of

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<sup>23</sup> Byford, *Conspiracy Theories*, 133.

<sup>24</sup> Byford, *Conspiracy Theories*, 130.

<sup>25</sup> Karen M. Douglas, Robbie M. Sutton and Michael J Wood, “Dead and Alive: Beliefs in Contradictory Conspiracy Theories,” *Social Psychological and Personality Science* January (2012): 4.

<sup>26</sup> Robert Alan Goldberg, “Mainstreaming Conspiracism,” in *Enemies Within: the Culture of Conspiracy in Modern America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 134.

<sup>27</sup> Goldberg, “Mainstreaming Conspiracism,” 134.

helplessness. Byford shares Goldberg's theory and states that in addition to easing a sense of powerlessness, belief actually offers a sense of superiority by allowing an individual "to see himself or herself as perfect and infallible in comparison to others who are seen as evil and defective."<sup>28</sup> The other main appeal of conspiracy thinking is that it fulfills a need for order and control, often in times of crisis, despite the irony that the control usually lies in the hands of the "evil" conspirators. For many this is "an oddly comforting way to cope with the anxiety of living in an uncertain and often inexplicable universe. The prospect of 'puppeteers,' even sinister ones, shaping the course of human events must seem less frightening to some people than the possibility that some events are either random, a result of human error, beyond our comprehension, or a combination of the above."<sup>29</sup> These two main psychological benefits, the relief from powerlessness and the restoration of order, shed light on why conspiracy theories form in the first place and how they continue to gain followers.

These psychological effects are closely intertwined with the sociological aspect of conspiracy thinking: the presence of a community of believers is central to any conspiracy theory since the sharing of beliefs helps individuals to feel empowered. Goldberg expertly points out that "conspiracy thinking does not thrive in isolation. It takes power in the resonance of community."<sup>30</sup> Being a part of this community gives believers a sense of belonging and unity, and thus they become part of something larger and more important than themselves. The upholding of the shared belief and the common goal to expose the conspiracy gives them purpose. These are communities in which the theorists "tend to perceive themselves, as a collective, to be resourceful and competent, and 'part of a genuinely heroic elite group'" that

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<sup>28</sup> Byford, *Conspiracy Theories*, 142.

<sup>29</sup> Beverly Ballaro and Chuck Goodwin, "Conspiracy Theories are Fodder for the Gullible," in *The Reference Shelf: Conspiracy Theories*, ed. Paul McCaffrey, (Ipswich: H.W. Wilson, 2012), 19.

<sup>30</sup> Goldberg, "Mainstreaming Conspiracism," 133.

cannot be fooled by the all-powerful conspirators.<sup>31</sup> This “strength in numbers” plays a major role in providing believers with confidence and the aforementioned relief from powerlessness that they may subconsciously seek.

With all this research in mind, it is not difficult to see why conspiracy theories formed around Pearl Harbor. The nature of the attack created these exact psychological conditions that have been identified as the driving force behind conspiracy thinking. Although the government clearly expected an attack in the month leading up to Pearl Harbor, it came as a complete surprise to average Americans and “inflicted a massive national trauma.”<sup>32</sup> This shock, along with the high death toll and the fear it created, would certainly create a deep sense of nationwide chaos if not outright panic. As the psychological research shows, in times of social turmoil like this, people feel the need for order and control, one of the key motives behind the formation of conspiracy theories. Byford confirms this exact observation when he states that conspiracy theories “have been shown to flourish in times of war, social crisis or economic disaster.”<sup>33</sup> America had been neutral and its people staunchly isolationist, even as the world was in turmoil around them; they were comforted by the belief that they could stay out of the war. Despite these beliefs there must have been a feeling of anxiety building in the minds of the American people given the chaotic state of the world even prior to the attack. Imagine the shock as people woke up on December 8 to the headline: “1500 DEAD IN HAWAII – CONGRESS VOTES FOR WAR.”<sup>34</sup> It is important to realize that at the time Americans could not know that Pearl Harbor would be an isolated incident, and the thought that the war would be brought to American soil must have been terrifying. Their place in the world had changed overnight; they were now thrust

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<sup>31</sup> Byford, *Conspiracy Theories*, 142.

<sup>32</sup> James Carrol, “Living in shock and infamy, years later,” *The Boston Globe*, December 7th, 2009, [http://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/tools\\_citationguide.html](http://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/tools_citationguide.html).

<sup>33</sup> Byford, *Conspiracy Theories*, 141.

<sup>34</sup> *New York World-Telegram*, December 8<sup>th</sup>, 1941

into the middle of a war they had strongly believed they could avoid, and the fear and anxiety of facing this new reality would certainly amplify previous feelings of powerlessness and even instill them anew. The surprise nature of the attack, which outraged Americans perceived as unfair and unethical, would further contribute to this sense of powerlessness — the other key motive behind the formation of conspiracy theories. It is clear how the attack on Pearl Harbor conjured the psychological mindset behind the formation and popularity of the conspiracy theories, but this mindset does not explain their content: why the government?

