

SYLLABUS
History 4881
Conspiracies and Conspiracy Theories in U.S. History
Spring 2026
Tu Th 11:00-12:20, Wooten Hall 212

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“We were all linked in a vast and rhythmic coincidence, a daisy chain of rumor, suspicion, and secret wish.”¹

Course Description:

Over the course of the 20th and 21st centuries many Americans have come to think the worst of our national government and its officials. Powerful and sinister forces, they believe, have infiltrated the government and subverted it to serve not the interests of the nation but those of a powerful few.

Nothing is beneath this shadowy cabal. The antidemocratic elites spiked our water supply with mind-altering chemicals to brainwash the citizenry and enable a communist takeover. They killed one president and faked the birth records of another. They stood by and allowed thousands of innocents to die needless, horrible deaths on December 7, 1941, and again on September 11, 2001. They destroyed evidence to hide their crimes and faked evidence to implicate others—or so the conspiracy theorists would have you believe. How could they believe that American leaders are capable of such horrible things? In part, because their leaders really have engaged in some horrible conspiracies.

The post-WWII explosion of conspiracy theories is part of a long tradition of the fear of conspiracies in America—a tradition that the historian Richard Hofstadter famously called “the paranoid style in American politics.” Americans do not have a monopoly on conspiracy theories, but such theories do tend to blossom in the modern U.S., perhaps because our society is so pluralistic. As the historian Kathryn Olmsted writes, “In a land of many ethnic and racial groups, where citizenship can be a choice as well as a birthright, some Americans have resorted to demonizing the ‘other’ as a way of bolstering their own sense of identity.” They worry that “their country is especially open—and vulnerable—to alien subversion.” Throughout American history this kind of demonizing has led to outbreaks of violence against Jews, Catholics, African Americans, Mexican Americans, immigrants, and other ethnic and religious minority groups. Conspiracy theories lead to real-world actions, and the people who believe them act on them, making history themselves.

¹ Don DeLillo, *Libra* (New York: Penguin Books, 1991), 57.

In this course we will study how conspiratorial thinking develops, how and why some Americans have come to embrace it, how media environments influence the spread of conspiracy theories, how conspiracy theories in the U.S. have changed over time and what we can learn from those changes. By the end of the course you should develop your own ideas about conspiratorial thinking and historical thinking, and how the latter might (or might not) serve as a deterrent to the former.

Communication: I will hold regular [office hours](#) for at least three hours per week on a first-come, first-served basis, and I will also be happy to schedule an appointment with you at any time outside of regular office hours on which we can both agree. I encourage you to visit me in office hours to discuss any aspect of this course—or literally whatever else is on your mind. They're free, so you might as well. If you can't visit during office hours, please email me. I will do my best to respond immediately.

I will also make periodic announcements (including, if necessary, changes to the course schedule) through the course's [Canvas](#) site. If I ever need to contact you directly, I will send an email to your @my.unt.edu account. **It is your responsibility to check that account regularly (or set it to forward to an account that you *do* check regularly) and to monitor the [Canvas](#) site. If you need to contact me, call the number above or email the address above.**

Required Texts/Readings: The following book is required and available from the college bookstore and other outlets. **It may be available in multiple editions, so please pay close attention to the edition I am assigning:**

Kathryn Olmsted, *Real Enemies: Conspiracy Theories and American Democracy, World War I to 9/11* (Oxford University Press 10th Anniversary Edition, 2019; ISBN: 9780190908560). You can find it at UNT's bookstore [here](#).

I will post additional readings on the course Canvas site. They too are required readings.

You may also find it helpful to keep an American history survey textbook on hand to serve as a background resource. I recommend the second volume of the online U.S. history textbook [The American Yanp](#).

Grades: Grades are computed on a ten-point scale: 90.0 – 100 = A, 80.0 – 89.9 = B, etc. I do not “curve” grades as such, but I will take improvement into account when assigning final grades.

Your grades will be based on four response papers, one of which is a take-home final exam (each worth 20% of your final grade; see Canvas for due dates), and class participation (20%).

You may opt to produce an “un-essay” in lieu of the writing assignments, or you may opt to research and write a research paper using UNT Special Collections in lieu of the final exam and one response paper. See below for a description of the un-essay assignment.

You will receive more detailed instructions for the response paper and research paper later in the semester. All papers must be typed, double-spaced, and formatted in a way that does not challenge my eyesight or sanity. The final exam, which is take-home, will share the

format of the response papers, unless you opt to write a research paper or produce an un-essay.

