■ *Research Paper*

The Kennedy Assassination, Unidentified Flying Objects, and Other Conspiracies: Psychological and Organizational Factors in the Perception of "Cover-up"*

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Cover-up theories are popular beliefs that powerful governmental agencies prevent the public from receiving full, accurate, and detailed explanations of real or imagined events. Drawing on Kruglanski's theory of lay epistemics and J. G. Miller's analysis of information overload, we propose that information processing at the individual level gives rise to cover-up hypotheses which are then 'supported' by delays, errors, omissions and other symptoms of information overload at the organizational level. This interplay of psychological and organizational variables is illustrated in beliefs that the US government is suppressing the truth about the John F. Kennedy assassination and is withholding evidence that unidentified flying objects (UFOs) are 'real' and under the control of intelligent extraterrestrial beings. We identify individual differences that might be linked to the acceptance or rejection of cover-up notions and outline steps that organizations may take to minimize their own contributions to the misattribution processes. A huge and expanding glut of ambiguous evidence coupled with selective perception and biased assimilation make the Kennedy assassination and UFO controversies impossible to resolve.

Keywords   organization; conspiracy; cover-up; John F. Kennedy; UFO

INTRODUCTION

Robert J. Groden introduces his lavish book, *The Killing of a President*, by noting that 'The horror and shock that followed in the wake of the assassination of John Fitzgerald Kennedy are overshadowed only by the even more shocking and ruthless cover-up of the crime' (Groden, 1993, p. xi). Cover-up theories, forms of conspircy theories predicated on beliefs that 'the truth' is being held from the public by governments and their agencies, secret societies, powerful organizations and cartels, have appeared in many cultures and at many times (Groh, 1987). There is no real way to disprove an allegation of cover-up, but for many people the number, popularity, strength and pervasiveness of such theories seem to outrun the verifiable data.

A cover-up theory is, in effect, an attribution, an inference which explains to the perceiver his or her inability to gain access to 'the facts'. Such attributions are based in part on the motivation and information processing of the individual and in part on evidence inferred from the words and deeds of organizations and their spokespersons. We propose that certain memories, situational prompts, motives and information processing strategies predispose people to hypothesize cover-up, and that delays, errors, omissions and distortions in the collection, storage and dissemination of information at the organizational level are misconstrued as stonewalling, evasion, lying, and other evidence that confirms the cover-up hypothesis. To illustrate the interplay of psychological and organizational processes we discuss widespread beliefs that the government is covering up conspiracies underlying the assassination of John F. Kennedy (JFK) and suppressing evidence that unidentified flying objects (UFOs) are extraterrestrial spacecraft under the control of intelligent beings from outer space.

Approximately 2000 books have been published on the assassination of JFK at Dealey Plaza in Dallas on 22 November 1963 (Posner, 1994, p. xvii). Although in the aggregate these books advance different opinions and analyses, a recurrent theme is that contrary to the results of the Warren Commission's official investigation, the assassin, Lee Harvey Oswald, did not act alone (e.g., Groden, 1993; Fonzi, 1994; Livingston, 1995). Some combination of physical, photographic and circumstantial evidence, coupled with eyewitness accounts, suggests to such observers that one or more of several powerful groups (political extremists, foreign agents, the military, organized crime) were involved in a conspiracy to murder the former president, but that organizations such as the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), and Department of Defense (DOD) have, for over three decades, suppressed the truth. According to Gallup polls, rejection of the government's official, lone assassin theory of the JFK murder rose from 64% in the late 1960s to 89% in the early 1990s (Goertzel, 1994). Similar, if somewhat muted, allegations surround Sirhan Sirhan's assassination of Senator and presidential candidate Robert F. Kennedy (RFK) at the

Ambassador Hotel in Los Angeles in 1968. Despite the Los Angeles Police Department's (LAPD's) Chief of Detectives Robert Houghton's directive, 'We are not going to have another Dallas here, I want you to act as if there is a conspiracy until we can prove that there wasn't one' (Moldea, 1995, p. 100) many people suspect that more than one assassin was involved but that the LAPD has suppressed proof of this fact for almost 30 years.

Suspicions of government cover-up permeate many discussions of UFO sightings and alleged human encounters with alien beings from outer space (e.g., Blum, 1990; Good, 1988). Strange aerial phenomena captured public interest in June 1947, when pilot Kenneth Arnold briefly glimpsed nine bright saucer-like objects flying at very high speeds over Washington state. Arnold refused to speculate on the nature of what he saw, and Gallup polls conducted between 1947 and 1950 suggest that most people thought that UFOs were either hoaxes, misidentifications of natural phenomena, or secret weapons. In 1950, less than 3% of Gallup interviewees expressed the opinion that UFOs came from outer space. Nonetheless, shortly thereafter, a series of influential articles, books and movies had established the myth that the US government was hiding proof that flying saucers were extraterrestrial spacecraft flown by alien beings (Peebles, 1994, p. 52). Over time, cover-up theories became increasingly extensive and elaborate. By the late 1960s, one UFO study organization believed that the Air Force was suppressing evidence of extraterrestrial visitation, while a second maintained the view that the CIA was withholding the truth from the Air Force (Craig, 1995, p. 151). As of 1969, a bibliography on UFOs listed over 1600 articles and books (Haines, 1979, p. xiii) and new works have appeared in the popular press ever since. On 30 September 1996, we found over 20 000 references to UFOs on the World Wide Web.

Hiding what 'really' happened in Dealey Plaza or during a UFO sighting has implications far beyond the suppression of truth. As Hofstadter (1965, pp. 3–41) points out, people react strongly to perceived conspiracies because these represent an assault on their way of life. The real issue is that the alleged conspirators violate national traditions and values. There is a discrepancy

between the way that the government is supposed to work and the way that it does work; a conflict between the public's right to know and the way that the government conducts itself. Thus, an investigator with the House Select Committee on Assassinations (HSCA) wrote that 'The conspiracy to kill the President of the United States was a conspiracy against the democratic system—and thus a conspiracy against each and every one of us' (Fonzi, 1994, p. xv).

