

Yale, Shadows, and American Royalty

by

David Lipson

The stories surrounding the Order of the Skull and Bones are tales of malice and evil, of secret rituals and shadowy oaths, and of the young elite conspiring against democracy. Established in the 1800s at Yale University, Skull and Bones is a secret society that recruits the most capable young students and members of powerful families; information about the members' participation in the society and the activities of Skull and Bones are kept secret, and only two aspects of the society are considered factually undeniable: the society exists and many extremely powerful individuals have been members. Conspiracy theorists who write about this secret society attribute a wide-ranging number of separate, sub-conspiracies to the Order, but one theme is consistently clear: the story of Skull and Bones is a story of the American elite working to quietly undermine the American ideal. One can easily dismiss the Skull and Bones theory, like other conspiracy theories, as conspiratorial lunacy or the thoughtless ravings of marginalized members of society. But to disregard these theories because of their extreme claims is also to ignore the vitally important social pertinence of these narratives; behind their seemingly absurd or fantastical claims, these theories voice individuals' legitimate concerns about the world they inhabit. The Skull and Bones story represents a real concern by middle-class Americans about whether the powerful are acting in their interest and also explores the divisive but

hazy gap between the perception of how power is attained American society and the reality of the attainment of power.

Because Skull and Bones conspiracy theories discuss an organization almost two centuries old, as opposed to a particular event, there is an extremely wide range of theories written about the society's various evildoings -- for example, one theory focuses on Skull and Bones indirectly financing Hitler, while another focuses on rigging the 2004 election. My research specifically focuses on Skull and Bones conspiracy theories that have emerged and circulated during and following the 1970s. My reasons for focusing on this period are based on two premises. The first is that the political status of publicly connected members of the society rose dramatically during and following the 1970s, thus generating further speculation about the magnitude of power that the society has; the second is that during and since the 1970s, cynicism regarding the public intent and righteousness of the American government has increased. Polls, particularly the American National Election Studies Guide to Public Opinion¹, support my assertion that lack of trust in the government has steadily risen since the early 1970s. As "Watergate and the Iran-Contra affair illustrate, small groups of powerful individuals do occasionally seek to affect the course of history, and with some nontrivial degree of success,"² and certainly these scandals mark post-1970 America as an era when the existence of a nefarious, conspiratorial secret society like the Skull and Bones seems more plausible. For these reasons, I

¹ "The ANES Guide to Public Opinion and Electoral Behavior," Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan, Center for Political Studies.
<http://www.electionstudies.org/nesguide/nesguide.htm>.

² Brian L. Keeley, "Of Conspiracy Theories," *The Journal of Philosophy*, 96, no. 3, (1999): 111.

believe that theories that have circulated following the 1970s are especially rich and warrant analysis. Additionally, within this set of theories, I am specifically exploring the underlying anti-Americanism of the society. For the purpose of this essay, I am defining "Americanism" as an ideal that cherishes political openness, democracy, and room for the upward mobility of an average citizen.

Despite the numerous variations of the story, some basic aspects of the conspiratorial narratives are quite consistent. The Order is a secret society that was established in the 1830s at Yale University and recruits future leaders and members of already powerful families. These "bonesmen" then take an oath to the society above all else and work to further the Skulls' sphere of influence through illegal, immoral, and, most importantly, anti-American means. Once the members of the Skull and Bones have pledged their devotion to the secret society and its anti-American approach to attaining power, they go on to infiltrate both the private and public sectors, with the constant goal of heightening their group's influence. Following these literal aspects of the story, the different Skull and Bones conspiracy theories go on to implicate the secret society in drastically different plots and events. From the Skull and Bones indirectly financing Hitler to bearing responsibility for the assassination of JFK or, more recently, rigging the 2004 election, the story of the Skull and Bones is an overarching narrative that encompasses any perceived evildoing that falls under the anti-American thematic substance of the story.

Despite the lengthy, detailed, and differing theories that conspiracy theorists attribute to the society, there is indisputable thematic consistency. The implicit belief that the Skull and Bones are a sort of American royalty and,

additionally, a purposefully anti-American royalty is echoed throughout all of the essays, online postings, and books published on the society that I encountered during my research. One theorist attached a brief preface to his theory, stating:

[The information about the Skull and Bones paints] a big picture... of a cynical, super-rich, entrenched ruling elite that passes its power from generation to generation, a classic ruling class that uses every tool at its disposal to retain power.³

This preface gets to the very core of the conspiracy theory, with an explicitness that is rare to find in these theories; no matter the specific details of the varying theories, this is a story of an American royalty. A secretive, elite group with no regard for morality that only has one concern: to maintain and increase power by any means necessary. A passage in a separate essay echoes this same notion of the Skull and Bones as a "ruling class" but also includes a vital counterpart to this, the society as a purposefully anti-American ruling class:

