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Amelia Earhart: Myth and Memory

Amy Lutz

M.A. History, University of Missouri-St. Louis, 2020

A Thesis Submitted to The Graduate School at the University of Missouri-St. Louis in
partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree
Master of Arts in History

August 2020

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INTRODUCTION

Every summer, tens of thousands of visitors flock to Atchison, Kansas, a small town nestled on the bluffs of the Missouri River, for the annual Amelia Earhart Festival. The occasion attracts guests from all over the world and features outdoor concerts, a food and crafts fair, and the famous “Concert in the Sky” fireworks show.¹ In between the cotton candy and country music, guests often exchange theories about Amelia Earhart, who was born in Atchison in 1897, and her disappearance. As a native of the small town whose given name is Amelia, I grew up in Earhart’s shadow, so to speak. I learned about the aviator’s life in classroom after classroom and during yearly museum trips to the Amelia Earhart Birthplace Museum. My classmates and I also became well-versed on theories of Earhart’s disappearance. Some theorists believe she simply crashed into the ocean after running out of fuel, while others suspect she and her navigator Fred Noonan survived on a deserted atoll for a time. The most intriguing theory, however, posited that Earhart and Noonan were captured by the Japanese and executed, possibly because they had been engaging in an espionage mission for the American government. As an adult, I could not help but wonder when and how that suspicion arose.

“Well, then, thousands of years ago, I was born in Atchison, Kansas,” Earhart wrote in her 1932 book, *The Fun of It*.² On July 24, 1897, the future record-breaking aviator was born in a small bedroom in her grandparents’ Victorian-style home overlooking the Missouri River. She was an adventurous child, always finding new ways of “getting into trouble,” often with her younger sister, Muriel. “I am sure I was a horrid

¹ “Amelia Earhart Festival.” VisitAtchison.com. <http://visitatchison.com/event/amelia-earhart-festival/> [Retrieved May 9, 2019]

² Amelia Earhart, *The Fun of It*. (Chicago: Academy Press Limited, 1932), 4.

little girl, and I do not see how she [her grandmother] put up with me, even part time.” She was rambunctious and ambitious, once attempting to build an operational roller coaster in her backyard after not being allowed to ride one at the St. Louis World’s Fair in 1904.³ As an adolescent, Earhart attended a small, parochial college preparatory school near her grandparent’s home in Atchison.

By the time Earhart was in her early teens, it was clear to her entire family that her father was an alcoholic. He had difficulty holding down a job and, as a result, the family moved frequently. In 1905, they relocated to Des Moines, Iowa, where Earhart saw an airplane for the first time in 1908 at the Iowa State Fair. She was enthralled, but skeptical, and later commented on the contraption’s poor construction, “It was a thing of rusty wire and wood and not at all interesting.” However, after the Wright brother’s successful flight just a few years later, her interest in aviation soared. Safely gliding far above the clouds encased in metal and shrouded by wings finally seemed possible.⁴

The Earhart family moved once more, and the future aviator graduated from high school in Hyde Park in Chicago in 1915. For three years, she served as a nurse’s aid amid the chaos of the First World War and Spanish Flu pandemic. Following the end of the war, she moved to New York and enrolled in Columbia University, hoping to go into medicine. Earhart was not destined to join the medical field, however. A few short years later, she left New York and moved to Los Angeles, where she took her first flight with record-breaking aviator Frank Hawks in 1920. The following year, she enrolled in flying lessons with Anita (“Neta”) Snooks, the first woman to run her own aviation business and own a commercial airfield. Soon, with the help of her parents and savings from a job at a

³ Earhart, *The Fun of It*, 5.

⁴ Mary S. Lovell, *The Sound of Wings*. (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1989), 15.

local telephone company, Earhart bought her first airplane and acquired her pilot's license in 1923.⁵

In 1928, Earhart became the first woman to fly across the Atlantic Ocean as a passenger – despite her experience, she did not pilot the airplane. Aviator Wilmer Stultz and his mechanic Louis “Slim” Gordon had been at the controls. Regardless, Earhart's popularity surged, and she became a worldwide celebrity. Her public notoriety was not only the result of her accomplishments, although they played no small part. Earhart was selected to participate in the flight by publisher George P. Putnam and the two quickly fell for each other. Putnam managed Earhart's growing popularity and introduced her to the biggest names in Hollywood, the media, and politics. The two were married in 1931. The road to marriage was not without its stumbles, however. Earhart, ever protective of her independence and progressive in her politics, refused Putnam's proposal multiple times before finally accepting. On the day of their marriage, she handed her fiancé a letter detailing her “terms” for the union. It read, in part, “On our life together I want you to understand I shall not hold you to any medieval code of faithfulness to me, nor shall I consider myself bound to you similarly...I must exact a cruel promise, and that is you will let me go in a year if we find no happiness together.”⁶ The two did “find happiness” together, however, and were married until Earhart's disappearance in 1937.

In 1932, Earhart became the first woman to fly across the Atlantic Ocean solo, and only the second person to complete the trip alone – Charles Lindbergh had been the first in 1919. She and Putnam traveled throughout Europe for weeks after her arrival and

⁵ “Amelia Earhart Biographical Sketch.” Amelia Earhart Collection, Purdue Libraries, Accessed June 18, 2020. <http://collections.lib.purdue.edu/aeahart/biography.php>

⁶ Lovell, *Sound of Wings*, 166.

before returning to New York in June 1932. Upon her return, she was greeted by a crowd of thousands and a tickertape parade in her honor.⁷ In 1935, Earhart joined the faculty at Purdue University, where she served as an advisor in aeronautics and as a counselor in the study of careers for women. In 1936, funds from the Purdue Research Foundation allowed her to purchase a new airplane, which she called her “Flying Laboratory.” By then, Earhart began to seriously plan a world flight at the equator.⁸

It is difficult to overestimate Earhart’s celebrity status during the 1930s. After her transatlantic flight in 1932, she and Putnam were granted an audience with Pope Pius XI. Benito Mussolini sent her a bouquet of red roses and the trio met while she was in Rome. Later, they met with the king and queen of Belgium in Brussels for a private meal, during which time Earhart was gifted the decoration of Chevalier of the Order of Leopold.⁹ Within a year of her flight across Atlantic Ocean, Earhart developed a friendship with President Franklin D. Roosevelt and First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt (George Putnam had been acquainted with Franklin Roosevelt as a child). Amelia and Eleanor became good friends and she even took the First Lady for a brief flight in her airplane. The couples met frequently throughout the 1930s at the White House. In 1935, Earhart was awarded the title of America’s Outstanding Airwoman at the prestigious Harmon Awards. Soon afterwards, a poll conducted by journalism students at New York University revealed that the two best-known women in the world were Eleanor Roosevelt and Amelia Earhart (Franklin D. Roosevelt and Adolf Hitler were deemed the best-known men). Both Earhart and her husband were close friends with Gene Vidal, and it was through the Amelia’s

⁷ Ibid. 192.

⁸ “Amelia Earhart Biographical Sketch,” Amelia Earhart Collection, Purdue Libraries.

⁹ Lovell, *The Sound of Wings*, 191.

influence that Vidal was appointed Director of Air Commerce in 1935.¹⁰ Earhart gave frequent radio addresses and speeches about aviation and women's rights and in November of 1936, she sent a letter to President Roosevelt updating him on her planned world flight.¹¹ By that point, people around the world knew the name "Amelia Earhart" and were waiting in excitement for her most daring challenge.

In March 1937, Earhart's plans were temporarily cut short when she crashed trying to depart from Luke Field in Hawaii. She resumed her attempt a few months later, on June 1, taking off from Miami. With her navigator Fred Noonan at her side, Earhart completed 22,000 miles of the trip before taking off from Lae, New Guinea on one of the final legs of a journey that would never be completed.¹² On July 2, 1937, Amelia Earhart and Fred Noonan disappeared over the Pacific Ocean. Their last transmissions were issued during the early morning of the 2nd as the small Lockheed Electra made its way toward tiny Howland Island for a fuel stop.¹³ At 7:42 am, Earhart broadcast: "We must be on you but cannot see you. Gas is running low. Been unable to reach you by radio. We are flying at 1,000 feet." Her last broadcast was issued at 8:44 am: "We are on the line 157/337. We repeat this message on 6210 kilocycles." The plane never arrived at Howland Island. The United States, with assistance from Great Britain and Japan, launched a multi-million-dollar search and rescue effort to no avail.

¹⁰ Ibid. 235.

¹¹ Letter from Amelia Earhart to President Roosevelt Regarding her World Flight, November 10, 1936; File PPF 960: Earhart, Amelia; President's Personal Files, 1933-1945; Papers as President, President's Personal File, 1933-1945; National Archives, Washington, D.C.

¹² "Amelia Earhart Biographical Sketch," Amelia Earhart Collection, Purdue Libraries.

¹³ "Radio Log of the Last Communications of Amelia Earhart." July 1-2, 1937. Records Relating to Amelia Earhart. National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, D.C.

<https://www.archives.gov/news/topics/earhart>

Amelia Earhart and Fred Noonan were never found, and the cause of the plane's disappearance has never been proven. Rumors about their whereabouts emerged immediately, however. Did the two run out of gas and crash into the ocean? Were they still floating in the ocean, desperate for rescue? No one could provide an answer to those or any of the other dozens of questions about the final flight. The world mourned the missing aviators for months. Schools and buildings were renamed in Earhart's honor. Benedictine College in Atchison, Kansas, renamed their football stadium after their former resident and city officials planned additional memorializing in the following years. Yet, the world eventually moved on and by 1939, most Americans turned their eyes once again across the Atlantic Ocean after the outbreak of the Second World War.

In the years following Earhart's disappearance, the "crash and sink" theory was the most popular explanation for her disappearance. As the name suggests, it posited that Earhart and Noonan had run out of gas and/or crashed and perished at sea. However, after the United States' entrance into the Second World War following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941, another theory emerged. Wartime rumors began to spread in early 1942, which suggested that the United States' newest military foe – Japan – may have been involved in Earhart's disappearance because she had disappeared near a grouping of Japanese mandated islands in the Pacific Ocean. The so-called "Japanese Capture Theory" received another boost from the wartime propaganda film, *Flight for Freedom*, a fictional tale very loosely based upon Earhart's life. In the movie, female aviator "Tonie Carter" is approached by a government agent, who asks her to "spy" on the Japanese pacific islands during her flight. She agrees and during her final flight, intentionally crashes her plane to avoid capture.

By November 1942, after months of promotion for *Flight for Freedom* had circulated through the American press, dozens of publications began to ask the same question: were Amelia Earhart and Fred Noonan the first “casualties” of the Second World War? Over the course of the next three years, numerous rumors were printed in the American press that bolstered the Japanese Capture Theory. Congress even became involved in 1944 when a New York congressman requested an investigation into Japan’s possible involvement with Earhart’s disappearance. No evidence of the claim was ever produced.

Japanese capture rumors faded for a decade and a half after the end of the Second World War. However, by 1960, rumors had become myth. Starting in the 1960s, the Japanese Capture Theory crystallized into two competing versions – the Saipan Theory and the Irene Bolam Theory. Both almost always take the form of conspiracy theories – the theory suggests that unseen Japanese forces conspired to capture and/or execute Earhart and the United States government “covered up” the “truth” behind her disappearance. At the beginning of the decade, English professor and World War II veteran Paul Briand Jr. published a biography of Earhart entitled *Daughter of the Sky*, which included in the final chapter a claim that the aviator may have been held prisoner and executed by the Japanese on the island of Saipan. This claim mirrored similar Japanese capture rumors that spread through the press in 1944. Radio reporter Fred Goerner launched an investigation into Briand’s theory soon after the publication of *Daughter of the Sky* and in 1966 published *The Search for Amelia Earhart*, which proposed the same theory and sold hundreds of thousands of copies. The Irene Bolam Theory originated with the publication of *Amelia Earhart Lives* by Joseph Klaas and Joe

Gervais. Klaas and Gervais, both veterans of the Second World War, were part of “Operation Earhart” with Briand, a small group of amateur researchers who undertook a series of investigations into Earhart’s disappearance, including ones on Saipan. In *Amelia Earhart Lives*, however, the two departed from Briand’s earlier thesis and argue that Earhart was held in captivity by the Japanese during the war, freed by American troops in 1945, changed her name to Irene Bolam, and settled in New Jersey (Irene Bolam herself would later vehemently deny the claim). Although there remain a range of versions of the Japanese Capture Theory, the Saipan and Bolam Theories are by far the most popular.

The publication of *The Search for Amelia Earhart* and *Amelia Earhart Lives* helped to keep the Japanese Capture Theory alive long after wartime rumors ended. Amateur investigations into Earhart’s disappearance – including those conducted by Goerner and Gervais – and their subsequent press coverage helped to spread and perpetuate the theory even more. By the 1970s, several high-profile books were published, and popular television documentaries produced on the theory. However, by the mid-1980s, “Earhart conspiracy fatigue” set in and the press largely covered new publications of the Japanese Capture Theory dismissively, if at all.

In the decades after Earhart’s disappearance, most of the books and articles published about her focused on her disappearance, and most of those added to the growing school of Japanese Capture literature. Outside of two books written by Earhart’s sister, Muriel Earhart Morrissey, there were very few biographies published about the aviator or books discussing her accomplishments and life, rather than her disappearance. Things changed in the late 1980s when a growing number of scholars, biographers, and cultural institutions began to celebrate Earhart for her politics, her advancement of

women's rights, and her overall accomplishments. Cultural institutions in Atchison, Kansas were particularly successful on this front. The Ninety-Nines, a society celebrating female aviators co-founded by Earhart, purchased the Victorian home where she was born in 1897 and turned it into a successful museum by the mid-1990s. The Amelia Earhart Festival held its inaugural celebration in Atchison in 1997 on the 100th anniversary of the aviator's birth and has greeted hundreds of thousands of visitors since its inception over two decades ago.

By the 1980s and 1990s, increased interest in Earhart's life overshadowed attempts to fully revive the Japanese Capture Theory to its high-water mark of the 1960s and 1970s. Japanese capture theorists were also rivaled by new, competing Earhart disappearance theories like the one from Richard Gillespie of the International Group for Historic Aircraft Recovery (TIGHAR). Gillespie's efforts to prove that Earhart had crash landed near Nikumaroro Island (now Gardner Island), where she perished were better funded and better covered than anything produced by Japanese Capture Theorists, at least during the 1990s. That did not stop them from trying, however. In 1989, a group of "Amelia Earhart researchers," including Joe Gervais and others who had published books on their respective theories, formed the Amelia Earhart Society of Researchers. The group aimed to consolidate and diffuse the latest theories about Earhart's disappearance. Nearly all the members adhered to the Japanese Capture Theory and all despised Gillespie's Gardner/Nikumaroro hypothesis. Although their efforts received limited success, their participation in television documentaries on Earhart's disappearance and deep ties to the Amelia Earhart Birthplace Museum helped to further spread the Japanese Capture Theory.

In the late 1990s and beyond, the Japanese Capture Theory found a new home: The Internet. The world wide web has allowed the theory to spread to users around the world. Thousands of websites, videos, and chat rooms emerged proclaiming the theory and older publications and documentaries on the theory became more easily accessible. Some researchers like Mike Campbell of Florida, who has made numerous pilgrimages to Earhart's hometown, took advantage of the new technology and created successful websites to share their version of the Japanese Capture Theory. In 2017, *HISTORY* channel released a documentary entitled, "Amelia Earhart: The Lost Evidence," which proclaimed to contain "new evidence" about Earhart's capture at the hands of the Japanese. The special was quickly debunked and pulled from the network. However, it was viewed by over 4 million people live and receive massive press coverage from local and national outlets. "The Lost Evidence" helped to truly revive the Japanese Capture Theory for the first time in over thirty years. Although it is still rivaled by counter theories, as of this writing, the Japanese Capture theory remains one of the most popular "explanations" for Amelia Earhart's disappearance in 1937.

Peer-reviewed research into the Japanese Capture Theory is sparse. As of this writing, no historian has taken on the task of writing a complete history of the theory, from its origins during the Second World War to its continued existence today. The few scholars who have mentioned the Japanese Capture Theory either do so dismissively or provide a mere paragraph or two of overview. In fact, the most prominent publication addressing Earhart disappearance theories comes from the field of psychology, not history. A 2012 entry in *The Journal of Contemporary Psychology* discussed the psychology of conspiracies surrounding Earhart's disappearance, rather than the theories

themselves.¹⁴ In short, an historiography of the Japanese Capture Theory (or any Earhart disappearance theories) is virtually non-existent.

The Japanese Capture Theory is now a myth, but it began as rumor. Jean-Noël Kapferer defined rumors as “primarily a piece of information” about “current goings on.” Rumors are “for believing” and “set out to convince people.¹⁵” This differs from myths, which Peter Heehs defines as “any set of unexamined assumptions,” often about past events. Heehs continues, pointing to the contemporary infusion of “factual history” and “such [mythical] assumptions,” “What we call history as at best mythistory.¹⁶” What Japanese Capture believers trust to be history, is closer to “mythistory.” The history of the Japanese Capture Theory is actually a history of how rumor becomes myth; how wartime fears crystallized into a conspiratorial narrative that influences the historical memory of the United States’ most famous female aviator.

The question remains as to *why* the Japanese Capture Theory emerged in the 1940s, re-emerged in the 1960s and 1970s, and still survives as of this writing. There are two different answers to this question. First, the mysterious and “unfulfilling” nature of Earhart’s disappearance, especially considering her celebrity status, naturally instigated a range of theories about her fate. As will be discussed later in this thesis, uncertainty itself begets rumors. Unsatisfying “answers” and unresolved mysteries mark the birth of speculation and conjecture. If Earhart’s disappearance continues to remain unsolved, theories (and myths) will exist that attempt to “explain” the unexplained. This

¹⁴ Swami, Viren & Adrian Furnham. “Examining Conspiracist Beliefs About the Disappearance of Amelia Earhart.” *The Journal of General Psychology* 139, 4 (2012). Pgs. 244-259.

¹⁵ Jean-Noël Kapferer. *Rumors: Uses, Interpretations, and Images*. New Brunswick, New Jersey: Transaction Publishers, 1990, 2.

¹⁶ Peter Heehs, “Myth, History, and Theory,” *History and Theory* 33, no. 1 (Feb., 1994): 1.

phenomenon is consistent with other rumors that emerge after a “great” man or woman’s unsatisfying, unexplained, or sudden death. Similar rumors exist about Anastasia Romanov, John F. Kennedy, Raoul Wallenberg, Elvis Presley, and others.

Second, the Japanese Capture Theory grew and/or spread for different reasons in each of its three distinct phases – its emergence in the 1940s, reemergence and increase in popularity in the 1960s and 1970s, and its decline in popularity (but continued existence) in the late 1980s and beyond. The first phase is covered in chapter one. The Japanese Capture Theory emerged in 1942, five years after Earhart’s disappearance because it was buoyed by heightened fears of Japanese aggression and a general rise in anti-Japanese sentiment, both of which were partnered by anti-Japanese wartime propaganda. The second chapter discusses the reemergence of the Japanese Capture Theory in the 1960s and 1970s. The reasons for its reemergence are more ambiguous than the reasons for its initial creation, but two cultural forces may have created fertile ground for its heyday in the 1960s and 1970s. First, Cold War paranoia produced an environment that fueled a rise in conspiracy theories, such as those about John F. Kennedy’s assassination. The Japanese Capture Theory, a conspiracy theory itself, fit in with this trend. Second, trust in government institutions plummeted beginning in the 1960s and this could have also provided more fertile ground for the theory. The Japanese Capture Theory is a theory inherently skeptical of the government because it denies the “official” explanation for Earhart’s disappearance (the “crash and sink” theory). Furthermore, many Japanese Capture theorists suggest said explanation is an effort by the Navy, Federal Bureau of Investigation, Central Intelligence Agency, or other government entity to “cover up” the “truth” about Earhart’s fate. After the Cold War waned and Japanese Capture theorists

were unable to bring forth new, unique “evidence” for their claims, its popularity faded. The theory’s continued existence is the subject of chapter three. The Japanese Capture Theory is not as popular as it was in its heyday of the 1960s and 1970s but still exists for three reasons. First, the “unfulfilling” and “mysterious” nature of Earhart’s disappearance will continue to elicit theories trying to explain it unless she no longer is a figure of reverence, or until her disappearance is conclusively solved. Second, cultural institutions in Atchison, Kansas promoted, intentionally and unintentionally, the Japanese Capture Theory beginning in the 1990s. Finally, the Internet has given the theory a permanent home.

The Japanese Capture Theory, from its inception in 1942 to its continued existence today, has considerably impacted the historical memory of Amelia Earhart. A woman who was so beloved and celebrated in life is largely more famous for her death. Her story was retold in hindsight, without her voice. The emergence of theories about her disappearance and popular fascination with it are understandable – mystery is much more engaging to the popular imagination. The unresolved nature of Amelia Earhart and Fred Noonan’s fate on that early morning in July 1937 will likely continue to fascinate for decades to come.

CHAPTER ONE

On July 2, 1937, Amelia Earhart and her navigator Fred Noonan disappeared over the Pacific Ocean without a trace. The two-week-long, multi-million-dollar search effort resulted in no clue to their whereabouts. Amid the uncertainty, rumors about their fate began to circulate. Did the two crash in the ocean? If so, were they floating at sea? Did they land on a deserted island, where they waited for rescue? As the weeks and months went by and no trace of Earhart, Noonan, or their plane was found, those questions went unanswered. Eventually, Earhart was memorialized around the world, but her disappearance was no longer front-page news. Then, things changed. On December 7, 1941, Japan attacked the United States at Pearl Harbor and in the light of this unprovoked attack, some began to wonder if the island nation may have been involved in the missing aviators' disappearance four years earlier. Rumors quickly began to spread through American newspapers about Japan's potential involvement in Earhart's fate. The film *Flight for Freedom* hypothesized that Earhart may have been on a spy mission for the U.S. government and the "Japanese Capture Theory" grew. Emboldened by the wartime antagonism towards the Japanese, which was escalated by wartime propaganda, American publications printed a series of unverified rumors which suggested that Earhart and Noonan had been lured off course and/or captured by the Japanese, possibly because they were on a "spy mission." By 1944, rumors that Earhart and Noonan were in the Marshall Islands or on Saipan appeared in publications nationwide. But none of these claims could be verified. Regardless, the wartime frenzy provided a firm foundation for the Japanese Capture Theory, which emerged in 1942, five years after Earhart's

disappearance, because of the increase in anti-Japanese sentiment and fears of Japanese military expansion post-Pearl Harbor.

This chapter covers the years 1937 to 1945 and is bookended by Earhart's disappearance and the end of the Second World War. The first section includes discussion of the years 1937 to 1942 and shows that the Japanese Capture Theory did not receive coverage in any American publication in the five years after Earhart's disappearance. The second section examines the rise of anti-Japanese sentiment in the United States in the months leading up to Pearl Harbor and afterwards. Sections three and four show how that trend led to the emergence of the Japanese Capture Theory as wartime rumor between 1942 and 1945 and section five applies modern rumor theory to this analysis.

I.

The Japanese Capture Theory does not appear in any of the earliest reports about Earhart's disappearance. Most articles reported the pervasive hope that Earhart and Noonan survived the crash and were floating at sea. The *Honolulu Star-Bulletin* was one of the first newspapers to announce the tragedy. On July 2, 1937, the day of Earhart's disappearance, the *Star-Bulletin* ran a front-page article announcing, "Amelia Lost! Hunt on." The article suggested that Earhart was "presumably forced down en route to Howland Island" after running out of fuel and quoted experts on her plane's design who suggested that the craft could float indefinitely.¹ *The Sacramento Bee* reported that Earhart's plane "is feared to be down" and announced the beginning of what would

¹ "Amelia Lost! Hunt on." *Honolulu Star-Bulletin*, July 2, 1937.

become a \$4 million search and rescue effort.² *The New York Times* ran a front page article on the missing aviator with a map of the area where she disappeared.³ The tragic news even reached Earhart's Kansas hometown the following day on July 3rd. *The Atchison Daily Globe* reported, "Former Atchison girl and companion forced down when fuel is exhausted on perilous flight."⁴ In the first week of July 1937, Earhart and Noonan's disappearance was front-page news in both small and large newspapers alike and none of the coverage indicated that the Japanese may have been involved.

Government documents from 1937, which have been declassified, also do not include any evidence that would lend credence to the Japanese Capture Theory. Shortly after Earhart and Noonan's disappearance, Japanese Ambassador Hiroshi Saitō wrote a letter to Secretary of State Cordell Hull offering Japan's assistance in the search efforts for Earhart's plane. Ambassador Saitō finished the letter with the comment, "I should like to take the opportunity of expressing the deep concern of the whole Japanese nation that no trace of Miss Earhart has been found."⁵ Despite growing tension between the United States and Japan in the years before the start of the Second World War, Japan's participation in the rescue efforts in 1937 was covered favorably by the American press.