PSYCHOLOGICAL FACTORS AND SUSPICIONS OF COVER-UP

Although analyses of conspiracy theories are 'psychological' in the sense that they invoke people's beliefs, the field has been dominated by historians and has received relatively little input from social scientists, especially psychologists (Graumann, 1987, p. 245). Nonetheless, previous discussions reveal two themes that are familiar to behavioral scientists: the psychodynamic theme with its focus on irrationality and emotion (e.g., Wulff, 1987; Zonis and Joseph, 1994) and the cognitive theme with its emphasis on information processing (Kruglanski, 1987). Our point of departure is the cognitive theme, specifically, Kruglanski's theory of lay epistemology or lay epistemics (Kruglanski, 1980, 1987, 1989, 1990). This general theory of how people acquire knowledge about themselves and the world provides an overarching paradigm which encompasses many topics in social cognition including attribution theory, cognitive consistency theory, and social perception, and it easily accommodates psychodynamic variables.

From the cognitive perspective, beliefs in conspiracies rest less on emotional upheaval and gross distortions of reality (paranoid thinking) than on normal, primarily rational information processing strategies that are accountable also for other beliefs. A belief in a government cover-up is an inference which helps the perceiver understand what he or she sees. Although based on intellect, the attribution process is not devoid of emotion as values, needs and motivational states direct attention, affect the amount of weight that is accorded an observation, influence ease of recall, and so forth.

Lay epistemics rests on two highly intertwined phases. The first of these, hypothesis generation, is influenced by content (ideas and propositions) which come from both memory and situational cues. We all have many ideas and there are many possible relationships among them; however, because we can attend to only so many ideas at any one point in time we work with limited subsets. Hypothesis generation is affected by motivational states which include a need for structure (closure), an opposing fear of invalidity (a reluctance to make wrong or erroneous judgments), and various conclusional needs that nudge people towards viewing the world in ways that satisfy their wants and desires.

The second phase, hypothesis testing or evaluation, involves assessing the hypothesis in light of the available 'evidence'. A logical or deductive process, hypothesis testing or validation is 'tantamount to deducing the hypothesis from the evidence assuming a prior implicational (if–then) relationship between them' (Kruglanski, 1987, p. 226). That is, the hypothesis is validated or confirmed if the hypothesis is derivable from (or consistent with) the evidence. One salient 'if–then' or implicational relationship is that since JFK's assassination was a large, momentous event it must have had a large or momentous cause. This presumption of proportionality of cause and effect has been discussed by historians and newscasters (Posner, 1994, p. 468) as well as by philosophers (Mill, 1952, p. 501) and psychologists (Kahneman and Tversky, 1972). In a series of four studies, McCauley and Jacques (1979) found that subjects were more likely to endorse a conspiracy theory when a president was shot at and killed than when a president was shot at and missed. Their subjects appeared to work on the assumption that successful assassinations are difficult tasks which require careful planning and coordinated efforts.

The sheer fact that large and powerful agencies are involved in an investigation may, through the presumption of proportionality, imply a profound mystery with far-reaching consequences. This impression may be enhanced by tantalizing details: for example, regulations and forms for filing or releasing reports (Good, 1988, p. 283). Yet, the nature of the agencies' involvement may be misunderstood. For example, UFOs were a threat to national security in

the early 1950s, not because they brought invaders from outer space but because they might be perceived as Russian secret weapons, be confused with Russian aircraft or missiles entering US airspace, or cause mass hysteria that would disadvantage the USA during a nuclear attack (Good, 1988, p. 306–365; Peebles, 1994, pp. 87–102). As early as 1952, notes Peebles, 'it was feared that the mere fact that the CIA was interested in flying saucers would be taken as "proof" they were real. Time would show this fear to be valid' (Peebles, 1994, p. 89).

Ideas

Cover-up theories rest, in part, on people's ideas about governmental agencies' capabilities and intentions. These reflect a combination of accrued knowledge, social pressures and media revelations. Consider, first, the capabilities of the Air Force, the CIA, the FBI and other groups that stand accused of conspiracies of silence. People know, for example, that these organizations are large, powerful, have clandestine means to achieve their ends, and keep many secrets. The immense capability of the government to maintain secrets was evident in the Manhattan Project, which led to the production of the first atomic bomb, and, on a smaller scale, the Lockheed 'skunkworks' which produced reconnaissance airplanes (such as the U-2 and SR-71) and the 'stealth' fighter (F-117). For decades, the defense establishment has hidden new weapons systems and the true state of our military preparedness from real and potential enemies, an enormous effort that required keeping the public in the dark as well. Confidential, classified and secret activities are a normal part of these agencies' daily operations, and it is doubtful that the public's views of these agencies' capabilities are diminished by movies, novels and other fictionalized accounts.

There has been a shift in Americans' attitudes towards government since the allied victory signaled the end of World War II. The 1950s and 1960s saw the Korean conflict which was marked by the dismissal of a popular general and a disappointing outcome; Senator Joseph McCarthy and others hammering away at the integrity of the US government; race riots and the destruction of large parts of major US cities due to civil

unrest; and the bewildering Vietnam conflict. The Watergate scandal of the Nixon years and Irangate of the Reagan years were other pivotal events. Certainly, the US government has never enjoyed the full faith and confidence of all of its citizens, but, since the 1950s overall trust in US government and its institutions has declined precipitously. In 1958, 73% of respondents to the Gallup poll reported that they could trust the government in Washington to do what is right, but by 1994 only 19% of Gallup's respondents expressed such confidence. Meanwhile, over the same 36-year interval, the percentage of respondents who stated that the government could be trusted only some of the time or never rose from 23% to 80%. It is no longer unthinkable that major institutions could act in ways that seem contrary to the common good (Cross and Kleinhesselink, 1985).

Cover-up theorists advance many reasons why governmental agencies might seek to suppress truth. Proposed motives for the cover-up of the JFK assassination include shifting power to the subsequent President Lyndon Johnson, maintaining the power of the military industrial complex by eliminating a pacifistic president, and serving the interests of foreign powers (such as the Soviet Union and Cuba) or domestic enemies (such as business cartels and organized crime). Other motives involve protecting the interests of the cover-up agencies themselves such as motives to suppress evidence of stupidity or inaction that could have prevented the assassination in the first place. Motives for governmental suppression or distortion of evidence pertaining to UFOs typically have to do with preserving the government's credibility and power. One view is that the government maintains secrecy to prevent the distintegration of economic, political and religious institutions. Another, more extreme view is that in return for technological advances that confer economic and military superiority over terrestrial competitors, the US government has entered a disastrous pact with treacherous aliens.

