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The Ideological Origins of Deep State Conspiracy Theories

Abstract: The term "deep state" has enjoyed political prominence in recent years, especially in movement around former President Donald Trump. However, the term has a far longer history in American politics, with its roots in the post-SDS activist milieu that sought to engender political realignment in the aftermath of the Kennedy assassination. Although the term has its origins in fringe left politics, those in the Trump movement use the term to level accusations of conspiracy at supposed subversives in the administrative state, attributing what they see as concerted attacks against Trump to the same "deep state" apparatus that supposedly killed Kennedy and cashiered Nixon. In doing so, they draw on a long-running but little-analyzed intellectual tradition which invokes conspiracy theories, purporting to unmask the real intentions of political actors in order to facilitate cooperation and recruitment across ideological and partisan divides. From the postwar period to the present, conspiracy theories, and the "deep state" vocabulary in particular, circulated freely across the left-right political divide. What attracted authors and activists to this collection of tropes and texts wasn't only the sense that they revealed concrete truths about long-hidden elements of American political life. It was the ambiguity and even co-optability of these texts which attracted would-be conspiracy theorists across the political spectrum. This ambiguity, coupled with the seeming pervasiveness of conspiracy theorist tropes across political divides, appeared to activists seeking realignment as a promising tactical opportunity to assert that they and their erstwhile enemies were actually engaged in a shared project. The outcome was that activists interested in realignment on both the left and right came to see conspiracy theory not as the province of an exclusively left or right politics, but as an autonomous cultural space they needed to contest, leading to cross-partisan encounters.

Introduction

On March 25, 2023 former President Trump spoke these words in public: "either the deep state destroys America, or we destroy the deep state" (Allen 2023). In invoking the deep state, he finally followed the lead of his erstwhile allies Steve Bannon and retired General Michael Flynn, known for their embrace of the more conspiratorial element of the former President's base. For this reason, Trump's adoption of the term was to be expected. To those familiar with the term

"deep state's" longer history in American politics, however, its recent cachet on the far right is quite puzzling. In fact, the term's application to American politics originates in the work of Peter Dale Scott, a former Canadian diplomat and emeritus professor at the University of California, Berkeley most famous for his socialist politics and his detailed document histories of what he portrays as a nexus between intelligence, government and criminal actors he has variously called the "parapolitical milieu," the "deep political milieu" and, more simply, the "deep state." How and why did a conceptual vocabulary with origins traceable to the writings of the Kennedy-era New Left come to hold such significance for the Trumpian right?

In this article I reconstruct and interpret a series of debates between major intellectuals and activists who offered accounts invoking conspiracies to explain the reasons for, and the political implications of, the Kennedy assassination. These earlier debates influenced contemporary thinkers responsible for the popularization of the idea of the "deep state" which has in recent times proved a rallying point for the radical right cohering around former President Trump. Much of the research on the rise of conspiracy theories in American politics over the last decades affirms the importance of "elites" like these in driving belief in claims of conspiracy amongst the mass public (Watts et al. 1999; Uscinski, Klofstad and Atkinson 2016; Nefes 2015, 2017), but little attention has been paid to the sources of "elite" ideas. To be sure, the likes of Bannon and his allies are far from consistent in their portrayal and analysis of the deep state (Beiner 2019), but even if they use the term inconsistently, the mere fact of using it at all still evokes over three decades debate. In fact, each major thinker who encountered the term as it emerged from sense-making efforts surrounding the Kennedy assassination interpreted it

differently.

In order to invent the deep state, thinkers of conspiracy drew on the work of others who they saw as invested in similar projects, but they also had to contest and subvert these influences. Kennedy had been assassinated by a conspiracy – about this, there was little doubt. What was less clear for these thinkers was why this had taken place. Complicating accounts which emphasize the protective psychological role played by conspiracy theories in providing simplified interpretations of complex events (Young 1990; Goertzel 1994; Abalakina-Paap et. al. 1999), earlier theories could not be counted on to provide a ready-made, coherent narrative enabling believers to seamlessly make sense of new events. Instead, conspiracy theorists clashed, producing divergent interpretations in their efforts to make sense of the assassination and what it meant for American politics. The materials produced by these searchers came to comprise much of what we now know as conspiracy theory. The resulting ambiguity, factual contradictions, and analytic dead ends of conspiracy theory are more than stylistic hallmarks of the genre. They record the accumulated sediment of efforts by political actors with contradictory motivations seeking to make sense of political events, but whose common task of sense-making in the face of official explanations lead them, again and again, to the same explanatory resources and objects of interpretation. Indeed, much of the promise of conspiracy theory as a tactic for broadly addressing others across ossified political divides, the historical view of which is the subject of this article, inheres in the genre's stylistic embrace of ambiguity and propensity to foster curiosity about, and questioning of, the origins and reality of those divides, while activating exactly the experiences of ignorance, dislocation and confusion that make those questions difficult to answer

(Masco and Wedeen 2023).

Contrary to accounts which position conspiracy theories as the domain of the radical right (Allcot and Gentzkow 2017; Faris et al. 2017; Vosoughi, Roy and Aral 2018), in the aftermath of the Kennedy assassination thinkers in radical movements on both the left and right, invoking what amount to genre conventions of conspiracy theory, began to stage themselves and their cross-ideological counterparts as collectively participating in a shared tradition or institution of “conspiracy theory” or “assassination research” that was suppressed by mainstream politics. In doing so, conspiracy thinkers joined contemporary social scientists in offering their own interpretative constructions of the “master code” of conspiracy theory – what the vast diversity of conspiracy stories were really all about. Produced in this way, the genre of conspiracy theory acted as an institution (Jameson 1981; Guillén 1971) mediating the relation between political thinkers and the public. Through their interpretations of what it meant for a text to be involved in the broader genre of conspiracy theory, postwar thinkers and writers attempted to enforce their intended meanings against divergent public and elite uses of their texts and ideas. With this in mind, my account stages conspiracy theory neither as a formal category defined by shared narrative characteristics (Pigden 2006; Dentith 2019; Uscinski and Enders 2022), nor as an epistemic category defined by a specific mode of justification (Sunstein and Vermeule 2009; Harris 2022) or a shared flaw (Keeley 1999; Feldman 2011; Cassam 2015; Cassam 2016), but as a genre. In doing so, I seek to center the flexibility and historical development of the category in response to thinkers' political environment and individual goals, recognizing the “family resemblance” and relations of influence between various conspiracy theories without overstating

their coherence or identity as a trans-historical category, even if activists themselves sometimes came to think of conspiracy theory in this way.

The Old Right and the Deep State

One major source of conspiracy theoretic thought in American political history was the pre-World War II Old Right, the broad collection of conservatives opposed to Roosevelt's New Deal. Ideologically diverse, the Old Right was more clearly defined by what it was against than what it was for. For example, isolationists, libertarians, and proponents of laissez-faire capitalism united in the Republican Party with anti-Roosevelt progressives like Wisconsin's Robert La Follette. Even as they lacked unity, the diverse ideologues of the Old Right distinguished themselves from those of the nascent New Right with their isolationist opposition to the war and their critiques of what they saw as a rising American imperialism (Nash 2006; also see Rothbard 2007).

While the term "deep state" was introduced to American political discourse through the work of Scott, it did not rise to prominence until thinkers in the movement around former President Trump embraced it. Some of these Trumpian thinkers – like Alex Jones, on whose *InfoWars* program Scott had made multiple guest appearances – were undoubtedly familiar with the term in its original context. They adopted this conceptual vocabulary to attribute what they saw as concerted attacks against Trump to the same “deep state” apparatus that supposedly killed Kennedy and cashiered Nixon. Others – like pundit Sean Hannity, who did much to introduce the term to a national audience – were likely ignorant of the term's long history in American politics.

Jones and related right-wing conspiracy theorists' adoption of the term is, in some ways, really a re-appropriation of the conceptual genealogy which underlies it. When Scott himself appropriated the terminology from the Turkish term "derin devlet," translatable to "deep state," he was criticizing and building on the earlier "secret team" conspiracy theory model of Fletcher Prouty and the "Yankee and Cowboy" model of Carl Oglesby, figures on the New Left who made no secret of their admiration for the libertarian thinkers of the Old Right like John T. Flynn and B. Carroll Reece. Like the thinkers of the Old Right, the emerging postwar New Left and their unlikely conservative and libertarian fellow travelers in the movement against American involvement in Vietnam were ideologically diverse, united more by what they opposed than by what programs they endorsed. What they opposed was the rise of what they saw as an unaccountable, hidden force within the American government, a "clandestine America"¹ born from the necessities of the industrial Second World War and surviving to run unchecked over the guide-rails of American democracy. The nature of this clandestine force was widely debated in a still-influential body of literature which crossed political and ideological boundaries, drawing in thinkers of the left and right to research, characterize and discuss the role of what they saw as an interlocking network of unaccountable power structures displacing the formal, constitutional structures of American governance.

