



Mechanics of Tradecraft

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A non-magical explanation of Jeffrey Epstein

On some level, in order to understand the society they live in, most people have to be conspiracy theorists. Forming correct conspiracy theories is a critical and essential part of understanding politics, international relations, and the justice system. Genuine conspiracies between people are a fact of living in an industrialized, highly populated globe. There are actual intelligence organizations, law enforcement agencies, insurrectionist militias, and organized criminal enterprises which by their nature create secrets, and clandestinely plan murders and arrests. We don't generally regard them as spectacular, because you can read about most of the important (and publicly disclosed) ones on Wikipedia.

Clearly, then, there are key differences between the regular conspiracy theorist, which almost all of us are, and the cultural conception of a "conspiracy theorist". One common difference is an implausible level of sophistication and ability assigned to the schemers. When working in their near lives, people have an intuition about how many people can be told about something salacious without it becoming public knowledge. Even in circumstances where everyone is properly motivated and there are low rewards for becoming an informant, like a middle school classroom, we understand intuitively how hard it is to keep everyone from leaking information to the teacher. The airquoted "conspiracy theorist" first and foremost rejects their internal social navigation sensors. Instead, in order to make their ideas plausible, they tend to see intelligence officers who are really just bigger LARPer than the "conspiracy theorist" as supernaturally competent and cooperative within their in-group.

A second thing the "conspiracy theorist" will do is assign demonic or otherworldly values to large groups of people, lacking any backstory for why they seem to have these strange motivations. Now, in real life, people can have very strange reasons for their actions. I find it hard to imagine that it'd be possible to successfully gather nineteen people for the 9/11 terror attacks, and end up without a single person who'd object and alert the FBI. But that's just a failure of my own imagination. There is a huge amount of indoctrination, socialization, and child rearing before someone is entrusted with a task like driving a plane into the pentagon - and on top of it the 9/11 hijackers were born into almost as different a culture from mine as you could find. Sacrificing yourself and thousands of others in the name of God is not an *implausible* story, given the enormous amount of brainwashing that goes into preparing someone for the role. It's just hard for me to empathize as some atheist American.

On the other hand, the "conspiracy theorist" will just call all government and business leaders pedophiles. They will usually not go far enough to suppose an actual source for these wildly dissimilar and almost universally abhorred preferences. They don't claim (usually) that elites grew up in a different culture where pedophilia is promoted and instilled as a norm in youth. They'll just claim that - for some reason - those are the people we tend to elect, and they also tend to be inhumanly good at trusting the right people and at prisoners' dilemmas.

A third, and perhaps the primary, social signal that we use to label someone a conspiracy theorist is that they are simply making outrageous seeming claims about powerful (or imagined powerful) entities like the U.S. federal government. Most people, probably quite reasonably, just take what they have been told about their

institutions their entire life as a baseline. If you ask them as they're walking down the street, they probably won't be able to come up with principled objections to 9/11 truthers. They will reject it (rightly or wrongly) because they need to go to work, and it's simply not in the category of things they're willing to believe.

It's of course still easy to make fun of the Alex Jones tier conspiracy theories. But if we're being honest, it's still really hard for any regular person to model opaque organizations like their local police department, their district attorney's office, the FBI, the NSA, the state department, or Congress. Most people believe silly things about one or more of the above institutions, and I think they believe them simply because they do not have the tools equipped to understand those organizations. Some of this is due to a lack of knowledge about what these organizations do and what their internal politics are. Some of this is due to the fact it's socially encouraged to have a non-sensibly cynical attitude when it comes to clandestine organizations, lest we be accused of being too naive by our wizened and grizzled friends. But a lot of it is just because, by default, we no longer get to use the operationally important reasoning for understanding the behavior of people we actually know when trying to understand the behavior of clandestine organizations. Instead we feel free to shift into far-mode thinking, and posit relationships and arrangements that do not actually occur in the wild. The things our theories say about us and let us get to believe become more important than their predictive value. We don't actually see any of these grand coverups happen, but it's cool to imagine they do, especially when we get to imagine our political enemies doing it. Sometimes the long downtime between regime changes are so boring that it's easier and more exciting to just assume it's happening all the time, everywhere, right out of sight.

How can rationalists prevent themselves from making these mistakes? There is one strong trick I know of and it's actually quite powerful, if you have the intellectual honesty for it. First, learn how your local criminal organizations, justice system, political organs, and intelligence agencies work, so that you have a solid understanding of the institutions you're trying to model. Easier said than done, I know, but that's the first part of modeling any institution or population well. You don't need to know everything, just enough to understand where risks to parties involved actually come from.

Let's take the business of drug dealing for example, where due to your research you find the vast majority of people are caught via compelled police informants. Now imagine you're the founder of the conspiracy to sell drugs. How would *you* attempt to make money selling drugs, if you actually didn't want to be looking at 30 to life after five years of median income? What risks would you be willing to take and why? How would you gather the introductions necessary to order large quantities of drugs without running into a police officer or informant first? How would you distribute them? Would you try to sell them yourself? Via other dealers who you'd have to recruit? Would you try to just mule the drugs and not distribute? Is it *really* a good idea to try to bribe a powerful state senator with no incentive to keep quiet if caught, and little reason to risk his position for drug money anyways?

