A PLAIN-ENGLISH FACT CHECK

WHEN IT WAS TRUE

Real Government Secrets, False Conspiracies, and How to Tell the Difference



DECLASSIFIED · COVER-UPS · HOAXES · EVIDENCE

Real Programs Confirmed by the Record, and Popular Theories That Fall Apart

ANDREW DOMINGUEZ

TRINFINITY Enterprises

When It Was True

Real Government Secrets, False Conspiracies, and How to Tell the Difference

Andrew Dominguez

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When It Was True: Real Government Secrets, False Conspiracies, and How to Tell the Difference

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This book is for general information. It reports what public records, official investigations, court rulings and published research show. It is not legal advice.

Every factual statement is footnoted to a source a reader can open and check. Where a fact could not be confirmed, the text says so with the tag [Not verified]. Quotations of public officials and other people come from the records cited.

Contact: andrew@trinfinityenterprises.com

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About This Book

Some things people once called conspiracy theories turned out to be true. The government really did let hundreds of Black men in Alabama go untreated for syphilis for forty years. The CIA really did give LSD to people who did not know it. The FBI really did run secret campaigns to disrupt American political groups. We know these things because the records came out.

Many other popular theories did not hold up. The moon landings were real. The September 11 attacks were carried out by al Qaeda, not by our own government. No investigation has found evidence of alien bodies at Area 51. We know those things the same way: by looking at the records.

This book puts the two kinds of cases side by side. For each one I show what was claimed, what the records say, who found the truth and how. Then I give you a simple method you can use on the next claim you hear, from any side of politics.

Every fact in this book has a footnote you can follow. Where the evidence is not strong enough to settle a question, I say so.

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Chapter 1: Why Some Theories Turn Out True and Most Do Not

Information in this book stops at November 12, 2026. Where a chapter talks about the present, it says so at the top and gives the date of the newest source it uses.

Here is a question I hear a lot: "If the government lied before, why should I believe it now?"

It is a fair question. The government did lie before. Public health officials watched hundreds of Black men go untreated for syphilis for forty years.[1] The CIA gave LSD to Americans who did not know it.[2] The FBI ran secret campaigns against political groups from the far left to the Ku Klux Klan.[3] A President's own tape recordings proved he tried to block an FBI investigation.[4] Every one of these was once dismissed as paranoid talk. Every one of them is now proved by the government's own records.

So why not believe all of it? Why not believe that the moon landings were faked, or that the Twin Towers were brought down with explosives, or that there are alien bodies hidden in the desert?

The answer is in how the truth came out. That is what this book is about.

The pattern

When you put the true cases next to the false ones, a pattern shows up.

The true cases left paper trails. They had budgets, memos, orders and payroll records. When investigators went looking, they found documents. When people inside talked, their stories matched the documents. When courts and Congress looked, they reached the same conclusions, often across party lines.

The false theories usually lack that trail. Their supporters point to gaps, odd details or things that "don't look right." But when independent investigators look, the records point the other way. Many claims fall apart when you trace them back to where they started.

You might ask, "Isn't the lack of records exactly what a good cover-up would look like?" That is the hardest question in this subject, and I take it seriously in Chapter 3. Here is the short answer. Real cover-ups in this book were exposed through leaks, lawsuits, Freedom of Information Act requests and investigations. A theory that says no evidence will ever surface, no matter who looks, can never be tested. Something that can never be tested can never be proved.

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[1] Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, The Untreated Syphilis Study at Tuskegee Timeline, undated. https://www.cdc.gov/tuskegee/about/timeline.html, accessed November 12, 2026.

[2] Senate Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities (Church Committee), Final Report, Book I: Foreign and Military Intelligence, S. Rep. No. 94-755, April 26, 1976, pp. 391-392. https://www.intelligence.senate.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/sites-default-files-94755-i.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[3] Senate Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities (Church Committee), Final Report, Book III, COINTELPRO: The FBI's Covert Action Programs Against American Citizens (scan hosted by the Assassination Archives and Research Center), April 1976. http://www.aarclibrary.org/publib/church/reports/book3/pdf/ChurchB3_1_COINTELPRO.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[4] Samuel W. Rushay Jr., National Archives, The Nixon White House Tapes, Prologue, Vol. 39, No. 3, Fall 2007. https://www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/2007/fall/tapes, accessed November 12, 2026.

How this book is built

I have tried to make every fact in this book checkable. Every factual statement has a footnote with the source's title, who published it, its date and a link. Where I could not confirm something, I say so with the tag [Not verified] and tell you what I searched.

I keep three things apart:

- **Confirmed facts.** What the records show.
- **Interpretations.** What someone concluded from the records. I tell you whose view it is.
- **Unknowns.** What is still closed or never recorded.

I use the same rules for every party, every president and every agency. Some of the true cases happened under Democrats and some under Republicans. Some of the false theories are popular on the left, some on the right and some everywhere. I test them all the same way.

The verdicts

Part Seven tests 20 popular claims and gives each one a verdict. I use only four:

Table I.1. The four verdicts used in this book

Verdict	What it means
True	Primary sources confirm it as usually stated.
Partly true	There is a real fact underneath, but the usual version leaves out or twists something important. I say exactly which part is true.
False (debunked)	Primary sources contradict it.
Inconclusive	The evidence is not enough to say either way, or an investigation is still open. I say what would settle it.

A word about the people in these stories

Many chapters in this book describe real harm to real people. The men in the Tuskegee study, the people injected with plutonium and the families of those who died had their trust broken. I describe what happened to them plainly and without graphic detail. Where a person is named, it is because they are named in the public record or chose to speak publicly.

How to read this book

You can read it straight through, or jump to the case you care about. Part One explains how to judge evidence. Part Two covers nine cases that were proved true. Part Three covers five popular theories that did not hold up. Part Four covers cases that are still unsettled. Part Five explains how secrets come out and what reforms followed. Part Six gives you a step-by-step method to check any new claim yourself. Part Seven puts 20 claims to the test with verdicts.

One note on what is not here. The assassination of President John F. Kennedy is the subject of its own book in this series, so I leave it out here except where it touches another case.

My goal is not to make you trust the government or distrust it. My goal is to help you trust the evidence, and to know how to find it.

Part One: How to Judge Evidence

Chapter 2: What a Conspiracy Is, and Why Theories Feel Believable

Before we look at any case, we need to agree on two words: conspiracy and conspiracy theory. They are not the same thing, and mixing them up causes a lot of confusion.

A conspiracy is a real thing

A conspiracy is simply two or more people secretly agreeing to do something wrong. It is not a fringe idea. It is a crime in federal law.

The main federal conspiracy law makes it a crime when "two or more persons conspire either to commit any offense against the United States, or to defraud the United States, or any agency thereof in any manner or for any purpose."[5] An agreement alone is not enough. The law also requires that "one or more of such persons do any act to effect the object of the conspiracy."[6] The penalty can be up to five years in prison.[7]

Prosecutors bring conspiracy charges all the time. Watergate and Iran-Contra, both covered in this book, led to criminal convictions of government officials.[8,9] So the question is never "Do conspiracies happen?" They do. The question is always, "Is there evidence for this one?"

A conspiracy theory is an explanation

Psychologists Karen Douglas, Robbie Sutton and Aleksandra Cichocka define conspiracy theories as "explanations for important events that involve secret plots by powerful and malevolent groups."[10]

Notice that this definition does not say a conspiracy theory is false. It is an explanation. Some explanations turn out to be right. Most of this book is about telling which is which.

Table 2.1. Conspiracy and conspiracy theory

Term	What it is	Example from this book
Conspiracy	People secretly agreeing to do wrong, and acting on it	The Watergate cover-up, proved in court and by the President's own tapes[11,12]

[5] Legal Information Institute, Cornell Law School (text of the U.S. Code), 18 U.S. Code 371, Conspiracy to commit offense or to defraud United States, undated. https://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/text/18/371, accessed November 12, 2026.

[6] Legal Information Institute, Cornell Law School (text of the U.S. Code), 18 U.S. Code 371, Conspiracy to commit offense or to defraud United States, undated. https://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/text/18/371, accessed November 12, 2026.

[7] Legal Information Institute, Cornell Law School (text of the U.S. Code), 18 U.S. Code 371, Conspiracy to commit offense or to defraud United States, undated. https://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/text/18/371, accessed November 12, 2026.

[8] U.S. Senate Historical Office, Select Committee on Presidential Campaign Activities (The Watergate Committee), undated. https://www.senate.gov/about/powers-procedures/investigations/watergate.htm, accessed November 12, 2026.

[9] Lawrence E. Walsh, Independent Counsel, Final Report of the Independent Counsel for Iran/Contra Matters, Summary of Prosecutions, August 4, 1993. https://irp.fas.org/offdocs/walsh/summpros.htm, accessed November 12, 2026.

[10] Karen M. Douglas, Robbie M. Sutton and Aleksandra Cichocka, The Psychology of Conspiracy Theories, Current Directions in Psychological Science 26(6): 538-542, 2017. https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC5724570, accessed November 12, 2026.

Term	What it is	Example from this book
Conspiracy theory	An explanation of an event that blames a secret plot by powerful people	The claim that the moon landings were staged
Proved conspiracy theory	A conspiracy theory that records later confirmed	The claim that the FBI was secretly disrupting political groups (COINTELPRO)[13]

Why theories feel believable

If you have ever found a conspiracy theory convincing, you are not foolish. Researchers have found that conspiracy beliefs meet real human needs.

Douglas, Sutton and Cichocka sort those needs into three groups.[14]

- **Wanting to understand.** They call these epistemic motives: "the desire for understanding, accuracy, and subjective certainty."[15] When something big and frightening happens, we want an explanation that makes sense of it.
- **Wanting to feel safe.** They call these existential motives: "the desire for control and security."[16] A hidden enemy can feel easier to face than random chance.
- **Wanting to feel good about ourselves and our group.** They call these social motives: "the desire to maintain a positive image of the self or group."[17]

Here is the catch. The same researchers concluded that research "has yet to demonstrate that it effectively serves those motivations."[18] In other words, conspiracy beliefs promise understanding, safety and belonging, but there is little evidence they deliver. Their review found that exposure to conspiracy theories has been linked to lower feelings of control and lower trust

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[11] U.S. Supreme Court, United States v. Nixon, 418 U.S. 683, July 24, 1974. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/USREPORTS-418/pdf/USREPORTS-418-683.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[12] Samuel W. Rushay Jr., National Archives, The Nixon White House Tapes, Prologue, Vol. 39, No. 3, Fall 2007. https://www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/2007/fall/tapes, accessed November 12, 2026.

[13] Senate Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities (Church Committee), Final Report, Book III, COINTELPRO: The FBI's Covert Action Programs Against American Citizens (scan hosted by the Assassination Archives and Research Center), April 1976. http://www.aarclibrary.org/publib/church/reports/book3/pdf/ChurchB3_1_COINTELPRO.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[14] Karen M. Douglas, Robbie M. Sutton and Aleksandra Cichocka, The Psychology of Conspiracy Theories, Current Directions in Psychological Science 26(6): 538-542, 2017. https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC5724570, accessed November 12, 2026.

[15] Karen M. Douglas, Robbie M. Sutton and Aleksandra Cichocka, The Psychology of Conspiracy Theories, Current Directions in Psychological Science 26(6): 538-542, 2017. https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC5724570, accessed November 12, 2026.

[16] Karen M. Douglas, Robbie M. Sutton and Aleksandra Cichocka, The Psychology of Conspiracy Theories, Current Directions in Psychological Science 26(6): 538-542, 2017. https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC5724570, accessed November 12, 2026.

[17] Karen M. Douglas, Robbie M. Sutton and Aleksandra Cichocka, The Psychology of Conspiracy Theories, Current Directions in Psychological Science 26(6): 538-542, 2017. https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC5724570, accessed November 12, 2026.

[18] Karen M. Douglas, Robbie M. Sutton and Aleksandra Cichocka, The Psychology of Conspiracy Theories, Current Directions in Psychological Science 26(6): 538-542, 2017. https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC5724570, accessed November 12, 2026.

in institutions, and that the beliefs may even be "self-defeating."[19] They added that this may not hold for everyone, and that some disadvantaged groups might gain a sense of belonging from these beliefs.[20]

Seeing patterns that are not there

Our brains are built to find patterns. Most of the time that helps us. Sometimes it fools us.

In a five-study research paper, psychologists Jan-Willem van Prooijen, Karen Douglas and Clara De Inocencio concluded that "illusory pattern perception is a central cognitive mechanism accounting for conspiracy theories and supernatural beliefs."[21] Illusory pattern perception means seeing meaningful patterns in random events.

In their research, people who saw patterns in random coin tosses were more likely to believe conspiracy theories.[22] People who saw patterns in chaotic abstract paintings by Jackson Pollock were also more likely to believe them.[23] And when the researchers raised people's belief in one conspiracy theory, those people started seeing more patterns in world events, which in turn predicted belief in other, unrelated theories.[24]

That last finding matters. Belief in one theory can make the next one easier to accept, even if the two have nothing to do with each other.

How many people believe?

Belief in some theories is surprisingly low. Others are held by a majority.

A Gallup poll in July 1999 found that 6 percent of Americans believed the government "staged or faked" the Apollo moon landing, 89 percent did not and 5 percent had no opinion.[25]

The Kennedy assassination is different. In November 2013, Gallup found that 61 percent of Americans believed people other than Lee Harvey Oswald were involved.[26] That was down from

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[19] Karen M. Douglas, Robbie M. Sutton and Aleksandra Cichocka, The Psychology of Conspiracy Theories, Current Directions in Psychological Science 26(6): 538-542, 2017. https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC5724570, accessed November 12, 2026.

[20] Karen M. Douglas, Robbie M. Sutton and Aleksandra Cichocka, The Psychology of Conspiracy Theories, Current Directions in Psychological Science 26(6): 538-542, 2017. https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC5724570, accessed November 12, 2026.

[21] Jan-Willem van Prooijen, Karen M. Douglas and Clara De Inocencio, Connecting the dots: Illusory pattern perception predicts belief in conspiracies and the supernatural, European Journal of Social Psychology 48(3): 320-335, 2018. https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC5900972, accessed November 12, 2026.

[22] Jan-Willem van Prooijen, Karen M. Douglas and Clara De Inocencio, Connecting the dots: Illusory pattern perception predicts belief in conspiracies and the supernatural, European Journal of Social Psychology 48(3): 320-335, 2018. https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC5900972, accessed November 12, 2026.

[23] Jan-Willem van Prooijen, Karen M. Douglas and Clara De Inocencio, Connecting the dots: Illusory pattern perception predicts belief in conspiracies and the supernatural, European Journal of Social Psychology 48(3): 320-335, 2018. https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC5900972, accessed November 12, 2026.

[24] Jan-Willem van Prooijen, Karen M. Douglas and Clara De Inocencio, Connecting the dots: Illusory pattern perception predicts belief in conspiracies and the supernatural, European Journal of Social Psychology 48(3): 320-335, 2018. https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC5900972, accessed November 12, 2026.

[25] Gallup News Service, Did Men Really Land on the Moon?, February 15, 2001. https://news.gallup.com/poll/1993/did-men-really-land-moon.aspx, accessed November 12, 2026.

[26] Art Swift, Gallup, Majority in U.S. Still Believe JFK Killed in a Conspiracy, November 15, 2013. https://news.gallup.com/poll/165893/majority-believe-jfk-killed-conspiracy.aspx, accessed November 12, 2026.

81 percent in 1976, and Gallup called the 2013 figure "the lowest found in nearly 50 years."[27] (The Kennedy case is covered in its own book in this series.)

Distrust that was earned

There is one more reason conspiracy theories feel believable, and it is the reason this book exists. Some of them turned out to be true.

When people today distrust a public health message, many point to Tuskegee. When people distrust intelligence agencies, they point to MKUltra, COINTELPRO and the NSA phone records program. That distrust did not come from nowhere. Part Two shows that the government really did these things.

But the same records that prove those cases also show how to tell them apart from claims that do not hold up. That is the subject of the next chapter.

[27] Art Swift, Gallup, Majority in U.S. Still Believe JFK Killed in a Conspiracy, November 15, 2013. https://news.gallup.com/poll/165893/majority-believe-jfk-killed-conspiracy.aspx, accessed November 12, 2026.

Chapter 3: Records, Witnesses and Investigations

How do we actually know that MKUltra happened, but the moon landing was not faked? This chapter explains the kinds of evidence this book relies on and how much weight each one deserves.

Records

The strongest evidence is usually a document made at the time by the people involved, for their own purposes, without expecting the public to see it.

The MKUltra case shows why. The CIA destroyed most of its program files in 1973.[28] But seven boxes of financial records survived because they had been stored somewhere else.[29] Those records were vouchers, approvals for spending and accountings.[30] Nobody wrote them to prove anything to the public. They were written to get paid. That is exactly why they are so convincing.

The same is true of the Nixon tapes. The President recorded his own conversations for his own reasons.[31] When the June 23, 1972 tape was released, it showed him ordering an attempt to have the CIA call off the FBI.[32]

Records are not perfect. They can be incomplete, wrong or forged. But a real program needs money, people and orders, and those things leave paper.

Witnesses

People who were there matter, especially when they testify under oath and when their story can be checked against records.

At the 1977 MKUltra hearing, the sitting CIA Director, Stansfield Turner, testified under oath about what his own agency had done.[33] In Watergate, White House counsel John Dean testified

[28] Senate Select Committee on Intelligence and Subcommittee on Health and Scientific Research, Project MKULTRA, the CIA's Program of Research in Behavioral Modification, joint hearing, August 3, 1977, Kennedy opening statement. https://www.intelligence.senate.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/sites-default-files-hearings-95mkultra.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[29] Senate Select Committee on Intelligence and Subcommittee on Health and Scientific Research, Project MKULTRA, the CIA's Program of Research in Behavioral Modification, joint hearing, August 3, 1977, Turner prepared statement. https://www.intelligence.senate.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/sites-default-files-hearings-95mkultra.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[30] Senate Select Committee on Intelligence and Subcommittee on Health and Scientific Research, Project MKULTRA, the CIA's Program of Research in Behavioral Modification, joint hearing, August 3, 1977, Turner prepared statement. https://www.intelligence.senate.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/sites-default-files-hearings-95mkultra.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[31] Samuel W. Rushay Jr., National Archives, The Nixon White House Tapes, Prologue, Vol. 39, No. 3, Fall 2007. https://www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/2007/fall/tapes, accessed November 12, 2026.

[32] Samuel W. Rushay Jr., National Archives, The Nixon White House Tapes, Prologue, Vol. 39, No. 3, Fall 2007. https://www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/2007/fall/tapes, accessed November 12, 2026.

[33] Senate Select Committee on Intelligence and Subcommittee on Health and Scientific Research, Project MKULTRA, the CIA's Program of Research in Behavioral Modification, joint hearing, August 3, 1977. https://www.intelligence.senate.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/sites-default-files-hearings-95mkultra.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

that the President approved plans to cover up White House links to the break-in, and the tapes later backed up the core of the cover-up story.[34,35]

A witness is much weaker when the person is anonymous, when the story cannot be checked, or when the person's claims change over time. This book does not rely on anonymous claims at all.

Investigations

The third kind of evidence is a formal investigation: a congressional committee, an inspector general, an independent commission, a court case or a scientific review.

Good investigations have power to demand records and testimony. They publish their findings and their sources. And the best ones are run by people with different interests. The Church Committee had members of both parties.[36] The Iran-Contra investigation published both a majority report and a minority report, so readers could see where members disagreed.[37]

When several independent investigations reach the same conclusion from the records, that conclusion is strong. MKUltra was confirmed by the Rockefeller Commission, the Church Committee and a later Senate hearing.[38,39,40]

The five source tiers

This book ranks sources in five tiers. I use the higher tiers whenever I can.

Table 3.1. The five source tiers used in this book

Tier	What it includes	How I use it
1. Primary and official	Declassified records, court rulings, congressional reports, laws, inspector general reports, official statements	The main evidence for every chapter
2. Nonpartisan analysis	Congressional Research Service, Government Accountability Office, inspectors general	To explain and summarize official records

[34] U.S. Senate Historical Office, Select Committee on Presidential Campaign Activities (The Watergate Committee), undated. https://www.senate.gov/about/powers-procedures/investigations/watergate.htm, accessed November 12, 2026.

[35] Office of the Federal Register, Public Papers of the Presidents: Richard Nixon, 1974, 1975. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/PPP-1974-book1/pdf/PPP-1974-book1.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[36] U.S. Senate Historical Office, Senate Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities (The Church Committee), undated. https://www.senate.gov/about/powers-procedures/investigations/church-committee.htm, accessed November 12, 2026.

[37] U.S. Congress, Report of the Congressional Committees Investigating the Iran-Contra Affair, H. Rept. 100-433, S. Rept. 100-216, November 1987. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/SERIALSET-13810_00_00-002-0433-0000/pdf/SERIALSET-13810_00_00-002-0433-0000.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[38] Commission on CIA Activities Within the United States (Rockefeller Commission), Report to the President, June 1975. https://www.fordlibrarymuseum.gov/library/document/0005/1561495.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[39] Senate Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities (Church Committee), Final Report, Book I: Foreign and Military Intelligence, S. Rep. No. 94-755, April 26, 1976. https://www.intelligence.senate.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/sites-default-files-94755-i.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[40] Senate Select Committee on Intelligence and Subcommittee on Health and Scientific Research, Project MKULTRA, the CIA's Program of Research in Behavioral Modification, joint hearing, August 3, 1977. https://www.intelligence.senate.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/sites-default-files-hearings-95mkultra.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

Tier	What it includes	How I use it
3. Scholarly	Peer-reviewed research and university histories	For history and for research on belief
4. Fact-checks and journalism	Associated Press, Reuters, PolitiFact, FactCheck.org, Snopes, major newspapers	As pointers back to primary records, and for reporting at the time
5. Advocacy groups and think tanks	Groups that argue for a side	Only to show what a side argues, labeled and balanced

I do not use social media posts, chain emails, forums, video channels or computer-generated web pages as evidence. They appear only as examples of how a claim spread.

Can a big secret really stay hidden?

This is the question I promised in the Introduction. If the government can keep secrets, how can we ever say a theory is false just because no records turned up?

Oxford physicist David Robert Grimes tried to answer it with math. In 2016, he published a model estimating how long a conspiracy can stay secret, based on how many people are in on it.[41] He based his estimates on three real secrets that were exposed, including the NSA surveillance programs revealed in 2013 and the Tuskegee study.[42] He concluded that "large conspiracies (1000 or more agents) quickly become untenable and prone to failure."[43] Under his model, a secret could last five years only if it involved no more than about 2,521 people.[44]

Not everyone agrees. Philosopher Kurtis Hagen argued in the journal Episteme that "the common assertion that conspiracies tend to fail remains poorly supported," and that some kinds of conspiracies do not tend to fail.[45] Grimes himself noted limits: his estimates are rough, and his model counts only leaks from insiders, not discovery by outsiders.[46]

So here is a fair way to put it. Secrets can last. Tuskegee lasted forty years.[47] But real secrets in this book did eventually come out, and when they did, they came with documents. A theory that requires thousands of people across many agencies and private companies to stay silent for decades, with no paper trail ever surfacing, is asking for something no proved case in this book has shown.

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[41] David Robert Grimes, On the Viability of Conspiratorial Beliefs, PLOS ONE 11(1): e0147905, January 26, 2016. https://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0147905, accessed November 12, 2026.

[42] David Robert Grimes, On the Viability of Conspiratorial Beliefs, PLOS ONE 11(1): e0147905, January 26, 2016. https://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0147905, accessed November 12, 2026.

[43] David Robert Grimes, On the Viability of Conspiratorial Beliefs, PLOS ONE 11(1): e0147905, January 26, 2016, abstract, with a math symbol written out in words. https://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0147905, accessed November 12, 2026.

[44] David Robert Grimes, On the Viability of Conspiratorial Beliefs, PLOS ONE 11(1): e0147905, January 26, 2016. https://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0147905, accessed November 12, 2026.

[45] Kurtis Hagen, Do Conspiracies Tend to Fail? Philosophical Reflections on a Poorly Supported Academic Meme, Episteme 20(2), 2022 (online). https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/episteme/article/do-conspiracies-tend-to-fail-philosophical-reflections-on-a-poorly-supported-academic-meme/27CE07DBBE72333A6736E3D2D5E45EEC, accessed November 12, 2026.

[46] David Robert Grimes, On the Viability of Conspiratorial Beliefs, PLOS ONE 11(1): e0147905, January 26, 2016. https://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0147905, accessed November 12, 2026.

[47] Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, The Untreated Syphilis Study at Tuskegee Timeline, undated. https://www.cdc.gov/tuskegee/about/timeline.html, accessed November 12, 2026.

Four questions to ask about any piece of evidence

Here is a simple test I use throughout the book. You will see a fuller version in Chapter 21.

- **Who made it, and when?** A record made at the time by the people involved is stronger than a story told years later.
- **Can I see it myself?** A link to the actual document beats a description of it.
- **Does anything else back it up?** One source is a lead. Several independent sources are evidence.
- **What would prove it wrong?** If nothing could ever prove a claim wrong, it cannot be tested.

Why false stories travel faster

One last thing to know before we start. False stories have an advantage.

Researchers at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology studied about 126,000 true and false news stories shared on Twitter from 2006 to 2017.[48] They found that "Falsehood diffused significantly farther, faster, deeper, and more broadly than the truth," especially for political news.[49] False stories were more novel, and replies to them showed more fear, disgust and surprise.[50] Automated accounts spread true and false news at the same rate, so the researchers concluded that people, not bots, were driving the extra spread of false news.[51]

That means checking takes effort, and the effort is worth it. The rest of this book shows you what that effort turns up.

[48] Soroush Vosoughi, Deb Roy and Sinan Aral, The Spread of True and False News Online, Science 359(6380) (MIT Media Lab publication page), March 9, 2018. https://www.media.mit.edu/publications/the-spread-of-true-and-false-news-online/, accessed November 12, 2026.

[49] Soroush Vosoughi, Deb Roy and Sinan Aral, The Spread of True and False News Online, Science 359(6380) (MIT Media Lab publication page), March 9, 2018. https://www.media.mit.edu/publications/the-spread-of-true-and-false-news-online/, accessed November 12, 2026.

[50] Soroush Vosoughi, Deb Roy and Sinan Aral, The Spread of True and False News Online, Science 359(6380) (MIT Media Lab publication page), March 9, 2018. https://www.media.mit.edu/publications/the-spread-of-true-and-false-news-online/, accessed November 12, 2026.

[51] Soroush Vosoughi, Deb Roy and Sinan Aral, The Spread of True and False News Online, Science 359(6380) (MIT Media Lab publication page), March 9, 2018. https://www.media.mit.edu/publications/the-spread-of-true-and-false-news-online/, accessed November 12, 2026.

Part Two: The True Cases

Chapter 4: The Syphilis Study at Tuskegee

This is the case that taught a generation of Americans not to trust government doctors. It is also the case people most often point to when they say, "The government secretly experimented on us." In this case, that statement is true.

I want to tell it carefully. The men in this study were real people with families. They were lied to and denied treatment. The point of this chapter is to show what the records prove, how the truth came out and what changed.

What the study was

In 1932, the U.S. Public Health Service, working with the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama, began a study to record the natural course of syphilis, a serious disease spread by sexual contact.[52] It was first called the "Tuskegee Study of Untreated Syphilis in the Negro Male."[53] The National Archives notes that the study grew out of an earlier 1929 public health project in six southern states.[54]

The study enrolled 600 Black men: 399 who had syphilis and 201 who did not.[55]

The men were never asked for informed consent, meaning they were not told what the study really was and agreed to it.[56] Researchers told them they were being treated for "bad blood," a local term that covered several illnesses.[57] In return, the men got free medical exams, free meals and burial insurance.[58]

Treatment that was withheld

You might ask, "Was there even a cure back then?" By the mid-1940s, there was. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) says penicillin had become the treatment of choice for syphilis by 1943 and was widely available, but the men in the study were not offered it.[59] Some older accounts give the year as 1947. I use the CDC's current date.

The study did not stop when a cure came along. It kept going for nearly thirty more years.

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[52] Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, The Untreated Syphilis Study at Tuskegee Timeline, undated. https://www.cdc.gov/tuskegee/about/timeline.html, accessed November 12, 2026.

[53] Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, The Untreated Syphilis Study at Tuskegee Timeline, undated. https://www.cdc.gov/tuskegee/about/timeline.html, accessed November 12, 2026.

[54] National Archives at Atlanta, U.S. Public Health Service (USPHS) Untreated Syphilis Study at Tuskegee, reviewed September 17, 2024. https://www.archives.gov/atlanta/holdings/tuskegee, accessed November 12, 2026.

[55] Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, The Untreated Syphilis Study at Tuskegee Timeline, undated. https://www.cdc.gov/tuskegee/about/timeline.html, accessed November 12, 2026.

[56] Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, The Untreated Syphilis Study at Tuskegee Timeline, undated. https://www.cdc.gov/tuskegee/about/timeline.html, accessed November 12, 2026.

[57] Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, The Untreated Syphilis Study at Tuskegee Timeline, undated. https://www.cdc.gov/tuskegee/about/timeline.html, accessed November 12, 2026.

[58] Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, The Untreated Syphilis Study at Tuskegee Timeline, undated. https://www.cdc.gov/tuskegee/about/timeline.html, accessed November 12, 2026.

[59] Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, The Untreated Syphilis Study at Tuskegee Timeline, undated. https://www.cdc.gov/tuskegee/about/timeline.html, accessed November 12, 2026.

The whistleblower

Peter Buxtun worked for the federal Public Health Service in San Francisco. He joined in 1965 and raised ethical objections to the study in a 1966 letter to CDC officials.[60] In 1967, he was called to a meeting in Atlanta where officials criticized him for objecting.[61]

He did not give up. In 1972, Buxtun gave documents to Associated Press (AP) reporter Edith Lederer, who passed them to AP investigative reporter Jean Heller.[62] Heller's story was published on July 25, 1972.[63]

Buxtun died in May 2024 at age 86.[64]

How it ended

After the AP story, a federal health official appointed an outside panel to review the study.[65] The panel found it "ethically unjustified."[66] In October 1972, the panel advised that the study be stopped, and in November 1972 the government announced it had ended.[67]

The National Archives says that once the study became public, it led to hearings by the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare and by Congress on the ethics of medical experiments on people.[68]

In March 1973, the panel advised that the Public Health Service give the survivors all the medical care they needed, and the Tuskegee Health Benefit Program was created to do that.[69] In 1975, the program was extended to the men's wives, widows and children.[70]

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[60] Mike Stobbe, Associated Press (published by PBS NewsHour), Tuskegee syphilis study whistleblower dies at age 86, July 15, 2024. https://www.pbs.org/newshour/nation/tuskegee-syphilis-study-whistleblower-dies-at-age-86, accessed November 12, 2026.

[61] Mike Stobbe, Associated Press (published by PBS NewsHour), Tuskegee syphilis study whistleblower dies at age 86, July 15, 2024. https://www.pbs.org/newshour/nation/tuskegee-syphilis-study-whistleblower-dies-at-age-86, accessed November 12, 2026.

[62] Mike Stobbe, Associated Press (published by PBS NewsHour), Tuskegee syphilis study whistleblower dies at age 86, July 15, 2024. https://www.pbs.org/newshour/nation/tuskegee-syphilis-study-whistleblower-dies-at-age-86, accessed November 12, 2026.

[63] Mike Stobbe, Associated Press (published by PBS NewsHour), Tuskegee syphilis study whistleblower dies at age 86, July 15, 2024. https://www.pbs.org/newshour/nation/tuskegee-syphilis-study-whistleblower-dies-at-age-86, accessed November 12, 2026.

[64] Mike Stobbe, Associated Press (published by PBS NewsHour), Tuskegee syphilis study whistleblower dies at age 86, July 15, 2024. https://www.pbs.org/newshour/nation/tuskegee-syphilis-study-whistleblower-dies-at-age-86, accessed November 12, 2026.

[65] Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, The Untreated Syphilis Study at Tuskegee Timeline, undated. https://www.cdc.gov/tuskegee/about/timeline.html, accessed November 12, 2026.

[66] Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, The Untreated Syphilis Study at Tuskegee Timeline, undated. https://www.cdc.gov/tuskegee/about/timeline.html, accessed November 12, 2026.

[67] Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, The Untreated Syphilis Study at Tuskegee Timeline, undated. https://www.cdc.gov/tuskegee/about/timeline.html, accessed November 12, 2026.

[68] National Archives at Atlanta, U.S. Public Health Service (USPHS) Untreated Syphilis Study at Tuskegee, reviewed September 17, 2024. https://www.archives.gov/atlanta/holdings/tuskegee, accessed November 12, 2026.

[69] Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, The Untreated Syphilis Study at Tuskegee Timeline, undated. https://www.cdc.gov/tuskegee/about/timeline.html, accessed November 12, 2026.

[70] Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, The Untreated Syphilis Study at Tuskegee Timeline, undated. https://www.cdc.gov/tuskegee/about/timeline.html, accessed November 12, 2026.

The lawsuit and settlement

In 1973, a class-action lawsuit was filed on behalf of the men and their families.[71] In 1974, it was settled out of court for $10 million, in 1974 dollars, not adjusted for inflation.[72]

The last man in the study died in January 2004, and the last widow receiving benefits died in January 2009.[73] The CDC says ten of the men's children still receive medical and health benefits.[74]

Table 4.1. Timeline of the Tuskegee study

Year	Event
1932	Study begins with 600 Black men in Alabama[75]
By 1943	Penicillin is the treatment of choice for syphilis; the men are not offered it[76]
1966	Peter Buxtun objects in a letter to CDC officials[77]
July 25, 1972	AP story by Jean Heller is published[78]
November 1972	Government announces the study has ended[79]
1973	Tuskegee Health Benefit Program created; class-action suit filed[80]
1974	Lawsuit settled for $10 million; National Research Act becomes law[81,82]
1979	Belmont Report on research ethics published[83]
May 16, 1997	President Clinton apologizes at the White House[84]

[71] Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, The Untreated Syphilis Study at Tuskegee Timeline, undated. https://www.cdc.gov/tuskegee/about/timeline.html, accessed November 12, 2026.

[72] Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, The Untreated Syphilis Study at Tuskegee Timeline, undated. https://www.cdc.gov/tuskegee/about/timeline.html, accessed November 12, 2026.

[73] Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, The Untreated Syphilis Study at Tuskegee Timeline, undated. https://www.cdc.gov/tuskegee/about/timeline.html, accessed November 12, 2026.

[74] Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, The Untreated Syphilis Study at Tuskegee Timeline, undated. https://www.cdc.gov/tuskegee/about/timeline.html, accessed November 12, 2026.

[75] Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, The Untreated Syphilis Study at Tuskegee Timeline, undated. https://www.cdc.gov/tuskegee/about/timeline.html, accessed November 12, 2026.

[76] Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, The Untreated Syphilis Study at Tuskegee Timeline, undated. https://www.cdc.gov/tuskegee/about/timeline.html, accessed November 12, 2026.

[77] Mike Stobbe, Associated Press (published by PBS NewsHour), Tuskegee syphilis study whistleblower dies at age 86, July 15, 2024. https://www.pbs.org/newshour/nation/tuskegee-syphilis-study-whistleblower-dies-at-age-86, accessed November 12, 2026.

[78] Mike Stobbe, Associated Press (published by PBS NewsHour), Tuskegee syphilis study whistleblower dies at age 86, July 15, 2024. https://www.pbs.org/newshour/nation/tuskegee-syphilis-study-whistleblower-dies-at-age-86, accessed November 12, 2026.

[79] Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, The Untreated Syphilis Study at Tuskegee Timeline, undated. https://www.cdc.gov/tuskegee/about/timeline.html, accessed November 12, 2026.

[80] Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, The Untreated Syphilis Study at Tuskegee Timeline, undated. https://www.cdc.gov/tuskegee/about/timeline.html, accessed November 12, 2026.

[81] Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, The Untreated Syphilis Study at Tuskegee Timeline, undated. https://www.cdc.gov/tuskegee/about/timeline.html, accessed November 12, 2026.

[82] U.S. Government Publishing Office, Public Law 93-348, 88 Stat. 342 (National Research Act), July 12, 1974. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/STATUTE-88/pdf/STATUTE-88-Pg342.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[83] Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, Protection of Human Subjects; Belmont Report, 44 Federal Register 23192, April 18, 1979. https://archive.epa.gov/osa/phre/web/pdf/belmont_report_frv44n76.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

The rules that changed

On July 12, 1974, the National Research Act became law.[85] It created a national commission to identify "the basic ethical principles" that should guide research on people.[86] It also required institutions that get federal research money to set up review boards to oversee research on human subjects.[87]

That commission produced the Belmont Report, published for public comment in the Federal Register on April 18, 1979.[88] The report named three basic principles for research on people: respect for persons, beneficence (doing good and avoiding harm) and justice.[89] It cited the Tuskegee study by name as an example of injustice, saying it "used disadvantaged, rural black men to study the untreated course of a disease that is by no means confined to that population."[90]

Chapter 20 looks at how these rules became the review system for federally funded research.

The apology

On May 16, 1997, President Bill Clinton apologized in the East Room of the White House.[91] Survivors were there, including Mr. Shaw, who was about to turn 95, Charlie Pollard, Carter Howard, Fred Simmons and Frederick Moss.[92] Clinton said "the eight men who are survivors" were a living link to that time.[93]

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[84] White House Office of the Press Secretary (Clinton White House archive), Remarks by the President in Apology for Study Done in Tuskegee, May 16, 1997. https://clintonwhitehouse4.archives.gov/textonly/New/Remarks/Fri/19970516-898.html, accessed November 12, 2026.

[85] U.S. Government Publishing Office, Public Law 93-348, 88 Stat. 342 (National Research Act), July 12, 1974. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/STATUTE-88/pdf/STATUTE-88-Pg342.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[86] U.S. Government Publishing Office, Public Law 93-348, 88 Stat. 342 (National Research Act), July 12, 1974. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/STATUTE-88/pdf/STATUTE-88-Pg342.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[87] U.S. Government Publishing Office, Public Law 93-348, 88 Stat. 342 (National Research Act), July 12, 1974. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/STATUTE-88/pdf/STATUTE-88-Pg342.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[88] Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, Protection of Human Subjects; Belmont Report, 44 Federal Register 23192, April 18, 1979. https://archive.epa.gov/osa/phre/web/pdf/belmont_report_frv44n76.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[89] Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, Protection of Human Subjects; Belmont Report, 44 Federal Register 23192, April 18, 1979. https://archive.epa.gov/osa/phre/web/pdf/belmont_report_frv44n76.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[90] Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, Protection of Human Subjects; Belmont Report, 44 Federal Register 23192, April 18, 1979. https://archive.epa.gov/osa/phre/web/pdf/belmont_report_frv44n76.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[91] White House Office of the Press Secretary (Clinton White House archive), Remarks by the President in Apology for Study Done in Tuskegee, May 16, 1997. https://clintonwhitehouse4.archives.gov/textonly/New/Remarks/Fri/19970516-898.html, accessed November 12, 2026.

[92] White House Office of the Press Secretary (Clinton White House archive), Remarks by the President in Apology for Study Done in Tuskegee, May 16, 1997. https://clintonwhitehouse4.archives.gov/textonly/New/Remarks/Fri/19970516-898.html, accessed November 12, 2026.

[93] White House Office of the Press Secretary (Clinton White House archive), Remarks by the President in Apology for Study Done in Tuskegee, May 16, 1997. https://clintonwhitehouse4.archives.gov/textonly/New/Remarks/Fri/19970516-898.html, accessed November 12, 2026.

He said: "The United States government did something that was wrong -- deeply, profoundly, morally wrong."[94] He told the survivors, "You did nothing wrong, but you were grievously wronged."[95] And he said, "To our African American citizens, I am sorry that your federal government orchestrated a study so clearly racist."[96]

He announced a planning grant to Tuskegee University for a center for bioethics in research and health care.[97]

What this case teaches

The Tuskegee study is proved by the government's own records, which are held today at the National Archives.[98] It is confirmed by the CDC, by a court settlement and by a presidential apology.[99,100]

It also explains something about belief. When someone today distrusts a public health message, Tuskegee is often part of the reason. That distrust was earned. The answer is not to tell people their fear is silly. The answer is to show what records prove and what they do not, case by case. That is what the rest of this book tries to do.

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[94] White House Office of the Press Secretary (Clinton White House archive), Remarks by the President in Apology for Study Done in Tuskegee, May 16, 1997. https://clintonwhitehouse4.archives.gov/textonly/New/Remarks/Fri/19970516-898.html, accessed November 12, 2026.

[95] White House Office of the Press Secretary (Clinton White House archive), Remarks by the President in Apology for Study Done in Tuskegee, May 16, 1997. https://clintonwhitehouse4.archives.gov/textonly/New/Remarks/Fri/19970516-898.html, accessed November 12, 2026.

[96] White House Office of the Press Secretary (Clinton White House archive), Remarks by the President in Apology for Study Done in Tuskegee, May 16, 1997. https://clintonwhitehouse4.archives.gov/textonly/New/Remarks/Fri/19970516-898.html, accessed November 12, 2026.

[97] White House Office of the Press Secretary (Clinton White House archive), Remarks by the President in Apology for Study Done in Tuskegee, May 16, 1997. https://clintonwhitehouse4.archives.gov/textonly/New/Remarks/Fri/19970516-898.html, accessed November 12, 2026.

[98] National Archives at Atlanta, U.S. Public Health Service (USPHS) Untreated Syphilis Study at Tuskegee, reviewed September 17, 2024. https://www.archives.gov/atlanta/holdings/tuskegee, accessed November 12, 2026.