The 1950's and 1960's: Changes in Right Wing Conspiracy Theory

In October of 1965, still reeling from Goldwater's defeat a year earlier, William Buckley

1 *The Lobster* no. 8. Primary source material will be cited in footnotes while scholarly material will be cited parenthetically.

and the editors of the *National Review* took aim at what they saw as the rise of extremism within the broader conservative movement. In their sights was the John Birch Society of Robert Welch, the conservative gadfly of conspiracy theory who famously alleged that the United States was endangered by conspiracies of communists and more nefarious, mysterious forces. In the years following the assassination of Democratic President John F. Kennedy in 1964, many Republicans became concerned that public opinion had taken sharp turn against them, blaming the excesses of far-right organizations like the John Birch Society. Now the Review had dedicated a special issue to the place of the Society within the conservative movement. Buckley was concerned that the Society had taken too prominent a place in the aftermath of the 1964 Presidential election, writing that “the Society is very plainly a beneficiary of the distress that ensued on the defeat of Senator Goldwater in his race for the Presidency last year. Enormous sums of money are pouring into the Society, which money is being spent...in cultivating points of view whose bearing on the anti-Communist struggle is harmful.”²

Were the editors of the *National Review* concerned that Welch's style of conspiracy theory was incorrect? That it would risk discrediting the American right? Not exactly. “There is, in fact, a Communist conspiracy of some significance acting domestically,”³ wrote Frank S. Meyer in an article targeting the Birchers. Instead, Meyer and Buckley both took issue with the Society's activist efforts to, as read a popular Birch bumper sticker, “Get US Out” of Vietnam. The Review writers saw Welch's conspiracy-mongering as dangerously discrediting of America's war effort. After all, if the government was influenced by a conspiracy, then surely it could not

² *National Review*, October 1965, 914.

³ *Ibid.*, 919.

be believed that the so-called anti-communist action in Vietnam was really in the interest of anti-communism. If there really was a conspiracy at the deepest levels of the American government, Birchers argued, then supporting *any* government action was out of the question.⁴ As James Burnham lamented, the Birch ideology had led the those in the Society to be “integrally and totally opposed, even as a counter-revolutionist would be opposed...to his government.”⁵

When Buckley and the editors of the National Review took aim at the John Birch Society in 1965, they were responding to a theoretical shift made by Welch in the aftermath of Kennedy's assassination wherein Welch began to de-emphasize the role of communist infiltration in his conspiracy theories, instead gravitating toward a more systemic understanding of conspiracy. While Welch would not formally communicate this ideological shift to the rest of the Society until 1964, he had long clashed with other Birch higher-ups about whether or not his hypothesized communist conspiracy was really the long-running theory of a Jewish world conspiracy by another name. In a series of works published in the years surrounding the Kennedy assassination, Welch would endorse an interpretation of his theories which emphasized a generic relationship with older texts alleging a grand conspiracy, namely John Robison's *Proofs of a Conspiracy* (1797). By drawing connections between his theories, historical theories of conspiracy and other contemporary texts which he saw as offering similar argument to his own, Welch constructed a category of “conspiracy theory” that could accommodate both anti-communist and anti-Semitic interpretations while deferring endorsement of either. In this way, Welch hoped to shore up solidarity within the John Birch Society which had become hamstrung

4 Ibid., 920.

5 Ibid., 926.

by disagreement over the nature of the conspiracy.

It is true, as Miller (2021) points out, that Welch had a blind spot for anti-Semites in his organization – besides firing his erstwhile collaborator Revilo Oliver, he took little direct action against those in the organization who embraced the theory of the Jewish world conspiracy. Many Birchers involved in researching for Welch's publications were also involved in anti-Semitic organizations. At the same time, it would be going too far to concur with Oliver's own assessment in the aftermath of his firing that Welch's conspiracy theories about communists were cynically intended to persuade the mass public of something like a Jewish conspiracy while maintaining plausible deniability.⁶ In fact, there is a strong correspondence between Welch's publicly expressed views decrying anti-Semitism and his private correspondence, in which he defended his theory of communist conspiracy against the anti-Semitic conspiracy theory. Despite Welch's consistent, private opposition to the anti-Semitic theory, he was unable to enforce agreement within the organization. At the highest levels of the organization there was little agreement on anything besides the existence of a conspiracy of some kind. In addition to hardcore anti-communists like Welch and traditionalist conservatives like Clarence Manion, the Society would also provide a political home and media grandstand for libertarians like Ludwig von Mises, radical Catholics like L. Brent Bozell Jr. (William F. Buckley's brother-in-law), Bonapartist supporters of General MacArthur like Col. Laurence E. Bunker, vocal anti-Semites like Revilo P. Oliver and neo-fascist internationalists like Francis X. Gannon. Putting on a united front in the pages of the Society's journal *American Opinion*, this motley collection of right-wing

⁶ After his expulsion from the JBS in 1964, Oliver would first accuse Welch of being an agent of a Jewish world conspiracy bent on "neutralizing" the radical right, before subsequently contradicting himself with allegations that Welch himself was also an anti-Semite who had drastically revised *The Politician* before publication to remove all "references to the Jews". See Revilo Oliver, *American Decline* (Londinium Press, 1981).

intellectuals nonetheless clashed behind the scenes. By 1962, Welch was facing increasing pressure from the anti-Semitic tendency represented by Oliver to modify the Bircher position on the conspiracy and explicitly “name the Jew.”

In the early 1960s, Oliver had apparently denied his flagrant and often-public anti-Semitism, remarking to William Buckley that his motives for associating with the anti-Semites of the *American Mercury* were purely tactical⁷. In fact, Oliver was active in openly anti-Semitic groups at the time, although he did not disclose this to the movement conservatives at the *National Review*, where his name was still listed on the masthead. However, Oliver was more open about his beliefs with Welch. Believing Welch to secretly support the hypothesis of a Jewish world conspiracy, he assumed that Welch intended Bircher rhetoric about the communist conspiracy to be an elaborate, politically-expedient dogwhistle. However, by 1962, Oliver and Slobodan Draskovich, another JBS executive council member, were organizing secret meetings of Society higher-ups to discuss unseating Welch from the organization.⁸

Faced with increasing internal pressure by advocates of the Jewish world conspiracy theory in the JBS, in 1963 Welch published "the Neutralizers," a pamphlet targeting anti-Semites in the organization. The pamphlet argued that embracing any one of several “neutralizing” ideologies – including anti-Semitism, as well as British Israelism and libertarianism – would drastically limit the organization’s effectiveness. Those drawn in by antisemitism, Welch argued, would "henceforth...be spending all of their time and energy, not in exposing and combating actual steps in the Communist advance, but in trying to convince everybody that they themselves

7 The Revilo P. Oliver Papers, Buckley to Welch, October 21, 1960.

8 The Revilo P. Oliver Papers, Draskovich to Oliver, April 20, 1962; Draskovich to Oliver, August 12, 1963.

are right in defining Communism as a Jewish plot.”⁹ In this sense they would become "neutralized" in terms of their political potential.

More than just a “neutralizing” distraction, Welch also used his theory of the communist conspiracy to argue that the anti-Semitic theory was simply incorrect. Welch argued that, because the conspiracy was primarily a power-seeking organization rather than an ideological movement, loyalty to the conspiratorial organization would likely supersede any other social, religious, national or cultural identity for the hypothesized Jewish conspirator, explaining that “when a Jew or a Catholic or a Protestant becomes a Communist he is no longer a Jew or a Catholic or a Protestant. He may now give more lip service to his former religion than ever before...it is one hundred percent fraud, because the Communists allow absolutely no other loyalty, to God or nation or family, but only to themselves.”¹⁰ Furthermore, because the conspiracy is capable of manipulating any ideological, racial, religious or social identity to foment conflict and support its own ends, these qualities could not be relied on by conspiracy theorists to distinguish friend from foe: “the Communists do work both sides of every street, or every battle line. And they have certainly been working diligently both sides of this 'anti-Semitic' battleground in their efforts to weaken or destroy The John Birch Society.”¹¹ This was precisely the trap, Welch writes, that his former collaborator Conde McGinley, of *Common Sense*, fell into, "who otherwise would have become and remained a tremendous force in the fight against Communism.”¹²

It seems prudent to be suspicious of Welch's sincerity in his publications decrying the “neutralizing” effects of anti-Semitic conspiracy theory, especially given the long-running

9 “The Neutralizers,” 5.

10 Ibid., 6.

11 Ibid., 7.

12 Ibid., 8.

presence of those alleging a Jewish world conspiracy theory in his organization.

However, Welch's private writings were also critical of the anti-Semitic conspiracy theory, and Welch regularly sought to defend his theory of communist conspiracy against alternative theories. In one letter from 1962, Welch wrote to one such anti-Semitic activist endorsed by Draskovich, Gerald L. K. Smith of the Wallace campaign and later the Christian Nationalist Crusade, to say that the men could not work together "because of a basic disagreement between us as to the main sources of the strength of the conspiracy," arguing that "at least since Stalin gathered into his own hands in about 1937 all the reins of Communist conspiratorial power," the conspiracy could not be a Jewish one. These conclusions, Welch continued, were "arrived at from a lot of studying over a long period of time...[they] are not for 'political reasons,' but are entirely sincere." Welch was, as he had "said many times...fighting the communists and nobody else."¹³ It is likely that Welch's beliefs really were as sincere as he claimed, since he was facing pressure from the Draskovich faction and it would have been more politically expedient to minimize his differences with one of Draskovich's allies.