This hypothetical planning technique doesn't just work because it prevents you from assigning implausible motives or actions to these shadowy people. It also works because these shadowy people, themselves, are often professional LARPerS. The stupid mistakes you make coming up with a plan to sell drugs are going to be very far from the stupidest mistakes drug dealers have ever made, because *there are no apprenticeships for drug dealers*. Most of their tradecraft is just made up on the fly, not an insignificant amount gathered from impressions gained in TV shows and

movies. In fact, when media depictions of criminal organizations like the movie *The Godfather* become extremely popular, a half a decade later there are often [accounts](#) from informants about how kingpins began to adopt the mannerisms and speech patterns of the characters they saw in the movie theater.

To a lesser extent, this also applies to longstanding government bureaucracies like the FBI and CIA - which are, in fact, bumbling government bureaucracies, and, for the most part, are not nearly as effective at espionage or crime deterrence as Google is at search. These political organs act the way they act because of political and historical happenstance, not because they out-competed their peers. It is understandably more difficult to model them correctly, because they hold private information, are sometimes staffed by smart people, and are much more complicated entities than a typical drug cartel. However, this works both ways - the more organized and well-documented the institution, the more you can benefit by reading about their history from insiders and historians.

The CIA has some terminology it uses to explain why people give state secrets to an enemy government, called MICE. It happens to be broadly applicable to a lot of conspiratorial motivation, and not just the motivations of spies. The acronym stands for Money, Ideology, Coercion, and Ego. Those first two reasons for a conspiracy are self explanatory - they make money, or they believe in what their doing for political or religious reasons. In espionage, the 'C' usually refers to blackmail (often by threatening to expose the information the agent has already passed on to their home government). In cases of criminal informants, it's threats of jail time for charges the prosecutor is willing to drop if the criminal helps arrest co-conspirators. The fourth is perhaps the most obvious to people who are thinking clearly, and yet one the "conspiracy theorist" will seldom acknowledge at all. Can you guess it? Have you really attempted to put yourself honestly in the shoes of a conspirator?

It's because conspiracy is *cool*! On some level, getting away with crimes or plots makes the average conspirator feel good about themselves, and not just because they've made money or advanced their political ambitions. They feel powerful, intelligent, and sophisticated. This is why would-be serial killers feel embarrassed if they get caught after a single murder, and would rather attempt to falsely claim dozens of other murders to look accomplished than leave a possibility of parole. Sure, the [CIA officer] *might* be [interned at ADX Florence for the rest of their life over some money they can't even really use without looking incredibly suspicious]. In the meantime though, the conspirator get to experience the thrill of being an actual spy/drug dealer/corrupt cop! The conspirator is a real person - just as incapable of keeping a secret as the rest of us - and also capable of doing something like take bribes mostly because he is bored and wants his life to be more cinematic.

Jeffrey Epstein is not Neo from the Matrix, or John Wick from John Wick. He did not live in an alternate shadow universe where logic and reason do not apply. He was a rich and a prolific sex offender. Everything that happened to and around him has a real and consistent mechanical explanation, whether we are capable of understanding the details or not.

There are basically two mysteries regarding Jeffrey Epstein - the first is how he died, and the second is how he managed to get the [plea bargain](#) wherein he served twelve months in para-prison for creating a network of dozens of underage prostitutes.

I have little insight to give on the first mystery, which I think is actually the less enlightening one. Jeffrey Epstein probably killed himself.

Every opinion (I can find) given by people with actual private knowledge of or investigating his death, from [correctional officers](#), [law enforcement](#), to neighboring [inmates](#), says he killed himself. The FBI and the Office of the Inspector General both extensively investigated his death, up to producing a [15-page psychological report](#) reconstructing the motives for his suicide.

You are probably aware of the details of his death that make it seem suspicious, such as the camera malfunction in front of his cell, the guards not following protocol, and the very few suicides at the prison prior to his death (not one for 21 years). Here I'll make some points you may not have heard:

- The base rate of cameras in government buildings not working is high.
- The cameras in front of his cell were [torn apart by the FBI for analysis](#) and apparently, there was no evidence of tampering.
- Epstein had his lawyers draft his will [two days before he died](#).
- The other cameras adjacent to his cell *were* working. [No one entered the area he was housed the night he died](#). The Attorney General, the highest ranking law enforcement official in the country, [personally reviewed the footage](#) surrounding Epstein's prison block to confirm this for himself. This is probably the most damning evidence because it means one of the other seven inmates in Epstein's prison tier may have basically had to escape their cell during night hours and murder him, without being noticed by any other inmates.
- Fundamentally, lots of people who are arrested have dirt on other criminals. Some 10-15% of our prison population is comprised of drug traffickers, who almost always possess the opportunity to lower their sentence by becoming an informant. It is suspicious that Epstein died the way he did at all, but not particularly suspicious that he was also a well connected criminal. The MCC itself has housed El Chapo, Paul Manafort, John Gotti, Michael D'Amico, Bernie Madoff, and several Al Qaeda operatives while they awaited trial. All of these people were either capable of, or currently in the middle of, providing incriminating information against people significantly more well-equipped to murder inmates than Alan Dershowitz. None of them were prophylactically murdered, probably because our maximum security jails are designed to prevent that sort of thing from happening.

