

THE SOCIETY OF THE CINCINNATI: CONSPIRACY THEORY IN THE EARLY AMERICAN REPUBLIC

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Conspiracy theories abound in the United States of America and worldwide, taking a multitude of forms and covering a wide variety of topics. One contemporary example is the hate-filled anti-Semitic accusation that the US federal government is in reality a “Zionist Occupational Government” bent on disarming, subjugating, and eventually exterminating white Americans. These charges can be found in the infamous Turner Diaries, which inspired Timothy McVeigh to bomb the Oklahoma City federal building in 1995. Less violent, but even more prevalent, are the various theories surrounding the assassination of John F. Kennedy in 1963. Rejecting the “lone gunman” explanation of the Warren Commission report, thousands of Americans have turned conspiracy theories about JFK into a veritable cottage industry. According to various “assassination buffs,” Kennedy became the victim of Cuban exiles, a CIA faction, the Mafia, the oil industry, the military-industrial complex or a combination of any of these groups. Oliver Stone’s movie *JFK* brought one variant to millions of Americans through the medium of the Hollywood movie. Indeed, the popular culture of the 1990s is full of conspiracy theory material, the most prominent example being the FOX network’s TV show *The X-Files*, featuring the exploits of an eccentric FBI agent trying to prove that the government is covering up the existence and nefarious plans of extraterrestrials on Earth. The show ran for nine years, demonstrating the attraction and staying power of conspiracy theories in contemporary American culture.

Historically, too, the United States has provided fertile ground for conspiracy theories in many shapes and forms. Franklin Roosevelt was accused of deliberately opening Pearl Harbor to a Japanese attack in order to drag the United States into World War II against the will of the people. During the 1950s, anticommunist witch hunters saw the U.S. on the brink of a “Red” takeover from within, repeating a pattern that had already been present in the aftermath of World War I. In the nineteenth century, nativists and protestant alarmists saw a life-threatening danger in the allegedly subversive activities and unholy rituals of the Catholic Church, the Mormons or the Freemasons. In the 1790s, the Congregationalist clergy of New England warned their parishes of the diabolical intentions

of the Illuminati, whom they blamed for drenching the French Revolution in blood and planning to do the same in America. Even the very creation of the United States was connected to conspiracy theory, as many Founding Fathers interpreted the various tax crises of the 1760s and 1770s not as bona fide political disagreements between England and her colonies, but as a ministerial conspiracy to enslave the American colonists, and eventually all free Englishmen. Leading English politicians, including George III in turn believed that a cabal of American radicals had planned to steer the colonies towards independence all along.¹

Historians, philosophers as well as cultural and literary theorists have tried to explain and analyze the phenomenon of conspiracy theories, and have arrived at a variety of conclusions. Curiously enough, hardly any of these theorists provides a working definition of conspiracy theory, in part because of wide-ranging disagreements as to their nature. Let me therefore offer a rough definition. I define conspiracy theories as all forms of political or cultural discourse that describe a group of people or an institution as secretly plotting to assume or exercise power over a larger group of people, using covert methods and pursuing goals that are presented as detrimental to the victim group. Typically, but not necessarily, the alleged conspirators operate behind a cover of legitimacy or benevolence, they target a nation, a state, a culture, a religion or even the entire world as their victims; their goals range from personal gain to shaping and controlling history, and their methods might include everything from the dismantling of individual liberties to the assassination of dissidents, and from the assumption of political or economic power all the way to mind-control and genocide. Note that this definition says nothing about the actual or potential veracity of a conspiracy theory, the motives, social status, and state of mind of those who promote it, or the effects of the conspiracy theory on society and politics in general. Nor does it say anything about whether the United States is exceptionally fertile or infertile ground for conspiracy theory—all these questions are hotly debated in various interpretations of conspiracy theories.

Interpretations of Conspiracy Theories

That being said, one can identify different schools of interpretation on the topic of conspiracy theories. The first of these, which might be called the “paranoid style” school, emerged from the concern of liberals in the aftermath of the 1950s anticommunist hysteria and was established by Richard Hofstadter’s article “The Paranoid Style in American History.” This school looks at conspiracy theory as a form of political pathology, typically found on the fringes of political culture. In their view, conspiracy theories are by definition radical, deluded, and often dangerous;

their adherents may even be clinically paranoid or at least display symptoms analogous to paranoia. According to this model, conspiracy theories arise from social, political, and cultural crises that lead some malcontents to disregard proper political process and turn to allegations of conspiracy to discredit their political opponents, social rivals, and cultural enemies. This tradition cites some of the great catastrophes of history, such as the Holocaust or the Stalinist terror, as the most horrible results of conspiracy theories, and points to especially distasteful examples of conspiracy theorists, such as racist hate-groups and witch-hunt hysterias as further examples. There is also a consensus among the school's proponents that the United States, with its liberal and pluralist political system, has proven relatively resilient to conspiracy theories, which, in their opinion, are in America a method of minority movements only. The "paranoid style" school is primarily interested in identifying the crises that generate conspiracy theories, the groups that are most likely to endorse them, and the ways and means of preventing the pathology of conspiracy theories from getting out of hand. It is a discourse of warning against a type of radicalism that threatens the properly liberal and pluralist politics that these authors implicitly see at work in the United States.²