On July 6, 1937, the *Boston Globe* reported that Japan and Great Britain had joined the search for the missing aviators. The article pointed out, "International cooperation was volunteered by Japan. That nation instructed all its ship and shore radio

² "Amelia Earhart Plane Is Feared To Be Down; Search of Sea Begins." *The Sacramento Bee*, July 2, 1937.

³ "Miss Earhart Forced Down at Sea, Howland Isle Fears; Coast Guard Begins Search." *The New York Times*, July 2, 1937.

⁴ "Amelia's Voice Heard by Amateur Radio Operator." *The Atchison Daily Globe*, July 3, 1937.

⁵ Letter, No. 158, The Japanese Ambassador (Saito) to the Secretary of State, [Washington, undated, received in the Department July 20], File: 800.79611 Putnam, Amelia Earhart/160, Central Decimal File, 1930-1939, General Records of the Department of State, RG 59.

operators to keep watch for possible new clues [sic].”⁶ The *Chicago Tribune* published a similar report on the same day, noting that both the Japanese government and professional and amateur radio operators throughout Japan were invested in finding the missing airplane.⁷ The *Globe* and *Tribune* reports expressed no skepticism about Japan’s involvement in the search, and neither did the dozens of other newspapers that reported the international search effort. For the most part, the press was largely favorable towards Japan and Great Britain’s involvement – the more eyes on the Pacific, the better.

As hope for Earhart and Noonan’s rescue faded, so did the press reports on their disappearance. The massive search was called off after just over two weeks. The *Kansas City Star* reported that the fifteen-day, multi-million-dollar effort resulted in “no clue” of the plane’s whereabouts.⁸ On July 20, 1937, the *Atchison Daily Globe* initiated early plans for Earhart’s memorialization, “Now that it is taken for granted that Amelia Earhart has perished in the broad Pacific Ocean, Atchison people are beginning to talk about a monument to her memory.”⁹ None of the newspaper reports printed in the aftermath of Earhart’s disappearance and the halting of the search effort implied Japanese involvement with Earhart’s final flight and/or disappearance.

In 1937, the only publication that came close to presenting the Japanese Capture Theory was printed not in the United States, but in Australia. A short article in the Australian magazine, *Pacific Islands Monthly*, from August 25 is worth noting because later Japanese Capture theorists pointed to contemporary articles from this magazine and used them to argue that suspicions about Japan’s “involvement” in Earhart’s

⁶ “Flares Sighted Were Meteors.” *The Boston Globe*, July 6, 1937.

⁷ “Tokio Appeals to Japanese Vessels to Hunt Amelia.” *The Chicago Tribune*, July 6, 1937.

⁸ “One Last Sea Hunt.” *Kansas City Star*, July 18, 1937.

⁹ “Proposing Monuments to Amelia Earhart.” *Atchison Daily Globe*, July 20, 1937.

disappearance emerged shortly after her airplane vanished. The actual text of the article told a different story, however. In “Japan Has A Look At Howland!”, a *Pacific Islands Monthly* correspondent reported on the international search effort for Earhart. The article began with the sentence, “Japan pulled an interesting bit of Yankee bluff during the search for the missing American aviators, Mrs. Earhart Putnam and Mr. Fred Noonan, in the vicinity of the Phoenix and Gilbert Islands.”¹⁰ The author of the piece did not argue that the Japanese were involved in Earhart’s disappearance, but merely speculated (based upon at least one “off the record” source) that Japan used the search for Earhart to investigate American and British activities on the islands of Jarvis, Baker, Howland, and elsewhere. No American newspaper picked up this reporting, nor did any publications in the United States express similar “skepticism” in 1937.

In 1938, *Pacific Islands Monthly* printed another short story involving Amelia Earhart. In his 2012 book, *Amelia Earhart: The Truth at Last*, Japanese Capture theorist Mike Campbell used it as evidence to support his theory.¹¹ According to an unnamed “special correspondent,” on November 27, 1937, an envelope arrived at the Jaluit post-office in the Marshall Islands addressed to Amelia Earhart. It was postmarked at the “Hollywood-Roosevelt Hotel, Hollywood, California” and the address on the envelope appeared:

Miss Amelia Earhart (Putnam

Marshall Islands (Japanese)

Ratak Group, Maloelab Is. (10)

¹⁰ “Japan Has A Look At Howland!” *Pacific Islands Monthly*. August 25, 1937.

¹¹ Mike Campbell. *Amelia Earhart: The Truth at Last*. (Mechanicsburg, PA: Sunbury Press, 2012.) Kindle edition, 3942.

South Pacific Ocean.

The author did not look inside the envelope and provided no images of it. He or she suggested that it “may have been written by some one desirous of hoaxing the public” but theorized that “it is conceivable that Amelia Earhart may have told some trusted friend in America, before setting out on her ill-fated journey, that she intended to take a look-see in at the Marshalls en route, or that she might possibly do so if in danger as she passed by.”¹² Although this claim originated from a single person and the actual item mentioned was never found again, it is a fair piece of circumstantial evidence for Campbell’s theory. However, it did not help to fuel the earliest versions of the Japanese Capture Theory because no one person or publication integrated it into the theory until Campbell and others did so decades later. Again, no American publications mentioned this find or mentioned any similar suspicions.

News reports about Earhart and her disappearance decreased between 1938 and 1942. In 1939, Earhart’s husband, George Putnam, had her declared legally dead in a Los Angeles court. The *Los Angeles Times* reported that Putnam was able to legally declare his late wife’s death a mere two years after her disappearance, rather than the typical seven years, because of the circumstances in which she disappeared. Judge Elliot Craig, who decided in Putnam’s favor, reasoned that the late aviator’s death “could not be classified as usual” and that two years sufficed for the legal declaration.¹³ Afterwards, Earhart’s name continued to appear in newspaper crossword puzzles, advertisements for her luggage and fashion lines, and in small articles about scholarships and buildings named in her honor. However, the amount of press the late aviator received in the few

¹² “Unclaimed Letter for Amelia Earhart.” *Pacific Islands Monthly*, March 17, 1938.

¹³ “Amelia Earhart Declared Dead.” *Los Angeles Times*, January 6, 1939.

years following her disappearance was limited and mundane. In fact, the most prominent story reported in connection to Earhart between 1938 and 1942 had little to do with the aviator at all. In May of 1939, George Putnam was kidnapped (and later released) by Nazi-sympathizers because his publishing company printed a fictional novel about an assassination attempt on Adolf Hitler.¹⁴ In news articles about the incident, Putnam was usually identified as “a publisher and husband of the late Amelia Earhart.”

Away from the public eye, the United States government kept tabs on any “news” about the missing aviator. An intelligence report from early 1939 discussed the possibility that Earhart and Noonan had been captured and were imprisoned on the Marshall Islands. A message in a bottle had washed up on a riverbank near Bordeaux, France which claimed to be from a prisoner on the islands. The writer asserted that they had seen Amelia Earhart and an unnamed man in a prison cell nearby.¹⁵ How the message in a bottle traveled from the Marshall Islands to a riverbank in France was never explained and its claims remain unverified. While this piece of “evidence” played a minor role in later Earhart disappearance theories, the intelligence report was not declassified until 1977. It could not have been used as evidence for the earliest versions of the Japanese Capture Theory, which, as of 1940, had yet to appear.

In March 1940, Earhart’s disappearance briefly re-emerged in a few newspapers when another “message in a bottle” was found floating in the Ohio River by a fisherman. A smattering of mid-sized newspapers around the county, largely in the Midwest, recounted the story about the Ohio find. The *Indianapolis News* reported on March 23

¹⁴ “George Putnam Kidnapped and Quickly Freed.” *The Evening Sun*. May 13, 1939.

¹⁵ “Report of Amelia Earhart as Prisoner in Marshall Islands.” Records of the Office of the Chief of Naval Operations, RG 38, Entry 81, General Correspondence, 1929-1942, File A4-3/Earhart, Box #70
<https://www.archives.gov/news/topics/earhart>

that the note was “puzzling authorities.” The find was rife with misspellings and declared to be from someone shipwrecked on “Brrren Island.” The writer claimed that “Amelia Airhart” was on the island and being held prisoner by unspecified forces.¹⁶ By early July, the *San Francisco Examiner* reported that the note had been discredited.¹⁷ While the rumor did not directly mention the possibility of Japanese involvement in Earhart’s disappearance, its coverage is worth noting. News stories reporting the find wrote that was “puzzling” and a hoax. Later rumors, even those with less credibility than the “Ohio river tale,” were often printed without the same amount of skepticism when they appeared to confirm the budding Japanese Capture Theory.

After 1940, the press largely stopped dabbling in Earhart disappearance speculation, but her name did pop up often in newspaper columns and reports. Occasionally, she continued to appear as an answer in a regional crossword puzzle and she was briefly mentioned in news stories featuring the accomplishments of other female aviators. Some newspapers included a brief blurb about each yearly anniversary of her disappearance, but the overall volume of coverage dropped considerably. By December 7, 1941, the Japanese Capture Theory had yet to appear in any American newspaper or publication. Then, the world changed.

II.

Two years before Japan attacked Pearl Harbor and after the Second World War was underway in Europe, President Franklin D. Roosevelt had given a speech in which he

¹⁶ “River Note Refers to Amelia Earhart’s Lost Pacific Flyer.” *Indianapolis News*. March 23, 1940.

¹⁷ “Amelia Earhart Note Discredited.” *San Francisco Examiner*. July 4, 1940.

ensured the American people that “this nation will remain neutral.”¹⁸ By 1941, however, the United States was extensively intertwined with the Allied efforts in Europe and the Roosevelt administration sought ways to convince Americans to join and support the war. After Pearl Harbor in December 1941, “yellow peril” fears, which had existed in the United States for decades, “came to a full boil.”¹⁹ Official wartime propaganda was innately antagonistic to the United States’ new military foes, including Japan. However, other evidence suggests that fears of and antagonism towards the Japanese rose outside of official channels. For example, the forced internment of Japanese Americans, authorized by Executive Order 9066 in February 1942, originated not by “official edict,” but by “pressure from an extremely popular grassroots movement.”²⁰ This shows that anti-Japanese sentiment was not solely influenced or directed by wartime propaganda and official government edicts. In fact, official propaganda merely confirmed and emphasized already-existing sentiments.

Public opinion polls conducted between December 1941 and 1945 corroborate both American support for the war in the Pacific and growing fears of a Japanese threat. A Gallup poll taken between December 12 and December 17, 1941 found that 97% of Americans supported Roosevelt’s declaration of war.²¹ In his analysis of the polling, George Gallup wrote,

¹⁸ Anthony Rhodes. *Propaganda: The Art of Persuasion: World War II*. (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1976.), 141.

¹⁹ Kenneth D. Rose. *Myth and the Greatest Generation: A Social History of Americans in World War II*. (New York: Routledge, 2008.), Kindle Edition, 4.

²⁰ Rose, *Myth and the Greatest Generation*, 4.

²¹ Lydia Saad. “Gallup Vault: A Country Unified After Pearl Harbor.” Gallup.com. Gallup, March 27, 2020. <https://news.gallup.com/vault/199049/gallup-vault-country-unified-pearl-harbor.aspx>.

“Ever since July of this year [1941] a majority of voters have been in favor of taking definite steps to curb Japanese expansion even if it meant risking war. This sentiment increased sharply when the Japanese invaded Indo-China in July. From that moment Institute surveys found two-thirds or more of the American people willing to take the risk of war in order to stop Japan from becoming more powerful.”

As Gallup argued, Americans were becoming more concerned of Japanese expansion in the months leading up to the attack on Pearl Harbor. Another poll taken the week before the attack found that 69% of voters favored curbing the Japanese threat at the risk of war, with 20% opposed. It is important to note, however, that these rising fears did *not* develop amid Japan’s earliest expansionist moves. After the Sino-Japanese War broke out on July 7, 1937 – a mere 5 days after Earhart’s disappearance – voters largely did not want to take sides. Several months after the war started, 55% of respondents were “neutral” in the war between China and Japan or did not want to “choose a side.” Based upon this polling, Gallup concluded that American fears of Japanese expansion rose once American interests were threatened by the nation’s bolder moves including the invasion of French Indo-China and Japanese movement towards the Philippines.²²

Fears of the Japanese military threat predictably increased in the first several months of the war. Initially, most Americans perceived Germany to be a greater military threat to the United States than Japan. In July of 1942, 50% of Americans believed Germany to be the principal danger, as compared to 31% who believed the same about Japan. By November 1942, that number reversed. A plurality of Americans, 58% of

²² George Gallup. “Public Found Taking Realistic Attitude on Japanese-American Relations.” *Public Opinion News Service*, December 12, 1941.

respondents, believed Japan to be the most significant military threat, as compared to 28% who believed the same of Germany. This gap continued throughout the war and widened as German military losses increased. The final poll taken in March of 1945 revealed a split of 64% to 19%, Japan over Germany.²³ Furthermore, a poll conducted in 1944 showed that 13% of Americans wanted to “kill all Japanese.” A 1945 poll showed that 22% of Americans were “disappointed” that more atomic bombs were not used on the Japanese.²⁴ Anti-Japanese sentiment and growing fears of Japanese expansion grew slowly in the years preceding the attack on Pearl Harbor and soared in the first year of the war and continued through 1945. The rise of the Japanese Capture Theory emerged out of these trends.

Wartime propaganda emphasized and exploited the natural uptick in American fears of their Japanese, German, and Italian military rivals. Historically, warring nations use propaganda to encourage both soldiers and civilians. A winning war needs support from both the trenches and the home front and during the Second World War, no nation was immune from the allure of war propaganda. The Allies and Axis powers alike distributed propagandistic images and publications celebrating their respective “causes” while casting their opponents in the most negative light. John Dower writes, “Governments on all sides presented the conflict as a holy war for national survival and glory, a mission to defend and propagate the finest values of their state and culture.”²⁵ He also concludes that for the participants on both sides, the Second World War was also a

²³ “Polling and Pearl Harbor,” Polling and Pearl Harbor | Roper Center for Public Opinion Research (The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, December 1, 2016), <https://ropercenter.cornell.edu/blog/polling-and-pearl-harbor>.

²⁴ Clayton R. Koppes and Gregory D. Black. *Hollywood Goes to War: How Politics, Profits and Propaganda Shaped World War II Movies*. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1987.), 250-251.

²⁵ John W. Dower. *War Without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War*. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1986.), Kindle Edition, 3.

“race war.” It exposed “raw prejudices and was fueled by racial pride, arrogance, and rage on many sides.”²⁶ Japanese propaganda exploited examples of racial conflict in the United States but disregarded their German allies’ aims of creating a “pure, Aryan” nation. Furthermore, Dower argues that the Japanese imperialist aims in the Pacific were premised on a belief that the Japanese were “destined” to rule over a “fixed hierarchy of peoples and races.”²⁷

In the United States, posters, films, and publications promoted American patriotism and degraded the nation’s German, Italian, and Japanese opponents. While war propaganda often juxtaposed Nazis with depictions of “Good Germans,” anti-Japanese propaganda targeted the Japanese “race” as a whole. This “race war” was perpetuated through various media throughout the country. On the big screen, Japanese characters were often featured as bloodthirsty and animalistic.²⁸ Such propaganda frequently utilized examples of Japanese atrocities – like the attack on Pearl Harbor – not falsely but “in the pious depiction of such behavior as peculiar to the other side.”²⁹ Alternatively, this messaging romanticized American patriotism and heroism. These efforts created a strong “us” versus “them” dichotomy: one side fought for “freedom” while the other fought for “slavery.” The heart of American war propaganda contained that specific theme, “two worlds were locked in mortal combat, the free world and the slave.”³⁰ The Japanese made a similar argument on the other side of the world, albeit in reverse, with Americans and their allies cast as the “masters” of the “slave world.”

²⁶ Dower, *War Without Mercy*, 4.

²⁷ *Ibid.* 8.

²⁸ Anthony W. Sheppard. "An Exotic Enemy: Anti-Japanese Musical Propaganda in World War II Hollywood." *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 54, no. 2 (2001): 303-57. doi:10.1525/jams.2001.54.2.303. pg. 303.

²⁹ Dower, *War without Mercy*, 12.

³⁰ *Ibid.* 16.

“Remember Pearl Harbor,” was one of the most-used phrases in the era’s propagandic productions and had the effect of perpetually reminding Americans “what they were fighting for.”³¹ This effort was especially successful on the big screen. In the 1940s, 85 million Americans visited a theater or nickelodeon each week.³² Between 1942 and 1944, over 375 films that were “clearly propagandistic” were produced.³³ These productions reinforced the United States’ war aims with heavily patriotic messages, as did Frank Capra’s famous *Why We Fight* film series, which was commissioned by Army Chief of Staff George C. Marshall and viewed by both the general public and American troops.³⁴ These productions had a drastic effect on American morale and support for the war in the trenches and on the home front.

Hollywood itself was impacted both directly and indirectly by Second World War propaganda. The United States Office of War Information (OWI) carried out the propagandist aims of the Roosevelt administration following its founding in 1942. It held great sway with another propagandist department, the Office of Censorship, which issued film export licenses.³⁵ Since the foreign market was so financially important for Hollywood studios, they were inclined to adhere to the advice of the OWI and the Office of Censorship and their propagandist aims. Additionally, OWI executives frequently met with Hollywood studios and encouraged them to create the “right kind of films,” i.e. ones that emphasized Roosevelt’s “Four Freedoms:” freedom of speech, freedom of worship, freedom from want, and freedom from fear.³⁶ Studios quickly picked up on the patriotic

³¹ Ralph Donald. *Hollywood Enlists! Propaganda Films of World War II*. (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017.), 38.

³² Rhodes, *Propaganda*, 150.

³³ Donald, *Hollywood Enlists!*, 8.

³⁴ Dower, *War Without Mercy*, 15.

³⁵ Koppes, Black, *Hollywood Goes to War*, vii.

³⁶ Koppes, Black, *Hollywood Goes to War*, 64.

messages even in the absence of direct government instruction. They were incentivized to respond to the cultural shifts produced by war propaganda because films that tapped into American support for the war that emphasized the “Four Freedoms” simply sold more tickets.

The Japanese villain was a popular trope among war era Hollywood films. For example, advertisements coordinated by the OWI for the 1942 propaganda film *Menace of the Rising Sun* featured “a huge Japanese figure, blood dripping from its buck-toothed fangs.”³⁷ While that ad was exceptionally lurid, antagonism towards the Japanese was a common feature of 1940s war propaganda. In 1942 alone, twenty-five films were released that relied heavily on anti-Japanese elements.³⁸ Because of the attack on Pearl Harbor, Americans “overwhelmingly” regarded Japan as the nation’s primary enemy, hence the effectiveness of the “Remember Pearl Harbor” message.³⁹ In film, Americans were presented as “the epitome of righteousness,” while the Japanese clearly “embodied all evil.”⁴⁰ However, despite rising “yellow peril” fears in the years leading up to the Second World War, the anti-Japanese component of these films was relatively new in 1942. Two anti-Japanese productions were released in 1937, but those were the exception, rather than the rule. Pre-war films were largely apolitical. Before the United States entered the war in 1941, politics were “seldom seen” on the big screen.⁴¹

³⁷ Koppes, Black, *Hollywood Goes to War*, 60.

³⁸ Sheppard, “An Exotic Enemy,” 307.

³⁹ Todd M. Bennett. 2012. *One World, Big Screen : Hollywood, the Allies, and World War II*. (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press.), 145.

⁴⁰ Koppes, Black, *Hollywood Goes to War*, 248.

⁴¹ Rhodes, *Propaganda*, 152.

III.

In 1942, wartime propaganda and Earhart rumors collided with the release of a film entitled *Flight for Freedom*. It premiered in 1943 but reports about its casting and plot circulated as early as the spring of 1942. The film was not directly produced by the U.S. government, but did receive approval and support from the U.S. Navy. In *Flight for Freedom*, fictional aviator “Tonie Carter,” played by Rosalind Russell and heavily based on Earhart, sought to circumnavigate the globe.⁴² According to the film, Carter was actually a spy for the United States government tasked with doing countersurveillance over Japanese-controlled territory. On the last leg of her flight, Carter discovered that Japanese forces were waiting for her at her next fuel stop and chose to crash her plane into the ocean instead. Although the film was presented as a love story, with Fred MacMurray playing the love interest, it was also heavily propagandistic. The first 10-15 minutes of the film mirrored Capra’s *Why We Fight*, showing American military pilots preparing for war. By the end of the film, Carter was presented as a tragic American hero who bravely chose to down her own plane to avoid the “inhuman” Japanese. While *Flight for Freedom* is purely fictional, it heavily influenced the emergence of the “Japanese Capture Theory” at the time of its release and ever since. In fact, no claim or evidence of Earhart’s supposed espionage emerged before *Flight for Freedom* was announced in 1942.

The earliest news report about the film appeared on January 12, 1942, when Hollywood gossip columnist Jimmie Fidler broke the story that a Hollywood studio was producing a film about Earhart but was “keeping very secret” about the plot, cast, and

⁴² *Flight for Freedom*. DVD. Directed by Lothar Mendes. Los Angeles: RKO, 1943.

other details.⁴³ In April, John Chapman reported in the *New York Daily News* that the studio RKO was hoping to recruit Rosalind Russell to star in the film “based on a legend” about Amelia Earhart.⁴⁴ The column was republished in several other prominent publications, including in the *Chicago Tribune* on the same day.⁴⁵ In May 1942, newspapers including the *San Francisco Examiner* officially announced the upcoming film entitled *Stand by to Die* featuring Russell in the lead role.⁴⁶ The film was later retitled the more patriotic, *Flight for Freedom*. Most of these early reports on the film were straightforward and simply noted Russell’s casting in the RKO production.

Many of these initial reports of the film’s casting and production clearly identified it as a fictional take on Earhart’s life. The more sensational versions of the Japanese Capture Theory did not appear until at least 1943. This mirrors the public opinion polling at the time, which revealed that Americans did not see Japan as a bigger military threat than Germany until the last few months of 1942. In John Chapman’s syndicated column, he called the espionage theory an Earhart “legend.” Similarly, a full page spread in the *Des Moines Register* proclaimed: “Weird story has famed flyer in a role of war heroine!”⁴⁷ The story went on to clarify that “the true story of what happened is still unknown. Only time—perhaps a motion picture—will tell.”⁴⁸ In August 1942, NEA Service Staff Correspondent Paul Harrison wrote in his “Hollywood” column about RKO’s attempts to procure U.S. Navy assistance with the film. The initial requests were denied. Harrison explained:

⁴³ Fidler, Jimmie. “Amelia Earhart Movie.” *El Paso Times*. January 12, 1942.

⁴⁴ John Chapman. “Hollywood.” *New York Daily News*, April 18, 1942.

⁴⁵ John Chapman. “Looking at Hollywood.” *Chicago Tribune*, April 18, 1942.

⁴⁶ Lonella O. Parsons. “RKO to Star Rosalind Russell In Biography of Amelia Earhart.” *San Francisco Examiner*. May 26, 1942.

⁴⁷ “Is Amelia Earhart Still Living?” *The Des Moines Register*. March 1, 1942.

⁴⁸ “Is Amelia Earhart Still Living?”

“Reason was that the story details a scheme for mass espionage over secret air and sea bases in the Japanese mandated islands, and there are some who believe that this actually was accomplished in July, 1937 when U.S. ships and planes searched the South Pacific for Amelia Earhart Putnam and her navigator, who were forced down during an attempted world flight.⁴⁹”

The Navy’s resistance was not permanent, however. Harrison’s column ended on the eerie note: “After Pearl Harbor, the U.S. Navy withdrew its objection.”

By November 1942, *Flight for Freedom* and the general wartime fervor began to inspire more dramatic, blatant takes on Earhart’s final flight. In the inaugural issue of *Skyways* magazine, Charles Palmer, a self-described “associate of George Palmer Putnam who is now with the armed forces,” wondered if Earhart was the “war’s first casualty.”

He wrote,

“Were these two [Earhart and Noonan] flyers the first victims in the present war between the United States and Japan? Did an alert U.S. Navy, already aware in 1937 that America sooner or later would be locked in conflict with the small yellow ‘Aryans’ of Nippon, grasp an opportunity to observe secret war preparations in the closely guarded Japanese-mandated islands – the strategic stepping-stones between Hawaii and the heart of Japan?”⁵⁰

Palmer admitted in the article that his question was conjecture and speculation only and that Earhart’s husband, George Putnam, denied claims that Earhart’s flight was funded by the federal government and that his missing wife was on a mission to spy on the Japanese. The article was largely a listing of rumors about Earhart’s potential fate and

⁴⁹ Harrison, Paul. “Hollywood.” *Delaware County Daily Times*. August 31, 1942.

