

## PLAP 3500: Conspiracy Theories and American Politics Summer 2021

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**Office Hours:** By appointment at <https://virginia.zoom.us/j/3894689242>

“The demagogue is one who preaches doctrines he knows to be untrue to men he knows to be idiots.”- H.L. Mencken

“The idea of the paranoid style as a force in politics would have little contemporary relevance or historical value if it were only applied to men with profoundly disturbed minds. It is the use of paranoid modes of expression by more or less normal people that makes the phenomenon significant.”- Richard Hofstadter

“I rise today to stand against our enemy. And to clarify, our enemy isn’t the president, or the president-elect. Fear is our enemy. It tells us what we want to hear, it incites anger and violence and fire, but it also haunts us into silence and inaction. What are you afraid of? My vote to impeach our sitting president is not a fear-based decision. I am not choosing a side, I’m choosing truth. It’s the only way to defeat fear.”- Rep. Jaime Herrera-Beutler

### **Course Overview:**

This course examines the history, psychology, and political impact of conspiracy theories on American politics. We will be examining why people believe in conspiracies, how conspiracies are spread, what the sources of conspiracies are, which conspiracies have been prominent in American history, and why they matter.

### **Course Goals:**

- 1) Learn about the history of conspiracy theories in the United States, and their effects on our culture, politics, and lives.
- 2) Learn where conspiracies come from, how conspiracies spread, and why people believe in them.
- 3) Learn how to debunk conspiracy theories and combat misinformation and disinformation.

### **Course Outcomes:**

By the end of the course, students should be:

- 1) More knowledgeable about the history of conspiracy theories and common current theories.
- 2) More aware of why conspiracies spread and why people believe in the theories.
- 3) Better equipped to protect themselves from false information and to speak to those who have fallen for false conspiratorial narratives.

**Textbooks:**

[West, Mick. 2018. \*Escaping the Rabbit Hole: How to Debunk Conspiracy Theories Using Facts, Logic, and Respect\*. New York: Skyhorse Publishing.](#)

[Merlan, Anna. 2019. \*Republic of Lies: American Conspiracy Theorists and their Surprising Rise to Power\*. New York: Metropolitan Books.](#)

All other readings will be available on Collab.

**Recommended, but not Required:**

[Walker, Jesse. 2014. \*The United States of Paranoia: A Conspiracy Theory\*. New York: Harper Perennial.](#)

[Niewert, David. 2018. \*Alt-America: The Rise of the Radical Right in the Age of Trump\*. London: Verso.](#)

[Knight, Peter, ed. 2003. \*Conspiracy Theories in American History: An Encyclopedia\*. Santa Barbara, CA: ABC CLIO.](#)

[Van Prooijen, Jan-Willem. 2018. \*The Psychology of Conspiracy Theories\*. New York: Routledge.](#)

[Uscinski, Joseph E. 2020. \*Conspiracy Theories: A Primer\*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield.](#)

[Nagle, Angela. 2017. \*Kill All Normies: Online Culture Wars from 4Chan and Tumblr to the Trump and the Alt-Right\*. Washington: Zero Books.](#)

**Important Dates:**

**July 2-** End of Add/Drop

**July 5-** Midterm Exam

**July 9-** Withdrawal Deadline

**July 14-** Final Paper and Podcast Due

**July 16-** Final Exam

**Grading Breakdown**

**Forum Posts-** 5%

**Weekly Quizzes-** 15%

**Midterm Exam-** 20%

**Final Paper-** 20%

**Attendance & Participation-** 5%

**Podcast-** 10%

**Final Exam-** 25%

**Structure of the Course:** This will course will conducted partly on Zoom and partly on your own time. You are responsible for attending the lectures, reading the required texts, and watching the assigned videos before the Zoom session. Our Zoom meetings will feature PowerPoint lectures followed by discussions. **You are expected to be prepared with questions** and ready to contribute to discussions. Some sessions will be held asynchronously, but you are still responsible for all the information and are expected to make your forum posts.

**Class Policies:** All normal university policies are in effect, even though this class is online. In addition to the ever-present Honor Code, plagiarism is a serious academic offense that, as the demise of former Montana Senator John Walsh demonstrates, can follow you for the rest of your life. You are on your honor to complete the quizzes and exams honestly. In our class discussions, you are expected to participate and respect the contributions of others in a civil manner. Moreover, I expect you to not be on other websites or doing other things during our Zoom sessions.

