

CIA Memo 1967: CIA Coined and Weaponized the Label “Conspiracy Theory”

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In 1967 The CIA released a dispatch that coined the label “conspiracy theory” and “conspiracy theorists” to attack anyone who challenged the official narrative from the Warren Commission. It’s interesting to note that the document is labelled “psych”, for psychological operations or disinformation. It’s also marked “CS copy” at the bottom, meaning “Clandestine Services” Unit.

This document was requested and released to The New York Times in 1976 via The [Freedom of Information Act](#). Below is the CIA dispatch. Read it for yourself.

CIA Dispatch: Weaponizing “conspiracy theorist” label Page#1

DISPATCH		CLASSIFICATION	PROCESSING ACTION				
		SECRET	MARKED FOR INDEXING				
TO	Chiefs, Certain Stations and Bases		X NO INDEXING REQUIRED				
INFO.	Document Number 1035-960		ONLY QUALIFIED DESK CAN JUDGE INDEXING				
F.C.M.	Chief, WOVVIEW	For FOIA Review on SEP 1976	CIA HISTORICAL REVIEW PROGRAM				
SUBJECT	Release In Full 1996						
<p>Counteracting Criticism of the Warren Report</p> <p><i>ACTION REQUIRED - REFERENCES</i></p> <p>PAUL H. FOR OSWALD PSYCH FILE 12 COPIES</p> <p><i>THIS WAS PULLED TOGETHER BY NED BENNETT OF CIA STAFF IN CLOSE CONJUNCTION WITH CIA/VA. WE FURNISHED MOST OF THE SOURCE MATERIAL, REWRITING MANY OF THE THEMES, AND PROVIDED GENERAL "EXPERTISE" ON THE CASE. THE SPEECH ARTICLE WAS WRITTEN BY BENNETT.</i></p> <p>1. Our Concern. From the day of President Kennedy's assassination on, there has been speculation about the responsibility for his murder. Although this was stemmed for a time by the Warren Commission report (which appeared at the end of September 1964), various writers have now had time to scan the Commission's published report and documents for new pretexts for questioning, and there has been a new wave of books and articles criticizing the Commission's findings. In most cases the critics have speculated as to the existence of some kind of conspiracy, and often they have implied that the Commission itself was involved. Presumably as a result of the increasing challenge to the Warren Commission's Report, a public opinion poll recently indicated that 46% of the American public did not think that Oswald acted alone, while more than half of those polled thought that the Commission had left some questions unresolved. Doubtless polls abroad would show similar, or possibly more adverse, results.</p> <p>2. This trend of opinion is a matter of concern to the U.S. government, including our organization. The members of the Warren Commission were naturally chosen for their integrity, experience, and prominence. They represented both major parties, and they and their staff were deliberately drawn from all sections of the country. Just because of the standing of the Commissioners, efforts to impugn their rectitude and wisdom tend to cast doubt on the whole leadership of American society. Moreover, there seems to be an increasing tendency to hint that President Johnson himself, as the one person who might be said to have benefited, was in some way responsible for the assassination. Innuendo of such seriousness affects not only the individual concerned, but also the whole reputation of the American government. Our organization itself is directly involved: among other facts, we contributed information to the investigation. Conspiracy theories have frequently thrown suspicion on our organization, for example by falsely alleging that Lee Harvey Oswald worked for us. The aim of this dispatch is to provide material for countering and discrediting the claims of the conspiracy theorists, so as to inhibit the circulation of such claims in other countries. Background information is supplied in a classified section and in a number of unclassified attachments.</p> <p>3. Action. We do <u>not</u> recommend that discussion of the assassination question be initiated where it is not already taking place. <u>Where discussion is active, however, addressees are requested:</u></p>							
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9 attachments h/w		BD 5847	4/1/67				
1 - SECRET <i>Satt.</i>		CLASSIFICATION	HQS FILE NUMBER				
8 - Unclassified		SECRET	DESTROY WHEN NO LONGER NEEDED				

