

THE MANTIK VIEW

CASS R. SUNSTEIN &
ADRIAN VERMEULE

CONSPIRACY THEORIES:
A DECIDEDLY
NEGATIVE REVIEW



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Written by David Mantik

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S&V bemoan the "crippled epistemology" of conspiracy believers. Ironically, they themselves suffer from a profound, even mortal, wound in their own epistemology – i.e., they persistently ignore the difference between lies and truth, writes David Mantik.

[The article under review was originally dated January 15, 2008, then updated to January 18, 2010. The electronic copy is at <http://ssrn.com/abstracts=1084585>.]

[The author is certified by the American Board of Radiology, completed a postdoctoral fellowship in physics at Stanford, and served on the tenure-track physics faculty at the University of Michigan. He is now a practicing radiation oncologist (in the treatment of cancer). He is not politically active, nor does he wish to be. He prefers to read (widely) and occasionally just to think.]

Many millions of people hold conspiracy theories; they believe that powerful people have worked together in order to withhold the truth about some important practice or terrible event.

– Sunstein and Vermeule

A lawyer without books would be like a workman without tools.

– Thomas Jefferson

To the astonishment of many, Cass R. Sunstein and Adrian Vermeule, both on the faculty of the Harvard Law School, have recently proposed that we substantially subvert the First Amendment (freedom of speech), purportedly to advance national security. Even more worrisome is that Sunstein has joined the Obama administration in a regulatory role: Sunstein is the Administrator of the White House Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs. [His appointment was greeted with controversy among progressive legal scholars and environmentalists. Sunstein's confirmation had been blocked for some time because of allegations about his political and academic views. See, for example, his Wikipedia entry at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cass_Sunstein.]

His name has even been bandied about as a candidate for the Supreme Court [<http://www.wnd.com/index.php?fa=PAGE.view&pageId=96775>; this online article cites the *Atlantic Monthly* as a source for the Supreme Court proposition.] Even his role in the White House concerns legal scholars insofar as he favors the US president (and his staff, presumably including Sunstein himself) over judges as interpreters of federal laws.

But let us turn to the article itself. Most curiously, the apparent definition (quoted above) by Sunstein and Vermeule (S&V) irresponsibly evades the primary issue of whether a given conspiracy theory is true or false. That profound lapse is not faced until page 4, but even

then, that focus lasts only for the blink of an eye. This distinction – between truth and falsehood – is so elemental that the title of their article would more informatively be entitled, "False Conspiracy Theories."

To compound this unnecessary ambiguity, S&V nowhere offer any epistemic standards for identifying false conspiracy theories that might lie hidden in a mixed bag of conspiracy theories. The reader is unavoidably, and helplessly, left with nothing save the authors' list – and even these (presumed exemplars) are not well-defined. Worse than that, some of their items are wrongly identified, i.e., conspiracies labeled by them as false actually appear to be true conspiracies – or at least, well-confirmed, as we shall soon see.

S&V cite a Zogby poll showing that 49% of New York City residents believe that US government officials knew in advance of the 9/11 attacks. They presume this data demonstrates that action must be taken (to correct the views of these miscreants). But Steven Pinker reminds us of polls showing that 25% of Americans believe in witches, 50% in ghosts, 50% in the devil; 50% believe that the book of Genesis is literally true, 69% believe in angels, 87% believe in the resurrection of Jesus, and 96% believe in a god or universal spirit [<http://www.assassinationresearch.com/v5n1/v5n1mantik.pdf>, footnote 26]. These polls suggest that US adults are generally prone to false beliefs. So, should we take corrective action on these other myths, too? And, if that is the case, where does this corrective action end? Must we likewise correct all rumor, speculation, and gossip, too?

Quite tellingly, S&V do not state the obvious: 9/11 was officially declared by the Bush administration – the American government – to be a conspiracy: it was claimed to be a *true* conspiracy. Insofar as S&V do not clearly distinguish between true and false conspiracies, the reader may immediately wonder if their chief recommendations, which we shall soon consider, are also intended to apply to conspiracy theories that are true.