So here is the most plausible murder scenario I can come up with:

1. A co-conspirator finds out the tier of the prison in which Epstein was housed, and compiles information on the other 7 cellmates, and selects someone willing to murder him.
2. They then take the extraordinary risk of approaching that person and giving them the means and motive to go along with this murder plot. I want to underscore how hard this is. Prison calls/visits are heavily monitored, and so you might have to not only trust that this person won't immediately rat you out to get out of the MCC, but also trust that a correctional officer or lawyer you're using to deliver the message will go along with the plot. And few rational people are willing to risk life in prison for murder conspiracy so they don't have to do what would maybe be seven years after a plea bargain for statutory rape.
3. That inmate or maybe the second recruited correctional officer disables the cameras in front of Epstein's cell without leaving any indication of tampering.

4. The prisoner-ninja then breaks out of their cell at 3:00 AM, then breaks into Epstein's cell without alerting him or causing him to scream for help, chokes him to death neatly enough for a medical examiner to pronounce him dead by suicide (no thrashing around by Epstein in a way that would leave bruises or undeniable evidence), then re-lock both cells and return by morning, all without leaving any evidence of this assassination for the FBI or correctional officers, or getting witnessed by the other inmates in the same tier, or getting caught on the adjacent cameras.

Now, I'm only 75% certain he wasn't killed. Maybe there's some other scenario I'm not thinking of that fits the crime. Maybe I underestimate the ruthlessness and sophistication of the parties that Epstein was affiliated with. Maybe the FBI *has* uncovered evidence of a murder and is being unusually good at practicing discrete investigation. I will say this - in the 25% scenario he was killed, I think we'll have a 75% chance of learning how in the future. I seem to be the only person on the planet who believes a murder plot this complicated can't go uncovered for long.

But from the facts I have in front of me today, organizing his death and getting away with it really does sound basically impossible. At least it sounds like a lot of work. Real sex offenders or turned LEO just take their retirement savings and fuck off to Guam at some point, or do nothing and pray to God that he doesn't mention anything.

That leaves the second mystery. How did Jeffrey Epstein get 12 months in prison along with 12 hours a day of "work release" for raping dozens of underage girls?

He was probably a CIA agent.

Of course, a CIA agent isn't (usually) someone who works at the CIA. In espionage they use really confusing terminology, wherein an "officer" is someone who works for an intelligence agency and an "agent" is someone who passes along information. If you talk to someone who works for the CIA and refer to them as an "intelligence agent", they might nervously smile before correcting you that an intelligence agent would be someone who spied on the CIA for a foreign government. A "double-agent", then, is a "fake" spy, someone who is believed to be a spy for Agency A in Agency B, but is actually feeding Agency A misinformation on Agency B operations on behalf of Agency B. Much of the time double agents are regular agents who were caught, tortured or threatened with jailtime, and then forced by their home countries to act as double agents.

Contrary to popular belief, attempting to cultivate genuine "agents" and process their information is 97.5% of what the Central Intelligence Agency does. They're also the designated clandestine services arm of the U.S. government, so it's not *all* they do, but what they and other intelligence agencies around the world *primarily* do is play rat handler. Their job is to cultivate and analyze the reports of people with privileged information about the plans and military operations of other governments, and then they sit there looking over those reports a hundred times to see if they spot any terrorists within the margins. When analysts find something interesting, they pass it up to the White House and the State Department decides if/how SEALs need to be deployed. But aside from a hundred or two hundred members of its Special Activities Center, the CIA's job is to collect information.

Epstein was an intelligence agent because as a [founder of the consulting firm Intercontinental Assets Group](#), which assisted clients such as Adnan Khashoggi in

recovering stolen money from fraudulent brokers and lawyers, he represented an almost perfect source of intelligence. One could not imagine a better opportunity for an intelligence officer, in the abstract. Unlike most spies, he was already an American. The people around him (aside from the ones he raped) uniformly described him as charismatic and sociable - Epstein practically got off on being well connected. And his actual job was to travel all over the world and track down the assets of scores of powerful people, whose connections he had a habit of maintaining for the rest of his life. There is no reason one can find without the benefit of hindsight why American intelligence services would refuse to accept his help, and they certainly accept help from people worse than Epstein in the course of doing their job.

That's not why I claim he was an intelligence agent. The first reason I know that he was an intelligence agent is because, at least according to Evening Standard, [Epstein literally bragged about being an intelligence agent to his friends while he was spying on behalf of the United States](#). Not something you'd typically expect someone committing capital crimes in foreign countries to do, unless you remembered that spies are sometimes, like Epstein, actual megalomaniacs who can't wait to tell acquaintances about the whole spy thing. The second reason I know this is because the prosecutor in Epstein's first trial [seems to have definitively stated](#) during his Trump transition interviews that the reason he gave Epstein such a nice plea deal was because the Department of Defense interceded on his behalf. He was later offered a chance to rebut this in front of reporters and instead stated an [extraordinary non-denial denial](#):

Reporter from AP: "Were you ever made aware that Jeffrey Epstein was an intelligence asset of some sort?"