According to our application of lay epistemics, the accessibility or salience of such ideas should bear a relationship to perceptions of cover-up. We expect that in comparison to people who view government agencies as having modest capabilities, people who view such agencies as

very powerful or even omnipotent will be more receptive to cover-up theories. The evidence on this is equivocal. Although Hamsher *et al.* (1968) found that in comparison to subjects who saw themselves as powerless, those who had a sense of empowerment or control were more accepting of the Warren Commission's conclusion that Lee Harvey Oswald was a lone assassin, their finding was not replicated by subsequent researchers (Bergsma and Bergsma, 1978). We also expect that in comparison to people who view governmental agencies as prosocial, people who believe that such agencies are self-serving or devious would be more likely to develop cover-up beliefs. Low trust is associated with a high level of suspiciousness that the US government is democratic in name only (Bishop, 1976), greater suspiciousness and cynicism about the Watergate affair (Wright and Arbuthnot, 1974), and disbelief in the Warren Commission's conclusion (Hamsher *et al.*, 1968). More recently, Goertzel's (1994) survey of 348 New Jersey residents' beliefs in 10 conspiracies (including the JFK assassination and UFO cover-up) found conspiratorial views were negatively correlated with interpersonal trust (in neighbors, relatives, police) and positively correlated with 'anomia', which includes the belief that government officials have little interest in the common man. Perhaps due in part to less positive experiences with government institutions and officials, minorities were more likely to perceive conspiracies than were non-minorities, a result confirmed by Herek and Capitanio's (1994) finding that minorities are particularly suspicious that the government is using AIDS as a form of genocide and is withholding crucial information from the public. Among Goertzel's (1994) respondents, those who were older were less likely to maintain conspiracy beliefs than were those who were younger, possibly because they were brought up in an era when there was relatively high trust in government. Furthermore, respondents who believed in one conspiracy tended to believe in another. In essence, belief in one conspiracy raises the salience of conspiracies-in-general and provides 'independent' supporting evidence for other conspiracies (Goertzel, 1994).

Accessibility of ideas varies not only as a function of memory but also of situational prompts which activate certain memories or bring new ideas into the set. Thus, media depiction of assassinations, UFO sightings, or human abductions by aliens can prompt or strengthen cover-up and other conspiracy beliefs. Oliver Stone's movie *JFK* which fosters New Orleans Prosecutor Jim Garrison's largely discredited conspiracy theories may keep the issue alive for another generation, an expectation that is borne out by Butler *et al.*'s (1995) finding that in comparison to adult theater-goers who were waiting to see the film, those who had just seen it were angrier and more firmly convinced that multiple agencies were involved in both the assassination and its cover-up. A Spanish researcher found that, on a world-wide basis, reports of human abductions by aliens tend to cluster in time following a major media event, and added that it was not until foreign abduction cases reached the Spanish media that the first claims of abduction occurred in Spain (Ballester-Olmos, 1994). One of the busiest years for UFO sightings in the UK was 1978, when the film *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* was first shown in England (Good, 1988, p. 72).

Human memory is notoriously unreliable. Memories fade over time, are blocked or shaped by newer memories, and are contaminated by the present. Memories, or what we take as memories, may be unwitting fabrications that take place when the memory is elicited or reconstituted (Schachter, 1995). Once contrived, a fake or distorted memory is indistinguishable from a 'real' memory, that is, a decent approximation of what actually happened. This raises some interesting questions about some eye-witness accounts of the JFK assassination and UFO sightings. Posner (1994, pp. 222–262) points out that many of the witnesses who provide evidence consistent with a conspiracy in the JFK assassination stepped forward years, sometimes decades after the fact. In some cases, their recent statements conflict with their sworn testimony taken close to the time of the assassination itself. One possibility is that the new testimony is heavily shaped by media accounts, social pressure and amateur interrogations. There is growing evidence that reports of human abductions by aliens rest in part on ideas that are manufactured or implanted during the course of an interview, sometimes under hypnosis (Spanos *et al.*, 1994). Hypnosis involves a suspension of

normal, critical thinking and increases susceptibility to influence by the hypnotist's ideas, but hypnosis is not a necessary precondition for reconstructive recall. Implanted memories may also account for first hand reports of past-life identities and ritual satanic abuse (Spanos *et al.,* 1994).

Motivational States

Motivational states direct people's attention, shape perceptions, and encourage conclusions that are congruent with their personal interests and needs. At the heart of lay epistemics are two opposing needs: a 'need for structure' or a clear-cut, unambiguous answer, and a 'fear of invalidity', or a need to avoid making wrong or erroneous judgments. As Goertzel (1994, p. 739) points out, conspiracy theories provide 'ready answers for unanswered questions and help resolve contradictions between known "facts" and the individual's belief systems'. McCauley and Jacques (1979, p. 644) suggest that continued interest in the JFK assassination is a manifestation of the Zeigarnik effect, a tendency to remember uncompleted tasks. Until the mystery is solved, it will weigh heavily in the public consciousness and people will continue to seek closure. A plausible manifestation of fear of invalidity is extreme thoroughness reviewing and analyzing the evidence. Hofstadter (1965, pp. 36–38) points out that there is a certain level of empiricism and scholarship in many political tracts; a huge list of evidentiary points supported by numerous footnotes and an extensive bibliography. Many (but not all) of the treatises on the JFK assassination and UFOs seem to fit this description. The sheer volume of information in conspiracy books makes refutation on a point-by-point basis almost impossible.

Conclusional needs, which make some conclusions more attractive than others, bring a wide range of motivational forces into the lay epistemic framework. For example, the concept of conclusional needs allows us to include utilitarian motives in our analysis of cover-up. The JFK assassination and UFO reports are big businesses which include profits for authors, publishers, speakers and vendors of information and memorabilia (McHoskey, 1995), and whole careers have been based on spinning conspiracy theories (DeLoach, 1995, p. 165). Conclusional needs also allow us to incorporate agression, defensiveness, displacement, projection and other psychodynamic concepts. Conspiracy explanations of the JFK assassination may be attractive because to admit that a single, crazed individual is capable of overthrowing a leader is admitting vulnerability to unpredictable destruction (Freedman, 1984).

