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Conspiracy Nation: The Politics of Paranoia in Postwar America

Peter Knight

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Why are Americans today so fascinated by the X-Files? How did rumors emerge about the origins of the AIDS virus as a weapon of biowarfare? Why does the Kennedy assassination provoke heated debate nearly forty years after the fact, and what do we make of Hillary Clinton's accusation of a "vast right-wing conspiracy" against her husband? The origins of these ideas reveal important facets of American culture and politics. Placing conspiracy thinking at the center of American history, and challenging the knee-jerk dismissal of conspiratorial thought as deluded and sometimes dangerous, Conspiracy Nation provides a wide-ranging survey of conspiracy theories in contemporary America. In the 19th century, inflammatory rhetoric about slave revolts, the well-publicized specter of the black rapist, and the formation of the Ku Klux Klan all worked as conspiracy theories to legitimate an emerging sense of national consciousness based on an ideology of white supremacy. Today, panicked responses to increasing multiculturalism and globalization yield new notions of victimhood and new theories about conspiratorial plans for global domination. Offering up a provocative array of examples, ranging from alien abduction to the novels of DeLillo and Pynchon to Tupac Shakur's "paranoid style" Conspiracy Nation documents and unearths the workings of conspiracy in the contemporary moment. Their conclusions, sometimes startling and always compelling, have much to say about the nature of identity and anxiety, imagination and politics, and the state of the American psyche today. Contributors: Clare Birchall, Jack Bratich, Bridget Brown, Jodi Dean, Ingrid Walker Fields, Douglas Kellner, Peter Knight, Fran Mason, John A. McClure, Timothy Melley, Eithne Quinn, and Skip Willman.

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