Eventually (p. 4), S&V advance their official definition of a conspiracy theory: *it is an effort to explain some event or practice by reference to the machinations of powerful people, who have also managed to conceal their role*. Astonishingly, this definition still does not address the matter of truth vs. falsehood. In other words, by their literal definition, *a real event manipulated by powerful individuals (whose role remained hidden) would also qualify for conspiracy mongering– even though it was a bona fide conspiracy*. [An excellent example of a true conspiracy *that meets their definition* may be found in *False Profits: The Inside Story of BCCI, the World's Most Corrupt Financial Empire* (1992), by Peter Truell and Larry Gurwin.] The reader's only option, it appears, is to trust S&V as the final arbiters regarding which conspiracy theories are acceptable. But they seem to require no facts, nor do they list any authoritative maps for use when the road bifurcates into truth, on the right, and into falsehood, on the left.

Furthermore, to make matters as hopeless as possible, as their very first example of a conspiracy theory, they cite the belief that the CIA was responsible for the assassination of JFK. Due to the untimely (for S&V) publication of *Inside the Assassination Records Review Board* (2009), by Douglas Horne, their favorite example appears to have suffered a mortal blow. [Also see *Murder in Dealey Plaza* (2000), edited by James Fetzer, which includes the results of my own nine visits to the National Archives.] In fact, Horne was a government insider, who served on the ARRB. In view of S&V's extremely high regard for government intervention (see below) by "well-intentioned" individuals (of whom Horne is surely one), Horne's role as a government insider is their ultimate *bête noire*.

Their second example of a purportedly false conspiracy is TWA Flight 800. This, too, is presented as a done deed – no evidence is offered. But the reader – and S&V, too – might wish to consult Kristina Borjesson's account of this event. [See *into the Buzzsaw: Leading*

Journalists Expose the Myth of the Free Press (2002), edited by Kristina Borjesson, pp. 103-149. Borjesson's media credits are many: WBAI, CNN, CBS, PBS, and *National Geographic Explorer*. Unfortunately for them, S&V's conclusion about TWA Flight 800 is far from clear-cut.

S&V (p. 4), surprisingly, cite the Martin Luther King, Jr., assassination as another example (of a false conspiracy), thereby ignoring the jury verdict that it was, in fact, the opposite – it was a true conspiracy [*New York Times*, December 10, 1999, p. 25]. That two lawyers would so unabashedly ignore the official result of a jury trial is so extraordinary that diligent readers may well wonder if their oversight was not deliberate.

S&V next cite the Paul Wellstone plane crash (as supposedly engineered by Republican politicians) as another conspiracy theory. I have no special insight into Republicans, but there are astonishingly many paradoxes about this crash, of which these are merely a small sample:

1. Persistently misleading reports about the weather at the time of the crash;
2. The absence of a distress call;
3. The miraculously early responses of the FBI;
4. The FBI's refusal to permit photography by fire or ambulance teams;
5. Odd meteorological phenomena consistent with the use of a directed-energy weapon;
6. A statement by one signatory of the official report that the NTSB actually "had no idea" what had caused the crash.

Three scholars (with four doctorates among them) also reached a conclusion opposite to that of the NTSB. [See *American Assassination* (2004) by Four Arrows, Ph.D., Ed. D., and James Fetzer, Ph.D.; and "The NTSB Failed Wellstone," *From the Wilderness* (2005), by James Fetzer, Ph.D. and John Costella, Ph.D., which may be accessed at

http://www.fromthewilderness.com/free/ww3/070605_wellstone.shtml.]

S&V cite the "Operation Northwoods" escapade as a potential true conspiracy (p. 4). To their citations, I would add the more comprehensive *Body of Secrets* by James Bradford (2001), which includes 613 pages and 612 footnotes. Incidentally, Douglas Horne, the author of *Inside the ARRB* (2009), turns out to be the individual who was responsible for the release of the Northwoods documents.