A second tradition, in contrast, views conspiracy theories primarily as a model of historical and causal interpretation. In the opinion of authors such as the historian Gordon Wood and the antitotalitarian philosopher Karl Popper, conspiracy theories serve primarily as a simplification of complex social, political, and cultural developments. Instead of looking at the structural causes of change, which are complicated and do not provide hard and fast answers, conspiracy theorists blame detrimental contemporary and historical events on the intentions of an individual or group. In many ways, conspiracy theory works very much like religion, replacing the will of God with the will of conspirators, but adhering to the same model of causality. While Popper condemns conspiracy theories as delusions and obstacles to proper social science, Wood acknowledges the role of conspiracy theories in the context of Enlightenment thought as a stepping stone from a religious to a truly scientific mode of interpretation. Cultural theorist Peter Knight puts a postmodern twist on this interpretation. For him, too, conspiracy theories serve as a model of interpretation, but not necessarily one that is by definition inferior to a structural analysis of history. In his opinion, conspiracy theories are an understandable response to the simultaneous dearth of knowledge generated by government secrecy and the overflow of information in the media, as well as the breakdown of "grand narratives." This school has in common, however, its view of conspiracy theories as responses to hermeneutical crises. For Wood it is the crisis of modernity and for Knight the

crisis of postmodernity, but conspiracy theories have apparently arisen in answer to both.³

The third school focuses on the cultural specificity of conspiracy theories rather than their function or pathology and is especially interested in the role of conspiracy theories in an American context. From this point of view, while conspiracy theories may well arise from the need to explain complex events in simple terms, and may well pose a threat to liberal politics, what is significant about them is the way they arise from and are embedded in specific cultural, political, and social traditions. This “cultural specificity” school was established by the historian David Brion Davis, who was the first author to look at conspiracy theories not only as a universal, but also a specifically American phenomenon. He found that the anti-Catholicism, anti-Mormonism, and anti-Masonry of the early nineteenth century were a reaction to the rapid social and economic changes of the Jacksonian era. The celebration of individualism and emerging capitalism of the time promised national expansion and prosperity, but they also proved deeply unsettling to many people, usually protestant and native-born, who yearned for reassurance and unity. The antiliberal movements and conspiracy theories allowed their adherents to unite against an enemy that, in their imaginations at least, stood against the equality and liberty they celebrated and feared at the same time. Subsequently, other authors have found conspiracy theories at the fault lines of American exceptionalism, for example in the tension between a millennial and a secular vision of America, the race question, or the conflict between local autonomy and national power in American politics. Consequently, while conspiracy theories are by no means exclusively American, they often are very specifically American.⁴

The newest tradition sees conspiracy theories not as a form of political pathology, but as an expression of a utopian impulse. Very recently, the cultural theorist Mark Fenster and the literary theorist Timothy Melley both published monographs highlighting the idealist background that underlies many conspiracy theories. Fenster sees conspiracy theories as one form of populist dissenting discourse, addressing very real problems about the unequal distribution of power, albeit in an ideologically distorted manner. Melley, based on a close reading of the plentiful conspiracy-theory-laden fiction of recent decades, concludes that the constant fear of conspiratorial manipulation expressed in the works of Thomas Pynchon, Don DeLillo and others, actually embraces the importance of individual autonomy. Nevertheless, this “utopian” school is not necessarily celebrating conspiracy theories. Neither of the authors sees conspiracy theories as an effective means of actually achieving the ideals that lie behind them, nor do they fail to recognize the potential for violence and hatred in conspiracy theories. Nevertheless, the “utopian”

school is important in pointing out that conspiracy theories do not necessarily arise from the basest of human instincts.⁵

All these approaches are useful, but a multi-tiered analytical framework combining a variety of aspects promises the best results in making sense of any specific conspiracy theory. First of all, it is necessary to trace the specific historical genesis of the conspiracy theory, including its contents, its dissemination, and its propagators. On this crucial descriptive level, it can sometimes be worthwhile to look into the conspiracy theory's veracity, for while most conspiracy theories are too exaggerated to be taken seriously, it can still be interesting to see whether real-life intrigue played a role in generating them. Secondly, a careful look at the political and cultural context is needed. What specific traditions and conditions helped generate the conspiracy theory and allowed it to spread and become a factor in political and cultural life? This question is especially important in determining whether there is anything specifically American about the conspiracy theory. Thirdly, we need to know the functions the conspiracy theory fulfilled for its believers, including its efficacy as a form of dissent, possible expression of utopian ideals, and its explanatory power as a model of interpreting historical and contemporary developments. The final step of analysis concerns the effect of the conspiracy theory on society and politics: Did the conspiracy theory become a pathology, threatening the stability of the political system? Did it have a lasting impact on the political culture? And, in the case of a historical conspiracy theory, it would be interesting to know whether it is still around.