**Attendance:** Zoom creates reports about your attendance, so I will not go through a roll call at the start of each class, however, I expect you to attend each session and stay logged on until I dismiss you. Each session you miss will reduce your attendance and participation grade by ten percent. If you miss three sessions, your final grade will be lowered by an entire letter grade. If you miss four sessions, you will fail the course. We are covering a vast amount of material in a very short window, so it is definitely in your interest to attend every single Zoom session.

**Forum Posts:** After each Zoom session, you are to submit a post to the “Discussions” tab of the Collab site. These “3, 2, 1 Posts” should include: 3 things you learned, 2 things you found interesting, and 1 thing you are still confused about from the day’s topic. These posts are due by 9 PM, Eastern every weekday.

**Readings:** Each day on the syllabus has materials that are listed as either “Required” or “Recommended.” Required materials are to be read (or viewed) **before the start of lecture on that day.** A lot of the recommended readings will be featured in the lectures. All readings, except for the textbook are available on Collab. The textbook is available on Amazon and through the college bookstore.

**Grading Scale:**

**A+:** 98-100

**B-:** 80-82

**D:** 63-67

**A:** 93-97

**C+:** 78-79

**D-:** 60-62

**A-:** 90-92

**C:** 73-77

**F:** <60

**B+:** 88-89

**C-:** 70-72

**B:** 83-87

**D+:** 68-69

**Grades:** The university is allowing the option of the Credit/No Credit grading system, so you can opt for Credit/General Credit/No Credit in lieu of the traditional system.

All grades are final. You can ask questions about your grades, but there are no regrades or do-overs, nor are there make-ups if you miss a window for a quiz or exam, except in emergency situations. **I will not accept late work.**

Remember, grades do not measure your worth as a person and will be utterly insignificant once you graduate from the University of Virginia. Actively participating in class and doing your best work will earn you recommendations from former professors and TAs; attempting to haggle your way to an A- instead of a B+ will not.

**Quizzes and Tests:** Since this is an online course, all quizzes and tests will take place entirely online. You are on your honor to not use **any** materials to aid you- no notes, books, syllabi, etc. and **certainly** no internet searches. If I have evidence that you have cheated, I will report you to the Honor Committee. Consider yourselves warned.

The quizzes will open up every Friday after class on Collab. Each quiz will be twenty multiple choice questions and you will have 30 minutes to complete once you open up the test. The quizzes are due by 9 PM every Sunday. There are no retakes for missed quizzes, except in the case of emergencies.

The tests will take place during the class window (1-3:15). The midterm will be 40 multiple choice questions covering the material of the first two weeks. The final will be 60 multiple choice questions and an essay. The final will feature 40 questions from the second half of the course, 20 questions from the first half of the course, and a cumulative essay.

**Academic and Nonacademic Support Resources at UVA:** I will work to provide a safe and equitable learning environment in this course; and, at the same time, I recognize that what happens in the classroom will be just one element of your session at UVA. Although I may not always be able to address your questions and concerns, I hope you will not hesitate to contact me about any issues that may be affecting your experience in this class.

Additional resources that are available to you include:

### **Resources for Addressing Sexual Violence:**

**UVA Writing Center:** The Writing Center is a wonderful way to enhance your writing ability throughout your time at UVA. Trained tutors work with you at any stage of the writing process on any writing assignment for any class with the ultimate goal of strengthening your ability and confidence as a writer. They will not proofread your papers, but they will help guide you through troublesome areas of the writing process or simply give you feedback that can help you learn things about yourself as a writer. This is a free and very valuable resource. Please, take advantage of it. The writing center is located at 314 Bryan Hall but will provide sessions online this summer. To make an appointment go to [virginia.mywconline.com](http://virginia.mywconline.com).

The University's central site is: <http://www.virginia.edu/sexualviolence/>. You can also contact the [Office of the Dean of Students](#): 434-924-7133 (or after hours and weekends call 434-924-7166 for the University Police Department; ask them to refer the issue to the Dean on Call);

[Sexual Assault Resources Agency](#) (SARA) hotline: 434-977-7273 (24/7); [Shelter for Help in Emergency](#) (SHE) hotline: 434-293-8509 (24/7); [UVA Women's Center](#): 435-982-2361; and [Student Health \(CAPS\)](#).

### **Resources for Addressing Racial Violence or Other Instances of Harassment or Discrimination:**

<http://www.virginia.edu/justreportit/>. You can also contact the [Office of the Dean of Students](#): 434-924-7133 (or after hours and weekends call 434-924-7166 for the University Police Department; ask them to refer the issue to the Dean on Call); and [Student Health \(CAPS\)](#).