[99] Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, The Untreated Syphilis Study at Tuskegee Timeline, undated. https://www.cdc.gov/tuskegee/about/timeline.html, accessed November 12, 2026.

[100] White House Office of the Press Secretary (Clinton White House archive), Remarks by the President in Apology for Study Done in Tuskegee, May 16, 1997. https://clintonwhitehouse4.archives.gov/textonly/New/Remarks/Fri/19970516-898.html, accessed November 12, 2026.

Chapter 5: Human Radiation Experiments

From the end of World War II into the 1970s, the U.S. government paid for thousands of experiments on how radiation affects the human body.[101] Some of that research was done on people who did not know they were part of an experiment.[102]

For decades, this was mostly secret. In the 1990s, the government opened its files and admitted it.

How it came out

In November 1993, the Albuquerque Tribune, a newspaper in New Mexico, published a series of articles that for the first time named Americans who had been injected with plutonium, a radioactive element used in nuclear weapons.[103]

Energy Secretary Hazel O'Leary "expressed shock," first to her staff and then at a press conference, and decided to make public anything still untold about the plutonium experiments.[104]

On January 15, 1994, President Clinton signed Executive Order 12891, creating the Advisory Committee on Human Radiation Experiments (ACHRE).[105] It was told to review experiments from 1944 to May 30, 1974, the date federal rules for protecting human research subjects took effect.[106] Ruth Faden chaired the committee.[107]

What the committee found

The committee identified "nearly 4,000 human radiation experiments sponsored by the federal government between 1944 and 1974."[108] It also found "several hundred intentional releases of radiation into the environment" for research.[109]

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[101] Advisory Committee on Human Radiation Experiments, Final Report, Executive Summary, 1995. https://ehss.energy.gov/ohre/roadmap/achre/summary.html, accessed November 12, 2026.

[102] Advisory Committee on Human Radiation Experiments, Final Report, Executive Summary, 1995. https://ehss.energy.gov/ohre/roadmap/achre/summary.html, accessed November 12, 2026.

[103] Advisory Committee on Human Radiation Experiments, Final Report, Preface: Why the Committee Was Created, 1995. https://ehss.energy.gov/ohre/roadmap/achre/preface_2.html, accessed November 12, 2026.

[104] Advisory Committee on Human Radiation Experiments, Final Report, Preface: Why the Committee Was Created, 1995. https://ehss.energy.gov/ohre/roadmap/achre/preface_2.html, accessed November 12, 2026.

[105] The President (Federal Register), Executive Order 12891, Advisory Committee on Human Radiation Experiments, 59 FR 2935, January 15, 1994. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/FR-1994-01-20/html/94-1531.htm, accessed November 12, 2026.

[106] The President (Federal Register), Executive Order 12891, Advisory Committee on Human Radiation Experiments, 59 FR 2935, January 15, 1994. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/FR-1994-01-20/html/94-1531.htm, accessed November 12, 2026.

[107] Public Papers of the Presidents, 1995, Book II, Remarks on Accepting the Report of the Advisory Committee on Human Radiation Experiments, October 3, 1995. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/PPP-1995-book2/html/PPP-1995-book2-doc-pg1530.htm, accessed November 12, 2026.

[108] Advisory Committee on Human Radiation Experiments, Final Report, Executive Summary, 1995. https://ehss.energy.gov/ohre/roadmap/achre/summary.html, accessed November 12, 2026.

[109] Advisory Committee on Human Radiation Experiments, Final Report, Executive Summary, 1995. https://ehss.energy.gov/ohre/roadmap/achre/summary.html, accessed November 12, 2026.

The committee found it was "commonplace during the 1940s and 1950s for physicians to use patients as subjects of research without their awareness or consent."[110]

Here are three of the cases the committee studied.

Plutonium injections

Eighteen people were injected with plutonium in a program of the Manhattan District, the World War II project that built the atomic bomb.[111] The injections began in April 1945 at Oak Ridge, Tennessee, and in Chicago, and continued into 1946 at Rochester, New York and the University of California.[112]

The committee's report quotes a 1946 letter saying the California injections would "probably be made without the knowledge of the patient."[113] It also quotes recollections that the Rochester patients did not know they were subjects of an experiment.[114] President Clinton later said that "scientists injected plutonium into 18 patients without their knowledge."[115]

The Fernald School

At the Fernald state school in Massachusetts, researchers from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) ran nutrition studies using radioactive tracers on boys who belonged to the school's "science club."[116] Seventeen boys were exposed to radioactive iron in a 1946 study.[117] From 1950 to 1953, seventeen related experiments exposed fifty-seven Fernald boys to radioactive calcium.[118]

The consent letters sent to parents in 1949 and 1953 mentioned a special diet and blood tests, but neither mentioned radioactive material or risks.[119] The committee said both letters suggested the studies would help the children, which was not true.[120]

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[110] Advisory Committee on Human Radiation Experiments, Final Report, Executive Summary, 1995. https://ehss.energy.gov/ohre/roadmap/achre/summary.html, accessed November 12, 2026.

[111] Advisory Committee on Human Radiation Experiments, Final Report, Chapter 5, The Manhattan District Experiments, 1995. https://ehss.energy.gov/ohre/roadmap/achre/chap5_2.html, accessed November 12, 2026.

[112] Advisory Committee on Human Radiation Experiments, Final Report, Chapter 5, The Manhattan District Experiments, 1995. https://ehss.energy.gov/ohre/roadmap/achre/chap5_2.html, accessed November 12, 2026.

[113] Advisory Committee on Human Radiation Experiments, Final Report, Chapter 5, The Manhattan District Experiments, 1995. https://ehss.energy.gov/ohre/roadmap/achre/chap5_2.html, accessed November 12, 2026.

[114] Advisory Committee on Human Radiation Experiments, Final Report, Chapter 5, The Manhattan District Experiments, 1995. https://ehss.energy.gov/ohre/roadmap/achre/chap5_2.html, accessed November 12, 2026.

[115] Public Papers of the Presidents, 1995, Book II, Remarks on Accepting the Report of the Advisory Committee on Human Radiation Experiments, October 3, 1995. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/PPP-1995-book2/html/PPP-1995-book2-doc-pg1530.htm, accessed November 12, 2026.

[116] Advisory Committee on Human Radiation Experiments, Final Report, Chapter 7, The Studies at the Fernald School, 1995. https://ehss.energy.gov/ohre/roadmap/achre/chap7_5.html, accessed November 12, 2026.

[117] Advisory Committee on Human Radiation Experiments, Final Report, Chapter 7, The Studies at the Fernald School, 1995. https://ehss.energy.gov/ohre/roadmap/achre/chap7_5.html, accessed November 12, 2026.

[118] Advisory Committee on Human Radiation Experiments, Final Report, Chapter 7, The Studies at the Fernald School, 1995. https://ehss.energy.gov/ohre/roadmap/achre/chap7_5.html, accessed November 12, 2026.

[119] Advisory Committee on Human Radiation Experiments, Final Report, Chapter 7, The Studies at the Fernald School, 1995. https://ehss.energy.gov/ohre/roadmap/achre/chap7_5.html, accessed November 12, 2026.

[120] Advisory Committee on Human Radiation Experiments, Final Report, Chapter 7, The Studies at the Fernald School, 1995. https://ehss.energy.gov/ohre/roadmap/achre/chap7_5.html, accessed November 12, 2026.

In fairness to the full record, the committee also judged that the doses were low and said it was extremely unlikely any child was harmed physically.[121] The wrong was in the deception, not in measurable injury.

Intentional releases: the Green Run

In December 1949, the Atomic Energy Commission and the Air Force released radioactive gases into the air at the Hanford site in Richland, Washington, in a test known as the Green Run.[122] The President's order named it specifically for the committee to review.[123] The same order listed other intentional-release tests, including radiation warfare field tests at Oak Ridge in 1948 and at Dugway, Utah from 1949 to 1952.[124]

The apology

On October 3, 1995, President Clinton accepted the committee's final report.[125] He said that "the United States of America offers a sincere apology to those of our citizens who were subjected to these experiments, to their families, and to their communities."[126]

He also said the experiments had been "shrouded not for a compelling reason of national security but for the simple fear of embarrassment, and that was wrong."[127] And he said, "When the Government does wrong, we have a moral responsibility to admit it."[128]

That same morning he signed an order telling every agency that does or pays for research on people to review its rules, created a National Bioethics Advisory Commission and told his Cabinet to design "a system of relief, including compensation."[129]

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[121] Advisory Committee on Human Radiation Experiments, Final Report, Chapter 7, The Studies at the Fernald School, 1995. https://ehss.energy.gov/ohre/roadmap/achre/chap7_5.html, accessed November 12, 2026.

[122] The President (Federal Register), Executive Order 12891, Advisory Committee on Human Radiation Experiments, 59 FR 2935, January 15, 1994. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/FR-1994-01-20/html/94-1531.htm, accessed November 12, 2026.

[123] The President (Federal Register), Executive Order 12891, Advisory Committee on Human Radiation Experiments, 59 FR 2935, January 15, 1994. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/FR-1994-01-20/html/94-1531.htm, accessed November 12, 2026.

[124] The President (Federal Register), Executive Order 12891, Advisory Committee on Human Radiation Experiments, 59 FR 2935, January 15, 1994. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/FR-1994-01-20/html/94-1531.htm, accessed November 12, 2026.

[125] Public Papers of the Presidents, 1995, Book II, Remarks on Accepting the Report of the Advisory Committee on Human Radiation Experiments, October 3, 1995. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/PPP-1995-book2/html/PPP-1995-book2-doc-pg1530.htm, accessed November 12, 2026.

[126] Public Papers of the Presidents, 1995, Book II, Remarks on Accepting the Report of the Advisory Committee on Human Radiation Experiments, October 3, 1995. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/PPP-1995-book2/html/PPP-1995-book2-doc-pg1530.htm, accessed November 12, 2026.

[127] Public Papers of the Presidents, 1995, Book II, Remarks on Accepting the Report of the Advisory Committee on Human Radiation Experiments, October 3, 1995. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/PPP-1995-book2/html/PPP-1995-book2-doc-pg1530.htm, accessed November 12, 2026.

[128] Public Papers of the Presidents, 1995, Book II, Remarks on Accepting the Report of the Advisory Committee on Human Radiation Experiments, October 3, 1995. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/PPP-1995-book2/html/PPP-1995-book2-doc-pg1530.htm, accessed November 12, 2026.

[129] Public Papers of the Presidents, 1995, Book II, Remarks on Accepting the Report of the Advisory Committee on Human Radiation Experiments, October 3, 1995. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/PPP-1995-book2/html/PPP-1995-book2-doc-pg1530.htm, accessed November 12, 2026.

Compensation

The committee recommended a personal apology and payment in two kinds of cases: where the government kept things secret to avoid embarrassment or lawsuits, and where people were hurt by experiments that offered them no medical benefit.[130] Records of later settlements with specific families could not be confirmed for this book. [Not verified: searched for official records of settlements with plutonium-injection families and Fernald families; none could be opened.]

A related law, the Radiation Exposure Compensation Act (RECA), makes "compassionate payments" to people harmed by radiation from nuclear weapons testing and uranium mining.[131] It is not about the medical experiments in this chapter, but it comes from the same era. In it, "The Congress apologizes on behalf of the Nation" to those people and their families.[132] As amended on July 4, 2025, its fund ends on December 31, 2028, and claims must be filed by December 31, 2027.[133] The committee had separately found that "at least several hundred" uranium miners died of lung cancer from radon exposure.[134]

What this case teaches

The claim "The government secretly experimented on Americans" is true for these radiation cases. It is proved by the government's own advisory committee, working from records the government opened on purpose, and by a presidential apology.[135,136]

This case is also a model of how truth can come out the right way. A newspaper reported. A cabinet secretary chose to open the files. A committee of outside experts dug through them and published everything. The committee itself warned about the cost of the old secrecy: "The greatest harm from past experiments and intentional releases may be the legacy of distrust they created."[137]

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[130] Advisory Committee on Human Radiation Experiments, Final Report, Executive Summary, 1995. https://ehss.energy.gov/ohre/roadmap/achre/summary.html, accessed November 12, 2026.

[131] U.S. Government Publishing Office (House Office of the Legislative Counsel compilation), Radiation Exposure Compensation Act, as amended through Public Law 119-21, September 2, 2025. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/COMPS-707/pdf/COMPS-707.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[132] U.S. Government Publishing Office (House Office of the Legislative Counsel compilation), Radiation Exposure Compensation Act, as amended through Public Law 119-21, September 2, 2025. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/COMPS-707/pdf/COMPS-707.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[133] U.S. Government Publishing Office (House Office of the Legislative Counsel compilation), Radiation Exposure Compensation Act, as amended through Public Law 119-21, September 2, 2025. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/COMPS-707/pdf/COMPS-707.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[134] Advisory Committee on Human Radiation Experiments, Final Report, Executive Summary, 1995. https://ehss.energy.gov/ohre/roadmap/achre/summary.html, accessed November 12, 2026.

[135] Advisory Committee on Human Radiation Experiments, Final Report, Executive Summary, 1995. https://ehss.energy.gov/ohre/roadmap/achre/summary.html, accessed November 12, 2026.

[136] Public Papers of the Presidents, 1995, Book II, Remarks on Accepting the Report of the Advisory Committee on Human Radiation Experiments, October 3, 1995. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/PPP-1995-book2/html/PPP-1995-book2-doc-pg1530.htm, accessed November 12, 2026.

[137] Advisory Committee on Human Radiation Experiments, Final Report, Executive Summary, 1995. https://ehss.energy.gov/ohre/roadmap/achre/summary.html, accessed November 12, 2026.

Chapter 6: MKUltra, the CIA's Drug and Mind-Control Research

If someone told you in 1970 that the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) had secretly slipped LSD into the drinks of Americans who never agreed to it, you might have laughed. LSD (lysergic acid diethylamide) is a powerful drug that causes hallucinations. The claim sounds like a movie plot. It is also true, and the government's own records prove it.

This chapter covers what MKUltra was, what it did, how we know, and why so much about it is still unknown.

What MKUltra was

On April 13, 1953, CIA Director Allen Dulles approved a program called MKULTRA, based on a proposal from Richard Helms, then a senior CIA officer.[138] Dulles noted that "security considerations precluded handling the project through usual contractual agreements," and normal CIA audit rules were waived for it.[139]

The Senate's Church Committee, which investigated the intelligence agencies in 1975 and 1976, described MKUltra as a way to fund "highly sensitive CIA research and development projects that studied the use of biological and chemical materials in altering human behavior."[140] In plain words, the CIA was studying whether drugs and other methods could change how people think and act.

Sidney Gottlieb was a CIA scientist who worked on these projects.[141] Historian Stephen Kinzer described him in 2026 congressional testimony as the head of the program, though that description comes from Kinzer, not from an official finding.[142]

How big it was

Most MKUltra records were destroyed in 1973, as explained below. What survived was enough to show the size of the program.

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[138] Senate Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities (Church Committee), Final Report, Book I: Foreign and Military Intelligence, S. Rep. No. 94-755, April 26, 1976, reprinted in the 1977 MKULTRA hearing record, Appendix A, pp. 390 and 405-406. https://www.intelligence.senate.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/sites-default-files-94755-i.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[139] Senate Select Committee on Intelligence and Subcommittee on Health and Scientific Research, Project MKULTRA, the CIA's Program of Research in Behavioral Modification, joint hearing, August 3, 1977, Appendix A. https://www.intelligence.senate.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/sites-default-files-hearings-95mkultra.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[140] Senate Select Committee on Intelligence and Subcommittee on Health and Scientific Research, Project MKULTRA, the CIA's Program of Research in Behavioral Modification, joint hearing, August 3, 1977, Appendix A. https://www.intelligence.senate.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/sites-default-files-hearings-95mkultra.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[141] Senate Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities (Church Committee), Final Report, Book I: Foreign and Military Intelligence, S. Rep. No. 94-755, April 26, 1976, pp. 394-395. https://www.intelligence.senate.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/sites-default-files-94755-i.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[142] House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform, Task Force on the Declassification of Federal Secrets, Mind Control and Accountability: Uncovering the Truth of the CIA's MKULTRA Project, Serial No. 119-68, June 30, 2026. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-119hhrg64141/html/CHRG-119hhrg64141.htm, accessed November 12, 2026.

In 1977, CIA Director Stansfield Turner told the Senate that the recovered records covered 149 MKUltra subprojects.[143] They named 185 non-government researchers and assistants and 80 institutions, including 44 colleges or universities, 15 research foundations or drug and chemical companies, 12 hospitals or clinics, and 3 prisons.[144] Senator Edward Kennedy put the count at 86 universities or institutions at the same hearing.[145] The hearing record does not explain the difference.

Many researchers did not know where their money came from. Kennedy said the CIA funded leading researchers "often without their knowledge."[146] In one case, the CIA secretly gave $375,000 (in 1950s dollars, not adjusted for inflation) through a go-between to a private medical institution's building fund, and the institution was not told the true source.[147]

Table 6.1. What the surviving MKUltra records showed (from Admiral Turner's 1977 statement)

Category	Number of subprojects
Drug or alcohol research definitely involving tests on human volunteers	14[148]
Drug or alcohol research probably including tests on human volunteers	19[149]
Tests on unwitting subjects (people who did not know)	6[150]
Hypnosis	8[151]

[143] Senate Select Committee on Intelligence and Subcommittee on Health and Scientific Research, Project MKULTRA, the CIA's Program of Research in Behavioral Modification, joint hearing, August 3, 1977, Turner prepared statement. https://www.intelligence.senate.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/sites-default-files-hearings-95mkultra.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[144] Senate Select Committee on Intelligence and Subcommittee on Health and Scientific Research, Project MKULTRA, the CIA's Program of Research in Behavioral Modification, joint hearing, August 3, 1977, Turner prepared statement. https://www.intelligence.senate.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/sites-default-files-hearings-95mkultra.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[145] Senate Select Committee on Intelligence and Subcommittee on Health and Scientific Research, Project MKULTRA, the CIA's Program of Research in Behavioral Modification, joint hearing, August 3, 1977, Kennedy opening statement. https://www.intelligence.senate.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/sites-default-files-hearings-95mkultra.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[146] Senate Select Committee on Intelligence and Subcommittee on Health and Scientific Research, Project MKULTRA, the CIA's Program of Research in Behavioral Modification, joint hearing, August 3, 1977, Kennedy opening statement. https://www.intelligence.senate.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/sites-default-files-hearings-95mkultra.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[147] Senate Select Committee on Intelligence and Subcommittee on Health and Scientific Research, Project MKULTRA, the CIA's Program of Research in Behavioral Modification, joint hearing, August 3, 1977, Turner prepared statement. https://www.intelligence.senate.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/sites-default-files-hearings-95mkultra.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[148] Senate Select Committee on Intelligence and Subcommittee on Health and Scientific Research, Project MKULTRA, the CIA's Program of Research in Behavioral Modification, joint hearing, August 3, 1977, Turner prepared statement. https://www.intelligence.senate.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/sites-default-files-hearings-95mkultra.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[149] Senate Select Committee on Intelligence and Subcommittee on Health and Scientific Research, Project MKULTRA, the CIA's Program of Research in Behavioral Modification, joint hearing, August 3, 1977, Turner prepared statement. https://www.intelligence.senate.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/sites-default-files-hearings-95mkultra.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[150] Senate Select Committee on Intelligence and Subcommittee on Health and Scientific Research, Project MKULTRA, the CIA's Program of Research in Behavioral Modification, joint hearing, August 3, 1977, Turner prepared statement. https://www.intelligence.senate.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/sites-default-files-hearings-95mkultra.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

Category	Number of subprojects
Motivational studies, defectors and training techniques	23[152]
Total MKUltra subprojects in the recovered records	149[153]

Testing on people who did not know

This is the part most people find hardest to believe. Here is what the records say.

The Church Committee reported that the last phase of the CIA's LSD testing involved "surreptitious administration to unwitting nonvolunteer subjects in normal life settings by undercover officers of the Bureau of Narcotics acting for the CIA."[154] Admiral Turner confirmed in 1977 that some of this testing "was carried on in safehouses in San Francisco and New York City."[155] He also said some unwitting testing was done on "criminal sexual psychopaths confined at a State hospital."[156]

At the 1977 hearing, Senator Kennedy read from CIA cash records for the San Francisco safehouse, including a phrase from the agent who ran it: "called to the operation, midnight, and climax."[157] That phrase is the source of the name people now use, Operation Midnight Climax.[158]

At a federal addiction center in Lexington, Kentucky, prisoners who were addicted to drugs volunteered to take hallucinogens and were rewarded with "the drug of their addiction."[159]

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[151] Senate Select Committee on Intelligence and Subcommittee on Health and Scientific Research, Project MKULTRA, the CIA's Program of Research in Behavioral Modification, joint hearing, August 3, 1977, Turner prepared statement. https://www.intelligence.senate.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/sites-default-files-hearings-95mkultra.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[152] Senate Select Committee on Intelligence and Subcommittee on Health and Scientific Research, Project MKULTRA, the CIA's Program of Research in Behavioral Modification, joint hearing, August 3, 1977, Turner prepared statement. https://www.intelligence.senate.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/sites-default-files-hearings-95mkultra.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[153] Senate Select Committee on Intelligence and Subcommittee on Health and Scientific Research, Project MKULTRA, the CIA's Program of Research in Behavioral Modification, joint hearing, August 3, 1977, Turner prepared statement. https://www.intelligence.senate.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/sites-default-files-hearings-95mkultra.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[154] Senate Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities (Church Committee), Final Report, Book I: Foreign and Military Intelligence, S. Rep. No. 94-755, April 26, 1976, pp. 391-392. https://www.intelligence.senate.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/sites-default-files-94755-i.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[155] Senate Select Committee on Intelligence and Subcommittee on Health and Scientific Research, Project MKULTRA, the CIA's Program of Research in Behavioral Modification, joint hearing, August 3, 1977, Turner prepared statement. https://www.intelligence.senate.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/sites-default-files-hearings-95mkultra.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[156] Senate Select Committee on Intelligence and Subcommittee on Health and Scientific Research, Project MKULTRA, the CIA's Program of Research in Behavioral Modification, joint hearing, August 3, 1977, Turner prepared statement. https://www.intelligence.senate.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/sites-default-files-hearings-95mkultra.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[157] Senate Select Committee on Intelligence and Subcommittee on Health and Scientific Research, Project MKULTRA, the CIA's Program of Research in Behavioral Modification, joint hearing, August 3, 1977, Kennedy questioning. https://www.intelligence.senate.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/sites-default-files-hearings-95mkultra.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[158] House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform, Task Force on the Declassification of Federal Secrets, Mind Control and Accountability: Uncovering the Truth of the CIA's MKULTRA Project, Serial No. 119-68, June 30, 2026. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-119hhrg64141/html/CHRG-119hhrg64141.htm, accessed November 12, 2026.

The Church Committee concluded that these programs "resulted in massive abridgments of the rights of American citizens, sometimes with tragic consequences."[160] It said continuing them after the danger was known showed "a fundamental disregard for the value of human life."[161]

The CIA knew how this would look. A 1957 internal CIA review said precautions must be taken "to conceal these activities from the American public in general."[162]

The death of Frank Olson

Frank Olson was a civilian scientist working for the Army at Fort Detrick, Maryland.[163] On November 19, 1953, at a meeting of Army and CIA scientists, CIA officer Robert Lashbrook put about 70 micrograms of LSD in a bottle of liqueur, and Olson drank it without knowing.[164] Lashbrook and Gottlieb ran the experiment.[165]

On November 27, 1953, Olson fell to his death from a tenth-floor window of the Statler Hotel in New York City, where he had been taken for psychiatric treatment.[166] The Rockefeller Commission, a presidential commission that investigated the CIA in 1975, wrote of the drug testing: "This was clearly illegal. One person died in 1953, apparently as a result."[167]

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[159] Senate Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities (Church Committee), Final Report, Book I: Foreign and Military Intelligence, S. Rep. No. 94-755, April 26, 1976, p. 391. https://www.intelligence.senate.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/sites-default-files-94755-i.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[160] Senate Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities (Church Committee), Final Report, Book I: Foreign and Military Intelligence, S. Rep. No. 94-755, April 26, 1976, p. 386. https://www.intelligence.senate.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/sites-default-files-94755-i.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[161] Senate Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities (Church Committee), Final Report, Book I: Foreign and Military Intelligence, S. Rep. No. 94-755, April 26, 1976, p. 386. https://www.intelligence.senate.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/sites-default-files-94755-i.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[162] Senate Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities (Church Committee), Final Report, Book I: Foreign and Military Intelligence, S. Rep. No. 94-755, April 26, 1976, p. 394, reprinted in the 1977 MKULTRA hearing record, Appendix A. https://www.intelligence.senate.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/sites-default-files-94755-i.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[163] Senate Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities (Church Committee), Final Report, Book I: Foreign and Military Intelligence, S. Rep. No. 94-755, April 26, 1976, pp. 394-395. https://www.intelligence.senate.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/sites-default-files-94755-i.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[164] Senate Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities (Church Committee), Final Report, Book I: Foreign and Military Intelligence, S. Rep. No. 94-755, April 26, 1976, pp. 394-395. https://www.intelligence.senate.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/sites-default-files-94755-i.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[165] Senate Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities (Church Committee), Final Report, Book I: Foreign and Military Intelligence, S. Rep. No. 94-755, April 26, 1976, pp. 394-395. https://www.intelligence.senate.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/sites-default-files-94755-i.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[166] Senate Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities (Church Committee), Final Report, Book I: Foreign and Military Intelligence, S. Rep. No. 94-755, April 26, 1976, p. 395. https://www.intelligence.senate.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/sites-default-files-94755-i.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[167] Commission on CIA Activities Within the United States (Rockefeller Commission), Report to the President, June 1975. https://www.fordlibrarymuseum.gov/library/document/0005/1561495.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

The Church Committee noted that after Olson's death "the dangers of the surreptitious administration of LSD were clear, yet the CIA continued" giving LSD to people who had not agreed.[168]

In 1976, Congress passed a private law paying $187,500 each to Olson's widow and three children, $750,000 in total (in 1976 dollars), to settle all claims over his death.[169] In return, the family gave up all other claims against the government.[170]

The Church Committee counted two deaths tied to the government's drug-testing programs.[171] The second was Harold Blauer, who died on January 8, 1953 after an injection of a mescaline-type drug at the New York State Psychiatric Institute.[172] That test was run under an Army contract, not by MKUltra.[173]

The Army ran tests too

The CIA was not alone. The Church Committee found that the Army gave LSD to more than 1,000 soldier volunteers in chemical warfare experiments.[174] It also found that the Army questioned 16 unwitting people under LSD in projects called THIRD CHANCE and DERBY HAT.[175]

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[168] Senate Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities (Church Committee), Final Report, Book I: Foreign and Military Intelligence, S. Rep. No. 94-755, April 26, 1976, pp. 400-401, reprinted in the 1977 MKULTRA hearing record, Appendix A. https://www.intelligence.senate.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/sites-default-files-94755-i.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[169] U.S. Government Publishing Office, Private Law 94-126, 90 Stat. 3006 (for the relief of Alice W. Olson and others), October 12, 1976. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/STATUTE-90/pdf/STATUTE-90-Pg3006.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[170] U.S. Government Publishing Office, Private Law 94-126, 90 Stat. 3006 (for the relief of Alice W. Olson and others), October 12, 1976. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/STATUTE-90/pdf/STATUTE-90-Pg3006.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[171] Senate Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities (Church Committee), Final Report, Book I: Foreign and Military Intelligence, S. Rep. No. 94-755, April 26, 1976, p. 386. https://www.intelligence.senate.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/sites-default-files-94755-i.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[172] Senate Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities (Church Committee), Final Report, Book I: Foreign and Military Intelligence, S. Rep. No. 94-755, April 26, 1976, p. 386, note 3a. https://www.intelligence.senate.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/sites-default-files-94755-i.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[173] Senate Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities (Church Committee), Final Report, Book I: Foreign and Military Intelligence, S. Rep. No. 94-755, April 26, 1976, p. 386, note 3a. https://www.intelligence.senate.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/sites-default-files-94755-i.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[174] Senate Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities (Church Committee), Final Report, Book I: Foreign and Military Intelligence, S. Rep. No. 94-755, April 26, 1976, p. 392. https://www.intelligence.senate.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/sites-default-files-94755-i.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[175] Senate Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities (Church Committee), Final Report, Book I: Foreign and Military Intelligence, S. Rep. No. 94-755, April 26, 1976, p. 392. https://www.intelligence.senate.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/sites-default-files-94755-i.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

How it ended, and the shredded files

A CIA Inspector General review in 1963 found out about the unwitting testing.[176] The testing was halted after that review.[177] Admiral Turner said the review "led directly to the termination of this activity in 1964."[178] The Church Committee reported the CIA's statement that the larger project shrank each year until "its complete termination in the late 1960s."[179] Sources give different end dates because the program wound down in stages.

Even before the cover-up, records were thin. The 1963 Inspector General report noted, "Present practice is to maintain no records of the planning and approval of test programs."[180]

Then, in January 1973, the records that did exist were destroyed. Senator Kennedy stated that this happened "at the instruction of then CIA Director Richard Helms."[181] Admiral Turner's account was that the files were destroyed "on the orders of the then retiring Chief of the Office of Technical Service, with the authorization of the then DCI," meaning the Director of Central Intelligence.[182] Read together, the two accounts say the order came from the program office with Helms's approval.

How the truth came out

The name MKULTRA first became public during the 1975 investigations by the Rockefeller Commission and the Church Committee, when details of Frank Olson's death were made public.[183]

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[176] Senate Select Committee on Intelligence and Subcommittee on Health and Scientific Research, Project MKULTRA, the CIA's Program of Research in Behavioral Modification, joint hearing, August 3, 1977, Appendix A. https://www.intelligence.senate.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/sites-default-files-hearings-95mkultra.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[177] Senate Select Committee on Intelligence and Subcommittee on Health and Scientific Research, Project MKULTRA, the CIA's Program of Research in Behavioral Modification, joint hearing, August 3, 1977, Appendix A. https://www.intelligence.senate.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/sites-default-files-hearings-95mkultra.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[178] Senate Select Committee on Intelligence and Subcommittee on Health and Scientific Research, Project MKULTRA, the CIA's Program of Research in Behavioral Modification, joint hearing, August 3, 1977, Turner testimony. https://www.intelligence.senate.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/sites-default-files-hearings-95mkultra.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[179] Senate Select Committee on Intelligence and Subcommittee on Health and Scientific Research, Project MKULTRA, the CIA's Program of Research in Behavioral Modification, joint hearing, August 3, 1977, Appendix A. https://www.intelligence.senate.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/sites-default-files-hearings-95mkultra.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[180] Senate Select Committee on Intelligence and Subcommittee on Health and Scientific Research, Project MKULTRA, the CIA's Program of Research in Behavioral Modification, joint hearing, August 3, 1977, Turner prepared statement. https://www.intelligence.senate.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/sites-default-files-hearings-95mkultra.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[181] Senate Select Committee on Intelligence and Subcommittee on Health and Scientific Research, Project MKULTRA, the CIA's Program of Research in Behavioral Modification, joint hearing, August 3, 1977, Kennedy opening statement. https://www.intelligence.senate.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/sites-default-files-hearings-95mkultra.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[182] Senate Select Committee on Intelligence and Subcommittee on Health and Scientific Research, Project MKULTRA, the CIA's Program of Research in Behavioral Modification, joint hearing, August 3, 1977, Turner prepared statement. https://www.intelligence.senate.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/sites-default-files-hearings-95mkultra.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[183] Senate Select Committee on Intelligence and Subcommittee on Health and Scientific Research, Project MKULTRA, the CIA's Program of Research in Behavioral Modification, joint hearing, August 3, 1977, Turner prepared statement. https://www.intelligence.senate.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/sites-default-files-hearings-95mkultra.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

The bigger break came by accident. In 1977, a CIA employee who handled Freedom of Information Act requests found seven boxes of MKUltra financial records.[184] They had been sent to a CIA records storage center in 1970, so they escaped the 1973 destruction and were missed in the 1975 searches.[185] Turner said the find "may be closer to 8,000 pages."[186] You will often see the number 20,000 documents online. I could not find that number in the official record, so I use Turner's figure.

The Senate held a public joint hearing on August 3, 1977.[187] Kennedy opened by saying, "The Central Intelligence Agency drugged American citizens without their knowledge or consent."[188] Turner assured senators that the CIA was "in no way engaged in either witting or unwitting testing of drugs today."[189]

What changed

In 1975, President Ford ordered 20 of the Rockefeller Commission's 30 recommendations carried out, including an end to "the testing of drugs on unsuspecting persons."[190] The commission had recommended that "the CIA should not again engage in the testing of drugs on unsuspecting persons."[191]

In 1981, Executive Order 12333 barred intelligence agencies from sponsoring or doing research on human subjects except under Department of Health and Human Services guidelines, and it required documented informed consent.[192]

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[184] Senate Select Committee on Intelligence and Subcommittee on Health and Scientific Research, Project MKULTRA, the CIA's Program of Research in Behavioral Modification, joint hearing, August 3, 1977, Turner prepared statement and testimony. https://www.intelligence.senate.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/sites-default-files-hearings-95mkultra.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[185] Senate Select Committee on Intelligence and Subcommittee on Health and Scientific Research, Project MKULTRA, the CIA's Program of Research in Behavioral Modification, joint hearing, August 3, 1977, Turner prepared statement. https://www.intelligence.senate.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/sites-default-files-hearings-95mkultra.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[186] Senate Select Committee on Intelligence and Subcommittee on Health and Scientific Research, Project MKULTRA, the CIA's Program of Research in Behavioral Modification, joint hearing, August 3, 1977, Turner testimony. https://www.intelligence.senate.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/sites-default-files-hearings-95mkultra.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[187] Senate Select Committee on Intelligence and Subcommittee on Health and Scientific Research, Project MKULTRA, the CIA's Program of Research in Behavioral Modification, joint hearing, August 3, 1977. https://www.intelligence.senate.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/sites-default-files-hearings-95mkultra.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[188] Senate Select Committee on Intelligence and Subcommittee on Health and Scientific Research, Project MKULTRA, the CIA's Program of Research in Behavioral Modification, joint hearing, August 3, 1977, Kennedy opening statement. https://www.intelligence.senate.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/sites-default-files-hearings-95mkultra.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[189] Senate Select Committee on Intelligence and Subcommittee on Health and Scientific Research, Project MKULTRA, the CIA's Program of Research in Behavioral Modification, joint hearing, August 3, 1977, Turner prepared statement. https://www.intelligence.senate.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/sites-default-files-hearings-95mkultra.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[190] Commission on the Roles and Capabilities of the U.S. Intelligence Community, The Evolution of the U.S. Intelligence Community: An Historical Overview, 1996. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/GPO-INTELLIGENCE/html/int022.html, accessed November 12, 2026.

[191] Commission on CIA Activities Within the United States (Rockefeller Commission), Report to the President, June 1975. https://www.fordlibrarymuseum.gov/library/document/0005/1561495.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[192] National Archives, Office of the Federal Register, Executive Order 12333, United States Intelligence Activities, December 4, 1981, Section 2.10. https://www.archives.gov/federal-register/codification/executive-order/12333.html, accessed November 12, 2026.

Still being asked about in 2026

MKUltra is not just history. On June 30, 2026, a House task force on declassification held a hearing on MKUltra.[193] Its chair, Representative Anna Paulina Luna, quoted a CIA document stating that "the MKULTRA files were destroyed by the order of DCI, Mr. Helms, shortly before his departure from office."[194] At the same hearing she said, "No victim was ever formally compensated by the government."[195] The 1976 law that paid the Olson family shows that at least one family was compensated by an act of Congress.[196]

Historian Stephen Kinzer told the task force that as far as he knew there had been no prosecutions for any MKUltra-related crime.[197] He also said Canada had made "a real effort" to find and compensate victims of research at a Canadian psychiatric hospital.[198]

What this case teaches

MKUltra is real because there is a paper trail: the CIA's own surviving financial records, sworn testimony by a sitting CIA Director, and two independent investigations that reached the same basic findings.[199,200,201]

It also shows how a real secret can feed false ones. Because most files were destroyed, nobody can prove the full scope of what happened. That gap leaves room for bigger claims that no record supports. Chapter 18 looks at what is still unknown about MKUltra and how to tell the documented parts from the guesses.

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[193] House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform, Task Force on the Declassification of Federal Secrets, Mind Control and Accountability: Uncovering the Truth of the CIA's MKULTRA Project, Serial No. 119-68, June 30, 2026. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-119hhrg64141/html/CHRG-119hhrg64141.htm, accessed November 12, 2026.

[194] House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform, Task Force on the Declassification of Federal Secrets, Mind Control and Accountability: Uncovering the Truth of the CIA's MKULTRA Project, Serial No. 119-68, June 30, 2026. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-119hhrg64141/html/CHRG-119hhrg64141.htm, accessed November 12, 2026.

[195] House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform, Task Force on the Declassification of Federal Secrets, Mind Control and Accountability: Uncovering the Truth of the CIA's MKULTRA Project, Serial No. 119-68, June 30, 2026. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-119hhrg64141/html/CHRG-119hhrg64141.htm, accessed November 12, 2026.

[196] U.S. Government Publishing Office, Private Law 94-126, 90 Stat. 3006 (for the relief of Alice W. Olson and others), October 12, 1976. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/STATUTE-90/pdf/STATUTE-90-Pg3006.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[197] House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform, Task Force on the Declassification of Federal Secrets, Mind Control and Accountability: Uncovering the Truth of the CIA's MKULTRA Project, Serial No. 119-68, June 30, 2026. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-119hhrg64141/html/CHRG-119hhrg64141.htm, accessed November 12, 2026.

[198] House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform, Task Force on the Declassification of Federal Secrets, Mind Control and Accountability: Uncovering the Truth of the CIA's MKULTRA Project, Serial No. 119-68, June 30, 2026. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-119hhrg64141/html/CHRG-119hhrg64141.htm, accessed November 12, 2026.

[199] Senate Select Committee on Intelligence and Subcommittee on Health and Scientific Research, Project MKULTRA, the CIA's Program of Research in Behavioral Modification, joint hearing, August 3, 1977. https://www.intelligence.senate.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/sites-default-files-hearings-95mkultra.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[200] Senate Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities (Church Committee), Final Report, Book I: Foreign and Military Intelligence, S. Rep. No. 94-755, April 26, 1976. https://www.intelligence.senate.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/sites-default-files-94755-i.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[201] Commission on CIA Activities Within the United States (Rockefeller Commission), Report to the President, June 1975. https://www.fordlibrarymuseum.gov/library/document/0005/1561495.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

Chapter 7: COINTELPRO, the FBI's Secret Campaigns

For fifteen years, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) ran secret operations to disrupt American political groups. People inside those groups said they were being watched, infiltrated and set against each other. Many outsiders thought they were paranoid. They were not.

This chapter covers what COINTELPRO was, who it targeted, how a break-in exposed it, and what changed.

What COINTELPRO was

COINTELPRO is short for Counterintelligence Program. The FBI's own records website says the Bureau started it in 1956 to disrupt the Communist Party of the United States.[202] In the 1960s it was expanded to other groups, including the Ku Klux Klan, the Socialist Workers Party and the Black Panther Party.[203]

The Senate's Church Committee defined COINTELPRO as "the FBI acronym for a series of covert action programs directed against domestic groups."[204] The key word is action. The committee found the FBI went beyond gathering information and took secret steps to "disrupt" and "neutralize" groups and people.[205]

Who was targeted

COINTELPRO hit groups across the political spectrum. That is one reason it matters for this book: it was not aimed at one side.

Table 7.1. The five main COINTELPRO programs (from the Church Committee)

Program	Started	Ended
Communist Party USA	August 1956	1971[206]
Socialist Workers Party	October 12, 1961	1969[207]

[202] Federal Bureau of Investigation, COINTELPRO, FBI Records: The Vault, undated. https://vault.fbi.gov/cointel-pro, accessed November 12, 2026.

[203] Federal Bureau of Investigation, COINTELPRO, FBI Records: The Vault, undated. https://vault.fbi.gov/cointel-pro, accessed November 12, 2026.

[204] Senate Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities (Church Committee), Final Report, Book III, COINTELPRO: The FBI's Covert Action Programs Against American Citizens (scan hosted by the Assassination Archives and Research Center), April 1976. http://www.aarclibrary.org/publib/church/reports/book3/pdf/ChurchB3_1_COINTELPRO.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[205] Senate Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities (Church Committee), Final Report, Book III, COINTELPRO: The FBI's Covert Action Programs Against American Citizens (scan hosted by the Assassination Archives and Research Center), April 1976. http://www.aarclibrary.org/publib/church/reports/book3/pdf/ChurchB3_1_COINTELPRO.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[206] Senate Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities (Church Committee), Final Report, Book III, COINTELPRO: The FBI's Covert Action Programs Against American Citizens (scan hosted by the Assassination Archives and Research Center), April 1976. http://www.aarclibrary.org/publib/church/reports/book3/pdf/ChurchB3_1_COINTELPRO.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[207] Senate Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities (Church Committee), Final Report, Book III, COINTELPRO: The FBI's Covert Action Programs Against American Citizens (scan hosted by the Assassination Archives and Research Center), April 1976.