I have chosen as my case study of conspiracy theories in the United States a controversy that is mentioned in passing in many histories of the early Republican period,⁶ but fully explored in none: the conspiracy theory targeting the Society of the Cincinnati, which accused this organization of Revolutionary War officers of trying to establish a hereditary aristocracy in the United States. This controversy came into being in the fall of 1783 and remained a factor in American political life throughout the 1780s, the period between the end of the Revolutionary War and the establishment of the new constitutional order, thus almost perfectly coinciding with what John Fiske has called the critical period of American history.⁷ From the point of view of the history of conspiracy theories, this is an intriguing period because it immediately precedes the French Revolution and thus the conspiracy theory about the Illuminati, which is much better documented but essentially an import that grew out of a European, not an American tradition.⁸ If there ever was a time for a specifically American conspiracy theory, it was during this formative period of the American Republic, and before the influence of the Illuminati theories hit U.S. shores. The Society of the Cincinnati conspiracy theory was indeed

a considerable factor in the politics of the critical period as well as in shaping the political culture of the United States.

The Society of the Cincinnati Conspiracy Theory, 1783–1784

In the spring of 1783, with news of a peace treaty with England expected any day, two leading officers of the Continental Army, Henry Knox and Friedrich von Steuben, organized a fraternal society of their fellow officers, and succeeded in recruiting George Washington as its first signer and ceremonial president-general. Such an organization seemed useful, even necessary at the time; most officers wanted to preserve the bonds of affection that had grown during seven years of war, friendships, and a sense of achievement that transcended state lines in this first American army. Moreover, the organization could serve as a source of support for those members of the officer corps that had been rendered invalid or indigent by the war, or for their widows and orphans. Finally, the officers had important interests in common: Congress had long promised them a pension of half-pay for life, a promise that was changed to a lump sum of five year's pay in early 1783 under a policy known as commutation. Many officers feared the economic uncertainties of returning to civilian life; they had already sacrificed much wealth to the cause of independence, and greatly hoped for a commutation payment as a just reward for services rendered. However, payment of commutation was uncertain. Throughout the war, Congress had proven extremely unreliable in even providing current pay, let alone pensions. Given the massive war debt and congressional lack of independent income, commutation seemed far from secure. Even though George Washington denied it in the years to come, the Society of the Cincinnati was certainly planned as one of the earliest examples of an interest group in U.S. politics.⁹

Knox, Steuben, and the other organizers drew the name for the society from Cincinnatus, a Roman general, who—at least in the idealized story known to the classically educated American elite—left his farm at the behest of the Senate, assumed leadership of the army, defeated Rome's enemies, and subsequently rejected all offers of political power to return to his plow. The name was also a clear reference to George Washington's reputation as a selfless patriot who intended to give up command of the Continental Army as soon as the war was over, a reputation that most officers felt that they, on a less exalted level, deserved as well. The "institution"¹⁰ that Knox and the others drew up included several key features that suited the founders' plans for a fraternal society, but left the organization wide open to criticism that soon coalesced into a conspiracy theory. The most critical of these features was hereditary succession, with membership passing from father to eldest son, or lacking direct

male offspring, to the collateral line. The institution also included a gold eagle badge suspended from a blue and white ribbon to be worn by the members, the possibility of bestowing non-hereditary honorary memberships on worthy citizens, and an organization that included a General Society as well as state societies and a French branch, all of which were to meet regularly and communicate through circular letters. Finally, the society was to establish a charitable fund, financed by each member contributing one month's pay. In the summer and fall of 1783, state societies were founded in all 13 states and in France, and the first meeting of the general society was planned for April 1784.¹¹

Soon the trouble started. During the summer of 1783, commutation became a highly unpopular and controversial issue in New England. Military pensions reminded the critics too much of the British system of a standing army and privileged bureaucrats; since the pensions were limited to the officers they were also perceived as an upper-class boon financed by middle-class taxes. Already, there were voices who cautioned that Congress was amassing too much power and that some people wanted to establish a central government detrimental to the hard-fought and newly won liberties of the American Revolution.¹² As the news of the formation of the Cincinnati became known, the critics started seeing a connection. In early September 1783, the town meeting of Killingworth, Connecticut, took note of the Cincinnati as an argument against commutation: If the officers could afford to establish a charitable fund, why would they need pensions anyway? The town meeting mockingly recommended that the Cincinnati loan their funds to the government in its time of need.¹³