S&V state clearly (pp. 4-5) that true accounts – i.e., true conspiracy theories – should *not* be undermined. In view of the above examples – which are *their own* examples – the reader is entitled to wonder why the authors do not take their own advice: i.e., why are they themselves undermining belief in true (or at least well-confirmed) conspiracy theories? This dilemma only emphasizes their crucial epistemic omission: How are true conspiracy theories to be winnowed from those that are false?

S&V suppose that conspiracy theories are a subset of false beliefs, thereby promptly negating their concession that some may be true (p. 5). Their examples of false beliefs include:

1. Prolonged exposure to sunlight is healthy;
2. Climate change is false.

But again, as usual with S&V, there is another side to the story: in view of the national plague of vitamin D deficiency (which includes me and my own son, who had clinical rickets) some sunlight exposure is now promoted by medical experts as commendable, especially in winter and in northern latitudes. Prolonged exposure under those specific conditions is likely to be quite safe and beneficial.

Moreover, although global climate change does seem likely, Steven Levitt and Stephen J. Dubner [*Super Freakonomics* (2009), pp. 165-203] emphasize;

1. That methane is 25 times more potent than CO₂ as a greenhouse gas and also;
2. That water vapor is actually the major greenhouse gas, but it is not taken into account in current models – and it may not be possible to do so until 2020.

So, even if Earth is heating up, it may be unwise to focus exclusively on CO₂ and the associated carbon credits. More research is clearly needed.

S&V then ask whether conspiracy theories are "justified" (p. 5). Here they stumble into a semantic bog. Perhaps they meant – and should have said – "self-justified." Instead they talk as if a belief in Santa Claus might be "justified." (I would instead have used "acceptable.") They then use "warranted" as a synonym for "justified," which hardly clarifies the matter. My dictionary defines "justify" as showing or proving something to be *right*. That is clearly *not* how S&V use the word. For interested readers, Alan Sokal has provided an excellent discussion of "justification." [See *Beyond the Hoax* (2008), p. 200. Also see *Against Method* (1993) by Paul Feyerabend, pp. 147-149.] In this same paragraph, S&V describe Earth as having "fires" at its core; in my four decades of reading *Scientific American*, I have never encountered such exciting geological news.

S&V claim that a conspiracy theory typically overlooks the role of random events (p. 6). For example, I would claim that a T-shaped inscription (with uniquely peculiar radiographic properties) on the JFK autopsy X-rays proves – *prima facie* – that this X-ray must be a copy. [See <http://www.assassinationresearch.com/v5n1/v5n1mantik.pdf>.

Also see PowerPoint slides from my November 2009 lecture in Dallas at:

<http://www.assassinationscience.com/> and <http://www.assassinationresearch.com/>

This, in turn, proves a conspiracy, both to produce such a copy and also to lose the original (it has in fact disappeared). That the process of copying also permitted a critical alteration to the X-ray is yet another concern.

So, was this strange property (of the T-shaped inscription) produced randomly, as S&V may want suggest? I would claim that no competent radiologist, after viewing this, would accept a random event as an explanation – that would require a total suspension of rationality. Therefore, not all conspiracies require consideration of randomness as a cause – that would be the grossest sophistry.

To explain the common acceptance of conspiracy theories, S&V claim that most folks prefer them because they are *simpler* causal stories. That is a peculiar perspective for them to adopt. For example, would it not be simpler to claim that Oswald did it than to invoke a host of other players in a JFK assassination conspiracy and cover up? And it certainly does not turn out to be emotionally *more reassuring* to conclude that 9/11 was perpetrated by the government than by 19 Islamic fundamentalists. Their position verges on incoherence.

They assert that secrets cannot be kept in open societies (p. 6), but that notion is highly suspect. I have discussed this issue at some length [see *Murder in Dealey Plaza* (2000), edited by James Fetzer, pp. 336-338; also see many other citations there]. Examples include the Manhattan Project, My Lai, the Pentagon Papers, radiation experiments of the 1940s (at blue ribbon institutions), *Tic-Tac-Dough*, and *Twenty-One*. Also see the many examples cited by Borjesson [*Into the Buzzsaw: Leading Journalists Expose the Myth of the Free Press* (2002), edited by Kristina Borjesson]. The reader is also referred to *A Culture of Secrecy* (1998), edited by Athan G. Theoharis; *The Secret War Against the Jews* (1994), by

John Loftus and Mark Aarons; and *Legacy of Ashes: The History of the CIA* (2007), by Tim Weiner.