⁵⁰ Charles Palmer. “The War’s First Casualty? Amelia Earhart.” *Skyways*, November 1942, 44.

whereabouts and provided no new evidence about potential Japanese involvement. It also did not mention *Flight for Freedom*, which appears to have inspired the “Earhart as spy” angle of the Japanese Capture Theory. Palmer was correct on one thing, however. In his last paragraph, he asked, “In mopping up the Japs our forces may clear up this mystery – or will its ghost hover forever over these islands with the ghosts of the enemy who tried to use them so treacherously?”⁵¹ Allied confrontations with the Japanese in the Pacific never provided any new answers for Earhart’s fate, but Palmer’s latter question deserves an affirmative answer. Theories about Earhart’s final flight – and potential Japanese involvement in her disappearance – do continue to “hover” over those small islands in the Pacific.

Flight for Freedom was released in theaters in the spring of 1943. In an April 1943 review of the film, Moira Wallace of the *San Francisco Examiner* wrote positively of its “patriotic theme of heroism and sacrifice.”⁵² The film received mostly positive reviews like Wallace’s, and critics rarely disparaged the theory it presented. There is one notable exception, however. In May 1943, the *Philadelphia Inquirer*’s Mildred Martin penned a relatively clear-headed analysis of the film, its impact, and its influences:

“But ‘Flight for Freedom’ proves more irritating than persuasive in its jumble of fiction combined with just enough fact to be disconcerting and throw the whole thing out of focus. Haunted by the personality of Amelia Earhart and her mysterious disappearance, RKO has hit upon what it presents as a possible solution. There is plausibility enough to stir interest in the idea that America’s ace

⁵¹ Palmer, “The War’s First Casualty,” 72.

⁵² Moira Wallace. “Golden Gate’s New Bill Is Good Entertainment.” *San Francisco Examiner*. April 9, 1943.

aviatrix deliberately plunged into the South Pacific when the Japs got wind of her Government-inspired mission to 'lose' herself on Gull Island; thereby giving our Navy excuse to search for her on Japan's mandated isles."⁵³

Unlike Martin, many critics and filmgoers were caught up in the "plausibility" of the theory presented in *Flight for Freedom* and the line between fact and fiction was blurred not only in the film, but in reality as well. *Flight for Freedom* had a drastic effect on the nature of theories about Earhart's disappearance. Although the film would fade from the headlines, the Japanese Capture Theory was just starting to gain steam.

By the time *Flight for Freedom* was released in 1943, months of anti-Japanese propaganda had taken hold. In the early months of the year, the Japanese Capture Theory appeared in a series of newspaper columns and the volume of these appearances quickly escalated. Like the November 1942 *Skyways* article, many did not mention the film, even though it originated the espionage angle of the theory, an angle some later theorists would adopt. Although there was an absence of any evidence to support it, it took on a life of its own. Anti-Japanese propaganda filled the vacuum left in the absence of proof. Starting in 1943, newspaper reports were an exercise in confirmation bias. Any and every rumor of Earhart's capture by the Japanese was nationwide news, no matter how unverified or ridiculous. In the context of war propaganda's view of the Japanese as "inhuman villains," any conspiracy theory about American heroine Amelia Earhart that cast Japan in a negative light just "seemed right."

⁵³ Mildred Martin. "Animal Actors on Screen Grabs Honors and Interest." *Philadelphia Inquirer*. May 16, 1943.

Many newspaper articles containing the Japanese Capture Theory beginning in 1943 included sensationalized headlines and speculative information. Therefore, even readers who merely glanced through the newspaper, perusing headlines, would have often been bombarded with the theory. A *Detroit Free Press* article asked, “Is Amelia Earhart a Japanese Prisoner?” The article went on to suggest, “Since Pearl Harbor, some little light has been thrown on Japan’s South Pacific secret island bases.”⁵⁴ War propaganda urged Americans to “Remember Pearl Harbor.” In the context of Earhart’s disappearance, that message was especially effective. In a later publication, for example, the *Detroit Free Press* previewed a column about Earhart with the headline: “Did the Japs Liquidate Amelia Earhart?”⁵⁵ In the *Miami Herald*, opinion columnist Ralph Goll declared, “Amelia Earhart May Have Been Killed by Japs.” He quoted Navy engineer Edward R. Dathe as saying, “The famous woman flier and her navigator undoubtedly were victims of a secret war which the Japs began waging against us in the Pacific long before the first bombers appeared over Ford Island and Hickam Field.” Goll theorized that Earhart and Noonan were led off course by “fake radio messages” from the Japanese.⁵⁶ This was pure conjecture. There was no evidence in 1937 or afterwards about Earhart’s reception of “fake messages” from anyone, let alone the Japanese.

Although war propaganda had already provided fertile ground for the Japanese Capture Theory, it sincerely gained steam in April 1943 when several prominent newspapers around the country reported Dr. Marion L. Brittain’s version of the theory. A headline from the *New York Daily News* proclaimed: “Hints Japs May Have Killed

⁵⁴ “Is Amelia Earhart a Japanese Prisoner?” *Detroit Free Press*. January 7, 1943.

⁵⁵ “Did the Japs Liquidate Amelia Earhart? –See Sunday’s Free Press.” *Detroit Free Press*. January 8, 1943.

⁵⁶ Ralph Goll. “Amelia Earhart May Have Been Killed By Japs.” *The Miami Herald*, January 17, 1943.

Earhart.”⁵⁷ A newspaper in Alabama reported that Dr. Brittain, the President of the Georgia School of Technology (now Georgia Tech), had very briefly spent time on a battleship that participated in the search efforts for Earhart. He accompanied a Georgia School of Technology ROTC unit on the trip and clarified in his statement that he “wasn’t even supposed to be aboard.” Despite his comments being mere hearsay, Dr. Brittain proclaimed his “unofficial suspicions that the long missing flier might have fallen into Japanese hands.” He claimed that the passengers on the ship had merely *discussed* the possibility of that the United States government had sent aviators, like Earhart, to take a “look-see” over the Japanese mandated islands. Dr. Brittain asserted that he had a “very definite feeling” that Earhart was participating in this type of mission at the time of her disappearance.⁵⁸ Other newspapers, including *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, ran with misleading and sensational headlines about Dr. Brittain’s claims. The *Inquirer* article printed on April 13 proclaimed, “Amelia Earhart Captive of Japs, Members of Search Party Believes.”⁵⁹

Dr. Brittain claimed he “broke his silence because it [was] no longer a matter of honor to refrain from casting suspicions on the Japanese.”⁶⁰ The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor caused the academic to “reconsider” his previous silence, which again shows how war era anti-Japanese sentiment inspired the Japanese Capture Theory. Brittain’s “change of heart” could have also simply been his own confirmation bias. The attack “confirmed” for Dr. Brittain his previous suspicions, despite the lack of evidence to support them.

⁵⁷ “Hints Japs May Have Killed Earhart.” *New York Daily News*, April 13, 1943.

⁵⁸ “Amelia Earhart Fell into Jap Hands Dr. Brittain Believes.” *The Anniston*. April 12, 1943.

⁵⁹ “Amelia Earhart Captive of Japs, Member of Search Party Believes.” *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, April 13, 1943.

⁶⁰ “Amelia Earhart Fell into Jap Hands Dr. Brittain Believes.”

Newspapers around the county picked up the proclamation and the rumor spread rapidly. The sensationalistic headlines continued for weeks in small and large newspapers alike. The *Tampa Tribune* titled an April 13th Associated Press report about Dr. Brittain's suspicions with "Amelia Earhart Believed Executed by the Japanese."⁶¹ Dr. Brittain's theory did not directly imply Earhart's execution, despite what the headline claimed. Brittain had actually just repeated the suspicion, possibly influenced by *Flight for Freedom* and the media coverage of the film, that Earhart was a spy for the United States government and had been tasked to fly over the Japanese mandated islands. A lack of evidence for that claim did not stop other newspapers from running with the report as well and adding their own spin to it. The *Daily Press*, published in Newport News, Virginia, proclaimed "Amelia Earhart Hinted Caught, Slain by Japs."⁶² The *Greeley Daily Tribune* was more direct: "Japs Suspected of Slaying of Amelia Earhart."⁶³ This is only a sampling of the most sensational headlines of the time – they appeared throughout the country.

Occasionally news reports featuring the Japanese Capture Theory relied heavily on the racial anti-Japanese sentiment of the era. On June 6, 1943, Davenport Steward wrote an article in the *Dayton Daily News* entitled "I Believe That Japs Murdered Amelia Earhart."⁶⁴ The column was reprinted in other newspapers, including the *Arizona Republic*, the *Oakland Tribune*, and the *Nebraska State Journal*.⁶⁵ The full-page report repeated Dr. Brittain's claims with Steward's own spin. He argued "In the navy there has

⁶¹ "Amelia Earhart Believed Executed by the Japanese." *Tampa Tribune*. April 13, 1943.

⁶² "Amelia Earhart Hinted Caught, Slain by Japs." *Daily Press*. April 13, 1943

⁶³ "Japs Suspected of Slaying of Amelia Earhart." *Greeley Daily Tribune*. April 13, 1943.

⁶⁴ Davenport Steward. "I Believe That Japs Murdered Amelia Earhart." *Dayton Daily News*. June 6, 1943.

⁶⁵ See Bibliography.

long been suspicion of the Japs. United States sailors have never cared for or trusted the snooping monkey-men of Nippon.” The depiction of the Japanese as animalistic “monkey-men” was common in the worst of the anti-Japanese films and propaganda of the era. It may have even influenced Steward’s theory about Amelia Earhart’s disappearance. He went on to claim, “I felt then and during the search that I was perhaps 50 per cent right...And I feel now that I am at least 75 per cent right.”⁶⁶ Unlike Dr. Brittain, who had at least been on a ship searching for Earhart, Steward had no expertise or experience with the search and rescue efforts. How, then, could he claim to feel “75 per cent right?” Steward and others, impacted by the anti-Japanese fervor that erupted after Pearl Harbor and its perpetuation by OWI war propaganda, found that early versions of the Japanese Capture Theory made sense because it fit into an already-established worldview that cast Japan as the eternal villain.

American newspapers printed during the Second World War published even the most absurd versions of the Japanese Capture Theory, including second and third-hand accounts. In the spring and summer of 1943, midwestern newspapers printed a brand-new rumor about Earhart’s disappearance that originated with painter Tino Costa. A report in the *Journal Gazette* in Mattoon, Illinois proclaimed, “Amelia Earhart Reported Held by Japan.”⁶⁷ *The Hammond Times* in Munster, Indiana ran with the rumor as well, as did a handful of other newspapers in the region.⁶⁸ Tino Costa was a painter temporarily living in Springfield, Illinois, where he was tasked with painting a portrait of Abraham Lincoln. He received a letter from his wife who, at the time, was living near Los Angeles,

⁶⁶ Steward, “I Believe That Japs Murdered Amelia Earhart.”

⁶⁷ “Amelia Earhart Reported Held by Japan.” *Journal Gazette*, April 27, 1943.

⁶⁸ “Rumor Amelia Earhart is a Jap Prisoner.” *The Hammond Times*, April 28, 1943.

California. Mrs. Costa wrote to her husband about a young roommate, Jane, who claimed to be Earhart's second cousin. "Jane" alleged that she had received word from the missing aviator, who declared that she was alive and being held prisoner by the Japanese. No further information or evidence was provided. Costa proclaimed that the claim could not be "just rumor" because his wife regarded it as "news and reliable." The same *Journal Gazette* article that included Costa's claim ended with an unproven and speculative sentence, presenting it as fact: "Miss Earhart at the time was engaged on a government mission and it was considered possible the Japs suspected her and caused her capture."⁶⁹ The Costa rumor spread throughout Illinois and neighboring states, reaching as far as Mississippi.⁷⁰

Costa's story was not true. Shortly after the story broke, the painter's wife and supposed source of the claim told the *Los Angeles Times* that she "regretted" her role in its spread. She stated, "I merely wrote him that I had heard over the radio and read in a neighborhood newspaper speculation that Miss Earhart might have been seized by the Japs because she had discovered secret Japanese fortifications in her famous South Pacific flight." Earhart's supposed relative "Jane" did not exist. Mrs. Costa called the situation "very unfortunate."⁷¹ The correction came too late and was printed only in the *Times* rather than the largely midwestern newspapers where it originated. Rumor had already outpaced the truth.

⁶⁹ "Amelia Earhart Reported Held by Japan." *Journal Gazette*

⁷⁰ "Amelia Earhart Putnam May Be Alive In Prison Of Japanese Is Rumored." *Clarion-Ledger*, April 28, 1943.

⁷¹ "Source Here Regrets Amelia Earhart Rumor." *Los Angeles Times*, April 28, 1943.

IV.

By 1944, questions and theories about Earhart's disappearance reached a fever pitch. In February, Representative James J. Heffernan (D-NY) brought the Japanese Capture Theory to the House floor. He proposed the United States government reopen the probe into Earhart's disappearance and look for "possible evidence" that she and Noonan were forced down by the Japanese near the Marshall Islands on their way to Howland Island. The *Boston Globe* report about Rep. Heffernan's suggestion stated: "The few clues as to Miss Earhart's lot yielded by the Pacific have caused others in the past to voice belief in a similar possibility."⁷² The *New York Daily News* reported that Rep. Heffernan sent a letter to the Secretaries of War and the Navy requesting further information.⁷³ Despite the congressmen's perseverance, his efforts were largely in vain. At the time, a new investigation was not reopened.

Rumors continued to spread in 1944 that Amelia Earhart may have crashed near the Marshall Islands, and that the Japanese forces on the islands may have played a hand in her fate. In April, shortly after Rep. Heffernan's proclamations, newspapers in Earhart's home state of Kansas and the surrounding region proclaimed that Earhart's husband, George Putnam had "no hope of finding Amelia Earhart." This and similar articles also picked up on the suspicion that Earhart had crashed near, or had been taken to, the Japanese-controlled Marshall Islands. Recall that in 1939, a message-in-a-bottle had washed upon on a riverbank in Bordeaux, France from someone proclaiming to be a prisoner in the Marshall Islands and had seen the missing aviator there as well. Those reports had not yet been declassified in 1944, so the "Marshall rumors" were more than

⁷² "May Probe Theory Japs Shot Down Amelia Earhart." *Boston Globe*, February 10, 1944.

⁷³ "Marshalls May Yield Amelia Earhart Clue." *New York Daily News*, February 10, 1944.

likely influenced by Rep. Heffernan's statements and American troop movements in the Pacific. A report from Iola, Kansas proclaimed: "Since capture of the Marshall Islands from the Japs by U.S. forces there have been suggestions that some trace of Miss Earhart, who disappeared in the Pacific on a round-the-world flight, might be found there."⁷⁴ No trace was found.

Rumors that placed Earhart in the Marshall Islands in July 1937 emerged at the same time the United States military seized control of the islands from Japan. These rumors led to more rumors and more claims of Earhart clues and sightings. In March, the Associated Press reported a strange rumor from Lieutenant Eugene T. Bogan of New York City. Bogan was a former tax lawyer and representative of the Marshall Islands military governor. He told an AP reporter about a supposed interaction he had with a Marshall Islands native named "Elieu" who had spoken to a "Jap trader named Ajima" nearly four years earlier on Rita Island near Australia. Ajima told Elieu that an "American woman pilot" had crashed between the Jaluit and Ailinglaplap atolls of the Marshall Islands and had been picked up by a Japanese fishing boat and taken to Japan. He mentioned nothing about a man (Noonan) with the "woman pilot." Bogan's repetition of the tale prompted Washington, D.C. based Lieutenant James Toole to come forward, claiming he too had spoken with Elieu, speculating that, "Ajima in telling about the 'American woman flyer' would be more impressed of course with the woman flyer, and the importance of the man would not amount to much—females are so inferior in Japan."⁷⁵

⁷⁴ "Has No Hope of Finding Amelia Earhart Now." *Iola Register*. February 11, 1944.

⁷⁵ "Hope that Amelia Earhart Putnam is in Japan Revived." *Dixon Evening Telegraph*. March 21, 1944.

The “Ajima” rumor was one of the most popular Japanese Capture rumors during the entirety of the war, likely because it came from a supposed “eyewitness” to her fate. After the story broke, it ran for several days in newspapers in nearly every state and a handful of outlets in Canada. The *Los Angeles Times* reported that a “clue” had been found in the Marshall Islands (“Ajima’s” claims).⁷⁶ The *Oakland Tribune* in California proclaimed that Earhart had been “rescued” and was “in Tokyo” according to the tale. The same article reported that Earhart’s mother, Amy Otis Earhart, was encouraged by the rumor, “I am delighted to hear this. It is the first real news we’ve had since my child disappeared seven years ago. It is very interesting.”⁷⁷ In the Midwest, the *Chicago Times* and *Kansas City Star* picked up on the tale.^{78,79} The *New York Daily News* ran with the rumor.⁸⁰ The *Boston Globe* ran a story on the claim as well, as did dozens of other newspapers nationwide.⁸¹ The popularity of the rumor was certainly not limited to one geographical area.

When Japan became involved in the search for Amelia Earhart in 1937, the move received mostly positive coverage. The same could not be said of the press coverage of Japan in 1944. In March of that year, a dozen or so newspapers that published a new “revelation” about Japan’s involvement in the search. The *Cincinnati Inquirer* “revealed” that the Japanese government had urged the United States to steer clear of the Marshall Islands: “There is no need for American planes to search the Marshall Islands. We will

⁷⁶ “Amelia Earhart Clue Found in Marshalls.” *Los Angeles Times*, March 22, 1944.

⁷⁷ “Amelia Earhart Rescued, In Tokyo, Claims Native.” *Oakland Tribune*, March 21, 1944.

⁷⁸ “Native Reports Japs’ Rescue of Amelia Earhart.” *Chicago Tribune*, March 22, 1944.

⁷⁹ “Stir New Earhart Hint.” *Kansas City Star*, March 21, 1944.

⁸⁰ Eugene Burns, “Amelia Taken to Japan, Marshall Native Says.” *New York Daily News*, March 22, 1944.

⁸¹ “Marshalls Native Hints Amelia Earhart Taken to Japan.” *Boston Globe*, March 21, 1944.

search them.”⁸² The unverified claim was disclosed by an unnamed executive officer who had been stationed on a ship that participated in the search efforts. While it is fair to see the request as odd, there is no factual evidence to suggest Japan’s motivation behind the request indicated their involvement in Earhart’s disappearance. The report is one of many possible speculative interpretations. Perhaps the Japanese merely found it to be more efficient for American carriers to look elsewhere or were concerned about international forces getting too close to possible military installments on the Marshall Islands. The possibilities are nearly endless. The assumption that the request was directly tied to Earhart’s fate requires quite a mental leap. It was an intriguing story, however. The *Kansas City Star* reported that the Japanese “cut in” on the Earhart search.⁸³ The *Miami News* picked up the story as well, as did a handful of other newspapers around the country.⁸⁴ Rumors that connected Earhart with the Marshall Islands continued to circulate throughout the remainder of the war.

Wartime rumors also connected Earhart’s disappearance with the island of Saipan, which is now part of the Northern Mariana Islands and was under Japanese control in 1937. In June and July 1944, a few dozen newspapers reported the possibility that clues about Earhart’s disappearance might be found on the island, which is hundreds of miles west of Howland Island, where Earhart’s plane was destined to land. Lt. Commander Richard B. Black, the man who received Earhart’s final radio transmission on the day she disappeared, brought up the possibility to a reporter that Saipan might hold the key to her fate because the island had the “largest static population of Japanese

⁸² “Japs Withheld Right to Search Marshalls For Amelia Earhart.” *The Cincinnati Inquirer*, March 24, 1944.

⁸³ “Japanese ‘Cut In’ on Search.” *Kansas City Star*, March 23, 1944.

⁸⁴ “Jap Restriction Revealed in Hunt for Amelia Earhart.” *Miami News*, March 23, 1944.

colonists of the islands attacked by American forces.”⁸⁵ While Black proclaimed that he was “not hopeful” about the prospects of finding any information on Saipan Island, newspapers reported the possibility in a more optimistic light. The Japanese Capture Theory had been so engrained in public consciousness that it appeared to be merely additional “evidence” of the theory’s validity despite Black’s skepticism.

Then, another discovery further “cemented” the Saipan theory for its believers. In the summer of 1944, United States Marines stationed on Saipan found a photo album containing photographs of Amelia Earhart. It was a strange discovery to be sure, but no one has ever been able to explain its origin or purpose. The album was later “lost.” Earhart was a worldwide celebrity during her time, so it is not unlikely that a Japanese soldier or official stationed on the island had at least heard of her or was perhaps a fan. The *San Francisco Examiner* reported the find, commenting that the discovery “revived the search for an answer to the seven-year mystery of the fate of America’s number one woman flyer.”⁸⁶ The coverage of the find spanned three months. In August, a handful of newspapers, including the *Indianapolis Times*, reported the find, calling it “suspicious.”⁸⁷ In September, the *Pittsburgh Sun-Telegraph* published an article on the photo album and connected it to other elements on the Japanese Capture Theory, including Dr. Brittain’s comments and Rep. Heffernan’s demand for an investigation.⁸⁸ The “photo album” rumor was one of the last rumors created during the course of the Second World War. After the war ended, news reports about Earhart’s disappearance and fate waned, but the Japanese

⁸⁵ Johnston, Richard W. “Clue to Amelia Earhart Fate to be Sought on Saipan Isle.” *Eugene Guard*. June 21, 1944.

⁸⁶ Howard Handleman, “Mystery of Amelia Earhart Revived by Album on Saipan.” *San Francisco Examiner*, July 12, 1944.

⁸⁷ “Still Mysterious.” *Indianapolis Star*, August 9, 1944.

⁸⁸ “Amelia Earhart: How Long a Mystery?” *Pittsburgh Sun-Telegraph*, September 10, 1944.

Capture Theory did not. Amelia Earhart had already been elevated to the pantheon of the “Greatest Generation” in hindsight, considered a fallen hero in the massive war against the Japanese.

V.

The origins of the Japanese Capture Theory serve as a helpful case study on wartime rumors and on rumors more broadly. Modern rumor theory emerged in the aftermath of the Second World War.⁸⁹ Jean-Noël Kapferer writes, “The large number of rumors circulating during the Second World War, and their deleterious effects on the morale of the troops and population at large, led several research teams to look into the subject.”⁹⁰ Over the course of the last several decades of research, scholars have theorized the reasons for rumors appearance and spread. Cass Sunstein writes, “Whenever a threat looms or a terrible event has occurred, rumors are inevitable.”⁹¹ There are few circumstances more threatening than world war, so the uptick in rumormongering during the course of the Second World War is easily explained by the current literature.

Modern rumor theory also explains the origins of the Japanese Capture Theory and its continued existence. The “terrible event” that precipitated such rumors was Earhart’s disappearance. Kapferer argues that “rumors arise when information is

⁸⁹ Galit Hasan-Rokem. “Rumors in Times of War and Cataclysm,” in *Rumor Mills*, ed. Gary Alan Fine, Veronique Campion-Vincent, and Chip Heath. (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Transaction Publishers, 2005), 33.

⁹⁰ Jean-Noël Kapferer. *Rumors: Uses, Interpretations, and Images*. (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Transaction Publishers, 1990), 2.

⁹¹ Cass R. Sunstein. *On Rumors: How Falsehoods Spread, Why We Believe Them, And What Can Be Done*. (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2014.), Kindle Edition, 14.

scarce.”⁹² Despite a multimillion-dollar search effort, clues about what happened to Amelia Earhart and Fred Noonan in July 1937 are limited. Rumors helped to populate the void left by that lack of information. Reasonably, Earhart’s family, friends, and fans alike desperately tried to find answers to the mystery of her disappearance because, as Luise White argues, “rumors resolve contradictions.”⁹³ Earhart’s disappearance was innately contradictory. How could a world-renowned celebrity, record-breaking aviator, and eloquent advocate for women’s advancement simply disappear into thin air? The most likely explanation for Earhart’s disappearance – that she ran out of gas and crashed into the ocean – seemed too mundane when juxtaposed with the stature of her career and reputation.

Japanese Capture rumors also fit with the preexisting mental frameworks and assumptions held by many Americans at the time. Kapferer argues that accepting a rumor as true, or possibly true, “depends on the frame of reference each individual uses to evaluate it.”⁹⁴ Sunstein concurs, “Rumors often arise and gain traction because they fit with, and support, the prior convictions of those who accept them.”⁹⁵ After Pearl Harbor, Americans understandably felt fearful of Japanese aggression, and betrayed by the sudden attack. Wartime propaganda only served to accelerate those emotions, as did the fact that many Americans on the home front had family and friends fighting in the Pacific. The Japanese Capture Theory fit perfectly with these wartime fears and assumptions. Earhart’s capture by the Japanese was something that likely seemed

⁹² Kapferer, *Rumors*, 19.