Through the sponsorship of the Barings and also the Rothschilds, a number of leading New England families, some of whom had sided with Great Britain during the American Revolution, were brought into the opium trade as junior partners... The founding families of Skull & Bones included the Russell and Perkins families, [sic] Over several generations, however, all

³ Risephoenix, "Skull and Bones: a Capsule History and Intimate Peek at One Section of the US Ruling Class," <http://www.geocities.com/CapitolHill/8425/BONES.HTM#Geronimo>.

these families heavily intemarrried [sic] and became, in effect, one extended power grouping.⁴

The writers of this passage, Paul Goldstein and Jeffrey Steinberg, implicitly discuss the anti-Americanism of the society here. I believe that the first section of this quote, where Goldstein and Steinberg comment that some of these families had sided with Britain during the Revolutionary War, is of paramount importance to the underlying message of this story. One would be hard-pressed to create a more black and white example of a clear attack on the American ideal than the opposition to independence during the birth of the United States. This notion, in conjunction with the perception of the Skull and Bones as a ruling class, gets to the heart of the Skull and Bones conspiracy story: a secret society that is made up of an American elite who swear an oath to oppose the public interest. Most importantly, these stories depict a ruling class that has attained its power through anti-American means.

No matter what derivative of the theory is being analyzed, almost all the theories are based on three basic premises. The first premise is that the Skull and Bones society aims to control America and intends to do so by any means necessary. The second premise is that the society is composed of an American ruling class in which old-money bloodlines absorb the newly emerging elite to create one unified grouping of the extremely powerful. The third premise is that this group holds their allegiance to the society higher than all else for the rest of

⁴ Paul Goldstein and Jeffrey Steinberg, *George Bush, Skull and Bones, and the New World Order, A New American View* – International Edition White Paper, 1991, *Freedom Domain* <http://www.freedomdomain.com/secretsocieties/skull01.html>.

their lives and, due to both their preexisting status and also connections gained through the Skull and Bones, infiltrate all aspects of American society. This grouping of premises (hereafter referred to as the “power network” premises) allows for the varying conspiracy theories to discuss drastically different theories about the workings of the society while still all citing the same evidence and coming to the same thematic conclusion. For example, a theory claiming that the secret society was behind the assassination of John F. Kennedy would utilize the power network premises by citing the first premise as indisputable evidence of the Skull and Bones’ motive. JFK, for various reasons depending on the theory, was an enemy of the Skull and Bones and an obstacle in their path to ultimate power. Now with motive established, the second premise is used to show that the secret society has the resources to carry out a conspiracy; the Central Intelligence Agency, according to many conspiracy theorists, is simply an extension of the Skull and Bones, and the CIA had the means to assassinate JFK. Finally, with both the motive and the ability to carry out the conspiracy established, the third premise seals the theory. The Skull and Bones wanted to murder JFK (attainment of power at any cost), had the means to carry out the assassination (the society has influence or control in every aspect of society), and carried out the killing (loyalty to the society’s goals over all else, including morality). This sort of complex rhetorical strategy is significant in that it helps to distinguish conspiracy theories from the perception that they are thoughtless rants. Although a tactic such as the power network premise utilized in Skull and Bones theories certainly does not make the theories themselves any more or less factual, it does illuminate the serious and complex thought that goes into

constructing conspiracy theories and, consequently, supports my belief that conspiracy theories do warrant analysis.

This sort of pyramid of premises is far from unique in conspiracy theory writing; in fact, it is the norm. The three-premise basis, supported by an abundance of citation, is representative of the approach that most conspiracy theorists employ. As early conspiracy theory scholar Richard Hofstadter observed, the conspiracy theorist goes to great lengths to create a web of details and facts in an effort to make the far-fetched seem completely undeniable.⁵ This intricate web then acts as the foundation for a rhetorical strategy such as the power network premises utilized in the Skull and Bones theories. Additionally, as Michael Barkun notes, "because the [conspiracy theory's] claims are so sweeping... they ultimately defeat any attempt at testing" and, because of the scope of whatever conspiracy is being discussed, any "information that appears to put a conspiracy theory in doubt must have been planted by the conspirators themselves in order to mislead."⁶ The juxtaposition of the theories' extensive citations as the basis for whatever claims the theorist is making and the message that any factual inaccuracy is an honest mistake or, more likely, a product of the conspiracy and, consequently, further proof of the purported conspiracy theory makes for a constant, underlying paradox in conspiracy theory writing. The conspiracy theorist is constantly emphasizing the groundbreaking accuracy of his research in order to establish

⁵ Richard Hofstadter, "The Paranoid Style in American Politics," *Harper's Magazine*, November 1962, 77-86.