Expectations: The attached class schedule lists weekly reading assignments, which you should complete before the first course meeting of that week. Our classroom discussions will obviously be more fruitful and you, personally, will get more out of them if everyone has completed the week's readings.

Again, your grade depends in part upon your ability to participate meaningfully in classroom discussions. The practice of history is about making and supporting arguments, but I do expect you to remain civil and respect the opinions of your classmates during these dialogues.

I do not have an official attendance policy, but **you absolutely cannot expect to do well in this course if you miss class often; at the very least your class participation grade will suffer.** I do reserve the right to implement an attendance policy during the semester should absenteeism become a problem.

I hope you will find that I work hard to prepare for class, make a point of arriving on time, do my best to return graded assignments promptly, treat my students with respect, and maintain a sense of humor. I ask no more—or less—than the same from you.

Please silence or turn your cell phone off before you enter the classroom, and please use laptops, tablets, and other devices for class purposes only.

Statement Regarding Academic Integrity, Plagiarism, and Generative AI: I encourage you to become familiar with the University's Student Academic Integrity Policy. The content of the Academic Integrity Policy applies to this course, and I refer cases of cheating and plagiarism to the Office of Academic Integrity. If you do choose to cheat or plagiarize on a paper or exam you will most likely fail the course. The UNT Libraries have assembled these [helpful resources re. plagiarism](#).

When you turn in an exam, essay, or primary source analysis in this course, you attest that the ideas and expressions in it are yours, unless they appear in quotation marks and are cited. If you use someone else's words and ideas without giving them credit, you're plagiarizing. If you copy and paste text from another website, you're plagiarizing. If you use a paraphrasing tool or AI to write an essay or primary source response for you, you're cheating.

Please take a moment to think about the learning you want to do in this course. Analyzing historical information, thinking about it critically, and expressing your own original ideas about it can be difficult. We can only learn how to do it through practice! If you copy and paste from another source or have chatgpt or another AI program write for you, you're denying yourself the opportunity to get better at this. I am genuinely interested in the ideas you have about the topics we will cover in this course and want to help you hone them and express them as clearly as you can. That's why we're here. If you plagiarize or use AI and try to pass that work off as you own, you make that impossible.

A Commitment to Academic Freedom: Higher education is predicated on the exchange, vetting, and deliberation of often controversial and unsettled ideas. We are not here to simply express personal opinions or repeat talking points, but rather to engage a set of ideas and research findings that have a long and complicated history and are therefore subject to ongoing debate. Committed students and scholars can, and do, disagree on the topics we will be discussing.

Such conversations require mutual trust and respect. It is therefore essential that students feel free to express their deeply held views and continually developing perspectives. This means ensuring that all students and faculty feel included and welcomed to engage in discussion. Because hateful or discriminatory speech and behavior degrades the possibility for a free exchange of ideas, it will not be tolerated.

Texas law and UNT regulations make it clear that if you hold a license to carry you have the right to carry a handgun on campus, including in this classroom and my office, and no matter how misguided and counter-productive I believe these regulations to be, there is nothing I can do about them. However, I happen to believe that the free exchange of ideas is not facilitated by the presence of guns on campus, so you can be sure that if you come to my classroom or my office you will not have to worry about my carrying a concealed weapon.

Disability Statement: UNT makes reasonable academic accommodation for students with disabilities. Students seeking accommodation must first register with the Office of Disability Access (ODA) to verify their eligibility. If a disability is verified, the ODA will provide a student with an accommodation letter to be delivered to faculty to begin a private discussion regarding one's specific course needs. Students may request accommodations at any time, however, ODA notices of accommodation should be provided as early as possible in the semester to avoid any delay in implementation. Note that students must obtain a new letter of accommodation for every semester and must meet with each faculty member prior to implementation in each class. For additional information see the ODA website at disability.unt.edu.

Emergency Notification & Procedures: UNT uses a system called Eagle Alert to quickly notify students with critical information in the event of an emergency (i.e., severe weather, campus closing, and health and public safety emergencies like chemical spills, fires, or violence). Please ensure that you receive Eagle Alerts via your chosen form of communication. In the event of a university closure, please refer to Canvas for contingency plans for covering course materials.

From the UNT Dean of Students

Acceptable Student Behavior:

Student behavior that interferes with an instructor's ability to conduct a class or other students' opportunity to learn is unacceptable and disruptive and will not be tolerated in any instructional forum at UNT. Students engaging in unacceptable behavior will be directed to leave the classroom and the instructor may refer the student to the Dean of Students to consider whether the student's conduct violated the Code of Student Conduct. The university's expectations for student conduct apply to all instructional forums, including university and electronic classroom, labs, discussion groups, field trips, etc. The Code of Student Conduct can be found at www.deanofstudents.unt.edu.