Enter Judge Aedanus Burke of South Carolina. Burke, an Irish immigrant, had for some time been a somewhat eccentric figure in South Carolina politics. In 1783 he held a seat on the high court of the state and was known for his efforts to protect loyalists from confiscation and disenfranchisement.¹⁴ Upon learning of the Cincinnati, Burke, under the pseudonym "Cassius," wrote the pamphlet "Considerations on the Society or Order of Cincinnati," which transformed public perception of the organization and effectively turned a vague discomfort into a full-fledged conspiracy theory.¹⁵ Burke accused the Cincinnati of establishing for themselves and their descendants a hereditary aristocracy, decorated with a badge, supported by a perpetual fund, and capable of raising as many as 30,000 armed men to ensure their will be done. And while Burke felt that the actual generation of revolutionary officers was not devoid of honor, it was just a matter of a few generations until their descendants would refuse to intermarry with commoners; eventually these noble patricians of the erstwhile American republic would even claim divine descent. In short, the Cincinnati were nothing less than "a deep laid con-

trivance to beget, and perpetuate family grandeur in an aristocratic Nobility, to terminate at last in monarchical tyranny."¹⁶ Burke lambasted the American people for turning a blind eye to the subversion of their liberties, and called on the state legislatures to outlaw the Cincinnati before it was too late. "Considerations" saw several printings and was distributed throughout the United States.

As a result, during the fall of 1783 and spring of 1784, accusations against the Cincinnati mounted. Among their critics were some of the most prominent figures of the American Revolution: Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, Samuel Adams, John Jay, Elbridge Gerry, and Benjamin Franklin all publicly or privately (in their correspondence) described the Cincinnati as a nascent nobility that would damage and subvert the republican character of the United States.¹⁷ Moreover, Burke's dramatic appeal to the state legislatures did not go unheeded. In February 1784, governor Benjamin Guerard of South Carolina addressed the state legislature, denouncing the Cincinnati.¹⁸ While the South Carolinians did not take action against the society, the Massachusetts legislature appointed a committee which concluded that the "Society, called the Cincinnati, is unjustifiable, and if not properly discountenanced, may be dangerous to the peace, liberty, and safety of the United States in general, and this Commonwealth in particular."¹⁹ The Massachusetts delegates were especially alarmed by the organization of the Cincinnati, which mirrored that of the United States itself, and thus gave the impression of creating a state within the state. A recurrent, but incorrect rumor that Rhode Island had disenfranchised the Cincinnati, was widely circulated.²⁰ Congress itself did not take up the issue, but in Jefferson's original version of the Northwest Ordinance, the western territories would remain closed to anyone who carried a hereditary title, a provision clearly aimed at the Cincinnati.²¹ By early 1784, membership in the Cincinnati had become such a political liability that General William Heath of Massachusetts actually circulated a false rumor that he had left the Society in order to bolster his chances at the polls.²²

George Washington, ever mindful of his reputation, and convinced by his correspondence and conversation with Jefferson and others that he was on thin ice, pressured the General Society at its first meeting in April 1784 to drop heredity and honorary membership and to place the charitable fund under the authority of the state legislatures. He would have preferred to dissolve the Cincinnati altogether, but the enthusiastic reception of the Society in France effectively precluded that option—dissolution would be a slap in the face of America's ally.²³ Even so, the delegates to the General Society only grudgingly accepted the revised institution, and only because Washington effectively threatened to leave if they did not comply. The revisions, along with a circular letter by

Washington explaining the innocent character of the society, of which the revisions were a clear sign, were widely published in newspapers.²⁴ What escaped the notice of the public was that a majority of the state societies never ratified the changes and thus prevented their implementation. By 1790, the General Society acknowledged that the original institution, complete with heredity, was still in effect.²⁵

The Conspiracy Theory After 1784

After 1784, as a result of the revised institution, the clamor surrounding the Cincinnati died down somewhat. Indeed, some contemporaries and later historians concluded that the controversy ceased to play a role in political life. However, the conspiracy theory about the Cincinnati remained in currency, and if anything became even more distorted and suspicious than before. Some of the prominent critics, most notably Elbridge Gerry and Thomas Jefferson, never ceased to believe in the baneful influence of the Society. In everyday politics, too, suspicions of the Society persisted, as can be seen from an episode in the Connecticut legislature of 1787. At issue was the incorporation of a state medical society, on which the *American Mercury* reported: "Col. Burrall observed . . . that he was against all Societies, whose constitutions and designs we did not know; such as the Cincinnati, Free Masons, and this Medical Society: that they were composed of cunning men, and we know not what mischief they may be upon."²⁶ The conspiracy theory was also reinforced by a version of Burke's pamphlet that had been translated into French and considerably edited by the Comte de Mirabeau; this version was retranslated into English and subsequently published in London and Philadelphia.²⁷ When Shays' Rebellion shook Massachusetts in late 1786 and early 1787, Mercy Otis Warren was quick to suspect those who, in her opinion, would inevitably profit from the call for a strong hand in putting down the insurrection: "The Cincinnati, who have been waiting a favorable tide to waft them on to the strong fortress of nobility, are manifestly elated by the present prospect."²⁸