People who study or investigate political assassinations or UFOs are likely to experience considerable frustration; despite their best efforts to get to the heart of the matter, the anticipated truth remains elusive. Aggressive reactions to frustrating agencies (dominated, after all, by authority figures) could take the form of questioning these agencies' competence and integrity. Also, whereas it is not possible to aggress against the political extremists, foreign agents, or renegades who ordered the assassination (or against the extraterrestrials that meddle in human affairs) the agencies that should have prevented the outrage remain a convenient target.

Denial, rationalization and the projection of hostility are plausible reactions from people who have spent many years studying the Kennedy assassination (or researching UFOs) and are then told that they have been wasting their time chasing a will-o'-the-wisp. For some people the choice—to write off a large part of their life and perhaps a lucrative career or to maintain their pre-existing beliefs—is not much of a choice at all. Indeed, one possible response to disconfirming evidence is to reaffirm one's initial position and then raise the stakes by rededicating oneself to the search for the truth. Self-justification is one mechanism that contributes to the escalation of commitment; this consists of actions to convince oneself and the world that one is competent and rational and that past decisions have been accurate and correct. Another mechanism, offered by prospect theory, suggests that rather than walking away from a losing project and incurring certain loss people sometimes choose to raise the stakes, thereby risking even greater loss but in return maintaining a chance for success. There is evidence for both of these mechanisms, and individual tendencies to escalate are amplified when decisions are made by groups (Whyte, 1993).

Logic

Once a hypothesis is formed it is tested in a logical fashion. In a sense, the lay person uses the same tools as the scientist for testing hypotheses. This does not mean that the lay person understands formal logic, or that he or she never makes mistakes. Logic, in lay epistemics, refers to a subjective if–then relationship. If the government stands mute, then they have something to hide. This dichotomy overlooks the possibility that the government has no information to release. Some people may reason that if an organization classifies a document as confidential or secret, it must bear a significant relationship to the case. This overlooks many possibilities, such as (1) the classification was a mistake; (2) the agency is required to accept and classify all reports independent of worth; (3) the classification came about for some tangential reason, for example, because it mentions a secret installation, refers to a covert operation, or came from a confidential informant. The CIA is conspicuous among the agencies that holds back on information not because of the sensitive content of the information itself but to protect the identities of its informants.

According to lay epistemics, people do seek consistency among their various ideas, but only when the issues are important to them. We note that there are two powerful forces that help people support the views that they hold dear. Each of these is likely to operate in cases such as political assassinations and UFOs, where there is a huge glut of theories, evidence and opinions. These are selective perception, or focusing on information that is consistent with one's needs and expectations, and biased assimilation, which involves interpreting and remembering information in such a way that it fits well with pre-existing beliefs. The result of these processes is that attitudes tend to persevere in the absence of additional confirming evidence, and even in the presence of disconfirming evidence (Anderson *et al.*, 1980).

As Lord *et al.* (1979, p. 2098) point out, in the course of examining relevant empirical evidence 'people are likely to accept ''confirming'' evidence at face value while subjecting ''disconfirming'' evidence to critical evaluation, and as a result draw undue support for their position'. These investigators presented proponents and opponents of capital punishment with 'mixed' evidence which included evidence that was not consistent with their personal beliefs. Because subjects processed the information in a biased or partial manner, both proponents and opponents rated the evidence that was consistent with their own views as more convincing than the evidence that conflicted with their views, and they became more convinced than ever of the soundness of their initial attitudes. McHoskey (1995) has recently extended this to people's beliefs about the JFK assassination. Exposure to the same synopses of conspiracy and anti-conspiracy perspectives led both proponents and opponents of conspiracy theory to become more polarized, that is, more convinced of the correctness of their initial convictions. Authoritarian subjects were more likely to accept the government's arguments than were non-authoritarian subjects, and subjects who had no opinion at the beginning of the experiment gravitated toward conspiracy theory. Anderson *et al.* (1980) found that once a person has developed a causal explanation of a phenomenon, that explanation is likely to persevere even though the explanation is based on minimal or dubious information and despite subsequent total discrediting of the evidence that led to person to accept that explanation in the first place. Oftentimes, people do not even consider alternatives to their pet theories; under some conditions, when induced to provide a contrary or counter-explanation their initial views will soften (Anderson and Sechler, 1986). The studies that have found this softening, however, have focused on non-emotional issues whereas the studies that found perseverance focused on issues that, like political assassinations and UFO sightings, are emotionally involving. Thus far, behavioral science has made greater progress documenting that people maintain flimsy theories despite evidence to the contrary than it has made towards understanding the conditions under which people's 'pet' theories will change (Anderson and Sechler, 1986).

ORGANIZATIONAL PROCESSES AND EVIDENCE OF COVER-UP

We propose that in the course of hypothesis

testing, organizational processes, especially those involved in the collection, storage and dissemination of information, provide (spurious) evidence of cover-up. The CIA, FBI, Secret Service and other agencies and commissions that investigate assassinations and UFOs are, like all organizations, imperfect information processors whose errors and omissions are accentuated under conditions of information overload, that is, when they are inundated with more information than they can accurately process within the allotted time. Information overload leads to processing strategies that decrease pressures on the system but at the expense of efficiency and quality of results (Miller, 1978, pp. 121–202). These strategies, which involve delays (queuing, filtering), omissions and increased tolerance for error, result in lost files (due to mislabeling, misplacement, or destruction), failures to respond to requests for information, long lags between the time that the information is requested and when it is divulged, selective disclosure, and spokespersons who give incomplete, shifting, or conflicting accounts. Each of these indicators or symptoms of overload may be construed as deliberate attempts to suppress information or mislead the public. Thus, much of the 'evidence' that supports cover-up hypotheses is consistent with a non-sinister interpretation based on the difficulties and problems that organizations encounter in the course of undertaking complex investigations.

Our understanding of the fundamental attribution error suggests that members of the general public and members of the organization should have very different interpretations of these indicators. The fundamental attribution error occurs when an observer overrates the contributions of dispositional forces (abilities, motives, personality) and underrates the contributions of situational forces (environmental influences, social pressures, fate) to observed behaviors (Ross, 1977, p. 183). For example, a citizen who waits and waits for information requested under the Freedom of Information Act may harbor dark thoughts about inefficiency, while the hard-working employee who is responsible for releasing the information may attribute the delay to a huge stack of competing requests. Thus, we expect that outsiders attribute errors and inefficiencies to incompetence, duplic-

ity and characteristics of the organization itself, while employees point to the complexity of the investigation, time constraints, political pressures and other situational variables that are beyond their control.