Sexual Discrimination, Harassment, and Assault: UNT is committed to providing an environment free of all forms of discrimination and sexual harassment, including sexual assault, domestic violence, dating violence, and stalking. If you (or someone you know) has experienced or

experiences any of these acts of aggression, please know that you are not alone. The federal Title IX law makes it clear that violence and harassment based on sex and gender are Civil Rights offenses. UNT has staff members trained to support you in navigating campus life, accessing health and counseling services, providing academic and housing accommodations, helping with legal protective orders, and more.

UNT's Dean of Students' website offers a range of on-campus and off-campus resources to help support survivors, depending on their unique needs:

<http://deanofstudents.unt.edu/resources> 0. Renee LeClaire McNamara is UNT's Student Advocate and she can be reached through e-mail at SurvivorAdvocate@unt.edu or by calling the Dean of Students' office at 940-565-2648. You are not alone. We are here to help.

The “Un-Essay” Assignment

Description:

If you elect this assignment in lieu of response papers, your final will take the form of an “un-essay.” An un-essay is a project that engages with Conspiracies and Conspiracy Theories in U.S. History in an unconventional fashion. For example, an un-essay about a person, event, or subject could take the form of a musical composition, a play, a podcast, or a video, or something I haven’t thought of yet. You might create a visual art, a video game, an embroidery project, or a website. The possibilities are limitless. Along with your un-essay, you will submit a brief reflection (2-3 pages) explaining why you chose this approach, what you learned, and how it connects to Conspiracies and Conspiracy Theories in U.S. History. The un-essay will be graded on creativity, effort, and an assessment of whether the historical approach shows engagement with course questions and materials. The un-essay is not graded on “quality” of artistry, but on the project’s success at communicating history in a non-traditional format.

Due Dates:

Feb. 5: Un-Essay Proposals Due

Your proposal should be no more than two paragraphs. The first paragraph will outline what the subject of your un-essay will be, how it ties in to our class objectives, and why you think the subject is historically significant. The second paragraph should focus on the format of your un-essay, what kinds of primary and secondary sources you might use, and an action plan/schedule to complete the project.

March 19: Annotated Bibliography Due

This assignment requires that you use at least 3 outside primary sources, 1 outside secondary source, and at least 1 primary or secondary source from class. That is a total of at least five academic sources. You can find sources from the subject guide created for our class on our Canvas site. Your bibliography should be annotated.

April 16: Un-Essay Blueprint Due

Now that we are getting close to the deadline, this is your chance to show me your progress so far and your plan for completion. Your blueprint should be one-page long and describe all the work you’ve done so far and your plan to complete the project, including what materials you’re using (wood, paint, food? The more specific the better), what resources you’re using (on campus or off), and any challenges you are facing. Please include any additional sketches, diagrams, or drafts of writing you’ve completed.

April 30: Un-Essay Showcase

We will be sharing our un-essays in a classroom showcase on April 30. This is an informal gathering; however, you must be prepared to explain your project in some detail and explain your choices to your classmates.

May 5: Un-Essay and Reflection Due

All un-essays must be uploaded to Canvas by May 5. How you upload it will depend on what your project is and you should consult with me about what that might look like (a photo of your project, a video of you explaining your project, a website, etc.) More details to come. You will also submit a brief reflection (2-3 pages) to Canvas explaining why you chose the subject and medium of your un-essay, what you learned, how successful you think the project was, what you would do differently if you had more time/resources, and how it connects to Conspiracies and Conspiracy Theories in U.S. history.

Class Schedule

(Subject to change on short notice—latest updates will always be posted at [Canvas](#))