That *major* secrets are typically kept by bureaucracies is actually exceedingly common [see *Voltaire's Bastards* (1992), by John Ralston Saul]. In the year 2005, for example, 125 secrets were classified *every minute* by federal departments, while during the year of 2004, a total of 15.6 million documents were classified, at a cost of 7.2 billion dollars. [See *The New York Times* (July 3, 2005) and:

http://www.nytimes.com/2005/07/03/politics/03secrecy.html?_r=1&pagewanted=print.]

As a particularly illuminating example, the CIA was then still fighting (in the courts) to keep secret its budgets from the 1950s and 1960s. In the 1970s it appears that the CIA allocated 29% of its budget to "media and propaganda." The CIA expenses *per annum* for propaganda in the 1970s were likely above \$285,000,000 – which is more than the combined budgets of Reuters, United Press International, and the Associated Press [<http://www.informationclearinghouse.info/article3700.html>].

As yet another highly illuminating example, in January 1995 the Secret Service destroyed presidential survey reports of some JFK trips for the fall of 1963. This destruction occurred only *after* the ARRB had already warned the Secret Service not to destroy pertinent documents, and *while* the ARRB was drafting further requests to the Secret Service for more information about these very trips. The Secret Service also destroyed files from the Fair Play for Cuba Committee, as well as Dallas-related files (for JFK's Dallas trip). What are the odds that this miraculous timing (of file destruction) was pure coincidence? If we are to believe S&V, the destruction (of precisely those documents wanted – *from 32 years earlier*) might well have been random chance. Furthermore, when the Secret Service submitted its "Final Declaration of Compliance" (September 18, 1998), *it was not executed under oath*, as had been expected of them [*Final Report of the ARRB* (September 30, 1998), p.149]. In the end, one can only wonder where S&V got their information – i.e., the notion that "secrets" cannot be kept. [Katherine Graham, who was the owner of the *Washington Post* for many decades, reminded a top CIA official of a fundamental fact when the Berlin Wall began to crack: "There are some things the general public does not need to know and shouldn't. I believe democracy flourishes when the government can take legitimate steps to keep its secrets and when the press can decide whether to print what it knows."

<http://www.informationclearinghouse.info/article3700.html>.]

S&V then offer another remarkable declaration: *our press is free* (p. 7). Borjesson's readers would surely develop some nagging doubts about that. In addition, though, serious doubts have been raised by Ben H. Bagdikian [*The Media Monopoly* (1992)] and by Noam Chomsky [*Necessary Illusions: Thought Control in Democratic Societies* (1989)], among others. One quote seems particularly germane:

The media are less a window on reality than a stage on which officials and journalists perform self-scripted, self-serving fictions [The New York Times (July 29, 1994), p. A13].

S&V want to encourage trust in government; in particular, they argue that widespread belief in conspiracy theories would undercut grounds for many other beliefs (p. 7), thus implying that this would be a great loss. The issue of "second-hand knowledge" (which seems to be their focus here) is indeed a serious one [although ignored by S&V, I would suggest *Second-Hand Knowledge: An Inquiry into Cognitive Authority* (1983), by Patrick Wilson], but sometimes a thorough evaluation of one's beliefs can effectively cleanse the Augean stables

of the mind. Insofar as public trust in government goes, that has dismally and dramatically decreased since the JFK assassination – and for good reason. [See:

<http://www.roaddrivers.org/whywedontrustgov.htm> and <http://unpan1.un.org/intradoc/groups/public/documents/UN/UNPAN025062.pdf>.]

It is a mystery why the authors have donned blinders for that rather plain fact. They state that no famine has ever occurred in a nation with a free press and democratic elections, which may even be true, but they also argue that it would be excessive to infer that famines in authoritarian nations are a "conspiracy" brought about by authoritarians. Those – I suspect this includes some of my own relatives – who experienced the Ukraine famine of 1932-33 would almost certainly disagree with S&V on this historical fact.