⁹³ Luise White. “Social Construction and Social Consequences: Rumors and Evidence,” in *Rumor Mills: The Social Impact of Rumor and Legend* ed. Gary Alan Fine, Veronique Campion-Vincent, and Chip Heath. (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Transaction Publishers, 2005), 243.

⁹⁴ Kapferer, *Rumors*, 73.

⁹⁵ Sunstein, *On Rumors*, 4.

plausible to an American public constantly bombarded with anti-Japanese propaganda and reports about the battles raging in the Pacific.

Although it is safe to assume word-of-mouth helped to circulate the Japanese Capture Theory during the Second World War, the press was its largest purveyor. Kapferer writes that the media's perpetual competition for "scoops" often helps to perpetuate rumors, "To check one's sources, following them back to their origins, takes time; it can be tempting to make information public without waiting for official confirmation."⁹⁶ Consider how many newspapers printed second and third-hand rumors about Earhart's fate without confirmation and without correction. Rumors that Earhart and Noonan were the "first casualties" of the war were sensational and interesting, and the kind of thing that engages readers. The near-constant publication of Japanese Capture rumors in the American press between 1942-1945 produced information cascades. Sunstein describes the phenomenon thusly, "Once a certain number of people appear to believe a rumor, others will believe it too, unless they have a good reason to believe that it is false."⁹⁷ Readers of the *New York Daily News*, *Boston Globe*, *Kansas City Star*, or the countless other newspapers that published multiple Earhart rumors during the war may have been led to believe Japanese Capture rumors were more credible, because many people appeared to believe them. In reality, those outlets were merely publicizing unconfirmed rumors, and a lot of them.

⁹⁶ Kapferer, *Rumors*, 54.

⁹⁷ Sunstein, *On Rumors*, 19.

CHAPTER ONE CONCLUSION

Kapferer writes, “as rumor spreads it becomes more convincing.”⁹⁸ By the final year of the Second World War, so many Japanese Capture rumors had spread in the United States, that even a U.S. Congressman was convinced of its plausibility. Wartime propaganda antagonistic towards the Japanese helped to further the theory during those years. This explains why the Japanese Capture Theory emerged in 1942, rather than 1937. Wartime anti-Japanese sentiment was the primary driver of the theory’s popularity even though no “smoking gun” evidence of the theory’s authenticity appeared during the war. It was largely just speculation and conjecture based upon wartime fervor and rumor. This phenomenon also helped to produce and perpetuate the theory. Rumors thrive in conditions of uncertainty. By 1945, the Japanese Capture Theory had spread widely after making an appearance in newspapers around the country, but it had not crystallized into a coherent theory yet. While some speculated about Earhart’s possible capture or crash near the Marshall Islands or Saipan, no one had yet (at least publicly) laid out a comprehensible theory that tracked Earhart’s fate step-by-step on the day of her disappearance and afterward. That wouldn’t happen for another fifteen years.

⁹⁸ Kapferer, *Rumors*, 80.

CHAPTER TWO

As the guns fell silent in the Pacific Theater in 1945, the Japanese Capture Theory also ebbed for the next fifteen years. While a few rumors of Earhart's potential survival circulated in the late 1940s, beliefs about Japan's involvement in the aviator's disappearance largely disappeared from newspapers and publications for over a decade. In 1960, it reappeared in the American media with the formation of a handful of high-profile amateur investigations into Earhart's disappearance following the first publication of books espousing it. During the Second World War, the theory existed as mere rumor alone. That changed, starting in the 1960s when the Japanese Capture Theory began to crystalize into a relatively coherent narrative. By 1970 and continuing into the late 1980s, adherents of the theory split into two general schools. One version, most famously espoused by CBS newsman Fred Goerner, posited that Earhart's plane crashed and/or was shot down by Japanese forces and both she and her navigator, Fred Noonan, were taken to the island of Saipan where they were held in captivity and later perished. The alternative school, adopted largely by members of "Operation Earhart," a group of Second World War veterans including Joseph Gervais, argued that Earhart was captured by the Japanese, taken to Japan, and then rescued by American forces in 1945. Following the war, these theorists argued, Earhart returned to the United States to live under the assumed name, Irene Bolam. The investigations of Goerner, Gervais and others and the subsequent publications and media coverage kept the Japanese Capture Theory alive long after the war and expanded its reach and scope. Although "Earhart conspiracy fatigue" had largely set in by the 1980s, the era spanning the years 1960-1987 denote a high watermark of the Japanese Capture Theory. The theory's heyday can be attributed to two

major cultural factors – Cold War era paranoia and its subsequent impact on the proliferation of conspiracy theories, and a dramatic increase in distrust in government institutions beginning in the 1960s. These two forces help to explain why the theory emerged in the 1960s, long after the Second World War ended.

This chapter is divided into eight sections. The first section covers the limited coverage of the Japanese Capture Theory from 1945 to 1960. Section two concerns Paul Briand Jr.'s book *Daughter of the Sky*, published in 1960, and the emergence of Josephine Blanco Akiyama's "eyewitness" claim from Saipan. Section three picks up with Fred Goerner's investigation of Briand's claims, which resulted in his publication of *The Search for Amelia Earhart*, a *New York Times* bestselling book which helped to propel the Japanese Capture Theory to prominence in the 1960s. The emergence of the "Irene Bolam" theory is covered in section four and section five is an overview of a sampling of books, press coverage, and television shows about the Japanese Capture Theory in the 1970s. Section six largely examines Vincent Loomis' contributions to the theory in his 1985 book, *Amelia Earhart: The Final Story*. Section seven covers Thomas Devine's *Eyewitness: The Amelia Earhart Story*, published in 1987, and the decline in popularity of the Japanese Capture Theory. Section eight is a theoretical analysis of the height of the Japanese Capture Theory during this period.

I.

The fading rumors about Earhart's fate that appeared in the late 1940s were largely characterized by what Jean-Bruno Renard labels "rumors of survival." As the name suggests, these were unfounded suspicions that Earhart had not in fact perished in

1937 and was still alive somewhere, possibly in Japan. Renard explains, “The psychological basis of these rumors is quite simple: we do not want to believe in the death of those we love, or we entertain fears about the survival of those we hate.”⁹⁹

Earhart is certainly not the only famous figure whose death has been met with a skeptical eye – Elvis Presley, Anastasia Romanov, and Tupac Shakur have all been common subjects of survival rumors. In Earhart’s case, these rumors were largely propagated by family members, friends, and admirers who struggled to believe that such an accomplished woman could die in such a tragic, yet banal, way.

In anticipation of Earhart’s fiftieth birthday in July 1948, the Associated Press distributed an article to newspapers nationwide about the remaining rumors of Earhart’s survival. It was published primarily in small and medium sized newspapers. The report printed by the *Los Angeles Times* emphasized the great amount of “doubt” surrounding claims Earhart was still alive.¹⁰⁰ The *Boston Globe* ran the article with the headline, “Amelia Earhart Would Be 50 Saturday – Many Think She’s Alive.” Later Pulitzer Prize (1981) winning journalist Saul Pett wrote that Earhart “lived in a time of hero worship.” He continued, noting that as recently as 1947, American officials in Tokyo once again had to “deny the persistent story that she had been on a secret government mission and the Japanese had taken her prisoner.” Unlike his wartime predecessors, who expressed little skepticism about rumors of Earhart’s capture and/or survival during the Second World War, Pett did not hesitate to express his disbelief, writing that “seldom has there been such a mass resistance to the finality of facts as in the case of Amelia Earhart.” He

⁹⁹ Jean-Bruno Renard, “Negatory Rumors: From the Denial of Reality to Conspiracy Theory,” in *Rumor Mills: The Social Impact of Rumor and Legend*, ed. Gary Alan Fine, Véronique Campion-Vincent, and Chip Heath. (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Transaction Publishers 2005), 226.

¹⁰⁰ “Earhart, Amelia – Dead’ Files Say, but Doubt Lives.” *Los Angeles Times*, July 18, 1948.

theorized about the cause behind this mass resistance, “Many people still don’t believe it, primarily because they don’t want to.”¹⁰¹ This “resistance to facts” formed the core of Earhart conspiracy theories in the 1940s and beyond.

The most noteworthy individual who had little interest in believing the simplest explanation for Earhart’s disappearance was, perhaps unsurprisingly, Amy Otis Earhart, Amelia’s mother. She told a reporter in late July 1949 that “Amelia told me many things...But there were some things she couldn’t tell me. I am convinced she was on some sort of a government mission, probably on verbal orders.”¹⁰² The elder Earhart’s belief was attached not to any evidence of espionage, but rather to a deep desire for information and closure in her daughter’s disappearance, and likely demise. Recall her expression of hope after rumors suggesting Earhart was held prisoner in the Marshall Islands during the Second World War. Following the publication of Amy Otis Earhart’s suspicions, a chemist named Alvan Fitak, who had served in a marine anti-aircraft unit during the war, proclaimed to another reporter that he had met a man named “Mike” while stationed on the Marshall Islands. “Mike” asked Fitak if he knew anything about the “white lady aviator” who “had been captured on the islands by the Japs.” Fitak later assumed the “white lady aviator” was Amelia Earhart.¹⁰³ In response to this claim, Kenjiro Kitajima, who had served as the governor of the Marshall Islands in 1937, reported that he had “absolutely no knowledge” of any woman landing on the islands during his tenure.¹⁰⁴ Kitajima’s response was part of a survey of “former Japanese

¹⁰¹ Saul Pett. “Amelia Earhart Would Be 50 Saturday – Many Think She’s Still Alive.” *Boston Globe*, July 18, 1948.

¹⁰² “Amelia Earhart Died in Japan; Mother Says.” *The Miami Herald*, July 25, 1949.

¹⁰³ “Marine Backs Earhart Story.” *San Mateo Times*, August 1, 1949.

¹⁰⁴ “Survey Discounts Amelia Earhart Prisoner Rumors.” *Honolulu Star-Bulletin*, August 26, 1949.

government and navy officials” conducted by the United Press regarding rumors that Earhart was a Japanese prisoner. The survey produced no evidence that Earhart had been held captive or executed in the Japanese Pacific islands.

Fitak’s claim is worth noting because it serves as an example of a larger pattern in the development of the Japanese Capture Theory. Supposed examples of “eyewitness” testimony, whether first, second, or third hand, almost always *follow* claims about Earhart’s capture or demise at the hands of the Japanese or her potential involvement in espionage. In this case, Amy Otis Earhart’s claims were published before Fitak came forward with a vague memory supposedly “confirming” her suspicions. This also holds true on a macro level. The *rumors* that Earhart was captured or killed by the Japanese that emerged in response to anti-Japanese sentiment and propaganda in 1942 preceded any supposed “eyewitness” or evidentiary claims. This pattern continued as the Japanese Capture Theory began to crystallize in the 1960s and beyond.

II.

Overall, the Japanese Capture Theory disappeared from public discourse in the 1950s. No new rumors or claims appeared during that decade. In the 1960s, a series of amateur investigators, all of whom were veterans of the Second World War, published books and launched investigations into Amelia Earhart’s disappearance. Many of the most elaborate wartime Japanese Capture rumors – like the November 1942 *Skyway’s Magazine* article that speculated Earhart may have been the “war’s first casualty” – elevated the missing aviator to the pantheon of what would later become known as the “Greatest Generation.” The common rumors that presented Earhart and Noonan as

“spies” implied that the two had “skin the game” – they put their lives on the line during the Second World War in the same way that the earliest Japanese Capture theorists did. Or so the story goes. Therefore, to the veteran theorists of the 1960s and 1970s, Earhart was “one of them.” Their adherence to Earhart Rumors of Survival may have been an exercise of loyalty – leave no man (or woman) behind.

The first on the scene was Paul Briand, Jr., a commissioned officer in the United States Air Force who was pursuing a Ph.D. in English at the University of Denver in the late 1950s. Since 1955, Briand had been an Assistant Professor of English at the United States Air Force Academy in Colorado.¹⁰⁵ His dissertation was a biography of Amelia Earhart, which he later published as a book entitled *Daughter of the Sky* in 1960. In the final chapter of the book, Briand presented a supposed “eyewitness” account from a woman who had lived as a child on the island of Saipan when it was under Japanese occupation. Her story soon became an early linchpin of the Saipan School of the Japanese Capture Theory.

At some point during his doctoral research, Paul Briand began to investigate claims that, after Earhart’s disappearance in 1937, she had been held captive on Saipan. Nowhere in his notes, correspondence, or publications did he explain how he came across that theory. Rumors that Earhart was being held captive on Saipan emerged as early as 1944, however, so it is possible that is where Briand first heard of the claim. He told the story of Dr. Casimir R. Sheft, a Navy dentist stationed on Saipan in the post-war period for the first time in *Daughter of the Sky*. In 1946, according to Briand, Dr. Sheft

¹⁰⁵ “Paul Briand Jr.,” Duell, Sloan and Pearce, Inc. (mostly from Charles Pearce), Folder 9, Box 2, Paul L. Briand, Jr. Papers, 1957-1978, MC 120, Milne Special Collections and Archives, University of New Hampshire Library, Durham, NH, USA.

wondered aloud if Amelia Earhart could have ended up in the Mariana Islands near Saipan because “he had read somewhere that the Marines had found AE’s flight log during the investigation.”¹⁰⁶ There are no reports about the discovery of a flight log, but after the Battle of Saipan in 1944, the Marines did find a photo album with photos of Earhart. The story was widely published in newspapers at the time.

After Dr. Sheft’s spontaneous proclamation, one of his dental assistants, Josephine Blanco Akiyama, claimed in response to have seen an “American woman flier” on Saipan several years earlier. According to Briand’s version of the story, in the summer of 1937, an eleven-year-old Akiyama was riding her bicycle near Tanapag Harbor. She “looked up” and saw a “two-engined plane” which “seemed to be in trouble.” She was later told by unspecified “others” to “come and see the American woman” who had just crash landed on the island. Akiyama claimed to have seen “two white fliers” (whom she claims were labeled “fliers” by others on the island), one male and one female with “hair cut short.” After the two were led away by Japanese soldiers, she heard shots ring out. Briand wrote in his book that he believed her story to be “most probably true.”¹⁰⁷

The Josephine Blanco Akiyama story forms the foundation of the Saipan school of the Japanese Capture Theory. It was the first supposed “eyewitness” statement about Earhart’s presence in Saipan and was widely publicized before any other “eyewitnesses” came forward with their own versions of the story. It is also the tale that inspired CBS newsman Fred Goerner to make multiple expeditions to Saipan to investigate such claims. Although Briand published the story first, Goerner’s 1966 book *The Search for Amelia Earhart* is by far the most widely read publication on the Japanese Capture

¹⁰⁶ Briand, Paul L. *Daughter of the Sky*. (New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1960.), 212.

¹⁰⁷ Briand, *Daughter of the Sky*, 213.

Theory. Because of the foundational nature of Akiyama's claim, it deserves a longer discussion. Although Briand claimed Akiyama's tale to be "most probably true," the version of her story that he published in his book is a far cry from the tale she initially told to Dr. Sheft in 1946.

In response to inquiries from Paul Briand during his dissertation research, Dr. Casimir Sheft sent a letter to Josephine Blanco Akiyama in 1957 asking her to confirm the details of her previous claims. Akiyama sent a letter in response on September 7th of the same year. She stated, "Well about the flying girl you asking me Dr., its was real true happened in Saipan but Dr., some of my conversation you were missed understood [sic] so now I'll explain to you again." She went on to state that she *didn't know the year* in which the incident occurred but claimed to remember seeing or hearing about (she did not clarify) a female pilot being shot down at Tanapag Harbor *in 1942*. The woman had short hair and was "dressed like a man" and died when the plane was shot down. Akiyama also wrote of about a story she heard on Saipan about three other people who had been captured by the Japanese, held in the Garapan prison on the island, and shot before the American military arrived in 1944. She wrapped up the letter stating that "this is only I know."¹⁰⁸ Despite that claim, Akiyama would soon add additions (and conflicting) "details" to her "eyewitness" claim.

According to a letter from Akiyama to Paul Briand in December 1958, the two met in California to discuss her story. During the meeting, she allegedly identified a

¹⁰⁸ Letter from Josephine Blanco Akiyama to Dr. Casimir Sheft, September 7, 1957. "Josephine Akiyama," Folder 2, Box 2, Paul L. Briand, Jr. Papers, 1957-1978, MC 120, Milne Special Collections and Archives, University of New Hampshire Library, Durham, NH, USA.

photo of Earhart and Noonan as the two people she had seen as a child on Saipan.¹⁰⁹ Besides a brief mention of the meeting occurring in correspondence between the two, there is no record of what was actually discussed. Therefore, it is difficult to ascertain exactly why and how Akiyama's story changed between the time she sent her letter to Dr. Sheft in 1957 and the publication of Briand's book in 1960. Regardless, letters between the two do reveal that Akiyama's memory was far shakier than Briand claimed in *Daughter of the Sky*, which is of little surprise considering he first contacted Sheft and then Akiyama two decades after Earhart's disappearance.

Additional letters among Briand, Akiyama, their mutual attorneys, and Briand's publisher do reveal that Akiyama's motivations in "revealing" this story were far more complex than her simply desiring to tell her story. In March of 1959, Josephine Akiyama sent a letter to Briand and mentioned that "he had once indicated" she would be paid for her story and asked "how much she was entitled" to earn.¹¹⁰ After hearing nothing back, Akiyama sent another letter in July of the same year stating, "I have been working so hard to bringing [sic] all the memory back, and all what I have been told you is truth, I am very anxious to help you of this story."¹¹¹ The following day, she sent another letter stating, "if we do not hear from you immediately, we will contact another author to

¹⁰⁹ Letter from Josephine Blanco Akiyama to Paul Briand, Jr., December 12, 1958. "Josephine Akiyama," Folder 2, Box 2, Paul L. Briand, Jr. Papers, 1957-1978, MC 120, Milne Special Collections and Archives, University of New Hampshire Library, Durham, NH, USA.

¹¹⁰ Letter from Josephine Blanco Akiyama to Paul Briand, Jr., March 26, 1959. "Josephine Akiyama," Folder 2, Box 2, Paul L. Briand, Jr. Papers, 1957-1978, MC 120, Milne Special Collections and Archives, University of New Hampshire Library, Durham, NH, USA.

¹¹¹ Letter from Josephine Blanco Akiyama to Paul Briand, Jr., July 22, 1959. "Josephine Akiyama," Folder 2, Box 2, Paul L. Briand, Jr. Papers, 1957-1978, MC 120, Milne Special Collections and Archives, University of New Hampshire Library, Durham, NH, USA.

publish the story.”¹¹² In the meantime, Briand largely ignored Akiyama’s correspondence.

For the most part, direct letters between Akiyama and Briand ended for one, very specific reason – Akiyama hired an attorney. William W. Penaluna, representing Josephine Akiyama and her husband, wrote to Briand in September 1959 demanding he clarify the issue of pay and threatened to withhold any additional “information” unless compensation was received, “Mrs. Akiyama has informed me,” he claimed, “that she has not as of yet given you all the information you need to complete the story. I have instructed her not to give you any further information for the time being.”¹¹³ The issue was resolved in October 1959 when Briand finally sent Akiyama a letter, a \$100 check, and a release form for her story. His response was cutting:

“To avoid any further discussion on this matter, I have enclosed a check for \$100.00 for the information you have given me...Please be further advised that wherever I have quoted you in my manuscript, such quotation has been rewritten out of the manuscript and the information is now in my own expression. I believe that I could have helped you better than you have helped yourself, but it now seems clear to me that you are looking elsewhere. Again, I am sorry that you could not have been more patient.”¹¹⁴

¹¹² Letter from Josephine Blanco Akiyama to Paul Briand, Jr., July 23, 1959. “Josephine Akiyama,” Folder 2, Box 2, Paul L. Briand, Jr. Papers, 1957-1978, MC 120, Milne Special Collections and Archives, University of New Hampshire Library, Durham, NH, USA.

¹¹³ Letter from William W. Penaluna to Paul Briand, Jr., September 1, 1959. “Josephine Akiyama,” Folder 2, Box 2, Paul L. Briand, Jr. Papers, 1957-1978, MC 120, Milne Special Collections and Archives, University of New Hampshire Library, Durham, NH, USA.

¹¹⁴ Letter from Paul Briand Jr., to Josephine Blanco Akiyama, October 8, 1959. “Josephine Akiyama,” Folder 2, Box 2, Paul L. Briand, Jr. Papers, 1957-1978, MC 120, Milne Special Collections and Archives, University of New Hampshire Library, Durham, NH, USA.

Briand's book was published in April 1960, which marked the revival of the Japanese Capture Theory, which had laid mostly dormant for over a decade. After the publication of *Daughter of the Sky*, Briand formed a group of researchers called "Operation Earhart" with Captain Robert S. Dinger and Major Joseph Gervais, another Air Force veteran.¹¹⁵ Although their "investigations" into Akiyama's story and the broader Japanese Capture Theory were publicized nationwide, and these investigations formed the basis of the 1970 book *Amelia Earhart Lives*, the efforts of "Operation Earhart" were soon overshadowed by another, similar amateur investigation.

III.

Josephine Blanco Akiyama followed through on her threat to pursue a different publisher. On May 27, 1960, the *San Mateo Times* published a front-page article with the bold headline, "AMELIA EARHART SHOT BY JAPANESE: MATEAN." That San Matean, of course, was Akiyama, who shared her story with *Times* journalist Lin Day after the dispute with Paul Briand over pay.¹¹⁶ The story began, "A San Mateo woman who may have been one of the last to see Amelia Earhart alive, says that the famed aviatrix was executed by a Japanese firing squad even while the U.S. Navy was spending \$4,000,000 in a futile search for the missing flier and her navigator, Frederick Noonan." The tale Akiyama wove for the *Times* mirrored her previous versions but lacked the uncertainty she expressed to Briand in her letters years earlier. The article also identified 1937 (instead of 1942) as the year the "11-year-old" witnesses saw a "non-Japanese"

¹¹⁵ "Earhart Controversy Rages." *San Mateo Times*, July 7, 1960.

¹¹⁶ "Amelia Earhart Shot By Japanese: Matean." *San Mateo Times*, May 27, 1960.

airplane fly over Saipan and two white people she was told were “fliers.” The story only briefly mentioned Briand and his book on page two.

Radio reporter and Navy veteran Fred Goerner saw the article in the *Times* and launched an investigation into the story, giving Briand only a passing mention. In his book, *The Search for Amelia Earhart*, published in 1966, he wrote of Briand on only two pages, noting that he “felt sorry for him.” Hearing of Goerner’s investigations on Saipan in the early 1960s, Briand had gotten in touch with Goerner claiming to have photographic evidence and affidavits from seventy-two “eyewitnesses” of Earhart and Noonan’s supposed “capture.” Goerner wrote that the “roof fell in on the captains” of “Operation Earhart” on July 7, 1960, when a panel of U.S. 5th Air Force senior officers described the “evidence” for the supposed seventy-two witnesses to be “a bunch of garbage,” in part because Gervais and Dinger had never actually traveled to Saipan and their “affidavits” were merely names of six dozen people on Saipan who supposedly knew information about the subject at hand. They were hardly “eyewitnesses.”¹¹⁷ Contemporary news reports confirm Goerner’s claims.¹¹⁸ And yet, for the Japanese Capture Theory itself, the phrase “all publicity is good publicity” is apt. Although Briand, Gervais, and Dinger’s reputations took a hit, their investigation, partnered with Goerner’s, relaunched massive public interest in the theory for the first time since the Second World War.

Because of “Operation Earhart’s” early blow to their credibility and perhaps because of Goerner’s regional (and soon, national) notoriety, his research into Earhart’s

¹¹⁷ Goerner, Fred. *The Search for Amelia Earhart*. (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1966), 69.

¹¹⁸ “Air Force Withholds Data on Earhart Case.” *The Sacramento Bee*, July 7, 1960.

disappearance reached a wider audience. Between his discovery of the *San Mateo Times* article and the publication of *The Search for Amelia Earhart*, Goerner traveled to the Pacific islands, including Saipan, a total of four times and publicly discussed his research on numerous occasions. By the book's publication in 1966, Goerner was a well-known Earhart "expert" and researcher. *The Search for Amelia Earhart* opened with Goerner's "discovery" of Akiyama's story and ended with his strong adoption of the Japanese Capture Theory. Although Goerner's book was not the first (Briand's preceded his by six years) to present the Saipan version of the theory, it was and is the most widely read - it sat on the *New York Times* best-seller list for six months after its publication in 1966.¹¹⁹ Because of the popularity of Goerner's book – and its role as a foundational text of the Japanese Capture Theory – it is worth examining in further detail.