In addition, the Center for Teaching Excellence (formerly the Teaching Resource Center) has assembled a wide-ranging list of sites and offices that can help respond to both academic and non-academic concerns. You can find it at:

<http://trc.virginia.edu/resources/support-for-uva-faculty-and-students/>.

As your teachers and as people, know that we care about your well-being and stand ready to provide support and resources as we can. As a faculty member and graduate student, I am a "Responsible Employee," which means that I am required by University policy and federal law to report anything you tell me about sexual violence to the University's Title IX Coordinator. The Title IX Coordinator's job is to ensure that the reporting student receives the resources and support that they need, while also reviewing the information presented to determine whether further action is necessary to ensure the safety of you and the University community. If you would rather keep information confidential, there are "Confidential Employees" you can talk to on Grounds ([http://www.virginia.edu/justreportit/confidential\\_resources.pdf](http://www.virginia.edu/justreportit/confidential_resources.pdf)).

The worst possible situation would be for you the people you care about to remain silent when there are so many at UVA willing and able to help.

Also, if you are experiencing any difficulties related to COVID-19, please do not be afraid to reach out to me. We are all continuing to battle twin global catastrophes and I want to help you all face this to the best of my ability.

**Contacting Me:** My email address is: [atw5tg@virginia.edu](mailto:atw5tg@virginia.edu).

## Class Schedule

Required readings and videos for each date are to have been read prior to the start of class on the day they are listed.

To paraphrase the immortal words of Captain Barbossa, “the syllabus is more like guidelines than actual rules.” In other words, the syllabus is subject to change.

### **Week One:** Sources of Political Knowledge

#### **June 21<sup>st</sup>:** Introduction and Welcome to the Course

Hofstadter, Richard. 1964. “The Paranoid Style in American Politics.” *Harper’s Magazine*.

**West**, Chapters 1 & 2

#### **June 22<sup>nd</sup>:** Sources of Political Learning

Uscinski, Joseph E. 2020. *Conspiracy Theories: A Primer*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield. pgs. 86-100.

Toff, Benjamin, & Rasmus Kleis Nielsen. 2018. “‘I just Google it:’ Folk Theories of Distributed Discovery.” *Journal of Communication*, 68, 636-657.

Nyhan, Brendan. 2012. “Knowledge Does Not Guard Against Conspiracy Theories.” *Washington Monthly*.

#### **June 23<sup>rd</sup>:** Mass Media and Promotion of Conspiracies

Waisbord, Silvio. 2018. “Truth is what Happens to News: On Journalism, Fake News, and Post-Truth.” *Journalism Studies*, 19, 13: 1866-1878.

Ladd, Jonathan & Alex Podkul. 2016. “The Spread of Inaccurate Political Information in the Era of Distrusted News Media.” Knight Foundation.

**Recommended:** Al-Rawi, Ahmed. 2019. “Gatekeeping Fake News Discourses on Mainstream Media versus Social Media.” *Social Science Computer Review*, 37, 6: 687-704.

#### **June 24<sup>h</sup>:** Facebook, Twitter, and Mainstream Social Media

**Watch:** [John Oliver on Facebook in Myanmar](#)

Vaidhyathan, Siva. 2018. *Anti-Social Media: How Facebook Disconnects Us and Undermines Democracy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. Chapter 7: “The Disinformation Machine.”

Prier, Jared. 2017. "Commanding the Trend: Social Media as Information Warfare." *Strategic Studies Quarterly*, 11, 4 (Winter): 50-85.

**June 25<sup>th</sup>:** Internet Forums and Conspiracies

Nagle, Angela. 2016. "The New Man of 4Chan." *Baffler*. 64-76.

Ganesh, Bharath. 2018. "The Ungovernability of Digital Hate Culture." *Journal of International Affairs*, 71, 2 (Ungoverned Spaces: Spring/Summer): 30-49.

**Recommended:** Watch *Q: Into the Storm* on HBO

**Recommended:** Nagle, Angela. 2017. *Kill All Normies*. Zero Books.

**\*\*\*Week One Quiz Open on Collab\*\*\***

**Week Two:** Psychological Underpinnings of Conspiratorial Attitudes

**June 28<sup>th</sup>:** Psychology of Conspiratorial Thinking

**Merlan**, Chapter 1

**West**, Chapter 4

**June 29<sup>th</sup>:** Uncertainty, Distrust, and Explanation

Wood, Michael, Robbie M. Sutton & Karen M. Douglas. 2012. "Dead and Alive: Beliefs in Contradictory Conspiracy Theories." *Social Psychology and Personality Science*, 3, 6: 767-773.

Van der Linden, Sander. 2013. "Why People Believe in Conspiracy Theories (What a Hoax!)." *Scientific American*.

