

REPUBLIC OF TÜRKİYE
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GRADUATE SCHOOL OF SOCIAL SCIENCES
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AMERICAN CULTURE AND LITERATURE

CONSPIRACY CULTURE IN THE UNITED STATES AND *THE X-FILES*:
INSTITUTIONAL PARANOIA IN THE POST-COLD WAR AMERICA

Master's Thesis

OKAN KÜRKÇÜOĞLU

Ankara-2025

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I state that all the information in my master's thesis titled "CONSPIRACY CULTURE IN THE UNITED STATES AND *THE X-FILES*: INSTITUTIONAL PARANOIA IN THE POST-COLD WAR AMERICA" (Ankara 2025), which I prepared under the Supervision of Assoc. Prof. Dr. Nisa Harika GÜZEL KÖŞKER, was collected and presented in accordance with academic rules and ethical behavior principles, I fully indicated the information received from other sources in the text and in the bibliography, I declare that I have acted in accordance with the ethical rules, and I will accept any legal consequences in case the contrary arises.

01.10.2025
Okan KÜRKÇÜOĞLU

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INTRODUCTION

Whether the subject of controversy was religious ideals, scientific discoveries, political ideologies, gossip, or conspiracy theories; history has witnessed the division between believers and non-believers. Therefore, it would be a mistake to consider such a dichotomy peculiar to the conspiracy culture. What sets conspiracy belief systems apart is the unique way in which the disagreement redefines and challenges knowledge. In conspiracy culture, the dispute is over the legitimacy of authority which could be scientific, governmental or even popular media powerheads. In this light, conspiracy theories emerge not just as ideas, but as counter ideas to what the status quo is. They not only question those who hold power, but also challenge the way that the ultimate truth is constructed. Hence, the positioning of the self as a seeker of that truth puts the conspirator in a dynamic where it turns into a tense and disillusioned state of mind.

In this thesis, I will explore how the television series *The X-Files* reflects and conceptualizes the American conspiracy culture of the post-Cold War decade; with particular attention to the public distrust against governmental bodies, the moral dualism of the New World Order narratives that surrounded the discourse of the era and how the series' own antagonists the Syndicate and the Cigarette Smoking Man embody this culture of paranoia. In order to understand this, I will be using historical contextualization by delving into the background of conspiracy theories and culture in the United States of America.

Although the culture of conspiracy has been amplified by internet culture, this sense of deep-rooted suspicion did not start with it. Before the blogs and social media communities allowed people all around the world to share and discuss theories of all kinds freely, there were earlier movements of shared beliefs by suspicious public that resulted in mass scale outrage with specific resonance with a great portion of the American public. From McCarthyism of 1940s to the

assassination of John F. Kennedy in 1963, or from the early days of the Roswell incident of the 1947 to the continuing debates on September 11 attacks in 2001; numerous episodes illustrate a recurring pattern in which governmental explanations and official accounts were met with counter-narratives, laying the groundwork for the conspiratorial psyche to thrive in today's world.

The culture of suspicion and unease changed and evolved throughout the decades as well as dramatic historical turning points; one of which being the 1990s where at the beginning of the decade the Soviet Union would dissolve, thereby ending the Cold War. The end to an era with the disappearance of the emblematic foreign adversary of the United States, left behind a gap for the public to fill in with their imagination. As their traditional enemy figure faded away, the suspicion that was now a code of character within a tremendous part of the population would look for a new enemy. This shift in the culture led to a new kind of conspiracy trend, one which was already brewing for decades to come. It was now time for the discontent to turn its arrow to domestic enemies and the power holders with accusations of internal betrayal. However, in order to analyze and dive deeper into the codes of the culture and the eventual shift to it in the 1990s, it is necessary to have a full understanding of the meaning and the historical emergence of the terms conspiracy theory, conspiracy, and of course theory.

The usage of the term “conspiracy theory” has been dated “back to at least 1863” (APNews). It is seen in a letter published in *The New York Times* on January 11, 1863, during the Civil War. The term referred to the idea that England was conspiring against the Union stating that:

our masses, having only a rough general knowledge of foreign affairs, and not unnaturally some what [sic] exaggerating the space which we occupy in the world's eye, do not appreciate the complications which rendered such a conspiracy

impossible. They only look at the sudden right-about-face movement of the English Press and public, which is most readily accounted for on the conspiracy theory.

(Bristed)

The letter sent by a reader of the newspaper uses the term conspiracy theory to dismiss the idea that England was deliberately conspiring against the Union forces during the Civil War by supporting the Confederacy. By labeling the claim of such an allegation as theory, the author in a way denotes its absurdity, framing it as an exaggerated and baseless notion arising from Americans' limited understanding of global politics. This rhetorical move mirrors the modern usage of conspiracy theory which often serves to disprove and undermine ideas deemed unrealistic or far-fetched, regardless of their potential merit. Obviously, this does not provide evidence to credit the author of the letter, which was signed C. A. BRISTED, with the coinage of the term. In fact, the usage may merely be circumstantial, and it is uncertain if there were earlier uses prior to it that have yet to be determined. Hence, it is not quite possible to pinpoint an exact creation moment for the term.

One ironic instance regarding discussions about the creation of the term is pointed out by Andrew McKenzie-McHarg, who notes that the quest for its origins itself often becomes a kind of conspiracy theory. It has been a subject of discussion that the term was created by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) as a political tool. Political scientist Lance deHaven-Smith attributes the term's rise in modern discourse to a CIA Dispatch issued in 1967 to counter skepticism about the official account of President John F. Kennedy's assassination. While deHaven-Smith argues that the CIA popularized the term to discredit public discourse regarding the incident, McKenzie-McHarg critiques this as a "highly tendentious reading" (62) pointing out that earlier examples predate the CIA's involvement.

While highlighting the rhetorical function of the term, this early utilization and debates surrounding it further underscore the ambiguous ancestry of it. Operating as an analytical strategy, conspiracy theory attempts to draw epistemic boundaries between legitimate and illegitimate knowledge. This functional approach becomes specifically clear in the way the term has transformed into a mechanism of delegitimization. Thus, it is safe to say that the term concurrently is rarely used in a neutral or detailed manner and, it functions as a derogatory label that ultimately delegitimizes narratives by coding them as irrational and delusional. This stigmatization thereby opens a path to radicalization and more marginalization of those who hold these theories as beliefs.

In order to distinguish the classification of whether a type of behavior can be labeled as a conspiracy theory or just merely a conspiracy and a theory, the terms need to be fully understood. Oxford Dictionary defines conspiracy as; “[t]he action of conspiring; combination of persons for an evil or unlawful purpose.” Cambridge on the other hand describes “theory” as “a formal statement of the rules on which a subject of study is based or of ideas that are suggested to explain a fact or event or, more generally, an opinion or explanation.” When combined together however, “conspiracy theory” means “a theory that explains an event or set of circumstances as the result of a secret plot by usually powerful conspirators” (Merriam-Webster). Joseph E. Uscinski defines conspiracy theory as follows:

Conspiracy theory refers to an explanation of past, ongoing, or future events or circumstances that cites as a main causal factor a small group of powerful persons, the conspirators, acting in secret for their own benefit and against the common good... While conspiracy refers to events that our appropriate institutions have determined to be true, conspiracy theory refers to an accusatory perception which may or may not be true, and usually conflicts with the appropriate authorities. (48)

Uscinski highlights that the existence of paranormal beings such as Bigfoot or the Loch Ness Monster does not constitute conspiracy theories; thus, neither does the theory of extraterrestrial beings. Theory would need to suggest that their existence was purposefully being hidden by people in power for it to be considered a conspiracy theory. Moreover, he defines “conspiracy belief” as “a person’s belief in a specific conspiracy theory or specific set of conspiracy theories” and “conspiracy thinking” as “an underlying worldview or disposition, similar to political ideology, toward viewing events and circumstances as the product of conspiracies” (50).

Conspiracy studies as a field has even been more recent than the term. According to the brief rundown of the field given by Michael Butter and Peter Knight in the book *Conspiracy Theories and the People Who Believe Them*, early research on conspiracy theories emerged during the 1930s and 1940s, influenced by world events like the world wars and totalitarianism (34). World Wars I and II created widespread fear, insecurity, and economic instability. This environment fostered suspicion, as people sought to make sense of complex, traumatic events by attributing them to hidden, malevolent forces or powerful elites orchestrating global affairs. This period of intense global panic not only shaped the public’s inclination toward conspiratorial thinking but also guided the focus of early academic inquiries into the phenomenon. Scholars began to examine the psychological and sociological underpinnings of these beliefs, leading to foundational theories about their origins and implications. “Political psychologists like Harold Laswell and Theodor Adorno” (Butter and Knight 34) focused on individual traits and the psychological explanation behind it; while sociologists such as Leo Loewenthal and Norbert Guterman connected conspiracy beliefs to modernization. Karl Popper put a label on this phenomenon and described it as “the conspiracy theory of society” which he considered to be “an utterly simplistic and, more

importantly, unscientific way of understanding social relations” (Butter and Knight 34). In some ways, Popper’s initial reaction to the trend could be considered more dismissive.

According to Butter and Knight, the phenomena gained more attraction in the United States especially following McCarthyism and the era known as the Red Scare. While some scholars dealt with the subject to some extent, the first to talk about a stylistic movement was Richard Hofstadter in his famous essay “The Paranoid Style in American Politics” published in the *Harper’s Magazine* in 1964. Michael Butter and Peter Knight puts this as;

The impact of Hofstadter’s conceptualization of conspiracy theory cannot be overestimated. While he did not coin the term conspiracy theory (and indeed, rarely used the phrase), his understanding of the phenomenon influences how considerable parts of the public, the media, and academics all over the world have conceived of the topic thus labeled ever since. Because of Hofstadter, paranoia and conspiracy theory have been almost inextricably linked. (35)

Hofstadter in a way defined a style which was beneficial to understand the cultural existence of it to a great extent. While the initial approach to the subject was by the scholars in psychology and political studies; cultural studies, with important scholars in the area such as “Jodi Dean, Mark Fenster, Timothy Melley, and Peter Knight” (Butter and Knight 40), increasingly put focus on the topic during the 1990s. This wave of scholars believed in understanding the popularity and the traction of conspiracy theories within the context of their surroundings and putting light on them as “indicators of larger anxieties and concerns” (40).

The patterns of modern conspiracy culture share a superficial resemblance to historical traditions of skepticism, yet the two differ fundamentally in their orientation. Classical skepticism, such as that found in the Enlightenment or the Reformation, was directed inward, aiming to refine

human understanding by questioning accepted truths and examining the limits of knowledge. Conspiracy thinking, by contrast, directs its doubt outward. It is less about questioning how we know and more about distrusting who holds power. While both arise in moments of uncertainty and social change, their purposes diverge. Skepticism seeks to clarify truth through critical reflection, whereas conspiracy theories seek to defend a sense of certainty in a world perceived as deceptive. Still, both can be seen as cultural responses to instability, different ways of coping with the tension between trust and doubt in modern life.

It would be restrictive to limit the culture of conspiracy theories to a certain behavioral model; however, it, without a doubt, contains certain dominant groups and among those groups, those who take on the task of questioning authority with allegations suggesting that said authority is actually being controlled by secret forces. At the core of a majority of these ideas lies the need to code the world in a sort of dichotomy between good and evil. This binary perspective often parallels the theological and mythical concepts of previous eras, which attributed chaos and misery to the conflict between divine and demonic entities. In the realm of conspiracy culture, this manifests as narratives depicting a virtuous, frequently oppressed society in opposition to an illicit elite cabal manipulating events from the shadows. This Manichean concept ¹makes sociopolitical systems easier to understand by putting all of the blame for problems on a secret, powerful them. The outcome is the deterioration of public confidence in institutions, with the dissemination of narratives that emphasize emotional and moral clarity at the expense of empirical complexity. This us versus them way of thinking is reassuring on a psychological level, but it often makes things less clear and ends up providing more obscurity. But its continued presence says a lot about how important it is to have interpretive clarity in times of uncertainty. J. Eric

¹ For a detailed analysis of Manichean concept refer to page 97.

Oliver and Thomas J. Wood suggest that there are three common characteristics to most conspiracy theories:

First, they locate the source of unusual social and political phenomena in unseen, intentional, and malevolent forces. Second, they typically interpret political events in terms of a Manichean struggle between good and evil... Finally, most conspiracy theories suggest that mainstream accounts of political events are a ruse or an attempt to distract the public from a hidden source of power. (953)

Michael Barkun also identifies three common principles in conspiracy theories. According to Barkun, “[n]othing happens by accident,” which denotes that everything that happens has an agenda and intention behind it; “[n]othing is as it seems,” which refers to the idea that appearances are all illusive to hide the underneath secrets; and “[e]verything is connected,” which means repetitive patterns and signs are clues to how conspiracies all have connections (3-4). Based on the structural observations of Oliver, Wood, and Barkun, it is clear that conspiracy thinking follows a distinct method of knowledge. In this framework, coincidence is eliminated, perception is regarded with skepticism, and it is presumed that concealed significance underlies all occurrences.

The first principle outlined by Oliver and Wood reinforces the previously discussed Manichean dualism. This emphasis on hidden evil reduces complicated global interactions to simple moral stories, framing geopolitical conflicts or social unrest as the deliberate actions of an adversarial entity. Barkun’s idea supports this by claiming that in the world of conspiracies, nothing happens by chance. People think that every political assassination, economic slowdown, or health problem is planned on purpose.

Barkun's second principle that nothing is as it seems, shows how conspiracy culture is based on a deep suspicion of what we see on the surface. Institutions, media, science, and even personal connections become questionable. Barkun says this is a key part of conspiracy theorist theory, where lying is the rule rather than the exception. This viewpoint encourages a never-ending hunt for hidden meanings, symbols, and agendas. It promotes an environment where different kinds of information are valued and the idea of a consensus reality is seen as a way to control people.

Last but not least, the third principle that everything is connected, lets conspiracists build big, comprehensive worldviews. Different events and people are put together to make one narrative about control. People see each new event as further proof of the same underlying power structure. Together, these principles explain how conspiracy theories function not only as belief systems but also as interpretive tools. They may also appeal to a need for order in a world that can seem unpredictable and unfair. In doing so, they give meaning to things that may not seem to have any and give people a sense of control when institutions fail. This is why conspiracy culture is so strong and holds the power to be so influential.

This ongoing structure of skepticism, moral absolutism, and pattern-seeking did not stay the same all throughout American history. The focus of conspiracy culture changed as history changed. Most twentieth-century and earlier conspiracy theories were about threats from outside, like communists, foreign governments, or opponents far away. But the 1990s were a turning point when people started to look inside. After the Cold War ended and there was no longer a clear foreign enemy, conspiracy theories started to focus on domestic institutions and powerful people in the core of government. In a way, the focus shifted to people inside the government,

corporations, and media networks who were now seen as betraying the public from the inside. Michael Barkun comments on the end of the Cold War as follows:

This development removed suddenly from mental maps a defining element of the post-1945 period: the figure of an adversary. The Soviet Union was not simply an enemy, it was the enemy, the evil empire against which all American and “free world” resources were marshaled. (63)

Thus, the 1990s witnessed a profound transformation in the landscape of American political paranoia. The Cold War faded into memory as the Soviet Union fell apart, leaving an immense void in the American mind. When there was no outside enemy to blame for people’s worries, they focused their suspicions on themselves. People started to mistrust domestic institutions. The federal government, intelligence agencies, large corporations, and even humanitarian groups were all looked at very closely. This was not a new thing, but the 1990s accelerated it and normalized such distrust in ways that had never happened before.

The New World Order (NWO) narrative becoming popular was one of the most significant developments of the decade. Pat Robertson and other televangelists made the NWO conspiracy famous, and militia organizations and right-wing commentators amplified it. The theory suggested that a secret global elite was trying to set up a centralized, totalitarian world government. The rhetoric suggested betrayal from within, which was different from the Cold War fears of a communist takeover. People said that American officials and institutions were working together in secret to take away people’s freedom and the country’s independence. People who were chosen or appointed to protect the country were seen as pawns of a bigger, more sinister plan. The mindset behind the theory was not just that the government officials were only failing to excel in their jobs, but it was also working to its disadvantage. In the minds of most people in the 1990s, power was

no longer in the hands of elected authorities alone. People thought power was a structure that worked in secret councils and locked chambers, behind the scenes. Moreover, it was thought to be evil.

This perspective is in a way Manichean in nature; conceptualizing global occurrences as a cosmic conflict between ultimate good and ultimate evil. Many conspiracy theories from the 1990s do not just say that political leaders are corrupt or self-serving; they also say that they are working with evil forces. In many versions of the NWO narrative, this is treated quite seriously. This religious overlay makes a strict moral binary even stronger. In this kind of system, there is no place for nuance or human error; there are simply heroes and traitors, the enlightened and the deluded. The clarity of such a duality is what makes it so appealing. It tells a fundamental narrative that helps to comprehend a world that is changing quickly and getting more complicated.

Building on this cultural atmosphere of growing suspicion, dualism, and a belief in secret elite control, *The X-Files* emerged as a narrative suitable for the anxieties of its time. The series, which first aired in 1993, did not merely illustrate these worries; it also became a way to talk about, dramatize, and turn them into myths. In a decade when many Americans were starting to think that powerful people were controlling or hiding the truth, *The X-Files* set itself up as a cultural mediator by questioning the hazy border between official fact and hidden reality. The show was all about how much it did not trust government institutions, how it showed hidden networks of control, and how it was obsessed with finding out what was really going on. These were the same things that were quickly shaping the political and conspiratorial mindset of the 1990s.

The alien cover-up is the most important and long-lasting conspiracy in *The X-Files*. It not only fascinated viewers, but also reflected the widespread fear of government secrecy in the years after the Cold War. The show suggested that the United States administration had been working

with aliens for years, keeping their presence and role in world events a secret from the public. This plot stands as an allegorical extension of worries about secret government actions, spying without permission, and treachery by the elite. The alien conspiracy in *The X-Files* is more than just about extraterrestrial beings. It is the ultimate loss of transparency. In many ways, the series depicted a world where the truth was systematically hidden, even when people's lives were at risk. The alien scare was already considered an allegorical outcome of people's distrust in the government according to some scholars. Jodi Dean argues that "[b]ecause of the pervasiveness of UFO belief and the ubiquity of alien imagery, ufology is an especially revealing window into current American paranoia and distrust. We might say that it's 'of the fringe' though no longer 'on the fringe'" (10). Dean's assertion that ufology is "of the fringe" but no longer "on the fringe" highlights how narratives about aliens and UFOs, formerly deemed marginal or quirky, have evolved into popular outlets for articulating collective paranoia and suspicion within American society. The prevalence of alien images in popular culture and media has legitimized what was formerly seen as fringe belief, making ufology an influential symbolic framework for expressing concerns around secrecy, power, and institutional treachery. In this context, UFO lore does not only reflect individual delusions but serves as a lens through which Americans navigate their discomfort with a swiftly evolving and frequently ambiguous political and cultural environment.

The X-Files mixes speculative fiction and cultural critique by putting this conspiracy in a science fiction setting. The aliens may be from another universe, but the real fear comes from the decisions people make about them. People are afraid not only of invasion, but also of treachery from inside. They are afraid of leaders who choose secrecy, control, and self-preservation over truth and accountability. This frame fits perfectly with the narratives about the New World Order theories that became quite prominent during the 1990s.

Thus, in my thesis, I will be analyzing how *The X-Files* and its major thematic elements along with characterization of its protagonists and antagonists were all a representation of the ongoing political climate in the 1990s and the culture of conspiracy that came into being as a reaction. The focus in this sense will be limited to the products of the series and the franchise in the 1990s, in order to frame the decade better. The study seeks to analyze how this particular decade served as a fertile ground for the popularization of conspiracy theories and the proliferation of a more skeptical outlook towards official narratives and government institutions. Therefore, the television series *The X-Files* will also be focused solely on the material it has provided in its original run from September 1993 to May 2002, and the 1998 movie of the same title. The 2008 movie *The X-Files: I Want to Believe* and the 2016-2018 revival of the series will not be included in the analysis. “[T]he vast majority of episodes were split into two distinct categories: ‘mythology’ episodes and ‘monster of the week’ episodes. The first category focused on a long-running story arc, related to a government/alien conspiracy, while the latter tended to be stand-alone stories, centred around a monster or a supernatural entity” (Wiggin). While there is references to character arcs or storylines from the monster of the week episodes; main focus of the study will be on the mythology episode arcs. Although it aims to understand conspiracy culture thoroughly, the study will have to be restricted to the decade aforementioned. Thus, I will not give a direct analysis of the current state of conspiracy culture in the United States. This limitation is aimed to seek out the state of this culture in that particular decade to analyze the discourse before the 9/11 attacks as the attacks are believed to have had immense cultural effects. Therefore, the political environment in which the United States was seen as a unipolar subject of power is considered to be particular to the era.

While this thesis frequently refers to ‘American conspiracy culture,’ the phrase should not imply a singular, monolithic belief system. Instead, it is used as shorthand for recurring narratives and interpretive frameworks that have circulated through different communities and political contexts throughout U.S. history. As Peter Knight suggests;

Following the assassination of President Kennedy in 1963 in particular, conspiracy theories have become a regular feature of everyday political and cultural life, not so much an occasional outburst of countersubversive invective as part and parcel of many people's normal way of thinking about who they are and how the world works. You now need, as the popular wisdom has it, to be a little paranoid to remain sane. A certain kind of world-weary paranoia has become the norm... (2)

Knight also observes from surveys that, “in 1958 73 percent of respondents answered that they trusted the government in Washington to do what is right just about always or most of the time; in 1994 (the lowest point), only 21 percent fell into these categories” (Knight 245). This erosion and what Knight describes as a “world-weary paranoia” suggest that conspiracy culture has broad reach in American society, especially by the 1990s. However, its manifestations and interpretations are always inflected by political, social, and historical circumstances. Uscinski and Parent add to this argument as well: “[c]onspiratorial thinking exists on a dimension separate from other general political attitudes. It is separate from right-wing or left-wing attitudes and is spread evenly across political ideology and partisanship” (14). Thus, the behavioral codes of conspiracy culture are spread out in political standings, albeit they are scattered within different popular concepts.

One concept that this thesis examines especially is the New World Order theory, which crystallizes many political and cultural anxieties by reflecting political bias. Popularized by figures such as Pat Robertson, the New World Order thesis situates elites and global powers as the

conspirators. While building on older anti-Masonic tradition, the narrative finds its popularity among contemporary populist and far-right movements as a rallying motivation against globalization and multiculturalism.

The aim and the significance of this very study is to investigate how *The X-Files* serves as a cultural artifact that both reflects and shapes American conspiracy thought in the post-Cold War era. The significance of this research is in its interdisciplinary methodology, integrating media analysis with political and cultural theory to elucidate how fictional portrayals both reflect and contribute to societal worries over politics, knowledge, and authority. This thesis emphasizes the cultural significance of conspiracy narratives and their capacity to influence public perception during periods of uncertainty.

In Chapter One, I will give a historical rundown of the twentieth-century American culture and how it built up to have conspiracy culture slowly but surely get integrated into life; starting by pulling from earlier American society and Puritan models to the Salem Witch Trials, and then moving onto Nativism and Red Scare eras. The cultural significance of events such as the John F. Kennedy assassination and the technological developments towards the end of the decade will be mapped out. Moreover, the first chapter will also analyze how the end of the Cold War marked a time for the United States to be seen as unrivalled, and how this very climate led to the public distraught towards bureaucratic forces.

In Chapter Two, I will analyze *The X-Files*' narrative structure, characters, and recurring themes that are especially related to truth, secrecy and distrust by giving examples of storylines from the series that parallel the conspiracy theories and scandals that contributed to those narratives throughout the decade. Thus, an analysis of the 1990s in the lens of public discord and the political rhetoric will be provided.

In Chapter Three, I will analyze one significant core theory within the conspiracy culture; the New World Order Theory. By using Pat Robertson's writings on it, with historical background on the Bavarian Illuminati and how it was part of a reasoning provided by theorists of NWO; the dualistic and Manichean nature of the theory and its religious undertones will be emphasized. Furthermore, a comparison of the overarching mythological storyline of *The X-Files* and the alien conspiracy with specific focus on the Syndicate and the Cigarette Smoking Man will be given.