While Welch portrayed his beliefs as sincere ones both publicly and privately, this does not imply that they were fixed. Welch would ultimately make significant revisions to the theory of the communist world conspiracy in the aftermath of the Kennedy assassination, which had the double effect of drawing unwanted attention to the conservative Society, as well as rendering the theory of a communist conspiracy implausible to those who believed it: it appeared that Oswald, a supposed communist, had killed Kennedy, who the Society had also alleged was a communist. The event posed a serious problem for Welch's theory of communist organizational unity, and he

¹³ Ernie Lazar Archive, Welch to Smith, 1962.

and the Birchers quickly moved to revise their narrative.

In a 1964 speech to members of the Society in Chicago, later published as a pamphlet entitled “More Stately Mansions” (1966), Welch acknowledged that the theory of world communist conspiracy had been rendered implausible. This turn in Bircher analysis, first appearing in a number of Welch’s speeches between the years of 1964-1966, is frequently characterized as a turn to the old Illuminati conspiracy theory first appearing in John Robison’s 1797 screed, *Proofs of a Conspiracy against all the Religions and Governments of Europe*. Sometimes called the first modern conspiracy theory, Robison implicated membership organizations like the Freemasons, “Reading Societies” and, in particular, Adam Weishaupt’s Illuminati organization in a grand conspiracy behind the French Revolution. While it is true that Welch explains Robison’s theory in the speech, he does not actually argue that the conspiracy he had theretofore described as communist was identical with Weishaupt’s Illuminati. In fact, Welch only suggests that any global conspiracy that existed presently would be “bound to have had an extreme degree of similarity to the Weishaupt clique, [therefore] it is worth while for us to...to examine some of the clearly established facts about this particular sect.”¹⁴ “The Communist Party of Khrushchev does not have to be a direct organizational descendant of Weishaupt's Illuminati,” Welch argued, “to be able to benefit from everything the collectivists learned from their manipulation.”¹⁵ Like they had for other American conspiracy theorists, the events of 1963 had shaken Welch’s beliefs in the theory that implicated the communists. In response, he turned to what was for him a classic case of conspiracy, a sort of ideal type, in hopes of producing a more

14 Welch, Robert. 1966. “More Stately Mansions” in *The New Americanism and other speeches and essays*. Western Islands Press.

15 Ibid., 24.

satisfactory explanation.¹⁶

By drawing a diachronic connection between his theory of a communist world conspiracy and the theory of the Illuminati, Welch generated an interpretation of what it meant for a theory to be a “conspiracy theory.” What were the shared qualities he saw as connecting his theory with Robison's pioneering conspiracy? Welch argued that the interests and motivations of both conspiracies could “be expressed quite simply in one word: Organization.”¹⁷ The most important attribute of the conspiracy’s structure, its basic function, was to ensure “continuity and organization”¹⁸ even while formal offices appeared to change hands. A successful conspiracy would also necessitate internal anonymity, such that even co-conspirators could not always recognize one another and, as far as possible, should “know nothing” of each others' actions.¹⁹ Finally, such a conspiracy would employ the extensive manipulation of non-conspirators such that many, and perhaps even most, working toward the ends of the conspiracy would be doing so unconsciously: “any and all persons, of whatever rank or character, who could forward the purposes of the Order in any way, were to be utilized as much as possible, without any necessity for them to be members and perhaps without their even knowing of the Order's existence.”²⁰

While Miller suggests that Welch revised his theory away from communist conspiracy toward the more nebulous and structural theory of the “Insiders” in response to flagging public

16 Nearly a decade before Welch's speech, William Guy Carr's *Pawns In The Game* (1955) similarly argued there was a connection between Weishaupt's Illuminati and the communist conspiracy, claiming that both were in turn controlled by a Jewish world conspiracy. It is possible that Welch, who read widely, was influenced by Carr's book. If so, Welch must have intentionally removed and de-emphasized the anti-Semitic parts of Carr's narrative. See Bill Ellis, *Raising the Devil: Satanism, New Religions and the Media* (University Press of Kentucky, 2000).

17 Ibid., 8.

18 “More Stately Mansions,” 6.

19 Ibid., 18.

20 Ibid., 17.

opinion of the Birch Society after the Kennedy assassination, Welch's writings suggest that he was also responding to increasing pressures from competing elites endorsing an expanding variety of alternative conspiracy theories. Welch concluded his argument in *The Neutralizers* by situating his defense of the communist theory in relation to other theories circulating at the time:

This writer is old-fashioned enough to believe that the Communists themselves are the promoters of Communism, and that to identify them as the Zionists, or the CFR, or Force X, or the Sons and Daughters of I Will Arise, is simply to complicate and confuse the total problem disastrously by mistaking the part for the whole. And so, we are, as we always have been, fighting the Communists - and nobody else. We believe that the only chance of stopping, routing, and destroying the Communist conspiracy, lies in "keeping our eye on the ball." And that ball is certainly not the Jews, as Jews.²¹

While the reference to the "Sons and Daughters of I Will Arise" is certainly a joke, referring to a fictional membership organization in the stories of Octavus Roy Cohen, and the reference to "the Zionists" clearly point to the theories of Welch's anti-Semitic counterparts, his mention of the theories invoking the Council on Foreign Relations and Force X are more significant. In fact, the Birchers would embrace the CFR theory in the coming years under the intellectual influence of *American Opinion* writer Gary Allen, and Welch would articulate a theory remarkably similar to the Force X theory a year later in 1964. His notice of these theories is evidence that they represented real theoretical challenges to the JBS' certified anti-communist narrative, but also a recognition that he saw important similarities between these theories and his own.

The emergence of the Force X theory in particular suggests that, throughout the American

21 "The Neutralizers," 11.

far right, competing elites found the theory of a pervasive communist conspiracy to be less and less plausible even in the months before the Kennedy assassination. Welch prided himself on his wide reading of the products of the political pamphleteers of his day,²² so it is likely that he would have been familiar with the specifics of the theories that he mentioned. Throughout 1963, a number of anti-communist and anti-Semitic publications reprinted a theory published in May of 1963 by a private intelligence journal entitled the *British Intelligence Digest*. The Digest was published, and largely authored, by Kenneth Hugh de Courcy, a minor British lord with a number of strange political commitments to pro-monarchy, imperial federalist and British Israelist organizations (Gerth 2023). Now De Courcy wrote an article alleging that the international communism was merely one sub-organization controlled by a much larger conspiracy that he referred to variously as “Force X” or “Organization X.” Citing disagreements between Russia and China, de Courcy asserted that “the Communist world is itself in confusion” and that this indicated that conspiracy theorists, to this point, had been wrong in describing the conspiracy as a communist one. “The facts show that no particular ideology has control of the situation...What is needed is confusion. This can best be generated by first backing this group and then another.”²³, wrote de Courcy.

The diverse publications of the far right took notice, and de Courcy’s article was reprinted in *Common Sense*²⁴, Canada’s *The Social Creditor*²⁵, as well as later in Birch supporter W. Cleon Skousen’s conspiracy theory book *The Naked Capitalist*. It is unlikely that the authors of each publication were in full agreement with de Courcy’s vague, yet capacious theory. For instance,

22 Ernie Lazar Archive, Welch to Smith, 1962.

23 *British Intelligence Digest*, May 1963.

24 *Common Sense*, No. 411, August 1963.

25 *The Social Creditor*, Vol. 43, No. 6, June 22, 1963.

several articles endorsing a purely anti-Semitic theory appear in the same issue of *Common Sense* as contained the reprint of the Force X theory, and Skousen argues that Force X is really just the CFR. And yet, the wide spread of the theory and its juxtaposition with other alternative theories of conspiracy suggests that the writers and readers of far-right publications saw the meta-theory as complementary to these theories.

While Welch had argued to shore up his own theory in “The Neutralizers” by asserting that the master conspiracy was still a communist one, he had already assimilated the idea that the relationship between various conspiracies could be characterized as one of “part” and “whole.” Now, in “More Stately Mansions,” he dropped any vestigial language about the primacy of communism, but retained his earlier structural concept of conspiracy. In striking contrast to Welch’s earliest theories, filled with accusations that various presidents and government officials were “conscious, dedicated agents of the communist conspiracy,”²⁶ the conspiracy was no longer an “octopus” with a myriad of tentacles consciously controlled by the center in Moscow. Instead, it took the form of a hidden, self-reproducing organizational structure laid over top of formal institutions. Welch and the Birchers, to be sure, remained vehement anti-communists in the aftermath of the speech. But the broad shift away from a focus on “the Communists, and no one else” to a more generalized critique of “collectivism,” coupled with an analysis of the conspiracy resembling later deep state theories in its portrayal of a systemic, unconscious and fragmented conspiracy subtly manipulating seemingly-opposed ideological actors from behind the scenes, prefigured debates across the ideological divides of American politics in the following decades.

26 Welch, Robert. 1970. *The Politician*. Western Islands Press.

The 1960's and 1970's: Crossing Ideological Boundaries

After Welch's 1964 speech, the John Birch Society was no longer wedded to single-minded anti-communism. His structural turn had opened the way for the Society, and its publishing arms, to embrace a wider variety of accounts that could now be united under Welch's broader interpretation of conspiracy theory and the counter-subversive project. Birch book-selling catalogs associated with their *American Opinion*-branded bookstores, which had previously focused on titles by Birch authors, expanded their offerings to include works from Weishaupt's *Proofs* to new titles which drew from a broader array of political influences. The same year that Welch drastically revised the JBS mythology was also marked by the first appearance of Gary Allen's writing in *American Opinion*. A former speechwriter for George Wallace, Allen's first contributions to the Society's publications raised alarms over the Civil Rights movement's supposed communist proclivities. However, it was his subsequent conspiracy theory research into the CFR theory which would make Allen the flagship writer of the Birch publishing empire until the restructuring of *American Opinion* in the 1980s.