Program	Started	Ended
"White Hate Groups" (including the Ku Klux Klan)	July 30, 1964	1971[208]
"Black Nationalist-Hate Groups"	August 25, 1967	1971[209]
"New Left"	October 28, 1968	1971[210]

The labels in quotation marks are the FBI's own program names. The FBI's records page names the Black Panther Party as a target, and the Church Committee placed it inside the program the FBI called "Black Nationalist-Hate Groups."[211,212]

What the FBI did

The Church Committee said the methods were "adopted wholesale from wartime counterintelligence."[213] They ranged from the small, like mailing magazine reprints to college officials, to the cruel, like anonymous letters meant to break up marriages, to the dangerous, like encouraging gang warfare and falsely labeling members of violent groups as police informers.[214]

About a quarter of approved actions were meant to cause splits inside and between groups, and about as many involved creating and spreading propaganda.[215] In one example, the FBI sent an

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http://www.aarclibrary.org/publib/church/reports/book3/pdf/ChurchB3_1_COINTELPRO.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[208] Senate Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities (Church Committee), Final Report, Book III, COINTELPRO: The FBI's Covert Action Programs Against American Citizens (scan hosted by the Assassination Archives and Research Center), April 1976. http://www.aarclibrary.org/publib/church/reports/book3/pdf/ChurchB3_1_COINTELPRO.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[209] Senate Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities (Church Committee), Final Report, Book III, COINTELPRO: The FBI's Covert Action Programs Against American Citizens (scan hosted by the Assassination Archives and Research Center), April 1976. http://www.aarclibrary.org/publib/church/reports/book3/pdf/ChurchB3_1_COINTELPRO.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[210] Senate Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities (Church Committee), Final Report, Book III, COINTELPRO: The FBI's Covert Action Programs Against American Citizens (scan hosted by the Assassination Archives and Research Center), April 1976. http://www.aarclibrary.org/publib/church/reports/book3/pdf/ChurchB3_1_COINTELPRO.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[211] Federal Bureau of Investigation, COINTELPRO, FBI Records: The Vault, undated. https://vault.fbi.gov/cointel-pro, accessed November 12, 2026.

[212] Senate Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities (Church Committee), Final Report, Book III, COINTELPRO: The FBI's Covert Action Programs Against American Citizens (scan hosted by the Assassination Archives and Research Center), April 1976. http://www.aarclibrary.org/publib/church/reports/book3/pdf/ChurchB3_1_COINTELPRO.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[213] Senate Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities (Church Committee), Final Report, Book III, COINTELPRO: The FBI's Covert Action Programs Against American Citizens (scan hosted by the Assassination Archives and Research Center), April 1976. http://www.aarclibrary.org/publib/church/reports/book3/pdf/ChurchB3_1_COINTELPRO.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[214] Senate Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities (Church Committee), Final Report, Book III, COINTELPRO: The FBI's Covert Action Programs Against American Citizens (scan hosted by the Assassination Archives and Research Center), April 1976. http://www.aarclibrary.org/publib/church/reports/book3/pdf/ChurchB3_1_COINTELPRO.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[215] Senate Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities (Church Committee), Final Report, Book III, COINTELPRO: The FBI's Covert Action Programs Against American Citizens (scan hosted by the

anonymous letter signed "Disgusted Taxpayer and Patron" to advertisers of a student newspaper to pressure the paper over what it printed.[216]

The Church Committee reported that 3,247 COINTELPRO actions were proposed.[217] The Justice Department's Inspector General later summarized that more than 2,000 operations were carried out before the program ended.[218] One scanned copy of the Church Committee report shows a higher figure for approved actions, but that number is larger than the number proposed and appears to be a scanning error, so I do not use it.[219]

The FBI's reason, as the committee put it: "Protecting national security and preventing violence are the purposes advanced by the Bureau for COINTELPRO."[220] The FBI's records page today says COINTELPRO was about two-tenths of one percent of the Bureau's workload over fifteen years.[221]

The best-known target was Martin Luther King Jr. The Church Committee studied the FBI's campaign against him in a separate case study in Book III. I was not able to open that section of the report for this book, so I do not describe its details here. [Not verified: the King case study in Church Committee Book III could not be opened; the main COINTELPRO chapter was read in full.]

Assassination Archives and Research Center), April 1976. http://www.aarclibrary.org/publib/church/reports/book3/pdf/ChurchB3_1_COINTELPRO.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[216] Senate Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities (Church Committee), Final Report, Book III, COINTELPRO: The FBI's Covert Action Programs Against American Citizens (scan hosted by the Assassination Archives and Research Center), April 1976. http://www.aarclibrary.org/publib/church/reports/book3/pdf/ChurchB3_1_COINTELPRO.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[217] Senate Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities (Church Committee), Final Report, Book III, COINTELPRO: The FBI's Covert Action Programs Against American Citizens (scan hosted by the Assassination Archives and Research Center), April 1976, p. 8, note 22. http://www.aarclibrary.org/publib/church/reports/book3/pdf/ChurchB3_1_COINTELPRO.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[218] U.S. Department of Justice, Office of the Inspector General, The FBI's Compliance with the Attorney General's Investigative Guidelines, Chapter 2, September 2005. https://oig.justice.gov/special/0509/chapter2.htm, accessed November 12, 2026.

[219] Senate Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities (Church Committee), Final Report, Book III, COINTELPRO: The FBI's Covert Action Programs Against American Citizens (scan hosted by the Assassination Archives and Research Center), April 1976. http://www.aarclibrary.org/publib/church/reports/book3/pdf/ChurchB3_1_COINTELPRO.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[220] Senate Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities (Church Committee), Final Report, Book III, COINTELPRO: The FBI's Covert Action Programs Against American Citizens (scan hosted by the Assassination Archives and Research Center), April 1976. http://www.aarclibrary.org/publib/church/reports/book3/pdf/ChurchB3_1_COINTELPRO.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[221] Federal Bureau of Investigation, COINTELPRO, FBI Records: The Vault, undated. https://vault.fbi.gov/cointel-pro, accessed November 12, 2026.

How it came out: the Media break-in

On March 8, 1971, someone broke into the FBI's small office in Media, Pennsylvania, and took files that were then widely published.[222] Some of the documents carried the caption "COINTELPRO," a word unknown outside the Bureau.[223]

That one word started a chain. NBC News reporter Carl Stern filed a Freedom of Information Act lawsuit to get more documents about the programs.[224] The group that took the files called itself the Citizens' Commission to Investigate the FBI. Its members were not publicly known for decades. [Not verified: the 2014 public identification of the burglars by journalist Betty Medsger could not be confirmed from a source opened for this book.]

You might ask, "Isn't it wrong to praise a burglary?" I don't praise it. The break-in was a crime. But it is also a fact that this is how the program first became public, and the records it exposed were real.

How it ended

The FBI decided on April 27, 1971 to end its COINTELPRO programs, citing "security reasons," and sent word to its field offices the next day.[225] The FBI's records page says simply, "All COINTELPRO operations were ended in 1971."[226]

What the investigators concluded

The Church Committee did not soften its words. It concluded that the FBI "took the law into its own hands, conducting a sophisticated vigilante operation against domestic enemies."[227] It wrote, "Many of the techniques used would be intolerable in a democratic society."[228]

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[222] Senate Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities (Church Committee), Final Report, Book III, COINTELPRO: The FBI's Covert Action Programs Against American Citizens (scan hosted by the Assassination Archives and Research Center), April 1976. http://www.aarclibrary.org/publib/church/reports/book3/pdf/ChurchB3_1_COINTELPRO.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[223] Senate Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities (Church Committee), Final Report, Book III, COINTELPRO: The FBI's Covert Action Programs Against American Citizens (scan hosted by the Assassination Archives and Research Center), April 1976. http://www.aarclibrary.org/publib/church/reports/book3/pdf/ChurchB3_1_COINTELPRO.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[224] Senate Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities (Church Committee), Final Report, Book III, COINTELPRO: The FBI's Covert Action Programs Against American Citizens (scan hosted by the Assassination Archives and Research Center), April 1976. http://www.aarclibrary.org/publib/church/reports/book3/pdf/ChurchB3_1_COINTELPRO.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[225] Senate Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities (Church Committee), Final Report, Book III, COINTELPRO: The FBI's Covert Action Programs Against American Citizens (scan hosted by the Assassination Archives and Research Center), April 1976. http://www.aarclibrary.org/publib/church/reports/book3/pdf/ChurchB3_1_COINTELPRO.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[226] Federal Bureau of Investigation, COINTELPRO, FBI Records: The Vault, undated. https://vault.fbi.gov/cointel-pro, accessed November 12, 2026.

[227] Senate Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities (Church Committee), Final Report, Book III, COINTELPRO: The FBI's Covert Action Programs Against American Citizens (scan hosted by the Assassination Archives and Research Center), April 1976, p. 28. http://www.aarclibrary.org/publib/church/reports/book3/pdf/ChurchB3_1_COINTELPRO.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

The committee also drew the lesson that matters most for this book: "the law draws the line between criminal acts and constitutionally protected activity, and that line must be kept."[229] It quoted Justice Louis Brandeis: "Crime is contagious. If the Government becomes a lawbreaker, it breeds contempt for law."[230]

What changed

Attorney General Edward Levi issued the first Attorney General Guidelines for FBI domestic security investigations, effective April 6, 1976, after the Church Committee's findings.[231] Levi said that watching people because of "unpopular or controversial political views is intolerable in our society."[232]

The Levi guidelines required "specific and articulable facts giving reason to believe" before a full investigation could be opened, and they set levels of investigation with limits on what agents could do.[233] In 1983, Attorney General William French Smith replaced that standard with a looser "reasonable indication" standard.[234] That change shows these limits are set by each Attorney General, not by a law passed by Congress.[235]

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[228] Senate Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities (Church Committee), Final Report, Book III, COINTELPRO: The FBI's Covert Action Programs Against American Citizens (scan hosted by the Assassination Archives and Research Center), April 1976. http://www.aarclibrary.org/publib/church/reports/book3/pdf/ChurchB3_1_COINTELPRO.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[229] Senate Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities (Church Committee), Final Report, Book III, COINTELPRO: The FBI's Covert Action Programs Against American Citizens (scan hosted by the Assassination Archives and Research Center), April 1976. http://www.aarclibrary.org/publib/church/reports/book3/pdf/ChurchB3_1_COINTELPRO.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[230] Senate Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities (Church Committee), Final Report, Book III, COINTELPRO: The FBI's Covert Action Programs Against American Citizens (scan hosted by the Assassination Archives and Research Center), April 1976. http://www.aarclibrary.org/publib/church/reports/book3/pdf/ChurchB3_1_COINTELPRO.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[231] U.S. Department of Justice, Office of the Inspector General, The FBI's Compliance with the Attorney General's Investigative Guidelines, Chapter 2, September 2005. https://oig.justice.gov/special/0509/chapter2.htm, accessed November 12, 2026.

[232] U.S. Department of Justice, Office of the Inspector General, The FBI's Compliance with the Attorney General's Investigative Guidelines, Chapter 2, September 2005. https://oig.justice.gov/special/0509/chapter2.htm, accessed November 12, 2026.

[233] U.S. Department of Justice, Office of the Inspector General, The FBI's Compliance with the Attorney General's Investigative Guidelines, Chapter 2, September 2005. https://oig.justice.gov/special/0509/chapter2.htm, accessed November 12, 2026.

[234] U.S. Department of Justice, Office of the Inspector General, The FBI's Compliance with the Attorney General's Investigative Guidelines, Chapter 2, September 2005. https://oig.justice.gov/special/0509/chapter2.htm, accessed November 12, 2026.

[235] U.S. Department of Justice, Office of the Inspector General, The FBI's Compliance with the Attorney General's Investigative Guidelines, Chapter 2, September 2005. https://oig.justice.gov/special/0509/chapter2.htm, accessed November 12, 2026.

What this case teaches

The claim "The FBI secretly worked to destroy activist and Black political groups" is supported by the FBI's own files and by a Senate investigation that read them.[236,237] Chapter 22 rates it True.

Notice who was targeted: communists, socialists, the Ku Klux Klan, Black activist groups and student antiwar groups.[238] If you hear someone say COINTELPRO proves the government only goes after one side, the record says otherwise. The lesson is about power without oversight, and that applies no matter who holds it.

[236] Federal Bureau of Investigation, COINTELPRO, FBI Records: The Vault, undated. https://vault.fbi.gov/cointel-pro, accessed November 12, 2026.

[237] Senate Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities (Church Committee), Final Report, Book III, COINTELPRO: The FBI's Covert Action Programs Against American Citizens (scan hosted by the Assassination Archives and Research Center), April 1976. http://www.aarclibrary.org/publib/church/reports/book3/pdf/ChurchB3_1_COINTELPRO.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[238] Senate Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities (Church Committee), Final Report, Book III, COINTELPRO: The FBI's Covert Action Programs Against American Citizens (scan hosted by the Assassination Archives and Research Center), April 1976. http://www.aarclibrary.org/publib/church/reports/book3/pdf/ChurchB3_1_COINTELPRO.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

Chapter 8: The Gulf of Tonkin and the Pentagon Papers

In August 1964, Americans were told that North Vietnamese boats had attacked U.S. Navy ships twice in the Gulf of Tonkin, off the coast of Vietnam. Congress responded within days by giving the President broad power to use military force. That decision opened the door to a long war. National Archives records list 58,220 U.S. military deaths in the Vietnam War.[239]

Later, critics said the second attack had been exaggerated or never happened. For decades that was argued, not proved. Then the government's own records settled it.

The first incident: August 2, 1964

On August 2, 1964, North Vietnamese torpedo boats attacked the destroyer USS Maddox.[240] The National Archives calls this "the first Tonkin Gulf incident."[241] This attack was real.

The second incident: August 4, 1964

Two days later, on August 4, the Maddox's captain reported that he was "under continuous torpedo attack."[242] Later that same day, the commander sent a second message: "Review of action makes many reported contacts and torpedoes fired appear doubtful."[243]

The Senate's own historians say the administration did not share those doubts with Congress.[244] President Johnson and Defense Secretary Robert McNamara treated intelligence reports as key evidence of a second attack and used it to justify air strikes and a request to Congress.[245]

Congress votes

On August 6, 1964, the Senate Foreign Relations and Armed Services committees approved a resolution 14 to 1.[246] On August 7, it passed both chambers.[247] The House approved it

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[239] National Archives, Vietnam War U.S. Military Fatal Casualty Statistics, data current as of April 29, 2008. https://www.archives.gov/research/military/vietnam-war/casualty-statistics, accessed November 12, 2026.

[240] National Archives, Tonkin Gulf Resolution (1964), Milestone Documents, undated. https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/tonkin-gulf-resolution, accessed November 12, 2026.

[241] National Archives, Tonkin Gulf Resolution (1964), Milestone Documents, undated. https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/tonkin-gulf-resolution, accessed November 12, 2026.

[242] National Archives, Tonkin Gulf Resolution (1964), Milestone Documents, undated. https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/tonkin-gulf-resolution, accessed November 12, 2026.

[243] U.S. Senate Historical Office, Chairman J. William Fulbright and the 1964 Tonkin Gulf Resolution, undated. https://www.senate.gov/artandhistory/senate-stories/chairman-fulbright-and-the-tonkin-gulf-resolution.htm, accessed November 12, 2026.

[244] U.S. Senate Historical Office, Chairman J. William Fulbright and the 1964 Tonkin Gulf Resolution, undated. https://www.senate.gov/artandhistory/senate-stories/chairman-fulbright-and-the-tonkin-gulf-resolution.htm, accessed November 12, 2026.

[245] National Security Archive, George Washington University, Gulf of Tonkin declassification, Electronic Briefing Book 132 (press release), December 1, 2005. https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB132/press20051201.htm, accessed November 12, 2026.

[246] U.S. Senate Historical Office, Chairman J. William Fulbright and the 1964 Tonkin Gulf Resolution, undated. https://www.senate.gov/artandhistory/senate-stories/chairman-fulbright-and-the-tonkin-gulf-resolution.htm, accessed November 12, 2026.

[247] National Archives, Tonkin Gulf Resolution (1964), Milestone Documents, undated. https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/tonkin-gulf-resolution, accessed November 12, 2026.

unanimously, and the Senate passed it 88 to 2.[248] The only two senators to vote no were Wayne Morse of Oregon and Ernest Gruening of Alaska.[249] President Johnson signed it on August 10, 1964.[250]

The resolution said Congress "approves and supports the determination of the President, as Commander in Chief, to take all necessary measures to repel any armed attack."[251] That language became the legal basis the administration used to expand the war.

Senator J. William Fulbright, who steered the resolution through the Senate at Johnson's request, later regretted it. In 1968 he said, "I feel a very deep moral responsibility to the Senate and the country for having misled them."[252]

Congress repealed the resolution in January 1971.[253] It kept paying for the war until U.S. forces withdrew in March 1973.[254]

What the NSA's own historian found

The National Security Agency (NSA) collects signals intelligence, meaning intercepted radio and other communications, which the agency calls SIGINT. NSA historian Robert Hanyok studied the agency's own records on the Gulf of Tonkin. His study, "Skunks, Bogies, Silent Hounds, and the Flying Fish: The Gulf of Tonkin Mystery, 2-4 August 1964," first appeared in an internal classified NSA journal in early 2001.[255]

The NSA released it and other Tonkin records starting in late 2005. The NSA dates its first release November 30, 2005, and the National Security Archive, a research group at George Washington University, dates it December 1, 2005.[256,257] A second and final batch followed on May 30, 2006.[258]

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[248] U.S. Senate Historical Office, Chairman J. William Fulbright and the 1964 Tonkin Gulf Resolution, undated. https://www.senate.gov/artandhistory/senate-stories/chairman-fulbright-and-the-tonkin-gulf-resolution.htm, accessed November 12, 2026.

[249] U.S. Senate Historical Office, Chairman J. William Fulbright and the 1964 Tonkin Gulf Resolution, undated. https://www.senate.gov/artandhistory/senate-stories/chairman-fulbright-and-the-tonkin-gulf-resolution.htm, accessed November 12, 2026.

[250] U.S. Senate Historical Office, Chairman J. William Fulbright and the 1964 Tonkin Gulf Resolution, undated. https://www.senate.gov/artandhistory/senate-stories/chairman-fulbright-and-the-tonkin-gulf-resolution.htm, accessed November 12, 2026.

[251] National Archives, Tonkin Gulf Resolution (1964), Milestone Documents, undated. https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/tonkin-gulf-resolution, accessed November 12, 2026.

[252] U.S. Senate Historical Office, Chairman J. William Fulbright and the 1964 Tonkin Gulf Resolution, undated. https://www.senate.gov/artandhistory/senate-stories/chairman-fulbright-and-the-tonkin-gulf-resolution.htm, accessed November 12, 2026.

[253] National Archives, Tonkin Gulf Resolution (1964), Milestone Documents, undated. https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/tonkin-gulf-resolution, accessed November 12, 2026.

[254] U.S. Senate Historical Office, Chairman J. William Fulbright and the 1964 Tonkin Gulf Resolution, undated. https://www.senate.gov/artandhistory/senate-stories/chairman-fulbright-and-the-tonkin-gulf-resolution.htm, accessed November 12, 2026.

[255] National Security Archive, George Washington University, Gulf of Tonkin declassification, Electronic Briefing Book 132 (press release), December 1, 2005. https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB132/press20051201.htm, accessed November 12, 2026.

[256] National Security Agency, Gulf of Tonkin, Historical Releases, 2005-2006. https://www.nsa.gov/Helpful-Links/NSA-FOIA/Declassification-Transparency-Initiatives/Historical-Releases/Gulf-of-Tonkin/smdpage14697/3/, accessed November 12, 2026.

Hanyok concluded that North Vietnamese boats did attack the Maddox on August 2, "although under questionable circumstances."[259] On August 4, he concluded, the intercepted signals show no attack took place.[260] He wrote, "The overwhelming body of reports, if used, would have told the story that no attack occurred."[261]

He found that NSA officials "mishandled" the August 4 intelligence and gave top officials "skewed" information.[262] He described "an active effort to make SIGINT fit the claim of what happened during the evening of 4 August."[263] He also said he found no "smoking gun" proving a deliberate cover-up.[264]

The NSA itself was careful. It said the release was not meant "to prove or disprove any one set of conclusions."[265] But it did put its own historian's findings in front of the public.

You might ask, "So did the government lie, or make a mistake?" The records support this much: the second attack most likely did not happen, intelligence was handled in a way that supported the official story, and doubts were not shared with Congress.[266,267] Whether top officials knew the attack was false when they spoke is a question the records do not fully answer.

The Pentagon Papers

The Gulf of Tonkin was one piece of a larger story told in the Pentagon Papers.

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[257] National Security Archive, George Washington University, Gulf of Tonkin declassification, Electronic Briefing Book 132 (press release), December 1, 2005. https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB132/press20051201.htm, accessed November 12, 2026.

[258] National Security Agency, Gulf of Tonkin, Historical Releases, 2005-2006. https://www.nsa.gov/Helpful-Links/NSA-FOIA/Declassification-Transparency-Initiatives/Historical-Releases/Gulf-of-Tonkin/smdpage14697/3/, accessed November 12, 2026.

[259] National Security Archive, George Washington University, Gulf of Tonkin declassification, Electronic Briefing Book 132 (press release), December 1, 2005. https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB132/press20051201.htm, accessed November 12, 2026.

[260] National Security Archive, George Washington University, Gulf of Tonkin declassification, Electronic Briefing Book 132 (press release), December 1, 2005. https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB132/press20051201.htm, accessed November 12, 2026.

[261] National Security Archive, George Washington University, Gulf of Tonkin declassification, Electronic Briefing Book 132 (press release), December 1, 2005. https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB132/press20051201.htm, accessed November 12, 2026.

[262] National Security Archive, George Washington University, Gulf of Tonkin declassification, Electronic Briefing Book 132 (press release), December 1, 2005. https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB132/press20051201.htm, accessed November 12, 2026.

[263] National Security Archive, George Washington University, Gulf of Tonkin declassification, Electronic Briefing Book 132 (press release), December 1, 2005. https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB132/press20051201.htm, accessed November 12, 2026.

[264] National Security Archive, George Washington University, Gulf of Tonkin declassification, Electronic Briefing Book 132 (press release), December 1, 2005. https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB132/press20051201.htm, accessed November 12, 2026.

[265] National Security Agency, Gulf of Tonkin, Historical Releases, 2005-2006. https://www.nsa.gov/Helpful-Links/NSA-FOIA/Declassification-Transparency-Initiatives/Historical-Releases/Gulf-of-Tonkin/smdpage14697/3/, accessed November 12, 2026.

[266] National Security Archive, George Washington University, Gulf of Tonkin declassification, Electronic Briefing Book 132 (press release), December 1, 2005. https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB132/press20051201.htm, accessed November 12, 2026.

[267] U.S. Senate Historical Office, Chairman J. William Fulbright and the 1964 Tonkin Gulf Resolution, undated. https://www.senate.gov/artandhistory/senate-stories/chairman-fulbright-and-the-tonkin-gulf-resolution.htm, accessed November 12, 2026.

In 1967, Secretary McNamara ordered a secret history of U.S. decision-making in Vietnam.[268] Its official title was "Report of the Office of the Secretary of Defense Vietnam Task Force."[269] It ran 47 volumes and about 7,000 pages.[270]

The copy that reached the press was made by Daniel Ellsberg and Anthony Russo, according to the National Archives.[271] Ellsberg was a military analyst who had worked on the study. The New York Times published the first part of it on June 13, 1971.[272]

The government went to court to stop publication. The Supreme Court heard the case, New York Times Co. v. United States, on June 26, 1971, and decided it four days later, on June 30.[273] By a vote of 6 to 3, it ruled for the newspapers.[274] The Court said any order stopping publication in advance comes with a "heavy presumption against its constitutional validity," and the government had not met its "heavy burden of showing justification."[275] Justice Hugo Black wrote, "The press was to serve the governed, not the governors."[276]

Senator Mike Gravel also read portions of the papers into the record in June 1971.[277]

Ellsberg was charged with crimes for the leak. The case against him was later dismissed. [Not verified: the May 11, 1973 dismissal and the reasons given by the judge could not be confirmed from a court record opened for this book.]

On June 13, 2011, the 40th anniversary of the first story, the National Archives and the Kennedy, Johnson and Nixon presidential libraries released the full report.[278] About 34 percent of it was made public for the first time.[279] You can read it today on the National Archives website.[280]

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[268] National Archives, Pentagon Papers, reviewed July 29, 2019. https://www.archives.gov/research/pentagon-papers, accessed November 12, 2026.

[269] National Archives, Press release 2011-225, Pentagon Papers release, June 2011. https://www.archives.gov/press/press-releases/2011-225, accessed November 12, 2026.

[270] National Archives, Press release 2011-225, Pentagon Papers release, June 2011. https://www.archives.gov/press/press-releases/2011-225, accessed November 12, 2026.

[271] National Archives, Press release 2011-225, Pentagon Papers release, June 2011. https://www.archives.gov/press/press-releases/2011-225, accessed November 12, 2026.

[272] National Archives, Press release 2011-225, Pentagon Papers release, June 2011. https://www.archives.gov/press/press-releases/2011-225, accessed November 12, 2026.

[273] U.S. Supreme Court (via Legal Information Institute, Cornell Law School), New York Times Co. v. United States, 403 U.S. 713, June 30, 1971. https://www.law.cornell.edu/supct/html/historics/USSC_CR_403_713_ZC.html, accessed November 12, 2026.

[274] U.S. Supreme Court (via Legal Information Institute, Cornell Law School), New York Times Co. v. United States, 403 U.S. 713, June 30, 1971. https://www.law.cornell.edu/supct/html/historics/USSC_CR_403_713_ZC.html, accessed November 12, 2026.

[275] U.S. Supreme Court (via Legal Information Institute, Cornell Law School), New York Times Co. v. United States, 403 U.S. 713, June 30, 1971. https://www.law.cornell.edu/supct/html/historics/USSC_CR_403_713_ZC.html, accessed November 12, 2026.

[276] U.S. Supreme Court (via Legal Information Institute, Cornell Law School), New York Times Co. v. United States, 403 U.S. 713, June 30, 1971. https://www.law.cornell.edu/supct/html/historics/USSC_CR_403_713_ZC.html, accessed November 12, 2026.

[277] National Archives, Pentagon Papers, reviewed July 29, 2019. https://www.archives.gov/research/pentagon-papers, accessed November 12, 2026.

[278] National Archives, Press release 2011-225, Pentagon Papers release, June 2011. https://www.archives.gov/press/press-releases/2011-225, accessed November 12, 2026.

[279] National Archives, Pentagon Papers, reviewed July 29, 2019. https://www.archives.gov/research/pentagon-papers, accessed November 12, 2026.

[280] National Archives, Pentagon Papers, reviewed July 29, 2019. https://www.archives.gov/research/pentagon-papers, accessed November 12, 2026.

What this case teaches

The claim "The Gulf of Tonkin attack that led to the Vietnam War was exaggerated" holds up against the records. The first attack was real. The second, which drove the decision, most likely did not happen, according to the NSA's own historian.[281,282] Chapter 22 rates it True, with the note that the first attack did happen.

Notice how long it took. The doubts were in a cable the same day.[283] The full intelligence history did not come out for more than forty years.[284] Patience and records requests matter.

[281] National Archives, Tonkin Gulf Resolution (1964), Milestone Documents, undated. https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/tonkin-gulf-resolution, accessed November 12, 2026.

[282] National Security Archive, George Washington University, Gulf of Tonkin declassification, Electronic Briefing Book 132 (press release), December 1, 2005. https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB132/press20051201.htm, accessed November 12, 2026.

[283] U.S. Senate Historical Office, Chairman J. William Fulbright and the 1964 Tonkin Gulf Resolution, undated. https://www.senate.gov/artandhistory/senate-stories/chairman-fulbright-and-the-tonkin-gulf-resolution.htm, accessed November 12, 2026.

[284] National Security Agency, Gulf of Tonkin, Historical Releases, 2005-2006. https://www.nsa.gov/Helpful-Links/NSA-FOIA/Declassification-Transparency-Initiatives/Historical-Releases/Gulf-of-Tonkin/smdpage14697/3/, accessed November 12, 2026.

Chapter 9: Operation Northwoods, a Plan That Was Proposed

Operation Northwoods is one of the most quoted documents on the internet. You will often see it used as proof that "the government stages fake attacks." This chapter reads the actual document, explains what it proposed, and explains what the records show happened to it. The difference between proposing something and doing it is the whole point of this chapter.

The memo

On March 13, 1962, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the top military leaders of the United States, sent Defense Secretary Robert McNamara a memorandum titled "Justification for US Military Intervention in Cuba."[285] It was signed by General Lyman Lemnitzer, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs.[286]

The memo was classified TOP SECRET.[287] It was written in response to a request from Colonel Edward Lansdale, who ran a secret anti-Castro effort called Operation Mongoose.[288]

What it proposed

The memo listed ideas for creating incidents that would make it look as if Cuba had attacked the United States, giving the U.S. a reason to invade. Here are its own words.

- Under the heading of a "Remember the Maine" incident, it said: "we could blow up a US ship in Guantanamo Bay and blame Cuba."[289]
- It said, "We could develop a Communist Cuban terror campaign in the Miami area."[290] A summary by the National Security Archive says the idea also covered other Florida cities and Washington.[291]

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[285] Joint Chiefs of Staff (L. L. Lemnitzer) (posted by the National Security Archive), Memorandum for the Secretary of Defense, Justification for US Military Intervention in Cuba, March 13, 1962. https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/sites/default/files/2022-10/Joint-Chiefs-pretexts-to-invade-Cuba-March-1962_0.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[286] Joint Chiefs of Staff (L. L. Lemnitzer) (posted by the National Security Archive), Memorandum for the Secretary of Defense, Justification for US Military Intervention in Cuba, March 13, 1962. https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/sites/default/files/2022-10/Joint-Chiefs-pretexts-to-invade-Cuba-March-1962_0.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[287] National Security Archive, George Washington University, Pentagon Proposed Pretexts for Cuba Invasion in 1962, April 30, 2001. https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/news/20010430/, accessed November 12, 2026.

[288] National Security Archive, George Washington University, Pentagon Proposed Pretexts for Cuba Invasion in 1962, April 30, 2001. https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/news/20010430/, accessed November 12, 2026.

[289] Joint Chiefs of Staff (L. L. Lemnitzer) (posted by the National Security Archive), Memorandum for the Secretary of Defense, Justification for US Military Intervention in Cuba, March 13, 1962. https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/sites/default/files/2022-10/Joint-Chiefs-pretexts-to-invade-Cuba-March-1962_0.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[290] Joint Chiefs of Staff (L. L. Lemnitzer) (posted by the National Security Archive), Memorandum for the Secretary of Defense, Justification for US Military Intervention in Cuba, March 13, 1962. https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/sites/default/files/2022-10/Joint-Chiefs-pretexts-to-invade-Cuba-March-1962_0.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[291] National Security Archive, George Washington University, Pentagon Proposed Pretexts for Cuba Invasion in 1962, April 30, 2001. https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/news/20010430/, accessed November 12, 2026.

- It said, "we could sink a boatload of Cubans enroute to Florida," which the National Security Archive describes as real or simulated.[292,293]
- It described an incident meant to show that "a Cuban aircraft has attacked and shot down a chartered civil airliner," in which "The actual registered aircraft would be converted to a drone."[294] In other words, the plan was to fake a shootdown using an empty, remote-controlled plane.

These are disturbing ideas to read from the country's top military leaders. You do not have to soften them, and I won't.

What the memo itself says about its status

The memo calls itself "a preliminary submission suitable for planning purposes."[295] It recommends that its proposals "should be forwarded to the Secretary of Defense for approval."[296] So on its face, it was a request for approval, not an order and not a record of anything done.

What happened to it

You might ask, "How do we know it wasn't carried out?" Here is what the records show.

Three days after the memo, on March 16, 1962, President Kennedy met with his top advisers on Cuba, including General Lemnitzer.[297] A State Department record of that meeting says the President "expressed skepticism that in so far as can now be foreseen circumstances will arise that would justify and make desirable the use of American forces for overt military action."[298] That note is a summary by an official at the meeting, not the President's exact words.

None of the official records I reviewed for this book shows that any of the staged incidents in the memo, such as a ship blown up at Guantanamo Bay or a faked airliner shootdown, was approved

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[292] Joint Chiefs of Staff (L. L. Lemnitzer) (posted by the National Security Archive), Memorandum for the Secretary of Defense, Justification for US Military Intervention in Cuba, March 13, 1962. https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/sites/default/files/2022-10/Joint-Chiefs-pretexts-to-invade-Cuba-March-1962_0.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[293] National Security Archive, George Washington University, Pentagon Proposed Pretexts for Cuba Invasion in 1962, April 30, 2001. https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/news/20010430/, accessed November 12, 2026.

[294] Joint Chiefs of Staff (L. L. Lemnitzer) (posted by the National Security Archive), Memorandum for the Secretary of Defense, Justification for US Military Intervention in Cuba, March 13, 1962. https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/sites/default/files/2022-10/Joint-Chiefs-pretexts-to-invade-Cuba-March-1962_0.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[295] Joint Chiefs of Staff (L. L. Lemnitzer) (posted by the National Security Archive), Memorandum for the Secretary of Defense, Justification for US Military Intervention in Cuba, March 13, 1962. https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/sites/default/files/2022-10/Joint-Chiefs-pretexts-to-invade-Cuba-March-1962_0.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[296] Joint Chiefs of Staff (L. L. Lemnitzer) (posted by the National Security Archive), Memorandum for the Secretary of Defense, Justification for US Military Intervention in Cuba, March 13, 1962. https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/sites/default/files/2022-10/Joint-Chiefs-pretexts-to-invade-Cuba-March-1962_0.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[297] U.S. Department of State, Office of the Historian, Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961-1963, Volume X, Cuba, Document 314, Guidelines for Operation Mongoose (with note on March 16, 1962 meeting with the President), March 14, 1962. https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1961-63v10/d314, accessed November 12, 2026.

[298] U.S. Department of State, Office of the Historian, Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961-1963, Volume X, Cuba, Document 314, Guidelines for Operation Mongoose (with note on March 16, 1962 meeting with the President), March 14, 1962. https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1961-63v10/d314, accessed November 12, 2026.

or carried out. I could not open an official document that records a formal rejection of the Northwoods memo by McNamara or Kennedy, so I state only what the meeting record shows. [Not verified: a written rejection of the Northwoods proposals; searched the State Department's Foreign Relations series and the Assassination Records Review Board's final report.]

How it came out

The memo was declassified decades later, and the National Security Archive posted it with a summary on April 30, 2001.[299] Author James Bamford, who wrote about it in his book Body of Secrets, called Northwoods possibly "the most corrupt plan ever created by the U.S. government."[300] That is an author's judgment, not an official finding.

What this case teaches

People often say, "The military planned fake attacks to justify a war." That statement is accurate as far as it goes: the Joint Chiefs put such plans in writing and asked for approval.[301] But it is often stretched into "the government carries out fake attacks," and then used to argue that some later event, such as September 11, must have been staged.

The Northwoods record does not support that leap. It shows a proposal at the top of the military and a President who, according to the meeting record, was skeptical of using U.S. forces at all.[302] Chapter 22 rates the claim Partly true: planned and proposed, yes; carried out, no.

There is a second lesson. Northwoods is known because the government kept the memo, declassified it and released it. The same records system that hid it eventually revealed it. When you hear that a document "proves" something, read the document. Usually it says less, or something different, than the claim built on top of it.

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[299] National Security Archive, George Washington University, Pentagon Proposed Pretexts for Cuba Invasion in 1962, April 30, 2001. https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/news/20010430/, accessed November 12, 2026.

[300] National Security Archive, George Washington University, Pentagon Proposed Pretexts for Cuba Invasion in 1962, April 30, 2001. https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/news/20010430/, accessed November 12, 2026.

[301] Joint Chiefs of Staff (L. L. Lemnitzer) (posted by the National Security Archive), Memorandum for the Secretary of Defense, Justification for US Military Intervention in Cuba, March 13, 1962. https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/sites/default/files/2022-10/Joint-Chiefs-pretexts-to-invade-Cuba-March-1962_0.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[302] U.S. Department of State, Office of the Historian, Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961-1963, Volume X, Cuba, Document 314, Guidelines for Operation Mongoose (with note on March 16, 1962 meeting with the President), March 14, 1962. https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1961-63v10/d314, accessed November 12, 2026.

Chapter 10: Watergate and the Cover-Up

Watergate is the case that gave us the phrase "it's not the crime, it's the cover-up." A small burglary led, step by step, to the only resignation of an American president. It is also a case where nearly every step can be checked in public records: court rulings, congressional reports, the President's own tape recordings and his own public statements.

The break-in

Early on the morning of June 17, 1972, five men broke into the Democratic National Committee headquarters at the Watergate complex in Washington, D.C.[303] Police arrested them with more than $3,500 in cash (in 1972 dollars) and surveillance equipment.[304]

The Senate's historians credit two Washington Post reporters, Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein, with raising questions about links between President Richard Nixon's reelection campaign and the burglars.[305] The White House denied any connection, and Nixon won reelection in a landslide in November 1972.[306]

Woodward and Bernstein had a secret source they called "Deep Throat." In May 2005, Mark Felt, who had been the FBI's number-two official, publicly revealed that he was that source.[307] Nixon's own tapes show he suspected Felt of leaking as early as October 1972.[308]

The trial and the Senate hearings

The trial of the burglars and two accomplices began on January 10, 1973. Five pleaded guilty and two were convicted by a jury in the court of Judge John Sirica.[309]

On February 7, 1973, the Senate voted unanimously to create a special committee to investigate, chaired by Senator Sam Ervin, a North Carolina Democrat, with Senator Howard Baker, a Tennessee Republican, as vice chairman.[310] The committee had four Democrats and three Republicans.[311]

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[303] U.S. Senate Historical Office, Select Committee on Presidential Campaign Activities (The Watergate Committee), undated. https://www.senate.gov/about/powers-procedures/investigations/watergate.htm, accessed November 12, 2026.

[304] U.S. Senate Historical Office, Select Committee on Presidential Campaign Activities (The Watergate Committee), undated. https://www.senate.gov/about/powers-procedures/investigations/watergate.htm, accessed November 12, 2026.

[305] U.S. Senate Historical Office, Select Committee on Presidential Campaign Activities (The Watergate Committee), undated. https://www.senate.gov/about/powers-procedures/investigations/watergate.htm, accessed November 12, 2026.

[306] U.S. Senate Historical Office, Select Committee on Presidential Campaign Activities (The Watergate Committee), undated. https://www.senate.gov/about/powers-procedures/investigations/watergate.htm, accessed November 12, 2026.

[307] Samuel W. Rushay Jr., National Archives, The Nixon White House Tapes, Prologue, Vol. 39, No. 3, Fall 2007. https://www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/2007/fall/tapes, accessed November 12, 2026.

[308] Samuel W. Rushay Jr., National Archives, The Nixon White House Tapes, Prologue, Vol. 39, No. 3, Fall 2007. https://www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/2007/fall/tapes, accessed November 12, 2026.

[309] U.S. Senate Historical Office, Select Committee on Presidential Campaign Activities (The Watergate Committee), undated. https://www.senate.gov/about/powers-procedures/investigations/watergate.htm, accessed November 12, 2026.

[310] U.S. Senate Historical Office, Select Committee on Presidential Campaign Activities (The Watergate Committee), undated. https://www.senate.gov/about/powers-procedures/investigations/watergate.htm, accessed November 12, 2026.

[311] U.S. Senate Historical Office, Select Committee on Presidential Campaign Activities (The Watergate Committee), undated. https://www.senate.gov/about/powers-procedures/investigations/watergate.htm, accessed November 12, 2026.

Televised hearings began in May 1973.[312] Former White House counsel John Dean testified that the President had approved plans to cover up White House links to the break-in.[313] Then a White House aide, Alexander Butterfield, revealed that Nixon had a voice-activated taping system in the White House.[314]

That changed everything. Now there might be proof.

The tapes

The Secret Service had installed Nixon's secret, sound-activated taping system in February 1971.[315] It recorded about 950 tapes, or roughly 3,700 hours, until it was turned off in July 1973, after Butterfield revealed it to Congress.[316]

On July 16, 1973, the Senate committee voted unanimously to subpoena White House tapes and documents.[317] Nixon refused, citing executive privilege, the idea that a president's private conversations should be protected.[318]

The Saturday Night Massacre

A special prosecutor, Archibald Cox, was also seeking the tapes. On October 20, 1973, Nixon ordered Attorney General Elliot Richardson to fire Cox.[319] Richardson and his deputy, William Ruckelshaus, refused and resigned.[320] Solicitor General Robert Bork then fired Cox.[321] The night became known as the "Saturday Night Massacre."[322]

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[312] U.S. Senate Historical Office, Select Committee on Presidential Campaign Activities (The Watergate Committee), undated. https://www.senate.gov/about/powers-procedures/investigations/watergate.htm, accessed November 12, 2026.

[313] U.S. Senate Historical Office, Select Committee on Presidential Campaign Activities (The Watergate Committee), undated. https://www.senate.gov/about/powers-procedures/investigations/watergate.htm, accessed November 12, 2026.

[314] U.S. Senate Historical Office, Select Committee on Presidential Campaign Activities (The Watergate Committee), undated. https://www.senate.gov/about/powers-procedures/investigations/watergate.htm, accessed November 12, 2026.

[315] Samuel W. Rushay Jr., National Archives, The Nixon White House Tapes, Prologue, Vol. 39, No. 3, Fall 2007. https://www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/2007/fall/tapes, accessed November 12, 2026.

[316] Samuel W. Rushay Jr., National Archives, The Nixon White House Tapes, Prologue, Vol. 39, No. 3, Fall 2007. https://www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/2007/fall/tapes, accessed November 12, 2026.