CHAPTER I: CONSPIRACY CULTURE IN THE UNITED STATES

In a short story by Robin Sloan written for *the Atlantic*; conspiracy theories are labeled as “the third great American art form, alongside jazz and superhero comics.” While Sloan humorously trivializes the subject in what is essentially a fictional story, he moves on and tells the story of how a conspiracy museum opens in the United States of America. Despite the fictional aspect of Sloan’s story, it is still fair to consider the art form of conspiracy theories, one that is essential to the culture of the United States. It would be a false narrative to suggest that conspiracy theories do not exist outside the United States. In fact, in many countries of the world the United States is seen as a protagonist of many theories regarding interference with democracy or suspicious military activity. This is significant as it positions conspiracy culture not merely as a domestic phenomenon confined to the intricacies of American society, but also as a global discourse. While Americans harbor skepticism towards their own government, other nations can be seen depicting the United States as the secret orchestrator of global events. This reinforces the image of America as both a victim of conspiracies and a conspirator, highlighting the nation's power and the conversation that power builds. In the case of some countries like the Russian Federation, the United States has become so synonymous with the phenomenon that “journalist Mikhail Zygar notes that ‘conspiracy theory and anti-Americanism have become the new official ideology’” of the country (Livers 128). Another example is how the overgrowing concerns of Chinese people toward the United States engagement in other countries in Asia. Wang puts forward that “based on conspiracy theorists’ interpretations ... United States is purposefully carrying out a ‘crescent encirclement’ of China through its use of military bases, deployment of anti-missile systems, military exercises, and alliances” (27).

The way some Americans direct conspiracy theories inward by professing their suspicion on their own government, media, or corporate elites; all the while the rest of the world frequently positions the United States as the puppet master of international crises is a contrast that highlights how conspiracy culture operates as both an internal and external force. It is a force of shaping perceptions of power, control, and historical agency in different contexts. Although there is this perception of the United States as a central figure in global conspiratorial narratives throughout the world; domestically, conspiracy theories have also long served as mechanisms for interpreting political and social events, often reflecting anxieties about government overreach and hidden agendas. As Jeffrey M. Bale suggests; “conspiracy theories help to make complex patterns of cause and effect in human affairs more comprehensible by means of reductionism and oversimplification” (51).

However, the role and the image of the United States government within the conspiracy culture had not been so sinister always. According to Radek Chlup “[b]efore the 1960s, conspiracy narratives were generally based on scapegoating an exotic Other” (231). Chlup puts forward that as time moved on “there emerged a new type of conspiracy discourse which is no longer about defending our good community against the evil Other but rather about doubting the basic institutions of modern society itself”. This evolving landscape of American conspiracy culture reveals a fundamental shift in its trajectory over time. While early forms of conspiratorial thinking primarily focused on external threats such as immigration or ideological subversion, modern conspiracy narratives have increasingly turned inward. The transition from external paranoia to internal suspicion reflects a growing crisis of trust in governmental institutions. Conspiracy theories increasingly suggest that the country is controlled by hidden elites with their own sinister agendas. This shift represents a deepening mistrust that is no longer directed outward but instead

focuses on the foundational structures of society itself. Over time, the suspicion that once targeted distant, unfamiliar forces has turned inward, reflecting growing unease with the systems that govern everyday life. As a result, the image of the state shifts from guardian to potential deceiver, feeding a cycle of skepticism that can be reflected on both public discourse and private belief. Events such as the Kennedy assassination or the Watergate scandal have reinforced this skepticism. As a result, conspiracy theories no longer solely depict America as the victim of foreign plots but instead abundantly suggest that the country is controlled by hidden elites with their own clandestine agendas. This shift in focus is critical to understanding the historical development of conspiracy culture in the United States. It illustrates how fear of external enemies gradually transformed into a broader sense of domestic disillusionment. Examining this transformation, from the paranoia rooted in Puritan origins to the institutional distrust of the modern era, provides crucial insights into how conspiracy culture has shaped American identity and political discourse.

In this chapter, in order to study how the culture of conspiracy evolved from a culture rooted in a phobia of outsider intervention eventually became much more cynical towards federal governance and its suspicious behavior, I will map out a historical pattern of American conspiratorial thinking and through references to pivotal events how it all came to be more internally speculative, which in many ways hits its peak in the 1990s following the end of the Cold War.

Considering the historical developments that led to today, it is viable to suggest that the culture of conspiracy in the United States has been historically significant. Timothy Melley suggests that “the tendency toward conspiratorial thinking is stronger in America than in Europe because of the former's long-standing populist suspicion of aristocracy and government” (203).

This entrenched skepticism ensured that conspiracy theories are not only occasional reactions to crises but a persistent element of American political culture. In this regard, conspiracy thinking operates not merely as a random eccentricity but rather as a cultural dynamic in the American life that resurfaces across various historical episodes. Conspiracy culture as an overarching paranoid state of mind has always been integral to the political and social life in the country though its essence and patterns have been subject to change during time. Thus, to fully understand this deep-rooted conspiratorial mindset, it is essential to examine its earliest roots in the forming of the country and see how it evolved. Puritan culture, where notions of divine mission, moral absolutism, and existential fear first took shape is quite the initiator to investigate as it is essential in the making of what would become the American culture eventually.

1.1 Puritanism and the Subsequent Salem Witch Trials

A peculiar culture of conspiracy and a rule of paranoia are traceable in the early days of the formation of the colonies, as early as when Puritans were stepping foot on the land. Puritan culture was marked by a strong belief in providence, moral absolutism, and a clear division between good and evil. Puritans believed “they were a ‘peculiar people,’ a company of Christians not only called but chosen, and chosen not only for heaven but as instruments of a sacred historical design” (Bercovitch 7-8) These ideas fostered a kind of skepticism towards external forces and an inclination to see the world as a battleground between divine and demonic forces, an early form of the us vs. them mentality found in many modern conspiracy theories. The Puritans saw themselves as a chosen people, destined to create a “City upon a Hill;” a new, godly society. “A sharp distinction was thus made between ... the Puritans – and the outsiders. For instance, when smallpox spread among the surrounding Native American population, John Winthrop – then Puritan Governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony – hailed it as God’s miracle” (Restad 29). This

interpretation of catastrophe as divine intervention that Restad mentions, demonstrates the Puritans' profound association of outsiders with corruption and threat thus supporting their belief that challenges to their community were both external and existential. This strong sense of mission came with a suspicion of outsiders or any perceived threat to their moral and religious purity. Thus it cast any other to their order as threats. Skepticism and purism were combined to create a mindset in which external forces, whether political, religious, or social, were seen as agents of potential corruption or evil. Yet this self-proclaimed exceptionalism is not left at the past. Restad compares the Puritan exceptionalism to what would later on become an American code and gives an example from the 2000s. "The 'war on terror' was cast by President Bush as a civilizational battle where the United States, as the leader of western civilization, simplistically represented the 'Good' and radical Islam the 'Bad'" (6). This consistency demonstrates how the Puritan practice of conceptualizing politics in clear moral binaries has carried on through the centuries, influencing the rhetoric of American discourse when faced with new difficulties. The early colonial perspective in a way established the language and logic of distrust that would persist in U.S. political culture.

John Winthrop's 1630 sermon, "A Model of Christian Charity," exemplifies this worldview through the metaphor of a "City upon a Hill," which encapsulates the Puritan conviction of being chosen and under constant observation. The concept articulated by Winthrop, provides a framework for understanding the Puritan culture's predisposition toward skepticism, paranoia, and a binary worldview. He warns;

For we must consider that we shall be as a city upon a hill. The eyes of all people are upon us. So that if we shall deal falsely with our God in this work we have undertaken, and so cause him to withdraw his present help from us, we shall be made a story and a

by-word through the world. We shall open the mouths of enemies to speak evil of the ways of God, and all professors for God's sake. We shall shame the faces of many of God's worthy servants, and cause their prayers to be turned into curses upon us till wee be consumed out of the good land whither we are a going.

In these words, Winthrop encapsulates both the Puritans' sense of chosenness and their sense of vulnerability. Through the warning that the eyes of all people are upon them, he imagines the community as perpetually under the scrutiny of outsiders and forever at risk of divine punishment if they failed to uphold their promise. His foundational metaphor reveals both their aspirations and anxieties, which shaped a culture that permits conspiratorial thinking. The initial creation of the idea through the Massachusetts Bay Colony reflects itself to the upcoming mindset and fate of the United States. The metaphor establishes an implicit but inevitable dichotomy: the Puritans as God's chosen people versus the rest of the world, whether they were Native Americans, Catholics, and other European settlers. This mindset has left its mark in the American public for centuries to come with a constant search of an enemy to highlight American supremacy. This underlying dichotomy, stemming from the Puritans' belief in their divine exceptionalism, not only fostered their sense of moral superiority but also heightened their perception of vulnerability, as they constantly viewed external influences as existential threats to their fragile social and political order. As Lauric Henneton states, "[t]he perceived fragility of the whole socio-political edifice betrayed an acute sense of vulnerability which accounts for a number of reactions to 'fear factors' seen as dangerous threats" (25). This sense of vulnerability, as Henneton suggests, led to a heightened reaction against perceived threats, fostering a cultural tendency to interpret external challenges, whether religious, political, or ideological; as existential dangers, thus laying the groundwork for a long-standing tradition of conspiratorial thinking in American society.

One of the earliest cases where the Puritan upholding of a strict moral code and communal purity created an environment of suspicion was the Salem Witch Trials of 1692.

A group of adolescent girls in Salem, Massachusetts, claimed to have been bewitched by certain older women. A hysterical "witch-hunt" ensued, leading to the execution in 1692 of twenty persons... [T]he reign of horror in Salem grew not only from the superstitions of the age but also from the unsettled social and religious conditions of the rapidly evolving Massachusetts village. The episode reflected the widening social stratification of New England as well as the anxieties of many religious traditionalists... (Kennedy et al. 50)

Rooted in a passionate belief in the supernatural and the pernicious threat to their godly community, the trials erupted from a mixture of religious paranoia, social tensions, and personal grievances. The Trials can be considered as one of the first public outcries of conspiracy in the country's early ages, where the fear of unseen forces infiltrating the community led to a collective hysteria and panic. The people that were sentenced in these trials were ostracized and denounced for going against the ideal grain:

The people that were sentenced in these trials were ostracized and denounced for going against the ideal grain The women accused during the witch trials had similarities in that they were each going against their prescribed gender roles within colonial Puritan society, making them vulnerable to accusations of witchcraft... If an individual, especially a woman, brought unwanted conflict between residents through various opinions, that could be reason to label her a witch... (Hughes 23-24)

The trials, therefore, became a medium where broader and deeper societal fears about the collapse of the Puritan social order and the external threats to the public were projected onto people, turning

them into symbols of moral and communal scapegoats. This use and framing of individuals as sacrificial villains to signify underlying tensions could be credited for setting a precedent in American culture for mixing personal deviance with broader existential threats, a pattern that would resurface in various forms throughout the nation's history.

Carol F. Karlsen describes the events as the “the most dramatic episode” in the United States history where the Massachusetts community “went into a paroxysm of accusation and counter-accusation, confession, denial, and death” (xii) The Salem Witch Trials therefore not only underscore the Puritans’ obsession with purity and conformity but also illustrate how deeply entrenched and emotionally motivated fears can manifest as conspiracy and persecution, creating a legacy of suspicion and paranoia that continues to echo in American culture.

1.2 Nineteenth Century and Nativism

As the United States took shape as a country and a society, the us vs. them dichotomy transformed, giving rise to nineteenth century nativism. This movement was marked by hostility toward immigrants, particularly Catholic groups, who were seen as threats to Protestant values, American culture, and economic stability. According to Billington, the English settlers brought with them an intense "fear and hatred of Rome" (1) and their consciousness still carried the remnants of the tensions of the Reformation movement. This tension led to the reinforcing of the enduring conflict between insiders and perceived outsiders in American identity. Between 1840 and 1860, the arrival of over four million Irish and German immigrants, many of whom were Catholic, heightened fears among the predominantly Protestant native-born population. This cultural and religious contrast fueled nativist sentiments and anti-Catholic conspiracies, driven by concerns over political and cultural disruption.

Before the rise of nineteenth-century nativism, however, earlier forms of conspiratorial thought in the United States had already taken shape around race, slavery, and the question of national unity. Especially during the antebellum period and throughout the course of the Civil War, enslaved people and free Black communities were often framed within political discourse as hidden networks conspiring to overturn the social order, while abolitionists themselves were accused of being agents of foreign or religious subversion. These patterns of suspicion and racialized paranoia reveal that conspiracy thinking was not only directed outward at foreign others but also inward at domestic populations whose emancipation or empowerment was perceived as a threat. While these dynamics fall beyond the central scope of this study, they form an essential backdrop to understanding how later forms of American conspiracy culture inherited the same logic of fear, control, and internal division that would resurface in new guises during the twentieth century.

As Luke Ritter puts it; “[c]ertain conspiratorial stories have emerged along with nativist movements during times of panic and have been fueled by opportunistic politicians and public figures (on both sides of the political aisle)” (179). Ritter also suggests that as immigration surged, anti-Catholicism intensified, and it was immensely fueled by conspiratorial narratives. Prominent figures like Samuel Morse, who has gained more fame for the invention of the telegraph, alleged that there was a secret “papal plot” to undermine America through Catholic institutions. These claims gained widespread following despite a lack of evidence (184). These narratives, echoed in popular books such as Morse’s 1835 publication *Foreign Conspiracy Against the Liberties of the U.S.* and provocation of the fears reinforced by media towards Catholic immigrants as a threat to American liberties. A reflection of what was once the Puritan way of positioning the society as one that had to be protected from outside interference, it was now an expansion to non-Catholic

Christian identity in general. However, it is important to note that nativist sentiment in this period was not driven solely by religious conspiracy fears. Economic competition and moral panic also played central roles, as immigrants were portrayed as threats to both labor stability and the moral character of the republic, blending material anxieties with ideological suspicion. Through immigration opposition, the isolation of American society also started as a growing phenomenon. Outsiders were now signifiers of threat to the American public which would grow to become a pattern and manifest itself in conspiracy culture of the United States.

1.3 The Cold War and the Red Scare

As the centuries changed, so did the American society, and with that the idea of who the enemy is. Rather than having an identity sacred to just the Puritans or Protestants, a multicultural American identity slowly made its way to a formation and stood a much firmer and encompassing ground. What had once begun as a narrowly defined moral and religious identity gradually expanded into a broader sense of national identity, shaped by the ideals of liberty, democracy, and individualism. However, the underlying tendency to define an enemy and whether it was based on a notion of spiritual, ideological, or political character remained a persistent pattern, adapting to the changing social and historical context.

An integral turning point in the history of conspiracy culture in the United States came in the middle of the twentieth-century when the fear of communist infiltration during the Cold War led to a nationwide moral panic, where anyone suspected of leftist sympathies was seen as a potential traitor. In many ways, this mirrored Puritan fears of spiritual contamination and reinforced the belief that secret conspirators could undermine the American way of life. According to Ellen Schrecker:

In the crucial early years of the Cold War, as the struggle with the Soviet Union came to dominate American foreign policy, federal officials increasingly came to view domestic Communism as part of a worldwide Soviet conspiracy. Accordingly, communist activities that had previously been opposed for political and ideological reasons now became matters of national security. (155)

This characterization of communism as an existential threat to American life rather than an ideological conceptual conflict allowed the public fears and notions to be framed within official discourse. Thus, the Cold War introduced a new period in American society where there was an emergence of a common enemy; the Soviet Union and the threat of communism. This public and statewide panic was soon to be named the Red Scare.

The Red Scare was one of the most significant moments in United States history that captured the paranoid tendencies embedded in the American culture. Remnant of the sense of terror Puritanism created among its believers, it was not a single event like the Salem Witch Trials nor was it a radical trend of thought like nativism, but it was rather a period of heightened fear of communist influence and Russian espionage that was situated against the United States. The enemy that people had adopted in their daily life, the Soviet Union, would be seen as a direct threat to the sacred American identity and this found evidential support in nationwide response.

Unlike the Salem Trials, while still reflecting on the nativist scare, the enemy had shifted towards an outer source. This national common enemy, within its core, would allegedly be beneficial for the sustainability of America because paranoia and fear helped antagonize an alien source of threat. This externalization of the enemy served to unify the American public under a shared sense of purpose, reinforcing loyalty to the state and the ideals of democracy. As Ritchie Savage notes; “in the very structure of political discourse itself ... there are certain components in

the symbolic constitution of political discourse ... that tend toward the formation of a collective memory or founding moment, as well as the construction of an enemy that disrupts this moment and its historical legacy” (565). Thus, during the Cold War, communism was portrayed as this disruptive force, enabling Americans to perceive themselves as protectors of their foundational beliefs by uniting against a hostile external danger.

However, in a very similar manner to what happened in Salem, the fear created an inward suspicion which would then go on to start a new kind of witch hunt. The idea of gender had been replaced by that of citizenship, as “[t]he experiences of accused men and women during the Salem witch trials depended on part of their gender roles within society, whereas the roles of 1950s men and women were defined by the concept of a loyal citizenship” (Hughes 28). Many citizens were as a result accused of having communist sympathies and views. Governmental reaction to this skepticism was rather instrumental to fuel it more than control it. Institutions like the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) and figures like Senator Joseph McCarthy capitalized on this paranoia, leading to widespread blacklisting and public trials. In this way, the Red Scare demonstrated how the historical patterns of fear and conspiracy in American culture could be a unifying force and a destructive one simultaneously. This movement, with association to the Senator, would go on to be known as McCarthyism. The effects of McCarthyism extended beyond politics, deeply influencing Hollywood, academia, and the broader cultural landscape, as individuals were forced to either conform to the discourse or risk being exiled.

Hollywood was one of the primary targets of McCarthyism, with numerous actors, writers, and directors accused of having communist sympathies, which led to blacklisting and career destruction. As Victor S. Navasky suggests, “the Communists in Hollywood ... and the entertainment industry in general posed the smallest threat to the security of the Republic...yet

yielded the greatest per-capita number of citizen-informers” (69). For example; The Hollywood Ten, a group of screenwriters and directors including Dalton Trumbo and Ring Lardner Jr., were jailed because they refused to testify in front of HUAC. Many film studios in this era enforced blacklists that excluded suspected communists from working. This would also consequently affect popular figures like actor and comedian Charlie Chaplin, who was exiled from the United States due to suspicions on his political affiliation, or director Orson Welles, who was ostracized from the industry.

This developing paranoia and cultural phenomenon of denouncement also manifested itself in politics. Businessman and lobbyist Robert W. Welch Jr. formed the group titled “John Birch Society.” The Society was “a wildly conspiratorial group founded on the belief that there was a communist conspiracy within the government that ‘was much deeper, and far broader than even Joseph McCarthy had imagined’” (Gover 1). The John Birch Society, formed in 1958, quickly gained traction among conservatives who feared that communists had infiltrated every level of American society, including the highest ranks of government. The organization promoted the idea that even prominent and powerful figures such as President Dwight D. Eisenhower were secret communist agents working to undermine the nation from within. This rhetoric echoed and even amplified the paranoia that was introduced to the discourse by McCarthyism, fueling a broader culture of suspicion that extended beyond Hollywood and into mainstream politics. The society’s influence persisted for decades, shaping the rise of modern conservative movements and reinforcing the tendency to view political opponents as existential threats rather than ideological rivals.

It would be justifiable to suggest that this era of suspicion and paranoia were most definitely triggered by the post-war psychosis. As evident with the historical background, there were already

instances of misinformed people believing in unproven conspiracies in the centuries before. However, following World War II, the atmosphere in the country changed drastically. The war created a disillusioned mentality in people, which is evident in not only political instances but also in culture and arts to a great extent. This would go on to reflect itself in a culture of conspiracy to an even higher extent. Dramatically powered by the Cold War and the Red Scare, the latter half of the nineteenth century presents a very paranoid and distrustful American public. In his book, *Political Conspiracies in America: A Reader*, Donald T. Critchlow lists many theories that had sprung from this era of Red Scare:

One of the most common theories to emerge ... was the belief that the United States and its membership in the United Nations was a precursor to America's enslavement in a one-world government by communists or other insidious subversive organizations working behind the scenes. Conspiracists also believed that communists had infiltrated public health facilities to introduce fluoride into the water supply of the United States to weaken the minds and bodies of Americans and thus lessen their resistance to a communist takeover. Other conspiracists of the period believed that communists occupied high-level government positions in order to overthrow the government. (101)

Transcending the idea of communism as a mere ideology, it is evident in these theories that it could become an image of something so sinister by speculation. Clouded by paranoia and distrust, conspiracy culture tends to thrive on the notion that hidden forces are working behind the scenes, manipulating events and controlling society. In the case of the Red Scare, this hidden source was the Soviets and the Communist movement. The notion that there were communists not only among the people and Hollywood but also in the highest positions of the United States

government, shows that conspiracy theorists were inclined to question the trustworthiness of the officials as they deemed them vulnerable to infiltration.

1.4 The Kennedy Assassination and the Civil Rights Movement

One of the most significant moments in United States history to hold a space within conspiracy culture is the Kennedy assassination. Peter Knight puts forward that “[t]he assassination of President Kennedy in Dallas in 1963 has inspired more conspiracy thinking in America than any other event in the twentieth century” (76). The shooting happened on November 22, 1963, when then President John F. Kennedy was fatally shot while riding in a motorcade in Dallas, Texas. This moment led to a wide spreading of conspiracy theories that are still a popular subject of conversation to this date. The Kennedy assassination represents a turning point in conspiracy culture, where distrust of official narratives became deeply ingrained in the American psyche. As Knight once again says; “[f]ollowing the assassination of President Kennedy in 1963... conspiracy theories have become a regular feature of everyday political and cultural life, not so much an occasional outburst of countersubversive invective as part and parcel of many people’s normal way of thinking about who they are and how the world works” (2). Unlike the Red Scare, where paranoia was mostly directed outward toward a foreign ideology, the assassination of John F. Kennedy reflected a new shift inward, with suspicion falling on the nation’s own government and institutions. This transition is a signal of a growing cynicism and a belief that powerful governmental bodies operate in secrecy, often at odds with the public interest. Knight notes among the claims regarding the popularity of conspiracy theories on the Kennedy assassination;

[One] common explanation for the prevalence of conspiracy theories is that the traumatic assassination led to a widespread loss of faith, not just in the goodness of America that Kennedy seemed to represent, but in the legitimacy of the authorities who investigated the

murder. Everything began to go wrong after that moment, the argument runs, and the story of the last four decades is one of increasing willingness to believe the worst about America in general, and the government and official agencies in particular. (78)

Although the official perpetrator of the crime, Lee Harvey Oswald, was linked to the Soviet Union through his relation to the USSR and support for Marxist ideologies, the conspiracy theories surrounding Kennedy's assassination quickly expanded beyond the Cold War narrative and many believed either Oswald did not act alone or was not even the actual assassin and was merely a scapegoat.

As Critchlow puts it, "no other conspiracy theory has occupied the American imagination more. This is strikingly evident in five public opinion polls conducted by Gallup in 1963, 1976, 1983, 1993, and 2003, which have consistently revealed that over half of all Americans believe that Oswald was part of a conspiracy" (103). The assassination also went on to be one of the biggest conspiracies in the history of the United States to occupy space in cultural discourse. It would go on to influence many media products such as the movie *JFK* (1991) or the television series *11.22.63* (2016) adapted from the 2011 novel by Stephen King.

The assassination of John F. Kennedy thus signifies a fracture in the political establishment and a significant pivot in American conspiracy culture, wherein skepticism turned inward and official accounts diminished in trustworthiness. The escalating environment of suspicion extended beyond the death of the President in Dallas in 1963, impacting the broader political landscape of the 1960s and influencing American interpretations of the following conflicts and turmoil. This was particularly visible in the Civil Rights Movement, where concerns of subversion and communist influence converged with struggles for racial justice and federal power.

In the aftermath of the Kennedy assassination, a series of significant events emerged that profoundly influenced the American psyche and intensified the nation's engagement with conspiracy culture. The 1960s as a decade saw immense political and social upheaval, with the Civil Rights Movement standing at the center of national division. The movement, which had been building momentum since the 1950s, was a nationwide struggle against racial segregation, discrimination, and disenfranchisement, particularly in the South. Led by figures such as Martin Luther King Jr., and Malcolm X, the movement consisted of protests, legal challenges, and civil activism to demand equal rights for Black Americans. The assassination of Kennedy, who had already proposed civil rights legislation, added further urgency to the cause, and thus carried on with his successor.

When Kennedy was assassinated in November, his civil rights bill seemed stalled on Capitol Hill. But Lyndon Johnson of Texas, who succeeded Kennedy in the White House, proved to be both a masterful strategist and a dedicated champion of a strong bill. In June 1964, President Johnson signed into law a bill that not only included a job-discrimination title but also authorized creation of a new agency, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC). (Patterson)

After President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act of 1964 to end segregation and discrimination based on race, many celebrated this as a victory for justice; yet, the act also intensified political polarization. Many right-wing conservatives opposed it with a passion, claiming it was an overreach of federal power and an attack on states' rights. This clash between federal authority and that of the states was the most significant since the Civil War, as Southern leaders viewed civil rights legislation as a direct challenge to their sovereignty and way of life. As Juan Tyress Williams suggests:

In 1964 ... opponents of the Civil Rights Act (Act) argued that it was a gross violation of every American's freedom to decide who they wanted to work with, do business with, and even eat with. Southern Democrats, also known as Dixiecrats, portrayed the law as an attack on the "southern way of life" and prime evidence of the federal government's intent to force racial mixing on the South. The idea of a civil rights act stirred old resentments among segregationists.