Allen was strongly influenced by the proto-libertarians of the Old Right including John T. Flynn,²⁷ whose conspiracy theory alleging that Roosevelt had advance knowledge of the Pearl Harbor attacks had provided a template for a host of other "advance knowledge" theories published in *American Opinion* and other libertarian pamphlets.²⁸ Allen's opposition to communism, which drew him to the John Birch Society, was based on his self-described "anti-

27 For some prominent examples, Allen cites Flynn in *The Rockefeller Files* (1976), and discusses his Pearl Harbor advance knowledge theory and relates it to the CFR in *None Dare Call It Conspiracy* (1971).

28 Libertarians would lean on this form of argument to a sometimes-comical extent – for example, activist and techno-libertarian theorist Samuel E. Konkin III dedicated an entire chapter of his *Agorist Primer* (2008) to making advance knowledge arguments for every single war involving American forces since the War of 1812 (82-89).

statism,” and was thus compatible with his stance against the government. Welch also adopted a more explicitly anti-government posture in the aftermath of the 1964 turn. Where before the U.S. government was merely subverted by outside forces, now it was “our main enemy.”²⁹

The move away from a theory which specifically implicated a communist world conspiracy enabled conspiracy theorist intellectuals in the Society to draw from a wider variety of source material. Allen couched his conspiracy theory in the more dignified, scholarly language of “power structure research,” referencing the work of C. Wright Mills and G. William Domhoff. He was influenced as much by the writings of New Left historian Gabriel Kolko, who he cited without reservation,³⁰ as he was by Dan Smoot, W. Cleon Skousen and Don Bell, the foremost proponents of the CFR theory on the radical right whose work now appeared in *American Opinion* catalogs. Allen, like the other conspiracy theorists interested in the CFR, also drew heavily on the records of the Old Right-inflected House Select Committee to Investigate Tax-Exempt Foundations (1952-1954), otherwise known as the Reece Committee after its leading member B. Carroll Reece. Reproductions of the reports of this committee were popular with conspiracy theorists, and they also appeared for sale in *American Opinion* catalogs. Formed to investigate major tax-exempt foundations like the Rockefeller, Carnegie and Ford Foundations, the Committee authored a report which alleged, in the words of committee member Norman Dodd, that the nation had undergone a “silent revolution” in the aftermath of World War II, wherein the foundations had acquired undue influence within government by providing much-needed education to the bureaucrats comprising the nascent administrative state. By funding the

29 Tuccile, Jerome. 1971. *It Usually Begins with Ayn Rand*. New York: Stein and Day.

30 e.g. Allen, Gary and Larry Abraham. 1971. *None Dare Call It Conspiracy*. Dauphin Publications.

CFR, the Ford, Rockefeller and Carnegie Foundations were allegedly able to influence foreign policy.³¹

Allen's contribution to the revised JBS conspiracy line drew heavily on the work of Smoot in particular. Although Smoot held no official post within the Society, and took pride in the fact that, "besides his church," he took no part in any membership organization³², he had publicly endorsed it in his weekly newsletter *The Dan Smoot Report* as early as 1961³³. *American Opinion* carried Smoot's *Invisible Government* (1962), in which an Anglo-American conspiracy centered in the Council on Foreign Relations played both sides of the Iron Curtain, manipulating both the American and Soviet governments.³⁴ Similarly to earlier conspiracy theorists of the Old Right, Smoot detected a conspiracy behind Roosevelt's decision to enter the war.³⁵ Roosevelt, after all, had been a member of the CFR. Smoot was credited by Allen and later writers for being the first theorist on the right to discover Carroll Quigley's infamous *Tragedy and Hope*, a huge historical text published in 1966 in which Quigley pointed toward Cecil Rhodes' Round Table group as an elite influencing policy on both sides of the Atlantic, and which would soon be carried by *American Opinion*. Quigley's word was especially credible to the conspiracy theorists of the right not just because, as a Harvard professor, he had previously participated in Round Table meetings and had access to the group's files, but also because Quigley's revelations seemed to affirm earlier conspiracy theories pointing toward the British

31 For example of one such allegation, see *U.S. Congress Special Committee to Investigate Tax Exempt Foundations: Summary of Activities of the Carnegie Corporation of New York, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, The Rockefeller Foundation* (1954), p. 1-12, 58-63. Also see Committee member Rene Wormser's book, *Foundations: Their Power and Influence* (1958). New York: The Devin-Adair Company.

32 *Dan Smoot Report*, Vol. 7 No. 21.

33 *Dan Smoot Report*, Vol. 7 No. 11.

34 *Dan Smoot Report*, Vol. 7 No. 24.

35 *Ibid*.

Empire and the role of Rhodes' group in particular.

Soon, many of these same resources would become popular in a very different political milieu. While Welch was expanding the offerings of American Opinion to include works from a broader array of political backgrounds, the anti-war “Movement” associated with the New Left sought to distance itself from the Marxist and social democratic ideas which defined the older, pre-war American left. While members of some tendencies in Students for a Democratic Society saw themselves as hardline Marxist-Leninists and revolutionary militants, others took a more moderate approach, instead hoping to reach out to anti-war elements on the right. Like the John Birch Society in 1963, SDS tolerated a wide variety of conflicting ideological positions and provided a forum for debate between various groups on the left. The bulk of SDS was described in its own *New Left Notes* newsletter as “a confederation of localized conglomerations of people held together by one name”.³⁶ In the “Port Huron Statement” SDS activists lamented that “Ideologies Are Exhausted.” Where their old “liberal and socialist predecessors were plagued by vision without program...our own generation is plagued by program without vision.”³⁷ Disagreement was vehement, and thinkers within the movement hoped to create a new vision that would unite the entirety of the left.

During the year he was president of the SDS, Carl Oglesby continually argued in favor of “organizing the anti-war movement to the right”³⁸ by uniting with Kennedy liberals and anti-war right-libertarians, a proposition for which he was continually criticized by writers in “Movement” outlets like *Ramparts*, which would become a major forum for debates over

³⁶ *New Left Notes*, June 24, 1968

³⁷ Port Huron Statement

³⁸ Oglesby, Carl. November 1974 “In Defense of Paranoia.” *Ramparts Magazine*. 15-16.

mobilization after the assassinations of Kennedy, Kennedy and King. After reading the works of right-libertarian Murray Rothbard at the behest of Richard Shuall, SDS President Carl Oglesby and Shuall together wrote *Containment and Change* (1967), in which they advocated for a cross-cutting alliance between the libertarian right and the New Left:

This central question is not clarified, it is obscured by our common political categories of left, right and center; it is not clarified, it is obscured, by the traditional American debate about socialism versus capitalism versus the Keynesian mixed economy. The socialist radical, the corporatist conservative, and the welfare state liberal are all equally capable of leading us forward into the totalized society. Whether central planning should be coordinated by government or corporate hands is a question whose realism has disappeared. The urgent question is about the locus of power in the community: is it in the state or is it in the people?³⁹

The anti-war libertarians of the right were, for Oglesby, the only other American political movement besides the New Left which agreed that the major threat to freedom was not one political program or another, but was instead state power itself – and moreover, a form of state power characterized as conspiratorial. He questioned why the libertarians had ended up allied with Oliver's anti-Semites in the John Birch Society or the warmongers of the mainstream right associated with Burnham and Buckley, all of whom justified the expansion of state power in service of counter-subversion. Drawing a comparison between the libertarians and their Old Right antecedents, he suggested that “in a strong sense, the Old Right and the New Left are

39 Oglesby, Carl and Richard Shuall. 1967. *Containment and Change*. New York: The Macmillan Company. 164.

morally and politically coordinate.”⁴⁰ Describing this potential alliance as a “democratic populist”⁴¹ one, Oglesby urged the anti-war activists from both sides to unite before it was too late. To argue in support of this alliance, Oglesby developed a conspiracy theory which tapped into the emerging far-right theory of the elite.

Citing both the power structure researchers of the left and the CFR theorists of the right, Oglesby detailed an early version of his meta-theory in an article in *The National Guardian* in 1968, and he would fully expound this theory years later with the publication of his book *The Yankee and Cowboy War* (1976). Oglesby drew heavily from the conspiracy theory research of the right conducted under the auspices of the John Birch Society. Like the Birchers had done under Allen, he interpreted the scholarly work of Carroll Quigley, who had argued that Cecil Rhodes' Round Table group, acting through the Council on Foreign Relations, was a conspiratorial agent that continued to manipulate American political outcomes. At the same time, he specifically positioned his analysis as a refutation of the line taken by Gary Allen and Dan Smoot of the John Birch Society. He argued that the Birchers misread Quigley – where they saw a single conspiracy implicating the CFR and its many interlocks, Oglesby said that the “implicit claim” of Quigley was that “a multitude of conspiracies contend in the night.”⁴²

Combining the SDS' concept of the “new class”⁴³ with the Birchers' multifaceted concept of the elite, he argued that the simplistic model of the CFR theorists was complicated by what he saw as a “split in the ruling class” between the “East Coast monopolists” that he called the

40 Ibid., 167.

41 Ibid., 167.

42 Oglesby, Carl. 1976. *The Yankee and Cowboy War*. New York: Berkley Publishing Corporation. 25-26.

43 Which was itself influenced by Burnham's concept of the managerial elite, which had also proved highly influential in the early days of the JBS.