[317] U.S. Senate Historical Office, Select Committee on Presidential Campaign Activities (The Watergate Committee), undated. https://www.senate.gov/about/powers-procedures/investigations/watergate.htm, accessed November 12, 2026.

[318] U.S. Senate Historical Office, Select Committee on Presidential Campaign Activities (The Watergate Committee), undated. https://www.senate.gov/about/powers-procedures/investigations/watergate.htm, accessed November 12, 2026.

[319] Library of Congress, Richard Nixon's Political Scandal: Researching Watergate in the Manuscript Collections, Administration Officials, undated. https://guides.loc.gov/watergate-manuscripts/administration-officials, accessed November 12, 2026.

[320] Library of Congress, Richard Nixon's Political Scandal: Researching Watergate in the Manuscript Collections, Administration Officials, undated. https://guides.loc.gov/watergate-manuscripts/administration-officials, accessed November 12, 2026.

[321] Library of Congress, Richard Nixon's Political Scandal: Researching Watergate in the Manuscript Collections, Administration Officials, undated. https://guides.loc.gov/watergate-manuscripts/administration-officials, accessed November 12, 2026.

[322] Library of Congress, Richard Nixon's Political Scandal: Researching Watergate in the Manuscript Collections, Administration Officials, undated. https://guides.loc.gov/watergate-manuscripts/administration-officials, accessed November 12, 2026.

A new special prosecutor, Leon Jaworski, was appointed on November 1, 1973.[323] The special prosecutor's office was reestablished the next day.[324]

The Supreme Court decides

The fight over the tapes went to the Supreme Court. In United States v. Nixon, decided July 24, 1974, the Court ruled 8 to 0 against the President.[325] Justice William Rehnquist did not take part.[326]

Chief Justice Warren Burger wrote: "The generalized assertion of privilege must yield to the demonstrated, specific need for evidence in a pending criminal trial."[327] The opinion also noted that the grand jury had named the President as an unindicted co-conspirator.[328]

Impeachment and the "smoking gun"

The House Judiciary Committee approved three articles of impeachment in late July 1974: obstruction of justice on July 27 by a vote of 27 to 11, abuse of power on July 29 by 28 to 10, and defying subpoenas on July 30 by 21 to 17.[329]

On August 5, 1974, Nixon released transcripts of three conversations from June 23, 1972, six days after the break-in.[330] He admitted that parts of them were "at variance with certain of my previous statements."[331] The National Archives describes this "smoking gun" tape as one in which Nixon ordered the CIA to ask the FBI to call off its Watergate investigation, intending to mislead the FBI into thinking national security was involved.[332]

Three days later, on August 8, 1974, Nixon told the nation: "I shall resign the Presidency effective at noon tomorrow."[333] His one-line resignation letter was delivered at 11:35 a.m. on

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[323] Library of Congress, Richard Nixon's Political Scandal: Researching Watergate in the Manuscript Collections, Administration Officials, undated. https://guides.loc.gov/watergate-manuscripts/administration-officials, accessed November 12, 2026.

[324] National Archives, Records of the Watergate Special Prosecution Force (Record Group 460), undated. https://www.archives.gov/research/guide-fed-records/groups/460.html, accessed November 12, 2026.

[325] U.S. Supreme Court, United States v. Nixon, 418 U.S. 683, July 24, 1974. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/USREPORTS-418/pdf/USREPORTS-418-683.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[326] U.S. Supreme Court, United States v. Nixon, 418 U.S. 683, July 24, 1974. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/USREPORTS-418/pdf/USREPORTS-418-683.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[327] U.S. Supreme Court, United States v. Nixon, 418 U.S. 683, July 24, 1974, p. 713. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/USREPORTS-418/pdf/USREPORTS-418-683.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[328] U.S. Supreme Court, United States v. Nixon, 418 U.S. 683, July 24, 1974. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/USREPORTS-418/pdf/USREPORTS-418-683.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[329] U.S. House of Representatives, Deschler's Precedents, Vol. 3, Ch. 14, Section 15, Impeachment Proceedings Against President Nixon, undated. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/GPO-HPREC-DESCHLERS-V3/html/GPO-HPREC-DESCHLERS-V3-5-5-2.htm, accessed November 12, 2026.

[330] Office of the Federal Register, Public Papers of the Presidents: Richard Nixon, 1974, 1975. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/PPP-1974-book1/pdf/PPP-1974-book1.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[331] Office of the Federal Register, Public Papers of the Presidents: Richard Nixon, 1974, 1975. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/PPP-1974-book1/pdf/PPP-1974-book1.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[332] Samuel W. Rushay Jr., National Archives, The Nixon White House Tapes, Prologue, Vol. 39, No. 3, Fall 2007. https://www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/2007/fall/tapes, accessed November 12, 2026.

[333] Office of the Federal Register, Public Papers of the Presidents: Richard Nixon, 1974, 1975. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/PPP-1974-book1/pdf/PPP-1974-book1.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

August 9.[334] On August 20, the House voted 412 to 3 to accept the Judiciary Committee's report.[335]

The pardon

On September 8, 1974, President Gerald Ford granted Nixon "a full, free, and absolute pardon" for any federal crimes he committed or may have committed while in office.[336]

What changed

The Senate Watergate Committee issued its final report on June 27, 1974, recommending campaign finance rules, a permanent special prosecutor and other reforms.[337] Many changes followed.

- In 1974, Congress amended the Federal Election Campaign Act to limit contributions and spending, require regular reporting and provide public money for presidential campaigns.[338]
- In 1974, Congress overrode a presidential veto to strengthen the Freedom of Information Act.[339,340]
- In 1974, Congress passed a law putting Nixon's records and tapes in the custody of the National Archives, and the Supreme Court upheld it.[341]
- In 1976, Congress passed the Government in the Sunshine Act.[342]
- In 1978, the Ethics in Government Act required financial disclosure by top officials, created the Office of Government Ethics and set up a way to appoint a special prosecutor, later called an independent counsel.[343]

Records from the case are still being released. In 2018, the National Archives released the grand jury's "Road Map," a sealed 1974 report on the evidence that Judge Sirica had sent to the House Judiciary Committee.[344]

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334 Office of the Federal Register, Public Papers of the Presidents: Richard Nixon, 1974, 1975. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/PPP-1974-book1/pdf/PPP-1974-book1.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

335 U.S. House of Representatives, Deschler's Precedents, Vol. 3, Ch. 14, Section 15, Impeachment Proceedings Against President Nixon, undated. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/GPO-HPREC-DESCHLERS-V3/html/GPO-HPREC-DESCHLERS-V3-5-5-2.htm, accessed November 12, 2026.

336 President Gerald R. Ford, Proclamation 4311, Granting Pardon to Richard Nixon, 88 Stat. 2502, September 8, 1974. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/STATUTE-88/pdf/STATUTE-88-Pg2502.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

337 U.S. Senate Historical Office, Select Committee on Presidential Campaign Activities (The Watergate Committee), undated. https://www.senate.gov/about/powers-procedures/investigations/watergate.htm, accessed November 12, 2026.

338 U.S. Senate Historical Office, Select Committee on Presidential Campaign Activities (The Watergate Committee), undated. https://www.senate.gov/about/powers-procedures/investigations/watergate.htm, accessed November 12, 2026.

339 U.S. Senate Historical Office, Select Committee on Presidential Campaign Activities (The Watergate Committee), undated. https://www.senate.gov/about/powers-procedures/investigations/watergate.htm, accessed November 12, 2026.

340 U.S. Senate, Vetoes by President Gerald R. Ford, undated. https://www.senate.gov/legislative/vetoes/FordG.htm, accessed November 12, 2026.

341 Samuel W. Rushay Jr., National Archives, The Nixon White House Tapes, Prologue, Vol. 39, No. 3, Fall 2007. https://www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/2007/fall/tapes, accessed November 12, 2026.

342 U.S. Senate Historical Office, Select Committee on Presidential Campaign Activities (The Watergate Committee), undated. https://www.senate.gov/about/powers-procedures/investigations/watergate.htm, accessed November 12, 2026.

343 U.S. Senate Historical Office, Select Committee on Presidential Campaign Activities (The Watergate Committee), undated. https://www.senate.gov/about/powers-procedures/investigations/watergate.htm, accessed November 12, 2026.

344 National Archives, Watergate Road Map, undated. https://www.archives.gov/research/investigations/watergate/roadmap, accessed November 12, 2026.

What this case teaches

When people first said the White House was behind the break-in, they were dismissed. The proof came from four places: reporters who kept digging, a Senate committee working in public, a special prosecutor and the courts.[345,346] And the strongest proof of all came from the President's own tapes.[347]

Notice also what the system did not do. It did not decide Nixon's guilt on rumor. It waited for evidence. That is the standard this book asks you to use, too.

[345] U.S. Senate Historical Office, Select Committee on Presidential Campaign Activities (The Watergate Committee), undated. https://www.senate.gov/about/powers-procedures/investigations/watergate.htm, accessed November 12, 2026.

[346] U.S. Supreme Court, United States v. Nixon, 418 U.S. 683, July 24, 1974. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/USREPORTS-418/pdf/USREPORTS-418-683.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[347] Samuel W. Rushay Jr., National Archives, The Nixon White House Tapes, Prologue, Vol. 39, No. 3, Fall 2007. https://www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/2007/fall/tapes, accessed November 12, 2026.

Chapter 11: Iran-Contra

In the mid-1980s, officials in President Ronald Reagan's administration secretly sold weapons to Iran and used some of the money to help rebels fighting the government of Nicaragua. Both actions went against stated policy, and the second went against a law passed by Congress. When the first reports came out, they sounded like a spy novel. They turned out to be true.

Iran-Contra is also a good case for seeing how investigators of different parties can look at the same facts and reach different conclusions. I give both views in their own words.

The two secret operations

The rebels in Nicaragua were called the Contras. Between 1982 and 1984, Congress passed a series of three measures, together known as the Boland Amendment, that limited the use of federal money for military support of the Contras "for the purpose of overthrowing the Government of Nicaragua."[348] The National Archives describes the hidden operations as aid to the Contras' military activities during an October 1984 to October 1986 ban on such aid, and arms sales to Iran that went against stated U.S. policy.[349]

How it came out

On November 3, 1986, a Lebanese weekly magazine, Al-Shiraa, reported that the United States had secretly sold arms to Iran.[350]

On November 25, 1986, Attorney General Edwin Meese held a press conference and disclosed that money from the Iran arms sales had been diverted to the Contras.[351] He put the amount at $12 million to $30 million.[352] Congressional investigators later concluded that at least $3.8 million (in 1980s dollars) was actually diverted.[353]

The FBI was ordered to investigate on November 26, 1986, and Lawrence Walsh was appointed as an independent counsel, a special prosecutor, on December 19, 1986.[354]

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[348] Lynn Nashorn, National Archives (The Text Message blog), The Iran-Contra Affair: Faded in Time, but not Forgotten, August 17, 2021. https://text-message.blogs.archives.gov/2021/08/17/iran-contra-affair/, accessed November 12, 2026.

[349] National Archives, Records of Lawrence Walsh relating to Iran/Contra, undated. https://www.archives.gov/research/investigations/walsh.html, accessed November 12, 2026.

[350] U.S. Congress, Report of the Congressional Committees Investigating the Iran-Contra Affair, H. Rept. 100-433, S. Rept. 100-216, November 1987. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/SERIALSET-13810_00_00-002-0433-0000/pdf/SERIALSET-13810_00_00-002-0433-0000.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[351] U.S. Congress, Report of the Congressional Committees Investigating the Iran-Contra Affair, H. Rept. 100-433, S. Rept. 100-216, November 1987. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/SERIALSET-13810_00_00-002-0433-0000/pdf/SERIALSET-13810_00_00-002-0433-0000.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[352] U.S. Congress, Report of the Congressional Committees Investigating the Iran-Contra Affair, H. Rept. 100-433, S. Rept. 100-216, November 1987. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/SERIALSET-13810_00_00-002-0433-0000/pdf/SERIALSET-13810_00_00-002-0433-0000.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[353] U.S. Congress, Report of the Congressional Committees Investigating the Iran-Contra Affair, H. Rept. 100-433, S. Rept. 100-216, November 1987. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/SERIALSET-13810_00_00-002-0433-0000/pdf/SERIALSET-13810_00_00-002-0433-0000.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[354] National Archives, Records of Lawrence Walsh relating to Iran/Contra, undated. https://www.archives.gov/research/investigations/walsh.html, accessed November 12, 2026.

Three investigations

The Tower Commission

President Reagan appointed a review board made up of former Senator John Tower, former Secretary of State Edmund Muskie and former National Security Adviser Brent Scowcroft.[355] The President received its report on February 26, 1987.[356]

On March 4, 1987, Reagan addressed the nation. He said: "A few months ago I told the American people I did not trade arms for hostages. My heart and my best intentions still tell me that's true, but the facts and the evidence tell me it is not."[357] He said what began as a strategic opening to Iran "deteriorated, in its implementation, into trading arms for hostages."[358] He took "full responsibility for my own actions and for those of my administration."[359]

The congressional committees

The Senate created a special committee on January 6, 1987, and the House created its own the next day.[360] They held the first joint House and Senate investigation, with 40 days of joint public hearings.[361] Their staffs reviewed more than 300,000 documents and interviewed or examined more than 500 witnesses.[362] Representative Lee Hamilton chaired the House committee and Senator Daniel Inouye the Senate committee.[363]

The majority report concluded: "the ultimate responsibility for the events in the Iran-Contra Affair must rest with the President. If the President did not know what his National Security

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[355] Lynn Nashorn, National Archives (The Text Message blog), The Iran-Contra Affair: Faded in Time, but not Forgotten, August 17, 2021. https://text-message.blogs.archives.gov/2021/08/17/iran-contra-affair/, accessed November 12, 2026.

[356] U.S. Congress, Report of the Congressional Committees Investigating the Iran-Contra Affair, H. Rept. 100-433, S. Rept. 100-216, November 1987. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/SERIALSET-13810_00_00-002-0433-0000/pdf/SERIALSET-13810_00_00-002-0433-0000.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[357] Office of the Federal Register, Public Papers of the Presidents: Ronald Reagan, 1987, Book I (Address to the Nation on the Iran Arms and Contra Aid Controversy, March 4, 1987), 1989. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/PPP-1987-book1/pdf/PPP-1987-book1.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[358] Office of the Federal Register, Public Papers of the Presidents: Ronald Reagan, 1987, Book I (Address to the Nation on the Iran Arms and Contra Aid Controversy, March 4, 1987), 1989. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/PPP-1987-book1/pdf/PPP-1987-book1.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[359] Office of the Federal Register, Public Papers of the Presidents: Ronald Reagan, 1987, Book I (Address to the Nation on the Iran Arms and Contra Aid Controversy, March 4, 1987), 1989. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/PPP-1987-book1/pdf/PPP-1987-book1.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[360] U.S. Congress, Report of the Congressional Committees Investigating the Iran-Contra Affair, H. Rept. 100-433, S. Rept. 100-216, November 1987. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/SERIALSET-13810_00_00-002-0433-0000/pdf/SERIALSET-13810_00_00-002-0433-0000.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[361] U.S. Congress, Report of the Congressional Committees Investigating the Iran-Contra Affair, H. Rept. 100-433, S. Rept. 100-216, November 1987. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/SERIALSET-13810_00_00-002-0433-0000/pdf/SERIALSET-13810_00_00-002-0433-0000.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[362] U.S. Congress, Report of the Congressional Committees Investigating the Iran-Contra Affair, H. Rept. 100-433, S. Rept. 100-216, November 1987. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/SERIALSET-13810_00_00-002-0433-0000/pdf/SERIALSET-13810_00_00-002-0433-0000.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[363] U.S. Congress, Report of the Congressional Committees Investigating the Iran-Contra Affair, H. Rept. 100-433, S. Rept. 100-216, November 1987. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/SERIALSET-13810_00_00-002-0433-0000/pdf/SERIALSET-13810_00_00-002-0433-0000.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

Advisers were doing, he should have."[364] It found no evidence that Vice President George H. W. Bush knew of the diversion.[365]

A minority report was signed by eight committee members, including Representative Dick Cheney.[366] It concluded that the errors were "mistakes in judgment, and nothing more. There was no constitutional crisis, no systematic disrespect for 'the rule of law,' no grand conspiracy."[367]

The independent counsel

Walsh's final report is dated August 4, 1993.[368] He concluded that the arms sales to Iran "contravened United States Government policy and may have violated the Arms Export Control Act," and that support to the Contras "violated the Boland Amendment ban."[369]

On the President, Walsh found "no credible evidence that President Reagan violated any criminal statute," but wrote that "he set the stage for the illegal activities of others."[370] He wrote that Vice President Bush was "fully aware of the Iran arms sales" but that his office "obtained no evidence that Bush was aware of the diversion."[371] He also found that officials deliberately deceived Congress and the public.[372]

The prosecutions and the pardons

Walsh's office charged 14 people with crimes, and 11 were convicted.[373] Two of those convictions were later overturned.[374]

Those two were Oliver North and John Poindexter.[375] Congress had given both men immunity in exchange for their testimony in 1987.[376] An appeals court threw out their convictions because

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[364] U.S. Congress, Report of the Congressional Committees Investigating the Iran-Contra Affair, H. Rept. 100-433, S. Rept. 100-216, November 1987. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/SERIALSET-13810_00_00-002-0433-0000/pdf/SERIALSET-13810_00_00-002-0433-0000.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[365] U.S. Congress, Report of the Congressional Committees Investigating the Iran-Contra Affair, H. Rept. 100-433, S. Rept. 100-216, November 1987. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/SERIALSET-13810_00_00-002-0433-0000/pdf/SERIALSET-13810_00_00-002-0433-0000.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[366] U.S. Congress, Report of the Congressional Committees Investigating the Iran-Contra Affair, H. Rept. 100-433, S. Rept. 100-216, November 1987. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/SERIALSET-13810_00_00-002-0433-0000/pdf/SERIALSET-13810_00_00-002-0433-0000.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[367] U.S. Congress, Report of the Congressional Committees Investigating the Iran-Contra Affair, H. Rept. 100-433, S. Rept. 100-216, November 1987. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/SERIALSET-13810_00_00-002-0433-0000/pdf/SERIALSET-13810_00_00-002-0433-0000.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[368] Lawrence E. Walsh, Independent Counsel, Final Report of the Independent Counsel for Iran/Contra Matters, Volume I (Federation of American Scientists copy), August 4, 1993. https://irp.fas.org/offdocs/walsh/, accessed November 12, 2026.

[369] Lawrence E. Walsh, Independent Counsel, Final Report of the Independent Counsel for Iran/Contra Matters, Executive Summary, August 4, 1993. https://irp.fas.org/offdocs/walsh/execsum.htm, accessed November 12, 2026.

[370] Lawrence E. Walsh, Independent Counsel, Final Report of the Independent Counsel for Iran/Contra Matters, Executive Summary, August 4, 1993. https://irp.fas.org/offdocs/walsh/execsum.htm, accessed November 12, 2026.

[371] Lawrence E. Walsh, Independent Counsel, Final Report of the Independent Counsel for Iran/Contra Matters, Executive Summary, August 4, 1993. https://irp.fas.org/offdocs/walsh/execsum.htm, accessed November 12, 2026.

[372] Lawrence E. Walsh, Independent Counsel, Final Report of the Independent Counsel for Iran/Contra Matters, Executive Summary, August 4, 1993. https://irp.fas.org/offdocs/walsh/execsum.htm, accessed November 12, 2026.

[373] Lawrence E. Walsh, Independent Counsel, Final Report of the Independent Counsel for Iran/Contra Matters, Summary of Prosecutions, August 4, 1993. https://irp.fas.org/offdocs/walsh/summpros.htm, accessed November 12, 2026.

[374] Lawrence E. Walsh, Independent Counsel, Final Report of the Independent Counsel for Iran/Contra Matters, Summary of Prosecutions, August 4, 1993. https://irp.fas.org/offdocs/walsh/summpros.htm, accessed November 12, 2026.

that immunized testimony had tainted their trials.[377] North's case was dismissed on September 16, 1991, and Poindexter's indictment was dismissed in 1993.[378] Walsh warned that granting immunity to key figures in a highly public case "will virtually rule out successful prosecution."[379]

The case against one CIA officer, Joseph Fernandez, was dismissed after the Attorney General blocked the release of classified information needed for the trial.[380]

On December 24, 1992, President George H. W. Bush pardoned former Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger and five others: Elliott Abrams, Duane Clarridge, Alan Fiers, Clair George and Robert McFarlane.[381] Weinberger and Clarridge had not yet gone to trial, and George had been convicted but not yet sentenced.[382] Bush's pardon called the prosecutions "the criminalization of policy differences."[383]

When Walsh's final report came out, Senate Republican leader Bob Dole called the investigation a "witch-hunt" on the Senate floor, objecting that it published unproven allegations about people who were never charged or convicted.[384]

Table 11.1. How three investigations judged Iran-Contra

Investigation	Main conclusion
Congressional majority (1987)	"Ultimate responsibility" rests with the President; he should have known[385]
Congressional minority (1987)	"Mistakes in judgment, and nothing more"; no grand conspiracy[386]
Independent counsel (1993)	No proof the President broke a criminal law, but "he set the stage for the illegal activities of others"; officials deceived Congress[387]

[375] National Archives, Records of Lawrence Walsh relating to Iran/Contra, undated. https://www.archives.gov/research/investigations/walsh.html, accessed November 12, 2026.

[376] National Archives, Records of Lawrence Walsh relating to Iran/Contra, undated. https://www.archives.gov/research/investigations/walsh.html, accessed November 12, 2026.

[377] National Archives, Records of Lawrence Walsh relating to Iran/Contra, undated. https://www.archives.gov/research/investigations/walsh.html, accessed November 12, 2026.

[378] Lawrence E. Walsh, Independent Counsel, Final Report of the Independent Counsel for Iran/Contra Matters, Summary of Prosecutions, August 4, 1993. https://irp.fas.org/offdocs/walsh/summpros.htm, accessed November 12, 2026.

[379] Lawrence E. Walsh, Independent Counsel, Final Report of the Independent Counsel for Iran/Contra Matters, Executive Summary, August 4, 1993. https://irp.fas.org/offdocs/walsh/execsum.htm, accessed November 12, 2026.

[380] Lawrence E. Walsh, Independent Counsel, Final Report of the Independent Counsel for Iran/Contra Matters, Summary of Prosecutions, August 4, 1993. https://irp.fas.org/offdocs/walsh/summpros.htm, accessed November 12, 2026.

[381] President George H. W. Bush, Proclamation 6518, Grant of Executive Clemency, 107 Stat. 2606, December 24, 1992. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/STATUTE-107/pdf/STATUTE-107-Pg2606.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[382] Lawrence E. Walsh, Independent Counsel, Final Report of the Independent Counsel for Iran/Contra Matters, Summary of Prosecutions, August 4, 1993. https://irp.fas.org/offdocs/walsh/summpros.htm, accessed November 12, 2026.

[383] President George H. W. Bush, Proclamation 6518, Grant of Executive Clemency, 107 Stat. 2606, December 24, 1992. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/STATUTE-107/pdf/STATUTE-107-Pg2606.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[384] Congressional Record, Senate, Iran-Contra Final Report (statement of Senator Bob Dole), p. S27, January 25, 1994. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CREC-1994-01-25/html/CREC-1994-01-25-pt1-PgS27.htm, accessed November 12, 2026.

[385] U.S. Congress, Report of the Congressional Committees Investigating the Iran-Contra Affair, H. Rept. 100-433, S. Rept. 100-216, November 1987. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/SERIALSET-13810_00_00-002-0433-0000/pdf/SERIALSET-13810_00_00-002-0433-0000.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[386] U.S. Congress, Report of the Congressional Committees Investigating the Iran-Contra Affair, H. Rept. 100-433, S. Rept. 100-216, November 1987. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/SERIALSET-13810_00_00-002-0433-0000/pdf/SERIALSET-13810_00_00-002-0433-0000.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

What this case teaches

The core facts of Iran-Contra are not in dispute. Arms were sold to Iran, money went to the Contras during a ban, and the President himself told the nation the facts did not match what he had said.[388,389] What people still argue about is how much the President knew and how serious it was. Those are questions of interpretation, and the records give you both sides in the investigators' own words.

Iran-Contra also connects to two claims tested in Chapter 22. One is that the CIA brought crack cocaine into Black neighborhoods. The other is that the government has plans to round up Americans in camps. Both trace partly to things that came out during the Iran-Contra years, and both are tested there against the records.

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[387] Lawrence E. Walsh, Independent Counsel, Final Report of the Independent Counsel for Iran/Contra Matters, Executive Summary, August 4, 1993. https://irp.fas.org/offdocs/walsh/execsum.htm, accessed November 12, 2026.

[388] Office of the Federal Register, Public Papers of the Presidents: Ronald Reagan, 1987, Book I (Address to the Nation on the Iran Arms and Contra Aid Controversy, March 4, 1987), 1989. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/PPP-1987-book1/pdf/PPP-1987-book1.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[389] Lawrence E. Walsh, Independent Counsel, Final Report of the Independent Counsel for Iran/Contra Matters, Executive Summary, August 4, 1993. https://irp.fas.org/offdocs/walsh/execsum.htm, accessed November 12, 2026.

Chapter 12: The NSA and Our Phone Records

Information in this chapter is current through November 12, 2026. The newest dated source it uses is from June 22, 2026, and the official lists of new laws and votes were checked through November 12, 2026.

For years, a lot of people said the government was keeping track of everybody's phone calls. Most people shrugged it off. Then, in June 2013, the records came out, and part of the claim turned out to be true.

This chapter is about what the National Security Agency (NSA) actually collected, how we found out, what the courts said, and what Congress changed. It also covers a newer law, Section 702, because that law was still in the news when this book was finished.

What came out in June 2013

On June 5, 2013, the British newspaper The Guardian published a secret order from the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Court, the special federal court that approves national security surveillance.[390] The order had been leaked by Edward Snowden, a contractor working for the NSA.[391]

The order told Verizon Business Network Services to give the NSA, "on an ongoing daily basis," its call detail records for calls between the United States and other countries and for calls made entirely inside the United States, including local calls.[392]

These records are called metadata. You might ask, "Does that mean they were listening to my calls?" No. The court that later reviewed the program explained that telephone metadata do not include what people say on a call.[393] Metadata covers things like which number called which, when the call happened and how long it lasted.[394,395]

That is still a lot of information. If you know who someone calls, when, and how often, you can learn a great deal about their life. That is why the program became such a fight.

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[390] U.S. Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit, ACLU v. Clapper, No. 14-42, 785 F.3d 787, May 7, 2015, slip op. pp. 19-20. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/USCOURTS-ca2-14-00042/pdf/USCOURTS-ca2-14-00042-0.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[391] U.S. Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit, ACLU v. Clapper, No. 14-42, 785 F.3d 787, May 7, 2015, slip op. pp. 19-20. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/USCOURTS-ca2-14-00042/pdf/USCOURTS-ca2-14-00042-0.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[392] U.S. Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit, ACLU v. Clapper, No. 14-42, 785 F.3d 787, May 7, 2015. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/USCOURTS-ca2-14-00042/pdf/USCOURTS-ca2-14-00042-0.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[393] U.S. Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit, ACLU v. Clapper, No. 14-42, 785 F.3d 787, May 7, 2015, slip op. pp. 7-8. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/USCOURTS-ca2-14-00042/pdf/USCOURTS-ca2-14-00042-0.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[394] U.S. Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit, ACLU v. Clapper, No. 14-42, 785 F.3d 787, May 7, 2015, slip op. pp. 7-8. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/USCOURTS-ca2-14-00042/pdf/USCOURTS-ca2-14-00042-0.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[395] Congressional Research Service, Origins and Impact of the FISA Provisions That Expired on March 15, 2020 (R40138), updated March 31, 2021, p. 7. https://www.congress.gov/crs_external_products/R/PDF/R40138/R40138.24.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

The program was not new in 2013. According to the Congressional Research Service (CRS), the research office that works for Congress, the NSA began collecting phone metadata in bulk shortly after the September 11, 2001 attacks under other authority, and from 2006 it ran the program under court orders issued under Section 215 of the USA PATRIOT Act.[396]

Who leaked it

Edward Snowden fled to Hong Kong on May 20, 2013, before the stories ran, according to a Senate resolution about the case.[397] On June 9, 2013, he identified himself publicly and said, "I have no intention of hiding who I am because I know I have done nothing wrong."[398]

On June 14, 2013, the federal government filed a criminal complaint charging him with theft of government property and two violations of the Espionage Act.[399] On June 23, 2013, he flew from Hong Kong to Moscow.[400]

In 2016, the House Intelligence Committee said Snowden had removed more than 1.5 million classified documents and that he "has remained in Russia since he fled there on June 23, 2013."[401] The committee called his actions the largest and most damaging release of classified information in American intelligence history.[402] His supporters see him very differently, as a whistleblower who exposed a program the courts later found was not authorized by law. I report both views and leave the label to you. Reports that Russia granted him citizenship in 2022 could not be confirmed from an official record for this book. [Not verified: searched for the Russian decree and for wire service reports; the pages could not be opened.]

What officials had said before

Three months before the leak, on March 12, 2013, Senator Ron Wyden asked the Director of National Intelligence, James Clapper, at an open Senate hearing: "does the NSA collect any type of data at all on millions, or hundreds of millions, of Americans?"[403]

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[396] Congressional Research Service, Origins and Impact of the FISA Provisions That Expired on March 15, 2020 (R40138), updated March 31, 2021, p. 7 and note 62. https://www.congress.gov/crs_external_products/R/PDF/R40138/R40138.24.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[397] U.S. Senate, S. Res. 198, 113th Congress (resolution on Edward Snowden), July 18, 2013. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/BILLS-113sres198is/html/BILLS-113sres198is.htm, accessed November 12, 2026.

[398] U.S. Senate, S. Res. 198, 113th Congress (resolution on Edward Snowden), July 18, 2013. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/BILLS-113sres198is/html/BILLS-113sres198is.htm, accessed November 12, 2026.

[399] U.S. Senate, S. Res. 198, 113th Congress (resolution on Edward Snowden), July 18, 2013. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/BILLS-113sres198is/html/BILLS-113sres198is.htm, accessed November 12, 2026.

[400] U.S. Senate, S. Res. 198, 113th Congress (resolution on Edward Snowden), July 18, 2013. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/BILLS-113sres198is/html/BILLS-113sres198is.htm, accessed November 12, 2026.

[401] House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, Executive Summary of Review of the Unauthorized Disclosures of Former NSA Contractor Edward Snowden, September 15, 2016. https://intelligence.house.gov/uploadedfiles/hpsci_snowden_review_-_unclass_summary_-_final.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[402] House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, Executive Summary of Review of the Unauthorized Disclosures of Former NSA Contractor Edward Snowden, September 15, 2016. https://intelligence.house.gov/uploadedfiles/hpsci_snowden_review_-_unclass_summary_-_final.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[403] Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, S. Hrg. 113-89, Current and Projected National Security Threats to the United States (hearing of March 12, 2013), 2013. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-113shrg82721/html/CHRG-113shrg82721.htm, accessed November 12, 2026.

Clapper answered, "No, sir," and then, "Not wittingly. There are cases where they could inadvertently, perhaps, collect, but not wittingly."[404]

The leaked court order showed that the NSA was in fact collecting call records on a very large number of Americans.[405] Clapper later sent a letter to the Senate Intelligence Committee about that answer. [Not verified: the copy of the letter on the intelligence community's website could not be opened, so its exact wording is not quoted here.]

What the reviews found

The government had defended the program as a key tool against terrorism. Two official reviews tested that claim.

President Obama appointed a review group that reported on December 12, 2013.[406] It found that the information the phone records program contributed to terrorism investigations "was not essential to preventing attacks and could readily have been obtained in a timely manner using conventional section 215 orders."[407] It recommended that the government get court approval to collect records about particular people, based on specific findings, instead of collecting records in bulk.[408]

The Privacy and Civil Liberties Oversight Board (PCLOB), an independent federal board, issued its report on the program on January 23, 2014.[409] The appeals court later summarized the board's conclusions: the program was not consistent with Section 215, it violated the Electronic Communications Privacy Act, and it raised privacy and First Amendment concerns.[410]

Not everyone agreed. In one case, an FBI deputy director told Congress after the leaks that without the NSA tip, the FBI "would not have been able to reopen" a particular investigation.[411] When the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals later reviewed the classified record in that case, it

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[404] Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, S. Hrg. 113-89, Current and Projected National Security Threats to the United States (hearing of March 12, 2013), 2013. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-113shrg82721/html/CHRG-113shrg82721.htm, accessed November 12, 2026.

[405] U.S. Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit, ACLU v. Clapper, No. 14-42, 785 F.3d 787, May 7, 2015. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/USCOURTS-ca2-14-00042/pdf/USCOURTS-ca2-14-00042-0.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[406] President's Review Group on Intelligence and Communications Technologies, Liberty and Security in a Changing World, December 12, 2013. https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/sites/default/files/docs/2013-12-12_rg_final_report.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[407] President's Review Group on Intelligence and Communications Technologies, Liberty and Security in a Changing World, December 12, 2013. https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/sites/default/files/docs/2013-12-12_rg_final_report.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[408] President's Review Group on Intelligence and Communications Technologies, Liberty and Security in a Changing World, December 12, 2013. https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/sites/default/files/docs/2013-12-12_rg_final_report.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[409] U.S. Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit, ACLU v. Clapper, No. 14-42, 785 F.3d 787, May 7, 2015, slip op. pp. 21-22. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/USCOURTS-ca2-14-00042/pdf/USCOURTS-ca2-14-00042-0.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[410] U.S. Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit, ACLU v. Clapper, No. 14-42, 785 F.3d 787, May 7, 2015, slip op. pp. 21-22. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/USCOURTS-ca2-14-00042/pdf/USCOURTS-ca2-14-00042-0.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[411] U.S. Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit, United States v. Moalin, No. 13-50572, September 2, 2020. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/USCOURTS-ca9-13-50572/pdf/USCOURTS-ca9-13-50572-0.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

found the phone metadata was not necessary to the case and that the public statements had been "inconsistent" with the record.[412]

What the courts said

On May 7, 2015, the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit ruled in a lawsuit brought by the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU). It held that "the bulk telephone metadata program is not authorized by [Section] 215."[413]

The court did not say Congress could never allow such a program. It said that if Congress wanted to authorize "such a far-reaching and unprecedented program, it has every opportunity to do so, and to do so unambiguously."[414]

In 2020, in the case mentioned above, the Ninth Circuit held that the government "may have violated the Fourth Amendment and did violate the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act" when it collected the phone metadata of millions of Americans.[415] The court still ruled that the evidence in that case did not need to be thrown out.[416]

What Congress changed

Section 215 lapsed on June 1, 2015.[417] The next day, June 2, 2015, Congress passed and the President signed the USA FREEDOM Act.[418,419]

The new law included a section titled "Prohibition on bulk collection of tangible things."[420] The law also let the surveillance court appoint outside advisers, called amici curiae, to argue for privacy in important cases.[421]

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[412] U.S. Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit, United States v. Moalin, No. 13-50572, September 2, 2020. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/USCOURTS-ca9-13-50572/pdf/USCOURTS-ca9-13-50572-0.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[413] U.S. Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit, ACLU v. Clapper, No. 14-42, 785 F.3d 787, May 7, 2015. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/USCOURTS-ca2-14-00042/pdf/USCOURTS-ca2-14-00042-0.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[414] U.S. Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit, ACLU v. Clapper, No. 14-42, 785 F.3d 787, May 7, 2015. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/USCOURTS-ca2-14-00042/pdf/USCOURTS-ca2-14-00042-0.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[415] U.S. Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit, United States v. Moalin, No. 13-50572, September 2, 2020. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/USCOURTS-ca9-13-50572/pdf/USCOURTS-ca9-13-50572-0.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[416] U.S. Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit, United States v. Moalin, No. 13-50572, September 2, 2020. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/USCOURTS-ca9-13-50572/pdf/USCOURTS-ca9-13-50572-0.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[417] Congressional Research Service, Origins and Impact of the FISA Provisions That Expired on March 15, 2020 (R40138), updated March 31, 2021. https://www.congress.gov/crs_external_products/R/PDF/R40138/R40138.24.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[418] Congressional Research Service, Origins and Impact of the FISA Provisions That Expired on March 15, 2020 (R40138), updated March 31, 2021. https://www.congress.gov/crs_external_products/R/PDF/R40138/R40138.24.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[419] U.S. Government Publishing Office, Public Law 114-23, USA FREEDOM Act of 2015, June 2, 2015. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/PLAW-114publ23/html/PLAW-114publ23.htm, accessed November 12, 2026.

[420] U.S. Government Publishing Office, Public Law 114-23, USA FREEDOM Act of 2015, June 2, 2015. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/PLAW-114publ23/html/PLAW-114publ23.htm, accessed November 12, 2026.

[421] U.S. Government Publishing Office, Public Law 114-23, USA FREEDOM Act of 2015, June 2, 2015. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/PLAW-114publ23/html/PLAW-114publ23.htm, accessed November 12, 2026.

The replacement program had its own problems. On June 28, 2018, the NSA announced that it had found "technical irregularities" in data from phone companies and had to delete three years' worth of call records.[422] In March 2019, news reports said the NSA was weighing whether to end the program altogether.[423] The Ninth Circuit later called it a "subsequently discontinued" program.[424] The legal authority behind it expired on March 15, 2020, and Congress did not renew it.[425]

The newer fight: Section 702

The bulk phone records program is over. A different law, Section 702, is where the surveillance debate moved.

Congress added Section 702 to the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act (FISA) in 2008.[426,427] It lets the government collect communications of people who are not Americans and who are reasonably believed to be outside the United States, with help from communications companies.[428]

Here is the key difference from an ordinary wiretap. Under Section 702, the court does not approve each target. Instead, the Attorney General and the Director of National Intelligence submit a yearly certification, and the court approves the government's rules for choosing targets and handling data.[429,430]

You might ask, "If it targets foreigners, why do Americans care?" Because when a foreign target talks with an American, the American's side of the conversation is collected too. This is called incidental collection. At least three federal district courts have held that this surveillance does not require a warrant, "even if that surveillance may incidentally collect U.S. persons' communications."[431]

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[422] Congressional Research Service, Origins and Impact of the FISA Provisions That Expired on March 15, 2020 (R40138), updated March 31, 2021, p. 8. https://www.congress.gov/crs_external_products/R/PDF/R40138/R40138.24.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[423] Congressional Research Service, Origins and Impact of the FISA Provisions That Expired on March 15, 2020 (R40138), updated March 31, 2021, p. 8. https://www.congress.gov/crs_external_products/R/PDF/R40138/R40138.24.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[424] U.S. Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit, United States v. Moalin, No. 13-50572, September 2, 2020. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/USCOURTS-ca9-13-50572/pdf/USCOURTS-ca9-13-50572-0.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[425] Congressional Research Service, Origins and Impact of the FISA Provisions That Expired on March 15, 2020 (R40138), updated March 31, 2021. https://www.congress.gov/crs_external_products/R/PDF/R40138/R40138.24.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[426] U.S. Government Publishing Office, Public Law 110-261, FISA Amendments Act of 2008, July 10, 2008. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/PLAW-110publ261/html/PLAW-110publ261.htm, accessed November 12, 2026.

[427] Congressional Research Service, Reauthorization of Title VII of the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act (R47477), March 17, 2023. https://www.congress.gov/crs_external_products/R/PDF/R47477/R47477.1.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[428] Congressional Research Service, Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act (FISA) (IF11451), updated December 17, 2024. https://www.congress.gov/crs_external_products/IF/PDF/IF11451/IF11451.6.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[429] Congressional Research Service, Reauthorization of Title VII of the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act (R47477), March 17, 2023. https://www.congress.gov/crs_external_products/R/PDF/R47477/R47477.1.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[430] Congressional Research Service, Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act (FISA) (IF11451), updated December 17, 2024. https://www.congress.gov/crs_external_products/IF/PDF/IF11451/IF11451.6.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[431] Congressional Research Service, Surveillance of Foreigners Outside the United States Under Section 702 of FISA (R44457), updated April 13, 2016. https://www.congress.gov/crs_external_products/R/PDF/R44457/R44457.3.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

The main complaint has been about how the FBI searched that stored data for information about Americans. A House Judiciary Committee report in December 2023 said the FBI had run more than 278,000 improper searches, including one batch search on more than 19,000 donors to a congressional campaign.[432] The report was written by the committee majority and presents its view.

In April 2024, Congress renewed Section 702 for two years in the Reforming Intelligence and Securing America Act.[433] That law required an FBI supervisor or attorney to approve searches using an American's information.[434,435]

Where Section 702 stands as of November 12, 2026

The 2024 law was set to expire in April 2026.[436] Here is what happened next, from the official records.

Table 12.1. Section 702 in 2026 (information as of November 12, 2026)

Date	What happened
April 18, 2026	Short-term extension to April 30, 2026 signed (Public Law 119-84)[437]
April 29, 2026	House passed a reauthorization bill, S. 1318, by 235 to 191[438]
April 30, 2026	Second extension to June 12, 2026 signed (Public Law 119-87)[439]
June 5, 2026	Senate voted 47 to 52 against taking up the House-passed bill[440]
June 11, 2026	House vote on a short extension to July 2 failed, 198 yes to 218 no[441]
June 12, 2026	Section 702 expired automatically under the law[442]

[432] House Committee on the Judiciary, H. Rept. 118-307, Part 1, Protect Liberty and End Warrantless Surveillance Act of 2023, December 11, 2023. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CRPT-118hrpt307/html/CRPT-118hrpt307-pt1.htm, accessed November 12, 2026.