Dixiecrats, who broke and drifted apart from the Democratic Party during the time in the South, were an example to how Republicans were not alone in this political dissent towards the Civil Rights Act. The unrest and the protest against federal intervention in racial policies were indicators of racial and political polarization were starting to be linked with alignments towards governmental anxiety. In a sense, it is a reflection of anxieties over federal power against individual agency.

In the climate of Cold War paranoia, conspiracy theories emerged as a reflection of the unsettling feelings that framed the Civil Rights Movement as a communist plot designed to destabilize the nation from within. Figures like Martin Luther King Jr. and organizations such as The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and Student National Coordinating Committee (SNCC) were accused of being controlled by communist operatives, reinforcing deep-seated fears of foreign and communist occupation. These ideas were manifested clearly in *The Blue Book of John Birch Society*, a collection of lectures and ideas presented by the founder Robert W. Welch Jr. in December 1958 during the organization's first meeting, which would later become a guidebook for the members and their ideology:

The trouble in our southern states has been fomented almost entirely by the Communists for this purpose. It has been their plan, gradually carried out over a long period with meticulous cunning, to stir up such bitterness between whites and

blacks in the South that small flames of civil disorder would inevitably result. They could then fan and coalesce these little flames into one great conflagration of civil war, in time, if the need arose. (19)

Welch's statement reflects John Birch Society's belief that the Civil Rights Movement was not a genuine fight for equality but a communist plot to incite division and destabilize the nation. By portraying racial unrest as a deliberate strategy orchestrated by foreign influence, Welch fueled conservative opposition to civil rights legislation and figures like Martin Luther King Jr. This paranoia reinforced efforts to discredit civil rights leaders, a narrative that found support within government agencies. The Federal Bureau of Investigation, under J. Edgar Hoover, took an active role in this effort, launching extensive surveillance campaigns against activists in the name of national security.

COINTELPRO, short for Counterintelligence Program, was a covert FBI operation launched in the 1950s and expanded in the 1960s to monitor, infiltrate, and disrupt groups deemed subversive. Originally targeting communists, the program soon focused on civil rights leaders, Black activists, and anti-war movements. Under the direction of J. Edgar Hoover, the FBI used surveillance, psychological warfare, and misinformation to discredit figures like Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, and organizations such as the Black Panther Party. Framed as a national security measure, COINTELPRO sought to weaken movements challenging the status quo by sowing distrust, harassment, and internal division. Peter Knight, in his encyclopedia of *Conspiracy Theories in American History* refers to COINTELPRO as one of the most damaging operations carried out by the Bureau under the presidency of Hoover as it was the most anti-democratic manifestation of its practices and would go on to be a pivotal feature for its reputation.

[I]n its common usage, the term “COINTELPRO” has come to signify the entire context of secret counterrevolutionary action directed against the social-democratic and civil rights movements of the 1960s and 1970s. When activists and congressional investigators exposed the actions of COINTELPRO in the 1970s, it publicly revealed just how closely the FBI resembled a totalitarian political police and sparked the most significant backlash against the Bureau in its history. (185)

Surveillance on people has gone onto become a major part of American conspiratorial scare of the people perpetuated against the federal government and this treatment of civil rights leaders and activists reinforced a growing distrust in bureaucratic institutions. The exposure of COINTELPRO in the 1970s confirmed fears that the government was not only monitoring its citizens but actively working to suppress and control political discourse. This revelation fueled a broader conspiracy culture that saw federal agencies as powerful, secretive forces operating against the interests of the people. The idea that the government could manipulate, discredit, and even physically eliminate individuals it deemed a threat became a lasting theme in American political paranoia, influencing public skepticism toward intelligence agencies and shaping future conspiracy narratives about state surveillance.

Barry Goldwater’s 1964 presidential campaign played a crucial role in legitimizing and mainstreaming the growing paranoia surrounding federal authority and social change within conservative political discourse. Lee Edwards describes Goldwater as "the most consequential loser" and an "ideological presidential candidate" who prepared the way for future conservative leaders. Running on a platform of staunch anti-communism and opposition to civil rights legislation, Goldwater framed federal intervention as an existential threat to individual liberties and states’ rights. His campaign rhetoric, which warned of an overreaching government and the

erosion of traditional American values, resonated with right-wing factions that viewed liberal policies as a conduit for socialist and communist ideologies. The campaign also garnered support from the John Birch Society, further embedding conspiracy-driven narratives about internal subversion and government overreach within conservative ideology. Although Goldwater suffered a decisive electoral defeat to Lyndon B. Johnson, his campaign is credited with the catalyzing of the ideological transformation of the Republican Party, paving the way for the emergence of the modern conservative movement and solidifying the paranoid style as a persistent feature in American right-wing political thought. Edwards suggests that “[h]is 1964 candidacy for president marked the beginning of a tectonic shift in American politics--from East to West, from the cities to the suburbs, from big government to limited government, from containment to liberation, from liberal to conservative--that shapes the nation to this day”. Goldwater’s political style has since also been compared to more prominent figures in politics such as President Donald J. Trump. Richard S. Conley likens the style of the two: “Trump’s style connects emotively to contemporary populists like Barry Goldwater, George Wallace, and H. Ross Perot... Populists often float conspiracy theories onto which their supporters latch and subsequently embellish” (20-21).

The assassinations of Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert Kennedy in 1968 significantly played a role in an already escalating atmosphere of disillusionment and distrust within society. Both assassinations occurred at a time of heightened political tension, reinforcing the belief that powerful forces were silencing leaders who challenged the status quo. Much like JFK, many suspected that King’s assassination was not the act of a lone gunman, James Earl Ray, but rather part of a broader government effort to neutralize the civil rights movement, particularly given the FBI’s infamous long history of surveillance and harassment against him. As documented by National Archives;

Speculation that the FBI--or, more probably, members of that organization, including highly placed Bureau officials--might have had a role in the assassination originated in the early 1970's when the public became aware of COINTELPRO, the Bureau's counterintelligence program that had Dr. King as one of its targets. When, in 1976, the report on the investigation of the Senate Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities was published and the full scope of the attempt by the FBI to discredit Dr. King became recognized, suspicions were widely rekindled.

Similarly, Robert Kennedy's assassination by Sirhan Sirhan was met with widespread skepticism, as Robert Kennedy had emerged as a unifying figure advocating for civil rights and opposing the Vietnam War. The deaths of these two prominent leaders, so soon after the assassination of JFK, deepened public cynicism, further embedding the idea that political assassinations were not random acts, but orchestrated events meant to suppress transformative change. This period solidified a collective suspicion of the government that would carry forward into later decades, fueling new conspiracy theories surrounding political figures and major historical events.

The suddenness and chaotic nature of these tragic events were not merely shocking. These events highlighted their perceived connections to broader political and social tensions. In the public eye, the official narratives regarding these assassinations have failed to adequately address the prevailing skepticism. This has resulted in a proliferation of speculation concerning potential concealed motives and the influence of powerful entities.

1.5 The Rise of Distrust Against the Government

The culmination of this period of skepticism reached its peak following the Watergate scandal during the early 1970s. The disclosure that President Richard Nixon and his administration had engaged in a cover-up related to the break-in at the Democratic National Committee headquarters significantly diminished public confidence in political institutions. In contrast to previous occurrences, Watergate presented tangible proof of corruption and collusion among the upper figures of government, thereby strengthening the perception that political figures functioned under a shroud of secrecy. Loosley suggests that “[b]eyond the White House, other institutions of US government, including the FBI, were compromised. The scandal was indeed a third-rate burglary, but it was a first-rate political fiasco that became an enveloping cultural catastrophe, poisoning the public discourse”. In order to highlight the event’s impact; Loosley mentions how “almost every scandal in a Western democracy since then has had the word gate appended to it shows how the impact of the burglary still resonates”. Following Watergate, President Nixon resigned from office. An event of such magnitude that had the most powerful office in the country be liable was a breaking point. This marked an era of political conspiracies that had no longer been secluded to theories but was finally exposed as realities. The Watergate scandal would also eventually be a common reference point for those who fear governmental surveillance.

The phenomenon of conspiracy culture during this period transcended the political sphere, incorporating elements such as celebrity tragedies, space exploration, and the existence of extraterrestrial life. The unexpected passing of Marilyn Monroe in 1962, which was officially classified as a suicide, has led to persistent theories suggesting foul play. These theories often implicate prominent figures such as John F. Kennedy and Robert Kennedy, with conjecture that her death may have been orchestrated to safeguard political reputations:

Monroe's romantic involvement with John F. Kennedy is well documented, and rumors that she started a relationship with Robert after John "dumped" her on his brother seem entirely plausible. Evidence directly implicating any of the Kennedys in Monroe's alleged murder, however, is scarce. One lone coincidence in favor of this theory is that actor Peter Lawford, who had married Kennedy's sister Patricia Kennedy-Lawford, was the last person to talk to Marilyn before she died. However unsubstantiated, the Kennedy theory remains the most popular among conspiracy enthusiasts. (Knight 499)

In a comparable manner, the moon landing of 1969 stands as a significant milestone for humanity, yet it has also become a central topic of contention, with ideas suggesting that NASA fabricated the event in a Hollywood studio to uphold US supremacy during the Cold War. Concurrently, the concept of extraterrestrial life engaged the public's imagination, particularly as events such as the Roswell UFO incident of 1947 and the enigmatic nature of Area 51 intensified suspicions that governmental entities were withholding information regarding the existence of aliens. Existence of aliens or UFO sightings had already been topics of theories, yet what would classify them as potential agents of conspiracy was surrounding the suspicious government activity around them:

[T]he first mass sighting of UFOs in the United States took place between November 1896 and May 1897. Described as "airships" by the people who witnessed them, these early UFOs were usually characterized as silent with white and colored lights, and, like modern UFOs, were said sometimes to land and, rarely, to carry occupants. ... There was no sense that the government had any additional information about the phenomenon or that facts were being withheld from the

public—the idea that there is a government conspiracy to hide the truth about UFOs did not emerge until the twentieth century. (Knight 699)

The dissemination of these theories within popular culture is evident in various mediums such as literature, cinema, and television, which serve to obscure the distinction between reality and fabrication. Films such as *Capricorn One* (1977), *Independence Day* (1996) or *Men in Black* (1997) illustrate how conspiracy theories surrounding extraterrestrial life and government secrecy are continuously reinvented in popular culture. For example, *Men in Black*, the popular conspiracy theory, is based on long speculations of people who witnessed mysterious men in dark suits visiting people's homes and to make sure they do not remember their interactions with extraterrestrial life. The movie *Men in Black*, humorously takes on the idea yet showcases that theories shared and spread by a smaller group were making their way into popular culture. This phenomenon mirrors an increasing societal inclination to scrutinize official narratives and pursue concealed truths.

1.6 Technology and Science in the Twentieth Century

Concerns regarding automation and the replacement of human labor, skepticism about the opacity of government research projects, and anxiety over the unpredictable impacts of rapid innovation illustrated the variety of reactions to technological advancement. These worries intensified throughout the Cold War, as the United States and the Soviet Union engaged in continuous pursuits for technological dominance. The rivalry transcended ideological conflict to include surveillance technology and scientific prestige, most prominently illustrated by the space race. The subsequent competitive atmosphere evoked both appreciation for human creativity and concern regarding the dangers of unregulated advancement.

Even the surge of UFO sightings in the 1940s and 1950s became entangled in Cold War anxieties, with many believing these unidentified crafts were not visitors from other planets but

Soviet surveillance devices or secret US military experiments. Greg Eghigian explains this in the following way:

Because the true nature of unidentified flying objects—in fact, even their very existence—remained an open question, UFOs functioned as a blank canvas onto which observers projected their decidedly earthbound desires and hopes as well as their anxieties and resentments. UFOs did not invite just any random set of aspirations and fears, however. ...[T]he UFO presented a way for people to weigh and forecast the promise and pitfalls of modern technoscience, to see in alien achievements versions of our own potential futures. (10)

The Cold War technological race was not confined to rockets and nuclear weapons; it extended into human experimentation, fueling deep fears about government overreach and secrecy. One of the most controversial programs was Operation Paperclip, carried between 1945 to 1959, in which the United States secretly recruited former Nazi scientists, including those who had conducted inhumane experiments in concentration camps, to work on American aerospace, medical, and psychological research. According to Peter Knight;

[t]he mid-1970s saw the first legislative investigations into the matter, partly due to a growing awareness that the last survivors of the Holocaust and slave labor would die soon. A subcommittee of the House Judiciary Committee under the leadership of Joshua Eilberg (D-PA) held hearings in 1977 and 1978. Its members concluded that government agencies had been more concerned about Communist propaganda than bringing these criminals to justice. (561)

While the operation was publicly framed as a necessity to keep Nazi expertise from falling into Soviet hands, in many eyes it confirmed suspicions that the US government was willing to

overlook atrocities and war crimes for the sake of scientific and military advantage. Operation Paperclip found itself represented and referenced in popular culture in the following decades with the most prominent example being its inclusion within the plot of *The X-Files*. This sense of moral compromise only deepened with the revelation of MKUltra, a covert mind-control program carried out by the Central Intelligence Agency between from 1953 to 1973. “The most notorious feature of MK-ULTRA, and the feature that is most commonly associated with it, is the testing of LSD in CIA-rented apartments in New York and San Francisco as part of Operation Midnight Climax, which formed the final phase of the program” (Knight 491). When these experiments were exposed in the 1970s, they validated long-held fears that the government was not just capable of unethical human experimentation, but had actively pursued it in the name of national security. Knight suggests that the concept of MK-ULTRA is “beloved by conspiracy theorists because it provides documented evidence to support claims that the U.S. government is involved in secret and hostile operations against its own citizens” (490). Much like the FBI was tainted and identified by conspiracy theories, the CIA was also now an institution that was seen with deep mistrust.

The revelations of unethical government experimentation in the 1970s were only the beginning of a larger reckoning with the extent of federal overreach, particularly in the realm of surveillance and covert operations. The Church Committee, a US Senate committee led by Senator Frank Church in 1975, uncovered widespread abuses by intelligence agencies, exposing decades of secret FBI and CIA activities aimed at controlling, infiltrating, and sabotaging political dissidents. Among its findings, the committee revealed that intelligence agencies had engaged in illegal wiretapping, blackmail, and psychological warfare against civil rights leaders, anti-war activists, and even elected officials. The exposure of COINTELPRO, the FBI operation that spied on figures of Civil Rights Movements, and CIA programs such as Operation CHAOS, which

targeted domestic protest movements, reinforced the growing public belief that the government was not only watching its own citizens but actively working to suppress them. Christopher Andrew suggests that “the harshest criticisms in the Church committee’s final report concerned FBI rather than CIA operations” (421). The report proved the long-held belief that the FBI had intentions to take down Martin Luther King Jr. These revelations legitimized fears that had long been dismissed as paranoia, cementing the intelligence agencies as primary antagonists in the growing landscape of conspiracy culture.

These revelations of violation of human rights for the sake of scientific progress blurred the line between science fiction and reality, reinforcing the idea that shadowy institutions were conducting dangerous, unchecked research. Furthermore, these institutions were not independent, in fact they were governmental bodies. This would create an anxiety and technophobia that would later manifest in countless conspiracy theories. These theories would include how chemtrails of planes were used as chemical weapons to manipulate people. Another theory would be the existence of mass surveillance through devices in people’s homes like computer cameras or telephones. Furthermore, use of television and media to use mind control and hypnosis through alleged uses of subliminal messages and techniques such as the 25th frame to alter people’s subconscious were heavily theorized.

As the revelations of government overreach, surveillance, and experimentation accumulated throughout the latter half of the twentieth century, the growing distrust in federal institutions morphed into a broader, more coherent fear of an all-powerful state with technology as a tool of control. The paranoia that had once been fragmented across different conspiracy theories of unique incidents slowly began to merge into a larger narrative. In people’s eyes the government itself was the ultimate force behind these sinister activities. Conspiracy theories were no longer solely about

individual events; but they were increasingly tied to a systemic suspicion of institutional power. This transition would become even more pronounced in the 1990s, as technological advancements expanded the government's perceived reach and influence into the everyday lives of citizens. This sense of unease that every advancement in communication technology could also be a tool for government oversight would only deepen in the decades that followed, giving rise to modern anxieties about digital tracking, data mining, and artificial intelligence-driven surveillance.

1.7 The End of the Cold War and the 1990s

A pivotal turning point in conspiracy thinking came with the 1990s. This decade firstly marks the beginning of public interaction with the internet. Now able to communicate easier and quicker, people started to form online communities to discuss these conspiracy theories. What was once a peculiar idea adopted by certain groups, now could be spread much easier. The internet also is a very prominent actor in the spreading of disinformation regardless of the intention behind it which is a major characteristic of conspiracy thinking. It embarked on a new era of thinking with a political and cultural climate in which emotions and personal beliefs are more influential than objective facts and evidence in shaping public opinion and decision making. The introduction of the internet fundamentally changed the way information was consumed, discussed, and disseminated, amplifying both the speed and reach of conspiracy culture. In a way, information was now never like it was before in its way of distribution. What had previously been isolated discussions in underground publications or niche radio programs could now be shared instantly across online forums, allowing conspiracy theories to spread and mutate at an unprecedented rate. This era gave chance for the emergence of early internet communities dedicated to uncovering hidden truths, fueling the belief that the government was monitoring, manipulating, and even fabricating events to maintain control. Birchall and Knight puts forward the following deduction:

The structure of the internet ... seems to encourage a conspiracy theory mindset, or at the very least it makes it easy to construct websites that link together snippets of evidence and factoids into a grand theory of everything. This argument also suggests that the internet does not just make conspiracy theorizing easier to produce and consume; it changes the form of conspiracy theories, encouraging the creation of ever more baroque theories that claim to tie everything together into a single, overarching master narrative.

(586)

In addition to showcasing big technological innovations, this decade also started with the dissolution and the collapse of the Soviet Union. As mentioned earlier, one of the subjects of conspiracy thinking in the United States was the Red Scare, the fear of communist invasion. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, the biggest rival of the US, the very few conspiracies and fears regarding an external threat to the country were now out of the picture. Many considered this moment to be a historical milestone for the entire world.

In a 1992 book by Francis Fukuyama titled *The End of History and the Last Man*, it is suggested that with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, liberal democracy had triumphed as the ultimate form of government. Fukuyama suggests that humanity has reached the “end of history” in the sense that the great ideological battles of the twentieth century, which are “fascism vs. democracy” or “communism vs. capitalism,” has been resolved. Liberal democracy and free-market capitalism were now the final, universal political systems. This would suggest that, without the existence of a big enemy, the United States had also triumphed as a unipolar powerhouse. Without a counterpart to be juxtapositioned with, there emerged a lack of “the other.” The dichotomy that had once been introduced with the Puritans, the us vs. them had

vanished. What was once the witches, then the Catholics and then the Communists had finally been in a way “defeated.”

However, Fukuyama’s idea of the “end of history” did not mean that conflict or paranoia would vanish. In fact, the collapse of the Soviet Union did not put an end to conspiracy thinking in the United States. While the Red Scare and fear of communist infiltration faded as tangible threats, new enemies and conspiratorial narratives quickly emerged. Thus began a new period where “the other,” the new “them,” the enemy became the state. With traces of what had already been brewing, the distrust for official institutions would reach a new peak. Once fueled by Watergate and the public perception of the uncertainty of the Kennedy assassination, the government in a way had the chance to emerge as a sole conspirator. The United States was now left with not many serious threats or rivals, and this boosted the conspiracy thinking to gravitate towards theories and paranoia regarding internal corruption even more.

Fukuyama’s initial theory would go on to be challenged by the likes of Samuel P. Huntington in his work *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* which challenges his thesis by rejecting the idea that liberal democracy and capitalism represent the final and universal form of human governance. Fukuyama argues that ideological conflicts have concluded with the triumph of Western liberalism, suggesting a harmonious global political future. In contrast, Huntington says that future conflicts will center on cultural and civilizational divisions, not ideology. He emphasizes that immense differences in religion, history, and cultural values will evolve into sources of conflict, predicting that the world will divide into competing civilizations rather than converge under a unified liberal-democratic order that Francis Fukuyama suggests.

In one way, the 1990s were a decade that was more available for Fukuyama’s theory to seem reasonable. He was not the sole advocate for the idea. Charles Krauthammer, in an article for

Foreign Affairs once suggested that: “the immediate post-Cold War world is not multipolar. It is unipolar. The center of world power is the unchallenged superpower, the United States, attended by its Western allies” (23). The American cultural, economic and political hegemony was believed by many to be unchallenged. However, Huntington’s theory would come into play when the millennium would turn around. The biggest turning point in this era would be without a doubt the September 11 attacks. “On September 11, 2001, terrorists linked to the Islamic extremist group al Qaeda—founded by Osama bin Laden—hijacked four commercial passenger airplanes and carried out suicide attacks against targets in the United States” (History.com). The incident, also known shortly as “9/11”, started the “war on terror” and offered the American public a new enemy: terror. This was a new period where culturally rooted conflicts and civilizational divisions took center stage, as Huntington had predicted. The September 11 attacks not only highlighted the growing tensions between the Western and Islamic civilizations but also reinforced the idea that ideological conflicts were being fueled by deeper cultural and religious gaps. The September 11 attacks themselves have also become a focal point for conspiracy theories, further complicating the discourse on civilizational conflict. While the dominant narrative framed the attacks as an act of terrorism orchestrated by al-Qaeda, alternative theories emerged, suggesting that the US government had prior knowledge or even facilitated the attacks to justify military interventions in the Middle East. As Fenster suggests;

Most 9/11 conspiracy theorists agree that both the World Trade Center and Pentagon attacks succeeded because high level executive branch and military officials ordered military defense operations and civilian air authorities to stand down; and/or because the military was unable to respond in a timely fashion or was confused by a series of war games that had been strategically scheduled for that morning as a distraction. (123)

This growing landscape of conspiracy theories surrounding the September 11 attacks are signs of a broader transformation in American conspiratorial thinking. While previous decades had largely fixated on external enemies, the post-9/11 era saw a shift inward, with the US government itself increasingly cast as a malevolent force. Kathryn S. Olmsted argues “that American conspiracy theories underwent a fundamental transformation in the twentieth century. No longer were conspiracy theorists chiefly concerned that alien forces were plotting to capture the federal government; instead, they proposed that the federal government itself was the conspirator” (4). As the war on terror unfolded and state power expanded through surveillance programs and military interventions, distrust in government institutions surged, solidifying their place as central antagonists in modern conspiracy culture.

Thus, the 1990s were an interesting decade. Situated between two very and deeply different wars, the decade had a unique mindset. Therefore, without the them as a threat to the public, the conspiracy theories would have to ease down. However, it had become a force of culture that was only getting stronger. This led to new antagonists in these theories. With suspicion and skepticism already reaching peaks in the prior years, the government and its institutions were becoming the most popular agents in conspiracy theories. Although this growing disturbance regarding governmental agency would manifest itself more outspokenly in the 2000s following the September 11 attacks, this behavioral change can be dated to the 1990s as the culture was taking a shape to offer a fertile ground to these theories.

Many revelations of prior incidents that occurred in the twentieth century had created a base for governmental suspicion, yet with the existence of the Cold War, people also had a tangible enemy to be concerned with. Hence, many conspiratorial sensations were linked to the Soviet Union. UFO sightings were theorized to be Soviet technology that was aiming to surveil and

infiltrate American people, the unease regarding civil rights movement and the treatment of its leaders by governmental bodies were excused with the fear of communist suspicions, even the suspicious assassination of John F. Kennedy was theorized to be a Russian conspiracy to create discord. Yet the end of the Soviet Union would leave a blank space for the public to fill with a new powerful actor since many answers still did not satisfy the questions of the public.

Federal governmental suspicion and paranoia, as exemplified earlier, were hardly new for the public. In fact, it can be compared to the Civil War. Just as the Civil War era had created deep divisions and a sense of distrust toward centralized power, the late twentieth century saw a similar dynamic emerge. Only this time, the distrust was not directed at a regional adversary but at the very institutions meant to protect and govern. During the Civil War, Americans saw federal overreach in the form of military drafts, suspension of habeas corpus, and increased government control over states, all of which fueled conspiracy thinking about tyranny and oppression and resulted in uproar. In the post-Cold War world, these fears reemerged with a new focus: government secrecy, technological surveillance, and elite control.

Thus, by the dawn of the twenty-first century, the seeds of a new kind of conspiracy culture had been firmly planted. No longer tethered to Cold War fears of foreign infiltration, the dominant narrative had become domestic control, with the government itself increasingly viewed as an authoritarian force using technology to manipulate and monitor its own people. Throughout the 1990s, many events that took place such as the Waco siege in 1993 and the Oklahoma City bombing in 1995, or the controversial presidential reign of Bill Clinton fueled this growing contempt against the federal government.

