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The United States of Paranoia: A Conspiracy Theory

By Jesse Walker

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The United States of Paranoia: A Conspiracy Theory By Jesse Walker

Jesse Walker's *The United States of Paranoia* presents a comprehensive history of conspiracy theories in American culture and politics, from the colonial era to the War on Terror.

The fear of intrigue and subversion doesn't exist only on the fringes of society, but has always been part of our national identity. When such tales takes hold, Walker argues, they reflect the anxieties and experiences of the people who believe them, even if they say nothing true about the objects of the theories themselves.

With intensive research and a deadpan sense of humor, Jesse Walker's *The United States of Paranoia* combines the rigor of real history with the punch of pulp fiction.

This edition includes primary-source documentation in the form of archival photographs, cartoons, and film stills selected by the author.

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Editorial Review

From [Booklist](#)

This is a remarkably comprehensive, wide-ranging look at the way American culture, politics, religion, and social structure have been affected by conspiracy stories. Here you'll find tales of Mormon conspiracies, the Salem witch trials, the Illuminati, satanists, the 1980s rash of bogus claims of child molestation (especially the famous McMartin case), the Church of the SubGenius, and, oh, so many more. Author Walker's intent is neither to ridicule nor debunk but simply to explore: How does an idea take hold, grow, permeate the culture? Sometimes it happens by accident: *Illuminatus!*, a satiric trilogy of novels published in the mid-1970s, led to a surge in interest in the (supposedly) real Illuminati—what was essentially a joke led to the spread of a very serious conspiracy theory. Sometimes, of course, an idea spreads because people want it to spread: John Todd, whose own story would make a fascinating book all by itself, spent his life aggressively promoting an elaborate conspiracy theory (which involved, among other elements, Ayn Rand and Charles Manson as puppets of the Illuminati). A lively, extremely interesting, and occasionally more than slightly scary book. --David Pitt

Review

"A superb analysis of American paranoia...terrific, measured, objective." (Publishers Weekly (starred review))

"Prepare to be amazed." (Jeet Heer, author of *In Love with Art*)

"Free-floating fear and half-baked ideas about what's really going on have been a more significant part of American history than is generally accepted, according to Jesse Walker's thorough, meticulously researched book." (Vice)

"Oddly entertaining...Walker quickly demolishes [Richard Hofstadter's "The Paranoid Style in American Politics"]. It's all too rare to come upon a writer willing to attack the sacred cows of the right and left with equal amounts of intelligence and flair." (Los Angeles Times)

"First there was *A People's History of the United States*. Now there's a paranoid's history, with Jesse Walker revealing that normal, sensible citizens have been conspiracy nuts ever since our nation's beginning." (Debbie Nathan, author of *Sybil Exposed*)

From the Back Cover

A history of America's demons

1693: Cotton Mather suggests that the spirits attacking Salem are allied with the colony's human enemies. At their "Cheef Witch-meetings," he writes, "there has been present some French canadians, and some Indian Sagamores, to concert the methods of ruining New England."

1835: A gunman tries to kill Andrew Jackson. The president accuses a senator of plotting the assassination. Jackson's critics counter that the shooting was arranged by the president himself to gain public support.

1868: An article in the *New-York Tribune* declares that the Democrats have engineered malaria outbreaks in

the nation's capital, pumping "the air, and the water, and the whisky of Washington full of poison."

1967: President Lyndon Johnson asks his cabinet if the Communists are behind the country's urban riots. The attorney general tells him that the evidence isn't there, but Johnson isn't convinced.

Conspiracy theories aren't just a feature of the fringe. They've been a potent force across the political spectrum, at the center as well as the extremes, from the colonial era to the present. In *The United States of Paranoia*, Jesse Walker explores this rich history, arguing that conspiracy stories should be read not just as claims to be either believed or debunked but also as folklore. When a tale takes hold, it reveals something true about the anxieties and experiences of those who believe and repeat it, even if the story says nothing true about the objects of the theory itself.

In a story that stretches from the seventeenth century to today, Walker lays out five conspiracy narratives that recur in American politics and popular culture. With intensive research and a deadpan sense of humor, *The United States of Paranoia* combines the rigor of real history with the punch of pulp fiction.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Lisa Streeter:

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Steven Williams:

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