“Yankees,” and the “Western tycoon entrepreneurs” he called the “Cowboys.”⁴⁴ While Yankees drew their power from their managerial status, Cowboys were classic bourgeois owner-operators. Each competing ruling class was defined not by their ideological views – it was not that, say, the Yankees were liberal and the Cowboys were conservative – but by their incompatible interests grounded in their economic bases and geographical location. In the theory, the Yankees were Atlanticists who supported detente with the Soviets and the slow expansion of multinational managerial capitalism, while the Cowboys favored an aggressive anti-communist foreign policy that hoped to improve American prosperity through aggressive rollback of Asian communism followed by investment in the newly “liberated” countries.

While Oglesby hoped to explain the conspiratorial forces underlying American politics and the assassinations of Kennedy, Kennedy and King, his primary goal was not to definitively answer these questions, so much as to raise them as a vehicle for mobilization, hoping that these questions would come to take on a symbolic role engendering political realignment. Indeed, the book's final chapter, simply entitled “Who Killed JFK?,” provided not yet another answer to that question, so much as it called for that question's politicization. The Watergate scandal had reawakened American's suspicions that had first emerged in the aftermath of the first Kennedy assassination, these suspicions could be redirected toward American's understandings of their own place in the world of politics. The assassinations were the central questions of American political life; to discover who killed the President was to complete the revolution against the invisible government:

How do we resist the power-elite tendency to resolve differences through state violence?

⁴⁴ Ibid., 9.

To these, I propose that a major immediate effort should be to politicize the question, Who killed JFK? That question sums up everything we need to fear in the Dallas-Watergate decade. To comprehend and solve that crime—and then the countercrime of Watergate, “who cashiered Nixon?”—is to restore the precondition of any self-governing and republican people, the security of the public state...to get at Dallas '63 would be to get at this sickness by one of its major victories. It would be to get at the political bottom of the Vietnam war, of the structures of internal conflict that helped produce that entire decade, the decade of Dallas-Watergate and Vietnam. Understand Dallas: That is the start of the way out.⁴⁵

Oglesby continually denied that he hoped to mobilize the anti-war movement in support of one side of this elite split, writing in his book's conclusion that "those of us who will read find the record tells us to turn against Yankee and Cowboy elites equally; to turn against the domination and closing up of political life by all clandestine forces and powers."⁴⁶

All the same, he was frequently accused of implicit support for the Yankee side of the equation. Oglesby had previously argued that the Yankees were against American involvement in Asia. In August of 1968, Oglesby published an article in *New Left Notes* alleging that he had been contacted by Eldridge Haynes of the Business International corporation, a private business intelligence company and lobbying firm representing a group that Oglesby called “the left wing of the ruling class,” analogous to the group that he would later call the Yankees, which allegedly offered to fund SDS protests against Nixon.⁴⁷ In the aftermath of the *Yankee and Cowboy War's*

45 Ibid., 322-323.

46 Ibid. 319.

47 See *New Left Notes*, August 12, 1968, as well as Kunen, *The Strawberry Statement*, (Random House, 1969) 130

publication, Oglesby ally Kirkpatrick Sale openly proposed a strategic alliance with the Yankees in an article in the New York Review of Books.⁴⁸

Sale's NYRB article explaining the Yankee and Cowboy theory was widely discussed after its publication. In particular, former Berkeley Free Speech Movement leader Steve Weissman expressed his skepticism at the idea that the ruling class was somehow split. "It is perhaps comforting to believe that there's a split in the ruling class," he argued, pointing out that the supposed conflicts between Yankees and Cowboys "seemed like the kind of economic competition that always goes on" between self-interested individuals, rather than something indicating a war between competing elite conspiracies.⁴⁹

Three months later, Oglesby responded with an article in *Ramparts* which he staged not only as a defense of he and Sale's Yankee-Cowboy theory, but as a full-blown "Defense of Paranoia," referencing Hofstadter's (1967) famous appraisal of the conspiracy theorist worldview. He claimed that Weissman "missed the point" of the Yankee-Cowboy theory, which was to "put the evidence of conspiratorial activity in a class-economic and historical perspective."⁵⁰ Conspiracy theory was a "visualization of politics," the point of which was not to "choose between the class system, the elite, the conspiracy or the lone madman...which is actual and present and which is only paranoid delusion," but to show "how the smaller is merely a certain density of the larger, how they express each other."

Oglesby's approach in this debate has been characterized as an example of a turn in the aftermath of Watergate toward "superconspiracy" theories (Thalmann 2019; Barkun 2013)

48 Sale, Kirkpatrick. May 1973. "The World Behind Watergate." New York Review of Books.

49 Reprinted in Weissman, Steve. 1974. *Big Brother and the Holding Company: The World Behind Watergate*. Ramparts Press.

50 Oglesby, Carl. November 1974 "In Defense of Paranoia." *Ramparts Magazine*.

alleging conspiracies of far greater scale and scope than had been described by earlier authors. But, rather than researchers or generators of theories themselves, authors of “superconspiracy” theories are better characterized as professional public interpreters of the work of other conspiracy theorists, a sore point that would often lead to tension between these interpreters and the “assassination researchers” who created the original work that was their raw material for interpretation. For example, Mae Brussell, who Thalmann takes as a paradigmatic superconspiracy theorist alongside later broadcasters David Icke and Alex Jones, attained notability for her lengthy radio career from 1971 to 1988, during which she hosted shows with titles like *Dialogue: Conspiracy* and *World Watchers International*, interpreting and publicizing the work of other conspiracy researchers.

The conditions of possibility for these professional interpreters to make public judgments about hosts of other conspiracy theories, thereby generating “superconspiracy theories” as the accumulated residue of their continual public revision of their own beliefs, involved the lumping together of these explanations as conspiracy theories, but it also involved the emergence of practices and methods of judgment which allowed interpreters to make sense of the increasing proliferation of competing theories. What appears as a huge conspiracy theory is really the product of an interpreter's attempt to make judgments about the truth and falsehood of many competing theories about many different events. The Yankee-Cowboy theory should be understood in this context.

While Oglesby sustained much criticism from Weissman and his fellow New Left organizers for his focus on conspiracy, his goal was neither to contribute his own theory of the

assassination, nor was it to combine existing theories about Kennedy and Watergate into a superconspiracy theory. When forced to defend his own project, Oglesby continually reiterated that the Yankee-Cowboy theory was not itself a theory but a “perspective,” “interpretation,” “visualization of politics,” “vocabulary” and “method.”⁵¹ Oglesby thus described the Yankee-Cowboy framework as a “language” and a “metaphor”⁵² with the political function of bringing into focus what he saw as a broad “sectional rivalry derived from the patterns of the Civil war.” The Yankee-Cowboy model was intended as a heuristic for identifying the persons appearing in various theories of the assassination with larger agencies, forces and power centers, enabling interpreters to draw connections between actors in competing theories and to make judgments about whether theories were compatible or incompatible.

Take, for example, the Plumbers, the Watergate burglars whose capture led to Nixon's impeachment. Virgilio Gonzales, Bernard Barker, James McCord, Eugenio Martinez and Frank Sturgis all worked for Nixon in various capacities, so commentators might assume that the event was straightforwardly a plot by Nixon. However, bringing to bear his Yankee-Cowboy metric, Oglesby submits that “McCord was the pointman of an anti-Nixon plot formed within the CIA,” citing as evidence, among other things, “intimations of Yankeehood in McCord's career.”⁵³ This move had the function of reorganizing the theories of Gary Allen and the Birchers, who Oglesby saw as locating conspiratorial power in institutions and agencies rather than persons. Contra some Birch theories which pinned the guilt for the assassination on the CIA as an organization, Oglesby argued that “the interior of the CIA appears strongly polycentric.” Instead of attributing

51 Ibid.

52 Oglesby, 1976.

53 Ibid., 271.

the cause of the assassination to compromised institutions, the Yankee-Cowboy metric provided a heuristic for interpreters to see how geography and sectionalism might underlie competing loyalties within those institutions.⁵⁴

1970s-1990s: The Deep State Concept and its Critics

Throughout *the Yankee and Cowboy War*, Oglesby cited the work of Peter Dale Scott, a former Canadian diplomat who would become a major intellectual force behind the movement in the years to come. Oglesby had met Scott through the organization that Oglesby had founded in 1972 to pursue the politicization strategy he later described in *the Yankee and Cowboy War*, the Assassination Information Bureau. The Assassination Information Bureau became a new home for many of the most important activists of the New Left. On its board, alongside New Left celebrities Allen Ginsberg and Norman Mailer, sat Tom Hayden, author of the Port Huron statement. Also on the board was David Dellinger, a co-defendant with Hayden in the famous Chicago Conspiracy Trial of 1968. Oglesby and his compatriots in the AIB's strategy for politicizing the assassinations involved developing interpretative frameworks like the Yankee-Cowboy theory and, later, Peter Dale Scott's theory of parapolitics, deep politics and the deep state.⁵⁵

While Scott's earliest works were meticulous reconstructions of conspiratorial behavior by the intelligence services with the goal of perpetuating American involvement in Asia, his lasting contributions to the literature of conspiracy theory were meta-theoretical frameworks for

⁵⁴ Ibid., 153.