Naturally, this period of federal suspicions would reflect itself in the cultural products of the era. One of, if not, the most influential one was the television series *The X-Files* created by Chris

Carter in 1993. The series which aired throughout a big portion of the decade and continued into early 2000s, having two movie spin-offs and a two-season reboot in the 2010s, can be quite beneficial to understanding 1990s and the conspiratorial mentality. Following two FBI agents, Fox Mulder and Dana Scully who would work on unexplainable and unsolved cases, *The X-Files* by the time of progress would find its lead characters entangled in a bigger conspiracy run by the Bureau and the government. Olmsted suggests that *The X-Files*

reflected the anxieties of the 1990s: the government is a conspiracy; Americans think they can uncover this conspiracy; the plotters always foil them. Self-consciously post-Dallas, post-Watergate, post-Iran-contra, and post-cold war, *The X-Files* combined the Kennedy assassination, Nixon's White House horrors, Tuskegee, Ruby Ridge, Waco, and Roswell into one gigantic government plot against the people. (203)

Garnering intense fan following and popularity, the show would be essential in voicing the growing mistrust in governmental bodies and how it would manifest itself in different conspiracy theories, thus being an essential vehicle in analyzing the societal behavior of the decade.

By the end of the twentieth century, American conspiracy culture had transitioned significantly from external concerns such as communism to suspicions focused on the state itself. This introspective shift, propelled by events from assassinations of public figures to Watergate, conditioned the public to perceive governmental secrecy and monitoring as the primary threats. The cultural texts of the 1990s encapsulated these worries, with *The X-Files* exemplifying this by combining decades of entrenched fears into a singular story of concealed conspiracies and elusive narratives. The series offers an essential perspective for comprehending the popularization and reconfiguration of conspiracy thinking in the post-Cold War period, allowing it to be an appropriate foundation for the following chapter.

CHAPTER II: *THE X-FILES* AND THE CONSPIRACY CULTURE OF THE 1990's

The 1990s in the United States of America were characterized by a very tense and peculiar atmosphere. Although the recent conclusion of the Cold War would suggest a time for the dust to settle, and in terms of international affairs it largely did so, a different kind of tension and unrest was brewing within the domestic front. Anxieties of an outward alien source of power interfering and threatening the lives of people had pivoted to inward sources. Thus, the paranoid conspiracy culture that was intertwined in American society in the previous decades was inherited with some evolutions. In this time of unease, TV series *The X-Files* emerged as not only a product of television but rather a cultural phenomenon reflecting the paranoid mindset of the decade. The series' impact and the cultural place it holds has been long voiced by many. Catherine Johnson labels the series "as a 'unique' programme in television broadcasting, in part because of its fan followings and cult status" (57).

Throughout the 1990s, various events and socio-political developments gave opportunity for the governmental suspicion to manifest itself. From domestic military operations that were deemed extreme by the public such as the Waco Siege in 1993, to the infamous Oklahoma City bombing in 1995; many tension-filled occasions gave way for the atmosphere to reveal conspiracy culture products. Thus, *The X-Files* did not emerge out of nowhere. It instead existed in the context of these anxieties. The success of the series and the space it holds in the cultural discourse is in a way owed to this. The recurring themes of governmental mistrust, the alien conspiracy, and the ambiguous elements of dealing with the truth allowed the series to reflect a relationship the public had developed with power. Thus, the protagonists, Fox Mulder and Dana Scully served as spokespeople for the American public and their skepticism.

In this chapter, I will be looking into the impact of *The X-Files*, with a deep dive on the series' thematic explorations, characteristic analysis and the conspiracy culture embedded within the run of the series. I will then re-evaluate my analysis of the series to pull comparisons to real life conspiracy theories and scandals from the 1990s to further prove the place the series has on the conspiratorial tendencies of the era.

2.1 *The X-Files* and The X-Philes

The X-Files, which came into being in an era of television's booming age, emerged as one of the most defining series of the 1990s. The series has been considered trailblazing in numerous ways. As it introduced a unique blend of genres like science fiction, horror, and conspiracy thriller; the series also revolutionized mainstream storytelling by using a mixture of episodic structures and an overarching mythology arc. This, along with a critically acclaimed storytelling aspect, helped the series to gain a devoted audience whose likes had rarely been seen. "The show's peak popularity in the mid-to-late '90s coincided with the proliferating use of the internet, where fans ... gathered to debate theories and behind-the-scenes gossip, while posting fanfiction, fan art and more." (Marya) Transcending the conventional behavior of loyal watchers of television shows, the fans and many who appreciated the series considered it to be a cultural phenomenon. The fandom of the series would eventually but not officially be known as Philedom and its members; the X-Philes. The name was self chosen by the fans "as a result of an informal poll conducted Spring 94 ... fans of the *The X Files* [chose] (with a 73% approval rating) to be called X-Philes" (Fanlore).

As the internet became more accessible in the mid-1990s, the X-Philes were among the first to utilize this new medium to connect and share their passion, becoming pioneers themselves in the habit of television watching. The show's alignment with the rise of the internet allowed fans to pioneer new forms of engagement, creativity, and community-building, solidifying its status as

a cultural phenomenon of the 1990s. These forms of engagement included formation of online communities, fanfiction writing and the concept of shipping which originated within the fan community of the show. These practices later on became inherently essential to fan culture.

The fans met under the same digital roof in Usenet newsgroups, such as alt.tv.x-files, to discuss episodes, theories, and feelings. These forums facilitated real time conversations, allowing fans worldwide to engage in in-depth analyses and debates. The creative energy of the fandom led to the practice of fan fiction, with enthusiasts crafting their own stories about Fox Mulder, Dana Scully, and other characters. To organize and archive these works, fans established the Gossamer Project in 1995. During the late 1990s, the Gossamer Project stood as one of the most comprehensive online platforms dedicated to a single media fandom, serving as a central hub for *The X-Files* fan fiction to be gathered. It maintained its status as the largest archive of its kind until the early 2000s. Another phenomenon introduced by the X-Files was “shipping.” Caroline Darney describes it as “[t]he phenomenon of wanting two -- sometimes fictional, sometimes real life -- people to stop the will-they-won't-they rigamarole and just get together already.” Darney then moves on to credit the X-Files fandom member and fan fiction writer Amy Schatz with the earliest documented usage of the word by introducing her work with a note that said: “I think that everyone, both R'shipper's and Non R'shipper's alike, can enjoy this story.” Fan blogs, fan fictions and the practice of shipping would go on to become integral part of media consumption in the twenty-first century. However, the introduction of these phenomena in the 1990s, when online culture was allowing spaces to unite fans all around the world for the first time, allowed the series to showcase its permanent impact.

The X-Files’ permanence in internet archives, fan communities, and digital footprint highlights not only the depth of its following but also the breadth of its cultural influence. The

series' basic involvement in forming participatory fan culture is demonstrative in the fact that fan-generated content ranging from fan fiction to forums and blogs. Beyond a successful TV series, *The X-Files* became an early model for how digital platforms may stretch an interactive universe beyond its screen time, hence enabling fans to co-author, reinterpret, and immortalize it. This longevity in digital spaces confirms that *The X-Files* was not only a product of its period but also a driver for changing how people interact with media in the internet era.

2.2 Themes of *The X-Files*

While the series' pioneering fan culture and the use of innovative storytelling allowed it to stay relevant to a great extent, its exploration of dark and unsettling themes such as aliens, government secrecy and unreliability of authority figures, government surveillance, blurred lines between truth and belief, and of course conspiracy theories allowed it to create more engagement than anything else. These themes allowed *The X-Files* to resonate with and reflect the cultural trends of the 1990s, creating a bond between the audience and the fiction through relativity.

The series relies on the backstory of Fox Mulder and how his "obsession" with aliens is related back to the abduction/disappearance of his sister Samantha. While many episodic storylines also deal with extraterrestrial life; the overarching mythology arc also is based on Mulder's motivation to prove the existence of aliens and thus prove that his sister was also abducted and hereby allowing him to find a path to reuniting with Samantha. The fate of Samantha is never fully determined; however, one thing that is clear is that Mulder never truly reunites with his sister. In episode sixteen of season two titled "Colony," Mulder briefly is made to believe that Samantha has returned to him. However, it is revealed that who he meets is one of the many clones of Samantha; whose existence further complicates the division between truth and fallacy. Throughout the series, Mulder's backstory gets intricately intertwined more into the broad arc as Mulder's

search for his sister becomes emblematic of a larger cultural anxiety in the series which is the fear that knowledge is unreliably controlled. Through obscure clues and messages, Mulder seeks the truth yet he rarely truly reaches it. Beyond his individual quest it is revealed that there actually is a conspiracy that revolves around a certain agenda agreed upon by the aliens and the government. Aliens therefore are not the actual antagonists or even the topic of discussion in the show. It is what the idea of this conspiracy represents. Instead of a science fiction approach to the creature itself, *The X-Files* presents a web of conspiracies where the humans are still the agents of chaos. Through exploration of corrupt deals and human experiments, the series provokes distrust and unease to a great extent. At first glance, the idea of aliens by definition is an external trigger of anxiety, yet through the conspiracy and the bodies system, the line between external and internal is indistinguishable. Aliens and UFOs become symbolic enemies that only highlight the real enemy; the forces within the power structures. Thus, the alien theme is less about their source planets, their motivation on earth and how these creatures function; and more about realistic forces that operate against society.

Starting in the very first episode, Mulder and Scully's attempts at revealing the truth are halted and hardened by unnamed forces within the Federal Bureau of Investigation. These forces, albeit with great obscurity to whether it is for the good or not, work against them from within the institution that they work for. With few exceptions, these actors are not named, and they are presented more as shadowy figures and obstacles on the path of our protagonists. The series characterizes them as active participants in a corrupt systematic effort to conceal knowledge and manipulate public perception. This results in the reflection of a deep-rooted skepticism toward traditional institutions of power. The FBI, or other government agencies and bodies, have rarely been exempt from being a part of conspiratorial questioning. The exploration of the theme of

government secrecy and unreliable authority figures who work towards concealment of the truth makes way for the idea that the problem is not individual or exceptional, but is rather institutional and systemic. The moral lines are also blurred to a great extent as the audience is subtly presented with the idea that what these people are concealing is for the good of the public. They are representing a sort of committee that is situated to decide what is best for the people since they are wiser than most. This committee embodies the idea of elites in a sense. As decision makers of what information the public is deemed worth of learning, they also preserve a sort of moral high ground. Therefore, attempts of Mulder and Scully to reveal the truth become more and more like the myth of Sisyphus who had to roll the stone again and again with no success as they uncover one truth only for it to create deeper layers of question and deception. Their struggles are the embodiment of societal frustration.

Another theme *The X-Files* engages with is the pervasive fear of government surveillance. A common anxiety among the public, especially following COINTELPRO hearings and the Watergate scandal, government surveillance was a symbolic practice the series had made use of to heighten the discontent and fear of the audience. The series portrays its protagonists to always be two steps behind because many times Scully and Mulder are under constant pervasive observation. This is fueled by the fact that the duo is a part of the organism that they are fighting against and thus always unable to escape higher power. To demonstrate this terror, the series presents a world where no conversation is truly private, no movement of the characters go unnoticed and no attempts of rebellion are undermined. From the beginning, Mulder and Scully find themselves monitored via their offices, their phones and even their homes. Unlike the alien theme, the invasion of their privacy is much more effective on the audience as it reveals true anxieties regarding government surveillance on civilians. Surveillance is not merely a method of intelligence

gathering, but is also an instrument of control and intimidation. Their allies are targeted; such as Deep Throat who ends up being killed; suggesting that no individual is free of oversight and breach of the rules can always be a threat to one's life. Surveillance in a way is omnipresent and it functions as a way to isolate Mulder and Scully from their goals as they are not possessive of agency of the truth since they cannot spread it freely. In many ways this makes the search for truth not only a fight against disinformation, but also a fight against the visibility and spread of that truth.

Finally, the most prominent theme in *The X-Files* is the concept of “truth.” Main driving force of the series is the discovering of truth, yet it becomes more of an obscure concept and an unattainable ideal. It is part of many dichotomies as “truth vs. lies,” “truth vs. conspiracy,” “truth vs power” and most crucially “truth vs. belief.” It is something deliberately obscure in layers of lies and deceit. Many episodes deal with the ambiguity of human experience. Among the most interesting examples of this is season three episode twenty; “José Chung’s From Outer Space,” a metafictional story that purposefully undermines the concept of objective reality. The episode features several different accounts of the same alien abduction, each more bizarre and contradictory than the last. Framed by a novelist trying to piece together the incident, the narrative reveals such fragmented and untrustworthy viewpoints that no clear version of events can be created. Even the protagonists are seen acting more and more out of character as their behavior is quite eccentric. This episode in many ways captures the core worry of *The X-Files*: that the truth could be in addition to being concealed, fundamentally unknowable, depending on memory, belief, and narrative frame distortion. The series thus suggests that the quest for truth is not only broken by outside interference but also by the constraints of human perception and the volatility of meaning itself. Throughout the series, Mulder and Scully often discover that the facts they had

revealed were also curated versions of reality they were made to believe were real. Knight comments on this aspect of the series:

[E]verything turns out not to be the final discovery but possible evidence of deliberately planted false trails, and hence clues to something much larger. No answer is ever final; no truth sacred; no interpretation set in cement. Even the X-Files themselves have been closed and reopened, burnt to oblivion, resurrected, closed down again--and reopened once more in the sixth series after the Syndicate seems to have been destroyed. (223)

Thus, both the duo and the audience are forced to question whether the truth even is possible to reveal. The boundary between conspiracy and truth is so unstable that the more they uncover, the more it becomes evident that conspiratorial explanations are what they will always find. Truth is also juxtaposed against the forces of power as it is suggested that those who hold it have the ability to suppress the truth and furthermore, an ability to produce their own version. Yet the most central dichotomy the series presents is that of truth and belief. Mulder's relentless pursuit of the unknown is fueled by evidence sometimes, yet not as much as a need to believe which often overshadows tangible evidence. Scully's skepticism on the contrary is a counterbalance to his belief as she is an anchor of reason. The tension of truth and belief or skepticism and faith become very visible with the characterizations of the two. It is also a tension that relies at the heart of the series as it carries two iconic taglines: "The Truth Is Out There" and "I Want to Believe."

Although the series has the infamous main tagline "Truth Is Out There" at the end of the opening sequence of each episode, while occasionally alternating it with some variations like "Trust No One" or "Deny Everything;" the infamous "I Want to Believe" poster that is hung on the wall of protagonist Fox Mulder's office arguably became an even more synonymous motto with the show. "The Truth Is Out There" in a way suggests an objective and tangible truth does

exist and it awaits to be uncovered regardless of any barriers or manipulations. However, with the series' recurring pattern of the protagonists being met with deceit and manipulation, this motto becomes ironic to an extent. In contrast, "I Want to Believe" poster reveals a personal and emotional motivation with a deeper dimension. As Peter Knight has noted; the phrase expresses Mulder's atavistic yearning for something that lies beyond the logical boundaries and even beyond the reach of conspiracies he is seeking to expose (217).

Ultimately, *The X-Files* relies heavily on not a mathematical equation of questions and answers, but on ambiguity and elusive storytelling. Although it does capture certain anxieties of the 1990s, it also captures its audience by making use of certain themes and embodying those themes in fleshed out characters.

2.3 Characterization in *The X-Files*

While use of themes and a highly engaging fan culture were essential to its success, *The X-Files* made great use of its characters and their ability to resonate with the audience to a great extent. Whether it is the main duo Scully and Mulder, or the morally ambiguous antagonists Krycek and Cigarette Smoking Man, or even the ally characters Walter Skinner and the Lone Gunmen; each character managed to embody different assets and struggles.

As mentioned earlier, the series relies much of its mythology arc on the backstory of Fox Mulder. Although Mulder is known to be a brilliant FBI agent, he is also a marginalized one who is pushed to the bottom floor of the Bureau both literally and figuratively. Specializing in the study of certain cases that have been deemed "unexplained" and labeled "X Files," Mulder is doing the work that many of his other colleagues would feel discomfort and belittlement with. This is further revealed by the nickname given to him by the other agents: "Spooky Mulder." Rather than being celebrated for his past success as a profiler or even his dedication as an investigator to the X files,

he is a figure whose insights are acknowledged as not credible as he remains undermined. His outsider status within the inside of the Bureau is extremely crucial to his characterization. It not only fleshes out his relationship to the authority and his deep skepticism towards it; but also aligns him with themes like isolation, resistance and persistence, thereby making him a character the audience feels obligated to root for.

As evident in the poster in his office and in all his actions, his belief system is an essential part of his character that is deeply intertwined in personal trauma. The abduction of his sister when he was a child becomes the emotional core and fuel of his life and work. This shapes Mulder's entire personality and his relentless pursuit of the truth. For Mulder, the search for extraterrestrial life and the exposure of the government conspiracies are not basic professional endeavors or ambitions; but they are part of the hope he has of making sense of that essential event in his life. As a result, Mulder very often prioritizes emotional intuitions and instinct over logic and conventional methods of investigation. Mulder's need to believe transcends reasoning because it is motivated by a wanting. In high contrast to the work he does or the institutional norms demanded of him, his approach is to an extent unconventional. This tension between believing and knowing defines both Fox Mulder, and the broader thematic atmosphere of *The X-Files*.

What further complicates Mulder's motivations and reinforces his emotional way of thinking are his familial relationships. His yearning for an answer to his sister Samantha remains at the center of the emotional aspect of the series. However, his relationships with his parents are marked by distance, secrecy and betrayal. As the series progresses, it is revealed that both of his parents may have had ambiguous roles in the larger conspiracy arc of it all. The relationship that he has with his father, Bill Mulder, is characterized by a lack of warmth and honesty. Over the course of the series, it comes to light that Bill Mulder was a former member of the shadowy group Syndicate

which orchestrates the main conspiracy arc of the series. It is possible that he was even directly involved in the decision-making process behind Samantha's kidnapping, and furthermore he may have given his consent to the abduction. His mother Teena, on the other hand, while also revealed to have been compromised in the role she played in her daughter's abduction, plays even more of a sensational role. It is revealed in the season seven episode two "The Sixth Extinction II: Amor Fati" that Mulder's father is in fact not Bill but actually Cigarette Smoking Man and Teena had an affair with him in the past. These revelations deepen Mulder's sense of isolation and unease. Mulder's personal history thus becomes inseparable from the broader narrative arc of the series, thus making him intertwined with the web of conspiracy by blood. Mulder is not only investigating the systemic lies but also personal ones told to him by his parents. Through this, his pursuit of the truth is rooted in the unresolved pain caused by his family and this haunting over him allows the audience to make sense of his motivation furthermore.

Beyond the narrative framework of the series itself, Fox Mulder emerged as an iconic figure in the 1990s popular culture through his embodiment of a specific cultural ambiance shaped by skepticism. He was more than a simple fictional character; he became an icon and an ideological pioneer that was a narrative engine for a transformative moment in time. Because his role in the ultimate scheme of events was representative of those that were his contemporary truth seekers. This resonance was amplified by Mulder's distinct personality, traumatic backstory, and unshakable belief system. This effect was further enhanced by the highly acclaimed performance of the actor David Duchovny which balanced the emotional depth with dry humor. From his very first line in the pilot episode where he introduces himself as "nobody here but the FBI's most unwanted," Mulder mocks his position as the Bureau's black sheep. His wit, emotional intensity and the relentless pursuit of the truth made him a compelling yet unconventional hero which was

a very interesting juxtaposition to the detectives of noir tradition or crime literature. Rather than acting with a brooding cynical detachment, he was driven by hope that what he believes will come true. This helped his mantra become a slogan for the fans and thus it was reused to the point of sometimes being associated with theorists themselves. Through Mulder, *The X-Files* found not just a character to solve cases, but a worldview they can offer their audiences to adopt.

While Mulder's impact on and outside the series is unmatched, his partner Dana Scully is nothing short of an icon either. Scully is a medical doctor and an FBI agent assigned to the X files division with the explicit purpose of monitoring and reporting on Mulder's unorthodox way of working. However, Scully not only serves as the FBI's eyes on Mulder, but she is also the audience's eyes on him as the audience is introduced to him at the same time as Scully. In a way this allows her to be a narrator for the series as her perspective and commentary are framing the storyline in some ways. In contrast to Mulder's intuitive and belief-based methods, Scully brings in a scientific approach that is skeptical of Mulder's theories. Thus, from the very beginning she is positioned as the institutional counterbalance to Mulder. Her assignment by the Bureau is not merely coincidental. She is meant to legitimize and regulate, and in a way discredit Mulder's work. However, despite all, Scully quickly establishes herself as a force of her own and a co-lead. They are not working against each other but working together against the institutional conspiracy that Scully gradually is revealed to at the same time as the audience. Her skepticism is not depicted as stubborn denial but more of a thoughtful approach that helps Mulder put his feet on the ground. By this, Scully becomes more than just the anti-Mulder; she becomes the viewer's anchor and the guide who forces both her partner and the audience to question the acceptance of instincts as truth.

As the series progresses, Dana Scully undergoes a tremendously nuanced and compelling character evolution. While she never abandons her acceptance of scientific values and skepticism;

her exposure to the paranormal gradually shapes her understanding of the world. Scully's encounter with each case, each alien autopsy and eventually her personal abduction storyline along with her unexplained medical condition force Scully to confront the limitations of those scientific values. Her abduction in episode five of season two is integral to not only the series but her arc. The trauma of her unexplainable disappearance and subsequent return introduces a deeper layer of vulnerability and a personal connection to the quest for truth perhaps even more internalized than Mulder's. Seasons later, in a storyline first revealed in season four that further blurs the line between science she is accustomed to and the unexplained phenomena she keeps encountering, Scully is diagnosed with an inoperable cancerous tumor. This development is preceded by her investigation in season three episode nine into other women who claim to have been abducted. Through these meetings Scully is revealed that these women are all suffering from cancer. In what would later be revealed to be a foreshadowing; these meetings plant the seeds of unsettling realizations that her body may be subject to consequences of forces beyond her understanding of science. Scully's cancer is questionably cured in the very beginning of season five. Yet it is quite ambiguous within the context of the chain of conspiracy because it is unclear whether it is due to medical efforts or the help of forces in the Bureau. Nevertheless, Scully is changed in a much more integral way. She never gives up her belief in science and logic and never converts into a full believer like Mulder, yet she adopts a more flexible state of mind than solid disbelief. Her transformation is not only intellectual but also emotional as she adopts her own motivation which was not as tangible in the beginning of the series as Mulder's was. Still, her skeptic manners remain a vital part of her identity, but they are never obstacles to the duo's quest. It is rather a means of grounding both for Mulder and the series, as the fantastic elements and irrational conspiratorial thinking would pose the threat of seeming caricaturistic and erratic. Scully's evolution does not

weaken her rationality but rather deepens it. Thus, through Dana Scully, *The X-Files* finds a chance to showcase that truth and belief are not standard opposites but they are companions in a world that is bound to be shaped by uncertainty.

One of the most intriguing complexities brought by Scully to the series is her Catholic faith which poses as a contrast to her commitment to scientific reasoning. Yet, rather than presenting her spirituality as a contradiction or a flaw, the series uses it to showcase Scully's personal depth and once again contradicting nature of belief and truth. Scully's faith is very rarely but effectively showcased and when it is; this portrayal allows the audience to see a multidimensional character. Her faith is deeply personal and internalized, but it is never an ideological trait. In fact, she is not a hardcore believer, and she is revealed to have struggled with it many times. One of the key episodes to deal with this struggle is season three episode eleven titled "Revelations." In this episode, Scully is faced with a case of a young boy who is being pursued to be killed by sinister forces because he is exhibiting wounds very similar to that of Jesus Christ. Scully's faith is reawakened by these uncanny events and she eventually is shown to return to a confessional booth after years of absence and it is not an act of absolution from a sin but rather a way of dealing with her belief in God. The episode exemplifies how Scully's faith is not a constant in her life, on the contrary it is quite unsteady. While Scully is cast as the skeptic and Mulder is the believer; when it comes to religion and faith their roles are very ironically reversed. Starting with episode thirteen of the first season "Beyond the Sea," the two switch roles as Mulder is the skeptic one for the first time which would repeat in a pattern for other episodes with the religious themes. Following the sudden death of her father in the episode, Scully begins to experience visions that challenge her rational worldview. Meanwhile, a death row inmate named Luther Lee Boggs claims to have psychic abilities and to be able to pass messages from Scully's father. However, Mulder is not

convinced by the man and his so-called abilities and he considers them manipulative attempts. This dichotomy allows the audience to study a different type of belief system from Mulder's conspiracy driven convictions. Scully's spirituality is a representation of a different type of belief from his because while Mulder seeks external validations of extraordinary events, she often seeks comfort with an internal source. Therefore, the series allows her character to reveal another layer of complexity in order to ask broader questions regarding science and religion. In doing so, *The X-Files* positions Scully not only as a cynical skeptic of the paranormal, but also as a believer herself in something quite intangible, highlighting that belief can take many forms and rationality as well.