Jan 13	Introduction
Jan 15	Conspiracy Theories in the U.S.: Roots, Patterns, and Media Environments Reading: Lacy, <u>"Historical Thinking as 12 Cs: A Mnemonic"</u> Olmsted, "Introduction" Listening: Throughline podcast, " Conspiracy "
Jan 20	As American as Apple Pie? Conspiracy Theories in the 18 th - and 19 th -century U.S.
Jan 22	Guest lecturer: J. Tomlin Reading: Davis, "Some Themes of Countersubversion" (available on Canvas) Neklasen, "The Conspiracy Theories that Fueled the Civil War" (available on Canvas) Hofstadter, <u>"The Paranoid Style in American Politics"</u> (available on Canvas) Listening: Backstory Radio podcast, " Grassy Knolls: Conspiracy Thinking in American History "
Jan 27	World War I, the Birth of the Surveillance State, the Red Scare, and "100% Americanism"
Jan 29	The Senate Munitions Inquiry Reading: Olmsted, chapter 1 Harcourt, "Ku Klux Konspiracism in the 1920s" (available on Canvas) Kenneth O'Reilly, "A New Deal for the FBI" (available on Canvas)
Feb 3	Pearl Harbor and the Paranoid Style;
Feb 5	Winning the War—and Losing the Peace? Response Paper I Due Reading: Kahn, "The Intelligence Failure of Pearl Harbor" (available on Canvas) Haynes and Klehr, "The Venona Project and Atomic Espionage" (available on Canvas) Olmsted, chapter 2 Suggested Listening: "Rachel Maddow Presents: Ultra," episodes 1-4
Feb 10	Un-American Activities after World War II
Feb 12	The Red Menace and Second Red Scare Reading: Olmsted, chapter 3

Clay Risen, "Naming Names"
 Sean Wilentz, "[Confounding Fathers: The Tea Party's Cold War Roots](#)," *New Yorker*,
 11 October 2010

Suggested Listening: "[Rachel Maddow Presents: Ultra](#)," episodes 5-8

Feb 17 The CIA and early covert operations
 Feb 19 COINTELPRO

Reading:

Gup, "The Coldest" (available on Canvas)
 "Operation Northwoods" (available on Canvas)
 Marcetic, "The FBI's Secret War" (available on Canvas)
 Gage, "What an Uncensored Letter to MLK Reveals" (available on Canvas)
["Under the Watchful \(F.B.\) Eye"](#)

Feb 24 The Kennedy presidency
 Feb 26 Kennedy assassination theories

Reading:

Olmsted, chapter 4
 Christopher Lasch, "The Life of Kennedy's Death" (available on Canvas)
Viewing: Oliver Stone's "JFK" (available from the UNT Media Library and multiple streaming services)

March 3 Nixon and Watergate
 March 5 Film: Nixon and Watergate

Reading:

Olmsted, chapter 5
Suggested Listening:
 State of Conspiracy Episode Two [Fringe to Mainstream](#)

March 10-12 **Spring Break**

March 17 Son of Watergate: The Church Committee investigation
 March 19 UFOs; **Response Paper II due**

Reading:

Church Committee, "[Interim Report](#)": Prologue, Introduction and Summary, Recommendations, and Epilogue
 "How the Pentagon Started Taking UFOs Seriously" (available on Canvas)
 "Pentagon Fueled UFO Mythology" (available on Canvas)

March 24 Real Conspiracies in the Reagan Era: Iran-contra
 March 26 Drugs and Thugs: Fallout from Iran-contra

Reading:

Gary Webb, "The Mighty Wurlitzer Plays On" (available on Canvas)
 Michael Kelly, "The Road to Paranoia," in *The New Yorker*, June 19, 1995 (available on Canvas)
 Olmsted, chapter 6

March 31	Medical and public health conspiracy theories
April 2	Militias: The Militarization of Conspiracy Theories Reading: Olmsted, chapter 7 “Years of medical abuse make Black Americans less likely to trust the coronavirus vaccine” (available on Canvas)
April 7	9/11: Inside Job?
April 9	More 9/11 Reading: Sales, “Click Here for Conspiracy” Editors of <i>Popular Mechanics</i> , Debunking 9/11 Myths Olmsted, Conclusion
April 14	Birthers
April 16	No class meeting; Response Paper III due Reading: Frankfurt, “On Bullshit” (available on Canvas) Olmsted, Conclusion
April 21	Conspiracy theories in the new media landscape
April 23	QAnon Reading: Robb, “Pizzagate: Anatomy of a Fake News Scandal” Suggested Listening: State of Conspiracy Episode One Conspirator in Chief This American Life 670 Beware the Jabberwock
April 28	January 6, 2021
April 30	Conclusions and un-essay showcase Reading: Rogers and Mithani, “Why People Fall for Conspiracy Theories” Feldman, “QAnon is Just the Standard Trump Train Now” Morris, “It’s Not Q. It’s You” Lorenz, “Birds Aren’t Real, or Are They? Inside a Gen Z Conspiracy Theory” Olmsted, Epilogue Suggested Listening: Reply All Episode 122 “The QAnon Code” State of Conspiracy Episode Three Covert Wickedness
May 5	Final exams and un-essays due 12:30 p.m.