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Conspiracy Theories: Everybody's Doing It

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Conspiracies and paranoia go together like tomatoes and mozzarella. Both combinations rely on the power of illusion. In one, a fruit pretending to be a vegetable makes congress with a lump of fat, and tells the world it's a salad. In the other, a rare occurrence joins forces with a common psychosis, and passes itself off as a public service announcement.



Recent events in Washington and elsewhere have been a boon to conspiracy theorists of all persuasions. No doubt, in the fullness of time everything will be revealed. But until that happy day, skeptics and rationalists must deal with the ignorant and the credulous as best they can.

It doesn't help that some of the most absurd-sounding conspiracies have turned out to be true: The Central Intelligence Agency really did feed LSD to unsuspecting civilians in the 1950s as part of a mind-control experiment. Or that some of the technically plausible ones have been patently false: The moon landings were not filmed on a sound stage.

It is human nature to look for a linear cause to explain complex events. The worse the tragedy, the greater the need for a narrative that does not involve dumb luck. Eight hundred years after the destruction of Constantinople by the knights of the Fourth Crusade, the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches are still unable to agree on who or what tipped the two Christian empires into a ruinous fight against one another.

Conspiracy theorists on the Orthodox Christian side still detect the dark hand of Pope Innocent III, whose minions, they say, secretly arranged for the Crusaders to be diverted from the Holy Land to Byzantium. It was all part of a plot to extend his power in the East. On the Catholic side, many agree that only a deep and nefarious conspiracy could have turned Christian against Christian; except the culprit wasn't Rome, it was Venice. Since the Venetians were the principal financiers of the Fourth Crusade, it stands to reason, they say, that the attack on Constantinople was planned from the beginning—in order to eliminate Venice's only rival in the Adriatic. Once sent out into the world, conspiracy theories tend to escape their masters and assume lives of their own. The newspaper mogul William Randolph Hearst is unusual in having been the peddler and victim of the same conspiracy theory.

As a peddler, Hearst stands accused of having manipulated the U.S. into fighting the Spanish-American War. The most cursory study of diplomatic history reveals that he had only limited influence in Washington and none in Havana or Madrid. But the great egoist wanted people to think that his campaign for a free Cuba had forced President McKinley to act. In May 1898, a week after hostilities commenced, Hearst's New York Journal ran the headline: "How Do You Like the Journal's War?"

Later, when critics started labeling Hearst a warmonger, he became the victim of his own success. People believed he was capable of anything. In 1901 a journalist named James Creelman claimed that in the months before the war, the Journal's illustrator, Frederic Remington, telegraphed from Cuba: "Everything is quiet. There is no trouble here. There will be no war. I wish to return." To which Hearst replied: "Please remain. You furnish the pictures, and I'll furnish the war."

The chief problem with the story is that Remington was nowhere near Cuba at the time. It doesn't matter that no copy of the telegram exists or that Hearst denied ever sending it. To this day, the fictitious communiqué remains the single-most quoted proof that Hearst engineered the Spanish-American War.

Whether there's a conspiracy to keep the Hearst conspiracy alive, who can say.

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