[See <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2009/nov/18/ukraine-famine-russia-holodomor> and <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VXkgGdZC6uQ>.]

They go on to ask how conspiracy theories begin (p. 9). Stunningly, the possibility that they arise because they actually occurred in the real world is not an option for S&V. The reader might well wonder again about 9/11 – how did that (official) conspiracy theory begin?

Some persons, according to S&V, cannot accept conspiracy theories because that would capsize too many of their other articles of faith (p. 10). But perhaps that is precisely why S&V lump true conspiracies with false conspiracies – i.e., because S&V themselves fear a loss of their own fundamentals of the faith. Although this country nominally believes in separation of church and state, there is, *de facto*, a kind of national secular religion, which is accepted by the vast majority of Americans. This is a belief in the Founding Fathers, the Declaration of Independence (and especially the Bill of Rights as a kind of divinely inspired document), the Constitution, the righteousness of American foreign policy, that the US actually looks out for the general welfare of other nations, that our markets (at least until recently) are free, and that the US is superior to other nations in moral values.

When a new president takes the oath of office, Americans perceive this almost as a religious right, and the president feels that he must say, "So help me God!" As another ritual, campaign speeches, and even some State of the Union addresses – which has actually occurred precisely as I write this – often recite, "God bless America." [See

http://seattletimes.nwsources.com/html/opinion/2004364209_domke22.html.]

To omit such phrases today can be politically dangerous. Although nominally a Presbyterian, Ronald Reagan was a prophet of this national religion:

Can we doubt that only a Divine Providence placed this land, this island of freedom, here as a refuge for all those people in the world who yearn to breathe freely: Jews and Christians enduring persecution behind the Iron Curtain, the boat people of Southeast Asia, of Cuba and Haiti, the victims of drought and famine in Africa, the freedom fighters of Afghanistan and our own countrymen held in savage captivity

[<http://hnn.us/articles/45469.html>].

S&V suggest that acceptance of conspiracy theories can be countered by showing "that some, many, or most (trusted) people accept or reject the theory" (p. 11). [S&V immediately inspired in me a nonsensical vision of a meeting of the American Physical Society, at which physicists voted on the validity of the latest string theory. Of course, that would be sheer madness; physicists would never vote on this – they would merely appeal to the data. Science, after all, is not democratic (or Republican). Nonetheless, S&V would like the majority to rule on questions that should instead be decided on the basis of logic and

evidence]. The whole notion of popular opinion (no matter what group) deciding a question that should rest on its merits (or perhaps even a modicum of data) is madly preposterous. Even more importantly, though, the majority of the best minds can be outrageously wrong.

For example, Robert McNamara has repeatedly described the counsel of LBJ's "Wise Men" on Vietnam [*In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam* (1995), pp. 196-198, 229, 309-311]. In the end, though, their advice was an utter disaster. The rioters in the streets were closer to the truth than were these "Wise Men." Barbara W. Tuchman has also chronicled the pervasive lunacy of government [*The March of Folly: from Troy to Vietnam* (1984)].

S&V wonder why conspiracy theories come to be accepted, so they discuss the role of information (p. 11), the role of famous believers (p. 12), group polarization (p. 13), selection effects (p. 13), and the "... shared sense of identity and ... bonds of solidarity" (p. 13). These too, though, have all the hallmarks of our national (secular) religion, though S&V seem not to notice. Moreover, at this juncture, they should at least have offered slight obeisance to the classic study of groupthink by Irving Janis [*Victims of Groupthink: a psychological study of foreign-policy decisions and fiascos* (1972)], which was a pioneering venture into these matters and is still highly relevant.

S&V conclude that the government should use "counter-speech" to discredit conspiracy theories (p. 14). In view of S&V's crippled definition and their agnostic position on truth versus falsehood, the reader might well ask if this applies to true theories as well. They propose that the government hire credible parties to engage in counter-speech. Of course, that has already been tried – nearly since the beginning of the CIA. Carl Bernstein has reported in detail on these collaborations between the media and the CIA. [See "The CIA and the Media," *Rolling Stone* (October 20, 1977), by Carl Bernstein, or visit:

http://tmh.floonet.net/articles/cia_press.html.]