Nichols, Tom. 2014. "The Death of Expertise." *The Federalist*.

**June 30<sup>th</sup>:** Rationality of Conspiracism

**Merlan**, Chapter 2

Van Prooijen, Jan-Willem. 2019. "Belief in Conspiracy Theories" in Forgas, Joseph E. and Roy Baumeister, eds. *The Social Psychology of Gullibility*. New York: Routledge.

**Watch:** [SNL Black Jeopardy!](#)

**\*Final Paper Topic Choices Due by Midnight\***

**July 1<sup>st</sup>:** Psychology of Political Extremism, Demagoguery, and Terrorism

**Merlan**, Chapter 8

Van Prooijen, Jan-Willem and André P. M. Krouwel. 2019. "Psychological Features of Extreme Political Ideologies." *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 28 (2): 159-163.

**July 2<sup>nd</sup>-** Debunking Conspiracies

**West**, Chapters 3, 5, 15

**Watch:** [Rep. Jaime Herrera-Beutler on Choosing Truth](#)

**Do:** [New York Times Interactive Chatbot](#)

**Recommended:** West, Chapter 6

**\*\*\*Week Two Quiz Open on Collab\*\*\***

**\*\*\*End of Add/Drop Period\*\*\***

**Week Three-** Case Studies in American History

**July 5<sup>th</sup>-** Conspiracy Theories in Early American History

**\*\*\*Midterm\*\*\***

**\*\*\*Asynchronous Lecture\*\*\***

**Watch:** [Homer Initiated into the Stonecutters \(The Simpsons\)](#)

**July 6<sup>th</sup>-** Nationalist Conspiracies

Stone, Barbara A. 1974. "The John Birch Society: A Profile." *The Journal of Politics*, 36, 1 (Feb): 184-197.

**July 7<sup>th</sup>-** John F. Kennedy Assassination

Ayton, Mel. 2003. "Forty Years On: Who Killed JFK?" *History Ireland*, 11, 4 (Winter): 45-49.

Holland, Max. 1994. "After Thirty Years: Making Sense of the Assassination." *Reviews in American History*, 22, 2 (June): 191-209.

**Watch:** [King of the Hill: Dale Reads the Warren Report.](#)



**July 8<sup>th</sup>**- Aliens, UFOs, and Area 51

**Merlan**, Chapter 9

“Coast to Coast AM Is No Wack Job.” *Wired*.

**July 9<sup>th</sup>**- Anti-Science Conspiracies (Anti-Vaxxers, Flat Earth, Climate Change Denial, 5G, Coronavirus)

**Watch:** [John Oliver on Coronavirus Conspiracy Theories](#)

**West**, Chapters 13, & 14

**Merlan**, Chapter 6

**Recommended:** West, Chapters 7 & 8

**\*\*\*Week Three Quiz Open on Collab\*\*\***

**\*\*\*Deadline to Withdraw from the Course\*\*\***

**Week Four:** Case Studies in American History, Continued

**July 12<sup>th</sup>**- 9/11, Birtherism & Other Contemporary Conspiracies

**Merlan**, Chapter 10

**West**, Chapter 11

**Watch:** [South Park: George Bush Did 9/11](#)

**Recommended:** West, Chapters 9, 10, 12

**Recommended:** Merlan, Chapters 4, 5

**July 13<sup>th</sup>**- Q-Anon

**\*Special Guest Speaker: Former Congressman Denver Riggleman\***

**Merlan**, Chapter 3, Epilogue

LaFrance, Adrienne. 2020. “The Prophecies of Q: American Conspiracy Theories are Entering a Dangerous New Phase.” *The Atlantic*.

Zuckerman, Ethan. & Mike McQuade. 2019. “QAnon and the Emergence of the Unreal.” *Journal of Design and Science*.

**Recommended:** Watch *Q: Into the Storm* on HBO

**July 14<sup>th</sup>**- Voter Fraud, January 6<sup>th</sup>, and Final Thoughts

**West**, Chapter 16, Conclusion

Quinlan, Sarah. 2021. "The Destructive Power of the GOP's Election Lies." *Arc Digital*.

**\*\*\*Final Papers and Podcasts Due at Start of Class\*\*\***

**July 15<sup>th</sup>**- No Classes, Study Day

**July 16<sup>th</sup>**- **Final Exam (1-3:30 PM, ET)**

## Final Paper

**Objective:** You will be analyzing a conspiracy theory or event case study from American history. Your analysis will look at the theory, itself, identifying the evidence for and against the conspiracy, and also identify the spread of the theory. Why did the theory spread? Who was the target audience of the theory? What were the political repercussions of the theory? Was the theory reasonable? In your analysis, make sure to make use of psychological and political theories we have discussed in the course.