The Search for Amelia Earhart details Goerner's multi-year investigation into the theory that Amelia Earhart had been held in captivity on Saipan shortly after her disappearance. In it, he included alleged testimony from nearly two dozen "eyewitnesses." Most of these supposed eyewitnesses to Earhart's fate merely repeated second or third hand rumors they had heard decades earlier. Additionally, according to Goerner's own account, many people whom he had interacted with on Saipan during his investigation were already thoroughly aware of rumors about Earhart's fate. Paul W. Bridwell, the head of the U.S. Naval Administration Unit on Saipan, told Goerner that when he arrived the island was "not as isolated," as many assumed (Goerner did not specify who constituted "many"), and that they had known about Goerner's investigation and Akiyama's claims for "a couple of weeks."¹²⁰ Goerner later wrote that the Catholic

¹¹⁹ "Fred Goerner; Broadcaster, 69." *The New York Times*, September 16, 1994.

¹²⁰ Goerner, *The Search for Amelia Earhart*, 44.

priests who helped connect him with interviewees on the island “had heard some rumors” about Earhart’s possible presence on Saipan.¹²¹ Therefore, it is nearly impossible to prove whether or not the memories of Goerner’s interviewees were affected by widely-circulated reports about Earhart’s possible fate on Saipan during the Second World War or by the news of Goerner’s impending visit to the island in 1960. This also reveals why these early investigations were so reliant upon the veracity of Akiyama’s story – it was the first of its kind.

The testimonies Goerner collected during his trips to Saipan were generally vague and differed in minute details, but they did fit a common narrative – in 1937, there were allegedly two “white fliers” on Saipan who later died, either from disease or execution (many of the “eyewitness” stories conflict on that point). Manuel Aldan, a dentist on Saipan who worked strictly on Japanese officers during the war, claimed that he did not see the “fliers” himself but “heard much about them from his patients.” Gregorio Camacho, a farmer, claimed to have seen “white people” at Tanapag Harbor and knew that they were fliers because “the Japanese said so.”¹²² There were nearly two dozen similar stories.¹²³ On Goerner’s return visit to Saipan, he spoke with Matilde Shoda San Nicholas, who claimed to have seen a “tall, thin, short-haired white woman in 1937 or 1938” and that the Japanese “later said” she died of dysentery.¹²⁴ This conflicts with something else Goerner reported. He mentioned after completing his first round of interviews that “none of these witnesses knew what had finally happened to the

¹²¹ Ibid. 47.

¹²² Ibid. 51-52.

¹²³ The names of Goerner’s “eyewitnesses” included Josephine Blanco Akiyama, Gregorio Camacho, Jesus Boyer, Jesus Bacha Salas, Manuel Aldan, Antonio Diaz, Jose Rios Camacho, Juan Guerro Reyes, Pedro Skisag, Maria Ohashi, Francisco Tudela, Jose Basa, Jose Y. Matsumoto, Elias Sablan, Vicente Galvan/Guerrero, Juan Ada, Oswald Sablan, Manuel Sablan, and Juan Villa-Gomez.

¹²⁴ Ibid. 52.

mysterious white people, although several felt that either one or both of them had been executed.”¹²⁵ At the most, Goerner’s collection of “eyewitness” testimony proves not that Amelia Earhart and Fred Noonan had been on Saipan, but that there was a *rumor* circulating on the island about the presence of “two white fliers” twenty-three years earlier. The existence of a rumor says little about its truthfulness, nor anything about the actual identity of the “two white fliers.”

In *The Search for Amelia Earhart*, Goerner also presented two important pieces of “tangible evidence” of Earhart and Noonan’s presence on Saipan. Both were debunked, although not before circulating wildly throughout the American press. First, Goerner found an airplane generator on the island which, according to him, “appeared to be of U.S. or British manufacture, not Japanese.”¹²⁶ He held a press conference on July 1, 1960 to trumpet its discovery. By then, Goerner had connected with Paul Mantz, a Hollywood stunt pilot and Second World War veteran who had known Amelia Earhart and became involved with the early investigations in the 1960s (Mantz was tragically killed in a plane crash in 1965). Mantz claimed that the generator he found “looked exactly like” one he had fitted on Earhart’s plane years earlier.¹²⁷ *The San Mateo Times* again put an Earhart story on the front page, running with the headline “AMELIA EARHART KILLED ON SAIPAN.”¹²⁸ Over the course of a few days, newspapers across the country proclaimed that Goerner had discovered “proof” of Earhart’s fate. However, shortly after the press conference in July 1960, the Bendix Aviation Corporation released a bulletin confirming that the generator *did not* come from Earhart’s plane and was traced back to the Toyo

¹²⁵ Ibid. 51.

¹²⁶ Ibid. 64.

¹²⁷ “Island Yields Clue to Missing Amelia.” *The Daily Oklahoman*, July 2, 1960.

¹²⁸ “Amelia Earhart Killed on Saipan.” *The San Mateo Times*, July 1, 1960.

Bearing Firm in Osaka, Japan.¹²⁹ Goerner's disappointment turned to speculation when he published the tale of the generator in his 1966 book, "Perhaps the gear had been exchanged," he argued, sometime before Earhart took off on her final flight.¹³⁰ He did not provide corroborating evidence.

During Goerner's investigation in the 1960s and in his subsequent book, he advertised a far more gruesome discovery than a simple generator. While on Saipan, Goerner found two skeletons, a male and a female, which he proclaimed to be Earhart and Noonan, "It's hard to believe they were other than Earhart and Noonan."¹³¹ As was the case with the generator a year earlier, American newspapers in late 1961 trumpeted the discovery as plausible proof of Earhart's fate. Both the Associated Press and United Press circulated the stories nationwide. The *Los Angeles Times* reported the discovery in a front-page story "Bones May Give Glue to Earhart: Finding on Saipan Island Linked to Round-World Flier."¹³² As was the case with the generator, experts quickly debunked Goerner's claims. Dr. Theodore McCowan, a professor of anthropology at the University of California examined the remains and said "they appear to be from Orientals, rather than Caucasians."¹³³ That did not, however, prevent Goerner from including the "find" in his book.

Midway through Goerner's book, after reporting the debunking of the generator and the skeletons, the author changed course. The remainder of *The Search for Amelia Earhart* took a drastic conspiratorial bent. It was also infused with a deep distrust of

¹²⁹ Goerner, *The Search for Amelia Earhart*, 70.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.* 71.

¹³¹ *Ibid.* 135.

¹³² "Bones May Give Clue to Earhart." *Los Angeles Times*, November 25, 1961.

¹³³ "Saipan-Found Bones, Teeth Not Earhart's" *Desert Sun*, December 4, 1961.

government institutions, including the Central Intelligence Agency. Goerner's argument rested on the belief that the United States government was "covering-up" the "true story" behind Earhart's disappearance. First, Goerner claimed to have been visited by a "Mr. Johnson," who he believed was part of the CIA and who questioned him about the purpose of his investigation.¹³⁴ After that meeting, Goerner proclaimed that he was frequently "followed" by several unnamed people whom he also assumed were part of a government agency. He even discussed unconfirmed details about his relationship with Fleet Admiral Chester W. Nimitz, whom he claimed to have met over the course of his investigation. Goerner wrote about a phone call he supposedly had with Nimitz in 1965 in which the retired admiral told him, "Fred, I want to tell you Earhart and her navigator did go down in the Marshalls and were picked up by the Japanese."¹³⁵ Nimitz had a stroke in 1965 and died in early 1966, before *The Search for Amelia Earhart* was published. The only "proof" of this conversation is Goerner's word alone, a claim which came long after his high-profile investigative failures.

After *The Search for Amelia Earhart* was published in the fall of 1966, Goerner departed on a thirty-two-city book tour and frequently appeared on radio, television, and in print.¹³⁶ As he intended, his appearances boosted the book's sales. By September 26, just a few short weeks after its release, it had already sold thirty thousand copies.¹³⁷ Goerner's work also helped to promote the Japanese Capture Theory in the same way that wartime rumors did in the 1940s. Unlike the wartime press, however, American publications did not shy away from skepticism over Goerner's arguments. The general

¹³⁴ Goerner, *The Search for Amelia Earhart*, 119.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.* 315.

¹³⁶ "He Seeks U.S. 'Secrets' of Last Earhart Flight." *The Minneapolis Star*, September 15, 1966.

¹³⁷ "Cromie Looks at Authors and Book." *The Chicago Tribune*, September 26, 1966.

media coverage was mixed. Some papers like the *Minneapolis Star* and the *Napa Valley Register* printed favorable coverage, but other coverage was far more skeptical.¹³⁸¹³⁹ *Time Magazine* printed a review of the book on September 16, 1966 with the headline, “Sinister Conspiracy?” It was far from favorable: “Obviously, if Earhart simply died in a plane accident, there would be no need for a book. By stitching surmise to fact, Goerner makes a book that barely hangs together.”¹⁴⁰ In his “Personality Parade” column, which boasted millions in readership, Walter Scott harshly criticized *The Search for Amelia Earhart* in April 1967, stating that Goerner provided “no evidence” for his argument.¹⁴¹ Criticism of the book’s lack of evidence was fairly common from the American press in 1966. Summarily, the coverage and response to Goerner’s book was mixed. It sold hundreds of thousands of copies but received both positive and negative reviews from the American public press.

A notable American politician even expressed support for Goerner’s theory. Former Press Secretary Pierre Salinger, in a speech to sixteen hundred people about the upcoming election season in October 1966, said that he believed it was time for the government to “make public information it may have on the disappearance of Amelia Earhart in 1937.” He referenced Goerner’s book and provided “statement of support” for the author.¹⁴² Salinger had served as Press Secretary for Presidents Kennedy and Johnson, agreeing to remain in the job for a few months after the assassination of the former. At one time, Kennedy expressed interest in Earhart’s life and accomplishments.

¹³⁸ *Minneapolis Star*, “He Seeks U.S. ‘Secrets.’” “Miss Earhart Was on Spy Mission When Plane Crashed.” *The Napa Valley Register*, July 25, 1966.

¹⁴⁰ “Books: Sinister Conspiracy?” *Time Magazine*, September 16, 1966.

¹⁴¹ “Personality Parade.” *Boston Globe*, April 9, 1967.

¹⁴² “Salinger Says LBJ Will Be Re-Elected.” *The Indianapolis Star*, October 3, 1966.

A July 1963 press release from Salinger's office included Kennedy's remarks upon hosting The Ninety-Nines in The Rose Garden. The representatives of the organization of female aviators presented the president with a commemorative stamp from Atchison, Kansas and the president remarked that their efforts were "very useful" in both remembering "Miss. Earhart" and reminding "our women that they ought to get out of the house and into the air."¹⁴³ On November 22, 1963, on the day of Kennedy's assassination, Salinger was on his way to – of all places – Japan. Had the assassination not taken place, the 35th president would have been the first American president to visit the island nation.¹⁴⁴

Although Salinger never expressed a belief in any Kennedy Assassination Theories, his approval of Goerner's book was not his final flirtation with conspiracy. After the explosion of TWA Flight 800 in 1996, Salinger – then a former *ABC News* correspondent – called for a congressional investigation into to the incident, believing that individuals within the federal government were "covering up" the fact that the crash had been caused by a Navy missile. The FBI and the National Transportation Safety Board denied the claims.¹⁴⁵ At the time of Salinger's proclamations, a group of journalists discussed his claims on the listservs CARR-L and SPJ-L beginning in 1996. While some of the participants initially suspected Salinger's theory to be potentially credible, most of the discussion revolved around concerns that the former Press Secretary

¹⁴³ Remarks on Issue of Amelia Earhart Commemorative Stamp to Members of the Ninety-Nine Club of Women Pilots, 26 July 1963. President's Office Files, Series 3, "Remarks on Issue of Amelia Earhart Commemorative Stamp to Members of the Ninety-Nine Club of Women Pilots, 26 July 1963." JFK Library.

¹⁴⁴ C-SPAN, "Pierre Salinger on the Kennedy Assassination," YouTube video, 1:30, November 4, 2013. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iv_T6iKjI2w

¹⁴⁵ "Salinger Seeks Congressional Inquiry on Flight 800." *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, May 14, 1997.

had been “taken with” online “news,” believing it to be “credible.”¹⁴⁶ A 1997 *New York Times* article from Matthew Purdy discussing Salinger’s theory included a connection to the Earhart mystery. The author asked one of the experts consulted in the article, Robert Kadlec, an engineer with Failure Analysis Associates in California, “What About Amelia Earhart?” Purdy writes, “Government investigators have already begin to confront the possibility that the conclusive evidence of what caused the crash was destroyed by the explosion and that no one will ever be able to say precisely what happened. Of course, that’s what makes unsolved mysteries so intriguing.” Kadlec continued, “Amelia Earhart crashed. No one knows why she crashed. There are hundreds of unsolved technological mysteries. Do you every look up at the heavens and wonder how the universe was formed? These are scientific frontiers. This is one of them.”¹⁴⁷ Those “technological mysteries” – whether it was Earhart or Flight 800 – appeared to be of great interest to the former Press Secretary.

During the 1960s, Fred Goerner and Paul Briand were not the only two people to publish books, give speeches, and write articles in favor of the Japanese Capture Theory. They were just the most read and most popular. At the same time “Operation Earhart” and Fred Goerner were conducting their investigations, a group of Ohio businessmen led by Joe Davidson conducted their own investigations on Saipan. Davidson revealed his “findings,” which mostly mirrored Goerner’s, in *Amelia Earhart Returns from Saipan*, which was published in 1969.¹⁴⁸ Although the book was printed in two more editions –

¹⁴⁶ Thomas E. Ruggiero and Samuel P. Winch, “The Media Downing of Pierre Salinger: Journalistic Mistrust of the Internet as a News Source.” *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 10, no. 2. (2006).

¹⁴⁷ Matthew Purdy, “Flight 800 Theories Come Out of the Woodwork.” *New York Times*, April 13, 1997.

¹⁴⁸ Davidson, Joe. *Amelia Earhart Returns from Saipan*, (Bloomington, Indiana: Unlimited Publishing, 1969.)

the most recent was published in 2002 – it sold very few copies and received very little media coverage. The Earhart headlines of the 1960s were dominated largely by stories about the Goerner and the “Operation Earhart” investigations.

IV.

The findings of “Operation Earhart” were published in 1970 in the book *Amelia Earhart Lives* by Joe Klaas and Joseph Gervais. Klaas (who would later be known for his work in the Alcoholics Anonymous community and as an expert on addiction) joined the Earhart team in 1966 after speaking with Robert Dinger and replacing him as the group’s “historian.”¹⁴⁹ He was the primary writer of the book, which told the story of Gervais’ efforts to find clues to Earhart’s fate. Like Goerner, Gervais, Dinger, Briand, and other Earhart investigators, Klaas was also a veteran of the Second World War and a decorated pilot. While the research that produced *Amelia Earhart Lives* operated parallel to Goerner’s work in the early 1960s, the book concluded with a far different theory than that of the CBS newsman. Klaas and Gervais’ book marks the first publication of the “Irene Bolam” version of the Japanese Capture Theory, which posited that Earhart was captured by the Japanese in the Pacific Islands, taken to Japan, freed by the American military, and returned to the United States to live under the name Irene Bolam.

Klaas and Gervais’ work was even more conspiratorial than Goerner’s and provided even less alleged evidentiary support. Like Goerner’s book, *Amelia Earhart Lives* also implied a government conspiracy was enacted to “cover up” the “real story” behind Earhart’s disappearance. The investigators were emboldened by the search. In the

¹⁴⁹ Klaas, Joe and Joseph Gervais. *Amelia Earhart Lives: A Trip Through Intrigue to Find America’s First Lady of Mystery*. (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1970.)

introductory chapter, Klaas wrote, “It has been like being Agent 007 or in the middle of The Man from U.N.C.L.E.”¹⁵⁰ During a trip to Saipan, Gervais and his team also interviewed a series of “eyewitnesses” to Earhart’s fate, with about as much success as Goerner. They met with Juana Anquingo - who claimed to have heard a plane crash on the island and later heard that it was an American plane.¹⁵¹ Antonio M. Cepada claimed that he saw “an American girl who was referred to by some as the ‘American spy woman’” who was held in the Hotel Hobayashi Royokan in Japan in 1937. Note that this statement conflicts with many of Goerner’s “eyewitnesses,” who claimed to see the “American woman” in or around Garapan prison. It is common for Japanese Capture theorists to “pick and choose” which “eyewitness” stories fit their respective theories best. Gervais’ team also spoke to Toyo Takashi, a resident of Okinawa, who claimed to have seen a plane crash in Truk Lagoon (now part of the Federated States of Micronesia) in May or June of 1937 (which would have been a month or two earlier than Earhart’s disappearance). She claimed it was an American plane and the pilots were taken captive by Japanese civilians. Then, the so-called “captors” said that the female pilot had been killed during the crash. Takashi believed that the male pilot “could have been executed there” or taken elsewhere.¹⁵² Gervais took her claim seriously and built it into his final theory, arguing that Earhart was spying on the Japanese on or near Truk in 1937.

Much of Gervais and Klaas’ work in *Amelia Earhart Lives* was pure speculation designed to fit “evidence” into their pre-existing theoretical framework. Gervais believed not only that Earhart was a spy captured by the Japanese, but that she was still alive and

¹⁵⁰ Klaas and Gervais, *Amelia Earhart Lives*, xi.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.* 78.

¹⁵² *Ibid.* 81, 163.

living in New Jersey under the assumed name Irene Bolam. Most of the “evidence” he provided was designed to fit into that broader framework, often tenuously and awkwardly. Gervais, with very little evidence to back up the claim, believed that Earhart used “up to five” planes during her final voyage, which is why it was so difficult for investigators to identify plane parts they discovered and evaluate “eyewitness” claims.¹⁵³ He was also forced to wrestle with the indication that it was actually *Flight for Freedom* which first put forward the suggestion that Earhart and Noonan were spies. He “found” an answer. He pointed out to Klaas that Gull Island – the fictional location Tonie Carter was headed to in the film – *sounds like* Hull Island, an island in the Phoenix system in the Pacific. Hull Island, Gervais claimed, is notoriously infested with seagulls, which is where the name “Gull Island” came from. He also pointed out that Jacqueline Cochran – another female aviator and friend of Earhart – was married to Floyd Odlum at the time, who was a majority stakeholder in RKO when the studio produced the film.¹⁵⁴ Therefore, Gervais claimed, Cochran must have had some “inside information” on Earhart’s disappearance, which made it into the *Flight for Freedom* script.

At a buffet luncheon in August 1965, Gervais met New Jersey housewife Irene Bolam, who he thought looked strikingly like Amelia Earhart and began to wrap “evidence” around his belief that she *really was* Earhart and had been living under an assumed name. He claimed that she was wearing a “silver medal” and red-white-and-blue ribbon that “can only be officially worn by those who have been awarded the American Distinguished Flying Cross.”¹⁵⁵ Earhart was the first woman to receive the award, and

¹⁵³ Klaas and Gervais, *Amelia Earhart Lives*, 135.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.* 197, 200.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.* 170.

Gervais took Bolam's pin as an indication that she was really the missing aviator. Gervais claimed that Bolam expressed interest in his investigation and gave him a card with the name "Irene Craigmile" (Craigmile was the surname of Bolam's second husband).¹⁵⁶ For reasons unexplained in the book, Gervais later wrote a letter to J. Edgar Hoover asking if an individual with the name "Irene Craigmile" "was wanted or apprehended by the FBI for being a 'German Agent' and working for the Axis Powers against these United States of America" from 1937 to 1945.¹⁵⁷ Hoover's office responded a week later stating that they could not disclose any information on any individuals accused of espionage and wrote, "I hope you will not infer either that we do or do not have material in our files relating to the individual you mentioned."¹⁵⁸ This in no way hindered Gervais' research, although he did drop any claim that Bolam was a "German Agent."

Once Gervais determined that Bolam "was Amelia Earhart," he developed a set of arguments to support it, ranging from fallacious to absurd. For example, Gervais took a letter from the names of each of the islands in the Phoenix system (each letter was in a different position in each word) and spelled out the name "Guy Bolam," Irene's husband. He then took the number of the position each letter was in in the source words and produced the number 17213421, which he claimed could be interpreted as the coordinates of Hull Island.¹⁵⁹ This near experiment in numerology was a key piece of "evidence" in Gervais' theory.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid. 173.

¹⁵⁷ Correspondence from Joseph Gervais to J. Edgar Hoover, 20 January 1969, H118-05, Box 3, Folder 1, Special Collections Department, McDermott Library, The University of Texas at Dallas.

¹⁵⁸ Correspondence from J. Edgar Hoover to Joseph Gervais, 27 January 1969, H118-05, Box 3, Folder 1, Special Collections Department, McDermott Library, The University of Texas at Dallas.

¹⁵⁹ Klaas and Gervais, *Amelia Earhart Lives*, 203.

He also put forward an argument for what Earhart knew that resulted in her capture and later anonymity. Gervais claimed – with no documentary proof – that Earhart had once “been aloft” in and knew about a “superior fighting plane” developed by the United States military.¹⁶⁰ He expressed disbelief that the Japanese were capable of producing the destructive “Zero” fighter planes during the Second World War and that they must have actually stolen plans from the United States for the “superior fighting plane” Earhart had once ridden in. Gervais queried, “How did the Emperor of Japan manage to obtain plans for a superior fighter plane remarkable in similarity to one which Amelia Earhart had personally watched being piloted on its maiden flight by her friend [Paul Mantz] who had designed and built it?”¹⁶¹ The answer, in Gervais’s mind, was that the Japanese – supposedly incapable of producing superior military technology – extracted the plans for the fighter planes from Earhart upon her capture. A far-fetched theory, indeed.

Klaas summarized the position of “Operation Earhart” in the conclusion to *Amelia Earhart Lives*,

“It is our opinion that in 1937 an American spy was intercepted and captured in the Pacific by the Japanese, who tried to use her to blackmail the United States into signing a consular treaty favorable to Japan. Her name was Amelia Earhart...The Japanese, who could not admit they had caught Amelia Earhart spying without owning up to flagrant violation of international in secretly building the huge naval base she was spying on at Truk, allowed her to survive in

¹⁶⁰ Ibid. 222.

¹⁶¹ Ibid. 225.

anonymity for one reason, and one reason alone. She in turn possessed a secret that was vital to Japan.¹⁶²

Note that this theory implies the United States government knew about Earhart's "capture" and had covered it up in the decades since her disappearance. Upon its publication, *Amelia Earhart Lives* was widely panned, but also widely covered. According to at least one published review, the book was "an instant sellout" with "thousands of readers."¹⁶³ That's little surprise, considering the volume of coverage it received. It was certainly widely-read by a popular audience. However, unlike Goerner's work, which received a relatively equal amount of positive and negative coverage, the criticism of *Amelia Earhart Lives* was largely negative. Much of the negative press spawned from a series of statements from Earhart's friends and family attacking the book and denying its claims that Irene Bolam was really the missing aviatrix.

Earhart's sister Muriel Earhart Morrissey quickly shut down Klaas and Gervais' claims. The *Boston Globe* reported in November 1970 that Morrissey responded, "Of course that's not Amelia," when asked about Bolam.¹⁶⁴ Three men who had previously worked on Earhart's plane – Jim Collopy, Allan Robert, and Allan Vagg – together denied that she was still alive and had been involved in espionage. Collopy, who arranged repairs on Earhart's plane in Lae, stated that there was "nothing on the aircraft that could be used for spying."¹⁶⁵ Robert and Vagg concurred with the statement. Earhart's hometown paper, the *Atchison Daily Globe*, in Kansas interviewed a handful of women who went to school with Earhart, who all rejected the claim that Bolam was really their

¹⁶² Ibid. 220.

¹⁶³ "Amelia Earhart's Fate is Analyzed." *Asbury Park Press*, December 11, 1970.

¹⁶⁴ "Earhart Survival 'Defabricated'" *The Boston Globe*, November 12, 1970.

¹⁶⁵ "Those Who Serviced Plane Dispute Claim Earhart Alive," *The Miami News*, November 12, 1970.

former schoolmate.¹⁶⁶ Even a spokesman from the Imperial Palace in Tokyo responded to claims that they had held Earhart captive, stating it was “unthinkable” that Earhart was ever held prisoner there.¹⁶⁷ Earhart’s stepson, George Palmer Putnam, gave a lengthy interview in which he not only denied the claims of *Amelia Earhart Lives*, but also suggested that most of the book might have been fabricated. Putnam maintained that none of Earhart’s family members had been contacted prior to the book’s publication. That fact was clear, he argued, because in many of conversations included in the book – including ones with Muriel Earhart Morrissey and other Earhart confidants – Earhart was referred to as “Amelia.” Her close family and friends always called her “AE.”¹⁶⁸ For these reasons, Putnam believed the book was “ridiculous” and mostly fabricated.