⁵⁵ For a complete list of directors and advisory board members see, for example, Harold Weisberg Archive, A Disk, Assassination Information Bureau file, Item 20. Oglesby to Weisberg, 4 December, 1978.

evaluating conspiracy theories in the tradition of Oglesby's Yankee-Cowboy model. The first of these frameworks was the “parapolitics” concept appearing in Scott's first book, *The War Conspiracy* (1972). Scott claimed later that his publishers had insisted on the appearance of the term “conspiracy” in the title, reflecting increasing public interest in conspiracies in the decades of the assassinations and the Watergate incident.⁵⁶ Scott, however, insists that, at the time, he was apprehensive about staging his work as a “conspiracy” theory, hence his efforts to introduce the alternative framework of parapolitics, which referred to “the conduct of public affairs...by indirection, collusion and deceit.” Scott explained, invoking the Colombian concept of *parapolitica*, that the “para-” in parapolitics is the same one found in the term “paramilitary,” referring to groups which are structured similarly to, and resemble, state military forces without being part of an officially-recognized force. Similarly, parapolitical phenomena are similar to politics, they appear political, but are in fact are not the result of public politics but of clandestine or conspiratorial machinations behind the scenes. Parapolitics, then, is the process by which outcomes in public affairs come to appear to be determined by public politics, when they are in fact determined by conspiracy.

Later, however, Scott came to see what he had called “parapolitics,” which had been roughly analogous to Oglesby's “clandestinism” in the Yankee-Cowboy model, as only one manifestation of a broader phenomenon he called “deep politics,” referring to “all those political practices and arrangements, deliberate or not, which are usually repressed rather than acknowledged.” As Scott would emphasize, the key notion in his concept of deep politics is “the

⁵⁶ Good, Aaron. Interview with Peter Dale Scott. May 31, 2022. “Minding the Darkness,” *American Exception*, 47. [Audio podcast episode]

repression of inconvenient facts, facts which certain groups find necessary to maintain their legitimacy or social acceptance.”⁵⁷

Scott did not wholeheartedly embrace the Yankee-Cowboy framework, although he did think there was a “kernel of truth” to it. Instead, he sought to revise the framework. Like Weissman, Scott was concerned that what he variously called “invisible government,” “shadow government” and “secret team” theories were over-simplistic and mis-characterized government conspiracies as the work of a few bad actors. Such theories, Scott argued, “by their very totalizing, do not seriously challenge the most sensitive feature of the conventional power paradigm...[which is] the belief that overt politics and deep politics have little to do with each other.”⁵⁸ For Scott, the question of “which forces are in control, the public or shadow powers” created an artificial distinction between overt and covert power. Instead, formal and informal institutions were linked together to form what he called the “deep political milieu” and later, after adopting a term used to describe similar phenomena in Turkey, the “deep state.” Scott argued that political structures were “pluralistic both above, in the public arena, and also below.”⁵⁹ Just because an area of political activity was unacknowledged or suppressed did not mean, necessarily, that it was a “determinant area...of our political life.”⁶⁰ The “invisible government” in total control, and the formal state in total control, were merely two sides of the same fantasy of government order. Repression, “resistance and denial” did not cover over the real functioning of a wholly covert government so much as these modes played important roles in connecting the public system to the covert one.

57 Scott, Peter Dale. 2013. *The War Conspiracy: JFK, 9/11 and the Deep Politics of War*.

58 Scott, Peter Dale. 1993. *Deep Politics and the Death of JFK*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

59 Ibid., 18.

60 Ibid., 18.

Besides voices on the radical left like those of Weissman and Horowitz, the AIB also sustained criticism from the (to Oglesby) “bewildered Kennedy liberals” of what was called the “assassination research community,” an informal community of researchers which predated, and was distinct from, the AIB set. Although they sought to uncover the truth of the Kennedy, Kennedy and King assassinations, and they generally believed that a conspiracy within the government was responsible for their deaths, the members of the assassination research community were defined by their unwillingness, in contrast to the AIB, to defend conspiracy theory as an enterprise. Exemplifying this tendency was self-described “critic” of the Warren Commission Harold Weisberg, a former OSS officer, U. S. Senate investigator and intelligence analyst who was described by his counterparts in the AIB as “the most prolific writer in the field.”⁶¹ In his private correspondence with fellow assassination researcher James Lesar⁶², Weisberg frequently excoriated Oglesby, Scott and other analysts of the assassination for their credulity toward the broader “conspiracy theory literature”.⁶³

Weisberg had known Scott since 1973 when he wrote to him after a brief meeting they had in D.C. to discuss access to private archives of documents related to the assassination.⁶⁴ By 1975, Scott had become involved in the AIB's efforts to publicize research relating to the

61 Harold Weisberg Archive, A Disk, Item 84: AIB JFK Assassination Selected Bibliography.

62 Lesar, along with Jim Hougan and Bud Fensterwald, would later diverge from Weisberg to follow a strategic trail quite similar to the one blazed by Oglesby and the AIB, remarking that serious assassination researchers should create a magazine focused not just on the JFK assassination, but on other “parapolitical” phenomena. This ultimately culminated in their formation of the Assassination Archives and Research Center (AARC), a strategic turn which earned the ire of Weisberg, who excoriated Lesar as a “conspiracy theorist.” As this exchange indicates, while “conspiracy theorist” was no pejorative to the activists of the AIB, to the assassination researchers these were fighting words. See Harold Weisberg Archive, L Disk, Item 15: Weisberg to Lesar, 20 October 1994.

63 See, for example, Harold Weisberg Archive, A Disk, AIB File, Weisberg to Goldberg, October 6, 1978; R Disk, Weisberg to Lesar, 13 January 1993.

64 Harold Weisberg Archive, S Disk, Scott File, Item 19, Weisberg to Lesar, June 20, 1973.

Kennedy assassination. Scott had reached out to Weisberg because he wanted to include some of Weisberg and Lesar's writing in an edited volume for Random House of the writings of what were then called "Warren critics." Scott had failed to properly pay Weisberg for his contributions. But more than that, Weisberg bristled at the inclusion in the volume of work by those he did not respect. Weisberg's selection appeared alongside writings by his longtime friend and collaborator Jim Lesar, but also with contributions from Mark Lane and David Lifton, who Weisberg castigated as "irresponsible...conspiracy theorists." "These people may see fit to tell themselves this is something else, but they are up to a rank commercialization...Do you think for a minute that they will include the politics of the current commercializers? Or not include those of the know-nothings?," accused Weisberg, in reference to Lane and Lifton's work.⁶⁵

What Weisberg's comment here highlights is that, at that point, for the longtime participants in the assassination research community, there was nothing like a politics of conspiracy theory – in fact, to Weisberg, the term “conspiracy theory” was itself dangerous because, in linking together the disparate hypotheses pursued by the squabbling members of the research community, it implied the existence of a uniform political perspective. After their first meeting in 1973, Weisberg thought Scott to be serious but strange. "He seems to take an orthodox Marxist view of the JFK assassination, in terms of capital/finance interlocks that seem to be, if I understood him, rather extensive," wrote Weisberg, "he rather complicates this subject without need or reason, I believe to conform to the connections he has worked out but connected with nothing solidly connected with the assassination... some of his views are rather paranoid to

65 Harold Weisberg Archive, S Disk, Scott File, Item 18, Weisberg to Lesar, May 2, 1975.

me."⁶⁶ Dismissing Scott as a "paranoid" Marxist, Weisberg thought that Scott overcomplicated the study of the assassinations to conform to his ideas about systemic "connections" behind the assassination. Weisberg himself was no rabid anti-communist. In fact, in the 1930's Weisberg had done intelligence work on behalf of the NLRB, specifically the LaFollette Committee, to investigate violations of labor organizing and speech rights in industrial workplaces. He was fired from the state department for alleged communist sympathies during the Red Scare, one of 212 government employees fired as a result of Executive Order No. 9835. The FBI had a file on him claiming that he leaked sensitive information to a communist newspaper, the Daily Worker, in 1939, so it was not that Weisberg disagreed with Scott's socialist-inflected politics. Rather, what worried Weisberg the most was that, in his view, Scott and Oglesby sought to speak on behalf of the whole research community, transforming it into a political force. By opening up the research community to "politicization," Weisberg worried that Oglesby, Scott and those at AIB were creating the sense that to be concerned about the Kennedy assassination necessarily implied embracing one politics or another, even if he was not necessarily opposed to the content of that politics.⁶⁷

Yet, while Weisberg wrote copious letters to the AIB to castigate them for presuming to speak "for the critical community," those same envelopes also contained cash and checks – while Weisberg criticized the organization, he still depended on them for access to research materials related to the assassinations. If the AIB contributed little in the way of original research, it did much to make available sources related to the assassinations to a wide audience. Oglesby would

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Farrell, Liam. "One Man Vs. One Government," *The Frederick News Post*. December 25, 2005.

https://www.fredericknewspost.com/archives/one-man-vs-one-government-part-1-of-2/article_da645112-674d-520f-b9e3-958a6bbba658.html.