Acosta: "So there has been reporting to that effect and let me say, there's been reporting to a lot of effects in this case, not just now but over the years and, again, I would be hesitant to take this reporting as fact. This was a case that was brought by our office, it was brought based on the facts and I look at the reporting and others, I can't address it directly because of our guidelines, but I can tell you that a lot of reporting is going down rabbit holes."

Perhaps there is some sort of guideline preventing him from speaking about this, but I have not heard of it. District Attorneys and the FBI publicly announce people were informants all of the time, as long as the people they're prosecuting are already prosecuted. They certainly don't swear an oath not to comment on the subject even in the event of the persons' death.

While it's uncommon for a career criminal like Epstein to give information to an intelligence agency rather than law enforcement, it's standard enough procedure. Acosta was probably not fazed by the ask to drop charges in response to claims that Epstein had been a high-level informant. Why?

Cop shows are filled with wild chess matches between criminal masterminds heading vast conspiracies and (basically lone) law enforcement officials. Unfortunately in real life there are only two surefire ways to prove criminal conspiracies and attack criminal organizations that have already begun to sprawl. The first is to listen to the conspirators talk to each other as they plan out the conspiracy. Any conspiracy, whether it's a terrorist network, drug cartel, or burglary ring, needs its members to coordinate with one another. Otherwise, it's regular boring crime.

Sometimes bugs and communication intercepts are impossible. It's relatively easy for a competent group of U.S. citizens to talk to each other without U.S. law enforcement listening, allowing for some simple but aggravating precautions. If everyone involved agrees never to talk indoors or near a phone, and instead walk two miles in a random direction from whatever building's nearby while they discuss their criminal activity, that's enough for 99% of U.S. organized crime to communicate without worry.

The second surefire way to attack conspiracies is by performing a memory dump on the people involved in them. Now, (thankfully) world governments haven't invented the brain scanner. This means that lots of conspiracies must be dismantled by accepting the testimony or leads to incriminating information from a defecting member. And so the only way a government can continue to exist and prevent insurrections, sans torture, is if it maintains a credible pledge to give leniency to criminals in exchange for cooperating. Under extreme circumstances, this leniency covers serial murder. Exerting powerful coercive pressure on insurrectionists, in some form or fashion, to inform on their co-conspirators, is a *requirement* if you want your government to last more than twelve months. It's only by this system that governments can prevent most wannabe kingpins from coordinating with more than three or four serious felons before running an unacceptable risk of someone getting caught for a "side hustle" and then snitching.

People with worse crimes than Epstein are regularly given immunity or greatly reduced sentences for this. [Samuel Gravano](#) admitted to killing or being directly involved in the deaths of nearly twenty people - more than most serial killers - and he currently makes candid podcasts on YouTube about his time as a mafioso, because he was critical witness against a large ongoing criminal organization. You can complain that giving amnesty is immoral or that it creates "bad incentives" or that it encourages corruption, and attempt to vote politicians in to dismantle it, but your elected officials are highly incentivized to dismantle plots to murder elected officials. A stable world power like the United States has to be able to, on occasion, turn people that are **literally willing to die** in the process of accomplishing their goals.

I don't know what information Jeffrey Epstein gave the U.S. government in exchange for an intelligence officer interceding on his behalf, but since all that his handler did was tell Acosta to "leave him alone", I don't think it needed to be much.

Does that mean Epstein didn't or wouldn't try to lever his wealth and influence? Not at all! He certainly poured an enormous amount of money on an army of lawyers for the case, so that he'd be in the strongest possible position to negotiate his fake sentence. He hired Alan Dershowitz, someone he'd [previously trafficked underage women to](#), as part of his defense team (and therefore, by implication, blackmail him into doing a swell job on the charges). He sent [private investigators](#) to regularly harass and intimidate potential witnesses during and after the trial. If you were a psychopath facing thirty years in prison, would you let the one reference from CIA John be the only thing keeping you free?

I think speculating like this about world events and opaque organizations is healthy and practical. Taken at face value, one of the most famous findings of the Good Judgement project is that regular people have enough information to do it. In fact, I'd go as far as saying that for a lot of you, making bets or pseudo-bets like I just gave above probably represents a pretty well fun+learning optimized method to test your rationality:

- Predicting conspiracies and future evidence requires you to estimate probabilities for discrete events and in low-information settings, much more analogous to the scenarios you might run into in real life than predicting someone's net worth.
- Doing necessary research about tradecraft or international relations, for many, is much more interesting than the other things that aren't that.
- A lot of people on this website are under the age of thirty. If you expect to live to 70-80 years, that means you're going to be alive in 2080. It is difficult to know what the political situation of your country is going to look like in forty or fifty years. Sometimes conspirators win, and it tends to catch people off guard. It always sounds extreme to people living in currently peaceful nations, but understanding how and why countries undergo large-scale political change may save your life, or the lives of your family members.
- If you vote for someone in local or national government, you should probably know what it is that person does and what their motivations are.