Despite the negative press coverage of *Amelia Earhart Lives*, it was covered in newspapers for months after its publication. This was partially due to the reemergence of a familiar pattern – Gervais and Klaas’ claims led other “eyewitnesses” to come forward and to “confirm” their findings. In November 1970, shortly after the book’s release, Michiko Sugita spoke to a United Press reporter in Tokyo and claimed that Earhart had been shot by the Japanese after her disappearance. Sugita declared that she had been raised on the Mariana Islands where her father was a police officer. She said that she heard her father and his colleagues discuss the “execution of an American woman in 1937” during parties at her home when she was a child. Her father later allegedly told her that the woman was an aviator and a spy. Sugita’s details do appear to once again conflict with other “eyewitness claims.” She claimed that the “beautiful” American woman had

¹⁶⁶ “The Malpractice Puzzle.” *Atchison Daily Globe*, November 15, 1970.

¹⁶⁷ “SF Author Sticks to Amelia Story.” *San Francisco Examiner*, November 12, 1970.

¹⁶⁸ “Amelia Earhart Tale Ridiculous, Says Stepson.” *Fort Lauderdale News*, November 12, 1970.

been captured alone and provided no information about a male co-pilot who could be identified as Fred Noonan, as other “eyewitness” statements had done.¹⁶⁹

Interest in Gervais and Klaas’ theory helped to keep *Amelia Earhart Lives* in the news, but so did their months-long battle with the real Irene Bolam, who routinely denied being Amelia Earhart. Shortly after the book was released, Bolam held a press conference during which she said, “I am not a mystery woman. I am not Amelia Earhart.” She called the theory a “poorly documented hoax” and claimed that the pin she wore to the luncheon in 1965 – the one that sent Gervais on his investigation to “prove” her identity – was actually a commemorative Earhart medal produced by the Book of the Month Club.¹⁷⁰ Both the United Press and Associated Press sent reporters to the press conference and their reports were distributed to newspapers nationwide. Instead of snuffing out the Gervais/Klaas theory, however, Bolam’s press conference garnered even more coverage for it.

Bolam did have the “last laugh,” so-to-speak. In August 1971, she brought a \$1.5 million damage suit against the book’s authors and publisher, McGraw-Hill. This action marked the end of Gervais and Klaas’ months of nationwide publicity, but not before the suit was widely publicized in newspapers around the country.¹⁷¹ In response to the lawsuit, McGraw-Hill pulled the book from the shelves. Although the “Bolamites” were taken far less seriously than others, like Fred Goerner, who advocated that Earhart had been held on Saipan, their theory has not died out completely. The theory that Irene Bolam, who died in 1982, was actually Amelia Earhart still lives on. No other book, however, has received

¹⁶⁹ “Amelia Earhart Shot, Japanese Woman Says.” *Greenville News*, November 13, 1970.

¹⁷⁰ “Woman Denies She’s Amelia Earhart.” *Miami Herald*, November 11, 1970.

¹⁷¹ “Woman Sues Over Earhart Book.” *Indianapolis Star*, August 31, 1970.

quite the same coverage as *Amelia Earhart Lives*. Robert Myers and Barbara Wiley published *Stand by to Die* in 1985, which also advocated the Bolam theory, but it received virtually no coverage. As recently as the early twenty-first century, books proclaiming Bolam to be Earhart were still being published, a subject that will be examined more in depth in the next chapter.

V.

After the Bolam suit was settled, Klaas and Gervais continued to search for evidence for their theory but largely dropped off the radar of the American press. The Japanese Capture Theory, however, did not. During the 1970s, both Earhart's story and the story of her disappearance were increasingly covered in documentary television shows and made-for-tv movies. A 1971 episode of the television show, *You Are There*, hosted by Walter Cronkite, starred Geraldine Brooks and was a fictional, non-conspiratorial take on Earhart's final flight. The episode was highly publicized but widely panned, with *Life Magazine* providing the most devastating critique, criticizing the film's mixture of fact and fiction, "If we can't believe Walter Cronkite, faith in anything is impossible. Next week Mickey Mantle will be promoting lung cancer."¹⁷²

In 1976, the television program *In Search Of...* hosted by Leonard Nimoy took on conspiracies about Earhart's disappearance directly. The short episode featured a range of theories about her disappearance from the "crash and sink" theory espoused by famous aviator Elgen Long to the Japanese Capture theory. Both Joseph Gervais and Fred Goerner were interviewed for the program and provided their perspectives. Goerner argued that it

¹⁷² "Cyclops." "Walter was There, Anyway." *Life Magazine*, October 8, 1971.

was “inconceivable” that the “eyewitnesses” he had spoken to were not telling the truth.¹⁷³ Although Goerner would continue to give similar interviews for decades, his work in particular was revived in a unique way in the 1970s. In 1972, the band Plainsong, then fronted by Iain Matthews, released their debut album entitled “The Search for Amelia Earhart,” named after Goerner’s book. The lyrics of the title song on the album proclaimed that a “CBS newsman (Goerner)” was “confused by all the facts” about the official story behind Earhart’s disappearance and believed that “someone’s been telling lies.” The song went on to specifically mention suspicions that Earhart was held captive on Saipan.¹⁷⁴ Although Plainsong’s album made little impact on the charts, it did have a following in Great Britain. In October 1972, the *Guardian* in London published a story about the band’s newest album and its premiere at Queen Elizabeth Hall. The story proclaimed that the Earhart “affair” had been “dusted off” by the folk group and that even the American ambassador had been invited to the event.¹⁷⁵

Professional rivalries between various Earhart “researchers” helped to keep the Japanese Capture Theory in the news throughout this era. Not to be outdone by Gervais and Goerner, Paul Briand made a reappearance in American newspapers in 1973 with his own proclamation of a government conspiracy after claiming to have seen the “secret” FBI files on Amelia Earhart. Briand’s proclamation was sporadically published in newspapers nationwide, though at a far lower volume than any previous coverage of his work. The *Cincinnati Enquirer*, for example, proclaimed in December of 1973 that “Amelia Earhart May Not Have Been Executed in ’37.” Briand pulled out two documents from the file to

¹⁷³ *In Search Of...* “Amelia Earhart.” Directed by H. G. Stark. Written by Alex Pomansanof. Sci-Fi, June 1, 1977.

¹⁷⁴ Plainsong, *In Search of Amelia Earhart*, Elektra Records, 1972.

¹⁷⁵ “Searchers’ Plainson.” *The Guardian*, October 18, 1972.

use as “evidence” for his new claim that Earhart was not actually executed as a spy in 1937 – a claim he and other theorists had previously espoused. One document in the file, Briand proclaimed, detailed an interview with an American soldier who had “overheard” a conversation in a Philippine hotel before Pearl Harbor between two Japanese soldiers who said, in English, “Amelia Earhart is still alive and is being detained in a hotel in Tokyo.” Briand also pointed to supposed “reports from Australian intelligence sources which speculated that [Fred] Noonan’s ‘recovery within a nominal time appears quite fairly probable.’”¹⁷⁶ Using these two sources – and others collectively – Briand proclaimed that Noonan, and perhaps even Earhart, were still alive long after the Second World War and might have still been alive in the early 1970s and that the government (most notably the FBI) was keeping their survival hidden from the American public.

Luckily, the FBI’s file on Amelia Earhart has since been digitized and it tells a different story than the one Briand proclaimed in 1973. The two documents he mentioned are included in the file, but they are merely two among several documents simply reporting claims of Earhart’s location or potential survival. Briand clearly “cherry-picked” the documents he believed would fit his theory the best. Though one thing is clear from the file – the FBI received countless reports since 1937 claiming Earhart was in Saipan, Japan, or elsewhere and they simply made a record of each one. The agency rarely commented on the legitimacy of each claim.

The tale Briand relayed about the anonymous soldier in a Philippine hotel room was included in a letter from J. Edgar Hoover to Brigadier General Carter W. Clark from January 1945 in which Hoover noted that the claim came from a person “whose reliability

¹⁷⁶ “Amelia Earhart May Not Have Been Executed in ’37.” *Cincinnati Enquirer*, December 2, 1973.

is unknown” and offered no confirmation of the tale.¹⁷⁷ In a separate letter to Lieutenant Colonel Longfield Lloyd of the Commonwealth Investigative Branch in Australia, Hoover wrote, “We have in the past received many communications suggesting that Mrs. Putnam is still alive. None of these has been found to have any foundation in fact however.”¹⁷⁸ The “reports from Australian intelligence sources” Briand cited were far from credible, or even verifiable, documents. In March of 1947, an unnamed sender from California sent a letter to the Director General of Security in Australia claiming that Fred Noonan had been seen in Japan, alive. The sender alleged that photos and a description of Noonan had been sent to an Australian Intelligence Officer in Japan to prove Noonan’s identity (whether “Noonan’s” identity was proven is unknown). The author believed that the “recovery” of Noonan was “probable.”¹⁷⁹

The same person who sent the Noonan letter to the Director General of Security sent another letter on May 13, 1947 detailing the old story about “Ajima the Jap trader” that had circulated in American newspapers during the Second World War.¹⁸⁰ From context, it appears that this unnamed person – like others whose letters were included in Earhart’s FBI file – had simply sent the Director two separate claims about Earhart and Noonan’s disappearance. Neither of the letters provided any documentary or photographic

¹⁷⁷ Letter from J. Edgar Hoover to General Carter W. Clarke, January 18, 1945. “Amelia Mary Earhart Part 01 of 01.” FBI file for Amelia Earhart, document no. 62-48646. *The FBI: Federal Bureau of Investigation*, US Department of Justice, <https://vault.fbi.gov/amelia-mary-earhart/amelia-mary-earhart-part-01-of-01/view>

¹⁷⁸ Letter from J. Edgar Hoover to Lieutenant Colonel Longfield Lloyd, April 16, 1947. “Amelia Mary Earhart Part 01 of 01.” FBI file for Amelia Earhart, document no. 62-48646. *The FBI: Federal Bureau of Investigation*, US Department of Justice, <https://vault.fbi.gov/amelia-mary-earhart/amelia-mary-earhart-part-01-of-01/view>

¹⁷⁹ Letter to The Director General of Security, March 4, 1947. “Amelia Mary Earhart Part 01 of 01.” FBI file for Amelia Earhart, document no. 62-48646. *The FBI: Federal Bureau of Investigation*, US Department of Justice, <https://vault.fbi.gov/amelia-mary-earhart/amelia-mary-earhart-part-01-of-01/view>

¹⁸⁰ Letter to The Director General of Security, May 13, 1947. “Amelia Mary Earhart Part 01 of 01.” FBI file for Amelia Earhart, document no. 62-48646. *The FBI: Federal Bureau of Investigation*, US Department of Justice, <https://vault.fbi.gov/amelia-mary-earhart/amelia-mary-earhart-part-01-of-01/view>

evidence and since the name of the sender is redacted, it is difficult to ascertain the letter's credibility.

Another memo in the file may have shed light on Briand's research process. An internal memo distributed in the FBI on January 20, 1967 shows that Briand sent a draft of a new manuscript for another work on Earhart for "security review." The FBI struck a section of the manuscript draft in which Briand claimed that the story about the soldier in a Philippine hotel was "hearsay evidence, very reliably reported by FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover." Rather, the story was sent *to* Hoover, not from him and the FBI Director said directly that he could not ascertain the soldier's credibility. Whoever reviewed Briand's file changed the language to "furnished to military authorities," a far more suitable claim about the tale's origins.¹⁸¹

Briand's new "discoveries" were repeated nearly verbatim in a handful of newspapers nationwide. However, a review of the file itself reveals that Briand likely cherry-picked two letters from the larger file and described them in a way to fit his preexisting assumptions about Earhart's fate. In actuality, the file is filled with letters from named and unnamed civilians to the FBI claiming to have knowledge about Earhart and Noonan's fate. Many of the claims conflict and there is not a single record within the documents to show that anyone in the FBI every took any of them as credible. Collectively, the files are hardly the "proof" that Briand claimed them to be.

¹⁸¹ Memorandum of Proposed Book Entitled "Requiem for Amelia" by Lt. Col. Paul Briand, USAF. "Amelia Mary Earhart Part 01 of 01." FBI file for Amelia Earhart, document no. 62-48646. *The FBI: Federal Bureau of Investigation*, US Department of Justice, <https://vault.fbi.gov/amelia-mary-earhart/amelia-mary-earhart-part-01-of-01/view>

VI.

After Briand, Goerner, and Gervais completed their respective trips in search of Earhart's fate, amateur investigations and subsequent book publications continued to keep the Japanese Capture Theory in the public discourse throughout the 1970s and 1980s, albeit at a lower volume. In 1978, the first stories about Vincent Loomis' expedition to the Marshall Islands in search of clues to Earhart's fate appeared in the press. Loomis' book, although less popular than Goerner's, became one of the foundational texts for twenty-first century Japanese Capture theorists. A *Los Angeles Times* article from April 1978 discussed an upcoming seven-member expedition to the Marshall Islands led by Loomis and his wife.¹⁸² The *York Daily Record* in Pennsylvania reported a lengthier version of the same story and detailed how Loomis claimed to have seen plane wreckage on the islands in the early 1950s when he was stationed there as a member of the Air Force. "I didn't think much about what I saw until I got back to the states and started seeing articles," Loomis said. "Then I married what I saw to the possibility the plane was Amelia Earhart's."¹⁸³ By June of 1978, newspapers reported that Loomis had already found "three witnesses" to Earhart's fate in the Marshall Islands.¹⁸⁴ Those three stories would form the foundation of his later publications.

In his 1985 book, *Amelia Earhart: The Final Story*, Loomis wrote that he first considered Earhart's fate after he left the Marshall Islands when he read a condensed version of Fred Goerner's book in a 1967 edition of *Reader's Digest*.¹⁸⁵ Upon reading

¹⁸² "Amelia Earhart Still Sends Spirits Soaring." *Los Angeles Times*, April 12, 1978.

¹⁸³ "Amelia Earhart's Plane Lures Searcher." *York Daily Record*, April 12, 1978.

¹⁸⁴ "Earhart Legend Bolstered." *Baltimore Sun*, June 7, 1978.

¹⁸⁵ Loomis, Vincent and Jeffrey Ethell. *Amelia Earhart: The Final Story*. (New York: Random House, 1985.),75.

Goerner's theory, Loomis wrote that he was "jolted as a memory flashed through his mind" of an aircraft he and his team had stumbled upon in 1952. He claimed that, at the time, "someone" mentioned the possibility that it had belonged to Amelia Earhart.¹⁸⁶ He embarked on his investigation in the 1970s not to "find" Earhart or learn about her fate, but to prove the aircraft he had seen was actually hers, which may have greatly affected how he processed "evidence" during his investigation. He was also critical of both *The Search for Amelia Earhart* and *Amelia Earhart Lives*, writing that the former "ended in conjecture without substantiating evidence" while the latter was guilty of "jumbled logic."¹⁸⁷

Although Loomis's research is consistent with the Japanese Capture Theory more broadly, the details differ slightly from both the Goerner and the Klaas/Gervais schools. He spoke to natives on the Mili Atoll in the Marshall Islands who claimed to have seen "white fliers" there years earlier. One of the women he interviewed, Bosket Diklan, claimed that she had "heard something" about a "lady pilot" crashing on Mili, but hadn't seen anything herself.¹⁸⁸ The other "eyewitnesses" Loomis interviewed provided similar tales. At the end of his book, Loomis concluded that Earhart drifted off course and ditched their plane near a small atoll in the Marshall Islands where they were captured by the Japanese and taken to Saipan, where they were imprisoned. His conclusion is similar to Goerner's but largely reliant upon "eyewitnesses" from the Marshall Islands rather than Saipan.

When analyzing the Goerner, Klaas/Gervais, and Loomis publications together, a similar theme appears. Goerner spoke to "eyewitnesses" on Saipan who testified to seeing

¹⁸⁶ Loomis, *Amelia Earhart*, 75.

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.* 77, 81.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.* 89.

a crashed plane and “two white fliers” on the island. Gervais (which was later reported by Klaas) discussed conversations he had had near Truk Lagoon with people who claimed to have seen a plane crash and two “white fliers” taken captive by the Japanese. And on the Marshall Islands, Loomis heard similar tales. How could the same thing have happened at the same time in different places? There is a simple answer – it could not. When looking at the “eyewitness” claims collectively, each theorist must choose to believe which ones fit their theory and discard ones that do not. It is difficult to ascertain exactly when this “white flier” motif emerged in the Pacific Islands, but the earliest reported tales start with Josephine Blanco Akiyama’s in 1960. This sheds significant doubt on the credibility of the supposed eyewitnesses. Instead of taking each of the tales at face-value, it is much more plausible to believe that this is merely a rumor motif perpetuated by the constant amateur investigations of Earhart’s fate in the Pacific islands.

Loomis’s book *Amelia Earhart: The Final Story* was published in 1985 with minor fanfare. Most of the mixed newspaper coverage consisted of reviews in medium and large newspapers. The *Indianapolis Star* reported that “Amelia Earhart Captured by Japanese,” and called the book “an incredible and fascinating piece of investigative work.” The review continued and sung a familiar refrain, “If he [Loomis] is right, Amelia Earhart and Fred Noonan were quite possibly the first casualties of World War II.”¹⁸⁹ In the *Baltimore Sun*, Myron Beckenstein was far more critical, writing “For those looking for a smoking gun, Mr. Loomis acknowledges that his book doesn’t prove it.” Beckenstein went on to accuse Loomis of having “a general fuzziness about dates” which – among other things – could have “eroded” the story’s credibility. At the conclusion of the report, Beckenstein made an

¹⁸⁹ “Amelia Earhart Captured by Japanese, Says Volume.” *Indianapolis Star*, June 30, 1985.

- perhaps unintentional - interesting connection between the wartime survival rumors of the Second World War and the Cold War, “In a way, Amelia Earhart is the Raoul Wallenberg of the Pacific. While we pressure a hostile Soviet government for information on the hero of Budapest, surely we can also pressure a friendly Japanese government for information about Amelia’s fate.” Wallenberg, who is credited with saving thousands of Jews in wartime Budapest, disappeared in 1945 after being arrested by Soviet soldiers. Both he and Earhart were subject to similar “survival rumors” in the twentieth century due to the ambiguity of their respective fates, which partially explains why both theories still exist today.

VII.

In 1987, Thomas E. Devine published *Eyewitness: The Amelia Earhart Incident*, which told a similar tale – Amelia Earhart and Fred Noonan were held captive on the island of Saipan (assumed to be spies by the Japanese) where they later perished. Although Devine did not publish his book until the late 1980s, he was a familiar character in Goerner’s earlier research, having joined the CBS newsman on one of his expeditions to Saipan. Like all of the other early Earhart researchers, Devine was a veteran of the Second World War - he had been stationed on Saipan in 1944-1945 with the 244th Army Postal Unit.¹⁹⁰ Like Loomis, in 1960 he read about Josephine Blanco Akiyama’s story which “reminded” him of something he had seen on Saipan in the 1940s. He claimed to have seen an airplane “tucked away” in a hanger and “kept secret” from most people on the island by government forces. Someone later claimed that the plane was Amelia Earhart’s. He

¹⁹⁰ Goerner, *The Search for Amelia Earhart*, 73.

maintained that the plane was “set ablaze” in July of 1944 and Earhart’s story buried by the American government (largely at the hands of Under Secretary of the Navy James V. Forrestal).¹⁹¹

Devine’s story is similar to that of Loomis’s, but much of his book is spent criticizing earlier theorists, Fred Goerner in particular, who he felt unfairly excluded him from taking a major role in his investigations in the 1960s. He wrote of multiple occasions when Goerner “didn’t return his calls” or didn’t “properly investigate” Devine’s claim that he had seen the location of Earhart and Noonan’s graves while on Saipan. For example, he wrote that Goerner first “promised to telephone with a report” after his initial investigation, but after three weeks, Devine had “heard nothing.”¹⁹² According to *Eyewitness*, during Devine’s involvement in Goerner’s 1963 trip to Saipan, the newsman even tried to ditch him at a hotel in Guam while he and a colleague continued on to Saipan.¹⁹³ While there was certainly no love lost between Devine and Goerner, he did not hesitate to criticize *Amelia Earhart Lives* as well, writing that Gervais and Klaas “created a mystery when none existed.”¹⁹⁴

Devine’s book did not make much of an impact in the American press in the late 1980s, perhaps reflecting an increasing sense of “Earhart disappearance fatigue” during that era – although new books continued to come that featured the Japanese Capture Theory, the narrative they presented had become a bit tired. Loomis gave a few radio and television interviews, which were reported in regional newspapers. For example, the

¹⁹¹ Devine, Thomas E. and Richard M. Daley. *Eyewitness: The Amelia Earhart Incident*. (Englewood, NJ: Renaissance House Publishers, 1987.), 47.

¹⁹² Devine, *Eyewitness*, 90.

¹⁹³ *Ibid.* 144.

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.* 170.

Philadelphia Inquirer wrote about his appearance on Lee Fielding's talk show in July 1987.¹⁹⁵ The only other mentions of his book appeared in small local newspapers, including the *Quad-City Times* in Davenport, Iowa and the *Baxter Bulletin* in Mountain Home, Arkansas, in the summer of 1987. Devine's book is worth mentioning, however, not just because of his involvement with Goerner's earlier investigation. After the publication of his book, Devine struck up a friendship with Mike Campbell, whom he inspired to take up his own investigation. Campbell would later become one of the most outspoken proponents of the Japanese Capture Theory in the twenty-first century.

By the time Devine's book was published, the Japanese Capture Theory appeared to be waning. American newspapers showed little interest in "new evidence" for the theory, largely because the evidence was hardly "new." There's only so many "eyewitnesses" who can come forth with similar stories before the claims become cliché. Additionally, two key events occurred in 1987 that should have put an end to the Japanese Capture Theory for good (the reasons they did not will be discussed in the following chapter). First, the San Francisco Court of Historical Review, a moot court that "investigates" historical questions and whose ruling hold no legal sway, investigated the Japanese Capture Theory. Its decision was published in newspapers nationwide, receiving far more press than Devine's book, which was published the same year. Witnesses in the trial included Fred Goerner and others who claimed to have "evidence" of Earhart's fate. The Historical Court determined that Japan was "cleared" in Earhart's fate and found no evidence to support the Japanese Capture Theory. Attorney Robert R. Bryan, who argued against the theory in "court,"

¹⁹⁵ "Talk Shows." *Philadelphia Inquirer*, July 29, 1987.

argued that the belief that the Japanese may have shot down Earhart and Noonan or had anything to do with their disappearance was “tantamount to racism.”¹⁹⁶

Later in 1987, Amelia’s sister, published a biography of the missing aviatrix called *Amelia, My Courageous Sister*. At the end of the book, she included a chapter entitled “History Not Mystery,” in which she concisely, but convincingly, “debunked” many of the claims inherent in the Japanese Capture Theory.¹⁹⁷ She wrote,

“To produce a sensational conclusion to Amelia’s story, some biographers have mingled hearsay, rumor and total fabrication. Now that the fiftieth anniversary of Amelia’s disappearance is at hand, additional theories are surfacing as many writers attempt to cash in on the inevitable publicity that will accompany this event. What continues to be striking about many of these theories is the total lack of convincing evidence which would substantiate them.”¹⁹⁸

She pointed to a report in the National Institute of Defense Studies, written by Fumihiko Nakajima, an Adjunct Professor at the University of Guam, who had written a series of reports responding to theories that Earhart had crashed on or near Saipan.¹⁹⁹ At the time of Earhart’s disappearance, Nakajima was a chemical engineer in Saipan. He began to write his reports in 1960 in response to the publicized investigations of Fred Goerner and “Operation Earhart.” He argued that in 1937, the Japanese had not yet fortified Japan and that there were no soldier stations on the island, so claims that the Japanese military captured Earhart as a spy were farfetched. Furthermore, he spoke to many Japanese

¹⁹⁶ “Mock Court Clears Japan In Amelia Earhart’s Case.” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, May 22, 1987.

¹⁹⁷ Morrissey, Muriel Earhart and Carol L. Osborne. *Amelia, My Courageous Sister*. (Santa Clara, California: Osborne Publisher, 1987.), 267.

¹⁹⁸ Morrissey, *Amelia*, 267.

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.* 282.

people who had lived on Saipan in 1937, claiming that “thousands” of them returned to Japan and “knew nothing” of an incident involving Miss. Earhart.²⁰⁰

Morrissey and her co-writer, popular historian Carol L. Osborne, reached out to Minoru Tamba, the Consul General of Japan in 1986, inquiring about a possible connection between Earhart and the Japanese. He responded in December of that year, writing, “As a result of extended research, we have concluded that no record has been found [sic] on Ms. Amelia Earhart nor on the Lockheed [sic] 10 airplane.”²⁰¹ Morrissey then argued that “unfortunately, it is now clear” that Earhart “did not understand adequately the operation of her radio,” and was likely unable to hear any responses to her final distress calls.²⁰² For these reasons, and others, she concluded in favor of Occam’s Razor – the problem-solving theory which posits that “entities should not be multiplied without necessity,” meaning the answer with the fewest number of assumptions is more likely correct - writing sadly that her sister likely ran out of gas and crashed into the Pacific Ocean in July of 1937.