⁶ Michael Barkun, *A Culture of Conspiracy: Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary America*, Berkeley, University of California Press (2003), 7.

credibility while also informing the reader that if inaccuracies do occur they should not hinder the readers' ability to see the truth in the overarching narrative.

The introduction of the preface discussed earlier states:

The material here is not my own research, so I cannot vouch for the accuracy of every detail. But even if there may be an occasional error, a problem from which all historical research suffers, what is important is the big picture that emerges...⁷

Following this preface, the "big picture" that the essay puts forth is created by a complex network of specific facts. But this paradox is in no way unique to conspiracy theorists.

The paradox of conspiracy theory writing, in many ways, echoes the way that American citizens approach the political process in the United States. "One reason Americans have so much difficulty grasping the political facts of life is that their political system is the world's most complex."⁸ Partially in response to this complexity, Americans "process information on the fly"⁹ without necessarily having a substantive understanding of the issues. For example, voters who watch a presidential debate "may not be able to answer a pollster's detailed questions about where [the candidates] stood on the issues, but... [the voters] will remember which one [they] liked best."¹⁰ In a sense, the conspiracy theorist requests the same paradoxical faith of the reader that the politician requests of

⁷ Risephoenix, "Skull and Bones: A Capsule History and Intimate Peek at One Section of the US Ruling Class," <http://www.geocities.com/CapitolHill/8425/BONES.HTM#Geronimo>.

⁸ Michael Schudson, "America's Ignorant Voters," *Wilson Quarterly*, 24 (2000), 496.

⁹ *Ibid*, 496.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 496.

the voter: look at this complex but important information as proof of why you should support this, but if an inaccuracy appears or something seems too complicated, simply trust the big picture.

Ironically enough, the paradox that can be so easily used to discredit conspiracy theorists by scholars in conventional fields is a fundamental tactic employed by those running for office. Chip Berlet, a vehement anti-conspiracy theory scholar, writes that conspiracy theorists “often employ common fallacies of logic in analyzing factual evidence to assert connections,”¹¹ an observation I have also found to be true. But what Berlet does not address is that weak connections between evidence and conclusions are commonplace in modern American society. The example of how political candidates sell themselves to the American public is a clear example of this. If a man running for president of the United States makes a significant leap in logic to try to attach himself to an image, it is seen as an inevitability in a system brimming with confusing complexities. If a conspiracy theorist makes a significant leap in logic to try to prove a claim, it is a flaw that discredits the entire medium of communication that is conspiracy theory. Therefore, the effect of this sort of inherently conflicted approach depends completely upon who presents the paradox. But if this is the case, then the discrediting of conspiracy theory has more to do with the fact that the information is coming from individuals who are not prominent, traditionally established members of society, rather than that it presents ill-conceived logic. Thomas McLaughlin writes that “individuals who do not come out of a tradition of philosophical critique are capable of raising questions about

¹¹ Berlet, Chip. “Conspiracism as a Flawed World View,” *Political Research Associates, PRA PublicEye.org*, <http://publiceye.org/conspire/conspiracism.html>.

dominant cultural assumptions,"¹² which seems like an obvious notion; but despite this, the discrediting of conspiracy theorists seems to stem more from their social stigma than from any sort of sloppy rhetorical tactic.

The various channels of communication in which versions of the Skull and Bones story circulate are almost as varied as the different conspiracy theories attached to the society. The greatest abundance of Skull and Bones theories, like many conspiracy theories, exists on the Internet. There are also a number of published books on the subject and three Hollywood films about the society; it is noteworthy that these films are narratives where, through the story, aspects of the society are illuminated, not specifically conspiracy films that promise to reveal the malicious activities of the society. The usage of the Skull and Bones as a backdrop in major motion pictures at first seems counterintuitive; however, conspiracy theory is not simply an obscure way of explaining the world by a small group but has become a widespread way of thinking. Peter Knight argues that the "fear of being at the mercy of a complex conspiracy with vague but sinister intentions has become deeply ingrained in the popular imagination,"¹³ which certainly makes the Skull and Bones' existence in widely-consumed films more understandable. The theories that exist on the Internet are arguably the most extensive because there are very few obstacles between a conspiracy theorist and the distribution of his theory. Since the Internet is a virtual space where any information can be disseminated inexpensively and with relatively little computer know-how, the individual who navigates the Internet is in complete control of the

¹²Thomas McLaughlin, *Street Smarts and Critical Theory: Listening to the Vernacular* (Madison, Wisconsin, University of Wisconsin Press, 1996), 5.

¹³Peter Knight, *Conspiracy Nation: The Politics of Paranoia in Postwar America*, (New York, New York University Press, 2002), 7.

sort of information that he seeks. Mark Fenster found that in July of 1994 "the monthly USENET survey... estimated that ninety-eight thousand people had at least browsed through the alt.conspiracy message index once during the month."¹⁴ Fenster's finding does not only depict the Internet as an effective channel of communication for conspiracy theory, but also supports the notion that conspiracy theory, as a field, garners enough interest that one cannot rationally disregard it as the obsession of a few lunatics on the fringe of society.

