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## FOREWORD

On occasion, a harried reporter contacts me to ask what I think about some present conspiracy theory infecting the republic. Explain this craziness to us, Professor. Is the United States a nation of nutcases, or what? Dinner party conversation often transpires similarly when a new acquaintance learns that I've written a book about conspiracy theory. How interesting, the companion states, before he or she declares with confidence that those crazy believers (who, not coincidentally, believe something opposite to the speaker) are unique to our time, our culture, our nation.

This lay impulse neatly tracks a more ambitious intellectual and academic perspective that understands what it sees as conspiracy theorists' paranoia as a functional but irrational response to stimuli extant in the political air—stimuli from which elites are curiously immune, despite their own willingness to view theorists' political organization itself as something of a conspiracy. Some of the academic work on conspiracy theory thus frames the object of its research as merely the product of particular conditions unique to the time period and culture under consideration, one that can simply be diagnosed as a dysfunction and pathology produced by and contingent on present events.

The error in these assumptions is obvious to historians and comparativists—or, really, to anyone with a memory or who has traveled. It ignores that previous periods and other popular and political cultures harbor groups and individuals who view the world around them as orchestrated by powerful characters who operate off stage. Viewing the current political leadership as criminally illegitimate; the moneyed elite as holding excessive and unchecked control; a foreign power as holding too much influence over domestic events, or a racial, ethnic, or religious Other as an existential threat to the nation—none of these is a new phenomenon. Indeed, such beliefs seem quite common if not endemic to modern democracies. (Allow me to defer for the moment the question of whether such views may on occasion be accurate.) Conspiracy