VIII.

A collective analysis of the theories underpinning the Japanese Capture Theory between 1960 and 1987 show not only the existence of a “white flier” rumor motif in the Pacific, but also reveal the drawbacks of the theorists’ reliance on supposed “eyewitness” statements. The tales collected by Goerner, Gervais, Loomis, Devine, and others may fit a larger theme, but conflict in detail. In his foundational book in the field of rumor studies, Jean-Noël Kapferer argues that perfect, clear eyewitness testimony – especially the amount

²⁰⁰ Ibid. 284, 285.

²⁰¹ Ibid. 285.

²⁰² Ibid. 292.

“collected” by the Earhart theorists – is “most unusual.”²⁰³ A belief in certain rumors, like the belief that Amelia Earhart was captured and/or killed by the Japanese, are more dependent upon our preexisting beliefs and “mental stereotypes.” He writes, “Accepting information as true depends on the frame of reference each individual uses to evaluate it. If the information is coherent with the frame of reference used, it acquires a high degree of probability of being held true.”²⁰⁴ Kapferer uses the example of a rumor that spread in the 1980s falsely connecting Procter & Gamble with Satan because of the construction of their logo. The rumor found fertile ground in a society where 66% of adults already believed in the existence of the devil. Furthermore, Kapferer addressed the “convergence” of testimony from several different witnesses, arguing that it is “not necessarily an indication of the truth of their declarations.” Rather, it can mean that “having the same stereotypes and mental scenarios, they perceived the facts identically but nevertheless erroneously.”²⁰⁵ This could explain, in part, how so many “eyewitnesses” came forward on Saipan and elsewhere with similar stories about “white flyers” and American spies. The similarities may have arisen not from factual eyewitness experiences, but rather from similar pre-existing viewpoints, perspectives, and assumptions about Earhart, the Japanese, and the wartime experience on Saipan.

Professional rivalries between Earhart theorists during this era also helped to perpetuate the Japanese Capture Theory. Each theorist displayed a desperation to “one-up” or even “correct” their contemporaries. Recall, for example, Devine’s treatment of Goerner in *Eyewitness*. This antagonism existed between other theorists as well. Klaas and Gervais

²⁰³ Kapferer, Jean-Noel. *Rumors: Uses, Interpretations, and Images*. (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Transaction Publishers, 1990.), 28.

²⁰⁴ Kapferer, *Rumors*, 73.

²⁰⁵ *Ibid.* 73.

wrote that Goerner was “flamboyant and emotional” and accused him of being conspiratorial.²⁰⁶ Shortly after the publication of *Amelia Earhart Lives*, Rod McGavarn of a press club in the Bay Area invited both Klaas and Goerner to a debate. The former declined and the latter accepted. In a letter to a colleague in December 1970, Goerner wrote that Klaas “declined with good reason...He wouldn’t stand a chance when the evidence is presented. His technique is rather to sneak around to programs where his claims cannot be answered or to establish a situation in which any questioner is at an extreme disadvantage.”²⁰⁷ He continued, more bluntly, “I suppose one could admire to a certain degree the nearly unbelievable gall and chutzpah enterprise of the man if he were not so totally unfeeling and amoral with respect to whom he hurts in the process.”²⁰⁸ The antagonism from Team Gervais and Klaas continued to be mutual. In 1992, Rollin C. Reineck, a founding member of the Amelia Earhart Society (which will be discussed at length in the next chapter) wrote a letter to Gervais, responding to recent critical comments Goerner had made about his rival’s research. At the time, Goerner was suffering from cancer and would succumb to it two years later. Of Goerner, Reineck wrote, “Poor Fred. I guess I’d be a little cantankerous too if I were going in for cancer surgery...I’ve always thought that there was a connection between those who hate so much and those that get cancer...Fred sure has his share of hate – and cancer.”²⁰⁹

²⁰⁶ Klaas, *Amelia Earhart Lives*, 195.

²⁰⁷ Correspondence from Frederick Goerner to Ira Blue, 15 December 1970, H118-05, Box 3, Folder 6, Special Collections Department, McDermott Library, The University of Texas at Dallas.

²⁰⁸ Correspondence from Frederick Goerner to Ira Blue, 15 December 1970.

²⁰⁹ Correspondence from Rollin C. Reineck to Joseph Gervais, 4 March 1992, H118-05, Box 3, Folder 6, Special Collections Department, McDermott Library, The University of Texas at Dallas.

Prashant Bordia and Nicholas DiFonzo write at length about why people choose to believe one rumor over another, in this case between Goerner's Saipan theory and Klaas and Gervais' Bolam theory:

“In most cases, given the choice between two rumors of equal credibility, people will prefer a rumor that enhances their sense of self rather than one that diminishes it. This may mean latching on to interpretations that agree with their worldview and help maintain or create a favorable image of their in-group.”²¹⁰

The deeper entrenched the Saipan and Bolam factions became, the more likely the nature of their research reflected it. Desperate to “one-up” each other, the groups clung tighter to their own fictions, thereby actually helping the rumor's continued spread. Group polarization also plays a role. According to Cass Sunstein's definition, “When group members begin with an antecedent belief in a rumor, internal deliberations will strengthen their belief that it is true (even if their belief was originally weak).”²¹¹ As rivalries grew, group coherence between “Operation Earhart” and Team Goerner increased, causing an increasing attachment to their theories – upon which they had largely founded their careers and fortunes – and also helping the spread of the Japanese Capture Theory.

Why did the Japanese Capture Theory not fade away after the Second World War? Kapferer writes that rumors, by definition, are fleeting. The only way for a rumor to last is by “snowballing,” or the perpetual addition of new “information” and “evidence” of an old rumor, thereby increasing the size of its scope. Kapferer writes, “Identical repetition kills

²¹⁰ Bordia, Prashant and Nicholas DiFonzo, “Psychological Motivations in Rumor Spread.” *Rumor Mills: The Social Impact of Rumor and Legend*. (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Transaction Publishers 2005), 96-97.

²¹¹ Sunstein, Cass R. *On Rumors: How Falsehoods Spread, Why We Believe Them, And What Can Be Done*. (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2014.), Kindle Edition, 33.

the news value of all information. Were a rumor to be repeated word for word, without any modification whatsoever, throughout its diffusion process, its death would be thereby accelerated.”²¹² The so-called eventual “death” of the Japanese Capture Theory, on the other hand, was forestalled by frequent “revelations” about Earhart’s disappearance and the professional rivalries that perpetuated them. Had the “evidence” for the Japanese Capture Theory remained stagnant, had Akiyama’s “eyewitness” account remained the only one of its kind, it is plausible that it would have faded away long ago. However, every time a new theorist brought forward new “evidence,” gave an interview, or published a book, the rumor snowballed and continued to exist, and often, grow. By the 1980s, the new “evidence” presented by Japanese Capture theorists was hardly unique – most stuck to similar narratives – so the “snowball” slowed.

The question of “why” the Japanese Capture Theory emerged, and achieved its heyday, in the 1960s and 1970s does not have a clear-cut answer. The rivalry between the United States and Japan had long since waned by the height of the Cold War. It is, though, the culture of the Cold War itself that provides a plausible answer. Richard Hofstadter’s foundational 1964 essay, “The Paranoid Style of American Politics” pointed to the increasing sense of paranoia and conspiratorial thinking that emerged in the United States during the Cold War era. This paranoid culture infected all facets of American society. Stephen J. Whitfield writes, “In this era, a specter was haunting America – the specter of Communism. Trying to exorcise it were legislators and judges, union officials and movie studio bosses, policemen and generals, university presidents and corporation executives,

²¹² Kapferer, *Rumors*, 108.

clergymen and journalists, Republicans and Democrats, conservatives and liberals.”²¹³ In such a time of “social crisis,” danger was “lurking around every corner.” Whitfield continues, arguing that the seeming “invulnerability” of the Soviet Union helped to “render intelligible the punitive and malicious excesses of the Red Scare. Forbearance was too ambiguous. Unable to strike directly at the Russians, the most vigilant patriots went after the scalps of their countrymen instead.”²¹⁴ American culture was therefore highly politicized and highly paranoid – “communism” wasn’t something that lurked just in the streets of Moscow or the gulags of Siberia. Communists could be “hiding in plain sight” in the political establishment, in Hollywood, or in a neighbor’s house down the street. This “paranoid” culture was rife with conspiracy theories, which thrive in times of social crisis and uncertainty. Second, trust in government institutions in the United States plummeted dramatically beginning in the 1960s. Fears about communist infiltration of the government, doubts about the Warren’s Commissions findings on John F. Kennedy’s assassination, the Vietnam War, and Watergate all helped to chip away at American institutional trust. The Japanese Capture Theory is a conspiracy theory, so it is little surprised that it reemerged during a time when paranoid and conspiratorial thinking was at its height. It is also a theory innately skeptical of the United States government, either implicitly or blatantly. Both these cultural forces – Cold War paranoia and an increasing distrust in government – may have helped to prompt the resurgence of the Japanese Capture Theory in the 1960s and 1970s.

Tony Shaw and Denise J. Youngblood write, “The 1960s was arguably the most turbulent decade of the twentieth century for Americans (the 1962 Cuban missile crisis,

²¹³ Stephen J. Whitfield, *The Culture of the Cold War*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991, 40.

²¹⁴ Whitfield, *The Culture of the Cold War*, 155.

civil right marches, political assassinations, Vietnam, the feminist movement, drugs, and rock 'n' roll) and was quickly followed by one of the most dispiriting decades (Watergate, energy crisis, economic recession, and international terrorism.”²¹⁵ This roots of this period’s uncertainty, paranoia, and distrust emerged earlier than the 1960s, and earlier than the reemergence of the Japanese Capture Theory. A handful of espionage trials in the postwar era created the general assumption that *anyone* could be a communist. In 1948, former U.S. Communist Party member Whittaker Chambers testified before the House Unamerican Activities Committee (HUAC), claiming to have passed classified documents to Soviet agents over a decade earlier. He produced evidence that indicated another government employee, Alger Hiss, had also been involved in espionage. Although the statute of limitations had passed for espionage, Hiss was convicted of perjury in 1950. Historian John P. Roche writes, “The stereotype of the Communist agent was irremediably shattered. Hiss looked like the man down the block in Scarsdale or Evanston, the man in the office across the hall on Wall Street or State Street. If this man could be a spy, anyone could.”²¹⁶ Chamber’s 1952 book *Witness*, which discussed both his experiences with the Hiss trial and conversion to Christianity, was a favorite of the Hollywood and political elite. John Wayne claimed to have memorized long sections of the book and Ronald Reagan quoted it in his 1965 autobiography, *Where’s the Rest of Me?*²¹⁷ The conviction and execution, in 1951 and 1953, respectively, of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg for espionage only compounded American fears of Communist infiltration.

²¹⁵ Tony Shaw and Denise J. Youngblood, *Cinematic Cold War: The American and Soviet Struggle for Hearts and Minds*. (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2010), 28.

²¹⁶ Whitfield, *The Culture of the Cold War*, 397.

²¹⁷ *Ibid.* 288.

Perhaps the most iconic representative of Cold War hysteria and paranoia was Senator Joseph McCarthy, who claimed in 1950 to have evidence of a Communist “spy ring” within the State Department. This prompted four years of accusations and theatrics from McCarthy, during which time he accused additional members of the administration and the United States military of spying on behalf of the Soviet Union.²¹⁸ These heightened fears of communist infiltration were compounded with rising national panic about the possibility of a nuclear war with the Soviet Union. The USSR detonated their first nuclear bomb in 1949 and successive presidential administrations invoked the threat of nuclear weapons, including President Eisenhower, who expressed the possibility of using one of the devastating weapons to end the stalemate in the Korean War, one of a series of proxy wars fought during the Cold War.²¹⁹ The Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962 only served to heighten these fears, which did not lessen until the waning of the Cold War.

Hollywood both exploited and advanced Cold War era paranoia. Shaw and Youngblood argue that the Cold War “forged the longest and most sophisticated cinematic conflict in history.”²²⁰ Movies and television programs existed with the backdrop of global crisis. In the same way the Second World War played out on the silver screen during the 1940s, so did the Cold War beginning in the postwar era. HUAC sought to find proof of communist infiltration in Hollywood in the late 1940s. Although they failed to do so, the investigation resulted in the blacklist of “real or suspected communists” in Hollywood which spread “like a tapeworm through the industry into the 1960s.”²²¹ Partially as a result of the blacklist, a series of staunchly anti-communist films emerged in the late 1940s and

²¹⁸ Ibid. 411.

²¹⁹ Ibid. 112.

²²⁰ Shaw and Youngblood, *Cinematic Cold War*, 15.

²²¹ Ibid. 19.

early 1950s including *The Iron Curtain* (1948), *The Red Menace* (1949), *The Red Danube* (1949), *Red Snow* (1952), and *The Steel Fist* (1952).²²² The earliest phrase (1947-1953) of Hollywood Cold War productions broadcast an “overriding theme...the fear of communist subversion.” Films implied that this “subversion” could appear in the military, the political establishment, the media, the entertainment industry, the pulpit – in short, everywhere.²²³ After Senator McCarthy was discredited in 1954, “space opened” for dissent from the Cold War consensus in Hollywood. Yet, the overwhelming number of films still exploited the era’s paranoia and played out with a Cold War backdrop. This includes a range of productions that satirized Cold War hysteria - from the iconic *Dr. Strangelove: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* (1964) to “The Monsters are Due on Maple Street,” a 1960 episode of the popular television program, *The Twilight Zone*. Espionage films including *The Manchurian Candidate* (1962), *Seven Days in May* (1964), and several James Bond films, beginning with *From Russia With Love* (1963) featured themes of Soviet subversion or threat. In the early 1970s, Hollywood capitalized on the “paranoia induced by press revelations of U.S. secret service dirty tricks of the early 1970s, featured most prominently in the Watergate scandal.”²²⁴ Films in this genre included *The Kremlin Letter* (1970), *Three Days of the Condor* (1975), and, most notably, *All the President’s Men* (1976). Each of these productions helped to further perpetuate and reinforce the general sense of paranoia that reigned during the Cold War.

Conspiracy theories have existed throughout human history but surged during the Cold War, a trend which Richard Hofstadter identified in his notable 1964 essay “The

²²² Whitfield, *Culture of the Cold War*, 1863.

²²³ Shaw and Youngblood, *Cinematic Cold War*, 25.

²²⁴ *Ibid.* 31.

Paranoid Style in American Politics,” and book of the same name. He identified the “paranoid style,” a type of political rhetoric most clearly espoused by Senator McCarthy as one of, “heated exaggeration, suspiciousness, and conspiratorial fantasy” and argued that it is “an old and recurrent phenomenon in our public life which has been frequently linked with movements of suspicious discontent.”²²⁵ After the assassination of President Kennedy in 1963, and then again after the widely controversial and “unsatisfying” findings (which established Lee Harvey Oswald as “lone shooter” who acted alone) of the Warren Commission published in 1964, conspiracy theories about the president’s death surged. In the three years after the assassination, just over 50% of American citizens believed JFK had been murdered “as part of a conspiracy.” That number peaked at 81% in 1975.²²⁶ Hofstadter’s “paranoid style” is a helpful explainer here. He writes, “The enemy [for the purveyor of the paranoid style] is clearly delineated: he is a perfect model of malice, a kind of amoral superman – sinister, ubiquitous, powerful, cruel, sensual, luxury-loving.”²²⁷ That hardly describes Lee Harvey Oswald – many of the staunchest JFK conspiracists refused to believe a “great” man like Kennedy could have been downed by someone as unspectacular and banal as Oswald (similar assumptions emerged after Earhart’s disappearance). The assassination *had* to be a conspiracy – it was the only thing that “made sense.” The Watergate breaking and coverup was a conspiracy theory that turned out to be true, confirming paranoid suspicions. By the mid-1970s, conspiracy theories that suggested the 1969 moon landing was “faked” began to emerge. These three represent some of the

²²⁵ Richard Hofstadter. “The Paranoid Style in American Politics.” *Harpers Magazine*, November 1964. <https://harpers.org/archive/1964/11/the-paranoid-style-in-american-politics/>

²²⁶ Jan-Willem van Prooijen and Karen M. Douglas, “Conspiracy Theories as Part of History: The Role of Societal Crisis Situations,” *Memory Studies* 10, no. 3 (2017): 323-333.

²²⁷ Hofstadter, “The Paranoid Style in American Politics.”

most prominent conspiracy theories of the age, but they were far from the only ones in existence.

Conspiracy theories thrive in times of “societal crisis,” which Jan-Willem van Prooijen and Karen M. Douglas define as “impactful and rapid societal change that calls existing power structures, norms of conduct, or even the existence of specific people or groups into question.”²²⁸ Recall Shaw and Youngblood’s argument about the “turbulence” of the 1960s and 1970s – both eras certainly fit the bill for “societal crisis.” Van Prooijen and Douglas explain the conspiracy theories that emerge during such times as “sense-making narratives” caused by “a fundamental need to understand why events occurred, particularly in the case of negative or unexpected events.” They continue, “Conspiracy theories provide people with simplified answers, specifically to questions of how a certain crisis situation emerged, and which societal actors can and cannot be trusted. These answers are highly relevant for how people cope with crisis situations.”²²⁹ This helps to explain why JFK assassination and other conspiracy theories found such a following post-1963. An American president had been assassinated for the first time in 62 years and, Cold War paranoia reigned, fears of nuclear war dominated headlines, and civil unrest grew on the home front. Conspiracy theories helped to sooth and simplify a very “un-simple” time. Cold War era culture may also help to explain the reemergence of the Japanese Capture Theory in the 1960s and 1970s. It was just one of many conspiracy theories that surged in popularity of the time. The Japanese Capture narrative also mimicked the paranoia of the age – “shadowy forces” within the Japanese military and political establishment caused the disappearance of American’s favorite female aviator and similarly “shadowy” and often

²²⁸ Van Prooijen and Douglas, “Conspiracy Theories as Part of History.”

²²⁹ Ibid.

undefined American government officials helped to “cover up” Earhart’s fate and possible ties to espionage. It just “made sense” to an American public wary of danger and conspiracy lurking around every corner.

The second possible reason for the reemergence of the Japanese Capture Theory in the 1960s and 1970s overlaps with the first. Both Cold War era paranoia and American cultural responses to disappointing economic and political events eventually turned inward. Distrust of government institutions plummeted during the 1960s and 1970s amid revelations about potential communist infiltration in government, downturn of the Vietnam War, Watergate scandal, and economic crises. In 1964, two years before the publication of Fred Goerner’s *The Search for Amelia Earhart*, Pew Research Center found that 77% of respondents trusted the government in Washington “always or most of the time.” By 1980, the number dropped to 26%.²³⁰ It is little wonder why so many conspiracy theories which implied government cover-ups or corruption emerged during these two decades and were popular.

The Japanese Capture Theory is inherently skeptical of the United States government and its institutions because it denies the “official” explanation communicated by the U.S. Navy and other institutions, that Amelia Earhart and Fred Noonan simply crashed into the ocean and died at sea. Versions of the theory that suggest Earhart was on an espionage mission prior to her disappearance also imply a government cover-up since no government document or source has ever acknowledged that suspicion. The most prominent Japanese Capture Theorists of the 1960s and 1970s either imply or directly implicated government forces in “covering up” Earhart’s disappearance. Recall Fred

²³⁰ “Public Trust in Government: 1958-2019.” Pew Research Center - U.S. Politics & Policy, May 30, 2020. <https://www.people-press.org/2019/04/11/public-trust-in-government-1958-2019/>.

Goerner's claims that he had been followed by agents from the Central Intelligence Agency, Joe Klaas and Joe Gervais' suspicion that the military "rescued" Earhart from Japan as assisted in creating her "second life" as Irene Bolam, and Paul Briand's claims that declassified FBI documents revealed the agency "knew" about Japan's role in Earhart's fate. Distrust of government institutions is therefore an integral part of the Japanese Capture Theory and may have boosted the theory's popularity during its heyday and in subsequent decades.

Cold War era paranoia, which sparked an increase in conspiracy theories' popularity, and a declining trust in government institutions during the 1960s and 1970s both helped to revive the Japanese Capture Theory. Yet, one question remains: Why did the theory reemerge in 1960 and not a decade and a half earlier during the beginning of the Cold War? First, trust in government institutions was still relatively high during the two decades after the Second World War. Another answer to that question is relatively simple – the reemergence of the theory required a precipitating event. No "eyewitness statements" or "new evidence" for the Japanese Capture Theory emerged in the immediate postwar era. The press did cover Amy Otis Earhart's suspicions that her daughter may be a prisoner of the Japanese in the late 1940s, but it was a suspicion alone – the elder Earhart had no new evidence to prove her claim. The precipitating event, therefore, was Paul Briand's discovery and publication of Josephine Blanco Akiyama's tale in 1960 and Fred Goerner's subsequent obsession with it. By that point, Cold War paranoia and increased conspiratorial thinking had already increased. In the mid-1960s into the late 1970s, the theory received a boost as trust in government institutions declined. The Japanese Capture Theory declined in popularity as the Cold War waned and as the American public tired of the conspiracy

and new theorists failed to provide new, unique “evidence.” The decline also coincided with a moderate uptick in trust in government institutions in the beginning of the 1980s and a decline in Cold War paranoia by the end of the decade.

Between 1960 and 1987, the Japanese Capture Theory crystallized into semi-coherent, publicized narratives. Although the nature of the theory ranged from theorist to theorist, its proponents largely fell into two camps, the Saipan school and the Bolam school. Frequent amateur investigations by members of each school, and others, helped to keep the Japanese Capture Theory “relevant” for decades. Books published on the Japanese Capture Theory, including Fred Goerner’s *The Search for Amelia Earhart*, which was a *New York Times* bestseller, helped the theory to snowball and remain strong throughout the 1960s and 1970s. Media interest in the theory helped to spread the theory even further. Yet, by the late 1980s, it waned as “Earhart conspiracy fatigue” set in. The decision by the San Francisco Court of Historical Review and Muriel Earhart Morrissey’s subsequent book “debunking” the Japanese Capture Theory, perhaps should have ended the rumor’s spread and its apparent credibility for good. But it does still exist today in the 21st century. Although the continued existence of the Japanese Capture Theory post 1987 will be discussed more fully in chapter three, Van Prooijen and Douglas do provide a helpful theory for why it failed to disappear when American culture changed. They proposed that “conspiracy theories can become coherent historical narratives that are transmitted to future generations as if they were facts, even if the actual facts do not provide compelling evidence for the conspiracy theory. What starts as a psychological response to cope with distressing feelings can become part of people’s representations of history.”²³¹ That

²³¹ Van Prooijen and Douglas, “Conspiracy Theories as Part of History.”

explanation fits the second phase of the Japanese Capture Theory's popularity and its continued existence. Soon after 1987, the widespread usage of new technological developments revived the theory and bolstered its continued its existence, as did cultural institutions in Atchison, Kansas. The Internet Age had arrived and with it would come a digital revival of the Japanese Capture Theory.

CHAPTER THREE

On June 20, 1988, 350 people gathered in Amelia Earhart's birthplace, Atchison, Kansas to celebrate the 60th anniversary of the aviator's record-breaking flight across the Atlantic Ocean – she was the first woman in history to make the journey. The *Chicago Tribune* reported on the gathering, noting that it was sponsored by The Ninety Nines, a society of female aviators founded by Earhart herself. In attendance was Muriel Earhart Morrissey, Amelia's younger sister.¹ Morrissey spent decades trying to persuade the nation and the world to remember the missing aviator for her life, not just her disappearance. She was relatively successful and was far from the only one pushing for increased commemoration of Earhart's accomplishments. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, a growing number of historians, journalists, documentary filmmakers, and amateur researchers turned their attention to Earhart's life, politics, and achievements. Although interest in her disappearance did not fade entirely, it was largely overshadowed by other efforts to commemorate her life.

For a brief period, the Japanese Capture Theory fell victim to the “Earhart craze” of the 1990s, when interest in the aviator's life rose. Although numerous books were published and documentaries created on the theory during that time, they received far less press and attention than similar publications released in earlier decades. Also, for the first time, the Japanese Capture Theory was rivaled by a more cohesive, well-funded theory. In the late 1980s, the International Group for Historic Aircraft Recovery (TIGHAR) set their sights on Earhart's disappearance and theorized that she crash-landed near Gardner Island (then, Nikumaroro Island), where she perished. For the last thirty years, TIGHAR

¹ “Earhart's Flight Still Cause for Celebration.” *Chicago Tribune*. June 20, 1988.

and its founder Richard Gillespie have dominated the Earhart disappearance space. However, that does not mean that Japanese Capture theorists simply faded away once their rivals appeared on the scene. The Amelia Earhart Society of Researchers was founded at the same time of Gillespie's early research and made a concerted effort to spread theories about Earhart's disappearance. The Society's close connections with the Amelia Earhart Birthplace Museum in Atchison, Kansas and their success obtaining Congressional action regarding government records about Earhart play an important role in the Japanese Capture Theory's continued existence. Although AES largely disbanded in the early 2000s, the Japanese Capture Theory found a permanent home around the same time – the World Wide Web. By the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century, thousands of pieces of online content, including websites, videos, and podcasts, brought the theory to an entirely new audience. Then, in 2017, a *HISTORY* Channel Documentary – and the subsequent online coverage of it – revived the Japanese Capture Theory and expanded its online reach even further.