The paper will also be the basis for a podcast submission, which is explained on page 13.

**First Step:** Email Professor Welch a ranked list of your top five choices for a paper by midnight on June 30<sup>th</sup>. The submissions are first come, first serve, so that we can have a wide variety of topics covered.

### Suggested Outline:

- Intro
  - Describe topic, summarize body paragraphs
  - Finish with thesis statement
- Theory/Event Summary
  - 1 or 2 paragraphs describing the core ideas of the theory
- History of Theory
  - Origins, spread, effects on society
- Psychological Analysis
  - Appeal of the Theory, Target Audiences, etc.
- Analysis of the Theory
  - Logic, Consistency, Believability, Evidence for/against
- Conclusion
  - Summarize paper
  - Finish on Strong Note

**Length:** 6-8 pages, double spaced, 12 pt. Times New Roman, 1-inch margins, Numbered Pages

### Other Requirements:

- Cite at least four **academic sources** (Scholarly Books, Journal Articles)
- Style: APA, MLA, Chicago/Turabian
- Proofread
- Have a Classmate Proofread and Sign Off

### Possible Topics (Not Exhaustive List):

- Coronavirus Conspiracies
- Q Anon, Pizzagate
- Hunter Biden
- Russiagate

- Obamagate
- Benghazi/Hillary Clinton Conspiracies
- George Soros
- 2008-2009 Recession
- Anti-Vaccination Conspiracies
- Climate Change/Global Warming
- Technology Conspiracies (5G, Microchips, Mind Control, etc.)
- Flat Earth and Similar Theories (Geocentrism)
- Illuminati
- Iraq War
- September 11<sup>th</sup>
- Ruby Ridge and Waco
- AIDS Conspiracies
- Posse Comitatus & Related Movements (Christian Identity, militias, etc.)
- Vietnam War Conspiracies
- Watergate
- Jimmy Hoffa
- Moon Landing
- JFK Assassination/Lee Harvey Oswald/Warren Report
- RFK Assassination
- Martin Luther King, Jr. Assassination
- John Birch Society Theories
- Anti-Immigrant Conspiracies
- Communist Conspiracies/McCarthyism/Red Scares
- Rosenbergs
- Area 51/UFOs/Roswell
- Charles Lindbergh Baby Kidnapping
- Pearl Harbor
- Nye Committee/Interwar Isolationism (America First Movement)
- Bilderbergs/Trilateral Commission/New World Order
- United Nations
- Yellow Journalism and the Spanish-American War
- Free Masons/Anti-Masonic Party
- Bank Wars/Banking Conspiracies
- End Times/Apocalypticism
- Abraham Lincoln Assassination
- Slave Power/Slave Rebellions
- Know Nothings/Anti-Catholicism
- Alien and Sedition Acts
- Aaron Burr's Treason
- XYZ Affair
- Newburgh Conspiracy
- Shays' Rebellion
- Salem Witch Trials

## Hoo-to-Hoo AM Podcasts

**Due:** 1 PM, July 14<sup>th</sup>

**Where:** Upload to the “Hoo-to-Hoo AM” Forum Under Discussions

**What:** Pretend you are the guest of a late-night conspiratorial talk radio program (a la *Coast to Coast AM*). Create a podcast lasting 10-15 minutes in which you discuss the conspiracy theory you researched for your final paper. You can do this alone, or with a partner, in which case you both discuss your theories and interact like co-hosts.

In your podcast, make sure to discuss the following:

- What the conspiracy theory is
- The historical background for your conspiracy theory
- How the conspiracy spread and who generally believes it
- An analysis of its plausibility and the evidence for/against it
- Overall judgment on how believable the conspiracy theory is

Be thorough and theoretical in your podcast, and make sure to have fun with this! If you need help with podcasting, do a Google search for podcasting apps that can make it easy.

After the last class, take some time to watch/listen to your classmates’ submissions. You are to review two other podcasts in the form of a 3, 2, 1 post. Therefore, reply to each forum with three things you learned, two things you found interesting, and one thing the podcast either did well or one suggestion for improvement. **These forum replies are due by 5 PM ET, Saturday July 17<sup>th</sup>.**

### Rubric:

**Podcast Length:** 20 Points (10-15 Minutes)

**Content:** 30 Points

**Presentation Quality:** 30 Points

Clarity of Presentation

Professionalism

Effort

**Forum Replies:** 20 Points