Bernstein discovered that 400 journalists had worked for the CIA over a 25-year interval. This included distinguished reporters and even Pulitzer Prize winners. Media executives who collaborated included William Paley of CBS, Henry Luce of Time, Inc., Arthur Hays Sulzberger of the *New York Times*, and James Copley of the Copley News Service. Other cooperating companies included ABC, NBC, Associated Press, United Press International, Hearst Newspapers, Scripps-Howard, *Newsweek*, Reuters, the old *Saturday Evening Post*, and the *New York Herald Tribune*.

James Jesus (sic) Angleton – who, as the chief Oswald stage-manager, is a suspect in the JFK assassination [see *Oswald and the CIA: The Documented Truth about the Unknown Relationship between the U.S. Government and the Alleged Killer of JFK* (2008), by John Newman; especially read "Epilogue, 2008"] – ran his own covey of journalist-operatives "who performed sensitive and frequently dangerous assignments. Little is known about this group for the simple reason that Angleton deliberately kept only the vaguest of files" [from "The CIA and the Media," *Rolling Stone* (October 20, 1977), by Carl Bernstein]. This was a classic Angleton ploy. The CIA even ran its own training school for would-be journalists.

S&V hope for a cadre of government agents (or their allies) to undermine the "crippled epistemology" of conspiracy believers (p. 15). But what if these very agents themselves have caused these "bad events"? [That federal agents have indeed acted illegally is well documented by Gerry Spence in *From Freedom to Slavery* (1995), pp. 27 and 50; also visit <http://www.ruby-ridge.com/gspence3.htm>.] Here is the central question: *who will govern those who govern?* Or is that not necessary in the world of S&V? But they do not dodge this question – in fact, they seem pleased to "assume" that the government is "well-motivated"

(sic). Incidentally, an absence of oversight has already been attempted (and found sorely lacking) in the case of the CIA. [Both Harry Truman, who signed off on the CIA in 1947, as well as George Kennan, who initially sent up this trial balloon, later offered their most profound regrets.] The sequelae of this approach are spelled out in alarming detail in *Legacy of Ashes* by Tim Weiner.

S&V insinuate (their syntax is a bit fuzzy here) that Bush spread a false conspiracy theory (p. 16). But we don't need to guess about lying in the White House. Eric Alterman has extensively discussed lying in the White House – *When Presidents Lie: A History of Official Deception and Its Consequences* (2004). If presidents lie (they actually do), then what is it that guarantees that other government employees (or agencies) will tell the truth? Are they to be trusted more than the president? And, if not, who will supervise them? [S&V might also consult *Official Lies: How Washington Misleads Us* (1992), by James T. Bennett & Thomas DiLorenzo. Also see:

[http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qa5421/is_n4_v59/ai_n28628633/.](http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qa5421/is_n4_v59/ai_n28628633/)

S&V bemoan the "crippled epistemology" of conspiracy believers. Ironically, they themselves suffer from a profound, even mortal, wound in their own epistemology – i.e., they persistently ignore the difference between lies and truth, as we have repeatedly seen here. How could an epistemology be more "crippled" than that? Until S&V provide reliable guidelines for extricating truth from lies, they can offer absolutely zero assistance in our ongoing conflict with terrorism. [The scientific method has been around for a few centuries and is generally considered reliable for finding truth, unless, of course, one is a postmodernist of a certain type. S&V seem virtually oblivious to its existence. On the contrary, those of us who have researched the JFK assassination (see Fetzer's books and Horne's five volumes) have been striving to expurgate rumor and speculation and instead substitute an objective and scientific foundation.] And, until S&V can learn from our prior experiences with "counter-speech" – as has been demonstrated by the CIA-media collaboration – they can scarcely expect an enthusiastic reception for their views. As George Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel sagely stated, "What experience and history teach is this – that people and governments never have learned anything from history, or acted on principles deduced from it

[\[http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/hegel/works/hi/history2.htm\]](http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/hegel/works/hi/history2.htm).