If it gets enough interest, I'll make this post the first in a sequence about the push and pull between law enforcement and organized criminal conspiracies. As a pedagogical tool (and for fun) we'll design a generic paramilitary organization for subverting U.S. government laws, and perhaps overthrowing the U.S. Hopefully, the sequence will improve your ability to accurately predict the actions and scope of our public safety institutions - not just by following the broad strokes of some ideology, but by mechanically understanding their behaviors.

Addendum: A non-magical explanation of Jeffrey Epstein

Around seven months ago I wrote the post "[a non-magical explanation of Jeffrey Epstein](#)". In it, I make the argument that Jeffrey Epstein did actually kill himself and that he was a CIA agent. I reach that conclusion mostly by drawing on some Conspiracy Theory and doing some light research.

I am *mostly* satisfied with *most* of the reasoning I did throughout the post, and in particular my conclusion that Epstein was a high level informant for American intelligence services. However, over time I became less satisfied with my conclusion about Epstein's death. The paradox of the Epstein case is that the circumstances of his death seem so organized, and yet succeeding investigative details and a nuanced understanding of the parties involved seem to completely rule out foul play. It's quite literally a locked room murder story.

Problems with the murder hypothesis

Impracticality, lack of forensic evidence, lack of witnesses

Multiple reviewers of footage from that night, including the Attorney General at the time, claimed related cameras around Epstein's cell showed no one exiting or entering the block he was in. I am satisfied in assuming that not all of the parties who verified this made a mistake or are secretly controlled by some puppet-master behind the scenes. This means Epstein would have to be killed by someone in his housing block who escaped their cell throughout the night, broke into Epstein's cell without any witnesses, and then strangled him to death without leaving any obvious and unmistakable evidence of a struggle for the coroner, and this seems *totally* implausible. Epstein didn't yell as his neighboring inmate sat there picking the lock? Get blood and skin under his fingernails? Do literally *anything* while this degenerate ninja-inmate tied his bedsheets around his neck? None of the other inmates thought to mention this if that's what happened, even after it was clear there was a coverup and they might be able to swing immunity out of it?

Epstein's will & foreknowledge of his death

Epstein clearly knew when he was going to die, because he drafted and signed a will just two days before it happened. You can also make up murder stories where he knows this, but one would think if he had advance warning Epstein would have been the type of person to cause maximum damage to his killers by explicitly telling people who he believed was going to kill him and why.

Lack of viable suspects

I don't think Epstein's sex abuse victims have accused anyone with either the motive or means to organize a high-security jailhouse murder regardless of the particular circumstances. This pretty much leaves the CIA, or some random unknown third party that wanted him dead for something maybe unrelated to raping children.

- I say motive because even if everything accused about any single one of the people fingered in the Epstein scandal were proven in a court of law, they still wouldn't be facing life in prison for murder. It's hard to imagine how someone sane could see killing Epstein as a rational solution to their relatively minor legal problems without the benefit of hindsight. Even if you were a sociopath, why would you risk getting life without parole for assassinating a state's witness so you could avoid five years in prison after a plea bargain for statutory rape?
- I say means because organizing the murder of potential witnesses is the type of thing that only makes sense if you already have trusted confederates you can task. If you are a major drug dealer, and you have five direct underlings, and one of them goes to jail and looks like they're going to testify against you, you can task one of the remaining four people with organizing a hit because you're already trusting that person in the course of your job and thus not taking on much additional risk. But if you don't have those pre-existing relationships then trying to get someone or a group of people to cooperate in killing a potential witness is, at best, replacing one potential witness with another potential witness. None of the Known Quantities (aside from hypothetically the CIA I guess) seem to be in possession of existing contacts useful in ameliorating this dilemma.
 - (Not to mention the fact that if you haven't already arranged murders before, you might think "damn, maybe I'll fuck this up and dig myself into an even deeper hole than I already have.")
 - My (admittedly limited) vision into how the CIA is structured and its officers are incentivized says that the people inside the CIA who would have any motive to murder Epstein would not be able to, in practice, use workplace resources to illegally assassinate an American citizen.
 - If I am very very very wrong and the CIA really has *that* little internal oversight over the Special Activities Division kill button and our intelligence agencies are *that* dirty, then the people involved probably have no reason to risk escalating attention by murdering Epstein anyways because in most of these alternate universes they don't face repercussions for cultivating him as an agent. You probably either live in a world where your intelligence agencies have impunity or a world where they have to organize assassinations of key figures; it less sense to me that a CIA would be both capable of assassinating Epstein AND scared of him testifying in court against it.

No in-progress plea bargain at Epstein's time of death

If Epstein still had incriminating information on other people he thought he could leverage for a better sentence, he would have been using it, and he would have been completely safe.

- Epstein was a wall street executive with zero sense of honor. He would absolutely have been ratting on co-conspirators if he thought it was something he could do to get out of hard time, and would have started negotiating such a plea well before he died instead of sitting in jail crying about his living conditions. He did this exact thing as a *pre-emptive strike* on a finance partner who helped him steal buckets of money in the 90s, before he was even indicted, just to *make sure* the other guy didn't get the opportunity to do it to him first.
- This would have been a major part of the story if it were true. A bunch of people would have known it was happening, including his lawyers who have failed thus far to mention such a plea or which people, if any, he was set to testify against.