One challenging, and possibly insurmountable, obstacle that exists in the field of conspiracy theory is attempting to accurately determine the readership of the theories. Although it may be impossible to conclusively define the readership, one can gain insight into the motives of the readers by trying to understand the desires of the conspiracy theorist. One writer, Ron Rosenbaum, admits that his curiosity about the society dates back to his days as a student at Yale when he saw the society as representative of the strangeness he "felt at [sic] being at Yale, at being given a brief glimpse of the mysterious workings of the inner temples of privelege [sic] but feeling emphatically shut out of the secret ceremonies within."¹⁵ Even Rosenbaum's wording implicitly elaborates on the way that power is viewed through the lens of the *Skull and Bones* narrative; it is something to be worshipped and protected with zealous devotion. His interest in the society stemmed from his frustration of feeling shut out from the inner circle

¹⁴ Mark Fenster, *Conspiracy Theories: Secrecy and Power in American Culture*, (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 185.

¹⁵ Ron Rosenbaum, "Ron Rosenbaum – Esquire Magazine – September 1977," *Freedom Domain*, <http://www.freedomdomain.com/secretsocieties/skull02.html>.

as a “nerdy, scholarship student”¹⁶ and I believe is representative of the motives that other investigators and theorists have when writing about the society. One conspiracy theorist, while discussing in a thread on a conspiracy message board the Skull and Bones relation to the 2004 election, states:

Of course, the really important fact about... [Kerry and Bush’s] common membership in S&H [sic] is that it shows the class basis of American politics.

But this can’t be a surprise to anyone. That [is] what “democratic” means in actual practice.¹⁷

I believe that this post penetrates the significance of the Skull and Bones story at its core, but not just as pertinent to the 2004 election derivatives of the theory; as the author articulates, membership in the Skull and Bones shows the basis of American politics but also represents the class bias in the attainment of any sort of power, whether it be political or otherwise, in the American democracy. For Rosenbaum, this story may provide an explanation for the struggles he felt as a scholarship student; for the author of the online posting, it provides an answer to the perception that neither candidate had a real understanding of legitimate, middle-class hardship.

When considering Skull and Bones, chances are that the 2004 election was not part of a secret society’s 170-year-old plot to quietly overthrow the

¹⁶ “skull bones 60 min 5 min,” 2006, online video, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LTUmCMH4mX0>.

¹⁷ AnimaMinima, “The Skull & Bones (aka Yawns & Groans),” posting to alt.fan.noam-choamsky, February 9, 2004, *Google Groups*, http://groups.google.com/group/alt.fan.noam-choamsky/browse_thread/thread/f4bee02f3b44081f/29e5ccba7761ee8a?lnk=gst&q=%22skull+%26+bones%22&rnum=5&hl=en#29e5ccba7761ee8a.

American democracy. However, middle-class America's concern that both candidates were equally out of touch with real American hardship and, in that sense, there was no choice was a very real and legitimate one. Rebecca Moore, a scholar who has written on conspiracy theory, writes that conspiracy "theories, for all their inherent secrecy and implicit danger, are nonetheless comforting because they eliminate uncertainty and moral ambiguity."¹⁸ I believe this assessment is true, but incomplete. For someone like Rosenbaum, the Skull and Bones theory does provide a morally simple explanation for any possible failures or shortcomings he may perceive in his own life, but it also creates a containable target that could possibly be destroyed. An evil secret society that is responsible for hindering a poor student's upward mobility could possibly be revealed and disassembled, but the notion that the nature of the United States dictates that there are some doors that will simply never open for a scholarship student is a much more daunting prospect. Conspiracy theories do not always simply eliminate uncertainty; sometimes they replace a challenging certainty with a more palatable one. The Skull and Bones theory then, in a sense, leaves the cultural notion of the American ideal intact. If the glaring injustices within the American system stem from a malicious secret society instead of real erosion of the American democracy at its core, the American ideal is not flawed, but simply under attack. Suspecting that there is a secret power group of American royalty manipulating the democracy shrouded in shadows and hidden behind closed doors is a disconcerting concern; suspecting that the American ideal is an illusion, that upward mobility is a pacifying cultural ruse, and

¹⁸ Rebecca Moore, "Reconstructing Reality: Conspiracy Theories about Jonestown," *Journal of Popular Culture*, 36 no. 2 (2002), 217.

that “pulling yourself up by your bootstraps” is a wholly unrealistic notion as opposed to an actual approach to living is a nation-crippling belief.

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This paper was written for Professor Eric Drown's course "Conspiracy: Theory."