Or as Shakespeare succinctly put it, "The past is prologue." [This is a paraphrase from *The Tempest*, Act 2, scene 1, 245-254; the paraphrase is inscribed above an entrance to the National Archives I, an entrance that I first took to view the JFK autopsy materials.] Rancho Mirage, CA January 27, 2009

Addendum

Immediately after writing the above review I discovered a current article by Glenn Greenwald ["Obama confidant's spine-chilling proposal," by Glenn Greenwald (January 15, 2010) at http://www.salon.com/news/opinion/glenn_greenwald/index.html?story=/opinion/greenwald/2010/01/15/sunstein]. He claims that Sunstein's proposal is " ... itself illegal [underlining in the original] under long-standing statutes prohibiting government 'propaganda' within the U.S., aimed at American citizens." I quote further from Greenwald:

As explained in a March 21, 2005 report by the Congressional Research Service, "publicity or propaganda" is defined by the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) to mean either;

- Self-aggrandizement by public officials,

- Purely partisan activity, or;
- "Covert propaganda."

By covert propaganda, GAO means, information which originates from the government but is unattributed and made to appear as though it came from a third party.

Greenwald notes that Sunstein acknowledges that some "conspiracy theories" previously dismissed as false have turned out to be true. Sunstein's examples were (1) CIA mind control experiments with LSD [as is typical of them, S&V do not cite an excellent reference (quickly plucked from my bookshelf) – *Journey into Madness: The True Story of Secret CIA Mind Control and Medical Abuse* (1989), by Gordon Thomas], (2) DOD plots to commit terrorism within the US with intention to blame Castro [see *Body of Secrets* (2001), by James Bradford], and (3) the White House bugging of the Democratic National Committee. Sunstein claims that the extraordinary powers in his proposal would only be " ... wielded by truly well-intentioned government officials who want to spread The Truth and Do Good – i.e., when used by people like Cass Sunstein and Barack Obama." [The quote itself is actually from Greenwald.] Greenwald next quotes directly from S&V's article (p. 15):

Throughout, we assume a well-motivated government that aims to eliminate conspiracy theories, or draw their poison, if and only if social welfare is improved by doing so.

We can now discern a pattern in S&V: they are glib at offering proposals, but absolutely abysmal at offering concrete guidelines for implementation. As we have observed, their chief oversight is a conspicuous hiatus in their definition of "conspiracy theory" – it did not even recognize the difference between truth and falsehood. And here is a similar *faux pas* – they offer no principles or procedures for identifying exactly who is "well-motivated." But there is a further problem. Even if trustworthy guidelines could be established, and such an individual (or group) identified, those conditions would only have been met at that singular point in time. In particular, what happens if this individual (or group) *later* becomes corrupted? (Recall Lord Acton.) In that case, who will notice the corruption – and will also have the courage to wave a red flag? This recalls my prior question: *Who will govern those who govern?* But we are still not done with the above quote from S&V. The following question inevitably arises as well: Should the government truly attempt to quell conspiracy theories that are *true*, if in doing so they improve social welfare? This begins to sound like George Orwell (*Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), p. 32).

But there is yet one more question that S&V do not answer: Who decides whether or not "social welfare" is truly enhanced? What yardstick is to be used? Or is this merely subjective, based on someone's opinion? If so, who will decide: Will it be a Democrat – or a Republican? Or a joint Congressional Committee? Or perhaps the National Security Council? Perhaps even the CIA? Without a clear-cut yardstick, S&V's entire whimsy could quickly degenerate into politics as usual.

After all of this discussion, though, the bottom line is this: S&V's proposal is both undemocratic and retrogressive; it lacks oversight, is clearly subject to mind-boggling subjectivity, is easily at risk for abuse and exploitation – and may actually be illegal. I would suggest that S&V wipe the slate clean and run home. They may well be qualified for projects of many kinds, but this one is not among them.