Course Description: This course will examine theories of conspiracy as a part of American culture, with particular emphasis on the 20th and early 21st centuries. Students will examine a number of conspiracy theories, not in attempt to prove or disprove them, but to seek a greater understanding of what the existence and influence of such theories can tell us about the culture and society that produced such explanations. The course will feature examinations of greater and lesser conspiracy theories with an emphasis on the 20th and 21st centuries, including the JFK assassination, the 9/11 conspiracy theories, McCarthyism, the Anti-Masons, various incarnations of the New World Order conspiracy, and regional conspiracy theories, among others. The course will also examine cultural productions influenced by the theme of conspiracy, including films such as JFK and The Manchurian Candidate.

Course Objectives:

Students will

• be able to demonstrate knowledge of and trace the origins and development of conspiracy theories.

• be able to compare and contrast various conspiracy theories in terms of production, dissemination, audience, ideology, and other factors.

• be able to explain the relationship between specific theories and American culture within specific historical contexts.

• develop their own interpretation, based on evidence and investigation, of the general role of conspiratorial thinking and secrecy in American culture and society.

• examine and evaluate primary and secondary sources.

Role of the instructor: The instructor will select common readings for the class; advise students on paper topics; help students select appropriate readings and sources for papers; lead discussions of common readings; lecture on selected topics.

Role of the student: Students will engage in and discuss common readings; develop paper topics and write a research paper.

Assignments and grading:

Grades will be assigned on the traditional 100 point scale (i.e., A=90-100, B=80-89, etc.)
Consult the GeorgiaView calendar for reading assignments and due dates. Look ahead; readings and papers will be listed on the day they are due.

Major assignments:

Weekly readings, readings quizzes, & class discussion 10%

Mid-term essay exam 30%

Final essay exam 30%

(The mid-term and final will be traditional essay exams tests designed to assess comprehension of the readings and lectures, ability to apply concepts from the readings and lectures to primary sources and make appropriately qualified generalizations, ability to trace and outline the origins and developments of various theories and ideas presented in class.)

Paper Proposal 10%

(Students will turn in a 1-2 page description of a research paper topic. In the proposal, students will identify a primary source or group of sources for research, identify 3 appropriate secondary sources, and briefly explain the goals and strategy of the paper.)

Research Paper 20%

(Students will complete a 12-15 page paper on a topic chosen in consultation with the instructor within the general boundaries of the course. The paper will examine an aspect of a particular conspiracy theory through examination of a primary source or group of sources (such as a pamphlet, book, website, or other cultural production related to conspiracy in American culture) and place the theory within the appropriate historical context using relevant secondary sources.

Required Books


In addition, primary source readings will be assigned through the GeorgiaView website, including PDF files and web links. Primary sources will include the wealth of documents that can be found at conspiracy websites, such as the Mary Ferrell Foundation site on the JFK assassination (http://www.maryferrell.org/wiki/index.php/Main_Page). Here, students can find the Warren Commission report in its entirety, along with a number of declassified government documents bearing on the assassination, alongside conspiracy-oriented analyses of these sources. The analyses themselves, of course, become primary sources for this course. Conspiracy-debunking sources will also be assigned,
including the wealth of resources found at John McAdams’s JFK Assassination website, which offers a sort of mirror image of the Ferrell site, including official documents interpreted in a non-conspiratorial fashion.