Fear of the Cincinnati also played a role in the most consequential debate of the early American republic, that about revising the Articles of Confederation. In 1785, the Massachusetts delegates to the Continental Congress wrote to governor James Bowdoin, warning against calling a convention to reform the Articles, for fear that the Cincinnati would dominate any such effort.²⁹ When the Federal Convention was called in 1787, the specter of the Cincinnati still loomed. Washington, reluctant to be connected too closely with the Cincinnati and claiming fatigue, made public his decision not to attend the Cincinnati general meeting in Philadelphia.³⁰ However, he was elected a delegate to the Federal Convention

(also meeting in Philadelphia at roughly the same time) shortly thereafter, and had to choose whether to offend his fellow officers by attending the Federal Convention and not the Cincinnati meeting, or to abandon what many felt was the last, best effort to secure a stronger federal government for the United States. Washington tried to procrastinate his arrival in Philadelphia so as to miss the Cincinnati meeting but be present for most of the Federal Convention, but since both meetings were delayed, he eventually attended both. Contrary to his earlier intentions, Washington remained the society's president-general until his death, but he never attended another meeting and had nothing to do with the society's everyday affairs.³¹

During the Federal Convention itself, Elbridge Gerry brought up his concerns about the Cincinnati. He rejected the notion of a popular election of the president, arguing that if the election were left to the easily swayed multitude, a well-organized group like the Cincinnati would effectively "elect the chief Magistrate in every instance."³² Given the fact that twenty-two delegates, including Washington, were at the time members of the Cincinnati, Gerry felt it necessary to proclaim his respect for individual members, but insisted on his reservations against the institution nonetheless. The conspiracy theory also affected the question of constitutional ratification. Washington himself stated that some people thought "the proposed general government was the wicked and traitorous fabrication of the Cincinnati."³³ Effectively, the conspiracy theory was one aspect of the Anti-Federalist argument against the constitution. Allegations against the society surfaced in newspapers and elsewhere throughout the late 1780 and into the 1790s. It was only in the course of the 1790s and 1800s that the Cincinnati faded from the public mind, and in the case of some state societies, out of existence. One of the reasons the revised "institution" (the Society's charter) that abolished heredity was never ratified was that after 1787 the triennial meeting of the General Society was unable to attain a quorum of seven state societies attending. In fact, the society came close to vanishing, until it was revived in the second half of the nineteenth century. Today, it is alive and well, with over 2,000 members and a magnificent headquarters of the General Society on Massachusetts Avenue in Washington, D.C.

The conspiracy theory against the Cincinnati was almost completely unfounded. While the officers certainly had important interests in common, there is no indication that they saw themselves as a nobility—existing, nascent or otherwise. In fact, the leading members of the society reacted to Burke's allegations with humor, as is evident from a letter of Steuben to Knox in early 1784: "the young marquis Henry Knox is already promised in marriage to a Princess of Hyder Ali, and . . . the young Comtesse of Huntington is to marry the hereditary Prince of Sweden,

. . . the King of Spain wishes to accept the place of Treasurer of the Order."³⁴ During the political frustrations of the early 1780s, radical members might well have wished for a monarchy, possibly with Washington as king, to impose political order. However, the society never pursued any such policies, especially as Washington himself was adamantly opposed to anything that might threaten civilian, republican government. While most Cincinnati strongly supported the new Constitution, there were also members among Anti-Federalist leaders, most notably governor George Clinton of New York. Similarly, during the first party system, most Cincinnati tended towards the Federalists, but there were also many among the Jeffersonian Republicans. If the society furnished the largest part of the new national army's officer corps, this was only to be expected and had little political effect. Even when Congress debated the fate of commutation certificates in 1790, the society did not make a strong lobbying effort on behalf its members. In short, the Cincinnati did not form a conspiracy, or even a political party.