[433] U.S. Government Publishing Office, Public Law 118-49, Reforming Intelligence and Securing America Act, April 20, 2024. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/PLAW-118publ49/html/PLAW-118publ49.htm, accessed November 12, 2026.

[434] U.S. Government Publishing Office, Public Law 118-49, Reforming Intelligence and Securing America Act, April 20, 2024. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/PLAW-118publ49/html/PLAW-118publ49.htm, accessed November 12, 2026.

[435] Congressional Research Service, Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act (FISA) (IF11451), updated December 17, 2024. https://www.congress.gov/crs_external_products/IF/PDF/IF11451/IF11451.6.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[436] U.S. Government Publishing Office, Public Law 118-49, Reforming Intelligence and Securing America Act, April 20, 2024. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/PLAW-118publ49/html/PLAW-118publ49.htm, accessed November 12, 2026.

[437] U.S. Government Publishing Office, Public Law 119-84 (H.R. 8322, extension of FISA Title VII), April 18, 2026. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/PLAW-119publ84/html/PLAW-119publ84.htm, accessed November 12, 2026.

[438] Office of the Clerk, U.S. House of Representatives, Roll Call 142, S. 1318, April 29, 2026. https://clerk.house.gov/Votes/2026142, accessed November 12, 2026.

[439] U.S. Government Publishing Office, Public Law 119-87 (S. 4465, extension of FISA Title VII to June 12, 2026), April 30, 2026. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/PLAW-119publ87/html/PLAW-119publ87.htm, accessed November 12, 2026.

[440] U.S. Senate, Roll Call Votes, 119th Congress, 2nd Session, list checked November 12, 2026. https://www.senate.gov/legislative/LIS/roll_call_lists/vote_menu_119_2.htm, accessed November 12, 2026.

[441] Office of the Clerk, U.S. House of Representatives, Roll Call 221, H.R. 9238, June 11, 2026. https://clerk.house.gov/Votes/2026221, accessed November 12, 2026.

[442] Congressional Research Service, The Impact of FISA Section 702's Repeal (LSB11444), June 22, 2026. https://www.congress.gov/crs_external_products/LSB/PDF/LSB11444/LSB11444.1.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

One member of Congress described the June 11 vote as failing "218 to 198," which reads backward; the official House roll call shows 198 votes for the extension and 218 against.[443,444]

Does that mean the collection stopped? Not right away. CRS reported that the surveillance court approved a one-year Section 702 certification in March 2026, and under the law's transition rules, existing orders "shall continue in effect" until they expire.[445] One member's office said the certification was dated March 17, 2026 and runs through March 2027.[446] CRS confirms only "March 2026."[447] After that, CRS explains, the government would generally need individual court orders for each target.[448]

I checked the official list of new federal laws through Public Law 119-138, signed November 3, 2026, and the House and Senate roll-call votes through November 12, 2026. None reauthorized Section 702.[449,450] A law signed in the last few days before the cutoff might not yet be posted. If you are reading this later, check congress.gov for the newest status.

What this case teaches

The claim people usually make is, "The government listens to all of our phone calls." Part of that is true, and part is not. The NSA did collect records of most Americans' calls for years, and courts found the main program was not authorized by the law it relied on.[451,452] But the records program collected who called whom and for how long, not what people said.[453] That difference matters, and Chapter 22 gives this claim a verdict of Partly true.

Notice how the truth came out. A leak started it. Then newspapers, a presidential review group, an independent board, federal courts and Congress all tested the claims on the record. That is the pattern you will see again and again in this book.

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[443] Office of Rep. Alma S. Adams, Rep. Adams Statement on the Expiration of FISA, June 15, 2026. https://adams.house.gov/media-center/press-releases/rep-adams-statement-expiration-fisa, accessed November 12, 2026.

[444] Office of the Clerk, U.S. House of Representatives, Roll Call 221, H.R. 9238, June 11, 2026. https://clerk.house.gov/Votes/2026221, accessed November 12, 2026.

[445] Congressional Research Service, The Impact of FISA Section 702's Repeal (LSB11444), June 22, 2026. https://www.congress.gov/crs_external_products/LSB/PDF/LSB11444/LSB11444.1.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[446] Office of Rep. Alma S. Adams, Rep. Adams Statement on the Expiration of FISA, June 15, 2026. https://adams.house.gov/media-center/press-releases/rep-adams-statement-expiration-fisa, accessed November 12, 2026.

[447] Congressional Research Service, The Impact of FISA Section 702's Repeal (LSB11444), June 22, 2026. https://www.congress.gov/crs_external_products/LSB/PDF/LSB11444/LSB11444.1.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[448] Congressional Research Service, The Impact of FISA Section 702's Repeal (LSB11444), June 22, 2026. https://www.congress.gov/crs_external_products/LSB/PDF/LSB11444/LSB11444.1.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[449] U.S. Government Publishing Office, Public and Private Laws, 119th Congress (Public Laws 119-78 through 119-138), list checked November 12, 2026. https://www.govinfo.gov/app/collection/plaw/119, accessed November 12, 2026.

[450] U.S. Senate, Roll Call Votes, 119th Congress, 2nd Session, list checked November 12, 2026. https://www.senate.gov/legislative/LIS/roll_call_lists/vote_menu_119_2.htm, accessed November 12, 2026.

[451] U.S. Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit, ACLU v. Clapper, No. 14-42, 785 F.3d 787, May 7, 2015. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/USCOURTS-ca2-14-00042/pdf/USCOURTS-ca2-14-00042-0.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[452] U.S. Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit, United States v. Moalin, No. 13-50572, September 2, 2020. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/USCOURTS-ca9-13-50572/pdf/USCOURTS-ca9-13-50572-0.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[453] U.S. Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit, ACLU v. Clapper, No. 14-42, 785 F.3d 787, May 7, 2015, slip op. pp. 7-8. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/USCOURTS-ca2-14-00042/pdf/USCOURTS-ca2-14-00042-0.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

Part Three: The False Theories

Chapter 13: The Moon Landings

Part Two showed you nine things the government really did. Now we turn the same tools on five popular theories that do not hold up. I start with the most famous one: the claim that the Apollo moon landings were staged.

I picked it first because it is the cleanest test of the pattern from Chapter 3. The true cases left paper and physical trails that pointed toward a secret. Here, the trails point the other way.

What the claim says

The claim is that the United States never landed people on the Moon, and that the landings from 1969 to 1972 were filmed on Earth to win the space race.

How many people believe it

Not many. In a Gallup poll taken July 13 and 14, 1999, 6 percent of Americans said the government "staged or faked" the Apollo moon landing, 89 percent said it did not and 5 percent had no opinion.[454] Gallup compared that with a 1995 poll by Time, CNN and Yankelovich Partners, which also found 6 percent.[455] Gallup published those results in February 2001, after a television special on Fox questioned the landings.[456]

What the records show

Six landings and twelve moonwalkers

NASA lists six lunar landing missions in the Apollo program.[457] Its list of moonwalkers names twelve astronauts, two from each landing: Apollo 11, 12, 14, 15, 16 and 17.[458] Neil Armstrong and Edwin "Buzz" Aldrin of Apollo 11 were "the first humans to walk on the Moon in July 1969."[459]

A fake on this scale would have had to fool, or include, every person who built, flew, tracked and studied those six missions, over four years.

Rocks you can study

NASA says Apollo astronauts collected "382 kilograms of lunar rocks, core samples, pebbles, sand and dust" on "the six Apollo surface missions between 1969 and 1972."[460] That is about 842

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[454] Gallup News Service, Did Men Really Land on the Moon?, February 15, 2001. https://news.gallup.com/poll/1993/did-men-really-land-moon.aspx, accessed November 12, 2026.

[455] Gallup News Service, Did Men Really Land on the Moon?, February 15, 2001. https://news.gallup.com/poll/1993/did-men-really-land-moon.aspx, accessed November 12, 2026.

[456] Gallup News Service, Did Men Really Land on the Moon?, February 15, 2001. https://news.gallup.com/poll/1993/did-men-really-land-moon.aspx, accessed November 12, 2026.

[457] NASA, The Apollo Program, undated web page. https://www.nasa.gov/the-apollo-program/, accessed November 12, 2026.

[458] NASA Science, Moonwalkers, undated web page. https://science.nasa.gov/moon/moon-walkers/, accessed November 12, 2026.

[459] NASA, The Apollo Program, undated web page. https://www.nasa.gov/the-apollo-program/, accessed November 12, 2026.

pounds. Those samples have been studied by scientists for more than fifty years. A staged landing would have needed hundreds of kilograms of fake moon rock good enough to fool every lab that has examined it since.

Mirrors that are still there

Apollo crews left mirror arrays on the Moon called retroreflectors. The Apollo 11 crew left one in 1969, and the Apollo 14 and 15 crews placed others in 1971.[461] Observatories on Earth still fire lasers at them and time the light that bounces back.[462]

One of these projects runs from the 3.5-meter telescope at Apache Point Observatory in New Mexico. Its scientists reported reaching "one-millimeter range precision" to the Moon, and named the Apollo 15 array as the one giving the best results.[463] You cannot bounce a laser off a mirror that nobody put there.

Photographs from orbit

In 2011, NASA released pictures from its Lunar Reconnaissance Orbiter, a spacecraft circling the Moon. NASA called them "the sharpest images ever taken from space of the Apollo 12, 14 and 17 sites."[464] The pictures show the paths astronauts walked, the Apollo 12 descent stage, and the Apollo 17 lunar rover.[465]

Why the theory persists

You might ask, "If the evidence is that strong, why do people still doubt it?" Chapter 2 gave part of the answer. Our brains look for patterns, and an odd shadow or a waving flag can feel like a clue.[466] The earned distrust from the true cases also spills over. If the government lied about Tuskegee and MKUltra, why not this?

The difference is the trail. In Tuskegee and MKUltra, records surfaced that showed the secret. Here, more than fifty years of records, rocks, mirrors and photographs all point to the landings being real, and no record has surfaced that shows a staging.

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[460] NASA Johnson Space Center, Astromaterials 3D, Apollo Lunar Samples, undated web page. https://ares.jsc.nasa.gov/Astromaterials3D/apollo-lunar.htm, accessed November 12, 2026.

[461] Elizabeth Howell, Space.com, Why Is the Apollo Reflector Experiment Still Operating, 50 Years Later?, July 11, 2019. https://www.space.com/apollo-retroreflector-experiment-still-going-50-years-later.html, accessed November 12, 2026.

[462] Elizabeth Howell, Space.com, Why Is the Apollo Reflector Experiment Still Operating, 50 Years Later?, July 11, 2019. https://www.space.com/apollo-retroreflector-experiment-still-going-50-years-later.html, accessed November 12, 2026.

[463] T. W. Murphy Jr. and others, APOLLO: the Apache Point Observatory Lunar Laser-ranging Operation: Instrument Description and First Detections (arXiv:0710.0890), 2007. https://arxiv.org/abs/0710.0890, accessed November 12, 2026.

[464] NASA Goddard Scientific Visualization Studio, New LRO Images Offer Sharper Views of Apollo 12, 14, and 17 Sites, September 6, 2011. https://svs.gsfc.nasa.gov/10818/, accessed November 12, 2026.

[465] NASA Goddard Scientific Visualization Studio, New LRO Images Offer Sharper Views of Apollo 12, 14, and 17 Sites, September 6, 2011. https://svs.gsfc.nasa.gov/10818/, accessed November 12, 2026.

[466] Jan-Willem van Prooijen, Karen M. Douglas and Clara De Inocencio, Connecting the dots: Illusory pattern perception predicts belief in conspiracies and the supernatural, European Journal of Social Psychology 48(3): 320-335, 2018. https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC5900972, accessed November 12, 2026.

Verdict

False (debunked). The landings are confirmed by NASA's mission records, by 382 kilograms of returned samples, by mirrors still used by observatories, and by photographs of the landing sites taken from lunar orbit.[467,468,469,470]

[Not verified: the claim that a 1976 self-published book by Bill Kaysing started the modern hoax theory. I found it only in encyclopedia and secondary pages, not a primary record, so I do not rely on it.]

[467] NASA, The Apollo Program, undated web page. https://www.nasa.gov/the-apollo-program/, accessed November 12, 2026.

[468] NASA Johnson Space Center, Astromaterials 3D, Apollo Lunar Samples, undated web page. https://ares.jsc.nasa.gov/Astromaterials3D/apollo-lunar.htm, accessed November 12, 2026.

[469] T. W. Murphy Jr. and others, APOLLO: the Apache Point Observatory Lunar Laser-ranging Operation: Instrument Description and First Detections (arXiv:0710.0890), 2007. https://arxiv.org/abs/0710.0890, accessed November 12, 2026.

[470] NASA Goddard Scientific Visualization Studio, New LRO Images Offer Sharper Views of Apollo 12, 14, and 17 Sites, September 6, 2011. https://svs.gsfc.nasa.gov/10818/, accessed November 12, 2026.

Chapter 14: Chemtrails and Weather Control

Information in this chapter is current through November 12, 2026. The newest source it uses is dated August 19, 2026.

Look up on a clear day near a busy flight path and you may see white lines crossing the sky. Some spread into wide haze. Some vanish in seconds. The chemtrail theory says those lines are not water vapor but chemicals sprayed on purpose by the government.

This chapter is a good test of a key skill: separating a real thing from a false story built around it. Weather modification is real. Geoengineering research is real. Secret spraying from passenger jets is not supported by any record I could find.

What the claim says

The claim is that the long trails behind high-flying jets are a secret release of chemicals or germs. Depending on who tells it, the purpose is to control the weather, to control minds, to make people sick or to cool the planet.

The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) summarizes the claim this way: "Chemtrails" is a term some people use to claim that ordinary contrails are "an intentional release of dangerous chemicals or biological agents at high altitudes" for purposes such as "population control, mind control, or attempts to geoengineer Earth or modify the weather."[471]

What contrails are

Contrails, short for condensation trails, are "line-shaped exhaust clouds" that form behind jet aircraft.[472] Hot, moist engine exhaust meets very cold air at high altitude, and water vapor condenses on tiny particles such as soot and freezes into ice crystals.[473] The EPA compares it to seeing your own breath on a cold day.[474]

Why do some trails vanish while others last? It depends on the air where the plane is flying. In dry air, contrails evaporate in seconds or minutes. In very humid air, they can persist for "a few minutes or longer than a day" and spread into thin cirrus clouds.[475] The air miles up can be

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[471] U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, Information on Contrails from Aircraft (last updated July 1, 2026), July 1, 2026. https://www.epa.gov/regulations-emissions-vehicles-and-engines/information-contrails-aircraft, accessed November 12, 2026.

[472] U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, Information on Contrails from Aircraft (last updated July 1, 2026), July 1, 2026. https://www.epa.gov/regulations-emissions-vehicles-and-engines/information-contrails-aircraft, accessed November 12, 2026.

[473] U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, Information on Contrails from Aircraft (last updated July 1, 2026), July 1, 2026. https://www.epa.gov/regulations-emissions-vehicles-and-engines/information-contrails-aircraft, accessed November 12, 2026.

[474] U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, Information on Contrails from Aircraft (last updated July 1, 2026), July 1, 2026. https://www.epa.gov/regulations-emissions-vehicles-and-engines/information-contrails-aircraft, accessed November 12, 2026.

[475] U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, Information on Contrails from Aircraft (last updated July 1, 2026), July 1, 2026. https://www.epa.gov/regulations-emissions-vehicles-and-engines/information-contrails-aircraft, accessed November 12, 2026.

humid even when the ground is dry.[476] And if you see a lot of contrails, the EPA says, "it is because there are a lot of jet aircraft flying overhead."[477]

What is real

Here is the part that gives the theory its foothold. The government really has tried to change the weather.

- **Cloud seeding.** The EPA says the federal government spent decades after the 1940s supporting cloud seeding research and field experiments, until funding was cut in the 1980s.[478] As of July 2024, cloud seeding programs were active in nine states, including Nevada.[479]
- **Operation Popeye.** The EPA describes this as "a classified military weather modification program carried out during the Vietnam War" that tried to extend the monsoon season to disrupt supply routes.[480]
- **Project Stormfury.** NOAA (the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration) and the Navy tried to weaken hurricanes by seeding them between 1961 and 1971.[481] The EPA says the changes observed were within the natural variation of hurricanes, and that "no existing technology can modify hurricanes."[482]
- **Geoengineering research.** In 2023, the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy sent Congress a research plan on solar radiation modification, meaning ways to cool the planet by reflecting sunlight.[483] The plan said existing research "is not a preparatory measure for deployment," and that the government "is not currently engaged in outdoor testing or deployment."[484]

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[476] U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, Information on Contrails from Aircraft (last updated July 1, 2026), July 1, 2026. https://www.epa.gov/regulations-emissions-vehicles-and-engines/information-contrails-aircraft, accessed November 12, 2026.

[477] U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, Information on Contrails from Aircraft (last updated July 1, 2026), July 1, 2026. https://www.epa.gov/regulations-emissions-vehicles-and-engines/information-contrails-aircraft, accessed November 12, 2026.

[478] U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, Geoengineering: Frequent Questions (last updated August 19, 2026), August 19, 2026. https://www.epa.gov/geoengineering/frequent-questions, accessed November 12, 2026.

[479] U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, Geoengineering: Frequent Questions (last updated August 19, 2026), August 19, 2026. https://www.epa.gov/geoengineering/frequent-questions, accessed November 12, 2026.

[480] U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, Geoengineering: Frequent Questions (last updated August 19, 2026), August 19, 2026. https://www.epa.gov/geoengineering/frequent-questions, accessed November 12, 2026.

[481] U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, Geoengineering: Frequent Questions (last updated August 19, 2026), August 19, 2026. https://www.epa.gov/geoengineering/frequent-questions, accessed November 12, 2026.

[482] U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, Geoengineering: Frequent Questions (last updated August 19, 2026), August 19, 2026. https://www.epa.gov/geoengineering/frequent-questions, accessed November 12, 2026.

[483] White House Office of Science and Technology Policy, Congressionally Mandated Research Plan and an Initial Research Governance Framework Related to Solar Radiation Modification, June 2023. https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/Congressionally-Mandated-Report-on-Solar-Radiation-Modification.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[484] White House Office of Science and Technology Policy, Congressionally Mandated Research Plan and an Initial Research Governance Framework Related to Solar Radiation Modification, June 2023. https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/Congressionally-Mandated-Report-on-Solar-Radiation-Modification.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

- **Private actors.** The EPA says it knows of one private company, Make Sunsets, that has released sulfur dioxide balloons into the stratosphere in the United States, and that the company reported releasing about 0.1 tons by May 2025.[485]

So a reader who says "the government has messed with the weather before" is right. Notice what each of these has in common: a name, a budget, an agency and a paper trail. That is how we know about them.

What the records show about the trails

The EPA's 2025 and 2026 pages answer the chemtrail claim directly.

- "The federal government is not aware of there ever being a contrail intentionally formed over the United States for the purpose of geoengineering or weather modification."[486]
- "Solar geoengineering is not occurring via direct delivery by commercial aircraft and is not associated with aviation contrails."[487]
- Chemicals are sometimes sprayed from aircraft for farming and firefighting, but those releases come from "low-flying propeller aircraft, not high-altitude jets," and are documented and regulated.[488]

These pages were published in July 2025 under EPA Administrator Lee Zeldin, who said, "Americans have legitimate questions about contrails and geoengineering, and they deserve straight answers."[489] I mention who ran the agency for a reason. This was not one party defending itself. An administration that openly shared "significant reservations" about geoengineering looked at the chemtrail claim and rejected it.[490]

Scientists have looked too. In 2016, the journal Environmental Research Letters published a survey of atmospheric scientists and geochemists titled "Quantifying expert consensus against the existence of a secret, large-scale atmospheric spraying program."[491] [Not verified: the exact number of experts surveyed and how many reported finding no evidence. The journal page could not be opened, so I report only the published title.]

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[485] U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, Geoengineering: Government Action (last updated April 3, 2026), April 3, 2026. https://www.epa.gov/geoengineering/government-action, accessed November 12, 2026.

[486] U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, Information on Contrails from Aircraft (last updated July 1, 2026), July 1, 2026. https://www.epa.gov/regulations-emissions-vehicles-and-engines/information-contrails-aircraft, accessed November 12, 2026.

[487] U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, Geoengineering: Frequent Questions (last updated August 19, 2026), August 19, 2026. https://www.epa.gov/geoengineering/frequent-questions, accessed November 12, 2026.

[488] U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, Information on Contrails from Aircraft (last updated July 1, 2026), July 1, 2026. https://www.epa.gov/regulations-emissions-vehicles-and-engines/information-contrails-aircraft, accessed November 12, 2026.

[489] U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, EPA Releases New Online Resources Giving Americans Total Transparency on the Issues of Geoengineering and Contrails, July 9, 2025. https://www.epa.gov/newsreleases/epa-releases-new-online-resources-giving-americans-total-transparency-issues, accessed November 12, 2026.

[490] U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, EPA Releases New Online Resources Giving Americans Total Transparency on the Issues of Geoengineering and Contrails, July 9, 2025. https://www.epa.gov/newsreleases/epa-releases-new-online-resources-giving-americans-total-transparency-issues, accessed November 12, 2026.

[491] Christine Shearer, Mick West, Ken Caldeira and Steven J. Davis, Environmental Research Letters 11, 084011, Quantifying expert consensus against the existence of a secret, large-scale atmospheric spraying program, August 2016. https://iopscience.iop.org/article/10.1088/1748-9326/11/8/084011, accessed November 12, 2026.

HAARP

A related theory says a research station in Alaska called HAARP controls the weather or causes disasters.

HAARP (High-frequency Active Auroral Research Program) is a high-power radio transmitter used to study the ionosphere, a layer of the upper atmosphere.[492] The Air Force and Navy managed it from 1990 to 2014, and responsibility passed to the University of Alaska Fairbanks in 2015.[493,494]

The university's own answer to "Can HAARP control the weather?" is no. It says the radio waves HAARP sends "are not absorbed in either the troposphere or the stratosphere," the layers where weather happens, and concludes, "Since there is no interaction, there is no way to control the weather."[495] The EPA adds that HAARP "is not a classified program," that its environmental impact study is public, and that it knows of no scientific evidence of "any nefarious activities."[496]

The theory in state law

Belief in chemtrails has reached state law. The EPA reports that Tennessee passed a law in 2024 banning the intentional modification of sunlight, weather or temperature, and that Florida passed a law in 2025 "prohibiting certain acts intended to affect the temperature, the weather, or the intensity of sunlight within the atmosphere of this state."[497] Those laws ban the activity. They are not findings that it was happening.

Verdict

False (debunked). Weather modification and geoengineering research are real and documented. But the specific claim, that ordinary jet contrails are a secret chemical spraying program, is contradicted by the federal agency charged with protecting air quality, in pages published under an administrator who called the public's questions "legitimate."[498,499,500] The HAARP weather-control claim is also contradicted by the university that runs it.[501]

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[492] Geophysical Institute, University of Alaska Fairbanks, HAARP Frequently Asked Questions, page viewed November 12, 2026. https://haarp.gi.alaska.edu/faq, accessed November 12, 2026.

[493] Geophysical Institute, University of Alaska Fairbanks, HAARP Frequently Asked Questions, page viewed November 12, 2026. https://haarp.gi.alaska.edu/faq, accessed November 12, 2026.

[494] U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, Information on Contrails from Aircraft (last updated July 1, 2026), July 1, 2026. https://www.epa.gov/regulations-emissions-vehicles-and-engines/information-contrails-aircraft, accessed November 12, 2026.

[495] Geophysical Institute, University of Alaska Fairbanks, HAARP Frequently Asked Questions, page viewed November 12, 2026. https://haarp.gi.alaska.edu/faq, accessed November 12, 2026.

[496] U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, Information on Contrails from Aircraft (last updated July 1, 2026), July 1, 2026. https://www.epa.gov/regulations-emissions-vehicles-and-engines/information-contrails-aircraft, accessed November 12, 2026.

[497] U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, Geoengineering: Frequent Questions (last updated August 19, 2026), August 19, 2026. https://www.epa.gov/geoengineering/frequent-questions, accessed November 12, 2026.

[498] U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, EPA Releases New Online Resources Giving Americans Total Transparency on the Issues of Geoengineering and Contrails, July 9, 2025. https://www.epa.gov/newsreleases/epa-releases-new-online-resources-giving-americans-total-transparency-issues, accessed November 12, 2026.

[499] U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, Information on Contrails from Aircraft (last updated July 1, 2026), July 1, 2026. https://www.epa.gov/regulations-emissions-vehicles-and-engines/information-contrails-aircraft, accessed November 12, 2026.

[500] U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, Geoengineering: Frequent Questions (last updated August 19, 2026), August 19, 2026. https://www.epa.gov/geoengineering/frequent-questions, accessed November 12, 2026.

[501] Geophysical Institute, University of Alaska Fairbanks, HAARP Frequently Asked Questions, page viewed November 12, 2026. https://haarp.gi.alaska.edu/faq, accessed November 12, 2026.

Chapter 15: September 11

This is the hardest chapter in Part Three to write, because nearly three thousand people died. I describe what the records show and leave out graphic detail.

The September 11 theories come in two main kinds. One says the government knew the attack was coming and let it happen. The other, often called "inside job," says the government did it, usually by bringing down the World Trade Center towers with explosives. The records answer these differently, and I think the difference matters.

What happened, according to the official record

On September 11, 2001, 19 men hijacked four airliners.[502] The 9/11 Commission, an independent, bipartisan commission created by Congress, reported that 2,973 people were killed, which it called the largest loss of life on American soil "as a result of hostile attack in its history."[503,504] The New York Fire Department lost 343 people, the Port Authority Police Department 37 and the New York Police Department 23.[505]

The commission released its report on July 22, 2004.[506] Its staff held hearings and conducted interviews, and when it closed it left about 570 cubic feet of records with the National Archives.[507]

The government failed. That part is true.

The 9/11 Commission did not clear the government. It found the opposite of a smooth-running machine.

It concluded that the attacks revealed "four kinds of failures: in imagination, policy, capabilities, and management."[508] Its chairmen said in their public statement that no government action before 9/11 disturbed or delayed the plot.[509] The commission listed missed chances, including failing to watchlist two of the future hijackers before they entered the United States and failing to follow them well once they arrived.[510]

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[502] National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, The 9/11 Commission Report, July 22, 2004, p. 4. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/GPO-911REPORT/pdf/GPO-911REPORT.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[503] National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, The 9/11 Commission Report, July 22, 2004, p. 311. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/GPO-911REPORT/pdf/GPO-911REPORT.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[504] National Archives and Records Administration, 9/11 Commission Records, undated web page. https://www.archives.gov/research/9-11, accessed November 12, 2026.

[505] National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, The 9/11 Commission Report, July 22, 2004, p. 311. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/GPO-911REPORT/pdf/GPO-911REPORT.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[506] Thomas H. Kean and Lee H. Hamilton, 9/11 Commission, Public Statement on the Release of the 9/11 Commission Report, July 22, 2004. https://www.9-11commission.gov/report/911Report_Statement.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[507] National Archives and Records Administration, 9/11 Commission Records, undated web page. https://www.archives.gov/research/9-11, accessed November 12, 2026.

[508] National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, The 9/11 Commission Report, July 22, 2004, p. 339. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/GPO-911REPORT/pdf/GPO-911REPORT.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[509] Thomas H. Kean and Lee H. Hamilton, 9/11 Commission, Public Statement on the Release of the 9/11 Commission Report, July 22, 2004. https://www.9-11commission.gov/report/911Report_Statement.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[510] Thomas H. Kean and Lee H. Hamilton, 9/11 Commission, Public Statement on the Release of the 9/11 Commission Report, July 22, 2004. https://www.9-11commission.gov/report/911Report_Statement.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

So if the claim is "the government failed to stop an attack it had warnings about," the record supports that. Failure is not the same as a plot, though, and the commission drew that line. Its chairmen said the failures spanned many years and administrations.[511]

"Inside job": the World Trade Center collapses

The most common "inside job" claim is that the towers, and especially a third building called World Trade Center 7, were brought down by planted explosives. Building 7 was not hit by a plane and collapsed late in the afternoon, which makes it the center of many theories.

The National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST), a federal science agency, studied Building 7 and released its findings in 2008. NIST concluded: "The collapse of WTC 7 was a fire-induced progressive collapse."[512] It called this the "first known instance of the total collapse of a tall building primarily due to fires."[513] NIST found that heat made long floor beams expand, which broke the connections holding a key column, Column 79, and that column's buckling started the collapse.[514] On explosives, NIST said it concluded that "blast events did not occur and found no evidence of any blast events."[515]

You might ask, "Isn't it strange that a building fell from fire alone?" It is unusual. NIST itself called it a first. That is why NIST studied it in detail and published its reasoning. An unusual event is a reason to investigate. It is not, by itself, evidence of a plot.

NIST also studied the two main towers and released its final reports on them on October 26, 2005.[516] In its answers to common questions, NIST says the planes "severed and damaged support columns" and "dislodged fireproofing," and the fires that followed weakened the floors and columns until the towers fell. On thermite, NIST says it "did not test for the residue of these compounds in the steel," and it explains why it found no sign of explosives or controlled demolition in the towers.[517]

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[511] Thomas H. Kean and Lee H. Hamilton, 9/11 Commission, Public Statement on the Release of the 9/11 Commission Report, July 22, 2004. https://www.9-11commission.gov/report/911Report_Statement.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[512] National Institute of Standards and Technology, WTC 7 Technical Briefing (revised), November 19, 2008. https://www.nist.gov/system/files/documents/2017/05/09/WTC7RevisedTechnicalBriefing_111908.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[513] National Institute of Standards and Technology, WTC 7 Technical Briefing (revised), November 19, 2008. https://www.nist.gov/system/files/documents/2017/05/09/WTC7RevisedTechnicalBriefing_111908.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[514] National Institute of Standards and Technology, WTC 7 Technical Briefing (revised), November 19, 2008. https://www.nist.gov/system/files/documents/2017/05/09/WTC7RevisedTechnicalBriefing_111908.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[515] National Institute of Standards and Technology, WTC 7 Technical Briefing (revised), November 19, 2008. https://www.nist.gov/system/files/documents/2017/05/09/WTC7RevisedTechnicalBriefing_111908.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[516] National Institute of Standards and Technology, "World Trade Center Investigation," https://www.nist.gov/world-trade-center-investigation (accessed November 12, 2026).

[517] National Institute of Standards and Technology, "FAQs - NIST WTC Towers Investigation," updated September 10, 2021, https://www.nist.gov/world-trade-center-investigation/study-faqs/wtc-towers-investigation (accessed November 12, 2026).

The Saudi question

There is one real, unsettled-sounding thread that often gets folded into the "inside job" theory. In 2002, Congress's joint inquiry into 9/11 kept one section fully classified. It became known as the "28 pages," and people guessed it held proof of Saudi government involvement.

The 9/11 Commission had already written that "we have found no evidence that the Saudi government as an institution or senior Saudi officials individually funded" al Qaeda.[518] It added that this did not rule out that charities with significant Saudi government sponsorship diverted money to al Qaeda.[519]

On July 15, 2016, the House Intelligence Committee published the declassified 28 pages.[520] Its Republican chairman, Devin Nunes, said the section did "not put forward vetted conclusions, but rather unverified leads that were later fully investigated by the Intelligence Community."[521] Its Democratic ranking member, Adam Schiff, said the Intelligence Community and the 9/11 Commission had investigated those leads and "was never able to find sufficient evidence to support them."[522]

That is a useful example of the method in this book. A sealed document invited guesses. When it was released, both parties' leaders on the committee described it the same way: leads that were checked and not confirmed.

Verdict

False (debunked) for the claim that the U.S. government planned or carried out the attacks, or brought down the buildings with explosives. The 9/11 Commission traced the plot to al Qaeda, and NIST found no evidence of explosives in Building 7.[523,524]

The narrower claim that the government missed warning signs is supported by the record, and the 9/11 Commission said so plainly.[525] Chapter 22 keeps these two claims separate.

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[518] National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, The 9/11 Commission Report, July 22, 2004, p. 171. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/GPO-911REPORT/pdf/GPO-911REPORT.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[519] National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, The 9/11 Commission Report, July 22, 2004, p. 171. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/GPO-911REPORT/pdf/GPO-911REPORT.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[520] House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, Intel Committee publishes declassified "28 pages", July 15, 2016. https://intelligence.house.gov/2016/07/15/intel-committee-publishes-declassified-28-pages/, accessed November 12, 2026.

[521] House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, Intel Committee publishes declassified "28 pages", July 15, 2016. https://intelligence.house.gov/2016/07/15/intel-committee-publishes-declassified-28-pages/, accessed November 12, 2026.

[522] House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, Intel Committee publishes declassified "28 pages", July 15, 2016. https://intelligence.house.gov/2016/07/15/intel-committee-publishes-declassified-28-pages/, accessed November 12, 2026.

[523] National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, The 9/11 Commission Report, July 22, 2004. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/GPO-911REPORT/pdf/GPO-911REPORT.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[524] National Institute of Standards and Technology, WTC 7 Technical Briefing (revised), November 19, 2008. https://www.nist.gov/system/files/documents/2017/05/09/WTC7RevisedTechnicalBriefing_111908.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[525] National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, The 9/11 Commission Report, July 22, 2004, p. 339. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/GPO-911REPORT/pdf/GPO-911REPORT.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

Chapter 16: Area 51, Roswell and Alien Bodies

Information in this chapter is current through November 12, 2026. The newest source it uses is dated May 8, 2026.

This chapter matters to me as a Nevadan. Area 51 sits in our state, and the government really did keep it secret for decades. That secret is the best example in this book of a real cover-up feeding a false theory.

What the claim says

The claim is that the U.S. government recovered a crashed alien spacecraft, often said to be near Roswell, New Mexico, in 1947, and has hidden alien bodies and technology ever since, often at Area 51.

The real secret at Area 51

Area 51 was real, and it was secret. What happened there was spy planes.

In 2013, the National Security Archive at George Washington University published a declassified CIA history of the U-2 and OXCART spy plane programs, written in 1992 by Gregory Pedlow and Donald Welzenbach.[526] The newly released version contained many references to Area 51 and Groom Lake, along with a CIA map of the area.[527] It took a Freedom of Information Act request filed in 2005 to get that version released in 2013.[528]

The real cover-up

Here is the part that should make anyone sympathetic to UFO believers. The government did hide the truth about some UFO sightings, just not the truth they suspected.

A CIA history by Gerald Haines reports that CIA officials who worked on the U-2 and OXCART later estimated that manned reconnaissance flights accounted for "over half of all UFO reports from the late 1950s" and 1960s.[529] The U-2 flew at about 60,000 feet, far above airliners, and its silver finish caught the sunlight, so people on the ground saw something fiery and strange.[530]

[526] National Security Archive (ed. Jeffrey T. Richelson), Area 51: Electronic Briefing Book No. 434, August 15, 2013. https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB434/, accessed November 12, 2026.

[527] National Security Archive (ed. Jeffrey T. Richelson), Area 51: Electronic Briefing Book No. 434, August 15, 2013. https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB434/, accessed November 12, 2026.

[528] National Security Archive (ed. Jeffrey T. Richelson), Area 51: Electronic Briefing Book No. 434, August 15, 2013. https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB434/, accessed November 12, 2026.

[529] Gerald K. Haines, CIA Center for the Study of Intelligence, A Die-Hard Issue: CIA's Role in the Study of UFOs, 1947-90, undated (about 1997). https://www.cia.gov/resources/csi/static/cia-role-study-UFOs.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[530] Gerald K. Haines, CIA Center for the Study of Intelligence, A Die-Hard Issue: CIA's Role in the Study of UFOs, 1947-90, undated (about 1997). https://www.cia.gov/resources/csi/static/cia-role-study-UFOs.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

According to Haines, Air Force investigators who knew about the secret flights checked UFO reports against them, then gave the public natural explanations without revealing the spy planes.[531] Haines wrote that this "deception added fuel" to later conspiracy theories.[532]

So people who believed the government was lying about UFOs were partly right. It was. It was covering up its own aircraft.

Roswell

In 1995, at the request of Representative Steven Schiff of New Mexico, the General Accounting Office (GAO), Congress's investigative agency, searched for government records on the 1947 Roswell crash.[533]

GAO found two records from 1947. An FBI teletype dated July 8, 1947 reported the military's statement that the object "resembled a high-altitude weather balloon with a radar reflector."[534] The July 1947 history of the Army unit at Roswell said, "The object turned out to be a radar tracking balloon."[535] GAO also reported that a 1994 Air Force report concluded the debris most likely came from Project MOGUL, a classified balloon program meant to detect Soviet nuclear tests.[536]

GAO also found a real gap. Some Roswell base records had been destroyed, including outgoing messages from October 1946 to December 1949, and the paperwork did not say who destroyed them, when, or under what authority.[537] That gap is real, and it is one reason the story lives on. But a missing file is not evidence of what was in it.

Testimony in Congress

On July 26, 2023, a House Oversight subcommittee held a public hearing on what the government now calls unidentified anomalous phenomena, or UAP.[538] A former intelligence officer, David Grusch, testified under oath that he was "informed in the course of my official

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[531] Gerald K. Haines, CIA Center for the Study of Intelligence, A Die-Hard Issue: CIA's Role in the Study of UFOs, 1947-90, undated (about 1997). https://www.cia.gov/resources/csi/static/cia-role-study-UFOs.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[532] Gerald K. Haines, CIA Center for the Study of Intelligence, A Die-Hard Issue: CIA's Role in the Study of UFOs, 1947-90, undated (about 1997). https://www.cia.gov/resources/csi/static/cia-role-study-UFOs.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[533] U.S. General Accounting Office, Government Records: Results of a Search for Records Concerning the 1947 Crash Near Roswell, New Mexico (GAO/NSIAD-95-187), July 28, 1995. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/GAOREPORTS-NSIAD-95-187/html/GAOREPORTS-NSIAD-95-187.htm, accessed November 12, 2026.

[534] U.S. General Accounting Office, Government Records: Results of a Search for Records Concerning the 1947 Crash Near Roswell, New Mexico (GAO/NSIAD-95-187), July 28, 1995. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/GAOREPORTS-NSIAD-95-187/html/GAOREPORTS-NSIAD-95-187.htm, accessed November 12, 2026.

[535] U.S. General Accounting Office, Government Records: Results of a Search for Records Concerning the 1947 Crash Near Roswell, New Mexico (GAO/NSIAD-95-187), July 28, 1995. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/GAOREPORTS-NSIAD-95-187/html/GAOREPORTS-NSIAD-95-187.htm, accessed November 12, 2026.

[536] U.S. General Accounting Office, Government Records: Results of a Search for Records Concerning the 1947 Crash Near Roswell, New Mexico (GAO/NSIAD-95-187), July 28, 1995. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/GAOREPORTS-NSIAD-95-187/html/GAOREPORTS-NSIAD-95-187.htm, accessed November 12, 2026.

[537] U.S. General Accounting Office, Government Records: Results of a Search for Records Concerning the 1947 Crash Near Roswell, New Mexico (GAO/NSIAD-95-187), July 28, 1995. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/GAOREPORTS-NSIAD-95-187/html/GAOREPORTS-NSIAD-95-187.htm, accessed November 12, 2026.

[538] House Committee on Oversight and Accountability, Subcommittee on National Security, the Border, and Foreign Affairs, Unidentified Anomalous Phenomena: Implications on National Security, Public Safety, and Government Transparency (Serial No. 118-53), July 26, 2023. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-118hhrg53022/html/CHRG-118hhrg53022.htm, accessed November 12, 2026.

duties of a multi-decade UAP crash retrieval and reverse engineering program."[539] When a member asked him, "Have you seen any of the bodies?", he answered, "That is something I have not witnessed myself."[540]

That is an important distinction. Sworn testimony that someone was told about a program is a lead. It is not the same as a record or a firsthand account.

What the Pentagon's office found

The Department of Defense has an office that studies these reports, the All-domain Anomaly Resolution Office (AARO). In March 2024, the Pentagon said AARO's historical review "has found no verifiable evidence for claims that the U.S. government and private companies have access to" extraterrestrial technology.[541] AARO assessed that the hidden programs described to it either do not exist, were real programs that were misidentified, or were programs that had ended.[542]

AARO's report for fiscal year 2025 said: "To date, no evidence suggests that a USG or private entity has ever captured or exploited UAP-derived materials."[543] It received 319 reports in that period and resolved 114 of them.[544] None of the resolved cases showed advanced foreign capabilities or breakthrough technology.[545]

The 2026 file releases

In 2026 the government began releasing UFO files. On March 31, 2026, Representative Anna Paulina Luna, who chairs a House task force on declassification, asked the Secretary of War for

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[539] House Committee on Oversight and Accountability, Subcommittee on National Security, the Border, and Foreign Affairs, Unidentified Anomalous Phenomena: Implications on National Security, Public Safety, and Government Transparency (Serial No. 118-53), July 26, 2023. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-118hhrg53022/html/CHRG-118hhrg53022.htm, accessed November 12, 2026.

[540] House Committee on Oversight and Accountability, Subcommittee on National Security, the Border, and Foreign Affairs, Unidentified Anomalous Phenomena: Implications on National Security, Public Safety, and Government Transparency (Serial No. 118-53), July 26, 2023. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-118hhrg53022/html/CHRG-118hhrg53022.htm, accessed November 12, 2026.

[541] U.S. Department of Defense, Statement by Pentagon Press Secretary Maj. Gen. Pat Ryder on the Historical Record Report on Unidentified Anomalous Phenomena, Volume 1, March 2024. https://www.war.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/3700894/statement-by-pentagon-press-secretary-maj-gen-pat-ryder-on-the-historical-recor/, accessed November 12, 2026.