Beyond her function as an individual character, Dana Scully represents a thematic anchor for *The X-Files*. She is a narrative symbol of rational counterweight to Mulder's emotional belief system. Furthermore, she is introduced to the subject of the extraterrestrials at the same time as the audience as opposed to Mulder who already has personal history and connotations regarding it. Scully's existence can be seen as a plot actor that continuously interrogates what is evidence and what actually qualifies as truth. As a scientist, she is an agent of methodology and data; but as a woman of faith, she embodies a coexistence of this rationalism with the spiritual side. This duality positions her as a complex figure through which the series can resist the traditional binary. In a way, the series has the chance to not reduce itself to the fully skeptic and fully believer dynamic. Symbolically, Scully stands for a rather cautious representative of reason. She does not ever claim to possess answers, but she possesses an even more important role which is the commitment to finding them whether they challenge her stances or not.

Scully's impact as a character exceeds the narrative of the series' universe and the broader landscape in which the series was met with the public. As an intelligent and complicated woman,

her strength was not a performative and shallow surface but an example of a successful competent investigator. Her status as a woman in a male dominated field subverts conventional tropes of female heroines that predates her debut in television. This allowed tangible consequences outside the television industry. Scully, who is portrayed by Gillian Anderson, has been credited with creating a phenomenon of women gravitating towards careers in science and medicine. This has been called the “Scully Effect.” According to Vanessa Reich-Shackleford,

a study by the Geena Davis Institute has examined just how much the character of Dana Scully has influenced girls and women to focus on STEM in their schooling and careers. In fact, of 2,021 participants, nearly two-thirds (63%) of women who are familiar with Dana Scully say she increased their belief in the importance of STEM, and 50% of those same women say Scully increased their interest in STEM.

This is a clear example of how as a character, she was not merely vital for the progress of the story but also had a clear status as an icon outside of the series. Dana Scully therefore has helped shift the media landscape toward a multidimensional female representation and also influenced transformations within the world of science.

Although Mulder and Scully are the emotional and narrative core of *The X-Files*, several recurring characters contribute significantly to the series’ moral complexity and thematic progress. One of them is Assistant Director Walter Skinner who is initially introduced as a disciplined bureaucrat. Skinner serves as a compelling representation of institutional ambiguity in the series. Introduced as Mulder and Scully’s direct superior, he is a loyal enforcer of FBI protocols whose primary concerns align with those of his workplace. However, as the series progresses, Skinner’s character evolves into a deeply conflicted figure who departs from his blind obedience to the Bureau and develops a stronger loyalty to Mulder and Scully. He is repeatedly confronted by the

requirements of his occupation and the moral implications of it in broader conspiracies. Not an idealist and a rebel like Mulder, nor a skeptic who is driven by reason like Scully; Skinner is an embodiment of a much clearer tension. He is a showcase of the good man trying to operate ethically within a corrupted system. His shifting role from the antagonistic boss to the ally who at times risks his job and even his life for the main duo reflects The X-Files' broader theme of dealing with authority. This is exemplified in one of the key episodes; episode two of season three titled "Paper Clip." In one scene in the episode, after Mulder and Scully obtain a tape containing hacked governmental documents regarding the aliens; which eventually leads to a three-episode chase of it by Cigarette Smoking Man; the tape ends up in Skinner's hands. Skinner stands up to and even threatens his boss, Cigarette Smoking Man.

SKINNER: I have the tape you've been looking for.

CIGARETTE-SMOKING MAN: Really?

SKINNER: I'm prepared to hand it over or destroy it in exchange for Mulder and Scully's safety and for their reinstatement here.

CIGARETTE-SMOKING MAN: What did I tell you, Mister Skinner? I don't negotiate.

Especially not with punks like you who think they can bluff me. (40:29)

Despite being CSM's inferior, and following the rules by obeying his orders up until that point, his abrupt change of attitude and rebellion gives a glimpse of how he is also bothered by the system.

Another complex character in the series is Alex Krycek. Krycek is introduced as the replacement for Dana Scully as Mulder's partner in the X files. While he is initially introduced as a clean and seemingly trustworthy agent, Krycek is quickly revealed to be a double agent who is meant to spy on and sabotage Mulder's work. In fact, it is thanks to him that Mulder's attempt to

save Scully is unsuccessful and she is abducted without her ex-partner being able to stop it. Krycek shows little emotional depth but still is quite a complex character. He thrives on deception and opportunism. Krycek is in a way an embodiment of the scariest concepts of the series which is a man without allegiance and whose motives are indescribable. His chaotic nature however complicates this allegory of evil and he is at many times switching sides with little explanation to his doings. Thus, he is an emphasis on the sense of disorientation that fuels the series and reinforces the idea that conspiratorial landscape is unpredictable and everchanging.

The Lone Gunmen, who also had a very short-lived spin-off series of their own with the same name, are quite the counterbalance to the world of the FBI characters. The three men; John Fitzgerald Byers, Melvin Frohike and Richard Langly; represent the world outside of the systematic struggle and give the perspective of the outside world. Befriended by Mulder, they are eccentric conspiracy theorists and investigators. They are actually very common conceptual reflections of conspiracy theorists in their eccentric paranoia and outcast status. Through them, the series offers a voice to the marginalized civilians. With their presence and their contribution to Mulder and Scully's work, *The X-Files* has the opportunity to acknowledge the role of everyday citizens in conspiracy culture and challenge dominant forces.

No other side character however provides as much of a service in the reflection of conspiratorial embodiment than the series' main antagonist, Cigarette Smoking Man. His eerie representation haunts the series and thus personifies the authority. He is a somewhat muted force of power that is portrayed to shape worldwide events and decisions. While his full motivations and representation is fleshed out truly to an extent, a more comprehensive analysis of the character will be in the next chapter as his role as the elite conspirator will be dissected in detail to investigate deeper themes within both the series and the culture of conspiracy.

Through these well-developed and richly written characters, *The X-Files* finds different ways to construct a narrative web in which the themes it introduces like belief, skepticism, forces of power and ambiguity are embodied and elaborated on. From the protagonists Mulder and Scully's pursuit of truth that is shaped by his idealism and her rationalism, to the employment of Skinner and Krycek as different sides of the pole of loyalty; motivation is recharacterized in a way to entangle the audience. Each character functions not only within the storyline but also as a reflection of the cultural anxieties of their era.

2.4 Conspiracy Culture and *The X-Files*

While the portrayals of monsters, extraterrestrials and other paranormal phenomena helped *The X-Files* become a cultural phenomenon; its most enduring role might be the shaping and reflecting the late twentieth century conspiracy culture in a unique way. As Poniewozik notes, the series "had roots in the anti-establishment 1970s (which also saw a craze for ufology). But it began in 1993, at a time when conspiracy theories about 'black helicopters' and a 'New World Order' were spreading, often crossing ideological lines". The series emerged at a moment when public trust in institutions was already in decay and it quickly became a response to that cultural moment. Knight suggests that:

With its endless reversal and re-evaluation of all certainties, The X-Files ... dramatizes in a condensed and stylized form the perpetual motion of suspicion that marks out ... conspiracy thinking ... Rather than dwelling on any particular fixed product of conspiracy theorizing, The X-Files concentrates, in line with other examples, on the process of repeatedly discovering that everything you thought you knew is wrong. (28)

Throughout the series, in addition to the fictional arc about surveillance, secrecy and control; real world conspiracies and scandals were also employed. By doing so, the series did more than

just borrowing from existing narratives, it created a double-sided participatory construction within the conspiratorial worldview. Both the audience who already had these theories and ideas could engage with it, and the series could become a reflection of them in a unique way. This helped blur the lines between fact and fiction and gave voice to anxieties that were considerably narrowed to a certain group. *The X-Files* turned institutional mistrust into a serialized narrative that transformed the ideas of government complicity, alien cover-ups and medical experiments into recurring actors within the web of conspiracy in the series' arc. Therefore, the series not only reflected but also enhanced and fueled a growing suspicion toward official narratives, positioning itself as both a product and a driving force of the 1990s American conspiratorial imagination.

Imagery and references to American Conspiracy discourse are used frequently in *The X-Files*. One of the earliest examples of this is the character with the code name Deep Throat who appears first on the season one episode two titled "Deep Throat" after him. Deep Throat is an informant who meets with Fox Mulder to give him secret insider information on his pursuit of the truth regarding the conspiracy within the FBI. The code name Deep Throat is a very clear reference to the Watergate scandal. "Deep Throat was the anonymous source who provided leaks to reporters Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein. Only after some 30 years later, it was revealed that the informant was FBI deputy director W. Mark Felt, Sr." (Perlstein). The decision to name Mulder's informant after the Watergate source situates *The X-Files* directly within America's post-Watergate climate of mistrust. By invoking "Deep Throat," the series taps into one of the most famous incidents of whistleblowing in United States history, reminding viewers of a moment when government secrecy was once successfully exposed. At the same time, the name is a signal that Mulder's pursuit of hidden truths is part of a longer tradition of suspicion toward official narratives. This reference both grants *The X-Files* immediate cultural resonance with conspiracy narratives

and reinforces the idea that Mulder's pursuit of truth is a noble journey that echoes the likes of real life accomplishments of Woodward and Bernstein.

In the episode that he is introduced, Deep Throat of *The X-Files* first appears in the beginning of the episode to warn Mulder to drop the current case he is working on. The scene happens in a bathroom where the informant appears out of the blue (04:53). "Leave this case alone Agent Mulder" he tells, signifying that he already knows what Mulder is working on and even warns that he is exposing [himself] and Agent Scully to unnecessary risk". The fact that this stranger knows about Mulder's partner, his work, and the dangers surrounding them creates an eerie sense that surveillance is everywhere. Deep Throat dismisses the question of who he is by saying "[i]t's unimportant," a refusal that again underlines his role as both insider and enigma. He is clearly tied to official structures, but he offers no clarity. The combination of secrecy and knowledge suggests he himself is a government officer, a reminder of the institution's capacity to be all-seeing and yet unaccountable.

He is then not seen until the very end of the episode where he shares an interesting dialogue with the protagonist (43:34). Mulder asks as Deep Throat is leaving "They're here, aren't they", to which Deep Throat replies "Mr. Mulder, They've been here for a long, long time" (45:00). The "they" in the dialogue refers to extra-terrestrial life on earth that live amongst humans. This brief but haunting exchange sets the tone for much of the series' mythology. By refusing to give a clear or definitive answer, Deep Throat's words embody the ambiguity that defines both the show and conspiracy culture more broadly. The "they" in his response functions less as a literal confirmation of extraterrestrial presence and more as a symbolic gesture toward unseen powers. In the context of American conspiracy discourse, "they" echoes the rhetoric of shadowy elites and the omnipresent government surveillance. Thus, the dialogue does more than gesture toward alien life.

It becomes an early glimpse at the tone of the series which feeds itself off of conspiratorial aesthetic and narrative.

At the season finale of season one, episode titled “The Erlenmeyer Flask”, Deep Throat’s arc is also concluded. The episode begins with Deep Throat’s cryptic call to Mulder, telling him to turn on the television to follow a police chase (03:15). The following day, Mulder and Scully argue over Deep Throat’s credibility. Scully warns him: “[h]ow do you know he’s not just yanking your chain? Who is this Deep Throat character? I mean, we don’t know anything about him” (04:42). The exchange presents that unlike Mulder, Scully is having a harder time trusting Deep Throat fully. Mulder’s investigation fueled by tips from Deep Throat eventually takes him to a storage, where he discovers human bodies suspended in tanks (22:13). The imagery of men preserved in liquid with wires and tubes displays medical experimentation very vividly. They are stuck in experimental tubes almost in a dehumanizing way. Yet when Mulder returns with Scully the following day, the room has been completely emptied. This sudden erasure of evidence visualizes a recurring motif in the series. The state’s power lies not in revealing truths but in its ability to erase, redact, and render them invisible.

The sense of a complex scheme of conspiracy is reinforced when a very famous incident is referenced:

MULDER: Doctor Berube was conducting human experiments with extraterrestrial viruses.

DEEP THROAT: Yes, but that’s been going on for years. We’ve had the tissue since 1947 but not the technology.

MULDER: Roswell?

DEEP THROAT: Roswell was a smoke screen; we’ve had a half-a-dozen better salvage

operations. Doctor Berube was killed because his work was too successful. You're standing in the room where the first DNA transplant took, the first human-alien hybrid was created. (28:56)

By tying the show's mythology to one of the most famous conspiracy landmarks in American culture and simultaneously undercutting it, the series both acknowledges and perpetuates popular conspiracy culture elements. When Mulder is abducted by unnamed forces within the government and Scully needs to save him, Deep Throat suggests that this is only "the tip of the iceberg" (40:59), expanding the scale of conspiracy beyond any single case.

Sent by Deep Throat, Scully enters a secretive lab in a government facility. To access the lab, she passes through layers of security checks and finally has to give the password "Purity Control" (37:26). These mundane bureaucratic procedures serve as a mask for extraordinary secrets, turning the alien fetus she finds in the flask into a revelation buried under paperwork and keycards. The climax to the episode comes with an exchange, where Scully delivers the fetus in a desperate attempt to save Mulder. Deep Throat is immediately shot dead by the shadowy men as they take the fetus and drop Mulder in return. In his dying words, Deep Throat is able to mutter a sentence that would become one of the key slogans of the series. "Trust no one" (42:39). These words encapsulate the epistemic stance *The X-Files* enforces: in a world of leaks, double agents, and manufactured evidence, trust itself becomes impossible. Later, Mulder and Scully learn that the X-Files division is formally closed by definitive administrative decision. The final image shows the elusive villain of the series Smoking Man filing the alien fetus into a Pentagon archive (45:01). The storage room is sterile and mundane, but the jars and cabinets hold extraordinary secrets. The closing shot transforms conspiracy from a spectacular drama into something

routinized and bureaucratic. Furthermore, by showcasing the Pentagon, *The X-Files* enhances the complexities of the web of conspiracy.

One of the most blatant examples to real life conspiracy theories and controversies integrated into the plot happens when *The X-Files* creates an intersection between the series' arc and the real-world conspiracy history with the direct reference of Operation Paperclip which were the undercover experiments led by Nazi scientists who fled Europe after the end of the Second World War and came to the United States. This historic event, which was incorporated into the series in the second episode of season three titled "Paper Clip," became a key part of the main conspiracy. In the episode, Mulder and Scully discover that the United States government had conducted a secret human-alien hybrid creation program with these Nazi scientists. Not only does the series reference the operation as a historical backdrop, it also reactivates a cultural scandal and institutional betrayal by framing it within a scientific invasion secret. The program's existence in the series highlights a larger theme of the fear of sanitized evil that is in a way carried through bureaucratic conducts and national benefit. It is a depiction of a scheme of conspiracy that shows the official narratives of being not only complicit with secrecy but also with ethical compromise.

Operation Paperclip is not the only time the government has been accused of being complicit with invasive medical experimentation and neither is it the last time it is referenced on *The X-Files*. The series tackles the theme while referencing real world conspiracies. One of the key episodes to showcase the theme is season three episode ten titled "731." In the episode Mulder boards a secret government train car containing an alleged alien-human hybrid, while Scully investigates a leprosy compound in West Virginia. As Scully uncovers from surviving patients, the experiments they had gone through involved being inserted with memory chips, many of whom –including Scully herself– were abducted and operated on without consent. What is essentially a storyline on

extraterrestrial secrecy becomes a deeper and chilling example of human experimentation, medical invasion and how these anomalies were not only allowed by but also conducted through federal systems. These storylines transform the human body into a sort of ground for manipulation yet they are not exempt from real life horrors. In many ways these experiments echo the likes of Tuskegee Syphilis Study which according to Centers for Disease Control and Prevention was a study where Black men, without their consent, were denied treatment for syphilis to observe the progression of the disease. The study eventually led to the establishment of the National Center for Bioethics in Research and Health Care at Tuskegee University by President Bill Clinton in 1997. Considered within this context, conspiracy thinking around health was essential in the arc *The X-Files* built itself on.

The most important piece of the mythology arc of *The X-Files* and American cultural sensation is the alleged government cover up of the existence of aliens. This, particularly centered around the 1947 Roswell incident and the mysterious Area 51, loomed as an enigmatic question above the American conspiratorial mind in the latter half of twentieth century. *The X-Files* cannot be credited with the invention of extraterrestrial conspiracy narrative, yet it is significantly a mutual agent within the cultural discourse surrounding it. After all, the central mythology arc of the series is built upon the sole premise that a select group of people within the United States government has a secret contract with extraterrestrial beings regarding the future of humanity. Aliens are not one conspiracy theory that occupies the American mind, but they are more of a multidimensional and intertextual phenomenon themselves. The certain visual and historical imagery incorporated within the folklore of the UFOs are used quite effectively within *The X-Files*. Alien autopsies, memory erasure, covert bases in the desert, men in black and many more elements are integral to both the alien mythology and *The X-Files* mythology. While the series

heavily tackles the subject, the definite answer is hardly ever provided. It presents layers of conflicting narratives and doing so it also reflects real life anxieties shared by many during the time period. As Susan Lepselter puts it, many people tapped in to radio shows with fear about the before the Hale-Bopp comet passed by the Earth in 1995. Lepselter echoes the radio callers:

We are being colonized. And the government knows what's going on. They are covering it up...They make deals with the aliens. They offered us up as guinea pigs; they are watching and they know—until the alien they and the government they converge into an allegorically felt figure of unseen power and agency, an overwritten, unfinalized they who invade and track ordinary experience from oblique, omniscient heights.(43-44)

This directly mirrors the central conspiracy of *The X-Files* mythology: people had genuine worries that the shadow government "they" is fully aware of the alien presence, is actively covering it up, and has negotiated a treaty sacrificing ordinary citizens "guinea pigs" in exchange for alien technology

At one point, the series introduces a setback in Mulder's belief system at the premiere of season five "Redux." Within the episode, Mulder is confronted with the idea that everything he believed in, the very foundation of his life, is something deliberately fabricated. In the episode a much more terrestrial conspiracy involving illegal experimentation and biopolitics are hidden behind the smokescreen of unhinged alien evidence planted to confuse minds. However, in the next season, by episode "Two Fathers" Mulder is met with new evidence of alien existence and realizes that the scheme of lies led him to believe that they were never real. Knight comments on this story arc by suggesting that "*The X-Files*, stylishly captures the possibility that we have entered what David Martin's book on the CIA and the Cold War termed a 'wilderness of mirrors'" (27). Knight's reference of the phrase "wilderness of mirrors," originally used to describe the murky

world of Cold War espionage by writers like David Martin, evokes a reality where truth and fabrication are indistinguishable, and every revelation could itself be part of a larger deception. *The X-Files* in a way dramatizes this sense and atmosphere by constantly shifting between competing explanations without ever fully resolving them, leaving both its characters and its audience trapped in a cycle of suspicion. In this sense, the series doesn't just tell conspiracy stories; it replicates the disorienting experience of living within a culture where official narratives and alternative accounts endlessly reflect and obscure one another. These episodes invert the central premise of the series by suggesting that the alien mythos may not be a cover up of reality, but they are the red herrings covering a different reality themselves. This is essential to the complicated nature of the alien narrative. The question that is constantly bearing another question thus becomes a paradox. In this manner, the alien conspiracy became a narrative device through which the series could explore deeper fears of invasion from not only external alien sources but also of betrayal from those within.

One of the most striking institutional figures in *The X-Files* is the Federal Bureau of Investigation itself. The series does not depict the FBI simply as a neutral investigative agency but as an organization entangled in layers of secrecy, internal conflict, and manipulation. Mulder and Scully, though agents of the Bureau, often find their work obstructed or redirected by senior officials whose motives remain ambiguous. This representation echoes broader historical anxieties about intelligence agencies in the United States, where the FBI's record, particularly its Cold War surveillance programs and operations such as COINTELPRO, fueled public suspicions that federal institutions were not only fallible but actively complicit in cover-ups and abuses of power. While the protagonists themselves work for the Bureau, their work is constantly undermined, sabotaged and even at times halted by unnamed senior officials within. From the very beginning, Mulder and

Scully are operating against something they are a part of. This portrayal, although containing many fictional commentaries, in many ways echoes discontent felt by the public against the FBI and other intelligence agencies. Fueled by the anti-communist mission that was intertwined in the establishment of it, scandals such as COINTELPRO have taunted the Bureau and gave way for conspiracy theories to emerge regarding extensive surveillance, cover-ups, election interference and even assassinations of prominent figures. By channeling this existent historical unease into a narrative structure, *The X-Files* casts the FBI as both the employer and the enemy. Figures such as Walter Skinner who are the rule followers with no bad intentions become obstruct allies while shadowy elites are reflections of systemic corruption and manipulation. This layered skepticism allows the series to portray the Bureau as not mainly a villain but a fragmented body of governance that is at fight with itself.

2.5 1990s and the Conspiracy Discourse

The 1990s in the United States were paradoxically marked by an environment of political stability yet a contrasting trend of distrust. As established in the previous chapter, as a result of the aftermath of the Cold War there was no singular geopolitical power to oppose the absolute reign of the country in the global scene. Within this climate, *The X-Files* not only entertained the conspiratorial mindset, but it also resonated with it and the idea that the enemy was now internal. While the main protagonists of the series, Fox Mulder and Dana Scully, were emblematic symbols of the war against the powerful, another duo was on the other side of the coin, embodying cynic paranoia: Bill and Hillary Clinton. While the Clinton administration presided over a period associated with economic growth and optimism, it was also surrounded by a decade of scandals and suspicion. Enhanced by the rise of network television, tabloid culture and the explosive growth of the internet; both the president and the first lady Hillary Clinton found a place in the conspiratory

mindset that would last for decades. By closely paralleling the events, scandals and conspiracy theories that dominated the discourse during the Clinton years, it would be possible to map out how as a decade the 1990s were a fertile ground for both *The X-Files* and the conspiracy culture to flourish.

From the inauguration of William Jefferson Clinton as the President in 1993, the Clinton family became more than political figures like those that had preceded them. According to Peter Knight:

Conspiracy theorists' eagerness to investigate the Clintons had several origins. In his acceptance speech to the 1992 Democratic National Convention, Clinton professed his admiration for Carroll Quigley, author of *Tragedy and Hope: A History of the World in Our Time* (1966) and famous in conspiracy circles for claiming that the world was run by a secret circle of well-connected financiers. This was seen as a proof that Clinton himself was part of the world-governing cabal. (175)

In many ways, the first family were cultural talking points. They were embodiments of polarization as they were both admired and resented by the public equally. 1990s was a decade with high-stakes as members of the royal family, celebrities, officials and public figures in general were constantly under scrutiny and were dissected by the media and public. Thus, the Clintons were bound to be actors of this discourse regardless of the legitimacy of discussions. These would include both actual scandals uncovered, and unproven theories about the family. The first of these scandals that bore many conspiracy theories was Whitewater. It is described by Peter Knight in the following way:

Whitewater refers to U.S. president William Jefferson Clinton's alleged financial wrongdoings in a labyrinthine Arkansas land deal during the late 1970s and 1980s.

The scandal, which emerged in 1992, also generated various conspiracy theories accusing Clinton and his wife Hillary of going to great lengths, including murder, to cover up incriminating evidence. (737)

This was an example of how a case against the Clintons easily became less about hard evidence and more about symbolic corruption and guilt. While no conclusive evidence of wrongdoing was ever definitively established through official investigations or legal proceedings, the case nevertheless became a powerful catalyst for conspiracy-laden narratives that would persist far beyond the initial allegations. What began as specific accusations of financial misconduct gradually transformed in the public imagination into much broader and more sweeping claims of systematic corruption. Yet the most definitive scandal of the Clinton era came towards the final years in 1998 when Bill Clinton was revealed to have engaged in an affair with White House intern Monica Lewinsky. The revelation not only led to Clinton's impeachment by the House of Representatives but also exposed the fragility of privacy in the new era of American life. What began as a private relationship rapidly evolved into a national crisis due to the scandalous and sensational nature of the event and the decade. The scandal was exposed through Linda Tripp's secret recordings of Lewinsky's confession which helped blur the boundaries between privacy and gossip. The scandal was even mentioned on a couple of episodes of *The X-Files*. Firstly, in the second episode of season six titled "Drive" where it is heard in the news background; and for the second time in the following episode titled "Triangle" where Mulder makes a joke saying that the trouble in the White House will soon "blow over" as a reference to the details of the scandal.