Additional fodder comes from jurisdictional disputes, which arise at both the interorganizational and intraorganizational levels. Jurisdictional disputes are associated with wheel-spinning and lost time, missed opportunities to collect and preserve evidence, information dispersed across two or more agencies, and mutual distrust between the agencies involved. At the interorganizational level we find conflicts over who should be in control of an investigation. In Dallas, the Police Department had legal jurisdiction and it was only after a confrontation that federal authorities removed JFK's body from Dallas and took charge of the investigation. Removal of JFK's body prior to autopsy left latitude for different hypotheses about the number of bullets that entered the body and even hypotheses about the surgical alteration or substitution of JFK's remains. Some of the controversy surrounding the assassination would have been circumvented if the corpse had remained in Dallas and undergone a procedurally correct forensic autopsy. The medical establishment does not treat celebrity patients (and, we suspect celebrity corpses) the same as it treats everyone else. Specifically, celebrities' physicians may be chosen on the basis of their position and status, rather than on the basis of their technical proficiency, and concerns about privacy and matters of state temper medical judgment (Kucharski, 1984). We see evidence of both of these tendencies in the autopsy of JFK.

At the intraorganizational level, investigations are channeled by subunit charters and goals, and potentially important details 'fall through the cracks'. When investigations are broken down into components and assigned to different teams, each team may proceed without regard for the progress of other teams that are focusing on different parts of the puzzle. An investigator with the HSCA stated that the five different teams that focused on different aspects of the JFK assassination wrote five independent reports. The summary report was written by yet another group and lacked consistency with the core background reports (Fonzi, 1994, p. 11). Simi-

larly, the Condon Commission's (Condon, 1969) report on UFOs was disjointed and, 'like a camel', obviously assembled by a committee (Craig, 1995, 216).

Factionalism and in-fighting can also fortify cover-up beliefs. Disgruntled or publicity-hungry employees may speak out of turn and, perhaps in a spirit of public duty or perhaps in a spirit of revenge, raise questions about the conduct of the inquiry or release embarrassing information. Major rifts during the final stages of the Condon Commission's investigation resulted in a mutiny and a movement to produce an alternative report that challenged the official Commission's findings (Craig, 1995, p. 228). Staff shake-ups, employee discontent and leaks also complicated the work of the HSCA (Fonzi, 1994, pp. 228–229, 245).

Information Acquisition

In both Kennedy assassinations agencies were confronted with unexpected, shocking crimes with profound social and political implications. Each investigation required assembling and organizing large teams of investigators; the Warren Commission had 83 staffers and 150 full-time FBI agents (Fonzi, 1994, pp. 178–179). Each investigation required in-depth, painstaking analysis of physical evidence, the review of thousands of documents and reports, and, of course, interviewing hundreds of witnesses. The initial stages of these investigations took place under severe time pressures, stemming from at least two sources.

First, investigative agencies try to obtain information before it is lost or distorted. Eyewitness memories fade rapidly and change as individual witnesses talk with one another and are exposed to media accounts. Physical evidence is quickly contaminated or destroyed. For example, one witness reported that before LAPD investigators arrived at the Ambassador Hotel a man dressed in a tuxedo used a pocket knife to pry a bullet from the wall of the pantry where RFK was shot (Moldea, 1995, p. 235). Thus, investigators must work quickly, and press on for extended periods of time without adequate sleep (DeLoach, 1995, pp. 113–143). During the final months of the Warren Commission, staffers worked 15-hour days and 7-day weeks (Posner 1994, p. 405).

Second, these investigations proceeded under relentless pressure for information, both from political leaders who wanted immediate answers and from news-hungry representatives of the media. Within a week of newly elevated President Lyndon B. Johnson's demand, the FBI had prepared an initial report on the JFK assassination that was fundamentally correct and never successfully challenged (DeLoach, 1995, pp. 130, 148). The Warren Commission was directed to complete its work in six months so that its activities would not overlap the 1964 Presidential elections. The potential for overload under such timelines is clear when we consider the magnitude of the investigators' jobs. Perhaps the sense of this was captured by DeLoach (1995, p. 149), who stated that the Warren Commission 'sifted an amount of evidence that might have topped the Washington Monument'. The FBI's initial report was 513 pages (DeLoach, 1995, p. 148). The Warren Commission report encompassed 24 volumes, and the later report by the HSCA (another effort measured in months rather than years) resulted in a summary supported by 26 volumes of documentation (Fonzi, 1994, p. 4). Even the LAPD's investigation of the RFK assassination involved 50 000 documents and over 2400 photographs (Moldea, 1995, p. 194). The original Condon Commission Report required 1465 pages (Craig, 1995, p. 216).

Time pressures pose another risk: forming a premature conclusion which becomes difficult to retract. In the early stages of an investigation important information may be overlooked or irrelevant information included. The high volume of unfiltered input results in many inconsistencies and contradictions that are consistent with negligence and cover-up. As the investigation continues and officials attempt to correct the record, the sheer fact of change itself may provide more 'support' for cover-up hypotheses. The need to selectively interview witnesses or to cut short interviews leaves some interviewees wondering why they were not allowed to tell their stories. Eventually, many of these stories reach the welcoming ears of amateur or independent investigators. If the investigator is not careful, a combination of structured interviews, selective perception and biased assimilation tilt such reports in the direction of false support for cover-up beliefs.

Moreover, reports may be filtered in such a way that only the most sensational reach the public.

A common fault in UFO investigations is selectively interviewing only those people who have noticed something unusual. Condon Commission researchers devoted considerable time to investigating strange 'beeping sounds' reported by a newcomer to a particular geographical area. Finally, they extended their investigation to long-term residents who had heard nothing unusual. The person who had reported the strange noises had heard the call of a pigmy owl that long-term residents knew was not out of the ordinary (Craig, 1995, pp. 3–13). After the owl was killed the beeping sounds ceased.