remark in a letter to Weisberg that most of the organization's funds were going to copying and distributing important sources like Kennedy's autopsy reports, as well as illegally-duplicated copies of the Zapruder film,⁶⁸ through mail-order catalogs. And yet, even as he made use of their services, Weisberg worried that Oglesby's and the AIB's attempts to make assassination research more accessible would only succeed in spreading un-scholarly paranoia. For him, the truth of the assassination was a historical question more than a political one. Looking back on the movement, the ever-pessimistic Weisberg lamented that the AIB had “misled an entire generation” of researchers.⁶⁹

The Assassination Information Bureau closed its doors in 1979 after the U.S. House Select Committee on Assassinations stated that there was evidence of a government conspiracy behind the Kennedy and King Assassinations, with Oglesby declaring that there was now “no reason to continue” the project.⁷⁰ Years later, Oglesby and Scott became involved, alongside Michael Parenti, in the formation of the Center for the Preservation of Modern History, an organization founded in 1989 to take up the AIB's project of distributing research material related to the assassinations. In the very first issue of the Center's magazine *Prevailing Winds*, Michael Parenti wrote a defense of conspiracy theory which appeared alongside articles by Oglesby and Peter Dale Scott. Referencing Oglesby and his own debates with anti-conspiracy theorist Noam Chomsky in *Ramparts* and *the Nation*, Parenti argued that the frame of conspiracy was not exclusive with less loaded approaches like “institutional analysis.” Quoting Domhoff, Parenti argued that the frame of conspiracy merely acknowledged that “the ruling elites...are aware of

68 Harold Weisberg Archive, A Disk, AIB File, Item 84.

69 Harold Weisberg Archive, A Disk, AIB File, Weisberg to Lardner, January 5, 1982.

70 “Study Group On Slayings of King and John Kennedy Is Disbanding,” *The New York Times*, December 16, 1979.

their interests, know each other personally, meet together privately and off the record, and try to hammer out a consensus on how to anticipate and react to events and issues."⁷¹ Responding to the "left critics" making arguments similar to Weissman who, in Parenti's telling, accuse the conspiracy theorists of "Camelot yearnings" and "are concerned that you might like Kennedy and not see how bad he really was," Parenti justifies the *Prevailing Winds* approach by identifying it as a simple "desire to know what is going on," a necessity for "democratic struggle."

Parenti, like Scott, described an approach which exemplified the strategy pioneered by Oglesby in *the Yankee and Cowboy War's* final chapter, a strategy defined by the move away from difficult-to-resolve factual questions about who killed Kennedy and toward the more politically-promising questions around the cover-up. The *Prevailing Winds* strategy was premised on the observation that positive theorizing about possible killers had less potential as a mobilizing strategy than asking questions about why there was so much uncertainty and equivocation on the part of the government around the former President's death - less "who killed Kennedy?" and more "why don't we know who did it?" In the conspiracy frame, the elite-mass distinction, for Parenti, Scott and Oglesby, became an epistemic one. Elites were "aware of their interests," and they "knew each other." They were the ones who were uninterested in questions about the killings, because they already knew the answers. Anyone not in-the-know, then, could be reasonably sure they were not part of that elite, and the *Prevailing Winds* set imagined a politics wherein the ignorant masses were mobilized against those in-the-know.

Throughout the 1980's, researchers from across the political spectrum began to share information and documents under the auspices of organizations like Oglesby's Center for the

71 Parenti, Michael. 1995. "State Power and the JFK Assassination." *Prevailing Winds*, 1, 1.

Preservation of Modern History, as well as Daniel Sheehan's Christic Institute. Radio programs also helped to popularize conspiracy theories to a wider audience, and conspiracy theorists whose work was endorsed by the AIB and whose publications appeared in the catalog of *Prevailing Winds* appeared as guests on shows hosted by the Pacifica Radio network. These factors contributed to increased contact between the various ideologically-separated thinkers interested in conspiracy theories involving the Kennedy assassination. In particular, the “secret team” theories which Scott had tried to critique would resonate broadly on the radical right. While he was writing articles for the left-oriented *Prevailing Winds*, Prouty had also given permission to the neo-Nazi Liberty Lobby's *Spotlight* magazine to reprint his works. *Spotlight* did so, but surrounded Prouty's “secret team” analysis with articles complaining of a “Jewish secret team.” Mark Lane, of the AIB, also acted as the legal representative for the Liberty Lobby when they were sued for defamation by Watergate burglar E. Howard Hunt.

In response, extremism researcher Chip Berlet, who wrote frequently in various New Left journals related to assassination research, published a critique entitled “Right Woos Left” (1990) which admonished assassination researchers associated with the New Left for working with researchers of the right, leading to a debate amongst the participants in the assassination research community about its scope and attitude toward the politics of its members. Berlet also criticized CPMH writers, including Oglesby and Scott as well as Scott's co-author Jonathan Marshall, for keeping in touch with Herbert Quinde, a representative of Lyndon LaRouche's *Executive Intelligence Review* journal and private intelligence service. LaRouche had formerly led the Labor Committee tendency within SDS, but in the aftermath of the organization's collapse his

now-independent National Council of Labor Committees took a turn to the radical right and began working with Carto's Liberty Lobby starting in 1974. Widely described as a political cult, the LaRouchians were uninterested in mobilizing around the Kennedy assassination, but they were terrified of infiltration and conducted extensive research into the actions of American intelligence agencies. The CPMH writers' defended their work with the LaRouchians through appeals to pragmatism. Scott explained that he felt "it is a matter of intellectual freedom to keep the lines of communication open," while also denouncing the LaRouchians as "probably guilty of some criminal conduct" (quoted in Berlet 1990). Similarly, Marshall explained that the LaRouchians had been a "source of good leads...if you look across the board at cultish groups that do research you find sometimes that they have found amazing documents that do in fact check out". At the same time, he cautioned assassination researchers to be careful of accepting their interpretations of those same documents. Oglesby was a bit more suspicious. While he worried that LaRouche's network might itself be a disinformation operation, he did agree that it had "access to sources of information that reflect official circuits."

The editorial staff of *The Lobster*, an influential conspiracy theorist magazine in which AIB affiliates like Scott, Oglesby and Marshall had published, responded to Berlet's criticism by blaming the mainstream American left. "Since the demise of *Ramparts* magazine, the American left has rarely been much interested in conspiracies and has thus left the field open for the right, who are," the editors wrote. "Would Marchetti and Lane have been sucked into the Liberty Lobby's operations if they had been taken seriously by the American left in the past 15 years? Did Prouty get any other offers from the left to republish his book before the one from Liberty

Lobby?”⁷²

In virtually all of the cases that Berlet discussed, the Center’s researchers disavowed any shared political aims with the conspiracy theory researchers of the radical right. Yet, their shared research activities and anti-government stance complicated the relationship between groups that openly opposed one another on political and ideological grounds. The conspiracy theorists of the Center were reluctant to neglect any source that might contribute to revealing the truth of the assassination. As a *Prevailing Winds* representative explained to Berlet, “it’s an argument we’ve gone back and forth on, it’s a tough question, whether or not to make it available and to preserve it for research. We are interested in getting the information to the people. The good thing about it is no one else is trying to build these bridges between groups. We need to reach a rainbow of people” (quoted in Berlet 1990).

As the debate illustrates, when crossing ideological divides, the conspiracy theorists of the left and right portrayed themselves as scholarly researchers more interested in seeking the truth than indulging in ideological or programmatic debate. They defended this attitude by pointing to the content of the theories they endorsed, which de-emphasizing the role of ideology and argued that ideological lines were being manipulated by conspiratorial actors. More importantly, while only two decades ago Oglesby and the AIB were making waves by creating a platform which united the disparate work of assassination researchers and “Warren critics” under the framework of conspiracy theory, the politicization of conspiracy had taken on a life of its own. By this point, those in the CPMH had come to see conspiracy theory as an autonomous domain, a genre space, that activists had to fight over. As exemplified by the accusations leveled

72 “Right Woos Left Review,” *Lobster* 23. 1992.

by the editors of the Lobster, there was now the worry that there was a domain of conspiracy theory that came with its own audience that would be attracted to the field regardless of its political content, such that if the left ignored the world of conspiracy, they would risk having “left the field open for the right.”

Conclusion: How the Deep State Became Trump's

Many have taken credit for the re-introduction of the term “deep state” and its related conceptual vocabulary back into American political life, but the extent to which any of these vectors is actually responsible, or whether any has a direct point of contact with the term as it was developed by Scott and the AIB, is not immediately obvious. In the years following the 9/11 attacks, Scott’s deep state analysis, initially proposed years earlier as a critique of simplistic “shadow government” theories, would become an important talking point among proponents of similar theories on the radical right. Some would simply shoehorn Scott’s terminology into the “shadow government” model. For instance, in 2008, Scott would make a series of appearances on Alex Jones’ *InfoWars* radio program, where Jones, implicating copious “Theys” who “ran the JFK assassination just like they ran 9/11,” would seem to conflate Scott’s model with the old “hydra” model of the early postwar period. Others, however, would draw from the work of Scott, Oglesby and the other assassination researchers to make more complex arguments.