Relevant Sources and Analytical Approach

The bulk of the allegations against the Cincinnati can be found in pamphlets, newspapers, as well as the correspondence of critics and supporters of the society. The holdings of the Society of the Cincinnati in Washington, D.C. include various editions of the anti-Cincinnati pamphlets by Burke and Mirabeau, as well as many manuscripts and little-known documentary collections such as Edgar Hume's *General Washington's Correspondence Concerning the Society of the Cincinnati*. Another important source for letters is the manuscript division of the Library of Congress. Furthermore, the papers of many of the most prominent Americans of the early republic are available in well-edited collections. Newspapers, with the exception of some well-known publications, such as the *Connecticut Courant* or *Independent Chronicle*, remain a largely unmined source. The Library of Congress holds practically all newspapers of the period. While the controversy of 1783–84 is relatively easy to follow due to the relatively widespread public debate, references to the Cincinnati from 1784–1786 are scarcer, but can nevertheless be found in letters as well as scattered newspaper articles. The period from 1787 to 1790 is especially interesting because the framing and ratification of the Constitution produced the most profound and lasting debates in the American political tradition. The Ratification of the Constitution Project at the University of Wisconsin at Madison holds practically all relevant sources for this period for their *Documentary History of the Ratification of the Constitution*.

Returning to the multi-tiered analytical framework described above, several aspects of the conspiracy theory are striking. Given the promi-

nence of some of the Cincinnati's critics, the conspiracy theory was clearly not a product of the political fringe, nor was it directed against a typical "scapegoat" minority. Instead, some of the leading politicians of the early American republic, as well as some more eccentric but well-established characters such as Aedanus Burke, accused an association of the United States' most prominent military leaders of threatening the republic with aristocracy, nobility, military rule, and even monarchy. Not all of the critics accused the Cincinnati of actually planning to bring such a disaster about, but quite a few did. The role of George Washington is especially interesting due to its ambivalence. On the one hand, practically nobody dared accuse the "American Cincinnatus" himself of plotting against the republic, although that would have been the logical conclusion of the conspiracy theory. On the other hand, George Washington obviously feared the impact of the Cincinnati on his reputation and acted accordingly. The conspiracy theory clearly was a phenomenon at the center of the American polity.

Therefore the accusations against the Cincinnati must be interpreted in the context of specifically American traditions and conditions. A strong case can be made that this conspiracy theory could only have arisen in America. In the monarchies of Europe, the establishment of a knightly order or a hereditary aristocracy hardly seemed a problem; they were realities of everyday life.³⁵ It was only in the context of the American debate about republicanism and equality that the Cincinnati could be perceived as a threat. A long-standing skepticism of standing armies and military establishment³⁶ fostered the distrust directed against the officers of the Continental Army, as did contemporary interpretations of the Cromwell regime and the decline of the Roman Republic. Finally, the 1780s were generally a time of political and economic turmoil in the aftermath of the American Revolution. There was an economic depression as well as a controversy over who should pay the bill for the revolutionary war. The same economic and political fears that prompted Shays' Rebellion and demands for paper money also put Americans on the lookout for those who might wish to profit from the troubles or who might even be behind them.

The conspiracy theory also appears to have functioned as a mode of causal interpretation. There was a common notion among American intellectuals, based largely on their interpretation of the classics, that constitutional decay from republicanism to despotism was a constant danger to any republic, and indeed the fate of practically all historical examples. Texts like Burke's "Considerations" identified the Cincinnati as the personification of constitutional decay. This process was encouraged by the fact that publicly accusing a specific individual of evil intentions was during this time considered bad manners at best and grounds for dueling

at worst. Directing their attacks against an institution rather than individuals allowed the conspiracy theorists to express their criticism more forcefully than would otherwise have been acceptable. At least during the controversies of 1783–1784, the accusations against the Cincinnati also played a role in the organization of political dissent. For example, the extralegal anticommunist Middletown convention in Connecticut (itself accused by its opponents of being an illegal plot against proper government) deliberately presented itself as a sort of anti-Cincinnati, to the point of trying to time its sessions with those of the state society.³⁷ While the anti-Cincinnati movement did not coalesce into a political organization, there was a rhetoric of common cause, for example in Burke's calls for resolutions against the Cincinnati not only in South Carolina but in state legislatures throughout America.

The conspiracy theory directed against the Cincinnati played an important role in the shaping of a "dissenting tradition" in American political culture,³⁸ a tradition that continued in aspects of Anti-Federalism, the Jeffersonian Republicans, and Jacksonian Democracy. It still exists in the various anticentralist, anti-elitist arguments and movements of the present day. This discourse of distrust against central authority and the insistence on the rights of "the people" against the machinations of the few runs like a red thread through much of American history, from the American Revolution to the twenty-first century. It is an expression of a utopian desire for equality that has taken the form of regular political debate as well as the form of conspiracy theories at various junctures in the history of the United States. While conspiracy theories remain a highly problematic aspect of American political culture, the role of episodes such as the Society of the Cincinnati conspiracy theory is not to be underestimated.