### **Distrust an American Virtue**

As is the case with Pearl Harbor, the party most commonly incriminated in conspiracy theories is the government. The answer lies in a deep distrust of government that has long been ingrained in American culture. A look at American history produces a long list of accusations of conspiracy, some true, others false and many unclear: the attack on September 11, 2001, Watergate in the 1970s, the Tuskegee syphilis experiments in the mid-1900s, the Tonkin Gulf incident in 1964, Pearl Harbor in 1941, the explosion of the *USS Maine* in 1898, the Slave Power Aristocracy in the mid-1800s, and the Corrupt Bargain of 1824. In the 1790s, only a few decades after the birth of the nation, Thomas Jefferson was convinced that the Federalist Alexander Hamilton was conspiring to turn the young nation into a monarchy.<sup>35</sup> Conspiracy theories are truly “a part of the national birthright,” and their fixation on the government reveals a distrust towards it that has been a part of our culture since the very beginning.<sup>36</sup> Patrick Henry, one of the nation’s founders and an American revolutionist, hinted at the danger of conspiracy when he said, “the liberties of a people never were, nor ever will be, secure, when the transactions of their

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<sup>35</sup> Peter Knight, *Conspiracy Theories in American History: An Encyclopedia*, Vol. 1 (ABC-CLIO : 2004), 296-297.

<sup>36</sup> Goldberg, “Mainstreaming Conspiracism,” 143.

rulers may be concealed from them.”<sup>37</sup> Knowing that power corrupts, our founders harbored strong suspicion and distrust of government and sought to construct a nation in which the government’s power could be kept in check and the people’s rights protected from abuse and oppression. Their distrust is evident in the very wording of the Constitution, the Bill of Rights, and in the checks and balances built into the branches of the federal government. Our country was in fact *founded* on the distrust of government. Again, we see this in the wisdom of Henry when he explains that “the Constitution is not an instrument for the government to restrain the people, it is an instrument for the people to restrain the government.”<sup>38</sup> The American idea is that distrust of government is a necessity, a positive value, not something to be avoided. This identity explains why the government is so commonly the target of conspiracy theories throughout American history; a framework of deep distrust has already been laid out.

This distrust of government has grown even stronger in the past half century, resulting in an epidemic of conspiracy theories surfacing in popular culture. Goldberg reports that in 1964, 25 percent of Americans distrusted the federal government, but this number has increased astronomically since. In my own survey I found that over 65 percent of people believe the federal government is involved in “lies, deceptions, or cover-ups about major issues.” The survey has a notably small sample size, but the findings are confirmed by more official sources: the percent of Americans that distrust the government has grown to 85 percent in 2011 according to a CNN poll.<sup>39,40</sup> This distrust is clearly visible in contemporary culture. Conspiracy theories have become a popular topic in books, movies, the media, and have found a strong foothold in Internet communities. In his article on conspiracy’s hold on mainstream culture, Goldberg explains that

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<sup>37</sup> “Patrick Henry Quotes,” [http://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/361839.Patrick\\_Henry](http://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/361839.Patrick_Henry).

<sup>38</sup> “Patrick Henry Quotes,” [http://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/361839.Patrick\\_Henry](http://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/361839.Patrick_Henry).

<sup>39</sup> Goldberg, “Mainstreaming Conspiracism,” 142.

<sup>40</sup> CNN Political Unit, September 28<sup>th</sup>, 2011 (6:00 a.m.), “CNN Poll: Trust in Government at All Time Low,” <http://politicalticker.blogs.cnn.com/2011/09/28/cnn-poll-trust-in-government-at-all-time-low/>.



“packagers of popular culture [have] certainly drunk deeply at the conspiracist well.”<sup>41</sup>

Americans are influenced consciously and subconsciously by the surrounding whirlwind of media and entertainment, and the popularity of conspiracy builds on our innate distrust of government, helping to legitimize conspiracy thinking. “The national media,” observes Goldberg, “confirm [believer’s] pleas and make conspiracism essential to an understanding of history and society.”<sup>42</sup> This modern obsession with conspiracy sheds some light on how the Pearl Harbor conspiracy theories retain their popularity even today, 70 years later, when few people still have a strong emotional connection to the actual attack.

To the casual observer, conspiracy theories may seem little more than paranoid delusions, but in truth they are far more complex, and research into these theories has taught us a great deal in recent years. In studying the psychological motivations behind conspiracy thinking, researchers have learned a great deal about the workings of the human mind and the way we view the world. The Pearl Harbor conspiracy theories are logically explained by this research and are but one episode in a long saga of conspiracy thinking directed towards the government in American history, the result of a distrust of political power that has been an integral part of American identity since the very formation of the nation. This distrust has become particularly strong and widespread in recent decades and conspiracy theories have become a dominating theme in American culture. From the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks to the “birther” movement against President Obama, modern conspiracies have gained mass popularity and significant media attention in the Internet age. Although skepticism towards the powers-that-be has always been an important and healthy part of our culture, this newfound zeal for conspiracy may be above and beyond what the founders had in mind. There is the potential that it is doing more harm than

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<sup>41</sup> Goldberg, “Mainstreaming Conspiracism,” 139.

<sup>42</sup> Goldberg, “Mainstreaming Conspiracism,” 135.

good. The sky isn't falling, but the radical nature of many modern conspiracy theories and their widespread popularity make it more important than ever that we seek to fully understand their causes and potential consequences.

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