There are clear parallels between investigating assassinations and investigating UFO sightings. In both cases, the event is unexpected and uncontrollable, and in both cases it is important to get eyewitness accounts and retrieve physical evidence as soon as possible. Yet, there are also some important differences. Assassinations are discrete historical events, but UFO sightings are ongoing and the aggregate number of sightings ranges in the hundreds of thousands, perhaps millions. UFO investigations are complicated by the sheer number of sightings, the lack of definitive physical evidence of any type, and the diversity of the reports themselves. By sifting through the 'data' it is possible to find instances that seem to support almost any contention.

Storage and Retrieval

Organizational memories, like human memories, tend to fade and distort with the passage of time. People involved in an investigation retire or die. Physical evidence deteriorates: improperly stored documents and photographs fade and crack, recordings lose fidelity or are broken, and so forth. Assassin Sirhan Sirhan's bullets fired at RFK in 1968 lost their evidentiary value as years of deterioration destroyed their identifying markings, and the revolver itself became untestable due to poor handling during storage and build-up of lead following many test firings by officials who sought souvenirs fired from the historic gun (Moldea, 1995, pp. 168, 319).

Gaps appear in the organization's memory when materials are checked out and either not returned or misfiled. Materials are collected that are believed to be of value and then, found to be uninformative, are destroyed, only to inspire retrospective interpretations of their actual 'worth'. Routine purges intended to reduce the size of files by deleting irrelevant or redundant information introduce further real or imagined 'gaps' in the picture; for example, DOD policy is to destroy routine files of more than two years of age unless otherwise specified. Information may be present in the system, but for all intents and purposes absent because of a faulty retrieval strategy. A physicist assigned to the Condon Commission discovered that the Air Force archivist could not produce a UFO report filed some 10 years earlier by a highly credible bomber crew. He reported becoming more concerned about the Air Force's failure to produce the report than by the content of the report itself. In fact, reports were filed by date, and the date given him by the bomber crew was off by two months. Later researchers who used a different retrieval strategy were handed the report in short order (Craig, 1995, pp. 149–150).

Dissemination

Many forces discourage the release of information to outsiders. Katz (1977) points out that while most analyses of organizational cover-up start from the position that external authorities (for example, Congress) and internal authorities (for example, CIA or FBI management) develop harmonious relations because they have common fates, in actuality there may be some antagonism between the two. Cover-up is one of the tools that internal authorities have to protect themselves against encroachment by outsiders. In addition to protecting the organization from meddling, cover-up increases the loyalty of organizational members whose performance lapses or transgressions could become problematic if known by people on the outside. Thus, on occasion, there are 'cover your rear' actions, including the destruction of documents, to avoid criticism or censure.

Forces for secrecy may be particularly strong in the FBI, CIA, DOD and other organizations that are required to conduct confidential business. There are good reasons for secrecy: to prevent tipping off subjects who are about to be apprehended, to avoid ruining the reputations of

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people who are under investigation and later exonerated, and to keep national foes in the dark. Many policies restrict the release of information. For example, the DOD's Operation Security (OPSEC) initiated in the 1980s prevents the release of any information that might reveal military preparedness or intentions, with the result that even the most inane questions sometimes go unanswered. The Air Force's unnecessary secrecy on UFOs between 1947 and 1968 did much to fuel suspicions of cover-up and 'played a significant role in the development of distrust of American people in their own defense establishment' (Craig, 1995, p. xiii).

A recent simulation study of an agency's response to citizen requests for information on an environmental risk shows how agency responses can affect public opinion (Sandman *et al.*, 1993). The researchers prepared bogus newspaper articles that contained the same basic information about environmental risks but varied the way that the information was released to the public. Under one set of conditions, agency spokespersons were courteous, willing to share the information, and encouraged people to form their own opinions. Under another set of conditions, the spokespersons were somewhat contemptuous, withheld some information, and released other information only after repeated requests. Although ultimately each agency released the same basic information, the reluctant discourteous spokespersons were seen as more secretive. Under the latter conditions, subjects considered the issue more serious and rated themselves as more concerned, frightened and angered. Furthermore, when spokespersons behaved in an offensive way, subjects were less satisfied with the amount of information that was released and were more concerned about learning additional details.

Interactions between citizens and agency spokespersons have the potential of unfolding in such a way as to intensify mutual suspicions. In psychology, 'self-fulfilling prophecy' (Snyder, 1984) and 'behavioral confirmation' (Snyder and Haugen, 1994) refer to acting in ways that induce others to confirm behaviorally our expectations. Germane here is Lemert's classic study of paranoia and the dynamics of exclusion (Lemert, 1962). He found that family members or coworkers who are highly suspicious may become an imposition or embarrassment. Other people collude to manage that person by withholding or manipulating information, keeping watch over him, ensuring that he is (or is not) exposed to certain kinds of situations, perhaps even arranging for incarceration in a mental hospital. Thus, a person who believes that others are 'out to get him' may in fact be persecuted although the persecutors do not realize that they are in fact part of a conspiracy and stoutly maintain that they have the person's best interests at heart. Similarly, a person who is a harsh critic of a governmental agency or who makes incessant demands upon that agency may evoke evasive, aggressive, or passive–aggressive responses which confirm the preliminary suspicions and intensify efforts to extract the truth. The intensification of suspicions increases the defensiveness of the agency spokesperson, and a downward spiral continues. Acting in ways that result in others confirming our expectations helps create an orderly, predictable world even if it does not smooth the path for future interactions (Snyder and Haugen, 1994).

Once released, 'evidence' may be of such poor quality and so ambiguous that it increases, rather than allays suspicions. The same 'evidence' has been used to support opposing conclusions (Lord *et al.*, 1979). Both assassination and UFO researchers have complained that documents released under the Freedom of Information Act tend to be heavily censored (reflecting, perhaps, a conservative strategy of 'when in doubt, black it out') and of poor photographic quality. Additionally, documents may bear cryptic stamps and markings that are well understood within the agency but enhance the recipient's sense of mystery.

Abraham Zapruder's home movie of the JFK assassination is perhaps the best photographic evidence of the Kennedy assassination. Zapruder was a hobbyist who used a small-format (8 mm), hand-held movie camera with a telephoto lens, a combination that led to grainy, unstable pictures. Over the years there have been multiple copies of his film; these differ not only in terms of quality but, to a limited extent, content. Additionally, various researchers have sought to apply corrective techniques and enhancements which could lead to the loss of some details and the accentuation of others.

