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JFK's death sparked conspiracy trend

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SCRIPPS HOWARD NEWS SERVICE

Americans increasingly suspect the worst about their government. They think Uncle Sam may be a mass murderer, or a drug dealer or a presidential assassin.

Cynicism and disillusionment are so widespread that Americans matter-of-factly say that government authorities are guilty of grisly atrocities.

For example, 51 percent of the public believes it is either "very likely" or "somewhat likely" that federal officials were "directly responsible for the assassination of President Kennedy" in 1963, according to a nationwide poll of 1,009 people conducted by Scripps Howard News Service and Ohio University.

More than one-third of those surveyed suspect the U.S. Navy, either by accident or on purpose, shot down TWA Flight 800 near New York City last year. An even higher percentage suspect FBI agents deliberately set the fires that killed 81 Branch Davidians in Waco, Texas, four years ago.

A majority also believe it is possible that the Central Intelligence Agency intentionally permitted Central American drug dealers to sell cocaine to inner-city black children.

"This is not good," concluded Oklahoma Gov. Frank Keating after seeing the poll results. "When we believe that our free institutions can commonly be corrupted to dark and evil purposes, it is a statement of a feeling of helplessness by the American people. We are in for some turbulent years as a nation."

"Maybe people are watching too many Oliver Stone movies. What we see on the movie screens these days demonizes government agencies and public officials. Free institutions cannot survive this kind of cynicism,"

Mr. Keating said.

The governor, a retired FBI agent, blames conspiracy paranoia for Timothy McVeigh's 1995 bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City at the cost of 168 lives. McVeigh, according to testimony from friends and relatives, was profoundly upset by the deaths in Waco.

But best-selling conspiracy book author Jim Marrs — who assisted in the Hollywood production of Mr. Stone's "JFK" — said government itself is to blame.

"It all started with the Kennedy assassination. None of the experts I know swallow the theory that [Lee Harvey] Oswald did it all alone. Then we have the legacies of Vietnam, and the Watergate and Iran-Contra scandals," Mr. Marrs said. "All of these things have had an eroding effect and now we are reaping the whirlwind."

Conspiracy theories have

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become a commercially successful industry. Mr. Marrs' book "Crossfire: The Plot That Killed Kennedy" was on the New York Times best-seller list for 10 weeks. Seven of Hollywood's 10 highest-grossing films last year included distinctly anti-government themes.

But the Texas-based author, whose newest book, "Alien Agenda," examines the possibility of government suppression of information about UFOs, said there are solid reasons to discount the Warren Commission's investigation of the Kennedy assassination.

Curtis Gans, executive director for the Washington-based Com-

mittee for the Study of the American Electorate, agreed the erosion of confidence in government began with Kennedy's death. Mr. Gans was in Dallas at the time, working for a wire service.

"I spent my Thanksgiving in 1963 with Oswald's mother. And I spent enough time looking at the Warren Commission report to know that it didn't wash," Mr. Gans said. "But I never believed the government was involved."

He said relentless anti-government messages by news organizations, special interest groups and the politicians themselves have so discouraged Americans that they are prepared to believe theories that once would have been discounted immediately.

"Paranoia is killing this country," Mr. Gans said. "It is essentially reducing cohesion in our society and is creating fear in the mind of our citizenry."

Forty-one percent in the poll said they believe it "very likely" that federal authorities are responsible for at least one of the most dire theories — Mr. Kennedy's murder, the crack-cocaine epidemic, the crash of TWA Flight 800 or the fatal fires at Waco. Thirty-eight percent said they believe at least one of these theories is "somewhat likely" while 21 percent labeled all four as "unlikely."

"The government has a slick way of sidestepping the issues. I just don't think there is a lot of honesty there," concluded Dee Anna Curry, 50, a housewife from Belton, Texas. "Take the CIA. They have done a lot of things that are illegal. I wouldn't put it past the CIA to use drugs."

"People don't have confidence in government anymore and I don't see a quick fix for this," said Neal Boneley, an X-ray technician from Clearfield, Ky. "The government still needs to address the JFK assassination."

The poll found that people of every race, age, education level, economic status and political orientation believe in government conspiracy theories. Most likely to believe, however, are young people, poor people and blacks.

Less than a third of adults of retirement age said they place much credence in the theories.

NATIONAL

CONSPIRACY THEORIES

The following are selected findings from a scientific survey of 1,009 American adults conducted June 15 to 29 in all 50 states and the District of Columbia by Scripps Howard News Service and the E.W. Scripps School of Journalism at Ohio University.

Generally, do you think the work the federal government is doing is making your life better, making it worse or having no effect upon you?

Better: 25%

Worse: 34%

No effect: 32%

Don't know or other: 9%

Does it seem to you that people you know personally are more angry with the federal government these days than they used to be?

Yes, more angry: 66%

No, not more angry: 26%

Don't know or other: 8%

Are you, personally, more angry at the federal government than you used to be?

Yes, more angry: 42%

No, not more angry: 51%

Don't know or other: 7%

Here are several serious accusations that some people have made against the federal government in recent years. Please tell me if you think each of these is very likely, somewhat likely or unlikely.

Officials in the federal government were directly responsible for the assassination of President Kennedy:

Very likely: 18%

Somewhat likely: 33%

Unlikely: 42%

Don't know or other: 7%

The U.S. Navy, either by accident or on purpose, shot down TWA passenger Flight 800 near New York City last year and is covering up what it did:

Very likely: 14%

Somewhat likely: 25%

Unlikely: 49%

Don't know or other: 12%

The FBI deliberately let the fires that destroyed the Branch Davidian compound in Waco, Texas, in 1993:

Very likely: 18%

Somewhat likely: 22%

Unlikely: 50%

Don't know or other: 10%

The U.S. Air Force is withholding proof of the existence of intelligent life from other planets:

Very likely: 24%

Somewhat likely: 24%

Unlikely: 40%

Don't know or other: 12%