- Epstein would have faced little to no threat of direct reprisal for such testimony. WITSEC has a literal 100% success rate at protecting informants from the worst criminal organizations in the world. Movies and television shows have lied to you about this, because a 100% success rate WITSEC makes for a very unconvincing story, and is anti-fun and anti-edgy to the point that people resist believing it.
 - It turns out that criminals, just like everyone else, have a coordination problem in punishing defectors. Even perennial institutions like the American Mafia with specific public reputations to uphold are typically lax about assassinating oathbreakers when they didn't hurt the specific regime of the people currently in charge. Criminals want informants to die *in general*, they don't have the motivation to *personally* go through the trouble and risk of enforcing underworld justice themselves, unless those people are actively putting guys from their organization in particular in jail. Murdering people is very expensive.
 - Please read [this](#) or another book on WITSEC before you start to quibble with me about the 100% success rate. Yes, there have been, in extremely rare circumstances, people who viciously assault civilians or start to move large amounts of drugs again after getting into the program, and then get *kicked out* of WITSEC after that as per their agreement, and then go back to their old neighborhoods against the advice of sane people and get hurt. If you want to use this to say Epstein would have been in danger, then go ahead and select a *specific actual reference example* of this happening so that we can debate whether or not that "exception" was the result of covert actions taken by people outside the program who wanted them dead, or that Epstein would have been forced to make the same mistakes. I say "100% success rate" because WITSEC has been 100% successful at doing *the thing Epstein would need it to do*, and *the thing a reasonable person would want it to do*, not because it's able to magically sedate every pathologically criminal psychopath with a death wish.

Low likelihood of FBI Corruption

Finally, as people pointed out in the comments of the post, I do in fact have a strong opinion that the parties that investigated Epstein's death, namely the FBI, are and were generally habitually honest in the relevant sense. Explaining the whole story behind why I believe this, even in spite of the circumstances, would take several posts to convey sufficiently for those that don't want to hear it, but the cliff-notes are:

- There have been *exceptionally* few apparent cases of corrupt FBI officers in the last fifty years. And if it were possible and happened, I do in fact expect there would be more apparent cases. Substantiating that second sentence is one of the things that would take a lot of prep work.
 - Those corrupt agents, predictably, had a limited ability to actually tamper with evidence. Tampering with evidence is really dangerous! They were instead suspected of giving information to criminals about things like potential informants or arrests, which is easy enough to do in private if the person you're giving information to is your CI.
 - In the two to four serious possible cases of organized crime or individual criminals corrupting FBI agents I'm aware of, it was contained to specific agents. There was not a culture of dishonesty among a task force that might indicate a broader problem, and the rest of the people on the corrupt agents' team were generally diligent in raising advance concerns.

- I have reasons to believe that the "teammates noticing and raising the alarm" part is not a selection effect and is in fact unusual for cases of corruption in law enforcement. Contrast this with the typical case of corruption in American *local* law enforcement where bad behavior often turns out to be endemic or systematically overlooked by the rest of the department.
 - A reviewer remarks that the reaction to this evidence could be "Look at other law enforcement bodies! They're so often corrupt - why not just believe the FBI has the resources to hide it really well?" My point is that the examples we have of FBI corruption seem *systematically dissimilar* to the examples we have of widespread corruption in other departments, in a way that implies they are edge cases. It's true that specific instances of local police departments being systematically, criminally corrupt ought to increase your prior that the FBI is compromised too. If those instances seemed so emblematic I were starting with a prior of near certainty, I might start to reason that the FBI were just extraordinarily good at coverups. But I don't actually think such a prior is justified, and while the FBI does have, say, a larger budget than local departments, those resources are earmarked for law enforcement and are not obviously useful for covering up their own corrupt behavior.
- FBI agents basically lack extrinsic motivation to become de novo corrupt, mostly by design.
 - FBI agents are already paid fairly well, in status as well as money. They make solidly above median income and get a position inside America's most elite crime fighting agency, and these positions are competed for and treasured very intensely even if you personally wouldn't value one. A substantial proportion of women find physically fit elite lawmen attractive. They have sex.
 - The benefits of accepting bribes in a first world country, as a police officer or a district attorney, are really quite small. While I respect that others may have different utility functions, it seems to me like only extraordinarily stupid or self-destructive people inside American law enforcement do it, regardless of morals. Even a 5% risk of ruining your career and going to jail for five years is probably not worth tolerating for monthly payments you cannot actually use to buy a house. And an agent accepting money from a typical professional or habitual criminal stands much more than a 5% chance of getting caught.
 - One way you can tell bribes are not much of a motivator is the fact that some of the most cited cases of possible FBI corruption did not even involve bribes! If you believe [Lindley Devecchio](#) did aid Greg Scarpa, he apparently did it mostly because it made him feel cool, or because he thought Scarpa's continued ability to work for him as an informant might help him boost prestige among coworkers.
 - The FBI's recruitment process is very good at filtering out people likeliest to disregard their incentives and become de novo corrupt anyways for reasons like pathological risk-taking. This is a primary goal of their screening and they go over and beyond by filtering out many who you would probably say are fine but seem even slightly on paper like they'd be interested in taking such risks.
- Corruption is a self-fulfilling prophecy, but also a self-refuting prophecy, and the prevalence of such corruption scales with common knowledge. The FBI has a general reputation among organized crime of being highly resistant to blackmail

and bribes. So gangs and vice networks tend to stick to turning local law enforcement when they decide that's advantageous, and so the FBI becomes seen as even less corrupt, in a virtuous cycle. This phenomenon is part of why there's a gulf between countries that have ubiquitous corruption by patrolmen/traffic cops and countries where very few people pay any bribes on a regular basis.