In the years shortly before and after Trump’s election to the Presidency, deep state vocabulary emerged separately in a number of places. For Scott, Oglesby and previous activists, the deep state referred to the overlap between state and non-state actors at the porous bounds of

the formal state apparatus. The major innovation of these new conspiracy theorists of the right was to take up the concept of the deep state and apply it instead to what they characterized as a permanent government apparatus, exemplified by bureaucratic organizations and the administrative state apparatus. Some journalistic accounts attribute the term's re-emergence to a 2016 book by Mike Lofgren, a former Republican Congressional aide, entitled *The Deep State: The Fall of the Constitution and the Rise of a Shadow Government*. While Lofgren uses the term in a way similar to Scott, referring to actors that link government with non-government organizations as comprising a "deep state," Lofgren displays no awareness of the term's conceptual history and attributes his knowledge of it to a 2013 novel by the legendary British spy fiction author John Le Carre where it refers to "non-governmental insiders." A more promising point of contact comes from a series of articles published in on Breitbart in December of 2016, shortly after Donald Trump's victory in the Presidential election, wherein a pseudonymous writer using the name Virgil argued that conservatives and libertarians should support Trump in his self-given mission to "drain the swamp" of the American administrative state.⁷³ Citing a freshly created Wikipedia article attributing the term to Scott, Virgil decried the CIA as part of a deep state coalition arraigned against Trump, but he also targeted the "complex of bureaucrats, technocrats and plutocrats" that "aims to survive any change of government with its collective will – and self-interest – fully intact. This "complex" had reasons to obscure the nature of its own actions, possessed by "a class interest, befitting people who live off of government money—and like it that way."⁷⁴ But Virgil's deep state was not limited to the "2.8 million civilian federal

73 Virgil, "The Deep State vs. Donald Trump." Breitbart. December 12, 2016.

<https://www.breitbart.com/politics/2016/12/12/virgil-the-deep-state-vs-donald-trump/>

74 Virgil. "The Deep State Becomes The Obvious State." Breitbart. September 9, 2020.

employee" of the government bureaucracy – it also referred to the "empire" of federal government contractors. Virgil argued that "this New Class...reached its apex under Barack Obama" and now found itself "threatened by the drain-the-swamp pledge of Trump."

While some accounts attributed the rise of deep state terminology in the Trump administration to Lofgren and Virgil, search trend data would suggest that neither of these earlier instances of use contributed much to the term's popularity. While Lofgren and Virgil were both using the term as early as 2016, search volume for the term "deep state" did not increase until early 2017, first peaking on January 10 when BuzzFeed News published the infamous document that would later become known as the Steele Dossier. Reportedly already circulating in government institutions and appearing in Presidential briefings, the document made a number of unsubstantiated allegations about President Trump's supposed relationship with Russian intelligence and Russian President Putin in particular, leading BuzzFeed news to publish the document "so that Americans can make up their own minds" about its truth or falsehood. This was despite the fact that many other news outlets had refused to publish the dossier, which alleged much but proved little. The upticks in search volume occur around the same time that Wikipedia users published the first draft of an article entitled "The Deep State in the United States," appearing in February 2017. While searching the term "deep state" on Wikipedia had resulted in a redirect to the article for "State Within a State" as early as 2008, that a dedicated article only appeared around the same time as the uptick in search volume due to public interest in the Steele Dossier and the later Vault 7 document archive suggests that the emergence of the deep state vocabulary into the mainstream of American politics is mostly attributable to

<https://www.breitbart.com/politics/2020/09/28/virgil-the-deep-state-becomes-the-obvious-state/>

discussion around the dossier.

What drove a large part of the search volume for the term “deep state” in January of 2017 was an article by investigative journalist Glenn Greenwald entitled “The Deep State Goes to War With President-Elect,”⁷⁵ wherein Greenwald chastised reporters at BuzzFeed News for publishing the dossier. Asserting that the dossier was spread or created by “the CIA and its shadowy allies” to justify attacks on President Trump, Greenwald employed the vocabulary of the deep state to draw parallels between older theories about CIA involvement in the Kennedy assassination, as well as Nixon's impeachment, and opposition to President Trump originating from both within and outside of government. A second, bigger jump in search volume occurs in early March 2017, coinciding with the first mentions of the term “deep state” on Sean Hannity's radio programs discussing the circumstances surrounding the Steele Dossier.⁷⁶ But Hannity did not actually introduce deep state terminology himself. Instead, deep state terminology first appeared on Hannity's program during an episode wherein MAGA influencer Jonathan Gilliam and Trump campaign strategist Jason Meister discussed the deep state. Jonathan Gilliam, filling in for Hannity in a radio episode dedicated to “the shadow government,” insisted he wasn't spreading conspiracy theories “like Alex Jones,” but was simply speaking the truth. Evoking Oglesby's dueling Yankee and Cowboy establishments, Gilliam argued that “the government is run by two different companies that have their own establishments,” and that “instead of

75 Greenwald, Glenn. “The Deep State Goes To War With The President.” *The Intercept*, January 11, 2017. <https://theintercept.com/2017/01/11/the-deep-state-goes-to-war-with-president-elect-using-unverified-claims-as-dems-cheer/>

76 In early 2017, the terminology had already been making its rounds on conservative talk radio even before the appearance of the Steele Dossier, first appearing in episodes of Clyde Lewis' *Ground Zero* conspiracy theory program wherein he discussed the Christic Institute's theories regarding the death of Danny Casolaro, a journalist who was allegedly killed by “the deep state” in 1991.

investigating Russia, we should be investigating something called the deep state.” By the next episode on March 7, between ads for Trump backer Mike Lindell's MyPillow, Hannity himself now alleged that a “deep state” consisting of “Obama holdovers” in government had plotted to “wiretap” the Trump campaign. What he called “the shadow government,” “the deep state,” “the establishment” and “the swamp,” all spanning “both parties,” were “literally trying to destroy the President.” Soon enough, the vocabulary of the deep state was appearing in White House memos⁷⁷ and, eventually, in Trump's speeches at rallies.

Hannity and Greenwald's use of the terminology surrounding the concept of the deep state both evoke and subvert the ways that it was used by its previous theorists. Whereas Oglesby's invocation of the deep state was intended to encourage those on the left to critically reconsider what divided them from their counterparts on the right and even to organize to the right, Hannity's invocation of the deep state worked to encourage his listeners to be suspicious of other Republican elites like John McCain who took the Steele Dossier seriously, shoring up polarization. Similarly, Greenwald invoked the deep state to argue that those on the left who were opposed to Trump shouldn't “cheer for the CIA” and former Republicans like General Michael Hayden merely because they seemed to stand against Trump. In this way, both Greenwald and Hannity took up deep state discourse in service of similar strategies of policing group allegiance. Thus, while Oglesby, Scott and even Welch adopted the discourse of the deep state to defer questions about political differences and facilitate solidarity between disparate groups, Hannity and Greenwald's contemporary usage suggests that the vocabulary is broadly

⁷⁷ Winter, Jana and Elias Groll. “Here's The Memo That Blew Up the NSC.” Foreign Policy, August 10, 2017. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2017/08/10/heres-the-memo-that-blew-up-the-nsc/>

useful for encouraging the re-appraisal of presently-existing political alliances by raising questions about how ideologies and allegiances are structured. The theory works to break down allegiances by facilitating suspicions about others motivations – motivations that may seem different but are unmasked as compatible, in the case of Oglesby's overtures to the libertarian right, but also motivations that seem compatible, but are revealed to be actually nefarious, as in the case of Greenwald's suspicions of what he characterized as “deep state” opposition to Trump, which seemed compatible with leftist visions but which were unmasked as incompatible.

My intent in this article, by following the development of the idea of deep state conspiracy theory across ideological divides and from the margins to the mainstream, is not to suggest that the activists of the New Left awakened the beast of conspiracy through their efforts to politicize the Kennedy assassinations by drawing on intellectual influences to their right. Instead, I hope to show how activists in the world of conspiracy theory on the left *and* the right pioneered a mobilization strategy, and an associated conceptual vocabulary, which seems increasingly salient. The practice of conspiracy theorizing operative in the politics Welch, Oglesby, Scott and now the Trumpian right, emerged as a strategy for making judgments about competing theories explaining political events. The deep state vocabulary proved particularly useful for deferring questions about which of these theories was factually correct, while politicizing the gaps in public knowledge that the multiplication of such theories tried to fill. Deep state conspiracy theories staged public ignorance around political events, even uniquely distressing ones, not as a basic condition of political life, but as an unnatural condition, a problem to be solved. For Oglesby and Scott, the fact that there was so much confusion about the

causes of the Kennedy, Kennedy and King assassinations was a tragedy that reflected poorly on American democracy – lack of knowledge about these events suggested that America was not truly democratic at all. As later activists came to see the genre of conspiracy theory as an autonomous cultural sphere to be fought over, what fell out of the analysis was a sense of the created-ness of the category of conspiracy theory. In effect, as was reflected in his frequent “defense of paranoia,” Oglesby rested his hopes on the possibility that conspiracy theory really was a “style” in the Hofstadterian sense, one that appealed to a natural constituency that cared more about the way in which certain political stories were told, than they did about what was actually being said. In fighting over the domain of conspiracy theory, activists learned how to ask new questions about political life, but they also came to cede the possibility that these questions would ever be truly answered, an impasse from which it followed that the domain of conspiracy theory would always exist as a venue for political conflict.

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