Even the film's status as the official timer of the event has been challenged, because of potential variations in the tightness with which the spring motor was wound at the beginning of the filming and the speed with which it wound down during the filming (Livingston, 1995, pp. 115–180).

Interpretations of UFO photographs also demonstrate the projective nature of much evidence. There are many such photographs but they are often grainy, blurred, or show some bright but ill-defined objects or mere pinpoints of light. Some photos are suggestive of identifiable terrestrial objects such as pie tins or Frisbees; some pictures are not centered and raise suspicions about supporting frameworks that are just outside of the camera's view. Some pictures have visible wires or strings holding the object aloft. Here, too, people's needs, values and wishes may be more important than the actual photographic content.

Proceeding in the post-modern literary tradition, ethnographer Nick Trujillo (1993) suggests that the events in Dealey Plaza have been reproduced so often and in so many different ways that the distinction between the actual events and the retelling are blurred, perhaps totally erased. We must settle instead for a 'hyper-reality', a simulation consisting of many overlapping but not identical descriptions which in the aggregate provide tremendous latitude for differing interpretations. The irony, he notes, is that the more books and articles written on the assassination, the more noise in the system and the less likely that we will ever find a definitive answer. The same line of reasoning applies to oft-told episodes involving flying saucers.

The public's lack of understanding of the issues, or failure to appreciate official nomenclature or jargon, also poses difficulties. Thus, when the health physicist at Three Mile Island nuclear power station said that a radioactive plume of several thousand microcuries of xenon gas had been released, he meant that only a very small and innocuous emission had occurred. The public only heard that 'thousands' of units of radioactive stuff were released, and imagined a glowing cloud of death pouring forth from the facility's cooling towers. Further statements to the contrary were interpreted as cover-ups.

Other distortions occur as the information is dispersed by the media (Mitroff and Bennis, 1989). Media reports tend to be selective and sensationalized. Reporters, in their attempts to keep it simple, avoid complex analyses. They may lack the necessary qualifications to provide an accurate analysis of a situation, or time pressures (such as publication deadlines or a need to 'scoop' the competition) prevent them from doing so. Reporters, like other people, try to achieve closure—sometimes before the end of that evening's news broadcast—and in the process they turn an incomplete story into something that has a beginning, and an end, and seems plausible. Oftentimes, sensational events make the headlines, but later, mundane reinterpretations either make the back pages or are never reported. Reporters who do develop accurate and in-depth studies are likely to go unrewarded for their efforts, because their product is untimely or outside the grasp of the mass audience.

Matters are complicated by the mass audience's demand (or perceived demand) for entertainment. A story may have important implications, but it is unlikely to command attention unless it has high interest value. Colorful individuals may be more newsworthy than thoughtful analysts, and reporters may capitalize on sensationalistic aspects of a story, replacing thoughtful commentary with sound bytes and other emotionally engaging 'hooks'. Sometimes, name-dropping and innuendo replace substance, and there is the ever-present problem of quotations out of context.

Moreover, in contemporary news reporting, there is a blurring of fantasy and reality. Current technology makes it possible to present situations as one would like them to be, rather than as they are. Scenes may be re-enacted for dramatic effect, pictures (including motion pictures) may be retouched or cropped, and misleading charts and diagrams may be prepared, all in the alleged interests of revealing the truth. In the retouching, the re-enactment, the dramatization, fictional elements gain ascendance over factual elements. The audience, conditioned by tabloids and docu-dramas, does not know where fact ends and fiction begins. Thus, simplistic explanations, limited attention spans, a desire to be entertained and the technical means to tamper with the evidence may feed beliefs in conspiracies.

Reporters are subject to the same psychological principles that govern everyone else and the processes of selective perception, biased assimilation, and escalation of commitment may help account for conspiracy theories' persistence. DeLoach (1995, p. 54) reports that almost immediately after JFK's assassination newscasters publicly speculated that a right-wing plot had been involved. When it turned out that the assassin was a Marxist who had lived in Russia and was a self-styled friend of Cuba, 'the liberal media first went into shock, and then into denial. Things simply couldn't have worked that way. Somehow, some way, the right wing had to be responsible.' Thus the media helped promulgate the theory that there was a well-organized conspiracy behind Oswald's act; thus the success of Oliver Stone's movie *JFK*, and thus widespread beliefs among American people that in the 1960s 'their government deceived them, plotted against them, and perhaps even murdered their president' (DeLoach, 1995, p. 155).

DISCUSSION

In this essay we explored some of the bases for widespread perceptions of government cover-up. We propose that public acceptance of cover-up theory can be understood in terms of an interplay of information processing at two system levels: the level of the organism and the level of the organization. Kruglanski's (1980–1990) theory of lay epistemics provided a convenient framework for our discussion.

Allegations of cover-up should not be dismissed as the product of ignorance or the 'lunatic fringe'. They are the result of normal motivational states, information, processing strategies, and organizational realities. We propose that beliefs in a powerful and untrustworthy government, sensationalized media accounts and the like set the stage for cover-up hypotheses. Such beliefs are shaped by a need for closure, a need to believe that we live in a stable and predictable world, and needs to vent frustration and anger. The activities and pronouncements of the CIA, DOD, FBI and other powerful agencies provide the public with the opportunity to test their cover-up hypotheses. Bureaucratic structures, established policies and procedures, and errors, delays and omissions in information processing give the illusion of confirming cover-up hypotheses. In sum, we suggest that much of the evidence that supports charges of government cover-up may be nothing more than misinterpretations of normal organizational phenomena.

Cover-up theories are almost impossible to dismantle because they cannot be disproved. For the adherent, the lack of definitive evidence simply provides additional testimony to the effectiveness of the cover-up. Additionally, as specific arguments in support of cover-up are dismantled, new arguments are introduced. The illusion of cover-up is maintained by raising new questions and increasing the number of people (and amount of resources and effort) involved in the alleged cover-up. In a sense, cover-up theories, like certain kinds of viruses, mutate: as one version approaches extinction, a new, slightly different version gains strength.