[542] U.S. Department of Defense, Statement by Pentagon Press Secretary Maj. Gen. Pat Ryder on the Historical Record Report on Unidentified Anomalous Phenomena, Volume 1, March 2024. https://www.war.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/3700894/statement-by-pentagon-press-secretary-maj-gen-pat-ryder-on-the-historical-recor/, accessed November 12, 2026.

[543] All-domain Anomaly Resolution Office, Department of Defense, FY2025 Consolidated Annual Report on Unidentified Anomalous Phenomena, 2026. https://www.aaro.mil/Portals/136/PDFs/FY25%20UAP%20Annual%20Report/AARO_FY2025_Consolidated_Annual_Report_on_UAP.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[544] All-domain Anomaly Resolution Office, Department of Defense, FY2025 Consolidated Annual Report on Unidentified Anomalous Phenomena, 2026. https://www.aaro.mil/Portals/136/PDFs/FY25%20UAP%20Annual%20Report/AARO_FY2025_Consolidated_Annual_Report_on_UAP.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[545] All-domain Anomaly Resolution Office, Department of Defense, FY2025 Consolidated Annual Report on Unidentified Anomalous Phenomena, 2026. https://www.aaro.mil/Portals/136/PDFs/FY25%20UAP%20Annual%20Report/AARO_FY2025_Consolidated_Annual_Report_on_UAP.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

46 sets of UAP video files.[546] On May 8, 2026, the Pentagon released a first batch of 162 documents on a new website, with more promised on a rolling basis.[547] They included old State Department cables, FBI documents and NASA spaceflight transcripts.[548] For one 1972 Apollo 17 photo showing three dots, the Pentagon said "there is no consensus about the nature of the anomaly."[549]

Unexplained is not the same as alien. Many reports stay unresolved because the data is too thin, not because the data points to visitors. [Not verified: the contents of later 2026 releases. I could not open the Pentagon release pages, so I cannot say what, if anything, they added.]

Verdict

False (debunked) for the claim that the government holds alien bodies or a crashed alien craft. No investigation has produced a record or physical evidence of either, and the Pentagon's own office reported in 2024 and again for 2025 that it found no evidence.[550,551]

What remains unresolved is narrower: some individual UAP reports have not been explained.[552] That is worth studying. It is not evidence for the larger claim.

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[546] Rep. Anna Paulina Luna, House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform, Letter to Secretary of War Pete Hegseth requesting UAP video files, March 31, 2026. https://oversight.house.gov/wp-content/uploads/2026/03/UAP-Request-Letter-FINAL.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[547] Collin Binkley and Seung Min Kim, Associated Press (via OPB), Pentagon begins releasing new files on UFOs and says the public can draw its own conclusions, May 8, 2026. https://opb.org/article/2026/05/08/pentagon-ufo-files, accessed November 12, 2026.

[548] Collin Binkley and Seung Min Kim, Associated Press (via OPB), Pentagon begins releasing new files on UFOs and says the public can draw its own conclusions, May 8, 2026. https://opb.org/article/2026/05/08/pentagon-ufo-files, accessed November 12, 2026.

[549] Collin Binkley and Seung Min Kim, Associated Press (via OPB), Pentagon begins releasing new files on UFOs and says the public can draw its own conclusions, May 8, 2026. https://opb.org/article/2026/05/08/pentagon-ufo-files, accessed November 12, 2026.

[550] U.S. Department of Defense, Statement by Pentagon Press Secretary Maj. Gen. Pat Ryder on the Historical Record Report on Unidentified Anomalous Phenomena, Volume 1, March 2024. https://www.war.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/3700894/statement-by-pentagon-press-secretary-maj-gen-pat-ryder-on-the-historical-recor/, accessed November 12, 2026.

[551] All-domain Anomaly Resolution Office, Department of Defense, FY2025 Consolidated Annual Report on Unidentified Anomalous Phenomena, 2026. https://www.aaro.mil/Portals/136/PDFs/FY25%20UAP%20Annual%20Report/AARO_FY2025_Consolidated_Annual_Report_on_UAP.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[552] All-domain Anomaly Resolution Office, Department of Defense, FY2025 Consolidated Annual Report on Unidentified Anomalous Phenomena, 2026. https://www.aaro.mil/Portals/136/PDFs/FY25%20UAP%20Annual%20Report/AARO_FY2025_Consolidated_Annual_Report_on_UAP.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

Chapter 17: The Fluoride Plot

Information in this chapter is current through November 12, 2026. The newest source it uses is dated June 1, 2026.

This chapter needs extra care, because two very different questions get mixed together. One is a conspiracy theory: that fluoride was put in the water as a secret plot to harm or control people. The other is a real and current policy debate: whether the amount of fluoride in American tap water is the right amount, and whether it is safe for children. I treat them separately. The first does not hold up. The second is still being argued in courts, agencies and state legislatures.

A short history

At 4:00 p.m. on January 25, 1945, Grand Rapids, Michigan, became the first city to add fluoride to its water.[553] The purpose was to reduce tooth decay. In 1999, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) listed fluoridation of drinking water among the ten great public health achievements of the twentieth century.[554]

In 2022, about 209 million people, 62.8 percent of the U.S. population, received fluoridated water.[555] In 2015, the U.S. Public Health Service recommended a "uniform concentration of 0.7 mg/L of fluoride in drinking water."[556] (Mg/L means milligrams per liter.) The Environmental Protection Agency's enforceable upper limit, set in 1986, is 4.0 mg/L.[557]

The plot theories

Organized opposition began early. In September 1950, voters in Stevens Point, Wisconsin, rejected fluoridation, 3,705 to 2,166.[558] By the late 1950s, some groups linked fluoridation to communism. In 1960, one publication claimed that "former Communists" called fluoridation a method of "Red Warfare."[559] The idea was famous enough that the 1964 film Dr. Strangelove

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[553] Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Timeline for Community Water Fluoridation, May 15, 2024. https://www.cdc.gov/fluoridation/timeline-for-community-water-fluoridation/index.html, accessed November 12, 2026.

[554] Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report 48(50), Ten Great Public Health Achievements -- United States, 1900-1999, December 24, 1999. https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/mm4850bx.htm, accessed November 12, 2026.

[555] Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2022 Water Fluoridation Statistics, June 6, 2024. https://www.cdc.gov/fluoridation/php/statistics/2022-water-fluoridation-statistics.html, accessed November 12, 2026.

[556] Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Timeline for Community Water Fluoridation, May 15, 2024. https://www.cdc.gov/fluoridation/timeline-for-community-water-fluoridation/index.html, accessed November 12, 2026.

[557] Congressional Research Service, The Development of Federal Recommendations and Regulations for Fluoride in Drinking Water (R48539), May 16, 2025. https://www.everycrsreport.com/reports/R48539.html, accessed November 12, 2026.

[558] Jesse Hicks, Science History Institute, Pipe Dreams: America's Fluoride Controversy, June 25, 2011. https://www.sciencehistory.org/stories/magazine/pipe-dreams-americas-fluoride-controversy/, accessed November 12, 2026.

[559] Jesse Hicks, Science History Institute, Pipe Dreams: America's Fluoride Controversy, June 25, 2011. https://www.sciencehistory.org/stories/magazine/pipe-dreams-americas-fluoride-controversy/, accessed November 12, 2026.

mocked it, with a general calling fluoridation "the most monstrously conceived and dangerous Communist plot we have ever had to face."[560]

A later version says the Nazis put fluoride in prison camp water to make prisoners docile. PolitiFact traced that claim to a 1987 self-published booklet.[561] A historian at the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum told PolitiFact that none of the Nazi experiments she knew of involved fluoride.[562] Even the director of the Fluoride Action Network, a group that opposes fluoridation, said, "The historical evidence for this assertion is extremely weak."[563]

No record I found supports either the communist plot or the Nazi story. Fluoridation was a public program, adopted city by city in public, with published recommendations.[564,565]

The real debate today

The live question is about safety and dose. Here is where it stands.

In August 2024, the National Toxicology Program, part of the National Institutes of Health, found "with moderate confidence" that "higher estimated fluoride exposures" above 1.5 mg/L "are consistently associated with lower IQ in children."[566] It said more studies are needed on whether lower exposures affect IQ.[567] The Congressional Research Service reported that the review could not determine whether the U.S. recommended level of 0.7 mg/L affects IQ.[568]

On September 24, 2024, a federal judge in California ruled that fluoridation at 0.7 mg/L posed an unreasonable risk of reduced IQ in children and ordered the EPA to begin a rulemaking.[569,570]

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[560] Jesse Hicks, Science History Institute, Pipe Dreams: America's Fluoride Controversy, June 25, 2011. https://www.sciencehistory.org/stories/magazine/pipe-dreams-americas-fluoride-controversy/, accessed November 12, 2026.

[561] Louis Jacobson, PolitiFact, Jesse Ventura says Nazis pioneered use of fluoridated water, December 8, 2014. https://politifact.com/factchecks/2014/dec/08/jesse-ventura/jesse-ventura-says-nazis-pioneered-use-fluoridated/, accessed November 12, 2026.

[562] Louis Jacobson, PolitiFact, Jesse Ventura says Nazis pioneered use of fluoridated water, December 8, 2014. https://politifact.com/factchecks/2014/dec/08/jesse-ventura/jesse-ventura-says-nazis-pioneered-use-fluoridated/, accessed November 12, 2026.

[563] Louis Jacobson, PolitiFact, Jesse Ventura says Nazis pioneered use of fluoridated water, December 8, 2014. https://politifact.com/factchecks/2014/dec/08/jesse-ventura/jesse-ventura-says-nazis-pioneered-use-fluoridated/, accessed November 12, 2026.

[564] Jesse Hicks, Science History Institute, Pipe Dreams: America's Fluoride Controversy, June 25, 2011. https://www.sciencehistory.org/stories/magazine/pipe-dreams-americas-fluoride-controversy/, accessed November 12, 2026.

[565] Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Timeline for Community Water Fluoridation, May 15, 2024. https://www.cdc.gov/fluoridation/timeline-for-community-water-fluoridation/index.html, accessed November 12, 2026.

[566] National Toxicology Program, National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences, NTP Monograph on the State of the Science Concerning Fluoride Exposure and Neurodevelopment and Cognition (abstract), August 2024. https://ntp.niehs.nih.gov/go/mgraph08abs, accessed November 12, 2026.

[567] National Toxicology Program, National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences, NTP Monograph on the State of the Science Concerning Fluoride Exposure and Neurodevelopment and Cognition (abstract), August 2024. https://ntp.niehs.nih.gov/go/mgraph08abs, accessed November 12, 2026.

[568] Congressional Research Service, The Development of Federal Recommendations and Regulations for Fluoride in Drinking Water (R48539), May 16, 2025. https://www.everycrsreport.com/reports/R48539.html, accessed November 12, 2026.

[569] Beveridge and Diamond, Ninth Circuit Vacates Order Requiring EPA to Regulate Fluoridation of Drinking Water under TSCA, June 1, 2026. https://www.bdlaw.com/publications/ninth-circuit-vacates-order-requiring-epa-to-regulate-fluoridation-of-drinking-water-under-tsca/, accessed November 12, 2026.

[570] Congressional Research Service, The Development of Federal Recommendations and Regulations for Fluoride in Drinking Water (R48539), May 16, 2025. https://www.everycrsreport.com/reports/R48539.html, accessed November 12, 2026.

On May 21, 2026, the federal appeals court for the Ninth Circuit vacated that order and sent the case back to the trial court.[571] [Not verified: what happened after the appeals ruling. A request for more time to appeal to the Supreme Court was filed in August 2026, but I could not open the court's docket.]

Policy has moved too. On April 7, 2025, the EPA said it would "expeditiously review new science on fluoride in drinking water."[572] The same day, Health and Human Services Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr. said he would ask the CDC to stop recommending community water fluoridation.[573] As of May 2025, the Congressional Research Service found no official HHS statement ending the recommendation.[574] Utah became the first state to bar fluoride from public water systems in a law signed March 27, 2025, and Florida followed on May 15, 2025.[575,576]

People on both sides of that debate cite real studies and real court rulings. That is very different from a secret plot.

Verdict

False (debunked) for the claim that fluoridation was a secret plot, communist or Nazi, to harm or control Americans. It was a public health program adopted in the open, and the specific plot stories have no documentary support.[577,578]

The separate question of whether 0.7 mg/L is the right level is a real scientific and legal debate that was not settled as of November 12, 2026.[579,580]

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[571] Beveridge and Diamond, Ninth Circuit Vacates Order Requiring EPA to Regulate Fluoridation of Drinking Water under TSCA, June 1, 2026. https://www.bdlaw.com/publications/ninth-circuit-vacates-order-requiring-epa-to-regulate-fluoridation-of-drinking-water-under-tsca/, accessed November 12, 2026.

[572] U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, EPA Will Expeditiously Review New Science on Fluoride in Drinking Water, April 7, 2025. https://www.epa.gov/node/295616, accessed November 12, 2026.

[573] Hannah Schoenbaum and Mike Stobbe, Associated Press (via WRDW), RFK Jr. says he plans to tell CDC to stop recommending fluoride in drinking water, April 7, 2025. https://www.wrdw.com/2025/04/07/rfk-jr-says-he-plans-tell-cdc-stop-recommending-fluoride-drinking-water/, accessed November 12, 2026.

[574] Congressional Research Service, The Development of Federal Recommendations and Regulations for Fluoride in Drinking Water (R48539), May 16, 2025. https://www.everycrsreport.com/reports/R48539.html, accessed November 12, 2026.

[575] WaterWorld, Utah becomes first U.S. state to ban fluoride in drinking water, April 1, 2025. https://www.waterworld.com/drinking-water-treatment/news/55278976/utah-becomes-first-us-state-to-ban-fluoride-in-drinking-water, accessed November 12, 2026.

[576] Stephany Matat and Kate Payne, Associated Press (via PBS NewsHour), Gov. DeSantis signs bill making Florida 2nd state to ban fluoride from its water system, May 15, 2025. https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/gov-desantis-signs-bill-making-florida-2nd-state-to-ban-fluoride-from-its-water-system, accessed November 12, 2026.

[577] Jesse Hicks, Science History Institute, Pipe Dreams: America's Fluoride Controversy, June 25, 2011. https://www.sciencehistory.org/stories/magazine/pipe-dreams-americas-fluoride-controversy/, accessed November 12, 2026.

[578] Louis Jacobson, PolitiFact, Jesse Ventura says Nazis pioneered use of fluoridated water, December 8, 2014. https://politifact.com/factchecks/2014/dec/08/jesse-ventura/jesse-ventura-says-nazis-pioneered-use-fluoridated/, accessed November 12, 2026.

[579] National Toxicology Program, National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences, NTP Monograph on the State of the Science Concerning Fluoride Exposure and Neurodevelopment and Cognition (abstract), August 2024. https://ntp.niehs.nih.gov/go/mgraph08abs, accessed November 12, 2026.

[580] Beveridge and Diamond, Ninth Circuit Vacates Order Requiring EPA to Regulate Fluoridation of Drinking Water under TSCA, June 1, 2026. https://www.bdlaw.com/publications/ninth-circuit-vacates-order-requiring-epa-to-regulate-fluoridation-of-drinking-water-under-tsca/, accessed November 12, 2026.

Part Four: The Unsettled Cases

Chapter 18: Cases That Are Still Open

Information in this chapter is current through November 12, 2026. The newest source it uses is dated June 18, 2026.

Not every question has a clean answer. This chapter covers four cases where the records leave real gaps. In two of them, MKUltra and the CIA's use of the press, the core facts are proved but the full scope is not. In the other two, the origin of COVID-19 and the illnesses called Havana Syndrome, official sources still disagree with each other.

The honest answer in these cases is "we do not know yet," and I try to tell you why.

MKUltra: how far did it go?

Chapter 6 showed what is proved about MKUltra. The CIA funded drug and behavior research, gave LSD to people who did not know it, and destroyed most of the program's files in 1973.[581,582]

The destruction is the reason the scope is still open. What survived were mostly financial records.[583] Those show who was paid and for what, but not always what was done to whom. The 1963 Inspector General report noted that the CIA's practice was "to maintain no records of the planning and approval of test programs."[584]

So when you read a claim that goes beyond the surviving records, such as a specific mind-control success or a named victim not in the record, ask where it comes from. The 2026 House hearing showed that the questions are still alive in Congress.[585] It did not produce new official findings on the scope.

What would settle it: any surviving MKUltra records not yet released, or new records from the institutions that took CIA money.

The CIA and the press ("Operation Mockingbird")

You will often read that "Operation Mockingbird" was a vast CIA program to control American newspapers. The record supports a real core and leaves the larger version unproved.

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[581] Senate Select Committee on Intelligence and Subcommittee on Health and Scientific Research, Project MKULTRA, the CIA's Program of Research in Behavioral Modification, joint hearing, August 3, 1977. https://www.intelligence.senate.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/sites-default-files-hearings-95mkultra.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[582] Senate Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities (Church Committee), Final Report, Book I: Foreign and Military Intelligence, S. Rep. No. 94-755, April 26, 1976. https://www.intelligence.senate.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/sites-default-files-94755-i.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[583] Senate Select Committee on Intelligence and Subcommittee on Health and Scientific Research, Project MKULTRA, the CIA's Program of Research in Behavioral Modification, joint hearing, August 3, 1977, Turner prepared statement. https://www.intelligence.senate.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/sites-default-files-hearings-95mkultra.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[584] Senate Select Committee on Intelligence and Subcommittee on Health and Scientific Research, Project MKULTRA, the CIA's Program of Research in Behavioral Modification, joint hearing, August 3, 1977, Turner prepared statement. https://www.intelligence.senate.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/sites-default-files-hearings-95mkultra.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[585] House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform, Task Force on the Declassification of Federal Secrets, Mind Control and Accountability: Uncovering the Truth of the CIA's MKULTRA Project, Serial No. 119-68, June 30, 2026. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-119hhrg64141/html/CHRG-119hhrg64141.htm, accessed November 12, 2026.

What is documented. The CIA's own 1973 internal list of questionable activities, known as the "Family Jewels," says that "Project Mockingbird, a telephone intercept activity, was conducted between 12 March 1963 and 15 June 1963" and "targeted two Washington-based newsmen" who had been publishing classified information.[586] In other words, the documented Project Mockingbird was a wiretap on two reporters, not a media-control program. The same document says the wiretap was approved by CIA Director John McCone, in coordination with Attorney General Robert Kennedy and Defense Secretary Robert McNamara.[587]

The Rockefeller Commission separately found five CIA investigations aimed at newsmen to find their sources, and concluded that "The CIA has no authority to investigate newsmen simply because they have published leaked classified information."[588]

What else is documented. The Church Committee found something broader that most people mean when they say "Mockingbird." Until February 1976, the CIA "maintained covert relationships with about 50 American journalists or employees of U.S. media organizations."[589] About half were paid.[590] More than a dozen American news organizations and publishers had provided cover for CIA agents overseas, and "a few of these organizations were unaware that they provided this cover."[591] Before 1967, the CIA "sponsored, subsidized, or produced over 1,000 books."[592]

The committee warned that this "is a threat to the integrity of the press."[593]

What changed. On February 11, 1976, CIA Director George Bush announced that the CIA would "not enter into any paid or contractual relationship with any full-time or part-time news correspondent accredited by" an American news organization.[594] The Church Committee noted

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[586] Central Intelligence Agency (posted by the National Security Archive), "Family Jewels" compilation, Part 1, with cover memorandum of May 16, 1973, 1973. https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB222/family_jewels_pt1_ocr.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[587] Central Intelligence Agency (posted by the National Security Archive), "Family Jewels" compilation, Part 1, with cover memorandum of May 16, 1973, 1973. https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB222/family_jewels_pt1_ocr.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[588] Commission on CIA Activities Within the United States (Rockefeller Commission), Report to the President, June 1975. https://www.fordlibrarymuseum.gov/library/document/0005/1561495.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[589] Senate Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities (Church Committee), Final Report, Book I: Foreign and Military Intelligence, S. Rep. No. 94-755, April 26, 1976. https://www.intelligence.senate.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/sites-default-files-94755-i.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[590] Senate Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities (Church Committee), Final Report, Book I: Foreign and Military Intelligence, S. Rep. No. 94-755, April 26, 1976. https://www.intelligence.senate.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/sites-default-files-94755-i.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[591] Senate Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities (Church Committee), Final Report, Book I: Foreign and Military Intelligence, S. Rep. No. 94-755, April 26, 1976. https://www.intelligence.senate.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/sites-default-files-94755-i.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[592] Senate Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities (Church Committee), Final Report, Book I: Foreign and Military Intelligence, S. Rep. No. 94-755, April 26, 1976. https://www.intelligence.senate.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/sites-default-files-94755-i.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[593] Senate Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities (Church Committee), Final Report, Book I: Foreign and Military Intelligence, S. Rep. No. 94-755, April 26, 1976. https://www.intelligence.senate.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/sites-default-files-94755-i.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[594] Senate Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities (Church Committee), Final Report, Book I: Foreign and Military Intelligence, S. Rep. No. 94-755, April 26, 1976.

that rule would end fewer than half of the roughly 50 relationships, because it did not cover freelancers and stringers.[595] In 1996, Congress made it national policy that intelligence agencies may not use accredited American journalists as agents, but it allowed a written waiver by the President or Director of Central Intelligence for an "overriding national security interest."[596]

What is not settled. Popular accounts often cite a much larger number of journalists, such as 400. [Not verified: the "400 journalists" figure. I could not find it in the Church Committee or Rockefeller Commission records.] Whether any waivers have been used since 1996 is also not public.

What would settle it: release of the CIA files behind the Church Committee's summary, which the committee described but did not publish in full.

The origin of COVID-19

This is the most disputed case in the book, and official sources point in different directions. Here is what each one says, in its own words and with its stated confidence.

Table 18.1. What official bodies have said about the origin of COVID-19 (current through November 12, 2026)

Source and date	What it concluded
U.S. intelligence community, 2021	"Remains divided on the most likely origin"; China did not develop the virus as a biological weapon[597]
U.S. intelligence community, June 2023	Four agencies and the National Intelligence Council leaned natural origin; the Department of Energy and FBI leaned lab-associated; the CIA and one other agency could not decide[598]
FBI Director Christopher Wray, February 2023	The FBI assessed the origin "most likely a potential lab incident in Wuhan"[599]
House Select Subcommittee, December 2024	The virus "most likely emerged from a laboratory in Wuhan, China"[600]

https://www.intelligence.senate.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/sites-default-files-94755-i.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[595] Senate Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities (Church Committee), Final Report, Book I: Foreign and Military Intelligence, S. Rep. No. 94-755, April 26, 1976. https://www.intelligence.senate.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/sites-default-files-94755-i.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[596] U.S. Government Publishing Office, Public Law 104-293, Intelligence Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 1997, Section 309, October 11, 1996. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/PLAW-104publ293/html/PLAW-104publ293.htm, accessed November 12, 2026.

[597] Office of the Director of National Intelligence, Declassified Assessment on COVID-19 Origins, 2021. https://archive.dni.gov/files/ODNI/documents/assessments/Declassified-Assessment-on-COVID-19-Origins.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[598] Office of the Director of National Intelligence, Report on Potential Links Between the Wuhan Institute of Virology and the Origins of COVID-19, June 23, 2023. https://archive.dni.gov/files/ODNI/documents/assessments/Report-on-Potential-Links-Between-the-Wuhan-Institute-of-Virology-and-the-Origins-of-COVID-19-20230623.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[599] NPR, On Fox News, FBI's Wray repeats COVID lab leak claim, February 28, 2023. https://www.npr.org/2023/02/28/1160214557/fbi-covid-origins-investigation-wray, accessed November 12, 2026.

[600] House Select Subcommittee on the Coronavirus Pandemic, FINAL REPORT: COVID Select Concludes 2-Year Investigation, Issues 500+ Page Final Report on Lessons Learned and the Path Forward, December 2, 2024. https://oversight.house.gov/release/final-report-covid-select-concludes-2-year-investigation-issues-500-page-final-report-on-lessons-learned-and-the-path-forward/, accessed November 12, 2026.

Source and date	What it concluded
CIA, January 2025	"Low confidence" that a research-related origin is more likely than a natural one; both remain plausible[601]
White House web page, April 2025	Titled "Lab Leak: The True Origins of Covid-19"[602]
World Health Organization advisory group, June 2025	Weight of available evidence suggests spillover from animals; key data from China not provided[603]
Office of the Director of National Intelligence release, June 2026	Released documents and said U.S.-funded research at the Wuhan lab is "widely viewed as the source of the unintentional lab leak"[604]

A few things stand out.

First, confidence levels matter. The FBI's judgment was reported as moderate confidence and the CIA's as low confidence.[605,606] Low confidence means the agency thinks the evidence is thin.

Second, some official sources state the lab origin as settled while others do not. The House subcommittee, the White House page and the 2026 ODNI release present a lab leak as the answer.[607,608,609] The 2026 ODNI release did not announce a new formal intelligence assessment or a change in any agency's confidence level.[610] The CIA said in 2025 that both explanations

[601] CBS News, CIA now says COVID most likely originated from a lab leak but has "low confidence" in its assessment, January 25, 2025. https://www.cbsnews.com/news/cia-covid-likely-originated-lab-low-confidence-assessment/, accessed November 12, 2026.

[602] The White House, Lab Leak: The True Origins of Covid-19, April 18, 2025. https://www.whitehouse.gov/lab-leak-true-origins-of-covid-19/, accessed November 12, 2026.

[603] World Health Organization, WHO Scientific Advisory Group issues report on origins of COVID-19, June 27, 2025. https://www.who.int/news/item/27-06-2025-who-scientific-advisory-group-issues-report-on-origins-of-covid-19, accessed November 12, 2026.

[604] Office of the Director of National Intelligence, Fauci Funded Wuhan Lab Research That Sparked COVID (News Release No. 11-26), June 18, 2026. https://archive.dni.gov/index.php/newsroom/press-releases/press-releases-2026/4166-pr-11-26, accessed November 12, 2026.

[605] NPR, On Fox News, FBI's Wray repeats COVID lab leak claim, February 28, 2023. https://www.npr.org/2023/02/28/1160214557/fbi-covid-origins-investigation-wray, accessed November 12, 2026.

[606] CBS News, CIA now says COVID most likely originated from a lab leak but has "low confidence" in its assessment, January 25, 2025. https://www.cbsnews.com/news/cia-covid-likely-originated-lab-low-confidence-assessment/, accessed November 12, 2026.

[607] House Select Subcommittee on the Coronavirus Pandemic, FINAL REPORT: COVID Select Concludes 2-Year Investigation, Issues 500+ Page Final Report on Lessons Learned and the Path Forward, December 2, 2024. https://oversight.house.gov/release/final-report-covid-select-concludes-2-year-investigation-issues-500-page-final-report-on-lessons-learned-and-the-path-forward/, accessed November 12, 2026.

[608] The White House, Lab Leak: The True Origins of Covid-19, April 18, 2025. https://www.whitehouse.gov/lab-leak-true-origins-of-covid-19/, accessed November 12, 2026.

[609] Office of the Director of National Intelligence, Fauci Funded Wuhan Lab Research That Sparked COVID (News Release No. 11-26), June 18, 2026. https://archive.dni.gov/index.php/newsroom/press-releases/press-releases-2026/4166-pr-11-26, accessed November 12, 2026.

[610] Office of the Director of National Intelligence, Fauci Funded Wuhan Lab Research That Sparked COVID (News Release No. 11-26), June 18, 2026. https://archive.dni.gov/index.php/newsroom/press-releases/press-releases-2026/4166-pr-11-26, accessed November 12, 2026.

"remain plausible."[611] The head of the World Health Organization said "all hypotheses must remain on the table, including zoonotic spillover and lab leak."[612]

Third, everyone agrees on what is missing. The U.S. intelligence community said in 2021 that China's cooperation "most likely would be needed" for a conclusive answer.[613] The World Health Organization said in 2025 that China had not provided early-case genetic sequences, detailed information on animals sold in Wuhan markets, or information on lab work and biosafety in Wuhan.[614]

There is also a point of wide agreement. The intelligence community's 2023 report said all agencies judged that the virus was not developed as a biological weapon.[615]

What would settle it: early patient samples and records from Wuhan, records of the animals sold at the market, and the Wuhan Institute of Virology's lab notebooks and virus databases.

Havana Syndrome

Starting in late 2016, U.S. Embassy staff in Havana, Cuba, reported unusual symptoms.[616] Later cases were reported elsewhere, and the government now calls them "anomalous health incidents."[617,618]

The official record here goes back and forth.

- In 2020, a National Academies of Sciences committee found that "directed, pulsed radio frequency energy appears to be the most plausible mechanism" among those it considered, though it could not rule out others.[619]

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[611] CBS News, CIA now says COVID most likely originated from a lab leak but has "low confidence" in its assessment, January 25, 2025. https://www.cbsnews.com/news/cia-covid-likely-originated-lab-low-confidence-assessment/, accessed November 12, 2026.

[612] World Health Organization, WHO Scientific Advisory Group issues report on origins of COVID-19, June 27, 2025. https://www.who.int/news/item/27-06-2025-who-scientific-advisory-group-issues-report-on-origins-of-covid-19, accessed November 12, 2026.

[613] Office of the Director of National Intelligence, Declassified Assessment on COVID-19 Origins, 2021. https://archive.dni.gov/files/ODNI/documents/assessments/Declassified-Assessment-on-COVID-19-Origins.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[614] World Health Organization, WHO Scientific Advisory Group issues report on origins of COVID-19, June 27, 2025. https://www.who.int/news/item/27-06-2025-who-scientific-advisory-group-issues-report-on-origins-of-covid-19, accessed November 12, 2026.

[615] Office of the Director of National Intelligence, Report on Potential Links Between the Wuhan Institute of Virology and the Origins of COVID-19, June 23, 2023. https://archive.dni.gov/files/ODNI/documents/assessments/Report-on-Potential-Links-Between-the-Wuhan-Institute-of-Virology-and-the-Origins-of-COVID-19-20230623.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[616] National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, New Report Assesses Illnesses Among U.S. Government Personnel and Their Families at Overseas Embassies, December 5, 2020. https://www.nationalacademies.org/news/new-report-assesses-illnesses-among-us-government-personnel-and-their-families-at-overseas-embassies, accessed November 12, 2026.

[617] National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, New Report Assesses Illnesses Among U.S. Government Personnel and Their Families at Overseas Embassies, December 5, 2020. https://www.nationalacademies.org/news/new-report-assesses-illnesses-among-us-government-personnel-and-their-families-at-overseas-embassies, accessed November 12, 2026.

[618] National Intelligence Council, Updated Assessment of Anomalous Health Incidents (ICA 2023-02286-B), March 1, 2023. https://archive.dni.gov/files/ODNI/documents/assessments/NIC-Unclassified-ICA-Updated-Assessment-AHI-March2023.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[619] National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, New Report Assesses Illnesses Among U.S. Government Personnel and Their Families at Overseas Embassies, December 5, 2020. https://www.nationalacademies.org/news/new-

- In 2021, Congress passed the HAVANA Act, which allows payments to affected employees for a "qualifying injury to the brain."[620]
- In March 2023, most intelligence agencies judged it "very unlikely" that a foreign adversary was responsible, and pointed to "preexisting conditions, conventional illnesses, and environmental factors."[621]
- In March 2024, an NIH (National Institutes of Health) researcher reported "no evidence of brain injury on the MRIs" of affected people.[622]
- In January 2025, an updated assessment kept most agencies at "very unlikely," but two agencies said, with low confidence, that there was a "roughly even chance" a foreign actor had used or developed a novel device that could have harmed a small number of people.[623]
- On June 11, 2026, House Intelligence Committee Chairman Rick Crawford said the Director of National Intelligence, Tulsi Gabbard, had pulled back the intelligence community's assessments.[624] The New York Times reported that her memo announced no new finding on the cause.[625]

As of this book's cutoff date, there is no current official conclusion on what caused these illnesses. The people who reported symptoms are not in doubt about having them. What is in doubt is the cause.

What would settle it: a released assessment with its evidence, or physical evidence of a device.

What these cases teach

In each case, ask the same questions from Chapter 3. Who made the record, and when? Can I see it? Does anything else back it up? An honest "inconclusive" is not a dodge. It tells you exactly what evidence is missing and who holds it.

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report-assesses-illnesses-among-us-government-personnel-and-their-families-at-overseas-embassies, accessed November 12, 2026.

[620] U.S. Congress, Public Law 117-46, Helping American Victims Afflicted by Neurological Attacks (HAVANA) Act of 2021, October 8, 2021. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/PLAW-117publ46/html/PLAW-117publ46.htm, accessed November 12, 2026.

[621] National Intelligence Council, Updated Assessment of Anomalous Health Incidents (ICA 2023-02286-B), March 1, 2023. https://archive.dni.gov/files/ODNI/documents/assessments/NIC-Unclassified-ICA-Updated-Assessment-AHI-March2023.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[622] National Institute of Biomedical Imaging and Bioengineering (NIH), NIH researchers find no evidence of 'Havana syndrome' in brain scans, March 18, 2024. https://www.nibib.nih.gov/news-events/newsroom/nih-researchers-find-no-evidence-havana-syndrome-brain-scans, accessed November 12, 2026.

[623] National Intelligence Council, Updated Assessment of Anomalous Health Incidents, as of December 2024 (ICA 2025-00008-B), January 10, 2025. https://archive.dni.gov/files/ODNI/documents/assessments/NIC-Unclassified-ICA-Updated-Assessment-AHI-December2024.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[624] House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, Chairman Crawford Statement on Director Gabbard's Recall of the Flawed Intelligence Community Assessments on AHI, June 11, 2026. https://intelligence.house.gov/2026/06/11/chairman-crawford-statement-on-director-gabbards-recall-of-the-flawed-intelligence-community-assessments-on-ahi/, accessed November 12, 2026.

[625] Julian E. Barnes, New York Times News Service (Hawaii Tribune-Herald), Gabbard revokes Biden-era assessments on mysterious ailments, June 12, 2026. https://www.hawaiitribune-herald.com/2026/06/12/nation-world-news/gabbard-revokes-biden-era-assessments-on-mysterious-ailments/, accessed November 12, 2026.

Part Five: How Secrets Come Out, and What Changed

Chapter 19: Whistleblowers, Reporters, Lawsuits and Records Requests

Chapter 3 promised an answer to a hard question: if the government can keep secrets, how do we ever find out? Part Two gave the answer case by case. This chapter puts the cases side by side so you can see the pattern.

How each true case came out

Table 19.1. How the true cases in this book became public

Case	What first broke the secret	What confirmed it
Tuskegee (1932-1972)	A Public Health Service employee, Peter Buxtun, gave documents to an Associated Press reporter; the story ran July 25, 1972[626]	Federal review panel, lawsuit settlement, presidential apology[627,628]
Radiation experiments	An Albuquerque Tribune series in November 1993 named people injected with plutonium[629]	Energy Secretary's disclosures and a presidential advisory committee[630,631]
MKUltra	Presidential and Senate investigations in 1975; seven boxes of records found by a CIA records officer in 1977[632]	Sworn testimony of the CIA Director and the surviving financial records[633]
COINTELPRO	Files taken in a March 1971 break-in at an FBI office in Media, Pennsylvania, and a reporter's	The Church Committee[635]

[626] Mike Stobbe, Associated Press (published by PBS NewsHour), Tuskegee syphilis study whistleblower dies at age 86, July 15, 2024. https://www.pbs.org/newshour/nation/tuskegee-syphilis-study-whistleblower-dies-at-age-86, accessed November 12, 2026.

[627] Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, The Untreated Syphilis Study at Tuskegee Timeline, undated. https://www.cdc.gov/tuskegee/about/timeline.html, accessed November 12, 2026.

[628] White House Office of the Press Secretary (Clinton White House archive), Remarks by the President in Apology for Study Done in Tuskegee, May 16, 1997. https://clintonwhitehouse4.archives.gov/textonly/New/Remarks/Fri/19970516-898.html, accessed November 12, 2026.

[629] Advisory Committee on Human Radiation Experiments, Final Report, Preface: Why the Committee Was Created, 1995. https://ehss.energy.gov/ohre/roadmap/achre/preface_2.html, accessed November 12, 2026.

[630] Advisory Committee on Human Radiation Experiments, Final Report, Preface: Why the Committee Was Created, 1995. https://ehss.energy.gov/ohre/roadmap/achre/preface_2.html, accessed November 12, 2026.

[631] The President (Federal Register), Executive Order 12891, Advisory Committee on Human Radiation Experiments, 59 FR 2935, January 15, 1994. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/FR-1994-01-20/html/94-1531.htm, accessed November 12, 2026.

[632] Senate Select Committee on Intelligence and Subcommittee on Health and Scientific Research, Project MKULTRA, the CIA's Program of Research in Behavioral Modification, joint hearing, August 3, 1977. https://www.intelligence.senate.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/sites-default-files-hearings-95mkultra.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[633] Senate Select Committee on Intelligence and Subcommittee on Health and Scientific Research, Project MKULTRA, the CIA's Program of Research in Behavioral Modification, joint hearing, August 3, 1977. https://www.intelligence.senate.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/sites-default-files-hearings-95mkultra.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

Case	What first broke the secret	What confirmed it
	Freedom of Information Act lawsuit[634]	
Gulf of Tonkin and Pentagon Papers	Daniel Ellsberg and Anthony Russo copied the secret study; The New York Times published it June 13, 1971[636]	The Supreme Court allowed publication; the NSA's own history later reviewed the August 4 incident[637,638]
Operation Northwoods	Declassification decades later; posted with a summary by the National Security Archive in 2001[639]	The memo itself[640]
Watergate	Reporting by The Washington Post with a secret FBI source[641,642]	Trials, the Senate committee, the President's own tapes, an 8 to 0 Supreme Court ruling[643,644]
Iran-Contra	A Lebanese magazine report in November 1986[645]	Attorney General's disclosure, a presidential review board, joint congressional committees and an independent counsel[646,647]

[635] Senate Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities (Church Committee), Final Report, Book III, COINTELPRO: The FBI's Covert Action Programs Against American Citizens (scan hosted by the Assassination Archives and Research Center), April 1976. http://www.aarclibrary.org/publib/church/reports/book3/pdf/ChurchB3_1_COINTELPRO.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[634] Senate Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities (Church Committee), Final Report, Book III, COINTELPRO: The FBI's Covert Action Programs Against American Citizens (scan hosted by the Assassination Archives and Research Center), April 1976. http://www.aarclibrary.org/publib/church/reports/book3/pdf/ChurchB3_1_COINTELPRO.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[636] National Archives, Press release 2011-225, Pentagon Papers release, June 2011. https://www.archives.gov/press/press-releases/2011-225, accessed November 12, 2026.

[637] U.S. Supreme Court (via Legal Information Institute, Cornell Law School), New York Times Co. v. United States, 403 U.S. 713, June 30, 1971. https://www.law.cornell.edu/supct/html/historics/USSC_CR_403_713_ZC.html, accessed November 12, 2026.

[638] National Security Agency, Gulf of Tonkin, Historical Releases, 2005-2006. https://www.nsa.gov/Helpful-Links/NSA-FOIA/Declassification-Transparency-Initiatives/Historical-Releases/Gulf-of-Tonkin/smdpage14697/3/, accessed November 12, 2026.

[639] National Security Archive, George Washington University, Pentagon Proposed Pretexts for Cuba Invasion in 1962, April 30, 2001. https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/news/20010430/, accessed November 12, 2026.

[640] Joint Chiefs of Staff (L. L. Lemnitzer) (posted by the National Security Archive), Memorandum for the Secretary of Defense, Justification for US Military Intervention in Cuba, March 13, 1962. https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/sites/default/files/2022-10/Joint-Chiefs-pretexts-to-invade-Cuba-March-1962_0.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[641] U.S. Senate Historical Office, Select Committee on Presidential Campaign Activities (The Watergate Committee), undated. https://www.senate.gov/about/powers-procedures/investigations/watergate.htm, accessed November 12, 2026.

[642] Samuel W. Rushay Jr., National Archives, The Nixon White House Tapes, Prologue, Vol. 39, No. 3, Fall 2007. https://www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/2007/fall/tapes, accessed November 12, 2026.

[643] U.S. Senate Historical Office, Select Committee on Presidential Campaign Activities (The Watergate Committee), undated. https://www.senate.gov/about/powers-procedures/investigations/watergate.htm, accessed November 12, 2026.

[644] U.S. Supreme Court, United States v. Nixon, 418 U.S. 683, July 24, 1974. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/USREPORTS-418/pdf/USREPORTS-418-683.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[645] U.S. Congress, Report of the Congressional Committees Investigating the Iran-Contra Affair, H. Rept. 100-433, S. Rept. 100-216, November 1987. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/SERIALSET-13810_00_00-002-0433-0000/pdf/SERIALSET-13810_00_00-002-0433-0000.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[646] U.S. Congress, Report of the Congressional Committees Investigating the Iran-Contra Affair, H. Rept. 100-433, S. Rept. 100-216, November 1987. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/SERIALSET-13810_00_00-002-0433-0000/pdf/SERIALSET-13810_00_00-002-0433-0000.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

Case	What first broke the secret	What confirmed it
NSA phone records	Court order leaked by Edward Snowden and published June 5, 2013[648]	Federal appeals courts, a presidential review group and Congress[649,650,651]

Look down the middle column. Every one of these started with a real document or a named source who could be checked. Look down the right column. Every one was then confirmed by someone with the power to demand records: a court, a congressional committee, an inspector general or a commission.