Notes

¹ For a list of conspiracy theories present at one time or another in the United States, see for example Richard Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics* (New York, 1965), or Robert Anton Wilson, *Everything Is under Control: Conspiracies, Cults, and Cover-Ups* (New York, 1998). The latter is a product of popular culture, but nevertheless useful. The *Encyclopedia of American Conspiracy Theories*, edited by Peter Knight of the University of Manchester, will be published by ABC-CLIO in 2004.

² Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics*. Daniel Pipes, *Conspiracy: How the Paranoid Style Flourishes and Where It Comes From* (New York, 1997) picks up a similar argument, but more along simplistic lines. Robert S. Robins and Jerrold M. Post, *Political Paranoia: The Psychopolitics of Hatred* (New Haven, 1997) most clearly points out the parallels between clinical paranoia and conspiracy theory.

³ Karl Raimund Popper, *Conjectures and Refutations; the Growth of Scientific Knowledge* (London, 1963); Gordon Wood, "Conspiracy and the Paranoid Style: Causality and Deceit in the Eighteenth Century," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd series 39,3 (1982): 401–41; Peter Knight,

Conspiracy Culture—American Paranoia from the Kennedy Assassination to the X-Files (London, 2000).

⁴ David Brion Davis, "Some Themes of Counter-Subversion: An Analysis of Anti-Masonic, Anti-Catholic, and Anti-Mormon Literature," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 47 (1960); Dieter Groh, "Die Verschwörungstheoretische Versuchung oder Why Do Bad Things Happen to Good People?," in *Anthropologische Dimensionen der Geschichte* (Frankfurt a.M., 1992), 267–304; Berndt Ostendorf, "Conspiracy Nation. Verschwörungstheorien und Evangelikaler Fundamentalismus," in *Politisierte Religion*, ed. Heiner Bielefeldt and Wilhelm Heitmeyer (Frankfurt a.M., 1998) most clearly connects conspiracy theories to American exceptionalism.

⁵ Mark Fenster, *Conspiracy Theories: Secrecy and Power in American Culture* (Minneapolis, 1999); Timothy Melley, *Empire of Conspiracy: The Culture of Paranoia in Postwar America* (Ithaca, N.Y., 2000).

⁶ Merrill Jensen, *The New Nation: A History of the United States During the Confederation, 1781–1789*, 1st ed. (New York, 1950), 261–65; Jackson Turner Main, *The Antifederalists: Critics of the Constitution, 1781–1788* (Chapel Hill, 1961), 64; Catherine Drinker Bowen, *Miracle at Philadelphia: The Story of the Constitutional Convention* (Boston, 1966), 20, 283; Richard B. Morris, *The Forging of the Union, 1781–1789* (New York, 1987), 50–52.

⁷ John Fiske, *The Critical Period of American History 1783–1789* (New York, 1898).

⁸ For the impact of the Illuminati conspiracy theory, see Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics*; the essential texts that established the conspiracy theory and were instrumental in exporting it to the U.S. were Abbé Barruel, *Memoirs, Illustrating the History of Jacobinism* (London, 1798) and John Robison, *Proofs of a Conspiracy against All the Religions and Governments of Europe, Carried on in the Secret Meetings of Free Masons, Illuminati, and Reading Societies* (Philadelphia, 1798).

⁹ Most histories of the Society of the Cincinnati were written by its members, the descendants of the historical actors of the 1780s. Early examples include Winslow Warren, *The Society of the Cincinnati* (Boston, 1929) and Edgar Erskine Hume, *George Washington and the Society of the Cincinnati* (Washington, D.C., 1933); the most recent and comprehensive one is Minor Myers, *Liberty without Anarchy: A History of the Society of the Cincinnati* (Charlottesville, 1983). The only major "outside" treatise is Richard Frank jr. Saunders, "The Origin and Early History of the Society of the Cincinnati" (PhD dissertation, University of Georgia, 1969), which to the best of my knowledge was never published.

¹⁰ The term "institution" in this context refers to the actual document describing the rules and bylaws of the Cincinnati.

¹¹ A copy of the institution is reprinted in Myers, *Liberty without Anarchy: A History of the Society of the Cincinnati*.

¹² See *Connecticut Courant*, 24 June 1783, for one of many examples of anticommutation sentiment. Main, *The Antifederalists: Critics of the Constitution, 1781–1788* analyzes the anticommutation, anti-impost sentiment of 1783–85 as one of the origins of anti-federalism.

¹³ *Connecticut Courant*, 2 September 1783.

¹⁴ Burke's personal papers were burned upon his death, in accordance with his last will and testament, so no biography of his private life exists. However, John C. Meloney, *The Public Life of Aedanus Burke: Revolutionary Republican in Post-Revolutionary South Carolina* (Columbia, SC, 1989) provides an excellent account of his political activities, both in South Carolina and as a member of the first Congress.