The citizen who encounters the morass of charge and countercharges, claims and counterclaims, can at best evaluate only a small fraction of the evidence. Properly evaluating issues of the size and complexity of the JFK assassination or UFO reports requires expertise in many areas. People who read about the JFK assassination, for example, encounter complex arguments based on understanding anatomy and physiology, forensic pathology, document analysis, photo interpretation, the reliability of eyewitness accounts, and lie detection (among other things). People who study UFOs need some understanding of physics, meteorology, psychology of perception and social psychology, as well as most of the tools that are useful for studying assassinations (document analysis, photo interpretation, and so on). Yet we suspect even people with the requisite backgrounds and an intense interest in the evidence may not undertake an impartial analysis. Instead, people may make up their mind on the basis of minimal or faulty information. Once this occurs, further study consists of a truncated search for information that supports one's initial position. First impressions are likely to be maintained despite evidence to the contrary, despite total disconfirmation of the evidence that led to the initial impression.

Of course, not everyone gives political assassinations or UFO sightings all that much thought.

People who lack sufficient motivation or ability to follow the issues tend to base their beliefs on heuristics or rules of thumb (Eagley and Chaiken, 1993; Petty and Cacioppo, 1986). The kinds of cues that people use to make judgments in such situations are unlikely to help the government's case. More specifically, many people will respond to the communicator who has the greatest credibility (distrust in government is pertinent here), the message that is the lengthiest or contains the most arguments (the length and intricacy of many treatises on political assassinations and UFOs are relevant here), and social consensus (which clearly rejects lone assassination theory but is divided on the issue of the 'reality' of UFOs). Official reports often reflect the investigator's lack of certainty and are worded in the conditional, a form that is comfortable for social scientists but suggests a certain inconclusiveness to people who want 'the answers'. This caution is not necessarily shown by independent investigators. Many of the accounts of assassinations and UFOs focus on vivid, colorful examples with rich and provocative detail. They are more attention getting and memorable than the bland, somewhat inconclusive assertions found in official reports, and they hold out the promise of closure, not necessarily right now but soon, soon.

From the organization's perspective, allegations of cover-up are more than a public relations or image problem. To the extent that such charges undermine public confidence they make it difficult for their organization to conduct subsequent investigations or gain public acceptance of later findings and recommendations. A straightforward, decisive investigation with clear-cut results may obviate allegations of cover-up, but not all mysteries are easily solved. The mystery may be complex, or history itself may intervene as when Jack Ruby's assassination of Lee Harvey Oswald ensured that Oswald's testimony would never be heard. Nonetheless, there are some steps that organizations may take.

First, jurisdictional issues should be resolved at the outset. A conflict between federal and local authorities (for example) causes agencies to lose in several ways. There is a loss of time, and perhaps evidence, as each agency spins its wheels. Jurisdictional conflicts may encourage a misattribution of intent. For example, people may believe that federal authorities attempt to usurp the prerogatives of local authorities because the federal authorities have something to hide. In addition, a public airing of such disputes may lead to a loss of the disputants' esteem in the eyes of the public.

Second, serious thought should be given to a truly workable time line, one that is defined by the problem, not by anxious politicians or news-hungry media. One approach is to assign massive resources to a high-profile case, with the anticipation that the more massive the effort, the faster the resolution. If 10 investigators can achieve closure in a year (for example), then perhaps 60 investigators can resolve the issue in two months. Increasing the number of investigators may speed some investigations (for example, a manhunt) but in some cases this is offset by problems of coordinating the different efforts. It takes time to sort and sift the data, and above all, to integrate it into a coherent report. It may be the faulty integration of data, rather than a lack of data, that encourages allegations of cover-up.

Third, there are many strategies for dealing with overload. In the long run, in important cases, strategies that ultimately involve processing the information (delaying, queuing, filtering) may be preferable to those that speed progress to the goal but in a crude or imperfect way (errors, omissions). Errors in the record, of course, cause confusion and doubt. It is never entirely clear to all observers that the 'corrected' version is more accurate than the original version, and inconsistencies may be attributed to manipulation of evidence. Errors of omission, for example, not interviewing witnesses who believe or at least claim that they have an important story to tell, may be interpreted as unwillingness on the investigating agency's part to hear testimony which is inconsistent with the official governmental 'line'.

Fourth, premature statements—intended, no doubt, to show that the agency is working on the problem and has the honorable intention of keeping the public up to date—may raise more suspicions than they allay. Hesitant, awkward, ill-considered answers, major omissions and an inability to answer probing questions may reflect nothing more than the current stage of the

investigation, but nonetheless validate people's suspicions. Similarly, the organization's integrity may be impugned if different spokespersons, who are perhaps privy to different information, provide inconsistent accounts of the investigation's progress.

Fifth, the old KISS (Keep It Simple, Stupid!) principle is worth reiterating here. The larger the investigation, the more likely it is to contain the seeds of its own destruction, not only because it provides a surfeit of data which is open to differing interpretations but because it increases the likelihood of overload and information processing strategies that create the illusion of cover-up. In addition to keeping investigations simple, straightforward, and centered on major evidence, there is some merit in issuing a simple, straightforward report. All too often official documents are couched in technical and bureaucratic jargon which makes them ripe for misinterpretation in line with the interpreter's needs, motives, and pre-existing beliefs. A complex document, especially one which has sections blacked out or is emblazoned with cryptic markings and illegible hand-written notes, has all the potential of a cloud or inkblot for eliciting differing interpretations. There are good reasons for technical and bureaucratic language and for markings that provide important information to 'insiders' in a short-hand way. However, it may be useful to provide reporters with guides to or interpretations of the document as well as copies of the document itself.

Finally, the organization's attempts at direct refutation may be taken as further evidence of duplicity, or elicit, from the cover-up theorist, a spirited counter-response. Perhaps here we may take a hint from studies of verbal conditioning which show that withholding agreement is a simple and reliable way to weaken verbal behavior. The gist of this was captured by a private guard who was accused of working for the Mafia, the CIA and Howard Hughes and who was suspected by many of discharging his gun in the pantry where RFK was assassinated. The guard explained that he tried to keep quiet in the hope that allegations of his involvement 'would die out and go away' (Moldea, 1995, p. 203).

In closing, suspicions of government cover-up seem to absorb significant portions of the attention of many of our contemporaries. We ourselves neither endorse nor reject the reality of any individual cover-up theory, nor do we question the rationality, competence, or integrity of people who maintain or promulgate cover-up beliefs. Our purpose is to identify some of the behavioral underpinnings of social phenomena that strike us as too robust to be fully explained by the most imaginative conspiracy theory, phenomena that transcend both culture and time.

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