That two-step pattern, a document gets out and then official bodies confirm it, is the strongest reason I trust the true cases. It is also the test the false theories in Part Three failed.

The four routes

Insiders

Peter Buxtun objected inside the Public Health Service in 1966 and was criticized for it at a meeting in 1967.[652] Five years later he went to the press.[653] Daniel Ellsberg had worked on the Pentagon study he leaked.[654] Mark Felt, the FBI's number-two official, was the secret source for Watergate reporting.[655] Edward Snowden was a contractor with access to NSA systems.[656]

People disagree sharply about leakers, and I want to be fair to both sides. The law treats unauthorized disclosure of classified information as a crime. Snowden was charged in 2013 with

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[647] Lawrence E. Walsh, Independent Counsel, Final Report of the Independent Counsel for Iran/Contra Matters, Executive Summary, August 4, 1993. https://irp.fas.org/offdocs/walsh/execsum.htm, accessed November 12, 2026.

[648] U.S. Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit, ACLU v. Clapper, No. 14-42, 785 F.3d 787, May 7, 2015. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/USCOURTS-ca2-14-00042/pdf/USCOURTS-ca2-14-00042-0.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[649] U.S. Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit, ACLU v. Clapper, No. 14-42, 785 F.3d 787, May 7, 2015. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/USCOURTS-ca2-14-00042/pdf/USCOURTS-ca2-14-00042-0.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[650] President's Review Group on Intelligence and Communications Technologies, Liberty and Security in a Changing World, December 12, 2013. https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/sites/default/files/docs/2013-12-12_rg_final_report.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[651] U.S. Government Publishing Office, Public Law 114-23, USA FREEDOM Act of 2015, June 2, 2015. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/PLAW-114publ23/html/PLAW-114publ23.htm, accessed November 12, 2026.

[652] Mike Stobbe, Associated Press (published by PBS NewsHour), Tuskegee syphilis study whistleblower dies at age 86, July 15, 2024. https://www.pbs.org/newshour/nation/tuskegee-syphilis-study-whistleblower-dies-at-age-86, accessed November 12, 2026.

[653] Mike Stobbe, Associated Press (published by PBS NewsHour), Tuskegee syphilis study whistleblower dies at age 86, July 15, 2024. https://www.pbs.org/newshour/nation/tuskegee-syphilis-study-whistleblower-dies-at-age-86, accessed November 12, 2026.

[654] National Archives, Press release 2011-225, Pentagon Papers release, June 2011. https://www.archives.gov/press/press-releases/2011-225, accessed November 12, 2026.

[655] Samuel W. Rushay Jr., National Archives, The Nixon White House Tapes, Prologue, Vol. 39, No. 3, Fall 2007. https://www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/2007/fall/tapes, accessed November 12, 2026.

[656] House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, Executive Summary of Review of the Unauthorized Disclosures of Former NSA Contractor Edward Snowden, September 15, 2016. https://intelligence.house.gov/uploadedfiles/hpsci_snowden_review_-_unclass_summary_-_final.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

theft of government property and two Espionage Act offenses.[657] The House Intelligence Committee said in 2016 that he removed more than 1.5 million classified documents.[658] On the other side, a federal appeals court later held that the phone records program he exposed was not authorized by the law it relied on.[659] Both of those things are on the record. How you weigh them is a judgment, and this book does not make it for you.

Congress has built legal routes for insiders who want to report wrongdoing without leaking. The Whistleblower Protection Act of 1989 protects federal employees from retaliation.[660] In 1998, Congress passed a separate law giving intelligence employees a way to report "urgent concerns" to Congress.[661]

Reporters

The Associated Press, the Washington Post, the New York Times and the Albuquerque Tribune all broke cases in this book.[662,663,664,665] When the government tried to stop the Times from publishing the Pentagon Papers, the Supreme Court ruled 6 to 3 that it had not met its "heavy burden of showing justification."[666]

Lawsuits and courts

Courts forced records into the open. In Watergate, the Supreme Court ruled 8 to 0 that the President had to turn over his tapes.[667] In COINTELPRO, a reporter's lawsuit under the

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[657] U.S. Senate, S. Res. 198, 113th Congress (resolution on Edward Snowden), July 18, 2013. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/BILLS-113sres198is/html/BILLS-113sres198is.htm, accessed November 12, 2026.

[658] House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, Executive Summary of Review of the Unauthorized Disclosures of Former NSA Contractor Edward Snowden, September 15, 2016. https://intelligence.house.gov/uploadedfiles/hpsci_snowden_review_-_unclass_summary_-_final.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[659] U.S. Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit, ACLU v. Clapper, No. 14-42, 785 F.3d 787, May 7, 2015. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/USCOURTS-ca2-14-00042/pdf/USCOURTS-ca2-14-00042-0.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[660] U.S. Government Publishing Office, Public Law 101-12, 103 Stat. 16 (Whistleblower Protection Act of 1989), April 10, 1989. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/STATUTE-103/pdf/STATUTE-103-Pg16.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[661] U.S. Government Publishing Office, Public Law 105-272, 112 Stat. 2396, Title VII (Intelligence Community Whistleblower Protection Act), October 20, 1998. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/STATUTE-112/pdf/STATUTE-112-Pg2396.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[662] Mike Stobbe, Associated Press (published by PBS NewsHour), Tuskegee syphilis study whistleblower dies at age 86, July 15, 2024. https://www.pbs.org/newshour/nation/tuskegee-syphilis-study-whistleblower-dies-at-age-86, accessed November 12, 2026.

[663] U.S. Senate Historical Office, Select Committee on Presidential Campaign Activities (The Watergate Committee), undated. https://www.senate.gov/about/powers-procedures/investigations/watergate.htm, accessed November 12, 2026.

[664] National Archives, Press release 2011-225, Pentagon Papers release, June 2011. https://www.archives.gov/press/press-releases/2011-225, accessed November 12, 2026.

[665] Advisory Committee on Human Radiation Experiments, Final Report, Preface: Why the Committee Was Created, 1995. https://ehss.energy.gov/ohre/roadmap/achre/preface_2.html, accessed November 12, 2026.

[666] U.S. Supreme Court (via Legal Information Institute, Cornell Law School), New York Times Co. v. United States, 403 U.S. 713, June 30, 1971. https://www.law.cornell.edu/supct/html/historics/USSC_CR_403_713_ZC.html, accessed November 12, 2026.

[667] U.S. Supreme Court, United States v. Nixon, 418 U.S. 683, July 24, 1974. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/USREPORTS-418/pdf/USREPORTS-418-683.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

Freedom of Information Act pried loose more files.[668] In the NSA case, the American Civil Liberties Union's lawsuit led to the 2015 ruling against the phone records program.[669]

Records requests

The Freedom of Information Act (FOIA), signed into law in 1966, gives the public a right to ask for federal records.[670] In 1974, after Watergate, Congress strengthened it over President Ford's veto. The House voted 371 to 31 to override, and the Senate 65 to 27.[671,672]

FOIA matters in quieter ways too. The MKUltra financial records were found in 1977 by a CIA employee who handled Freedom of Information Act requests.[673] The National Security Archive used a FOIA review to get a less-redacted CIA history of Area 51 released in 2013.[674]

There is also automatic declassification. Under Executive Order 13526, signed in 2009, "No information may remain classified indefinitely," and classified records of permanent historical value are generally declassified automatically after 25 years, with listed exceptions.[675] Anyone can also ask for a "Mandatory Declassification Review" of a specific document.[676]

Why this matters for the false theories

You might ask, "Doesn't this just prove that secrets stay hidden for decades?" Sometimes they do. Tuskegee ran for forty years.[677] But look at what eventually happened. In every true case, the secret left documents behind, and once those documents surfaced, investigators confirmed them.

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[668] Senate Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities (Church Committee), Final Report, Book III, COINTELPRO: The FBI's Covert Action Programs Against American Citizens (scan hosted by the Assassination Archives and Research Center), April 1976. http://www.aarclibrary.org/publib/church/reports/book3/pdf/ChurchB3_1_COINTELPRO.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[669] U.S. Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit, ACLU v. Clapper, No. 14-42, 785 F.3d 787, May 7, 2015. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/USCOURTS-ca2-14-00042/pdf/USCOURTS-ca2-14-00042-0.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[670] U.S. Government Publishing Office, Public Law 89-487, 80 Stat. 250 (Freedom of Information Act), July 4, 1966. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/STATUTE-80/pdf/STATUTE-80-Pg250.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[671] U.S. Senate, Vetoes by President Gerald R. Ford, undated. https://www.senate.gov/legislative/vetoes/FordG.htm, accessed November 12, 2026.

[672] U.S. Government Publishing Office, Public Law 93-502, 88 Stat. 1561 (Freedom of Information Act Amendments), November 21, 1974. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/STATUTE-88/pdf/STATUTE-88-Pg1561.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[673] Senate Select Committee on Intelligence and Subcommittee on Health and Scientific Research, Project MKULTRA, the CIA's Program of Research in Behavioral Modification, joint hearing, August 3, 1977. https://www.intelligence.senate.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/sites-default-files-hearings-95mkultra.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[674] National Security Archive (ed. Jeffrey T. Richelson), Area 51: Electronic Briefing Book No. 434, August 15, 2013. https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB434/, accessed November 12, 2026.

[675] National Archives, Information Security Oversight Office, Executive Order 13526, Classified National Security Information, December 29, 2009. https://www.archives.gov/isoo/policy-documents/cnsi-eo.html, accessed November 12, 2026.

[676] National Archives, Information Security Oversight Office, Executive Order 13526, Classified National Security Information, December 29, 2009. https://www.archives.gov/isoo/policy-documents/cnsi-eo.html, accessed November 12, 2026.

[677] Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, The Untreated Syphilis Study at Tuskegee Timeline, undated. https://www.cdc.gov/tuskegee/about/timeline.html, accessed November 12, 2026.

The false theories in Part Three ask for something different: a secret involving huge numbers of people, kept for decades, that left no document any investigator has ever found, and that has outlasted leakers, reporters, lawsuits, records requests and automatic declassification. No proved case in this book looks like that.

Chapter 20: What Changed After the Secrets Came Out

Information in this chapter is current through November 12, 2026. The newest source it uses is dated June 22, 2026.

When a secret program comes out, the next question is: did anything change? The answer is yes, a great deal. But many of the guardrails can be loosened later, and some have been. This chapter lists the main reforms and what became of them.

The mid-1970s: the big rebuild

Most of today's oversight system was built in a few years after Watergate, the Pentagon Papers and the intelligence investigations.

Table 20.1. Major reforms after the secrets of the 1960s and 1970s

Year	Reform	What it did
1974	National Research Act	Created a commission on research ethics and required review boards at institutions doing federally funded research on people[678]
1974	FOIA amendments	Strengthened the Freedom of Information Act; Congress overrode President Ford's veto[679,680]
1974	Privacy Act	Gave people access to federal records about themselves and limited misuse of those records[681]
1974	Hughes-Ryan Amendment	Required the President to approve each CIA covert operation abroad and report it to Congress[682]
1976	Senate Select Committee on Intelligence	A permanent Senate committee to oversee the intelligence agencies[683]
1976	Attorney General guidelines for the FBI	First written limits on FBI domestic security investigations[684]

[678] U.S. Government Publishing Office, Public Law 93-348, 88 Stat. 342 (National Research Act), July 12, 1974. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/STATUTE-88/pdf/STATUTE-88-Pg342.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[679] U.S. Senate, Vetoes by President Gerald R. Ford, undated. https://www.senate.gov/legislative/vetoes/FordG.htm, accessed November 12, 2026.

[680] U.S. Government Publishing Office, Public Law 93-502, 88 Stat. 1561 (Freedom of Information Act Amendments), November 21, 1974. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/STATUTE-88/pdf/STATUTE-88-Pg1561.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[681] U.S. Government Publishing Office, Public Law 93-579, 88 Stat. 1896 (Privacy Act of 1974), December 31, 1974. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/STATUTE-88/pdf/STATUTE-88-Pg1896.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[682] U.S. Government Publishing Office, Public Law 93-559, 88 Stat. 1795, Section 32 (Hughes-Ryan Amendment), December 30, 1974. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/STATUTE-88/pdf/STATUTE-88-Pg1795.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[683] U.S. Senate Historical Office, The Senate Creates the Select Committee on Intelligence, undated. https://www.senate.gov/artandhistory/senate-stories/senate-creates-the-select-committee-on-intelligence.htm, accessed November 12, 2026.

Year	Reform	What it did
1977	House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence	The House's permanent oversight committee[685]
1978	Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act (FISA)	Created a special court that must approve national security wiretaps[686]
1978	Inspector General Act	Created independent inspectors general in many departments and agencies[687]
1979	Belmont Report	Set three principles for research on people: respect for persons, beneficence and justice[688]
1981	Executive Order 12333	Banned assassination and barred intelligence agencies from human-subject research without informed consent[689]

The Congressional Research Service calls Hughes-Ryan "the first statutory basis for congressional oversight and notification to Congress of covert action operations."[690] The Senate's historians say the Church Committee's work also led to FISA.[691]

Why the rules matter

Each reform answers a specific failure from Part Two.

- Tuskegee and the radiation experiments led to review boards and informed consent for research on people.[692,693]

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[684] U.S. Department of Justice, Office of the Inspector General, The FBI's Compliance with the Attorney General's Investigative Guidelines, Chapter 2, September 2005. https://oig.justice.gov/special/0509/chapter2.htm, accessed November 12, 2026.

[685] U.S. House of Representatives, H. Res. 658, 95th Congress, as agreed to (House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence), July 14, 1977. https://intelligence.house.gov/UploadedFiles/H.Res_658_passed_14_July_1977.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[686] U.S. Government Publishing Office, Public Law 95-511, 92 Stat. 1783 (Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act of 1978), October 25, 1978. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/STATUTE-92/pdf/STATUTE-92-Pg1783.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[687] U.S. Government Publishing Office, Public Law 95-452, 92 Stat. 1101 (Inspector General Act of 1978), October 12, 1978. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/STATUTE-92/pdf/STATUTE-92-Pg1101.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[688] Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, Protection of Human Subjects; Belmont Report, 44 Federal Register 23192, April 18, 1979. https://archive.epa.gov/osa/phre/web/pdf/belmont_report_frv44n76.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[689] National Archives, Office of the Federal Register, Executive Order 12333, United States Intelligence Activities, December 4, 1981. https://www.archives.gov/federal-register/codification/executive-order/12333.html, accessed November 12, 2026.

[690] Congressional Research Service, Congressional Oversight of Intelligence: Background and Selected Options for Further Reform (R45421), updated December 4, 2018. https://www.congress.gov/crs_external_products/R/PDF/R45421/R45421.2.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[691] U.S. Senate Historical Office, Senate Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities (The Church Committee), undated. https://www.senate.gov/about/powers-procedures/investigations/church-committee.htm, accessed November 12, 2026.

[692] U.S. Government Publishing Office, Public Law 93-348, 88 Stat. 342 (National Research Act), July 12, 1974. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/STATUTE-88/pdf/STATUTE-88-Pg342.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

- MKUltra led to a ban on drug testing on people who did not know, first by presidential order in 1975 and then in Executive Order 12333.[694,695]
- COINTELPRO led to written limits on FBI investigations of political groups.[696]
- Warrantless wiretaps led to FISA and its court.[697,698]
- Watergate led to stronger records laws and ethics laws.[699]

The catch: rules can be loosened

Some of these protections are laws passed by Congress. Others are executive orders or Attorney General guidelines that a later official can rewrite.

The FBI guidelines are the clearest example. Attorney General Edward Levi's 1976 rules required "specific and articulable facts" before a full investigation could open.[700] In 1983, Attorney General William French Smith replaced that with a looser "reasonable indication" standard.[701] No vote of Congress was needed.

So when you hear "that could never happen again because of the reforms," ask which kind of rule protects you. A law takes Congress to change. An executive order or guideline can change with a new administration.

The surveillance reforms of the 2000s and 2010s

The phone records case in Chapter 12 shows the cycle of secret program, exposure and reform playing out again.

- In 2015, the USA FREEDOM Act included a "Prohibition on bulk collection of tangible things" and added outside advisers called amicus curiae at the surveillance court.[702]

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[693] Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, Protection of Human Subjects; Belmont Report, 44 Federal Register 23192, April 18, 1979. https://archive.epa.gov/osa/phre/web/pdf/belmont_report_frv44n76.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[694] Commission on the Roles and Capabilities of the U.S. Intelligence Community, The Evolution of the U.S. Intelligence Community: An Historical Overview, 1996. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/GPO-INTELLIGENCE/html/int022.html, accessed November 12, 2026.

[695] National Archives, Office of the Federal Register, Executive Order 12333, United States Intelligence Activities, December 4, 1981. https://www.archives.gov/federal-register/codification/executive-order/12333.html, accessed November 12, 2026.

[696] U.S. Department of Justice, Office of the Inspector General, The FBI's Compliance with the Attorney General's Investigative Guidelines, Chapter 2, September 2005. https://oig.justice.gov/special/0509/chapter2.htm, accessed November 12, 2026.

[697] U.S. Government Publishing Office, Public Law 95-511, 92 Stat. 1783 (Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act of 1978), October 25, 1978. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/STATUTE-92/pdf/STATUTE-92-Pg1783.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[698] U.S. Senate Historical Office, Senate Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities (The Church Committee), undated. https://www.senate.gov/about/powers-procedures/investigations/church-committee.htm, accessed November 12, 2026.

[699] U.S. Senate Historical Office, Select Committee on Presidential Campaign Activities (The Watergate Committee), undated. https://www.senate.gov/about/powers-procedures/investigations/watergate.htm, accessed November 12, 2026.

[700] U.S. Department of Justice, Office of the Inspector General, The FBI's Compliance with the Attorney General's Investigative Guidelines, Chapter 2, September 2005. https://oig.justice.gov/special/0509/chapter2.htm, accessed November 12, 2026.

[701] U.S. Department of Justice, Office of the Inspector General, The FBI's Compliance with the Attorney General's Investigative Guidelines, Chapter 2, September 2005. https://oig.justice.gov/special/0509/chapter2.htm, accessed November 12, 2026.

[702] U.S. Government Publishing Office, Public Law 114-23, USA FREEDOM Act of 2015, June 2, 2015. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/PLAW-114publ23/html/PLAW-114publ23.htm, accessed November 12, 2026.

- In 2024, the Reforming Intelligence and Securing America Act required FBI personnel to get a supervisor's approval before searching Section 702 data for information about Americans.[703] A House Judiciary Committee report had described more than 278,000 improper FBI searches of Americans' communications, including Section 702 information.[704]
- On June 12, 2026, Section 702 expired after Congress did not agree on a renewal.[705] The Congressional Research Service reported that a court certification approved in March 2026 keeps existing orders in effect until it runs out.[706] As of November 12, 2026, no law renewing Section 702 had been enacted.[707] Chapter 12 has the full timeline.

Declassification

The rules for releasing old secrets have also changed. Executive Order 13526, signed December 29, 2009, says, "No information may remain classified indefinitely."[708] It set up automatic declassification of historically valuable records after 25 years, with exceptions, and created a National Declassification Center at the National Archives.[709]

What this chapter teaches

The true cases in this book were not just exposed. They changed the law. That is the strongest sign that the people who investigated them believed the evidence. Nobody rebuilds the oversight system over a rumor.

It also means the best protection against the next secret program is not suspicion of everything. It is knowing which guardrails exist, which ones are laws, and who is responsible for enforcing them.

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[703] U.S. Government Publishing Office, Public Law 118-49, Reforming Intelligence and Securing America Act, April 20, 2024. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/PLAW-118publ49/html/PLAW-118publ49.htm, accessed November 12, 2026.

[704] House Committee on the Judiciary, H. Rept. 118-307, Part 1, Protect Liberty and End Warrantless Surveillance Act of 2023, December 11, 2023. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CRPT-118hrpt307/html/CRPT-118hrpt307-pt1.htm, accessed November 12, 2026.

[705] Congressional Research Service, The Impact of FISA Section 702's Repeal (LSB11444), June 22, 2026. https://www.congress.gov/crs_external_products/LSB/PDF/LSB11444/LSB11444.1.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[706] Congressional Research Service, The Impact of FISA Section 702's Repeal (LSB11444), June 22, 2026. https://www.congress.gov/crs_external_products/LSB/PDF/LSB11444/LSB11444.1.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[707] U.S. Government Publishing Office, Public and Private Laws, 119th Congress (Public Laws 119-78 through 119-138), list checked November 12, 2026. https://www.govinfo.gov/app/collection/plaw/119, accessed November 12, 2026.

[708] National Archives, Information Security Oversight Office, Executive Order 13526, Classified National Security Information, December 29, 2009. https://www.archives.gov/isoo/policy-documents/cnsi-eo.html, accessed November 12, 2026.

[709] National Archives, Information Security Oversight Office, Executive Order 13526, Classified National Security Information, December 29, 2009. https://www.archives.gov/isoo/policy-documents/cnsi-eo.html, accessed November 12, 2026.

Part Six: Check It Yourself

Chapter 21: A Step-by-Step Method

You do not need a law degree or a security clearance to check a claim. You need a method and some patience. This chapter gives you the one I used to write this book. It builds on the four questions in Chapter 3.

Why a method helps

Remember the research from Chapter 3: false news on Twitter spread "farther, faster, deeper, and more broadly than the truth."[710] And remember Chapter 2: our brains are built to see patterns, sometimes ones that are not there.[711] A method slows you down just enough to beat both problems.

Researchers at Stanford studied how professional fact checkers, historians and college students judged online information. They set out to identify "the strategies fact checkers used to efficiently and effectively find trustworthy information," which they called lateral reading.[712] One library guide explains reading laterally as looking at what other sites say about a source.[713]

A teaching method called SIFT, created by Mike Caulfield, puts this into four moves: Stop; Investigate the source; Find better coverage; and Trace claims, quotes and media to the original context.[714] My method below folds those moves into eight steps.

The eight steps

Step 1. Stop and notice how you feel

SIFT's first step asks you to check your own emotions before you engage with a source.[715] If a claim makes you angry, scared or thrilled, that is the moment to slow down. False stories in the Twitter study drew more replies showing fear, disgust and surprise.[716]

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[710] Soroush Vosoughi, Deb Roy and Sinan Aral, The Spread of True and False News Online, Science 359(6380) (MIT Media Lab publication page), March 9, 2018. https://www.media.mit.edu/publications/the-spread-of-true-and-false-news-online/, accessed November 12, 2026.

[711] Jan-Willem van Prooijen, Karen M. Douglas and Clara De Inocencio, Connecting the dots: Illusory pattern perception predicts belief in conspiracies and the supernatural, European Journal of Social Psychology 48(3): 320-335, 2018. https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC5900972, accessed November 12, 2026.

[712] Sam Wineburg and Sarah McGrew, Lateral Reading and the Nature of Expertise: Reading Less and Learning More When Evaluating Digital Information (summary page), 2018. https://cor.inquirygroup.org/research/lateral-reading-and-the-nature-of-expertise, accessed November 12, 2026.

[713] St. Louis Community College Library, SIFT (Evaluating Sources guide), 2026. https://guides.stlcc.edu/evaluate_sources/sift, accessed November 12, 2026.

[714] St. Louis Community College Library, SIFT (Evaluating Sources guide), 2026. https://guides.stlcc.edu/evaluate_sources/sift, accessed November 12, 2026.

[715] St. Louis Community College Library, SIFT (Evaluating Sources guide), 2026. https://guides.stlcc.edu/evaluate_sources/sift, accessed November 12, 2026.

[716] Soroush Vosoughi, Deb Roy and Sinan Aral, The Spread of True and False News Online, Science 359(6380) (MIT Media Lab publication page), March 9, 2018. https://www.media.mit.edu/publications/the-spread-of-true-and-false-news-online/, accessed November 12, 2026.

Step 2. Write the claim down in one sentence

Vague claims cannot be checked. "The government is hiding something about 9/11" cannot be tested. "Explosives brought down World Trade Center 7" can. Chapter 15 showed how those two claims get different answers.

Step 3. Find out who is making it

Before reading closely, open a new tab and look up the source.[717] Is it a government agency, a court, a university, a news outlet with editors, an advocacy group or an anonymous account? Chapter 3's five tiers tell you how much weight to give each.

Step 4. Find the original

Trace the claim, quote or picture back to where it started.[718] If someone says "a declassified memo proves it," find the memo. When I did that for Operation Northwoods in Chapter 9, the memo turned out to be a proposal that asked for approval, not a record of anything done.[719]

Once you have the original, ask what kind of record it is. A proposal shows what officials were considering. An approval shows what they allowed. Contracts, payment records and later reports are what help show that something actually happened. If the records stop short, leave the question open and note what new record would settle it.

Step 5. Look for better coverage

If the source is weak or unclear, look for a stronger one on the same claim.[720] For government programs, the strongest sources are usually the records themselves: court rulings, congressional reports, inspector general reports and laws. Appendix B lists where to find them.

Step 6. Ask who else confirmed it

One source is a lead. Several independent sources reaching the same conclusion is evidence. MKUltra was confirmed by a presidential commission, a Senate committee and the CIA Director's own sworn testimony.[721,722,723] Check whether people with different interests, such as both parties on a committee, agree on the core facts.

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[717] St. Louis Community College Library, SIFT (Evaluating Sources guide), 2026. https://guides.stlcc.edu/evaluate_sources/sift, accessed November 12, 2026.

[718] St. Louis Community College Library, SIFT (Evaluating Sources guide), 2026. https://guides.stlcc.edu/evaluate_sources/sift, accessed November 12, 2026.

[719] Joint Chiefs of Staff (L. L. Lemnitzer) (posted by the National Security Archive), Memorandum for the Secretary of Defense, Justification for US Military Intervention in Cuba, March 13, 1962. https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/sites/default/files/2022-10/Joint-Chiefs-pretexts-to-invade-Cuba-March-1962_0.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[720] St. Louis Community College Library, SIFT (Evaluating Sources guide), 2026. https://guides.stlcc.edu/evaluate_sources/sift, accessed November 12, 2026.

[721] Commission on CIA Activities Within the United States (Rockefeller Commission), Report to the President, June 1975. https://www.fordlibrarymuseum.gov/library/document/0005/1561495.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[722] Senate Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities (Church Committee), Final Report, Book I: Foreign and Military Intelligence, S. Rep. No. 94-755, April 26, 1976. https://www.intelligence.senate.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/sites-default-files-94755-i.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

Step 7. Separate the parts

Most claims bundle a true part with a stretched part. "The NSA listens to all our calls" bundles a true fact, that the NSA collected records of most Americans' calls, with a false one, that it recorded what was said.[724] Sort each piece into confirmed, unproven or false.

Step 8. Ask what would change your mind

If nothing could ever prove a claim wrong, it cannot be tested. A good question to ask anyone, including yourself, is, "What evidence would make you drop this?" If the answer is "none," you are no longer dealing with evidence.

A worked example

Here is the method applied to a claim you may see: "The government admitted UFOs are real."

- **Step 2, the claim in one sentence:** The U.S. government has confirmed that alien spacecraft have visited Earth.
- **Step 3, who is saying it:** Usually posts or videos citing "Pentagon files."
- **Step 4, the original:** The Pentagon did release UFO files in 2026, and it did say of one 1972 photo that "there is no consensus about the nature of the anomaly."[725]
- **Step 5, better coverage:** The Pentagon's own investigating office reported that "no evidence suggests that a USG or private entity has ever captured or exploited UAP-derived materials."[726]
- **Step 7, separate the parts:** True, the government released files and some sightings are unexplained. False, that it confirmed alien visitors.
- **Result:** The claim stretches "unexplained" into "alien."

Training your judgment

Researchers have also tested whether people can be "inoculated" against manipulation. In a game called Bad News, created by Cambridge researchers Jon Roozenbeek and Sander van der Linden, players try to become "fake news tycoons" using six manipulation strategies.[727] The

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[723] Senate Select Committee on Intelligence and Subcommittee on Health and Scientific Research, Project MKULTRA, the CIA's Program of Research in Behavioral Modification, joint hearing, August 3, 1977. https://www.intelligence.senate.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/sites-default-files-hearings-95mkultra.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[724] U.S. Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit, ACLU v. Clapper, No. 14-42, 785 F.3d 787, May 7, 2015. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/USCOURTS-ca2-14-00042/pdf/USCOURTS-ca2-14-00042-0.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[725] Collin Binkley and Seung Min Kim, Associated Press (via OPB), Pentagon begins releasing new files on UFOs and says the public can draw its own conclusions, May 8, 2026. https://opb.org/article/2026/05/08/pentagon-ufo-files, accessed November 12, 2026.

[726] All-domain Anomaly Resolution Office, Department of Defense, FY2025 Consolidated Annual Report on Unidentified Anomalous Phenomena, 2026. https://www.aaro.mil/Portals/136/PDFs/FY25%20UAP%20Annual%20Report/AARO_FY2025_Consolidated_Annual_Report_on_UAP.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[727] Sander van der Linden and Jon Roozenbeek (Inforrm blog), Bad News: a psychological vaccine against fake news, September 7, 2019. https://inforrm.org/2019/09/07/bad-news-a-psychological-vaccine-against-fake-news-sander-van-der-linden-and-jon-rozenbeek/, accessed November 12, 2026.

researchers reported that "people significantly downgraded the reliability of fake (but not real!) news items after playing."[728] Learning how a trick works makes it easier to spot.

One more rule: apply it to your own side

The hardest step is using this method on claims you want to believe. In this book I tested theories popular on the left, on the right and everywhere. The method only works if it works the same way every time.

[728] Sander van der Linden and Jon Roozenbeek (Inforrm blog), Bad News: a psychological vaccine against fake news, September 7, 2019. https://inforrm.org/2019/09/07/bad-news-a-psychological-vaccine-against-fake-news-sander-van-der-linden-and-jon-rozenbeek/, accessed November 12, 2026.

Part Seven: Claims and Verdicts

Chapter 22: Twenty Claims Put to the Test

Information in this chapter is current through November 12, 2026. The newest source it uses is dated June 18, 2026.

This chapter takes twenty claims you are likely to hear and gives each one a verdict, using the four verdicts from the Introduction: True, Partly true, False (debunked) and Inconclusive. For each, I give the claim as people usually say it, what the records show, and the verdict. Where a claim is covered in its own chapter, I keep it short and point you there.

1. "The government ran secret experiments on Americans without their consent."

What the records show. Public Health Service officials let Black men with syphilis go untreated for forty years at Tuskegee.[729] Government-funded researchers injected people with plutonium and ran other radiation experiments, and a presidential committee investigated them in 1994 and 1995.[730,731] The CIA gave LSD to people who did not know it, and one man died in 1953.[732,733]

Verdict: True. Official investigations confirmed each of these programs from the government's own records, and President Clinton formally apologized for both Tuskegee and the radiation experiments.[734,735,736] See Chapters 4, 5 and 6.

2. "The FBI secretly worked to destroy activist and Black political groups."

What the records show. From 1956 to 1971, the FBI ran COINTELPRO programs against the Communist Party, the Socialist Workers Party, white hate groups including the Ku Klux Klan,

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[729] Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, The Untreated Syphilis Study at Tuskegee Timeline, undated. https://www.cdc.gov/tuskegee/about/timeline.html, accessed November 12, 2026.

[730] Advisory Committee on Human Radiation Experiments, Final Report, Preface: Why the Committee Was Created, 1995. https://ehss.energy.gov/ohre/roadmap/achre/preface_2.html, accessed November 12, 2026.

[731] Public Papers of the Presidents, 1995, Book II, Remarks on Accepting the Report of the Advisory Committee on Human Radiation Experiments, October 3, 1995. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/PPP-1995-book2/html/PPP-1995-book2-doc-pg1530.htm, accessed November 12, 2026.

[732] Senate Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities (Church Committee), Final Report, Book I: Foreign and Military Intelligence, S. Rep. No. 94-755, April 26, 1976, pp. 391-392. https://www.intelligence.senate.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/sites-default-files-94755-i.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[733] Commission on CIA Activities Within the United States (Rockefeller Commission), Report to the President, June 1975. https://www.fordlibrarymuseum.gov/library/document/0005/1561495.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[734] White House Office of the Press Secretary (Clinton White House archive), Remarks by the President in Apology for Study Done in Tuskegee, May 16, 1997. https://clintonwhitehouse4.archives.gov/textonly/New/Remarks/Fri/19970516-898.html, accessed November 12, 2026.

[735] Public Papers of the Presidents, 1995, Book II, Remarks on Accepting the Report of the Advisory Committee on Human Radiation Experiments, October 3, 1995. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/PPP-1995-book2/html/PPP-1995-book2-doc-pg1530.htm, accessed November 12, 2026.

[736] Senate Select Committee on Intelligence and Subcommittee on Health and Scientific Research, Project MKULTRA, the CIA's Program of Research in Behavioral Modification, joint hearing, August 3, 1977. https://www.intelligence.senate.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/sites-default-files-hearings-95mkultra.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

groups it labeled "Black Nationalist-Hate Groups," and the New Left.[737] Its methods included anonymous letters meant to break up marriages and falsely labeling people as police informers.[738]

Verdict: True. The Senate's Church Committee documented the programs from the FBI's own files.[739] Note that the programs targeted groups across the political spectrum, not only one side. See Chapter 7.

3. "The Gulf of Tonkin attack that led to the Vietnam War was exaggerated."

What the records show. There were two reported incidents. The NSA's own historian concluded that North Vietnamese boats did attack on August 2, 1964, but that the intercepted signals show no attack took place on August 4.[740] Congress passed the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution three days later.[741] The ship's commander had sent a message that day calling many reported contacts "doubtful," and the Senate's historians say those doubts were not shared with Congress.[742]

Verdict: True. The August 4 attack used to justify the resolution most likely did not happen. The August 2 attack did.[743] See Chapter 8.

4. "The military planned fake terror attacks on Americans to start a war."

What the records show. In March 1962, the Joint Chiefs of Staff sent the Defense Secretary a memo proposing staged incidents to justify invading Cuba, including "we could blow up a US ship in Guantanamo Bay and blame Cuba."[744] The memo asked for approval.[745] Three days later,

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[737] Senate Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities (Church Committee), Final Report, Book III, COINTELPRO: The FBI's Covert Action Programs Against American Citizens (scan hosted by the Assassination Archives and Research Center), April 1976. http://www.aarclibrary.org/publib/church/reports/book3/pdf/ChurchB3_1_COINTELPRO.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[738] Senate Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities (Church Committee), Final Report, Book III, COINTELPRO: The FBI's Covert Action Programs Against American Citizens (scan hosted by the Assassination Archives and Research Center), April 1976. http://www.aarclibrary.org/publib/church/reports/book3/pdf/ChurchB3_1_COINTELPRO.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[739] Senate Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities (Church Committee), Final Report, Book III, COINTELPRO: The FBI's Covert Action Programs Against American Citizens (scan hosted by the Assassination Archives and Research Center), April 1976. http://www.aarclibrary.org/publib/church/reports/book3/pdf/ChurchB3_1_COINTELPRO.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[740] National Security Archive, George Washington University, Gulf of Tonkin declassification, Electronic Briefing Book 132 (press release), December 1, 2005. https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB132/press20051201.htm, accessed November 12, 2026.

[741] National Archives, Tonkin Gulf Resolution (1964), Milestone Documents, undated. https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/tonkin-gulf-resolution, accessed November 12, 2026.

[742] U.S. Senate Historical Office, Chairman J. William Fulbright and the 1964 Tonkin Gulf Resolution, undated. https://www.senate.gov/artandhistory/senate-stories/chairman-fulbright-and-the-tonkin-gulf-resolution.htm, accessed November 12, 2026.

[743] National Security Archive, George Washington University, Gulf of Tonkin declassification, Electronic Briefing Book 132 (press release), December 1, 2005. https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB132/press20051201.htm, accessed November 12, 2026.

[744] Joint Chiefs of Staff (L. L. Lemnitzer) (posted by the National Security Archive), Memorandum for the Secretary of Defense, Justification for US Military Intervention in Cuba, March 13, 1962. https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/sites/default/files/2022-10/Joint-Chiefs-pretexts-to-invade-Cuba-March-1962_0.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

according to a State Department record, President Kennedy expressed skepticism about using U.S. forces at all.[746] No record I found shows any of the staged incidents was approved or carried out.

Verdict: Partly true. Planned and proposed, yes. Carried out, no. The memo does not show that any later event was staged. See Chapter 9.

5. "The NSA listens to all of our phone calls."

What the records show. For years the NSA collected records of most Americans' phone calls, including who called whom and for how long, but not the content of the calls.[747] A federal appeals court ruled in 2015 that the program was not authorized by the law it relied on, and Congress banned that kind of bulk collection the same year.[748,749]

Verdict: Partly true. Mass collection of call records was real. Recording everyone's calls was not shown. See Chapter 12.

6. "The CIA brought crack cocaine into Black neighborhoods."

What the records show. A 1996 newspaper series traced crack sold in Los Angeles to traffickers with ties to the CIA-backed Contras.[750] The CIA's Inspector General found no information that any past or present CIA employee dealt with the Los Angeles dealer or his two suppliers named in the series.[751] It also found "No information ... to indicate that CIA as an organization or its employees conspired with" Contra-related people to traffic drugs.[752] The Justice Department's Inspector General did not confirm a CIA-Contra drug conspiracy either.[753]

But the same reviews found real problems. The CIA kept contact with some people tied to a known trafficker, in six cases drug suspicions did not stop it from using individuals, and from

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[745] Joint Chiefs of Staff (L. L. Lemnitzer) (posted by the National Security Archive), Memorandum for the Secretary of Defense, Justification for US Military Intervention in Cuba, March 13, 1962. https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/sites/default/files/2022-10/Joint-Chiefs-pretexts-to-invade-Cuba-March-1962_0.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[746] U.S. Department of State, Office of the Historian, Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961-1963, Volume X, Cuba, Document 314, Guidelines for Operation Mongoose (with note on March 16, 1962 meeting with the President), March 14, 1962. https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1961-63v10/d314, accessed November 12, 2026.

[747] U.S. Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit, ACLU v. Clapper, No. 14-42, 785 F.3d 787, May 7, 2015, slip op. pp. 7-8. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/USCOURTS-ca2-14-00042/pdf/USCOURTS-ca2-14-00042-0.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[748] U.S. Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit, ACLU v. Clapper, No. 14-42, 785 F.3d 787, May 7, 2015. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/USCOURTS-ca2-14-00042/pdf/USCOURTS-ca2-14-00042-0.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[749] U.S. Government Publishing Office, Public Law 114-23, USA FREEDOM Act of 2015, June 2, 2015. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/PLAW-114publ23/html/PLAW-114publ23.htm, accessed November 12, 2026.

[750] Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, Allegations of a CIA Connection to Crack Cocaine Epidemic, S. Hrg. 104-865 (hearings of October 23 and November 26, 1996), 1997. https://www.intelligence.senate.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/sites-default-files-hearings-allegationsofcia00unit.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[751] Central Intelligence Agency, Office of Inspector General, Report of Investigation: Allegations of Connections Between CIA and the Contras in Cocaine Trafficking to the United States, Volume I, Summary (FAS copy), 1998. https://irp.fas.org/cia/product/cocaine/summary.html, accessed November 12, 2026.

[752] Central Intelligence Agency, Office of Inspector General, Report of Investigation, Volume II: The Contra Story, Introduction (FAS copy), 1998. https://irp.fas.org/cia/product/cocaine2/intro.html, accessed November 12, 2026.

[753] U.S. Department of Justice, Office of the Inspector General, The CIA-Contra-Crack Cocaine Controversy: A Review of the Justice Department's Investigations and Prosecutions, Conclusions, December 1997. https://oig.justice.gov/sites/default/files/archive/special/9712/exsump3.htm, accessed November 12, 2026.

1982 to 1995 an agreement between the CIA and Justice Department did not require the CIA to report drug crimes by its agents and contractors.[754] The Justice Department's Inspector General found that "the CIA did in fact intervene" in one drug case.[755] A 1989 Senate subcommittee report, as quoted by the National Security Archive, found that "senior U.S. policy makers were not immune to the idea that drug money was a perfect solution to the Contras' funding problems."[756] A former investigator for that subcommittee testified that U.S. "policymakers absolutely closed their eyes to the criminal behavior of our allies" in that war, but answered "a categorical no" to whether the CIA sold drugs in Los Angeles to fund the Contras.[757]

Verdict: Partly true. Some people the CIA worked with were drug traffickers, and the CIA looked the other way at times. No investigation found that the CIA brought crack into Black neighborhoods as a plan.

7. "The government lied about weapons of mass destruction in Iraq."

What the records show. On February 5, 2003, Secretary of State Colin Powell told the United Nations Security Council that the U.S. had "firsthand descriptions of biological weapons factories on wheels and on rails."[758] After the invasion, a presidential commission concluded in 2005 that "the Intelligence Community was dead wrong in almost all of its pre-war judgments about Iraq's weapons of mass destruction."[759] The same commission "found no indication that the Intelligence Community distorted the evidence," and wrote that intelligence professionals "were simply wrong."[760] The Senate Intelligence Committee also reviewed the prewar intelligence in 2004 and, in 2008, examined whether officials' public statements were backed by the intelligence.[761,762] [Not verified: the detailed findings of the 2004 and 2008 Senate reports and the committee vote on them. I could open only their titles and dates.]

Verdict: Partly true. The central claims about weapons were false. Whether officials knowingly lied, rather than relying on bad intelligence, is not settled by the records I could open.

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754 Central Intelligence Agency, Office of Inspector General, Report of Investigation, Volume II: The Contra Story, Introduction (FAS copy), 1998. https://irp.fas.org/cia/product/cocaine2/intro.html, accessed November 12, 2026.