¹⁵ Aedanus Burke, *Considerations on the Society or Order of Cincinnati* (Charleston, 1783; reprint, Robert Bell, Philadelphia)

¹⁶ *Ibid.* 14

¹⁷ Thomas Jefferson to George Washington, 16 April 1784, Edgar Erskine Hume, *General Washington's Correspondence Concerning the Society of the Cincinnati* (Baltimore, 1941), 135–39;

John Adams to Elbridge Gerry, 25 April 1784, Wallace Evans Davis, "The Society of the Cincinnati in New England 1783–1800," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd series 5 (1948): 17; Samuel Adams to Elbridge Gerry, 23 April 1784, Saunders, "The Origin and Early History of the Society of the Cincinnati", 129; John Jay to Gouverneur Morris, 10 February 1784, Saunders, "The Origin and Early History of the Society of the Cincinnati", 146; Elbridge Gerry to Samuel Adams, 4 March 1784, George Athan Billias, *Elbridge Gerry: Founding Father and Republican Statesman* (New York, 1976), 104; Benjamin Franklin to Sarah Bache, 26 January 1784, Myers, *Liberty without Anarchy: A History of the Society of the Cincinnati*, 54.

¹⁸ *Journal of the House of Representatives of South Carolina, 1783–84*, Theodora Thompson et al, eds. (Columbia, 1977), 403–04.

¹⁹ *Independent Chronicle*, 25 March 1784.

²⁰ Davis, "The Society of the Cincinnati in New England 1783–1800," 8

²¹ The clause was eventually struck out.

²² Davis, "The Society of the Cincinnati in New England 1783–1800," 13–14

²³ Myers, *Liberty without Anarchy: A History of the Society of the Cincinnati*, 61–62

²⁴ See for example *Connecticut Journal*, 2 June 1784.

²⁵ It is quite curious that hardly anybody noticed that heredity was still in effect. Upon the death of Nathanael Greene, several newspapers reported that his son, George Washington Greene, would be admitted to the society once he came of age. See for example *Connecticut Journal*, 19 July 1786. In fact, John Quincy Adams did notice and wrote his father about it: John Quincy Adams to John Adams, 30 June 1787, Saunders, "The Origin and Early History of the Society of the Cincinnati", 32–33. However, as far as I have found, this realization was not widespread.

²⁶ *American Mercury*, 4 June 1787.

²⁷ Gabriel-Honoré de Riquetti Mirabeau, *Considerations on the Order of Cincinnatus. To Which Are Added Several Original Papers Relative to That Institution. Translated from the French of the Count De Mirabeau* (Philadelphia, 1786). Benjamin Franklin, one of the milder critics of the Cincinnati, had given a copy of Burke's "Considerations" to the Comte, whose translation was aimed at French politics rather than America. Interestingly, Mirabeau's younger brother was a member of the French society.

²⁸ Massachusetts Historical Society, *Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society*, 64:160.

²⁹ The Massachusetts Delegates (Elbridge Gerry, Samuel Osgood and Rufus King) to the Governor of Massachusetts (James Bowdoin), 3 September 1785, Edmund C. Burnett, ed., *Letters of Members of the Continental Congress*, 8 vols. (Washington, D.C., 1921–1938) 8: 208.

³⁰ Washington's circular letter was, for example, reprinted in the *Boston Gazette*, 14 May 1787.

³¹ Myers, *Liberty without Anarchy: A History of the Society of the Cincinnati*, 97.

³² Max Farrand, ed., *The Records of the Federal Convention of 1787*, 4 vols. (New Haven, 1966): 2, 214.

³³ George Washington to William Barton, 7 Sept 1788, quoted in Saunders, "The Origin and Early History of the Society of the Cincinnati", 220.

³⁴ Fredrick William, Baron von Steuben, to Henry Knox, 11 November 1783, quoted in: Hume, Edgar Erskine. "Steuben and the Society of the Cincinnati." *The American-German Review* 1,3 (1935): 17–19; 54.

³⁵ During the *Ancien Régime*, there were some suspicions against the Cincinnati because they were connected to republicanism. It was only during the radicalisation of the French revo-

lution that the French Cincinnati were accused of aristocratical leanings; during the *terreur* many members became victims of the guillotine.

³⁶ See Richard H. Kohn, *Eagle and Sword: The Federalists and the Creation of the Military Establishment in America, 1783–1802* (New York, 1975).

³⁷ *Connecticut Journal*, 7 April 1784.

³⁸ This term is taken from Saul Cornell, *The Other Founders: Anti-Federalism & the Dissenting Tradition in America, 1788–1828* (Chapel Hill, 1999), a brilliant analysis of Anti-Federalist thought in the early republic and its influences even on the present day.