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CONTINUATION OF DISPATCH	CLASSIFICATION SECRET	DISPATCH SYMBOL AND NUMBER BD 5847
<p>a. To discuss the publicity problem with liaison and friendly elite contacts (especially politicians and editors), pointing out that the Warren Commission made as thorough an investigation as humanly possible, that the charges of the critics are without serious foundation, and that further speculative discussion only plays into the hands of the opposition. Point out also that parts of the conspiracy talk appear to be deliberately generated by Communist propagandists. Urge them to use their influence to discourage unfounded and irresponsible speculation.</p> <p>b. To employ propaganda assets to answer and refute the attacks of the critics. Book reviews and feature articles are particularly appropriate for this purpose. The unclassified attachments to this guidance should provide useful background material for passage to assets. Our play should point out, as applicable, that the critics are (i) wedded to theories adopted before the evidence was in, (ii) politically interested, (iii) financially interested, (iv) hasty and inaccurate in their research, or (v) infatuated with their own theories. In the course of discussions of the whole phenomenon of criticism, a useful strategy may be to single out Epstein's theory for attack, using the attached Fletcher Knebel article and Spectator piece for background. (Although Mark Lane's book is much less convincing than Epstein's and comes off badly where contested by knowledgeable critics, it is also much more difficult to answer as a whole, as one becomes lost in a morass of unrelated details.)</p> <p>4. In private or media discussion not directed at any particular writer, or in attacking publications which may be yet forthcoming, the following arguments should be useful:</p> <p>a. <u>No significant new evidence</u> has emerged which the Commission did not consider. The assassination is sometimes compared (e.g., by Joachim Joesten and Bertrand Russell) with the Dreyfus case; however, unlike that case, the attacks on the Warren Commission have produced no new evidence, no new culprits have been convincingly identified, and there is no agreement among the critics. (A better parallel, though an imperfect one, might be with the Reichstag fire of 1933, which some competent historians (Fritz Tobias, A.J.P. Taylor, D.C. Watt) now believe was set by Van der Lubbe on his own initiative, without acting for either Nazis or Communists; the Nazis tried to pin the blame on the Communists, but the latter have been much more successful in convincing the world that the Nazis were to blame.)</p> <p>b. Critics usually overvalue particular items and ignore others. They tend to place more emphasis on the recollections of individual eyewitnesses (which are less reliable and more divergent -- and hence offer more hand-holds for criticism) and less on ballistic, autopsy, and photographic evidence. A close examination of the Commission's records will usually show that the conflicting eyewitness accounts are quoted out of context, or were discarded by the Commission for good and sufficient reason.</p> <p>c. Conspiracy on the large scale often suggested would be impossible to conceal in the United States, esp. since informants could expect to receive large royalties, etc. Note that Robert Kennedy, Attorney General at the time and John F. Kennedy's brother, would be the last man to overlook or conceal any conspiracy. And as one reviewer pointed out, Congressman Gerald R. Ford would hardly have held his tongue for the sake of the Democratic administration, and Senator Russell would have had every political interest in exposing any misdeeds on the part of Chief Justice Warren. A conspirator moreover would hardly choose a location for a shooting where so much depended on conditions beyond his control: the route, the speed of the cars, the moving target, the risk that the assassin would be discovered. A group of wealthy conspirators could have arranged much more secure conditions.</p> <p>d. Critics have often been enticed by a form of intellectual pride: they light on some theory and fall in love with it; they also scoff at the Commission because it did not always answer every question with a flat decision one way or the other. Actually, the make-up of the Commission and its staff was an excellent safeguard against over-commitment to any one theory, or against the illicit transformation of probabilities into certainties.</p>		
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After the 1960's the word "conspiracy theory", "conspiracy theorist", and "conspiracy" started having a negative connotation and is enough to silence anyone who questions the official narrative. To this day we still view conspiracy theorists as crazy tinfoil hatters.

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