

Lesson Plan: Using history to evaluate conspiracy theories

ANALYSIS OF THE CONSPIRACY THEORIES (Suggested answers)

A. We know that religion and civil order remained in the United States, so either there was no conspiracy or it was unsuccessful. The illuminati conspiracy theory increased fear of foreign influence in America and was used to pass laws restricting immigrants in the United States.

B. The Catholics never took over and there was no Catholic war, in the sense that Catholics never made a physical attack to take over the government or wipe out Protestants. There has been suspicion and animosity against Catholics running for president, such as in 1928 and 1960, but no war.

C. The Masons never took over the government, although Masons have served in government.

D. There is certainly evidence that government decisions favored the South and slavery in the 1850s, but there is no evidence here that people plotted and coordinated to get these results. But claiming a sinister conspiracy was politically useful: Republican leaders used the threat from the alleged slave power conspiracy in the 1850s to engender fear among northern voters and thereby gain political power to stop the spread of slavery.

E. This is a more extreme and specific slavery-related conspiracy, for which there is no evidence. There was no trace of poison in any of the deaths alleged to be from poison, no connection linking the man who tried to shoot President Jackson to pro-slavery leaders, and no evidence of sabotage in the train derailment. In this case, as in the other cases where there is a lack of evidence, people who believe in the conspiracy theory might respond that the lack of evidence actually shows that the conspirators were successful in covering up their conspiracy. Lack of evidence = proof. Yikes!

F. There is no evidence that President Lincoln sold his soul to Satan to gain popularity.

G. There is abundant evidence that Booth was part of a plot to assassinate President Lincoln. His co-conspirators were caught and convicted based on that evidence.

H. This is a classic case of using leading questions to weave a conspiracy theory. There is no evidence of Secretary of War Stanton being involved with any of these details. The bodyguard was tried for leaving his post but acquitted. The telegraph that went down

was run by a private company and had nothing to do with the War Department. The bridge was not closed in time because there were no soldiers near it when the order went out to close it. There is, however, evidence against this conspiracy theory. Stanton ordered that Booth should be captured alive. The circumstances of the shooting when he was located are quite unclear. There are many other details to this conspiracy theory, all of which have been refuted by later historians.

I. There is no evidence to show that a curse caused these presidents to die in office, nor could there be any evidence to support it. This theory is a classic case of patternicity, someone connecting random dots and concluding it is a pattern with a sinister cause. There is no evidence supporting the curse as the cause for the presidents' deaths.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What do you notice about these conspiracy theories from early American history?

They are almost all false. The only one that is an actual conspiracy (Item G) is a narrow argument about a specific action. General conspiracies about takeover of society in general are unlikely to be true. Item D does seem possible but there is no direct evidence of a conspiracy.

2. Based on these conspiracy theories from early American history, what should people do to evaluate whether conspiracy claims made today are real?

- *Ask if there is actual evidence to support the conspiracy theory.*
- *Ask if there could be evidence to support the conspiracy theory. If there is no possibility of finding evidence to test the conspiracy, then we should not accept it.*
- *Check other sources for evidence to support or weaken the conspiracy theory.*
- *Is it a complex conspiracy, involving many people?*
- *Does it ask leading or suggestive questions, without evidence?*

Here is a conspiracy detection kit from Michael Shermer, science author and historian of science:

1. *Patternicity – Is there convincing evidence to connect the dots this way?*
2. *Agency – A conspiracy theory that involves super powerful agents is most likely false.*
3. *Complexity – The more elements involved, the less likely it is to be true.*
4. *The more people involved, the less likely it is to be true.*
5. *Grandiosity – The more ambitious the conspiracy (world domination) the more likely it is to be false.*

6. *Scale – Specific conspiracies limited in their scope and aims might be true, but larger-scale ones are less likely to be true.*
7. *Significance – World changing conspiracies are less likely to be true.*
8. *Accuracy – If it mixes facts with conjectures, it is less likely to be true.* 9. *Paranoia – If it is suspicious of people or government in general, then it is less likely to be true.* 10. *Falsifiability – If a conspiracy theory cannot be falsified, then it is unlikely to be true.*

3. Why do you think people believe conspiracy theories?

According to researchers, there are many possible reasons why people believe conspiracies, among which are:

1. *Conspiracies are interesting and exciting.*
2. *People who believe them may feel special, since they feel they have inside information that other people don't know (who they sometimes refer to as sheep).*
3. *Many conspiracy theories supply simple explanations for complex problems in the world. They paint the world in black and white/good and evil.*
4. *People who are distrustful of government or authority in general tend to be more inclined to believe conspiracies.*