- The FBI is a **huge** organization. The cases where FBI agents have been corrupted were cases where there was a specific team investigating particular groups of people, like "Boston area crime bosses", for long periods of time, who could actually influence the progress of those investigations long term. Why would the mysterious third party's random mole, if they had one, be particularly likely to be assigned to the investigation of Epstein's death? Or even be in a position to get themselves assigned to that investigation if that were possible?

Problems with the naive suicide hypothesis

- The death rates inside these prisons is extremely low. How come the first person in this prison that managed to kill themselves in this prison in so many years happened to be as high profile as Epstein? *Lots* of people in that jail want to die.
- How on earth do these cameras specifically along his cell go out at the same time as Epstein is hanging himself? Even if this happens all the time it's gotta be a hundred, maybe a thousand to one that it happens for those specific cameras on that day.
- How come the guards violated protocol that night by not checking on Epstein every thirty minutes, and falsified records to say they did? If your hypothesis is that the guards were lazy or that this prison's security was lax, why does that hypothesis happen to be the case in this particular prison? Also, why does this particular prison seem to be so otherwise successful at preventing suicides of people in similar situations as Epstein?

The third option

So my opinions of both hypotheses were fairly low. I settled this by saying that the murder hypothesis is stupider than the naive suicide hypothesis, and went the latter. The justification in my head was something like: "The fact that this case was brought to my attention meant that it was a low-probability event anyways, and so it's not really that odd that it's so strange."

I think that was a mistake, possibly a generalizable mistake to learn from. Instead of saying "I am really *not sure* what happened, but X is more likely than Y", I picked one and forgot or didn't realize there could be alternative explanations. If both of your theories seem like million-to-one events, they're probably both wrong and you're making a mistake in concluding they're the only available options. I have now come up with a third hypothesis, which I guess you could say is technically covered by #2:

Epstein paid correctional officers to let him die. The cameras weren't working and/or the guards failed to check on him that night, because Epstein explicitly bribed someone(s) to disable those cameras and/or look the other way. The base rate of suicide in the MCC correctional facility is low because generally its precautions *work* to prevent suicide attempts.

Epstein took deliberate action to ensure they *didn't*. He did so partly to save himself a life in prison, but also as part of a plan to spite his victims. His suicide denied them both the satisfaction of a trial and complicated access to any resources which his will would pour into an inaccessible private trust. That will, by the way, seemed deliberately designed to most observers to minimize the government's ability to access his fortune or get him to pay restitution in the event of his death.

I know this seems like the kind of wild theory you say you believe in an essay because it's thought provoking. This is what I actually believe; it's my 85% hypothesis. It's the only story that makes sense; it explains Epstein's behavior, the incidentally poor security, why there was nobody going in or out of the housing blocks and no evidence of a struggle, and doesn't propose some wide ranging conspiracy across multiple government departments that we would already probably know about. It's the only way he could be expected to kill himself inside that prison in the first place if he did. It also explains why this plot wasn't uncovered: because there are like, three people that would have to know about it, not even including Epstein's lawyers. Epstein could have just made up a sob-story and convinced a correctional officer to look the other way himself, or promised the officer his lawyers would pay them after the fact, and then didn't, because arranging that would be more complicated and time consuming.

And I'll admit, even to the hit of my own credibility, that I love this theory because it's so... Anticlimactic? Left-field? No one *wants* to believe this story, except pedantic weirdos like me. It's so *satisfyingly unsatisfying*. You don't figure this out by imbuing some grand intentionality to the story or thematic significance to the people involved. You get it by following all the billiard balls really closely and paying attention to all of the uninteresting details and seeing what incidental property emerges. And once you're done you're usually left without some obvious message because these people aren't living their lives deliberately trying to convey some grand story about corruption. Those lessons are there, but they're not there as part of a curriculum designed to teach them to you. Reality is irregular and unrepentingly insistent on taking into account stupid little details.

Don't take the organizational chart literally

"Do you know how much power I'd have to give up to be President?" - Lex Luthor

The CIA, like all intelligence agencies, spends much of its time managing and creating spies. Managing and creating spies is its primary job, and though it's also the clandestine operations arm of the U.S. government, the vast majority of employees at the CIA are devoting to analysis or acquisition of information from these "human intelligence" sources.

For field officers in particular, creating your first spy is a very significant career milestone. If a CIA officer is unable to accomplish this after being trained for it and spending a few years in a foreign country, they'll probably have to pick a different job. So let's imagine that newly trained field officer is you. Who would be your *ideal* informant? Who would you want to flip, if you could flip anybody in the world?