The Japanese Capture Theory still exists and did not disappear after its waning in the 1980s, for three reasons, and each has a corresponding section in this chapter. The organization of this chapter is more thematic than chronological, as section two spans the entirety of the era covered in this chapter – 1987 to 2017 – whereas chapter one covers the 1990s and chapter three covers the first two decades of the twenty-first century. Section one argues that the mystery shrouding Earhart's disappearance, and its unanswered questions, will continue to fuel theories like the Japanese Capture Theory unless a point in time arrives when Earhart is no longer remembered, or conclusive answers to her disappearance are found. This section primarily focuses on the emergence

and activity of the Amelia Earhart Society of Researchers (AES) in the early 1990s and the routine reappearance of the Japanese Capture Theory in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Section two shows how cultural institutions in Atchison, Kansas – most notably the Amelia Earhart Birthplace Museum and Amelia Earhart Festival – helped to spread the theory and keep it alive, even as its popularity waned. Section three argues that the advent of the Internet is a main cause of the theory’s continued existence. Together, these sections explain why the Japanese Capture Theory still exists, even though its heyday is long over.

I.

As long as Amelia Earhart’s disappearance goes unsolved, there will be researchers devoted to “solving it.” In the 1990s, most Japanese Capture theorists formed the Amelia Earhart Society of Researchers (AES), which aimed to “find the truth” about Earhart’s disappearance. Although the organization claimed not to herald any one theory as the “final solution” (their terminology) to Earhart’s disappearance, this was largely untrue. Most of the “research” published in the AES newsletters, which ran from 1989 to 2000, was supportive of the Japanese Capture Theory. The group considered themselves rivals of TIGHAR and Gillespie and refused to even consider any of his claims. Although their efforts were rarely covered by the press and greatly out shadowed by the Gillespie’s Gardner/Nikumaroro theory, the group is worth analyzing for three important reasons. First, members of AES were occasionally interviewed as “experts” on national televised Earhart documentaries and in the press. Second, their efforts to declassify government Earhart documents prompted Congressional action and moderate press coverage. Finally,

AES had close ties with the Amelia Earhart Birthplace Museum, which is, as of this writing, the only museum dedicated solely to Earhart.

A few familiar names show up in the Society newsletters. Joe Gervais, Joseph Klaas, and Rollin Reineck were all active members. Fred Goerner was not an active member of the organization, partially perhaps because of his previous rivalries with its most committed members, but largely because of his health - he suffered from cancer for years before passing away in 1994. Some of his research and letters, however, were printed in the newsletters and his publications were frequently referred to by its members. In the early years, the most active AES members were Bill Prymak, who founded the group and wrote most of the newsletters, Gervais, Reineck, and T. C. "Buddy" Brennan. Brennan was a retired Air Force veteran and real estate developer who published the book *Witness to the Execution: The Odyssey of Amelia Earhart* in 1988. Coverage of Brennan's research and book was limited and largely negative. In 1986, *The Washington Post* printed a column criticizing Brennan's familiar theory that Earhart was executed as a spy on Saipan. Historian Arthur Schlesinger Jr. and officials from the Franklin D. Roosevelt Library in Hyde Park, New York provided comment. Schlesinger dismissed the espionage theory, stating, "It's an old legend that a number of people have tried to find evidence for. I know no evidence connecting Roosevelt to Earhart in espionage."² Brennan was not dissuaded by the criticism, however. He continued his research until his passing in 1997.

The AES bylaws made a bold claim that guided the organization, "The preponderance of evidence overwhelmingly suggests that something covert did occur

² Hall, Carla. "Reviving the Earhart Mystery." *The Washington Post*. September 18, 1986.

prior to, during, and after the final flight.” The phrasing of that statement explicitly excluded more mundane theories about Earhart’s fate and led its members to mostly embrace different forms of the Japanese Capture Theory. AES hoped to discover the “final solution” (a frequently used and connotationally questionable phrase utilized by society members) to the Earhart mystery by disseminating quarterly newsletters with the latest “research,” encouraging members to assimilate research in one central location (AES), and scheduling frequent gatherings. In the bylaws, Prymak wrote that the organization “will avoid sensationalism and irresponsible reporting of frivolous theories.” The statement was likely a passive aggressive swipe at TIGHAR and Gillespie, whom many members of AES believed were attention-hungry, unserious researchers, a subject that will be discussed in depth later in this chapter.³ As we will see, however, AES did not shy away from seriously discussing theories that had already been dismissed by historians and Earhart’s family and friends. This includes the overlapping Irene Bolam and espionage theories.

The Amelia Earhart Society was launched in earnest following yet another “investigation” into the Marshall Islands. In 1989, Bill Prymak, Joe Gervais, and two others, John Prymak and Neal Skinner visited the islands and interviewed locals about Earhart’s possible presence there in 1937. The investigation struck a familiar tone – the team interviewed Marshall Island natives and their descendants who claimed to have seen or heard claims that Earhart crash landed in the area. One of the interviewees was Bilamon Amaron, who claimed to have seen an “American woman” and “thin American man” fitting Earhart and Noonan’s descriptions in 1937. Prymak’s analysis of Amaron’s

³ The Joseph Gervais Papers, “Amelia Earhart Society Bylaws,” Folder 1, Box 21, Series III, Special Collections Department, McDermott Library, The University of Texas at Dallas.

story is noteworthy. He wrote, “Critics and arm-chair research experts have patently tried to debunk and discredit each and every native eye-witness, crying they are wrought with embellishment and mendacity. But let me tell you that Mr. Amaron is one of the most respected, revered, and successful businessmen in the Marshall Islands.”⁴ This is a non sequitur Prymak would employ multiple times in the Society newsletters, including in an article entitled “The Credibility of Witnesses” in the May 1997 edition. In it, Prymak wrote, “To discredit these people, you’d have to brand them liars, embellishers, storytellers, fabricators, or worse.”⁵ Eyewitness testimony (which was briefly discussed in chapter 2) is historically unreliable, a fact acknowledged by both historians and law enforcement officials. Memory is complex and it is possible for anyone to misremember details unintentionally, especially decades after an event’s occurrence. Reasonable analysis or questioning of the memory of “eyewitnesses” like Amaron is not an attack on their character, as Prymak seemed to believe. It is simply an acknowledgment that the Earhart “eyewitnesses” are human, and therefore not gifted with perfect recall.

The mystery of Earhart’s disappearance was common fodder for television programs in the latter part of the twentieth century – the lack of concrete answers made for exciting television and engaged viewers. In 1990, *Unsolved Mysteries* hosted by Robert Stack premiered an episode about Amelia Earhart’s disappearance. Rollin Reineck, Tom Devine, Fred Goerner, Elgen Long, and Buddy Brennan were all interviewed about their theories.⁶ Long – the first aviator to fly around the world over

⁴ The Joseph Gervais Papers, “Amelia Earhart Society, 1991 Mar-Dec,” Folder 2, Box 21, Series III, Special Collections Department, McDermott Library, The University of Texas at Dallas.

⁵ The Joseph Gervais Papers, “Amelia Earhart Society, 1997 Jan-Nov,” Folder 8, Box 21, Series III, Special Collections Department, McDermott Library, The University of Texas at Dallas.

⁶ *Unsolved Mysteries*. “Episode #3.8.” NBC, November 7, 1990.

both poles – was the biggest proponent of the “crash and sink” theory which posited, as the name suggests, that Earhart and Noonan crashed into the Pacific Ocean in July 1937 and died at sea. Long was the “token” crash and sink theorist in the Amelia Earhart Society and was often greeted with skepticism by more active members like Prymak, Gervais, and Reineck. In the newsletter entry previewing the *Unsolved Mysteries* episode in 1990, Prymak wrote that the upcoming episode would feature Long, the “esteemed researcher on his special theory.” Prymak also pointed out that AES hoped to get a commercial spot during the episode’s premiere, but they could not afford the \$150,000 price tag.⁷ This is important to note as the financial limitations of the group likely lessened their impact, at least in comparison to TIGHAR, which was far more well-funded. In the first AES newsletter following the premiere of the *Unsolved Mysteries* episode on Earhart, Prymak wrote that the group was “disappointed” that much of their contributions were left on the cutting room floor. They believed that TIGHAR was too heavily featured and that the episode did not include anything about Reineck’s efforts to encourage the State Department to declassify any documents pertaining to Earhart.⁸ Despite this, however, *Unsolved Mysteries* did provide a platform for Japanese Capture theorists to make their claims, thus introducing or re-introducing it to the popular program’s audience.

AES devoted significant newsletter copy to the *Unsolved Mysteries* episode, both before and after it premiered. However, it was not the only television program from the late 1980s and early 1990s to feature theories about Earhart’s disappearance. In 1988, A&E produced an episode of *Secrets & Mysteries* called “The Disappearance of Amelia

⁷ The Joseph Gervais Papers, “Amelia Earhart Society Bylaws.”

⁸ The Joseph Gervais Papers, “Amelia Earhart Society, 1991 Mar-Dec.”

Earhart.” Host Edward Mulhare discussed the Japanese Capture Theory, stating that its proponents believe her to be “one of the first casualties of the Second World War.” Fred Goerner, Tom Devine, and Elgen Long were all interviewed and shared their respective theories.⁹ *Unsolved Mysteries* returned to Earhart’s story with another episode about her disappearance in 1992, but it primarily featured the efforts of Richard Gillespie and TIGHAR, rather than those of the Amelia Earhart Society.¹⁰ Also in 1992, an episode of *Untold Stories* took on Earhart’s disappearance and featured interviews with Richard Gillespie, Elgen Long, and Buddy Brennan, covering the entire range of theories about the aviator’s disappearance.¹¹ In the early 1990s additional television programs and films portrayed Earhart’s life, rather than her disappearance, and will be discussed at length later in this chapter.

Although they largely did not receive the national attention they sought, members of the Amelia Earhart Society continued to actively pursue research into the “final solution” to Earhart’s fate, thus helping to keep the theory alive. Despite its connotations, the phrase “final solution” was frequently used by multiple AES members when communicating what they hoped to accomplish. In the very first AES newsletter, Prymak wrote that “several serious expeditions to the Pacific” were being organized by members. Others stayed stateside and were “still banging on government doors in Washington, D.C., where they feel the final solution lies.” Some members traveled the country giving speeches to small groups about their Earhart theories. One of these members was Art

⁹ *Secrets & Mysteries*. “Amelia Earhart.” A&E, August 27, 1988.

¹⁰ *Unsolved Mysteries*. “Episode #4.26.” NBC, April 8, 1992.

¹¹ *Untold Stories*. “The Search for Amelia Earhart.” Produced by Bill Hillier. NBC, April 15, 1992.

Parchen, who gave speeches as a benefit to the Leukemia Society, in memory of his daughter who passed away from the disease in 1987.¹²

On September 11, 1991, Rollin Reineck and Joe Gervais hosted a press conference claiming to have “new evidence” and “proof” of Earhart’s fate. Despite the bold claim, the event was little covered by the media. Following the press conference, the Society sold copies on videotape for \$15 each.¹³ During the event, Reineck reported on his efforts to convince the State Department to declassify files pertaining to Earhart, a task he had not yet completed in September 1991. Gervais claimed to have received a photo of Amelia Earhart taken after her disappearance in July 1937 in an unsigned envelope postmarked in Saipan. The photo itself, however, which was printed in the AES newsletter following the press conference, includes no indication of when or where it was taken - Gervais’ assumption appears to have been based solely on the postmark on the envelope the photo arrived in. The “Saipan photograph” has never been authenticated.

Gervais and Reineck were two of the loudest, most active voices in AES during the 1990s. Like the pair, most AES members and contributors adhered to the Japanese Capture Theory, even if they disagreed on specifics. The only active contributor who disagreed was Elgen Long, who was largely alone in his belief in the “crash and sink” theory. Some members submitted critical columns to the newsletter, but disagreed not with the Japanese Capture Theory itself. Rather, they differed on details, or with one version of the theory. In December 1991, the AES newsletter printed a letter from Jerry Steigmann, who vociferously disagreed with the belief that Earhart was held prisoner on Saipan. He wrote, “The persistent claims, of the theorists that Amelia, was detained on

¹² The Joseph Gervais Papers, “Amelia Earhart Society, 1991 Mar-Dec.”

¹³ Ibid.

Saipan, for a period of 6.5 years, and then executed, defies all Japanese and Military protocol” (capitalization and punctuation errors his).¹⁴ Steigmann was the exception, not the rule. Most of the pages of the AES newsletter were filled with updates about Reineck, Gervais, and Prymak’s work, old newspaper articles linking Earhart’s disappearance to Japan, and member-submitted columns discussing personal research into the Japanese Capture Theory. Not a single article was ever printed in the pages of the Amelia Earhart Society newsletters defending the Gardner/Nikamuro Theory from Richard Gillespie and TIGHAR.

In chapter two, we saw how group polarization helped to intensify the spread of the Japanese Capture Theory during its heyday. In the 1990s, the same phenomenon also led AES members to not only reject TIGHAR’s theory, but to often embrace the most extreme, conspiratorial versions of the Japanese Capture Theory. Cass Sunstein refers to group polarization as “the fact that when like-minded people get together, they often end up thinking a more extreme version of what they thought before they started to talk to one another.”¹⁵ Bill Prymak did not shy away including any and every version of the Japanese Capture Theory in the newsletters. This could have been due to his antecedent belief in other conspiracies, particularly government conspiracies. In September 1991, he argued that the United State government covered up the circumstances of Earhart’s disappearance, “We only need refer to the latest revelations on the Kennedy Assassination to see the extent of the great deceptions foisted upon the unsuspecting public.”¹⁶ He followed up on the topic in March of the following year, encouraging AES

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Cass R. Sunstein. *On Rumors: How Falsehoods Spread, Why We Believe Them, And What Can Be Done*. Princeton, New Jersey: (Princeton University Press, 2014.) Kindle Edition, 6.

¹⁶ The Joseph Gervais Papers, “Amelia Earhart Society, 1991 Mar-Dec.”

members to watch Oliver Stone's JFK because it shows that government conspiracies "can happen."¹⁷

Gervais' brushes with conspiracy were discussed fully in chapter two, but not even a lawsuit from Irene Bolam could completely stop his musings on the more extreme versions of the Japanese Capture Theory. Prymak, however, rushed in to defend Gervais' research in a column in the newsletter in the fall of 1992, claiming that his colleague had never actually accused Bolam of being the missing aviator, "Joe has taken a lot of flak regarding his Irene Bolam experiences, but if you read carefully, nowhere is there a claim or statement that Irene is Amelia." The claim is true in only a literal sense – in *Amelia Earhart Lives*, Gervais and Klass never used the phrase "Irene Bolam is Amelia Earhart" or anything similar. Yet, the book in its entirety very clearly implies that exact statement, as did the numerous press conferences and interviews the authors gave during the time of its release and after. Why else would Irene Bolam sue the authors and publishers? Later in the same article, Prymak employed a common form of doublespeak utilized by the most avid AES researchers. He wrote that AES had largely "avoided" discussing the Bolam theory in the newsletter because it was "controversial." However, in the very next sentence, he wrote that "several very serious, intelligent and knowledgeable Earhart researchers are only recently turning up the horsepower on studies in this direction."¹⁸ In a single paragraph, Prymak cast the Bolam theory as far-fetched before claiming it was a worthwhile topic for "serious researchers."

¹⁷ The Joseph Gervais Papers, "Amelia Earhart Society, 1991 Mar-Dec," Folder 2, Box 21, Series III, Special Collections Department, McDermott Library, The University of Texas at Dallas.

¹⁸ The Joseph Gervais Papers, "Amelia Earhart Society, Mar-Sept 1992."

In *Amelia Earhart Lives*, Gervais and Klaas pulled the same stunt. Occasionally proponents of the Japanese Capture Theory claim that Earhart was forced to give radio broadcasts in Japan as Tokyo Rose, despite the fact that Earhart's husband, George Putnam, listened to Tokyo Rose broadcasts and stated that the voice sounded little like his missing wife. That did not stop Gervais and Klaas from speculating in their book, however. They wrote, "We found references to a white woman called Tokyo Rose. A Rose by the name of Earhart? A coincidence so obvious that it couldn't be anything by coincidence. Or could it?"¹⁹ Although the authors presented their theories as "just asking questions," the implication was clear. This style of argumentation was frequently utilized by the Society's most active members.

Although Gervais, Prymak, and others devoted significant time and energy to the Amelia Earhart Society, most members did not. This is not an uncommon group dynamic – a few highly active members do most of the work while many more just "stay along for the ride" out of interest and curiosity. This did not stop Prymak from bemoaning such a dynamic in AES's third newsletter, despite the relative infancy of the organization. He wrote a length article entitled, "Obituary time for the AES newsletter?" He complained, "The response has been terrible. The audience was conceived originally to consist of active AE researchers and historians, giving them a common pipeline to share new information. Instead, we have virtually all 'recreation readers,' people interested in AE but not willing to contribute anything towards the AE Newsletter or AE fellowship." He begged readers to send him letters responding to the claim and making the case for their membership. If he did not receive "enough responses," he threatened, "the Amelia Earhart Society will

¹⁹ Klaas, Joe and Joseph Gervais. *Amelia Earhart Lives: A Trip Through Intrigue to Find America's First Lady of Mystery*. (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1970), x.

shrink ranks and align itself with active researchers and historians only.”²⁰ Apparently Prymak did receive “enough responses,” because, with the exception of a letter from an AES member encouraging him to keep printing the newsletter in the issue following the initial threat, he never returned to the topic in writing.

Despite perpetual membership struggles, the Amelia Earhart Society did have a few successes to celebrate. Or, rather, near successes. In early 1993, Rollin Reineck finally convinced Senator Daniel K. Inouye of Hawaii – Reineck’s home state - to introduce legislation to declassify “any remaining information on the disappearance of Amelia Earhart.” The February 1993 AES newsletter included the full text of the bill, which was introduced in January of that year in the 103rd Congress. The Society triumphed the accomplishment, proclaiming “Finally, Paydirt for Colonel Reineck!!!” on the newsletter’s first page. It also included a copy of a letter from Senator Inouye to Reineck disclosing his plans to introduce the bill. Although the attempt received moderate press coverage (which will be discussed more at length later in this chapter), the bill did not go anywhere. Senator Inouye introduced Senate Bill 146 on January 21, 1993 and it was referred to the Committee on Governmental Affairs the same day. It died in committee.²¹

Despite Reineck’s failure to see Earhart’s files declassified, he and other active members of the Amelia Earhart Society continued to pursue efforts to find their “final solution” to the Earhart mystery. In the fall of 1993, AES held a successful symposium in San Jose, California. Around eighty AES members and curious researchers paid a \$35

²⁰ The Joseph Gervais Papers, “Amelia Earhart Society, Mar-Sept 1992.”

²¹ U.S. Congress, Senate, *A bill to require that all Government records that contain information bearing on the last flight and disappearance of Amelia Earhart be transmitted to the Library of Congress and made available to the public*, S. 146, 103rd Cong., 1st sess., introduced in Senate January 21, 1993, <https://library.bowdoin.edu/research/chicago-gov.pdf>

registration fee to attend the three-day gathering, where they shared their latest findings and research. Despite issuing an open invitation to all interested parties, the Society's biggest gathering of the early 1990s was shrouded in secrecy. While promoting the upcoming symposium in June of 1993, Prymak clarified that "NO PRESS or VIDEO CAMERAS will be allowed for certain portions of the SYMPOSIUM. There will be information on Earhart revealed that should not, and will not be taped." Although the September issue of the AES newsletter provided a thorough recap of the August symposium, it never revealed anything about this "information" they wanted kept away from the press.

Again, the list of symposium speakers included familiar names. Bill Prymak, Rollin Reineck, Joe Gervais, Joseph Klaas, Buddy Brennan, and Ann Pellegrino addressed the crowd. Pellegrino was an active member of AES and was later associated with the Amelia Earhart Birthplace Museum. She is most famous for completing a round-the-world flight in 1967 in a Lockheed 10-A, a plane similar to the one Earhart disappeared in during her round-the-world flight. Elgen Long also spoke to the symposium crowd about his latest research into the "crash and sink" theory. In a fall issue of the newsletter, Prymak couldn't help but add a backhanded compliment to his report on Long's research, writing "Mr. Long was heatedly contested on his position by several researchers, but, as is with AES policy, all sides are given time to plead their case."²²

A strange name appears on the list of symposium nametags printed in the Society Newsletter: Irene Bolam. She explained her presence in a December 1993 column entitled, "A Personal View of Irene Bolam." The Irene Bolam who attended the AES

²² The Joseph Gervais Papers, "Amelia Earhart Society, 1993 Feb-Dec," Folder 4, Box 21, Series III, Special Collections Department, McDermott Library, The University of Texas at Dallas.

event in August 1993 was actually the sister-in-law of the woman Joe Gervais long claimed was Amelia Earhart. Out of curiosity, she and her husband attended the symposium upon hearing rumors the about Irene Craigmile Bolam, who passed away in 1982. The younger Mrs. Bolam got straight to the point writing, “What do we think about the Irene Bolam/Amelia Earhart connection? After a most fascinating three days of the AES Symposium at the Flying Lady, our heads were swimming with the news information revealed.” By all accounts, Bolam appeared to believe the rumors about her late relative and added to the speculation. In the conclusion of her column, she wrote,

“In her final days, Irene was taken to an indigent hospital where they say she died. Her body was willed to Rutgers University Hospital with the stipulation that no fingerprints would be taken. The hospital later reported they had cremated her body and the ashes were buried in an unmarked grave. This sounds too much like a contrived ‘final solution’ to this intriguing story.”²³

Simply because of her name, the younger Bolam added to the “credibility” of Gervais’ theory and she remained an active member of AES throughout the 1990s.

The element that most defined the Amelia Earhart Society was not their members’ occasional conspiratorial musings, however. The most dominant characteristic of the AES newsletters and of its most active members, rather, was a profound distrust and hatred of TIGHAR and Richard Gillespie. Gillespie, TIGHAR’s founder, embarked on a series of well-funded, well-covered expeditions starting in 1989 to Gardner Island, which was known as Nikumaroro Island during the time of Earhart’s disappearance. Gillespie theorized that Earhart and Noonan had crash landed near Gardner/Nikumaroro, where

²³ The Joseph Gervais Papers, “Amelia Earhart Society, 1993 Feb-Dec.”

they were marooned and later perished. This theory was partially based upon unverified radio distress signals from Earhart heard by amateur radio operators in July 1937 and a series of items found on the island following Earhart's disappearance. These items included a woman's size 9 shoe (Earhart's size), an aircraft navigator's bookcase from the 1930s, a cigarette lighter (Noonan was a smoker) and a partial skeleton. The skeleton was found on Gardner/Nikumaroro by British colonial officer Gerald Gallagher in 1940 and he presumed at the time it could potentially be Earhart's. However, it was sent to Fiji, where Dr. D.W. Hoodless concluded the bones likely belonged to a male around five feet, five-and-a-half inches tall. Based upon this analysis, the partial skeleton could be neither Earhart nor Noonan. The findings were not publicized at the time and the bones were later lost. However, the additional artifact discoveries, radio transmissions, and more advanced skeletal analysis techniques led Gillespie to believe those original assumptions may have been false.²⁴

TIGHAR was a well-funded organization often covered favorably by the mainstream press during the late 1980s and beyond. The Amelia Earhart Society was neither of those things, which perhaps led to the latter's resentment for the former for over a decade. Nearly every edition of the newsletter included a column (or columns) attacking TIGHAR's theories and the press coverage they received. The first significant mention of the organization in the pages of the AES newsletter occurred in March of 1991 when Prymak printed a "letter to the editor" style submission from a member bemoaning "TIGHAR's recent splash in the TV and press."²⁵ In March of 1992, AES

²⁴ "The Earhart Project: Summary of Evidence," The International Group for Historic Aircraft Recovery, April 1991, Accessed May 26, 2020.

https://tighar.org/Publications/TTracks/1991Vol_7/SummaryofEvidence.pdf

²⁵ The Joseph Gervais Papers, "Amelia Earhart Society, 1991 Mar-Dec."

member Roy Stafford submitted a column criticizing TIGHAR's recent success, claiming that they "manipulated the media" into covering their work. In the following newsletter, