

Cassidy Marshall

COMM 210

Dr. York

Dec 17, 2021

### Why Conspiracy Theories Stay Relevant

Conspiracy theories have been around since the dawn of time. The most common types of conspiracies are those which incorporate some aspect of politics. One of the first-ever early American conspiracy theories was that of the attempted assassination attempt of President Andrew Jackson in 1835. It was theorized that Mississippi Senator George Pointdexter orchestrated this failed assassination attempt, and at the time, thousands of Americans believed it as well. However, to this day this theory is not well known. Some may say it is just due to time, and more important theories have just taken their place, but there are three important factors that make a conspiracy theory relevant enough to withstand all time, the impact they have on people, the political climate at the time of the theory, and the lengths, if any, that were taken to cover it up. Without the right characteristics for each of these factors, a conspiracy theory will become a fad rather than a well-known piece of conspiratorial history.

When someone is asked to list off conspiracies one of the first that comes to everyone's mind is that of Princess Diana's suspicious death. On August 31st, 1997 Diana, Princess of Wales was involved in a motor vehicle accident in the Pont de l'Alma tunnel in Paris, France. Diana, along with her partner Dodi Fayed, and the driver Henri Paul, all died as a result of the car crash. Diana's funeral was the most-watched television broadcast in all of history, her death impacting millions of lives. Diana's death was no accident and that MI6, Prince Charles, the British Monarchy, and the French police helped orchestrate the murder of Princess Diana.

This conspiracy theory has managed to stay relevant with new theories and new supporters being created each and every day. But how has this theory managed to withstand the test of time, in comparison to others? The Princess Diana conspiracy is a perfect embodiment of the three factors.

The first factor is the impact the theory had on people. Diana Spencer was a beloved individual that millions of people from around the world looked up to. Diana broke the stigma with AIDS patients and was a normal loving and relatable mother to her two sons, Prince William and Prince Harry. The media portrayed Diana in this way, and everyone brought her in as a member of their own family. Unlike any monarch of the past, Diana was not afraid of negative criticism from the media and continued to be true to herself. When she passed, the people who looked up to her felt as if a member of their own family had been lost. It was such a shocking and unbelievable event, and many people wanted to believe it was not true. With millions of people in attendance for her funeral and the countless memorials and visitors to her grave, Diana is still making an impact on people's lives. There is no doubt that this conspiracy impacts people, and thus embodies one of the three factors.

The Second is the political climate at the time in which the conspiracy first was created. Within hours of Diana's death conspiracies were being posted and plastered on every form of media. Diana passed away in 1997, and at that time the world was in an optimistic place in terms of the political and cultural climate. The cold war was officially over and people were now able to focus on more mundane news. The royal family was something that fascinated not only British citizens but many other countries tuned into the royal life and were fascinated by the growing family. When Diana was killed under suspicious circumstances the first organization to be under scrutiny was her ex-husband's family and the

monarchy. People began uncovering suspicious and controversial events from years before in order to justify their suspicions over the supposedly corrupt monarchy. The Princess Diana conspiracy theory was developed at a time of peace in the political world climate, and thus allowed people to latch onto this rather than worrying about other issues.

The third and final factor is the lengths, if any, that were taken to try and cover the conspiracy theory up. One of the reasons that the Princess Diana theory is so well known is that there was little to no effort on behalf of the monarchy to try and shut down these theories. You can see in the present, many people believed that Prince Phillip was already dead and just waited to announce it once the Opera interview with Harry and Megan aired. This is an example of how the monarchy tried to cover something up. However in the case of Diana, if the monarchy was discovered to have any involvement in trying to cover up aspects of the case or her death in general, it would lead to even more distrust. There were little to no cases of attempted cover-ups of the theory in general. That is not to say that there were no coverups, but the few that happened were uncovered and used as evidence to support the theory further. The fact that there were very few coverups in this theory has allowed it to flourish and stay relevant.

While Diana's conspiracy theory has stayed relevant for over twenty years due to the characteristics of the three factors, there are examples of conspiracy theories that don't embody the correct characteristics. One conspiracy theory that is irrelevant to most people is that of the Chappaquiddick incident. Sara Pruitt summarized the incident as followed, "On the night of July 18, 1969, a black Oldsmobile is driven by U.S. Senator Edward Kennedy plunged off the Dike Bridge on the tiny island of Chappaquiddick, off Martha's Vineyard, landing upside down in the tidal Poucha Pond. The 37-year-old Kennedy survived the crash, but

the young woman riding with him in the car didn't..." "Kennedy later claimed he dove repeatedly "into the strong and murky current" to try and find Kopechne before making his way back to the cottage. He then drove back to the scene with his cousin, Joseph Gargan, and aide Paul Markham, who both tried in vain to reach Kopechne. But rather than report the accident to the police at that time, Kennedy returned to his hotel in Edgartown. As a result, Mary Jo Kopechne remained underwater for some nine hours until her body was recovered the next morning." This conspiracy theory discusses how Kennedy drove off the bridge, and if attempts to rescue Kopechne actually happened. This case is very similar to the Death of Princess Diana. Both were car crashes that involved political figures. However, the Chappiquiddic conspiracy does not have all the right characteristics of the three factors.

The first factor is the impact the theory had on people. Unlike the Princess Diana Theory, Mary Jo Kopechne was not a well-known and beloved figure and symbol of a culture. In comparison, the person under scrutiny in this investigation was the brother of beloved former president John F. Kennedy and recently assassinated Robert F. Kennedy. While the story of what happened was published at the time, there was no big investigation or media coverage that truly questioned what Ted Kennedy did wrong. He was merely charged with a misdemeanor of fleeing the scene of an accident. If the roles were reversed, however, and Ted Kennedy had died, it would have been a much larger conspiracy.

The second factor that the Chappaquiddick theory doesn't have the right characteristics for is the political and cultural climate at the time of the theory. The year was 1969, Ted Kennedy was the only remaining brother in the family. Joseph Kennedy Jr, a wartime hero who fell during World War II, John f. Kennedy, who was assassinated just six years prior, and more recently Robert Kennedy was assassinated in June of 1968. So much had already been taken from the

Kennedys and to the world, they appeared to always be the ones who are victims. To many Americans believed a Kennedy would not willingly leave a drowning woman alone, or drink and drive in the first place. Additionally, at the time of the incident America was involved in Vietnam. Thousands of Americans had more important things to worry about such as their sons, husbands, and brothers who were serving overseas. Also, America was yet again distracted by another Kennedy, or his legacy that is, just six days after the Chappaquiddick incident, the Apollo 11 team landed on the moon. This was everything John F. Kennedy had dreamed of and was taking most of the media's attention. Due to the upset in politics and the overall trust in the Kennedy name, the Chappiquidick theory does not hold the correct characteristics for the second factor.

The third fact is the lengths taken to cover up the conspiracy. In the Chappiquidick theory, there were many more measures taken to keep this a closed incident. Lorraine Boissoneault explains, "Part of the reason details are so spotty comes from those 10 hours of waiting to report the accident. Why didn't Kennedy contact authorities sooner? He would later claim he was suffering from physical and emotional shock, and not thinking clearly. And then there was talk of a cover-up, of Kennedy and his press team attempting to downplay the incident so as not to harm his future political aspirations." There was no concrete story of what happened that night, and with the ten hours of Ted Kennedy and his press team being aware of what was to come, it allowed them to prepare and premeditate the damage control. In comparison, news reporters were on the scene minutes after Diana's crash which lead to no time being allowed to mix up stories or formulate a cover-up. Overall The Chappaquiddick theory relied heavily on cover-ups, and it does not have the right characteristics for factor three.

These two theories put side to side are pretty similar. Both are women who died in an awful car “accident”, and both had suspicions regarding what led up to and what the true intentions behind the accident were. But the characteristics of the three factors, are polar opposites. Diana’s face is still plastered on magazines and there are countless documentaries discussing the facts of the case and various theories. The Chappaquiddick case on the other hand is so buried you have to dig to even find out who died in the accident. These theories are just two examples of thousands of theories that are so similar yet so different. The theories we remember to abide by the characteristics of the three factors, the impact they have on people, the political climate at the time of the theory, and the lengths, if any, that were taken to cover it up. The theories that do not obtain these characteristics of the three factors are not necessarily forgotten, it just requires much more research and time to find reliable sources and discover what happened. The three-factor method to a conspiracy staying relevant is something that more people need to be made aware of. Even in times of political distress or just because an event does not receive a lot of media coverage, does not make it or the lives that were impacted any less important.

## Works Cited

Boissoneault, Lorraine. "Why the True Story of 'Chappaquiddick' Is Impossible to Tell."

*Smithsonian.com*, Smithsonian Institution, 2 Apr. 2018,

<https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/why-true-story-chappaquiddick-impossible-tell-180968638/>.

Gorvett, Zaria. "What We Can Learn from Conspiracy Theories." *BBC Future*, BBC, May 2020,

<https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20200522-what-we-can-learn-from-conspiracy-theories>

.

Kramer, Jillian. "Why People Latch on to Conspiracy Theories, According to Science."

*Science*, National Geographic, 3 May 2021,

<https://www.nationalgeographic.com/science/article/why-people-latch-on-to-conspiracy-theories-according-to-science>.

Pruitt, Sarah. "Ted Kennedy's Chappaquiddick Incident: What Really Happened."

*History.com*, A&E Television Networks, 6 Apr. 2018,

<https://www.history.com/news/ted-kennedy-chappaquiddick-incident-what-really-happened-facts>.

Sutton, Robbie M., et al. "The Psychology of Conspiracy Theories." *SAGE Journals*, Dec.

2017, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/0963721417718261>.