This is an important exercise. Most of the time you won't be able to just arrange a series of private meetings with people of *real* stature, like the head of a foreign military, so you can convince them to betray their country. However, it's not unheard of that an officer turns someone of small stature, say an analyst at the [ISF](#), and that person later gets heavily promoted. Perhaps because they got help from a Certain Intelligence Agency.

A counter-terrorism analyst is privy to a lot of secret information throughout the course of their job. But that analyst's commanding officer manages a bunch of counter-terrorism analysts. So, getting your source that manager job means they're going to be *even more* helpful. Right?

Well, maybe. It certainly sounds like it'd be impressive on a Wikipedia article or a spy resume. But there are a few problems in practice with this strategy, some specific to intelligence and some more general:

- Spies often still have an odd sense of patriotism. If they become promoted *really* heavily, they sometimes start to feel embarrassed on behalf of their country or at least like they no longer need to talk to you, and demand to call the whole relationship off.
- An elevated rank tends to carry more scrutiny. Your spy might now be subject to more intense surveillance by their host country, like a permanent security detail, that may complicate your ability to communicate privately or provide them with "gifts" they can actually use.
- Most importantly for this conversation, your agent's boss might *nominally command* the people privy to the details you want, but that doesn't mean they have access to those details themselves, nor does it mean they can actually tell their underlings to do what you want them to. Especially if what you want them to do is punished by hanging.

There's a very significant difference between the statements "almost everybody in the Lebanese ISF is my agent", and "the person who is nominally in charge of the ISF is my agent". There'd even be a difference between that and "almost everybody in the ISF is my agent and knows who the other agents are and they cooperate with each other".

Having a working relationship with the major general of the ISF is certainly useful! It will be really embarrassing for Lebanese security when that comes out in 25 years! But it wouldn't obviously be more useful than was say, the KGB's working relationship with [Robert Hanssen](#). *Robert Hanssen* held the job of determining whether or not Russian defectors were legitimate. His position as a background investigator meant that he was able to, on more than one occasion, give Russia a complete list of American spies, most of whom were eventually executed.

In many ways James Comey would have been a *worse* informant than Robert. James Comey wouldn't actually have been able to get a list of all active spies, at least by default. He'd be in a better position to goad, convince, or trick someone into breaking information silos than you are, but that'd still be very risky for him, and you might not have enough influence over him to get him to risk doing so even if he were your silent partner.

Sometimes when people argue that Elites are compromised or doing something nefarious (which is often true), they make the mistake of assuming that just because someone is in a leadership position over X, they can actually just tell everybody in X to reject its mission charter and pursue some tertiary objective. This practice of heedlessly adopting a simplified model of bureaucracy, where commanders losslessly bucket brigade arbitrary orders down to foot soldiers, and foot soldiers losslessly share information with command, like some horrible Java object schema, is called ["taking the org chart literally"](#). It's an acceptable approximation when appropriately applied, but it's also the central underlying fallacy of most (bad) conspiracy theories.

Even if he would like to have been, the person of Richard Nixon was most certainly *not* equivalent to the federal government of the United States. He possessed real power, and could and did make subversive orders of his underlings throughout the course of his job. But it turns out people in his position generally don't have great foreknowledge of which underlings are going to find commands objectionable, or which third parties are going to hear about those orders and try and blow the whistle, or which evil minions will defect when threatened with prison time.

And those same limitations that apply to intelligence agencies when they try to corrupt foreign law enforcement, also apply to attempts by civilians to do the same thing. In a comment disagreeing with my recent post about the Epstein scandal, where I make the argument that Epstein's death was a suicide, [/u/Mitchell_Porter](#) writes:

Seriously, look at the chain of command. He was in a US federal prison. US federal prisons are run by a branch of the Department of Justice. The head of the Department of Justice was William Barr, whose father was a retired OSS agent who gave Epstein his first job.

I hope now you can anticipate my response to such an argument, even if I'm wrong. When you explain away evidence gathered from multiple different branches of the DOJ and the actions of dozens of different people by saying that "Bill Barr, the Attorney General, was a member of the conspiracy", what you're really saying is that the Attorney General *and all of his relevant subordinates* were members of the conspiracy, either because they followed orders that were obviously illegal or because they had some secondary reason to be in on it. Your theory is that Bill Barr or Bill Barr's partner wanted Epstein dead, so he told the New York medical examiner to mess up the autopsy, and the guards from the MCC to ignore his cell and remove his cellmate, and the FBI agents investigating his death to ignore evidence of a struggle,

and someone in the [Special Activities Center](#) or the prison housing block to strangle him. Or, even worse, Bill had to tell some other chain of persons who then conveyed all of these orders second hand.

And I'm not saying that, in particular, "this is a very complicated plan and so it didn't happen" is some knockdown argument. Conspiracy is just a special case of coordination. People that say that you can't have a conspiracy "with too many people involved" assume certain possibly incorrect things about how conspiracies scale. But when you do assert that basically the entire U.S. government has collaborated on murdering Epstein, make sure you're not making this particular mistake of pretending the conspiracy involves less coordination than it really does, because you've identified a suspicious person at the top of the org chart and have made the simplifying assumption of totalitarian control.