Clintons have been prominent players in conspiracy theories in many ways but the most persistent and sensational one to point out was the so-called "Clinton Body Count." The theory is founded on the assumption that the number of untimely or suspicious deaths of individuals

associated with Bill Clinton far exceeds the logical explanation (Knight 177). Promoters of the theory, such as Linda Thompson argue that these deaths, which included a list of thirty-four people who had died due to suicide or accidents, are not coincidental but indicative of a deliberate effort to silence potential threats. The theorists of the idea suggest that Clintons were directly involved in the orchestrating of these deaths. The theory gained enough traction to make its way to Congress when Congressman William Dannemeyer distributed a letter to the leaders to initiate a formal investigation. As Knight notes, the power of the theory lies less in concrete evidence, but it gains its popularity due to an ability to map out a pattern and a cynical question of intentionalism behind it (177).

The 1990s were a time when government officials, corporate interests and the media were increasingly viewed not as agents of public advocacy but potential manipulators of truth. This discomfort thus manifested itself both in discussions and in real-life events. A group of widely reported events from federal standoffs to domestic terrorism served as a way to confirm public anxieties about unrestrained governmental power in a cultural setting where the disturbing origins of paranoia were no longer limited to fiction or fringe discourse. Events like the Waco Siege, Ruby Ridge Standoff, and the Oklahoma City Bombing represented a rising conviction that the federal American state was deemed a threat by certain people with ability to be hostile to its own people, thus intensifying anti-government feeling in the decade. Sensationalized in the media, these events set the stage for a conspiratorial perspective in which official stories were naturally made questionable.

During the early 1990s, one of the most significant and divisive events was the Waco Siege:

The Waco siege refers to the standoff between the Branch Davidians, a religious sect led by David Koresh, and federal law enforcement agencies in Waco, Texas, that occurred

from February 28 to April 19, 1993. The conflict began when the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms (ATF) attempted to raid the compound to serve warrants related to child abuse and weapons violations... The siege ended when the compound burned to the ground, resulting in seventy-six deaths. Subsequent congressional hearings were held questioning the motives, responsibility, and accountability of the federal agencies involved. (Buckler)

The spectacle of tanks and armed agents attacking a domestic compound caused a great deal of unease among a large number of Americans. The killings only served to further increase the public's suspicion of the institutions of the federal government. The Waco incident was a significant factor in the mobilization of the militia movement, which in turn fueled perceptions that the government was willing to use lethal force against its own citizens.

Another development of anti-government sentiment in the United States was the Ruby Ridge standoff, which occurred prior to the events that took place in Waco.

"Ruby Ridge" is a shorthand phrase for events that occurred in 1992 in Ruby Ridge, Idaho, after an attempt by U.S. Marshals to arrest Randall Weaver on a fugitive warrant. Deputy United States Marshals became involved in a shootout with Weaver, members of his family, and a family friend. A Deputy Marshal and Weaver's teenage son were killed during the gunfire ... During the resulting standoff, an FBI sharpshooter shot and killed Weaver's wife. Weaver and his family ultimately surrendered. In a federal trial of Weaver, he was acquitted of murder and other serious federal charges. (Department of Justice)

National attention was drawn to the incident not only because of the violence that occurred, but also because of the idea that it marked a severe overreach of power on the part of the federal government against a family that had chosen to live off the grid. As a result of the investigation,

the rules of engagement of the FBI were questioned, and serious cracks in public confidence in federal law enforcement were once again revealed.

Both the Waco Siege and the standoff of Ruby Ridge manifested themselves in more than conversations. The bombing that took place in Oklahoma City on April 19, 1995, ended up being the deadliest act of domestic terrorism in the history of the United States until that time. The bombing resulted in the deaths of one hundred and sixty-eight people and injuries to hundreds more. The terrorist attack, which was carried out by Timothy McVeigh, a veteran of the Gulf War, was intended to be a form of vengeance against the actions taken by the government at Waco and Ruby Ridge. As Sarah Pruitt puts it:

McVeigh viewed Ruby Ridge as clear evidence that the U.S. government aimed to disarm the public and take away people's Second Amendment rights. [He] reacted even more strongly to ... the Waco siege... Before he was executed in 2001, McVeigh made it clear that he intended the bombing as retribution for the deaths at Waco and Ruby Ridge, and had deliberately planned the bombing to take place on the second anniversary of the Waco disaster.

McVeigh's action echoes a belief that the federal government had exceeded the constitutional bounds that it was allowed to operate within, and the bombing was intended to send a message of violence against the perceived tyranny of the state. His ideology was firmly established in a larger ecosystem of anti-government paranoia and conspiracy theories that had been gaining strength in the early 1990s. "Ruby Ridge and the events at Waco fueled anger within the fledgling American militia movement and other far-right groups at what they saw as an oppressive government determined to attack and suppress anyone who ... refused to conform to its will" (Pruitt) Although McVeigh acted with only minimal assistance, his ideology was deeply rooted in this more

widespread ecology. He lent validity to a worldview that had, up until that moment, mostly stayed in the boundaries of discourse and speculative fiction.

Taken together, these events and cultural shifts demonstrate how the 1990s created fertile ground for the growth of conspiracy thinking, particularly in the ways popular culture and public distrust became intertwined. *The X-Files*, in this setting, solidified paranoia instead of merely dramatizing it. The series resonated with a broader climate of uncertainty, shaped by political scandal, violent standoffs like Waco and Ruby Ridge, and a media culture that increasingly blurred the boundary between private life and public controversy. In a society where official narratives lost significance on their own, the show's imaginary universe filled with cover-ups, murders, medical experiments, and deep state conspiracies felt more and more believable. Real-life conspiracy theories from the Clinton Body Count to worries of government overreach were at the same time absorbing the narrative and aesthetics of visual media. The 1990s thus stood out as a major confluence point: a decade in which conspiracies acquired cultural validity, truth became splintered, and trust both in government and in information itself became a battleground. *The X-Files* did not just come out as a product of this atmosphere; it flourished inside it; thus it was an active agent participating in and producing the very paranoia it depicted.

2.6 *The X-Files* and the 1990s

All in all, the influence of *The X-Files* goes well beyond its storytelling or production elements. The conduct of the audience and especially its fandom, whose participation techniques sometimes reflected the logic of conspiracy thinking itself, is one of the most telling aspects of the show. Unlike passive spectators, X-Philes were active players who analyzed episodes, theorized over clues, created content, and discussed the plot of the overarching web of conspiracy over Usenet threads, fanfiction archives, and other venues. Much like conspiracy theorists, these

followers rejected surface answers and embraced a concept that a deeper, more elusive reality was buried in the series. From this perspective, *The X-Files* functioned as both entertainment and a participatory space where viewers rehearsed the very interpretive practices that characterized the conspiratorial worldview it dramatized. The series allowed a reality for audiences to imagine a chance to question surface explanations and search for hidden connections; hence effectively training them in the same analytical approaches that define conspiratorial thinking during the decade.

The series' consistent attempts to blur the lines between fact and fiction served to amplify the interaction between the logic of real-world conspiracies and the narratives of fictional characters. It was common for episodes to draw inspiration from real-life occurrences, clandestine programs, and historical activities, which gave the series' mythologies a spooky sense of familiarity. As a result, the series' storylines and real-life scandals of the 1990s, such as the Waco Siege, Ruby Ridge, and the controversies that occurred during the Clinton administration, were intertwined. "*The X-Files* was of the moment and reflective of a very particular set of political circumstances – the comedown from the Reagan/Bush era and the intensity of the Clinton-era that was building towards the Monica Lewinsky scandal via the ever-more convoluted White Water scandal" (Fenwick and Rogers 12). The series was able to depict cult raids and secret federal experiments with an uncanny realism that was reminiscent of the headlines that were prevalent at that time period. The boundaries between reality and fiction were further blurred as a result of this convergence, which further reinforced the notion that the narratives presented by the government were no more reliable than the screenplays presented on television. By incorporating contemporary controversies into its plotlines, *The X-Files* effectively mirrored and dramatized the

distrust that pervaded the 1990s, turning ongoing political and cultural anxieties into part of its fictional mythology.

With the overarching alien conspiracy at the heart of its mythology, *The X-Files* managed to employ these extraterrestrials as clichés from the world of science fiction, as well as allegories for institutional treachery, ethical crisis, and systematic dishonesty. During the first several seasons, extraterrestrials were portrayed as dangerous invaders; however, as the series progressed, this premise became less stable. Flipping of narratives reflected a more fundamental cultural shift: the fantasy of invasion that existed during the Cold War gave way to a dread of domestic corruption that emerged after it. The aliens in *The X-Files* came to symbolize not the antagonists but rather the unsettling realization that the real villains could be a domestic, bureaucratic, and entirely human entity. Because of this, the extraterrestrial served as both a metaphor and a sinister reflection of the corrupted power structures.

In summation, *The X-Files* should be understood not merely as a television series but as a cultural artifact that captured and contributed to the atmosphere of the 1990s, a decade marked by disillusionment and institutional mistrust. Its popularity reflected the growing resonance of conspiratorial thinking, while its narratives simultaneously reinforced and gave shape to that worldview. Rather than offering clear resolutions, the series employed fragmented storytelling and sustained ambiguity, dramatizing a cultural moment in which truth appeared unstable, reality seemed subject to manipulation, and official authority was regarded with suspicion. By refusing closure and constantly blurring the boundary between fact and fiction, *The X-Files* mirrored the anxieties of an era shaped by political scandal, media saturation, and declining trust in institutions, providing audiences with both recognition of their unease and a form of cathartic engagement with it. At the same time, the series pointed toward a wider conspiratorial framework, one that shifted

attention from isolated scandals to visions of a coordinated, transnational elite. This thematic move, crystallized in the show's Syndicate arc, paralleling the rise of New World Order narratives in the 1990s, making *The X-Files* an account of suspicions of government secrecy and later discourses of global conspiracy.



CHAPTER III: THE NEW WORLD ORDER AND *THE X-FILES*

President George H. W. Bush in 1990, when talking about the Persian Gulf crisis, said that “[o]ut of these troubled times... -- a new world order -- can emerge”. While President Bush was initially referring to a new era of global cooperation for the times following the Cold War, to many, the phrase New World Order (NWO) would go on to symbolize something far more sinister; a hidden agenda by global elites to establish an authoritarian one-world government. As the Cold War faded into history, conspiracy theorists shifted their focus from external enemies like the Soviet Union to ideas that revolved more around a secretive ruling class manipulating world events. Thus, Bush’s words would become emblematic within the conspiracy culture as it was a perfect rhetorical excuse for those who hold the belief that globalism was going to take over in the following decade. What may have been intended by the president as a sort of call for an era of diplomacy was, for many members of the conspiracy circles, heard as a sinister admission to a bigger plan. The phrase New World Order therefore became a cornerstone to the movement. NWO, in general, was more of a concept than an ideology as it was not something that was vocally advocated for, and even when it was, it was not based on the motivations attained to it by its objectors.

The 1990s, characterized in its essence by growing globalization, political scandals, and rapid technological advancements, became a breeding ground for a new brand of paranoia. In this new era one of the key figures to come forward was Pat Robertson with his influential book *The New World Order*. Published in 1991, Robertson’s book was a materialization of the theories on NWO within a distinctly Christian framework. In the book, Robertson claimed that a powerful group of global elites was working towards a one world government and to do so they were selling their souls to the devil. While the framework of the said theories was quite preposterous and out

of the box on the surface, the book generated quite the talk and “briefly appeared on the New York Times bestseller list and is now heavily promoted in Christian Coalition publications” (Isikoff).

The idea or more accurately the scare of the NWO was hardly new. In fact, for centuries, the idea that secretive and powerful groups were working behind the curtains was at the very core of conspiratorial thinking. Theories about organizations such as the Illuminati and the Freemasons came to be in consideration as actors who could take on the responsibility of the moral decay, political chaos and significant global events. These groups were believed to operate behind governments, financial order and media. Eventually, they carried on their reputation into the 1990s, and were also frequently credited by Pat Robertson in his book.

In this chapter, I will be studying the idea and the theories of secretive classes of elite managing power behind closed doors throughout history in order to flesh out how it accumulates itself in the 1990s in the post-Cold War era through especially the conspiracy theory concept of the New World Order. In order to better examine its manifestations, I will be analyzing the Syndicate, the elite group that operates the main conspiracy in *The X-Files*, and its most important member to the plot; the Cigarette Smoking Man. By doing so, I will highlight how the Syndicate reflects the anxieties of the NWO scare while employing contrasts to build a certain narrative structure embedded in the core of *The X-Files*.

3.1 The Elite

The concept that a secret, powerful ruling class, which is often mentioned as just “the elite,” has long been a pillar in the structure of conspiracy theories. It has further been a foundation for conversations surrounding the New World Order (NWO) theory. The idea in itself rests on the belief that “a cabal of powerful elites is secretly implementing a dystopian international governing structure that will grant them complete control over the global populace” (Flores). The elite have

been labeled with many different names throughout history. From the Illuminati and Freemasons to the Protocols of the Elders of Zion, many conspiracy theories have cast different suspicions on different groups with the same motive. These concerns gained new significance in the 1990s, a decade marked by expanding international cooperation, developing technologies, and accelerating globalization. Furthermore, international organizations and their reach caused discomfort amongst those who were skeptic of their nature. “The formation of the United Nations in 1945 and the onset of the Cold War galvanized speculation on the political margins that a shadowy, malevolent international government was seeking world domination by targeting the United States and its political culture” (Murphey). In order to understand the state of this phenomenon in the 1990s better, it is necessary to fully flesh out its the trajectory.

The Illuminati may be the most notorious organization to ever hold space within the conspiracy mindset. While many interpretations have been generated even in contemporary times, the Illuminati can initially be traced back centuries.

The Illuminati was founded by professor Adam Weishaupt in Bavaria on May 1, 1776. Weishaupt, chafing at the power of the conservative Catholic Church and the Bavarian monarchy, sought to cast aside organized religion in favor of a new form of “illumination” through reason. Inspired by the spread of the Enlightenment across Europe, he also drew upon ideas expressed by the Jesuits ..., the Mysteries of the Seven Sages of Memphis, the Kabbalah and Freemasons. (Rotondi)

Although its original official existence was short lived, the Illuminati transformed into different concepts in people's imaginations and went on to live in popular culture as a sinister puppet master that orchestrates the stream of events worldwide. Centuries after its original run, Illuminati would become more of a representation of the elite powers that run the world. For conspiracy theorists

concerned with the NWO, the Illuminati became the imaginary architects of globalization which would reach its peak in the 1990s after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. According to Robert Alan Goldberg, the order was initially accused of infiltrating Freemasonry, allowing it to spread into France, where it was believed to have played a critical role in orchestrating the French Revolution (6). This early connection, as Goldberg suggests, went on to lay the groundwork for modern conspiracy thinking as the fears of Illuminati interference within governance would reach to the United States. “Rev. Jedidiah Morse, an orthodox Congregational minister and geographer, was among those who delivered sermons against the Illuminati. In fact, one of the first accounts of the Illuminati to be printed in the United States was Jedidiah Morse’s Fast Day sermon of 9 May 1798” (McIntosh). As Goldberg points out the fears gained enough consideration that it led to legislative action: “[c]ongress acted in the wake of the Illuminati scare ... In summer 1798 it passed the Alien Act, which authorized the president to arrest and expel foreign nationals involved ‘in any treasonable or secret machinations against the government’” (6). This allowed the federal government to target suspected foreign conspirators. This panic shows how the fear of secret societies was already being used to justify government crackdowns, explain political instability, and interpret world events through the lens of clandestine manipulation, even though the perceived threat was exaggerated. S. Jonathan O’Donnel suggests that “the Illuminati scare of the late 18th century is among the earliest, most paradigmatic examples of American cultural demonologies”. The demonology pointed out by O’Donnel refers to a tradition in American politics which works in the true sense of demonizing an opponent, claiming they are influenced or in cohorts with the devil, and thus building a narrative of scare. O’Donnel also suggests that “[d]emonology and conspiracy have long been bedfellows”, linking the term the conspiratorial thinking. Therefore, the myth of the Illuminati did not arise in an absence; rather, it developed at a time when deep-

seated cultural concerns about control and infiltration merged with new forms of state power, revolutionary change, and democratic fragility.

Beyond conspiracy theories involving politics and religion, the Illuminati has also managed to hold a steady position in popular culture, where its symbolic significance has been shifted by satire, fiction, and even games. *The Illuminatus! Trilogy* by Robert Shea and Robert Anton Wilson released in 1975, a chaotic and humorous mashup of science fiction, philosophy, and conspiracy theory, was one of the most significant reinterpretations. It ridiculed both authoritarian power structures and the paranoid thinking that supports them. The cult status of it contributed to the Illuminati's establishment as a cultural joking point, which can be seen as a symbol that could stand for both absurdity and over excessive control. This ironic take was also continued in gaming culture with the release of the *Illuminati* card game in 1982 by Steve Jackson Games. The game was structured around competing secret factions fighting to achieve ultimate world domination. In many ways it offered a playful and self-aware simulation of conspiratorial paranoia. As Mark Fenster notes, the game encapsulates "paranoia for a few hours" with the objective being nothing less than "to take control of the world" (174). Thus, the game transforms the suspicion and hidden control into an interactive experience that demonstrates how the myth of Illuminati operates not just as a political agent but also as a phenomenon in cultural discourse.

Freemasonry, a legitimate fraternal organization with a long history and a reputation for mystery, is another key component of elite conspiracy theories. "The history of Freemasonry traces back to the early 17th century, with the formation of the Grand Lodge of England in 1717 being a significant turning point. However, the origins of Freemasonry [ranged] from ancient builders to medieval stonemasons" (United Grand Lodge of England). Despite being founded in England, Freemasonry had immense impact in American history, "after all, 13 of the 39 men who signed

the U.S. Constitution were Masons. Founding Fathers like George Washington, James Monroe, Benjamin Franklin, John Hancock and Paul Revere all counted themselves as members of the fraternal order” (Rotondi). However, it has frequently been the subject of suspicion and theories due to its covert meetings, obscure symbols, and powerful known members. Freemasons are portrayed as the administrative and spiritual guardians of a global cabal in a lot of conspiracy theories, particularly those that are connected to stories about the NWO. The infamous pyramid and the all-seeing eye are two examples of their essential architectural imagery that frequently resurfaces in popular media and conspiracy theories as symbols of Masonic dominance. As evident in the “Alien and Sedition Acts,” the Freemasonic influence bore with it an anti-Masonic movement in the United States. This manifested in the formation of the Anti-Masonic Party in the 1820s.

Formed in 1826 in the wake of the disappearance of William Morgan, a New York bricklayer alleged to have divulged lodge secrets, the Anti-Masonic Party was the product of hysteria, cleverly played upon by local politicians. It played an influential part in the politics of New York and surrounding states, and drew sufficient Whig support away from Henry Clay in the 1832 presidential election to help sweep President Andrew Jackson back into office. (OxfordReference)

The anti-Masonic movement exceeded to create discontent towards minority religions, particularly Mormonism. As concerns about Freemasonry’s extent escalated, it created reactions against the members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints. As Goldberg notes, Americans came to perceive Mormons not for their theology, but as alternative structures of power that can be threats of revolt. Then Missouri Governor Lilburn Boggs even went on to suggest “[t]he

Mormons must be treated as enemies, and must be exterminated . . . if necessary, for the public peace’” (7).

The lengthy list of well-known people who have been confirmed Freemasons, especially in the political and intellectual arenas, contributes to the suspicion surrounding the organization. As mentioned before, many of the founding fathers of the United States openly admitted to being Freemasons including George Washington. “The Capitol's first cornerstone was laid on September 18, 1793, by President Washington in a Masonic ceremony” (Architect of the Capitol). The Esoteric Freemasons website lists Alexander Fleming, Henry Ford, Simón Bolívar, Voltaire, Winston Churchill, and Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart among many world-renowned Freemasons. The prominent positions of these members, according to some, supported the notion that Freemasonry is a silent force behind political and cultural advancements rather than just a private society. Meanwhile, the anti-Masonic movement also includes well known advocates. “Among the prominent Americans supporting the anti-Masonic movement were John Quincy Adams, William Lloyd Garrison, and Thurlow Weed” (Goldberg 7)

Myths about the Freemasons and Illuminati have been directly and symbolically incorporated into theories of the New World Order. These groups are frequently cited as models of secretive control and bureaucratic manipulation rather than as actual organizations with active members. The Illuminati and Freemasons are portrayed as the historical roots of a global elite that currently functions through contemporary institutions like central banks, multinational corporations, and international organizations in the discourse surrounding the NWO, especially that which has been influenced and produced by religious leaders like Pat Robertson and strengthened by populism. It is claimed that this elite uses networks of influence that cut across national boundaries and democratic procedures to impose their will. The NWO’s metaphorical

framework easily fits the language of secrecy, initiation, and ritual that surrounds these groups. Freemasonic symbols like the pyramid or all-seeing eye are seen as evidence that this ancient order still influences modern power structures, particularly when they appear on government buildings or national currency as exemplified in the American one-dollar bill. Conspiracy culture also reframes the Illuminati, which was once a local intellectual society, as the ideological leader of globalization and excessive rule. Conspiracy culture thus gives its anxieties a historical heritage by incorporating these earlier secret societies into theories of the NWO, implying that the current global order is the product of a long-term, intentional plan rather than a recent development.

Narratives of the New World Order flourished in the 1990s, when globalization was improving fast. Suspicion was now centered on institutions like the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and the United Nations. Conspiracy theorists viewed these organizations as instruments of a centralized power that sought to erase national identities and impose ideological unity. This feeling of losing control was only worsened by the growth of international coalitions and international collaboration. Critics of globalization saw the state of media and technology as proof of an elite-led conspiracy to undermine individuality and impose a new ideological order. Conspiracy thinking was particularly critical of the United Nations, which was often portrayed as the symbolic organization of a future one-world government. In this framework, the structure and symbolism of earlier secret societies were retroactively mapped onto these contemporary institutions, creating a renewed sense of political and cultural scare by intertwining old and new anxieties.

3.2 The New World Order Theory

While myths and speculation surrounding secret societies like Illuminati and the Freemasons had circulated around for many centuries, it was the 1991 book *The New World Order*

that introduced them to newer audiences in a brand-new perspective. While the idea of an undercover circle of elites working behind the curtains was already more or so prominent, Pat Robertson departed from the secular critics of the concept and instead adopted a spiritual approach. In many ways Robertson constructed a narrative in a dichotomous framework of moral conflict which presented a fight between the good and the evil in quite a Manichean fashion.

Manichaeism was a dualistic religious movement that originated in third century Persia, founded by the prophet Mani who referred to himself as the “Apostle of Light” and the ultimate “Illuminator” (Britannica). The Manichean worldview, rooted in the idea of the ancient religion, is the approach that the universe is a battleground between the forces of pure evil and good. In this sense, good and evil are not mere moral qualities or judgements, but they are metaphysical opposites. This strict dualism made Manichaeism a symbolic foundation for interpreting the world as a battleground for this never-ending conflict. However, as Jeffrey Burton Russell points out, dualism is not exclusive to only Manichaeism but it exists on a spectrum throughout many religious traditions. Russell states that:

Dualistic religions form a spectrum from the extreme and absolute of Zoroastrianism, becoming more and more attenuated through the Zoroastrian heresy Zervanism, Gnosticism, and Manicheism to Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, where dualism almost ceases to exist. All these religions, however different from one another, stand together in their distance from monism. (99)

What Russell means by this is that dualism, while most visible in systems like Zoroastrianism or Manichaeism, persists as an underlying tension even within monotheistic traditions. The enduring distinction between divine and demonic, good and evil, or purity and corruption continue to shape moral perception and social narratives. While Christianity, Judaism, and Islam all contain similar,

albeit more subtle, tensions between good and evil, spirit and matter, or God and Satan, Manichaeism is one of the most evident manifestations of this ideology. Thus, in contemporary cultural or political discourse, the term "Manichean" has become a symbolic term frequently employed to characterize simplistic, black-and-white takes on conflict, particularly those that present events as a cosmic struggle between absolute good and absolute evil.

Pat Robertson's rhetoric fits into this inherited tradition of moral absolutism. Robertson uses a Manichean way of thinking to frame the events of his time not just as political fights but as signs of a deeper spiritual war. He sees the actions of global elites, international institutions, and even political opponents in the United States as part of a larger cosmic conflict in The New World Order. He does this by using the structure of Manichean dualism and changing it to fit the worries of American conservatism in the late twentieth century. While building his arguments, Robertson structures it around conspiracy theories that had accumulated upon that point regarding the Illuminati. According to Michael Barkun; Robertson was not the first person to voice such concerns, however his theories held importance "not in its content but in its authorship, for Robertson [was] the first modern religious and political figure of national stature to embrace a belief in an Illuminist conspiracy" (53). In *The New World Order*, Robertson suggests that Adam Weishaupt, the founder of the Bavarian Illuminati, aimed to overthrow "civil governments, the church, and private property" (67) to create a one world leadership run by those that are deemed worthy and illuminated. Robertson continues to write that the group successfully infiltrated the French government and made way for the French revolution, and he even suggests that "several of the key leaders of the French Revolution were members of the Illuminati" (68). Robertson goes on to link the revolution to the communist triumph in Russia.

Moreover, Robertson states that in the aftermath of the French revolution, with the rundown state of the country, “France was ready for dictatorship, not by the Illuminati, but by Napoleon. Thus ended the first modern new world order” (68). In constructing a version of history that substantiates his approach, Robertson portrays a perfect and unquestionable thread for his readers to follow. He provides a dark agenda by Weishaupt and the Illuminati to create the first attempt at a new world order. Robertson insinuates that by overthrowing monarchy, the French Revolution gained the secret society its first political manipulation operation with success. By calling it “the first modern new world order,” Robertson differentiates it from the then conflicts and allusions of the Illuminati in the 1990s. In a way it is the second coming of the Illuminati that is in his perspective taking over with the rise of the United Nations, economic globalism and of course transnational blurring of individual state governance.

Pat Robertson argues that this new version is not only politically but also spiritually sinister at its core. One perfect symbolic annotation of this is at the very beginning of the book. At the very beginning of the book, there is a biblical passage from Luke 4:5-8 which is as follows;

Then the devil, taking Him up on a high mountain, showed Him all the kingdoms of the world in a moment of time. And the devil said to Him “All this authority I will give You, and their glory; for this has been delivered to me, and I give it to whomever I wish. “Therefore, if You will worship before me, all will be Yours.” And Jesus answered and said to him “Get behind Me, Satan! For it is written, ‘You shall worship the Lord and your God, and Him only you shall serve.’”

Robertson’s use of this passage highlights his religious motivations but it also is an indicator of an even more substantial message in the book. It describes an exchange between Christ and the Devil where the latter one is offering the former power over all the kingdoms of the world in exchange

for worship. This, in many ways, sets the tone for the theme that these global elites are not only aiming for absolute power, but they are also orchestrating a Satanic conspiracy to control the world. By the use of this passage, Robertson implies that his contemporary world power structures were in direct contact with and under the influence of the devil. The book therefore motivates its reader and Robertson's existing base he has from his success with conservative Christian right-wing circles with the highlight of a direct challenge to their religious values, making a perfect argument for the Manichaeian discourse it sets.

The New World Order in many ways is a key source to understand the era since its author had a reach of impact greater than the book. Pat Robertson's influence over the American conservative circles had a decades-long standing to provide his book the momentum it gained in the 1990s. Robertson initially acquired fame as a televangelist, which means "someone who makes regular television broadcasts to promote a particular form of Christianity and raise money for particular Christian groups or projects" (Collins). Robertson originally founded his own network named the Christian Broadcasting Network (CBN) in the 1960s. Thus, he was already a well-established household name for his target audience. He even ran for the Republican presidential nomination in the 1988 elections yet lost the primary race to George H. W. Bush, whom he critiqued numerous times in *The New World Order*. Although he lost the nomination, he gained an even more nationwide profile following the election and went on to found the Christian Coalition in 1989. His book, therefore, did not exist as a standalone study of a conspiracy theorist, but as a manifesto of a man with remarkable following.

3.3 The Syndicate in *The X-Files*

As explored in the analysis of Pat Robertson's *The New World Order*, one way conspiracy narratives in the post-Cold War era framed global events was through the idea that they could be

understood as outcomes of a hidden struggle between good and evil. This rhetoric, drawing on moral absolutism and casting the enemy less as specific corrupt individuals than as a pervasive force, illustrates a broader tendency within conspiracy discourse of the period. This pattern was not limited to Robertson's text alone, as similar forms of moral dualism circulated widely in popular and political contexts. In popular culture one example of this is *The X-Files*. As explained in the previous chapters, *The X-Files* tells the struggles of Fox Mulder and Dana Scully in a constant war against a systematically intertwined group within the FBI and the government. This group is named the Syndicate.

Cambridge Dictionary defines the word syndicate as “a group of people or companies who join together in order to share the cost of a particular business operation for which a large amount of money is needed”. While the initial definition of the word is an annotation to financial collaboration, the Syndicate in *The X-Files* is referring to a much darker concept. It is a secretive group of powerful men who have aligned themselves with a conspiracy to collaborate with alien colonists. This fictitious group does not behave like an outsider faction; instead, it works as a deeply established part of government and business structures. This is essentially quite similar to real-world suspicions that global elites are secretly influencing the path of human history.

The group is seen gathering around dark, smoky, and ‘shady’ rooms -both literally and figuratively- throughout the seasons with barely any context attained to their existence. Their name even does not come up more than a couple of times. First time they are named is by the key member, Cigarette Smoking Man in a scene from “Two Fathers,” eleventh episode of season six. In the scene Cigarette Smoking Man calls up a man named as the Second Elder in the script and he says he has “called an emergency meeting of the Syndicate” (14:49). Until this moment the group is always seen and present yet never named.

The two-part mythology arc in the thirteenth and the fourteenth episodes of season five, titled “Patient X” and “The Red and the Black,” marks a pivotal moment in the series, expanding the range of *The X-Files*’ conspiracy storyline. In the episodes, there is an unprecedented narrative as Fox Mulder and Dana Scully clash on their usual debates on the existence of extra-terrestrial life; yet this time Mulder is the one approaching the subject from a sceptic approach. Following the events that led him to believe the alien life conspiracy was a cover-up of a government project; he argues with Scully. He even presents his sceptic arguments at a conference at the start of the episode “Patient X”.

MULDER: What I've seen, I've seen because I wanted to believe ... It's strongly held by believers in UFO phenomena that there is military complicity or involvement in abductions, but what if there is no complicity? What if there is simply just the military, seeking to develop an arsenal against which there is no defense ... a conspiracy wrapped in a plot inside a government agenda.

The episodes present two essential characters, a son and a mother, Agent Jeffrey Spender and Cassandra Spender. Cassandra is a self-identified abductee who insists she was part of a conspiracy: “I'm sure the government's involved. They just, they don't want us to know about it all” (13:43). While Scully believes she shares the same trauma with Cassandra, Mulder and Cassandra’s son Jeffrey denies this. Cassandra’s narrative becomes pivotal as she is disclosed to be integral to an experiment about alien-human hybridization.

Throughout both episodes another aspect is how the Syndicate seems to be in a vulnerable state as a force stronger than them seems to be in action: faceless alien rebels. In one scene they reveal signs of worry when Well-Manicured Man (WMM) and two elders who are unnamed and credited with code names discuss:

SECOND ELDER: What the hell is going on? This is our own backyard.

FIRST ELDER: This is no good. I don't like being kept in the dark on this.

WMM: Someone's going to great lengths to sabotage our work.

SECOND ELDER: Who?

WMM: One way or another, we'd better find out before it's determined we're unable to handle this ourselves ... to put a stop to it ... before the Colonists intervene.

This exchange is striking because it reverses the usual power dynamic of the series. For the first time, the Syndicate, normally the faceless force orchestrating events, is itself “kept in the dark,” echoing the paranoia and uncertainty it has long imposed on others. This moment humanizes the conspirators, stripping away their sense of omnipotence and showing them as fallible actors caught in circumstances beyond their control. Unlike supernatural villains or alien beings, they are ordinary men whose authority is contingent and precarious. The fact that they can lose control over the very conspiracy they created underscores the fragility of power structures, making their fears both realistic and relatable. In this sense, the Syndicate embodies a truth about real-world conspiracies: that secrecy and dominance are never absolute, but always vulnerable to disruption, exposure, or forces beyond calculation. In a way, the series conveys the apprehension that these intellectuals and elite global leaders are not only concealing the truth but may also be unable to control the repercussions of their actions.

“Patient X” ends with many abductees, including Cassandra and Scully, lured to a bridge where an alien aircraft appears and they are attacked by faceless alien rebels. However, in “The Red and the Black”, Scully manages to survive the attack, yet, she has no recollections. Still in a debate with Mulder over the extra-terrestrial involvement, Scully decides to get hypnogogic trance in order to evoke memories of the incident (20:43). Scully reveals that Cassandra was taken by the

alien aircraft while the rest of the abductees were attacked by the rebels. However, Mulder refuses this by saying he previously underwent the same procedure to understand his sister's abduction. Mulder alleges the memory is altered and he also did not remember the real occurrences. When talking with Walter Skinner about the tape of Scully's session Mulder disagrees: "Agent Scully witnessed a very powerful event. Not unlike the one I described on my regression tape of the false memory of my sister's abduction" (23:30). Mulder's distrust towards not only Scully's but also his own memory is a sign of the deep epistemological uncertainty that drives both the series and conspiracy culture more broadly. By casting doubt on the very reliability of perception, the show demonstrates how truth itself becomes elusive, always filtered through potentially manipulated recollections. This instability blurs the line between authentic experience and constructed narrative, mirroring how conspiracy theories thrive in the gaps between evidence and interpretation. In this moment, Mulder embodies the paradox of the believer who is compelled to seek answers, yet increasingly suspects that even his own memories may be part of the deception. The episode ends with the revelation that the Cigarette Smoking Man is the ex-husband of Cassandra Spender and father of Jeffrey Spender (44:00).

Season six episode eleven "Two Fathers" and the following episode "One Son," which aired a season after "Patient X" and "The Red and the Black," are key parts of the overarching mythology arc of the series and offer a great deal of exposé on the Syndicate by concluding the storyline of their project and the main conspiracy. After the credits, "Two Fathers" starts with Cigarette Smoking Man in a dark room, talking to an unseen person. Right from the start, CSM summarizes the big conspiracy:

I could never have scripted the events that led us to this. None of us could. All the brilliant men, the secret that we kept so well. It happened simply, like this: We had a perfect

conspiracy with an alien race. Aliens who were coming to reclaim this planet and to destroy all human life. Our job was to secretly prepare the way for their invasion. To create for them a slave race of human/alien hybrids. They were good plans. Right plans.

Kept secret for over 50 years, ever since the crash at Roswell. (04:30)

What makes the episodes quite essential is a very obscure drawing of the line between good and evil. It is revealed that the project was aimed to make sure the alien colonists were satisfied with their surrender and collaboration; while covertly developing a super-human hybrid race to combat them for when the time comes. Although still cast as the antagonists, the revelation of the groups motives and how the project was aimed at the survival of the human race puts many aspects into question. For the group, the project is more about necessity than profit.

In the episode, Cassandra Spender returns after a year of her abduction. While she was in a wheelchair the last time we see her; Cassandra can now walk. Cassandra explains herself the events and the components of the conspiracy:

CASSANDRA SPENDER: I told you that the aliens were here to do good and that I was being used as an oracle to spread the word. Only now I know what the aliens are here for and it isn't good.

MULDER: What are they here for?

CASSANDRA SPENDER: To wipe us off the planet. They're taking over the universe.

They're infecting all other life-forms with a black substance called Purity. (20:25)

Cassandra then goes on to reveal to Scully and Mulder that his ex-husband is part of the group of men that had a secret collaboration with the alien colonists. Going through the FBI system, Mulder and Scully find through Cassandra and Jeffrey's last name who that man is. "Smokey's got a name" (26:40) says Mulder as they discover the identity of CSM to be C.G.B. Spender on their screen

although there seems to be no information available about him. The idea that a man so deeply enmeshed in government conspiracies can exist within the heart of the FBI system without a trace resonates strongly with the cultural fear that state power is maintained not only by secrecy but by selective erasure. The absence of information, then, becomes proof of hidden influence. In this way, the series dramatizes one of the central paradoxes of conspiracy thinking: silence and omission are not neutral but are themselves reinterpreted as evidence of control.

While “Two Fathers” introduces an inner glance at the mechanical workings and the ideological justifications of the Syndicate, the following episode “One Son” brings the conclusive end of it. Once Cassandra is revealed to also be a liability to the decades-long operation, the Syndicate decides to hand her over to the alien colonists in order to trigger the long overdue alien invasion. The episode starts with a flashback to 1973 (00:55), to when the group first offered their family members as subjects to the alien colonists as a sign of obedience and trust. The scene also portrays them laying the folded flag of the United States on the floor at the feet of the aliens. This scene frames the Syndicate's origins not in dominance but in capitulation. By offering up their own family members and laying the American flag at the feet of the aliens, they embody both complicity and vulnerability. The flag, symbol of sovereignty and national ideals, becomes instead a gesture of submission, signaling how human agency is already compromised. The Syndicate appear less as omnipotent puppet masters than as desperate collaborators, trading kin and principle for a fragile share of power. In cultural terms, the moment echoes 1990s anxieties about globalization and the erosion of national authority, fears that international forces might overtake American sovereignty. As the Syndicate gather at an air base to meet the aliens with Cassandra as an offering of surrender, they are met by alien rebels (38:40). The rebels, off-screen, incinerate them all in a sudden attack. It is shown that only Cigarette Smoking Man and his loyal associate

Diana Fowley manage to escape and the rest of them are killed. Thus, both the project to build an alien-human hybrid and the conspirators behind them are met with their end. In an ironic way, their destruction is not at the hands of Mulder or Scully but the aliens that they have conspired with since the very beginning.

Cigarette Smoking Man's arc is quite important in the episodes. CSM is driven by a complicated moral position. CSM is portrayed as operating from a conflicted moral stance: his collaboration with the colonists is not driven by personal profit but by a belief that compliance is the only way to ensure human survival, even if it requires moral compromise. This rationale, coupled with his strained role as a father to Jeffrey Spender, complicates the audience's view of him as merely a villain, positioning him instead as a figure trapped within a logic of necessity and sacrifice. In a way the episode reflects the broader thematic bases of the series as the truth is not only out there, but it is obscured by layers of intention and outcome. The villains are not evil for evils sake, in fact they are doing what they do for the public's sake making personal sacrifices along the way. "Two Fathers" and "One Son" therefore deepen the series' portrayal of the Syndicate as a crisis of control and identity.

The Syndicate's strategy involved postponing alien colonization by collaborating and gaining time while they developed a human-alien hybrid resistant. Similar but also different to Pat Robertson's portrayal of global occurrences as a cosmic struggle between good and evil, *The X-Files* integrates the Syndicate into a narrative of moral ambiguity, wherein collaborators with a malevolent entity rationalize their actions as salvaging the rest of the world. *The X-Files* not only portrays conspiracy ideas but also gives way to their inherent paradoxes, implying that the secrecy and power accumulation characteristic of such elites ultimately contribute to their demise.

The Syndicate's secretive nature in *The X-Files* is both a plot device and a way to criticize how powerful people can act without being held accountable for their actions by the public. The series shows a world where a few powerful people make decisions for everyone else without their permission, which is similar to real-life fears that elites are controlling world events without being held accountable. Richard Flannery and David Louzecky state that in the case of democratic philosophy the idea of publicity is at the foundation of good governance. They reference Jeremy Bentham to show that the idea of keeping things secret may help in the short term, but in the long run, it destroys trust and makes people unhappy. They assert that according to Bentham openness, not dishonesty, is what makes democracy strong (65-66). The Syndicate's method, which is based on deception and hidden goals, is completely at odds with this idea. The Syndicate's one-sided choice to side with alien colonists and keep the public in the dark is a perfect example to the abuse of secrecy that people fear in *The X-Files*. The series dramatizes the terrible effects of elite secrecy, which is similar to a larger cultural worry about who really has power. The fall of the Syndicate is in a way not just the conclusion of a made-up plot; it is also a warning about how easy it is to lose trust in any institution.

3.4 The Cigarette Smoking Man

If the Syndicate serves as an allegorical embodiment of elite conspiratorial dominance, then the Cigarette Smoking Man represents its embodied core. Present from the very first episode of *The X-Files*, sometimes remaining in the background of pivotal scenes without speaking any word, CSM's enduring yet quiet presence is a symbolic existence that transcends any plot progression. He is enigmatic, rarely revealing actual and accurate personal details, yet his impact is evident in almost every significant governmental decision and concealment portrayed in the series. Thus, in many aspects he transcends conventional characterization, serving as a key figure

for systemic power, embodying a shadow state whose authority is gained not by election but by secrecy and manipulation. As the show advances, CSM evolves from an anonymous background character into a very intricate human. This evolution enables the audience to confront the unexpected humanity underlying the surface metaphor he stands for within the context of the conspiracy.

Much of the Cigarette Smoking Man's life is purposefully veiled in the show and the little detail presented about his past is constantly shrouded by intentional plot holes or absurd details that derail the truth. According to the obscure theories in the series, he is the orphan of a Communist spy and was raised in state institutions following his mother's death from lung cancer. He later joined the United States Army and became involved in covert activities during the Cold War. Over time, he became a powerful player within the State Department, appearing at pivotal points in secret history, especially the cover-up of alien contact and conspiring with aliens. He went by several identities, the most well-known one being C.G.B. Spender. CSM's existence in *The X-Files* is marked by manipulation, moral ambiguity, and a dedication to his duties, which frequently comes at the expense of truth and human lives.

One of the most quintessential episodes in not only the Cigarette Smoking Man's repertoire but also the entire run of the series is the seventh episode of season four, titled "Musings of a Cigarette Smoking Man." Contrary to the rest of the series the episode is not accounted through Mulder and Scully's perspectives. It is instead told as a story by one of the Lone Gunmen; Frohike. In the episode, the group along with the audience as well as Scully and Mulder attempt to uncover the past of CSM. However, instead of offering conventional clarity to his background, the episode blurs the line between fact and fiction, simultaneously enforcing the ambiguous nature of truth and conspiracy thinking. In the narrative sense, the episode traces the rise of CSM from an orphaned

child of an allegedly communist spy to a high-ranking military officer who then evolves into the figure the audience is familiar with. CSM is depicted as a man that is capable of some of the most key events in United States history from assassinating John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King Jr. to scripting Muhammed Ali's fate, to even controlling and rigging sports events. In a way, he is a secret hand behind the curation process of modern times.

The claims or discoveries made about the Cigarette Smoking Man's past are presented in such exaggeration that the series in a way creates a parody of itself. However, *The X-Files* does not entirely dismiss these theories, it instead presents them in a tone with such ambiguity that this fiction within a fiction becomes a sort of enigma and a representation of the nature of truth. In many ways, "Musings of a Cigarette Smoking Man" refuses to validate these revelations nor does it disprove them. The uncertainty is cultivated as a narrative device, which accomplishes to maintain the tone of obscure stylistic storytelling of the series.

While Frohike presents his findings to Mulder and Scully, CSM himself is seen secretly listening on their conversation, while lining up a sniper shot at Frohike. However, with great suspense as to whether he will pull the trigger until the very end of the episode, he ends up deciding not to kill him. The very last line of the episode is CSM muttering to himself "I can kill you whenever I please... But not today" (43:30). This is a great indicator of the outreaches of his power. He had the knowledge that the Lonely Gunmen and the Mulder and Scully duo could have been uncovering deep secrets he had worked decades to keep under wraps, and furthermore he had the power to stop it. He also had the chance to pull the trigger at the very end and punish Frohike for his curiosity. However, the fact that he had control over the information Mulder and Scully were getting, he had the privilege of deciding whether they can attain the knowledge about himself, and the very fact that he was already one step ahead of them is proof that his existence as an

antagonist that is omnipresent is an indicator to how Mulder and Scully may never actually attain the real answers. The information they are getting is always on his terms. Whether the motivation behind CSM's decision to not assassinate Frohike is moral or logical is never clarified, yet this is also very much consistent with any motivation he has ever had. The narrative's lack of providing a firm ground for the actions not only destabilizes the audience's comprehension of the content of the episode, but also the entire storytelling of *The X-Files*.

One more part of what makes the episode as obscure as it is is how it plays with the idea that the information about CSM that Frohike has gathered may as well be the projection and imagination of CSM himself. In the episode, he is seen attempting to publish fictional stories under pseudonyms in the hope of becoming a writer. While his writings mirror the events the audience watches throughout the episode, they are constantly reminded that this may as well be a narrative of CSM attempting to mythologize his life. Unlike all the conspiracy plots he pulls, the assassinations, the coverups and much more elaborate operations he is behind; his writing seems to be the most enthusiastic pursuit of his. In a way, this can be taken as a criticism towards authoritarian desire to construct narrative and dictate the discourse.

"Musings of a Cigarette Smoking Man" is ambiguously crafted in order to function as an embodiment of conspiracy narratives about the elite as well. CSM is seen as a caricature of a puppet master pulling the strings and the levers behind the scenes. The idea that this singular official inside the government can be behind of not only the assassination of president Kennedy, MLK Jr., the outcome of the Super Bowl, and to top all of that a secret project to conspire with alien colonists is beyond absurd. Yet, this is how the series acknowledges the eccentric scope of conspiracist mindset. CSM therefore is less of a real man than a mythical figure of evil.

According to Richard A. Hall, the episode “shows the possibility, or probability, that CSM was never a man with evil intent but, rather, a man whose patriotism and sense of duty was used by nefarious sources to coerce him into a life of villainy (exacerbated by his own failures at his desired profession)” (49). This distorted portrayal of the Cigarette Smoking Man as both omnipotent and pitiable directly contributes to the Manichean framework that supports much of conspiracy culture. CSM is a representation of elite evil, but it is not always clear how to deal with it. He is not a demon or a messiah; instead, he is in an area that shows the audience’s own anxieties and projections. In the conventional dualism of good versus evil, the elite conspirator would have to be portrayed as entirely sinister, operating without a consequence to his deeds. But *The X-Files* does not support this binary. There are a lot of contradictions in CSM’s description. He is cold but sentimental, strong but weak, and manipulative but held back by his own unfulfilled goals. The viewer is not sure if he is really in charge of world events or just dreaming about it in a desperate attempt to gain recognition and fame.

Another episode that can be examined to further understand the characteristics of the Cigarette Smoking Man is the fifteenth episode of season seven, “En Ami.” The episode is significant for many reasons, one of them being the fact that it showcases one of the rare occasions where CSM interacts with Dana Scully directly and alone. However, the greatest significance would be the writer; William B. Davis who is also the actor that portrays CSM. In the episode, not only the manipulative scheming side of CSM is displayed, but also his altruistic facade that he puts on allows a questioning of whether true information would ever be accessible as long as it is controlled by figures like him. In the episode, he approaches Scully pretending to be offering peace, saying he has a treatment for terminal diseases and giving her a chance to change the world.

This premise gives *The X-Files* a chance to look into the complicated feelings of both characters. CSM knows that Scully will be interested in the chance to help people because she is both a scientist and has a history with cancer herself. Yet, the ordeal gives Scully not much space to allow herself to trust CSM. He wants her to trust him without offering enough reason and evidence. The dynamic between the two, in a way, reflects larger ideas in elite conspiratorial culture. People in authority are accused of saying they are doing what is best for everyone, but not giving people the knowledge they need to hold them accountable for their actions that happened behind the curtains in a democracy.

Furthermore, “En Ami” echoes a conspiracy theory that is among the most popularly believed ones; that the government possesses the cure for cancer and intentionally prevents the public from ever attaining it. According to an online survey conducted by J. Eric Oliver and Thomas J. Wood in 2014, 63 percent of people have heard of the conspiracy theory that “[t]he Food and Drug Administration is deliberately preventing the public from getting natural cures for cancer and other diseases because of pressure from drug companies” (817). Among the participants 37 percent said they agree with the theory, 31 said they neither agree nor disagree and only 31 percent said they do not believe it; making the theory the most popular one in the survey compared to those about HIV or vaccinations. Hence, the episode highlights the worries about public health by portraying CSM as a gatekeeper of the cure.

While the episode perfectly captures manipulation, it also showcases honesty and deception. The audience is challenged at different times to think about whether CSM is being honest or just acting out an illusion. Scully is ultimately betrayed. The data disk he gives is encrypted, and no important scientific breakthrough is found. This betrayal, which seems small and anticlimactic, makes the point that CSM’s power does not necessarily come from violence or

domination; it also comes from his capacity to manipulate expectations and curate the narrative. While trying to convince Scully, the following dialogue takes place between the two:

SCULLY: What exactly is it you expect to receive?

CIGARETTE SMOKING MAN: Your trust. You question my sincerity. You think I'm heartless. Would it soften your opinion of me if I confessed that I've always had a particular affection for you? I assure you my intentions are honorable. I have affection for Mulder, too. My affection for you is special. I held your life in my hands. Your cancer was terminal. I had a cure. Can you imagine what that's like? To have the power to extinguish a life or to save it and let it flourish? Now, to give you that power, so you can do the same. (16:19)

CSM's unsettling moral dilemma is captured in this moment. Instead of appearing evil, he disguises his manipulation with familiarity and grace. Not only does the power disparity seem disturbing, but it also resembles gracious behavior by offering life and demanding trust. Cigarette Smoking Man in a way plays God by showcasing omnipotent power. The episode shows how elite authority in *The X-Files* is not just about control but also narrative modifications, where authority is disguised as salvation by owning the right to choose who lives and dies. Furthermore, he alleges that it is a burden rather than an abuse.

Throughout the episode Scully notes and records every data she acquires about the Cigarette Smoking Man and even mails Mulder the voice recordings, however they never reach him. At the end of the episode when Scully takes Mulder to the place she met with CSM, it is empty where his supposed office was. As Mulder asserts that CSM used her, Scully keeps on saying "Mulder, I looked into his eyes. I swear what he told me was true" (42:27). The scene goes

on to a cut of CSM destroying the disk that contains the cure by tossing it out into the water. In the meantime, the following dialogue continues between Mulder and Scully:

MULDER: He did it all for himself. To get the science on that disk. His sincerity was a mask, Scully. The man's motives never changed.

SCULLY: You think he used me to save himself at the expense of the human race?

MULDER: No, he knows what that science is worth, how powerful it is. He'd let nothing stand in his way.

SCULLY: You may be right... but for a moment, I saw something else in him. A longing for something more than power. Maybe for something he could never have.

(42:39)

The ending scene and the dialogue from “En Ami” allows two contradicting looks at CSM, as Scully sees his humanity and Mulder sees the insincere manipulator. Yet, both perspectives coexist as their cases can be seen as plausible given the grey ambiguity of the character.

Thus, the Cigarette Smoking Man is a way for the show to look at the metaphysical terror of not knowing what will happen. In conspiracy narratives, especially those that are based on the NWO fear, the truth is always just out of reach because the elite and their secretive institutions keep it hidden. But *The X-Files* makes things even more complicated by turning even the most powerful people into unreliable storytellers. CSM does not have the all-knowing power to the extent he should have. Ironically, his desire to be known as a novelist instead of a murderer and a creator instead of a destroyer shows that he wants to be recognized, not be an object of fear. This conflict between how he wants to be seen and what he really is brings to mind the bigger paradox at the heart of elite conspiracy thinking: the idea that a small handful of godlike characters control

the world, even if they often contradict in their range of capability regardless of their reception by the suspecting public.

3.5 The Syndicated World Order

To conclude, the study of the Syndicate in *The X-Files* in a world concerned immensely with theories regarding a New World Order conspiracy gives us the chance to reveal a common cultural anxiety. The 1990s were marked by a growing public discomfort with the idea that a small group of elite men wielded hidden influence. Whether it was through the Illuminati, the controversial United Nations or the fictional Syndicate, these figures were believed to control institutions, push their secret agendas and manipulate information. In the aftermath of the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the decades long “enemy” of the United States, many aspects of life were subject to change. One of the exceptions to these changes was the public tendency to be cautious of and alerted to dangerous powers at war against the ideal American life. At the center of these anxieties came the fear of a covert operation towards a cynical NWO which would antagonize those who hold power and those behind them.

In a very literal sense, a new world order was dawning with the end of the Cold War. Hence, the idea was voiced by prominent figures. End of the Cold War meant that the established global power balance was subject to dramatic change. Yet, how people perceive and receive the idea of power was also shifting with it. Defense mode is essential to survival. For centuries the balance rested on the us vs. them psyche in the American public, reaching its peak during the Cold War. However, when it was brought to an end, the us remained, and the them evolved. The 1990s did not stand alone in this suggestion. The distrust in the governmental institutions had long been brewing ever since the assassination of John F. Kennedy, the overstepping of the line by the CIA

and FBI, and the many scandals and revelations of instances of corruption by office holders that gave the public more and more reason to feel discontent.

The secret society plots were also not new to the 1990s by all means. As mentioned earlier, the Bavarian Illuminati had even been credited with overthrowing the French monarchy for their pursuit of a world without governments. The sinister undertone and the annotations to these narratives persisted throughout modern history, yet the 1990s marked a transition for them as well. With the concept of an outside threat shifting inwards, the idea that secret societies were operating inside governments and institutions was becoming undeniably plausible. Conspiracy theories surrounding these groups became more and more associated with globalization. The idea that invisible networks of elite operated with unease surrounded this new landscape with revival of these conspiracies, and further amping it up. Thus, in this sense, the NWO did not simply describe the changing global political frame, but it also became a discourse around mistrust in a world with truth becoming less visible and more ominous.

The X-Files, with the cultural space it held in conspiracy culture, does not shy away from engaging in this idea. The secret societies with rituals and pagan depictions took the place of men in suits, enemies more recognizable and thus more repulsive to the eye, sitting around in dark rooms, making decisions on behalf of their “subjects.” Despite the science-fictional aspects, this was more plausible to the eye as actual decision makers were fitting this role even more. This visual representation mirrored the real-life anxieties better because it represented actual powerful bureaucrats behind closed doors. The Syndicate embodied the aesthetic of this conspiracy theory perfectly. Its members were never aliens themselves, but they went to extreme lengths, even sacrificing their own family members to cooperate with the colonists; as they did so in the case of Samantha Mulder and Cassandra Spender. The clerical idea of demonic cults sacrificing actual

human life as rituals would be a part of a horror sequence, but government members making choices for the greater good would resonate more with the audience. By portraying its conspiracy not in the framework of cults, *The X-Files* managed to paint a picture of a more systematic and imaginable representation of the elite.

When Pat Robertson opened his book *The New World Order*, with a verse from the Bible, he manifested a theory and a narrative rooted in theological aesthetics. While Robertson alleged the leaders of the modern world were in cohesion with the Devil; *The X-Files*' Syndicate is in a very similar fashion in cohort with another source, aliens. Yet, in both instances, the conspiracy is not about the supernatural other, it is the humans who betray their own kind and align with the extraterrestrials/devil. The Syndicate, much like Robertson's elites, find ways to justify their actions as necessary sacrifices. They consider themselves to be vessels of intellect and they assume a responsibility attributed to them by the most powerful source they know, themselves. This self-proclaimed authority is what makes each narrative so disturbing. The notion that salvation or existence necessitates compliance to an unseen agreement, established without the awareness or approval of people, emerges as the primary threat to democracy itself. In a way, this goes against the core of the American ideals that were laid down in the Declaration of Independence as it is clearly stated in it that "[g]overnments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed." Thus, the disregard of consent reveals in a sense a disregard to the American ideals and democracy. This mutual agreement between those that govern and that are governed is in a way questioned in the series through this portrayal of the ones in charge. Furthermore, working together with Satan or aliens becomes a symbol of elite detachment, where decisions that impact all of humanity are made not by democratic agreement but by hidden, existential deals. In both contexts, the true horror lies not in the existence of a supernatural force,

but in the deliberate complicity of human agents who have neglected social order for the sake of control.

However, there is a very essential part of the story in *The X-Files* that is quite different than Robertson's understanding of the world; the moral and the motivation. In the world of the series, even after the Syndicate is taken down and dismantled, the conspiracy continues, the alien threat remains, and new questions keep arising. The ambiguity and a search for the elusive truth remains at the heart of the series. Yet the most ambiguous aspect is the refusal to subject to the clean moral dichotomy that defines the much more Manichean approach of Robertson. While Robertson's concept of the NWO is built on a binary division between good and evil, *The X-Files* does not use the same formula. The members of the Syndicate are not evil nor do they personally benefit from their cause. Many believe that the whole ordeal is for the interest of the survival of humanity. Thus, they depart from the villainous conspirators of the traditional understanding. In fact, their failure stems from their hubris and leads to the classical hamartia. While they cast themselves as those tasked with the power to decide the right and wrong; they fail to realize that is also a blurred line in the very space they are operating in. Just like truth, morality is also fragmented in *The X-Files*, which reaches its peak point in the characterization of the Cigarette Smoking Man.

The series' refusal to offer a fixed moral compass for CSM is what differentiates the conspiracist narrative of Pat Robertson from the mythological lore of *The X-Files*. Robertson imagines a world where malicious agents go against God's will and can be easily detected and differentiated from the rest. However, CSM never gets that kind of narrative clarity. Even though he is often cold blooded, his acts are not always motivated by malice. Rather, they arise from a complex interplay of duty, patriotism, and even fatalism. CSM is not a basic stand-in for Satanic evil; he is a display of how authoritarianism may hide behind rationality, sacrifice, and the idea of

order. Even though he is a person who lies, hides, kills, and manipulates people, he does it for the greater good. This intricacy defies the moral clarity pursued by theological conspiracists. Instead of spiritual combat, the series shows psychological conflict. CSM is not merely bad; he is also the personification of the bureaucratic dullness and emotional disintegration that happen when one person believes too strongly in the need for secrecy. His moral ambiguity therefore is not a sign of lacking in the writing; it is an intentional narrative device that fits with *The X-Files*' larger themes.

All in all, through its enigmatic style, *The X-Files*, rather than providing the audience with traditional answers to the questions it possesses; challenges them to consider what it means to pursue truth in a world designed to shroud it with lies and fallacies. The version of the conspiracy it employs is essentially different from that employed by the NWO theorists. It is a cautionary tale for all its agents rather than a heroic battle against the forces of darkness. In doing so, the series manages to reach an idea that the elite conspiracies do not endanger the world with only lies and secrecy, but also with control of narrative and eventually loss of it. The audience, much like the protagonists Mulder and Scully, is left navigating themselves in a territory marked with both intentional and uncontrolled conspiracies. In order to make sense of the actual new world and how it's order will be, *The X-Files* reminds us that the most dangerous force may not be hidden agendas behind closed doors, but the impossibility of ever separating truth from lie and thus reality from fiction. With its mythological arc weaved to reveal an omnipotent force of power which can also end up being fragmented, *The X-Files* challenges the traditional idea of elite presented by the likes of Pat Robertson all the while embodying aspects of it.

CONCLUSION

Throughout the course of this thesis, I have examined the American conspiracy culture to reveal that they are not mere irrational panicky outcries of marginal groups, but more of a sociological response to shifts of power. I have used the series *The X-Files* in order to highlight my main emphasis on the decade of the 1990s as it is both a product of it, and a reflection of the trend of thoughts of the decade. My central reasoning and argument in choosing this specific decade and the series is based on the historical shift at the end of the Cold War which had shaped the discourse around global power for the latter half of the twentieth century, which would result in a society that now had hesitations about a different enemy than the Soviet Union. This shift did not simply replace one enemy with another, but it redirected much of the suspicion once aimed at the Soviet Union toward domestic institutions. In the post-Cold War era, government agencies themselves increasingly became framed as potential antagonists within conspiracy discourse.

In the overall history of the United States, the paranoid state of mind that was described by the likes of Richard Hofstadter and the culture of conspiracy that it bore shaped the course of events on many occasions with itself being shaped by those events mutually. While conspiracy culture was deeply embedded in the roots and branches of American history, it started out as a different dynamic. Building itself on the motivation of an us vs. them idea; the culture of conspiracy in the earlier stages of the country was based on a fear and opposition to outsiders. In the nineteenth century, this dynamic was particularly visible in nativist movements, where Catholic immigrants were portrayed as agents of a papal conspiracy to undermine American institutions and Protestant society. This arguably would lead to theories regarding the wave of migrants of the time and create discord and tension.

However, fear of the outsider or the alien would reach a peak during the Cold War when a wave of Red Scare emerged in the country. Red Scare was the anxiety among Americans who believed that the Soviet Communist agenda was going to take over the world and thus America. The external paranoia was not confined to individual discourse; it was rather encouraged at the institutional level. With the establishment of the House Committee on Un-American Activities, the outreach of the Federal Bureau of Investigation and the cultural hunt for Communist traitors which would even scrutinize public figures like Lucille Ball and Charlie Chaplin were all fuels to the fire within the society. In other words, the state itself was a protector of the order in a literal but unusual war against this enemy that was believed to be in attempts to sneak in.

While conspiracy theory conventionally refers to unevidenced notions fueled by hyperbole or subjective perceptions; many events lead to the fragmentation of the narrative to contribute to the mindset behind this culture. Political scandals like Watergate, revelation that the FBI and the Central Intelligence Agency had taken measures to monitor civilians, the public discourse around the assassinations of John F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert F. Kennedy all created a disillusioned American psyche. While the state and its body parts were still considered the protector of the American ideal, there was a slow deterioration in the trust towards the systemic structures.

This shift reached a maximum point at the end of the Cold War because the disappearance of the common enemy left a vacant spot for the conspiracy culture circles to feel obligated to fill with internal enemies. Without a visible “other,” the suspicion turned to invisible sources within. Americans were no longer worried about foreign plots, but owing to the decades long brewing anxieties, they instead began to suspect that their own institutions were complicit in conspiracies and manipulation. The reason that this could be narrowed down to this certain time, the 1990s, is

that the aftermath of September 11 attacks would bring a new discourse of war on terror. While still questioned with conspiracy theory rhetoric, the attacks and the war of cultures brought a new dynamic and a new outside enemy for the American mindset to fear and speculate on. Thus, the 1990s stand as a peculiar timeframe where there was little to no signs of a threat to the United States in the global power environment.

The 1990s is a decade where the government once viewed to be in defense against infiltration was now seen as the conspirator itself. One of the clearest manifestations of this ideological shift was the rise of New World Order discourse. NWO theories did not come into existence out of nowhere, in fact they had bases that relied on centuries long historical context. NWO relied on the skepticism about the Bavarian Illuminati and the Freemasons that had been a part of conversations in Europe about secret plots. The narrative of a NWO, which was going to be built following the collapse of the Soviet Union according to the advocates of the theory, suggested that the high-ranking officials, the global institutions and the influential institutes like the media and the banks were all being run by the elite class. The theoreticians believed that there was a betrayal of public trust and values from within.

The theory was popularized by certain circles such as the right-wing evangelical discourse and especially by popular figures like Pat Robertson. Robertson and his contemporaries accused politicians, media moguls, international bankers and even global organizations such as the United Nations of being in cohorts with the actual, biblical devil. Thus, the NWO discourse was, in its essence, based on a Manichean structure that suggested the world was divided into absolute good and evil. In this binary structure, the elites were framed as demonic conspirators. The dualist nature of the theory resonated with a decade that had already faced rapid technological change and a fierce growth of globalism.

As the world shifted, theories spread, and the power dynamics evolved; a cultural sensation appeared in the popular television series *The X-Files*. The series allowed space for what many people had voiced concerns for. In many ways, it offered a fictionalized reflection of cultural anxieties. Focused on its two leading characters, Fox Mulder and Dana Scully, the series was about a grand overarching scheme of conspiracy about certain people and forces inside the government hiding the existence of extraterrestrial presence on earth; and moreover, conspiring with these alien colonists in their plan to invade earth. Conceptualizing the government bodies as them in contrast to the main characters being the embodiment of the “us” as in the public themselves allowed the series to showcase the narrative popularized in the decade it aired in.

Conspiracy culture nourishes on ambiguity and *The X-Files* provided a great deal of it. The series toyed with the concept of “truth” throughout its run and created a mythological arc that was like a puzzle without certain pieces to complete and reach a resolution. As Mulder and Scully worked towards the ultimate answers, those answers remained in smaller portions compared to the new questions they faced along the way. This constant pursuit of the unattainable mirrored the very structure of conspiratorial mindset where actual answers to theories are out of reach and suspicion never satisfies itself. The audience, much like believers of real-life conspiracy theories, found themselves in the position of investigators. Therefore, *The X-Files* blurred the line between fiction and cultural reality, which helped it resonate with the unstable climate of the 1990s.

The series also employed the moral structure of the NWO conspiracy which was the idea that trustworthy institutions were just puppets for an unseen evil force. In this sense, instead of Pat Robertson’s allegation that the elite was in cohorts with the devil, it was now aliens. However, the problem or the actual enemy here is neither the devil nor the aliens. In both cases, it is the people that collaborate with them to preserve the world order they hold true to themselves. Scully and

Mulder did not look for the truth in other countries or among people with extreme beliefs. Instead, they looked for it in the core of American bureaucracy, like the FBI, the military-industrial complex, and secret government groups. Although *The X-Files* did not come up with the idea that people do not trust the government, it gave it a cultural vehicle and narrative that millions of people could relate to.

At the core of the grand conspiratorial scheme of *The X-Files*, was the presence of the Syndicate and the elusive antagonist of the series; the Cigarette Smoking Man. In many ways, the group and the CSM personified the fear that a covert elite force was orchestrating the course of history. The Syndicate's secret collaboration with aliens, their control over information, and their ability to change political outcomes were all things that people were worried about in real life and were similar to what people said about the New World Order. On the other hand, the Cigarette Smoking Man, in particular, became a metaphor of the deep state's power. He was unrecognizable, omnipresent, and eerie.

The X-Files used the Syndicate and the CSM to illustrate a serialized story about elite conspiracy that fit perfectly with the ideas that were being circulated around at the time. The series did not disregard these concepts by marginalizing them; instead, it put them on prime-time television. It created a space for conspiratorial views to be seen in mainstream discourse, demonstrating people's anxiety on not only what government agencies do, but also if they can ever have access to the truth. It helped move conspiracy theories from the outer edges of American culture to the center of American life.

To clarify, I do not suggest that *The X-Files* advocates these theories. In fact, it can even be regarded as a criticism of these extremes as it constantly portrays Fox Mulder's belief system and his reasoning as a paradoxical pursuit. The series repeatedly showcases his belief without

skepticism on whether the subject is conspiratorial, extraterrestrial or paranormal. His blind and emotional motivation at occasions misleads him. Furthermore, his mindset has a counter balance in Dana Scully. “In fact, *The X-Files* actively promotes rigorous investigation and skepticism, not blind belief” (Norcross). While in some ways the danger of conspiracy culture is that it relies on faith in these theories without the existence of evidence, in *The X-Files* there is a constant search for evidence and truth.

As Scully challenges and rationalizes Mulder, his theories are also not discredited. This creates the perfect ambiguity for the series to address the cultural obscurity. It refuses to validate or entirely dismiss conspiratorial thinking. Mulder’s ideas are proven in many cases. However, while they are partially accurate, they are never the full truth; forcing Mulder to abandon the notion that he shall believe for the sake of believing. It is this balance between skepticism and belief that captures the essence of American conspiracy culture in the 1990s. The series does not take a definitive stance to suggest the world leaders are corrupt and must be taken down. It instead invites its audience to explore a culture of uncertainty and a search for the truth, while giving way for this cultural phenomenon of conspiracy theories to reveal itself.

While the series did become a mirror to the cultural psyche of the 1990s, it also served as a device for the audiences to make sense of the new state that the world was in. Through its portrayal of suspicion of the institutional bodies, *The X-Files* gave a demonstration of cultural anxieties. Works of art, literature, cinema and thus television cannot be separated from the time they were created in. In this sense, fictional narratives have the power to both portray and dissect the discourse. This is not to suggest that there are fully realized intentions behind the creation of them. However, it is inevitable for a cultural work to succeed to the extent of this particular TV series without being aware of the culture.

The slogan “The Truth Is Out There” which is seen at the end of each opening sequence of every episode of *The X-Files* echoes this pursuit of truth rather than comment on it with ideological motivations. In a way, the demolition of the Syndicate does not allow the series to peacefully conclude itself. Instead, the conspiracy web becomes even more intricate, and it transcends the elite. The truth as a concept stays “out there” as Mulder and Scully keep on working towards answers and questions.

The Syndicate also is not as simplistic and evil as the notion of most NWO theories on the elite. In fact, they are complicated characters instead of cynical sinister portrayals. CSM and the other members of the organization are portrayed to be in complete faith that their scheme is for the greater good of the public. While Pat Roberston’s notion of the elite only uses power for more power's sake, the Syndicate is still working for the benefit of society. It just does so in unconventional ways. Therefore, the line between good and evil drawn by the Manichean dualist approach is also blurred. Thus, the series does not become a one-sided mouthpiece for certain ideologies or conspiracy theorists. Instead, it presents a balanced view of a discourse that was quickly taking over around the time.

Analyzing *The X-Files* through the perspective of conspiracy culture illustrates the significance of different approaches that integrate media studies with political theory, cultural history, and epistemology. It stresses that products of popular culture and entertainment cannot be perceived merely as agents of recreation. Narratives, especially those that are widely shared and watched repeatedly give the audience an idea on what they mean to their consumers of the period they belong to. Created in a time when the line between fact and fiction was getting harder to detect, these kinds of assessments are not just useful, they are necessary. Thus, the disillusioned eras like the 1990s are better understood through works like *The X-Files*.

Through this analysis of the series within the confines of cultural context, political theory and conspiracy studies; I have aimed to demonstrate the impact of the post-Cold War political climate on the culture of paranoia and suspicion which shifted the fear of outsiders to inward anxieties. While this inward shift is not a simple reassessment of power; it was a deeper revelation of erosion of faith in systems and institutions. *The X-Files* gives this cultural moment a voice, yet it does so without claiming to offer a resolution or an answer to this crisis. It instead encapsulates the cultural moment. It allows the audience to reassess not only the conspiracy theory, but also the conspiracy theorists themselves and offers an exploration of both skepticism and belief. By understanding *The X-Files* and examining it in this study, I have sought to provide a contribution to the discourse on conspiracy culture, within the frame of a certain time, and reveal how the assessment of power and distrust in it were reflected in popular media.

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ABSTRACT

This thesis aims to analyze the concepts of paranoia, institutional paranoia, and their ramifications in the television series *The X-Files* in relation to the post-Cold War period. *The X-Files* premiered in 1993, within the context of conspiracy culture in the United States of America in the 1990s. Through usage of historical contextualization, literary analysis and political theory; this study offers an understanding of the shift within the paranoid thinking and institutional paranoia in the post-Cold War period. Conspiracy theories and the culture situated around it has long been an integral part of American society and politics. As the earlier culture surrounding conspiracy discourse usually focused on external threats; this saw a shift over time. Internal distrust regarding the American government and institutional bodies increased, a case which would eventually reach a whole new extent with the end of the Cold War. With the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the biggest adversary of the United States up until that point was now no longer the red scare. This brought forward a whole new culture of skepticism along with narratives regarding the establishment of a brand-new world order. The history of conspiracy culture in the United States up until the 1990s offers an intricate insight into understanding the Red Scare, Kennedy assassination and the end of the Cold War within the limits of skepticism. As this thesis analyzes *The X-Files* and its impact on the conspiracy culture, it documents the characterization of the Cigarette Smoking Man (CSM) along with the Syndicate and Pat Robertson's *The New World Order* to provide insight into how the analysis of the series offers a better perspective on United States conspiracy culture within the 1990s. All in all, this thesis aims to demonstrate how as a pop culture product *The X-Files* encapsulates and reflects a pivotal shift in American conspiracy culture. The series accomplishes this through an exploration of themes such as secrecy, trust and the truth; along with characterization of its heroes and villains. Thus, understanding *The X-Files*

in a conspiracy culture framework deepens the comprehension of a paranoid state of mind during a decade marked by global change and rapid developments.

Keywords: Conspiracy culture, Institutional paranoia, 1990s, New World Order, The X-Files, Post-Cold War, Television analysis.



ÖZET

Bu tez, 1990'larda Amerika Birleşik Devletlerinde komplo kültürü bağlamında 1993 yapımı *The X-Files* televizyon dizisinin analizini ortaya koymayı amaçlamaktadır. Çalışma kapsamında, tarihsel bağlamsallaştırma, edebi analiz ve siyaset teorisini kullanarak, Soğuk Savaş sonrası dönemde paranoyak düşünce ve kurumsal paranoya içindeki değişimi anlamlandırmak hedeflenmiştir. Komplo teorileri ve etrafında oluşan kültür, uzun zaman boyunca Amerikan toplumunun ve siyasetinin ayrılmaz bir parçası olmuştur. Komplo söylemini çevreleyen kültür erken dönemlerde genel olarak dış tehditlere odaklanırken; bu durum zamanla değişime uğramıştır. Amerikan hükümetine ve kurumsal yapılarına yönelik iç güvensizlik artmış ve bu güvensizlik Soğuk Savaşın sona ermesiyle birlikte yeni bir boyuta ulaşmıştır. Sovyetler Birliği'nin dağılmasıyla birlikte, Amerika Birleşik Devletleri'nin o zamana kadarki en büyük düşmanı artık bir korku unsuru olmaktan çıkmıştır. Bu durum yeni bir dünya düzeninin kurulduğuna ilişkin söylemlerle birlikte yeni bir şüphecilik kültürünü de beraberinde getirmiştir. Bu tezin amacı; bir popüler kültür ürünü olarak *The X-Files*'in Amerikan komplo kültüründeki önemli bir değişimi nasıl yansıttığını göstermektir. Dizi bunu gizlilik, güven ve gerçek gibi temaları keşfederek; ve kahramanları ile kötü adamlarının karakterizasyonu üzerinden gerçekleştirmektedir. Dolayısıyla, *The X-Files*'i komplo kültürü çerçevesinde anlamlandırmak, küresel değişim ve hızlı gelişmelerin damgasını vurduğu bir on yıl boyunca paranoya odaklı bir ruh halinin nasıl değerlendirilmesi gerektiği hususunda bir fikir sunmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Komplo kültürü, Kurumsal paranoya, 1990lar, Yeni Dünya Düzeni, *The X-Files*, Soğuk Savaş sonrası, televizyon analizi.