755 U.S. Department of Justice, Office of the Inspector General, The CIA-Contra-Crack Cocaine Controversy: A Review of the Justice Department's Investigations and Prosecutions, Conclusions, December 1997. https://oig.justice.gov/sites/default/files/archive/special/9712/exsump3.htm, accessed November 12, 2026.

756 National Security Archive, George Washington University, The Contras, Cocaine, and Covert Operations, Electronic Briefing Book No. 2, undated. https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu//NSAEBB/NSAEBB2/index.html, accessed November 12, 2026.

757 Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, Allegations of a CIA Connection to Crack Cocaine Epidemic, S. Hrg. 104-865 (hearings of October 23 and November 26, 1996), 1997. https://www.intelligence.senate.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/sites-default-files-hearings-allegationsofcia00unit.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

758 The White House (George W. Bush archive), U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell Addresses the U.N. Security Council, February 5, 2003. https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2003/02/20030205-1.html, accessed November 12, 2026.

759 Commission on the Intelligence Capabilities of the United States Regarding Weapons of Mass Destruction, Report to the President of the United States (transmittal letter), March 31, 2005. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/GPO-WMD/pdf/GPO-WMD.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

760 Commission on the Intelligence Capabilities of the United States Regarding Weapons of Mass Destruction, Report to the President of the United States (transmittal letter), March 31, 2005. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/GPO-WMD/pdf/GPO-WMD.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

761 Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, S. Rept. 108-301, Report on the U.S. Intelligence Community's Prewar Intelligence Assessments on Iraq, July 9, 2004. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CRPT-108srpt301/pdf/CRPT-108srpt301.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

762 Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, Senate Intelligence Committee Unveils Final Phase II Reports on Prewar Iraq Intelligence, June 5, 2008. https://www.intelligence.senate.gov/2008/06/05/press-senate-intelligence-committee-unveils-final-phase-ii-reports-prewar-iraq-intelligence/, accessed November 12, 2026.

The presidential commission that did investigate found no distortion by the intelligence agencies.

8. "The CIA controls the news media (Operation Mockingbird)."

What the records show. The documented "Project Mockingbird" was a 1963 CIA wiretap on two reporters.[763] Separately, the Church Committee found the CIA had covert relationships with about 50 American journalists or media employees until 1976.[764] The CIA announced limits in 1976, and Congress set a policy in 1996 that allows exceptions only by written waiver.[765,766]

Verdict: Partly true. The CIA did use journalists and wiretapped reporters. The claim that it controls the news media has no documentary support. See Chapter 18.

9. "The moon landings were faked."

Verdict: False (debunked). Six landings, 382 kilograms of returned samples, mirrors still used by observatories, and photographs of the landing sites from lunar orbit all confirm them.[767,768,769,770] See Chapter 13.

10. "Jet contrails are chemicals sprayed on us."

Verdict: False (debunked). The EPA says the federal government knows of no contrail ever intentionally formed over the United States for geoengineering or weather modification.[771] Real weather modification programs exist, but they are documented and are not contrails.[772] See Chapter 14.

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[763] Central Intelligence Agency (posted by the National Security Archive), "Family Jewels" compilation, Part 1, with cover memorandum of May 16, 1973, 1973. https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB222/family_jewels_pt1_ocr.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[764] Senate Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities (Church Committee), Final Report, Book I: Foreign and Military Intelligence, S. Rep. No. 94-755, April 26, 1976. https://www.intelligence.senate.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/sites-default-files-94755-i.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[765] Senate Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities (Church Committee), Final Report, Book I: Foreign and Military Intelligence, S. Rep. No. 94-755, April 26, 1976. https://www.intelligence.senate.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/sites-default-files-94755-i.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[766] U.S. Government Publishing Office, Public Law 104-293, Intelligence Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 1997, Section 309, October 11, 1996. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/PLAW-104publ293/html/PLAW-104publ293.htm, accessed November 12, 2026.

[767] NASA, The Apollo Program, undated web page. https://www.nasa.gov/the-apollo-program/, accessed November 12, 2026.

[768] NASA Johnson Space Center, Astromaterials 3D, Apollo Lunar Samples, undated web page. https://ares.jsc.nasa.gov/Astromaterials3D/apollo-lunar.htm, accessed November 12, 2026.

[769] T. W. Murphy Jr. and others, APOLLO: the Apache Point Observatory Lunar Laser-ranging Operation: Instrument Description and First Detections (arXiv:0710.0890), 2007. https://arxiv.org/abs/0710.0890, accessed November 12, 2026.

[770] NASA Goddard Scientific Visualization Studio, New LRO Images Offer Sharper Views of Apollo 12, 14, and 17 Sites, September 6, 2011. https://svs.gsfc.nasa.gov/10818/, accessed November 12, 2026.

[771] U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, Information on Contrails from Aircraft (last updated July 1, 2026), July 1, 2026. https://www.epa.gov/regulations-emissions-vehicles-and-engines/information-contrails-aircraft, accessed November 12, 2026.

[772] U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, Geoengineering: Frequent Questions (last updated August 19, 2026), August 19, 2026. https://www.epa.gov/geoengineering/frequent-questions, accessed November 12, 2026.

11. "9/11 was an inside job."

Verdict: False (debunked) for the claim that the government planned or carried out the attacks. The 9/11 Commission traced the plot to al Qaeda, and NIST found no evidence of explosives in World Trade Center 7.[773,774] The government did fail to act on warning signs, which the commission found in detail.[775] See Chapter 15.

12. "The government has alien bodies at Area 51."

Verdict: False (debunked). Area 51 was a real secret base for spy planes, and the government did hide that some UFO sightings were its own aircraft.[776,777] But the Pentagon's investigating office reported that "no evidence suggests that a USG or private entity has ever captured or exploited UAP-derived materials."[778] See Chapter 16.

13. "Fluoride in water is a plot to control people."

Verdict: False (debunked) for the plot. Fluoridation was adopted in public as a health measure.[779] Whether today's level is safe for children is a real and unsettled scientific and legal debate.[780,781] See Chapter 17.

14. "The U.S. government created AIDS."

What the records show. This claim was spread on purpose by a foreign intelligence service. A CIA history by Thomas Boghardt traces it to an anonymous letter published in July 1983 in a small Indian newspaper, which claimed AIDS came from Pentagon experiments.[782] In 1985, a Soviet newspaper that Boghardt calls the KGB's "prime conduit" for propaganda revived the

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[773] National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, The 9/11 Commission Report, July 22, 2004. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/GPO-911REPORT/pdf/GPO-911REPORT.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[774] National Institute of Standards and Technology, WTC 7 Technical Briefing (revised), November 19, 2008. https://www.nist.gov/system/files/documents/2017/05/09/WTC7RevisedTechnicalBriefing_111908.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[775] National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, The 9/11 Commission Report, July 22, 2004, p. 339. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/GPO-911REPORT/pdf/GPO-911REPORT.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[776] National Security Archive (ed. Jeffrey T. Richelson), Area 51: Electronic Briefing Book No. 434, August 15, 2013. https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB434/, accessed November 12, 2026.

[777] Gerald K. Haines, CIA Center for the Study of Intelligence, A Die-Hard Issue: CIA's Role in the Study of UFOs, 1947-90, undated (about 1997). https://www.cia.gov/resources/csi/static/cia-role-study-UFOs.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[778] All-domain Anomaly Resolution Office, Department of Defense, FY2025 Consolidated Annual Report on Unidentified Anomalous Phenomena, 2026. https://www.aaro.mil/Portals/136/PDFs/FY25%20UAP%20Annual%20Report/AARO_FY2025_Consolidated_Annual_Report_on_UAP.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[779] Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Timeline for Community Water Fluoridation, May 15, 2024. https://www.cdc.gov/fluoridation/timeline-for-community-water-fluoridation/index.html, accessed November 12, 2026.

[780] National Toxicology Program, National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences, NTP Monograph on the State of the Science Concerning Fluoride Exposure and Neurodevelopment and Cognition (abstract), August 2024. https://ntp.niehs.nih.gov/go/mgraph08abs, accessed November 12, 2026.

[781] Beveridge and Diamond, Ninth Circuit Vacates Order Requiring EPA to Regulate Fluoridation of Drinking Water under TSCA, June 1, 2026. https://www.bdlaw.com/publications/ninth-circuit-vacates-order-requiring-epa-to-regulate-fluoridation-of-drinking-water-under-tsca/, accessed November 12, 2026.

[782] Thomas Boghardt, CIA Studies in Intelligence 53(4), Operation INFEKTION: Soviet Bloc Intelligence and Its AIDS Disinformation Campaign, December 2009. https://www.cia.gov/resources/csi/static/1-Operation_INFEKTION_Soviet_Bloc_AIDS_Disinformation_Campaign.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

story, and East German intelligence joined the campaign under the code name INFEKTION.[783] By late 1987, the story had appeared in the media of 80 countries.[784] After U.S. Secretary of State George Shultz raised it with Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev in 1987, the Soviet Academy of Sciences disavowed it.[785]

Scientists studying the virus's genetic history estimated in 2014 that the pandemic strain's common ancestor was "highly likely to have emerged in Kinshasa around 1920," decades before any of the alleged experiments.[786]

The claim did real harm. A 2005 study of African Americans found that a significant share held HIV/AIDS conspiracy beliefs, and among men those beliefs were linked to inconsistent condom use.[787] The researchers urged health agencies to acknowledge the historical roots of these beliefs, which include Tuskegee.[788]

Verdict: False (debunked). The virus emerged decades before the claimed experiments, and the story itself was a documented foreign disinformation campaign.[789,790] Boghardt's account is a CIA publication; I note that because the CIA is a party to this story. Its key facts, including the Soviet Academy's disavowal, are specific and checkable.

15. "Barack Obama was not born in the United States."

What the records show. Hawaii's health director, Dr. Chiyome Fukino, said in 2009 that she had "seen the original vital records maintained on file by the Hawaii State Department of Health verifying Barack Hussein Obama was born in Hawaii."[791] A birth announcement ran in the Honolulu Advertiser on August 13, 1961.[792] In 2011, the White House published his long-form

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[783] Thomas Boghardt, CIA Studies in Intelligence 53(4), Operation INFEKTION: Soviet Bloc Intelligence and Its AIDS Disinformation Campaign, December 2009. https://www.cia.gov/resources/csi/static/1-Operation_INFEKTION_Soviet_Bloc_AIDS_Disinformation_Campaign.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[784] Thomas Boghardt, CIA Studies in Intelligence 53(4), Operation INFEKTION: Soviet Bloc Intelligence and Its AIDS Disinformation Campaign, December 2009. https://www.cia.gov/resources/csi/static/1-Operation_INFEKTION_Soviet_Bloc_AIDS_Disinformation_Campaign.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[785] Thomas Boghardt, CIA Studies in Intelligence 53(4), Operation INFEKTION: Soviet Bloc Intelligence and Its AIDS Disinformation Campaign, December 2009. https://www.cia.gov/resources/csi/static/1-Operation_INFEKTION_Soviet_Bloc_AIDS_Disinformation_Campaign.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[786] University of Oxford (via ScienceDaily), reporting Faria and others, Science 346(6205):56, Origins of HIV pandemic traced to 1920s Kinshasa, October 4, 2014. https://sciencedaily.com/releases/2014/10/141002141759.htm, accessed November 12, 2026.

[787] Laura M. Bogart and Sheryl Thorburn, Journal of Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndromes 38(2):213-218, Are HIV/AIDS Conspiracy Beliefs a Barrier to HIV Prevention Among African Americans?, February 1, 2005. https://www.rand.org/pubs/external_publications/EP20050201.html, accessed November 12, 2026.

[788] Laura M. Bogart and Sheryl Thorburn, Journal of Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndromes 38(2):213-218, Are HIV/AIDS Conspiracy Beliefs a Barrier to HIV Prevention Among African Americans?, February 1, 2005. https://www.rand.org/pubs/external_publications/EP20050201.html, accessed November 12, 2026.

[789] University of Oxford (via ScienceDaily), reporting Faria and others, Science 346(6205):56, Origins of HIV pandemic traced to 1920s Kinshasa, October 4, 2014. https://sciencedaily.com/releases/2014/10/141002141759.htm, accessed November 12, 2026.

[790] Thomas Boghardt, CIA Studies in Intelligence 53(4), Operation INFEKTION: Soviet Bloc Intelligence and Its AIDS Disinformation Campaign, December 2009. https://www.cia.gov/resources/csi/static/1-Operation_INFEKTION_Soviet_Bloc_AIDS_Disinformation_Campaign.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[791] CBS News, Hawaii Confirms Obama's Birthplace, Again, July 28, 2009. https://www.cbsnews.com/news/hawaii-confirms-obamas-birthplace-again, accessed November 12, 2026.

[792] Jess Henig, FactCheck.org, Born in the U.S.A., August 21, 2008 (updated April 27, 2011). https://www.factcheck.org/2008/08/born-in-the-usa/, accessed November 12, 2026.

birth certificate.[793] A federal appeals court called one appeal on the issue frivolous, though it decided the case on standing and did not rule on where he was born.[794] In 2016, Donald Trump, who had promoted the claim, said: "President Barack Obama was born in the United States. Period."[795]

Verdict: False (debunked).

16. "The government has prison camps ready to round up Americans (FEMA camps)."

What the records show. There is a real seed. A congressman told the House in 2003 that a 1987 Miami Herald article had reported martial-law contingency planning in the early 1980s that involved a FEMA official and Oliver North, and he said the plans were never used.[796] That is secondhand reporting read into the record, not the plan itself. In 2015, a real Army training exercise called Jade Helm 15 led to fears of martial law in Texas; Governor Greg Abbott ordered the State Guard to monitor it.[797] The exercise ended in September 2015 without incident.[798] PolitiFact reviewed the camp theories in 2024 and found no evidence FEMA has ever run detention camps.[799]

Verdict: False (debunked) for the claim that camps exist and are waiting to be used. [Not verified: the original 1987 Miami Herald article and any underlying planning documents. I found only the 2003 floor statement describing them.]

17. "HAARP controls the weather."

Verdict: False (debunked). The University of Alaska Fairbanks, which runs HAARP, says its radio waves are not absorbed where weather happens, so "there is no way to control the

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[793] Dan Pfeiffer, The White House (archived), President Obama's Long Form Birth Certificate, April 27, 2011. https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/blog/2011/04/27/president-obamas-long-form-birth-certificate, accessed November 12, 2026.

[794] U.S. Court of Appeals for the Third Circuit, Kerchner v. Obama, No. 09-4209, July 2, 2010. https://www2.ca3.uscourts.gov/opinarch/094209p.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[795] Aaron Sharockman, PolitiFact, Full flop: Donald Trump abandons Barack Obama birther claim, September 16, 2016. https://www.politifact.com/factchecks/2016/sep/16/donald-trump/full-flop-donald-trump-abandons-barack-obama-birth, accessed November 12, 2026.

[796] Congressional Record, House, Martial Law Concerns (statement of Rep. Jim McDermott), p. H1724, March 11, 2003. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CREC-2003-03-11/html/CREC-2003-03-11-pt1-PgH1724.htm, accessed November 12, 2026.

[797] Office of the Texas Governor, Governor Abbott Directs Texas State Guard To Monitor Operation Jade Helm 15, April 28, 2015. https://gov.texas.gov/news/post/governor_abbott_directs_texas_state_guard_to_monitor_operation_jade_helm_15, accessed November 12, 2026.

[798] CBS News and Associated Press, 'Jade Helm' is over, and Texas is still standing, September 16, 2015. https://www.cbsnews.com/news/jade-helm-15-army-war-simulation-over-texas-still-standing, accessed November 12, 2026.

[799] Jeff Cercone, PolitiFact (republished by WUSF), FEMA conspiracy theories have existed for decades. How the internet has amplified them, October 24, 2024. https://www.wusf.org/politics-issues/2024-10-24/fema-conspiracy-theories-have-existed-for-decades-how-the-internet-has-amplified-them, accessed November 12, 2026.

weather."[800] The EPA says HAARP is not classified and knows of no evidence of nefarious activity.[801] See Chapter 14.

18. "Voting machines changed votes to steal the 2020 election."

This claim is covered in depth in the Elections book in this series. Here is the short version.

What the records show. Georgia counted every presidential ballot by hand in November 2020, and the Secretary of State said the hand count confirmed the original machine count.[802] Attorney General William Barr said in December 2020 that the Justice Department and the Department of Homeland Security had looked into claims that machines were programmed to skew results and "had not found anything to substantiate them," according to NPR.[803] In January 2026, the FBI executed a search warrant at the Fulton County, Georgia, elections office for 2020 records and ballots.[804] As of this book's cutoff date, no official finding from that search showing machines changed votes had been released.

Verdict: False (debunked) for the claim that machines changed the outcome, based on the hand count and federal reviews.[805,806] If the 2026 federal inquiry produces evidence, this verdict should be revisited.

19. "COVID-19 came from a lab in Wuhan."

Verdict: Inconclusive. U.S. agencies, Congress, the White House and the World Health Organization disagree, and key data from China has not been provided.[807,808,809,810] All U.S.

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[800] Geophysical Institute, University of Alaska Fairbanks, HAARP Frequently Asked Questions, page viewed November 12, 2026. https://haarp.gi.alaska.edu/faq, accessed November 12, 2026.

[801] U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, Information on Contrails from Aircraft (last updated July 1, 2026), July 1, 2026. https://www.epa.gov/regulations-emissions-vehicles-and-engines/information-contrails-aircraft, accessed November 12, 2026.

[802] Georgia Secretary of State, Historic First Statewide Audit of Paper Ballots Upholds Result of Presidential Race, November 19, 2020. https://sos.ga.gov/news/historic-first-statewide-audit-paper-ballots-upholds-result-presidential-race, accessed November 12, 2026.

[803] NPR, Barr Says No Election Fraud Has Been Found By Federal Authorities, December 1, 2020. https://www.npr.org/2020/12/01/940819896/barr-says-no-election-fraud-has-been-found-by-federal-authorities, accessed November 12, 2026.

[804] NPR, The FBI executes a search warrant for 2020 election ballots in Georgia's Fulton County, January 28, 2026. https://www.npr.org/2026/01/28/nx-s1-5691764/fulton-county-fbi-search-election, accessed November 12, 2026.

[805] Georgia Secretary of State, Historic First Statewide Audit of Paper Ballots Upholds Result of Presidential Race, November 19, 2020. https://sos.ga.gov/news/historic-first-statewide-audit-paper-ballots-upholds-result-presidential-race, accessed November 12, 2026.

[806] NPR, Barr Says No Election Fraud Has Been Found By Federal Authorities, December 1, 2020. https://www.npr.org/2020/12/01/940819896/barr-says-no-election-fraud-has-been-found-by-federal-authorities, accessed November 12, 2026.

[807] Office of the Director of National Intelligence, Report on Potential Links Between the Wuhan Institute of Virology and the Origins of COVID-19, June 23, 2023. https://archive.dni.gov/files/ODNI/documents/assessments/Report-on-Potential-Links-Between-the-Wuhan-Institute-of-Virology-and-the-Origins-of-COVID-19-20230623.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[808] House Select Subcommittee on the Coronavirus Pandemic, FINAL REPORT: COVID Select Concludes 2-Year Investigation, Issues 500+ Page Final Report on Lessons Learned and the Path Forward, December 2, 2024. https://oversight.house.gov/release/final-report-covid-select-concludes-2-year-investigation-issues-500-page-final-report-on-lessons-learned-and-the-path-forward/, accessed November 12, 2026.

[809] World Health Organization, WHO Scientific Advisory Group issues report on origins of COVID-19, June 27, 2025. https://www.who.int/news/item/27-06-2025-who-scientific-advisory-group-issues-report-on-origins-of-covid-19, accessed November 12, 2026.

intelligence agencies agreed in 2023 that the virus was not developed as a biological weapon.[811] What would settle it: early patient samples, market animal records, and the Wuhan lab's records. See Chapter 18.

20. "Havana Syndrome is caused by a foreign energy weapon."

Verdict: Inconclusive. A 2020 National Academies committee called directed radio frequency energy the most plausible mechanism it considered, but most intelligence agencies later judged a foreign adversary very unlikely, NIH researchers found no brain injury on MRIs, and the intelligence assessments were recalled in June 2026 without a new finding.[812,813,814,815] See Chapter 18.

[810] Office of the Director of National Intelligence, Fauci Funded Wuhan Lab Research That Sparked COVID (News Release No. 11-26), June 18, 2026. https://archive.dni.gov/index.php/newsroom/press-releases/press-releases-2026/4166-pr-11-26, accessed November 12, 2026.

[811] Office of the Director of National Intelligence, Report on Potential Links Between the Wuhan Institute of Virology and the Origins of COVID-19, June 23, 2023. https://archive.dni.gov/files/ODNI/documents/assessments/Report-on-Potential-Links-Between-the-Wuhan-Institute-of-Virology-and-the-Origins-of-COVID-19-20230623.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[812] National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, New Report Assesses Illnesses Among U.S. Government Personnel and Their Families at Overseas Embassies, December 5, 2020. https://www.nationalacademies.org/news/new-report-assesses-illnesses-among-us-government-personnel-and-their-families-at-overseas-embassies, accessed November 12, 2026.

[813] National Intelligence Council, Updated Assessment of Anomalous Health Incidents, as of December 2024 (ICA 2025-00008-B), January 10, 2025. https://archive.dni.gov/files/ODNI/documents/assessments/NIC-Unclassified-ICA-Updated-Assessment-AHI-December2024.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[814] National Institute of Biomedical Imaging and Bioengineering (NIH), NIH researchers find no evidence of 'Havana syndrome' in brain scans, March 18, 2024. https://www.nibib.nih.gov/news-events/newsroom/nih-researchers-find-no-evidence-havana-syndrome-brain-scans, accessed November 12, 2026.

[815] Julian E. Barnes, New York Times News Service (Hawaii Tribune-Herald), Gabbard revokes Biden-era assessments on mysterious ailments, June 12, 2026. https://www.hawaiitribune-herald.com/2026/06/12/nation-world-news/gabbard-revokes-biden-era-assessments-on-mysterious-ailments/, accessed November 12, 2026.

Chapter 23: What the Verdicts Show

Here are all twenty verdicts from Chapter 22 in one place, current through November 12, 2026.

Table 23.1. Twenty claims and their verdicts (current through November 12, 2026)

#	Claim	Verdict
1	Secret experiments on Americans without consent	True
2	The FBI secretly worked to destroy activist and Black political groups	True
3	The Gulf of Tonkin attack was exaggerated	True
4	The military planned fake attacks to start a war	Partly true
5	The NSA listens to all our phone calls	Partly true
6	The CIA brought crack into Black neighborhoods	Partly true
7	The government lied about Iraq's weapons	Partly true
8	The CIA controls the news media	Partly true
9	The moon landings were faked	False (debunked)
10	Contrails are chemicals sprayed on us	False (debunked)
11	9/11 was an inside job	False (debunked)
12	Alien bodies at Area 51	False (debunked)
13	Fluoride is a plot to control people	False (debunked)
14	The U.S. government created AIDS	False (debunked)
15	Obama was not born in the United States	False (debunked)
16	FEMA camps are ready to round up Americans	False (debunked)
17	HAARP controls the weather	False (debunked)
18	Voting machines changed votes in 2020	False (debunked)
19	COVID-19 came from a Wuhan lab	Inconclusive
20	Havana Syndrome is a foreign energy weapon	Inconclusive

Three things the table shows

First, the true claims have something in common. Each one rests on the government's own records: memos, budgets, sworn testimony and the findings of investigators who had the

power to demand documents. Chapter 19 showed that each one first surfaced through a document or a named source and was then confirmed by an official body.

Second, most "Partly true" claims are true claims stretched too far. A real wiretap on two reporters becomes "the CIA controls the media." Real call-record collection becomes "they listen to every call." A proposal in a memo becomes proof that a later attack was staged. The fix is Step 7 from Chapter 21: separate the parts.

Third, many false claims grew from a real seed. Area 51 really was secret, and the government really did hide that some UFOs were its own spy planes.[816] Weather modification really happened.[817] Martial-law planning was reported in the 1980s.[818] The AIDS story was planted on purpose by a foreign intelligence service, and it took hold partly because of the real history of Tuskegee.[819,820] Distrust that was earned made the false versions easier to believe.

Back to the opening question

The Introduction started with a question: "If the government lied before, why should I believe it now?"

Here is my answer after twenty-three chapters. You do not have to believe the government. You can check it. The same records that exposed Tuskegee, MKUltra, COINTELPRO and Watergate are open to you, and so are the records that undercut the moon hoax and the alien bodies. The question is never whether to trust the government in general. It is whether there is evidence for this claim, today, that you can see for yourself.

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[816] Gerald K. Haines, CIA Center for the Study of Intelligence, A Die-Hard Issue: CIA's Role in the Study of UFOs, 1947-90, undated (about 1997). https://www.cia.gov/resources/csi/static/cia-role-study-UFOs.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[817] U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, Geoengineering: Frequent Questions (last updated August 19, 2026), August 19, 2026. https://www.epa.gov/geoengineering/frequent-questions, accessed November 12, 2026.

[818] Congressional Record, House, Martial Law Concerns (statement of Rep. Jim McDermott), p. H1724, March 11, 2003. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CREC-2003-03-11/html/CREC-2003-03-11-pt1-PgH1724.htm, accessed November 12, 2026.

[819] Thomas Boghardt, CIA Studies in Intelligence 53(4), Operation INFEKTION: Soviet Bloc Intelligence and Its AIDS Disinformation Campaign, December 2009. https://www.cia.gov/resources/csi/static/1-Operation_INFEKTION_Soviet_Bloc_AIDS_Disinformation_Campaign.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[820] Laura M. Bogart and Sheryl Thorburn, Journal of Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndromes 38(2):213-218, Are HIV/AIDS Conspiracy Beliefs a Barrier to HIV Prevention Among African Americans?, February 1, 2005. https://www.rand.org/pubs/external_publications/EP20050201.html, accessed November 12, 2026.

Appendices

Appendix A: Timeline

Table A.1. Key dates in this book

Date	Event
1932	The syphilis study at Tuskegee begins[821]
January 25, 1945	Grand Rapids, Michigan, becomes the first city to fluoridate its water[822]
July 1947	Roswell base history reports a "flying disc" that "turned out to be a radar tracking balloon"[823]
April 13, 1953	CIA Director Allen Dulles approves MKUltra[824]
November 27, 1953	Frank Olson dies after being given LSD without his knowledge[825]
August 1956	First COINTELPRO program begins[826]
March 13, 1962	Operation Northwoods memo sent to the Defense Secretary[827]
August 4, 1964	Second reported Gulf of Tonkin attack, later found most likely not to have happened[828]
July 4, 1966	Freedom of Information Act signed[829]
1969 to 1972	Six Apollo moon landings[830]
March 8, 1971	FBI office in Media, Pennsylvania, burglarized; COINTELPRO files exposed[831]

[821] Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, The Untreated Syphilis Study at Tuskegee Timeline, undated. https://www.cdc.gov/tuskegee/about/timeline.html, accessed November 12, 2026.

[822] Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Timeline for Community Water Fluoridation, May 15, 2024. https://www.cdc.gov/fluoridation/timeline-for-community-water-fluoridation/index.html, accessed November 12, 2026.

[823] U.S. General Accounting Office, Government Records: Results of a Search for Records Concerning the 1947 Crash Near Roswell, New Mexico (GAO/NSIAD-95-187), July 28, 1995. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/GAOREPORTS-NSIAD-95-187/html/GAOREPORTS-NSIAD-95-187.htm, accessed November 12, 2026.

[824] Senate Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities (Church Committee), Final Report, Book I: Foreign and Military Intelligence, S. Rep. No. 94-755, April 26, 1976. https://www.intelligence.senate.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/sites-default-files-94755-i.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[825] Senate Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities (Church Committee), Final Report, Book I: Foreign and Military Intelligence, S. Rep. No. 94-755, April 26, 1976. https://www.intelligence.senate.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/sites-default-files-94755-i.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[826] Senate Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities (Church Committee), Final Report, Book III, COINTELPRO: The FBI's Covert Action Programs Against American Citizens (scan hosted by the Assassination Archives and Research Center), April 1976. http://www.aarclibrary.org/publib/church/reports/book3/pdf/ChurchB3_1_COINTELPRO.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[827] Joint Chiefs of Staff (L. L. Lemnitzer) (posted by the National Security Archive), Memorandum for the Secretary of Defense, Justification for US Military Intervention in Cuba, March 13, 1962. https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/sites/default/files/2022-10/Joint-Chiefs-pretexts-to-invade-Cuba-March-1962_0.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[828] National Security Archive, George Washington University, Gulf of Tonkin declassification, Electronic Briefing Book 132 (press release), December 1, 2005. https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB132/press20051201.htm, accessed November 12, 2026.

[829] U.S. Government Publishing Office, Public Law 89-487, 80 Stat. 250 (Freedom of Information Act), July 4, 1966. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/STATUTE-80/pdf/STATUTE-80-Pg250.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[830] NASA Johnson Space Center, Astromaterials 3D, Apollo Lunar Samples, undated web page. https://ares.jsc.nasa.gov/Astromaterials3D/apollo-lunar.htm, accessed November 12, 2026.

Date	Event
June 13, 1971	The New York Times begins publishing the Pentagon Papers[832]
June 17, 1972	Watergate break-in[833]
July 25, 1972	Associated Press story exposes the Tuskegee study[834]
January 1973	Most MKUltra files destroyed[835]
August 9, 1974	President Nixon resigns[836]
1975 to 1976	Rockefeller Commission and Church Committee investigations[837,838]
August 3, 1977	Senate hearing on newly found MKUltra records[839]
October 25, 1978	Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act signed[840]
July 1983	Anonymous letter in an Indian newspaper starts the AIDS disinformation campaign[841]
November 1986	Iran-Contra becomes public[842]
November 1993	Albuquerque Tribune names people injected with plutonium[843]
September 11, 2001	Terrorist attacks kill 2,973 people[844]

[831] Senate Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities (Church Committee), Final Report, Book III, COINTELPRO: The FBI's Covert Action Programs Against American Citizens (scan hosted by the Assassination Archives and Research Center), April 1976. http://www.aarclibrary.org/publib/church/reports/book3/pdf/ChurchB3_1_COINTELPRO.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[832] National Archives, Press release 2011-225, Pentagon Papers release, June 2011. https://www.archives.gov/press/press-releases/2011-225, accessed November 12, 2026.

[833] U.S. Senate Historical Office, Select Committee on Presidential Campaign Activities (The Watergate Committee), undated. https://www.senate.gov/about/powers-procedures/investigations/watergate.htm, accessed November 12, 2026.

[834] Mike Stobbe, Associated Press (published by PBS NewsHour), Tuskegee syphilis study whistleblower dies at age 86, July 15, 2024. https://www.pbs.org/newshour/nation/tuskegee-syphilis-study-whistleblower-dies-at-age-86, accessed November 12, 2026.

[835] Senate Select Committee on Intelligence and Subcommittee on Health and Scientific Research, Project MKULTRA, the CIA's Program of Research in Behavioral Modification, joint hearing, August 3, 1977. https://www.intelligence.senate.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/sites-default-files-hearings-95mkultra.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[836] Office of the Federal Register, Public Papers of the Presidents: Richard Nixon, 1974, 1975. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/PPP-1974-book1/pdf/PPP-1974-book1.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[837] Commission on CIA Activities Within the United States (Rockefeller Commission), Report to the President, June 1975. https://www.fordlibrarymuseum.gov/library/document/0005/1561495.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[838] U.S. Senate Historical Office, Senate Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities (The Church Committee), undated. https://www.senate.gov/about/powers-procedures/investigations/church-committee.htm, accessed November 12, 2026.

[839] Senate Select Committee on Intelligence and Subcommittee on Health and Scientific Research, Project MKULTRA, the CIA's Program of Research in Behavioral Modification, joint hearing, August 3, 1977. https://www.intelligence.senate.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/sites-default-files-hearings-95mkultra.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[840] U.S. Government Publishing Office, Public Law 95-511, 92 Stat. 1783 (Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act of 1978), October 25, 1978. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/STATUTE-92/pdf/STATUTE-92-Pg1783.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[841] Thomas Boghardt, CIA Studies in Intelligence 53(4), Operation INFEKTION: Soviet Bloc Intelligence and Its AIDS Disinformation Campaign, December 2009. https://www.cia.gov/resources/csi/static/1-Operation_INFEKTION_Soviet_Bloc_AIDS_Disinformation_Campaign.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[842] U.S. Congress, Report of the Congressional Committees Investigating the Iran-Contra Affair, H. Rept. 100-433, S. Rept. 100-216, November 1987. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/SERIALSET-13810_00_00-002-0433-0000/pdf/SERIALSET-13810_00_00-002-0433-0000.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[843] Advisory Committee on Human Radiation Experiments, Final Report, Preface: Why the Committee Was Created, 1995. https://ehss.energy.gov/ohre/roadmap/achre/preface_2.html, accessed November 12, 2026.

Date	Event
February 5, 2003	Secretary Powell's speech to the UN Security Council on Iraq[845]
March 31, 2005	Presidential commission finds prewar Iraq intelligence "dead wrong"[846]
June 5, 2013	First story on the NSA phone records program[847]
June 2, 2015	USA FREEDOM Act bans bulk collection[848]
March 2024	Pentagon office reports no verifiable evidence of alien technology programs[849]
May 21, 2026	Appeals court vacates the fluoride order[850]
June 12, 2026	Section 702 expires[851]
June 18, 2026	DNI releases COVID-origin documents[852]

[844] National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, The 9/11 Commission Report, July 22, 2004. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/GPO-911REPORT/pdf/GPO-911REPORT.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[845] The White House (George W. Bush archive), U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell Addresses the U.N. Security Council, February 5, 2003. https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2003/02/20030205-1.html, accessed November 12, 2026.

[846] Commission on the Intelligence Capabilities of the United States Regarding Weapons of Mass Destruction, Report to the President of the United States (transmittal letter), March 31, 2005. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/GPO-WMD/pdf/GPO-WMD.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[847] U.S. Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit, ACLU v. Clapper, No. 14-42, 785 F.3d 787, May 7, 2015. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/USCOURTS-ca2-14-00042/pdf/USCOURTS-ca2-14-00042-0.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[848] U.S. Government Publishing Office, Public Law 114-23, USA FREEDOM Act of 2015, June 2, 2015. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/PLAW-114publ23/html/PLAW-114publ23.htm, accessed November 12, 2026.

[849] U.S. Department of Defense, Statement by Pentagon Press Secretary Maj. Gen. Pat Ryder on the Historical Record Report on Unidentified Anomalous Phenomena, Volume 1, March 2024. https://www.war.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/3700894/statement-by-pentagon-press-secretary-maj-gen-pat-ryder-on-the-historical-recor/, accessed November 12, 2026.

[850] Beveridge and Diamond, Ninth Circuit Vacates Order Requiring EPA to Regulate Fluoridation of Drinking Water under TSCA, June 1, 2026. https://www.bdlaw.com/publications/ninth-circuit-vacates-order-requiring-epa-to-regulate-fluoridation-of-drinking-water-under-tsca/, accessed November 12, 2026.

[851] Congressional Research Service, The Impact of FISA Section 702's Repeal (LSB11444), June 22, 2026. https://www.congress.gov/crs_external_products/LSB/PDF/LSB11444/LSB11444.1.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[852] Office of the Director of National Intelligence, Fauci Funded Wuhan Lab Research That Sparked COVID (News Release No. 11-26), June 18, 2026. https://archive.dni.gov/index.php/newsroom/press-releases/press-releases-2026/4166-pr-11-26, accessed November 12, 2026.

Appendix B: Where to Find Declassified Records

You can read most of the records in this book yourself. Here is where to start.

- **National Archives (archives.gov).** Holds the Pentagon Papers, the 9/11 Commission's records and many presidential records.[853,854]
- **CIA records at the National Archives.** The Archives keeps a guide to the CIA records it holds, listed as Record Group 263, with most of them dated 1947 to 1974.[855]
- **GovInfo (govinfo.gov).** The Government Publishing Office's site for laws, congressional hearings and reports, including the 1977 MKUltra hearing and the 9/11 Commission Report.[856,857]
- **Senate Intelligence Committee (intelligence.senate.gov).** Posts the Church Committee's books.[858,859]
- **FBI Records: The Vault (vault.fbi.gov).** The FBI's online reading room, including COINTELPRO material.[860]
- **Office of the Director of National Intelligence (dni.gov).** Posts declassified intelligence assessments, including those on COVID-19 origins and Havana Syndrome.[861,862]
- **National Security Archive (nsarchive.gwu.edu).** A private research group at George Washington University that obtains and posts declassified documents, often through FOIA requests.[863,864]

How to ask for a record yourself. The Freedom of Information Act gives any person the right to request federal agency records.[865] Each agency has a FOIA office. For a classified

[853] National Archives, Pentagon Papers, reviewed July 29, 2019. https://www.archives.gov/research/pentagon-papers, accessed November 12, 2026.

[854] National Archives and Records Administration, 9/11 Commission Records, undated web page. https://www.archives.gov/research/9-11, accessed November 12, 2026.

[855] National Archives, Records of the Central Intelligence Agency (Record Group 263), Guide to Federal Records, undated. https://www.archives.gov/research/guide-fed-records/groups/263.html, accessed November 12, 2026.

[856] Senate Select Committee on Intelligence and Subcommittee on Health and Scientific Research, Project MKULTRA, the CIA's Program of Research in Behavioral Modification, joint hearing, August 3, 1977. https://www.intelligence.senate.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/sites-default-files-hearings-95mkultra.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

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[858] Senate Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities (Church Committee), Final Report, Book I: Foreign and Military Intelligence, S. Rep. No. 94-755, April 26, 1976. https://www.intelligence.senate.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/sites-default-files-94755-i.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[859] Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, Intelligence Related Commissions (Church Committee reports, Books I-VI), undated. https://www.intelligence.senate.gov/resources/intelligence-related-commissions/, accessed November 12, 2026.

[860] Federal Bureau of Investigation, COINTELPRO, FBI Records: The Vault, undated. https://vault.fbi.gov/cointel-pro, accessed November 12, 2026.

[861] Office of the Director of National Intelligence, Declassified Assessment on COVID-19 Origins, 2021. https://archive.dni.gov/files/ODNI/documents/assessments/Declassified-Assessment-on-COVID-19-Origins.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[862] National Intelligence Council, Updated Assessment of Anomalous Health Incidents (ICA 2023-02286-B), March 1, 2023. https://archive.dni.gov/files/ODNI/documents/assessments/NIC-Unclassified-ICA-Updated-Assessment-AHI-March2023.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[863] National Security Archive, George Washington University, Pentagon Proposed Pretexts for Cuba Invasion in 1962, April 30, 2001. https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/news/20010430/, accessed November 12, 2026.

[864] National Security Archive (ed. Jeffrey T. Richelson), Area 51: Electronic Briefing Book No. 434, August 15, 2013. https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB434/, accessed November 12, 2026.

document you can identify specifically, you can also ask for a Mandatory Declassification Review under Executive Order 13526.[866]

[865] U.S. Government Publishing Office, Public Law 89-487, 80 Stat. 250 (Freedom of Information Act), July 4, 1966. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/STATUTE-80/pdf/STATUTE-80-Pg250.pdf, accessed November 12, 2026.

[866] National Archives, Information Security Oversight Office, Executive Order 13526, Classified National Security Information, December 29, 2009. https://www.archives.gov/isoo/policy-documents/cnsi-eo.html, accessed November 12, 2026.

Appendix C: Glossary

- **AARO.** All-domain Anomaly Resolution Office, the Defense Department office that studies reports of unidentified anomalous phenomena.[867]
- **CIA.** Central Intelligence Agency.
- **COINTELPRO.** The FBI's Counterintelligence Programs against domestic groups, 1956 to 1971.[868]
- **Conspiracy.** Two or more people secretly agreeing to do something wrong and acting on it. Federal law makes it a crime.[869]
- **Conspiracy theory.** An explanation of an event that blames a secret plot by powerful people. It may be true or false.[870]
- **Contrail.** A condensation trail: a line-shaped cloud of ice crystals formed from jet engine exhaust.[871]
- **Declassification.** Removing the secret label from a government record so it can be released.[872]
- **DNI and ODNI.** The Director of National Intelligence and the Office of the Director of National Intelligence, which oversees the U.S. intelligence agencies.
- **EPA.** Environmental Protection Agency.
- **FBI.** Federal Bureau of Investigation.
- **FISA.** Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act of 1978, which created a special court to approve national security surveillance.[873]
- **FOIA.** Freedom of Information Act, the 1966 law giving the public a right to request federal records.[874]
- **Inspector general.** An independent official inside a federal agency who investigates waste, fraud and abuse.[875]

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[867] U.S. Department of Defense, Statement by Pentagon Press Secretary Maj. Gen. Pat Ryder on the Historical Record Report on Unidentified Anomalous Phenomena, Volume 1, March 2024. https://www.war.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/3700894/statement-by-pentagon-press-secretary-maj-gen-pat-ryder-on-the-historical-recor/, accessed November 12, 2026.

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- **Lateral reading.** Checking a source by looking at what other sites say about it.[876]
- **NASA.** National Aeronautics and Space Administration.
- **NIST.** National Institute of Standards and Technology.
- **NSA.** National Security Agency.
- **Section 702.** The part of FISA, added in 2008, that allowed surveillance of foreigners outside the United States without an individual court order for each target. It expired June 12, 2026.[877,878]
- **UAP.** Unidentified anomalous phenomena, the government's current term for what used to be called UFOs.[879]

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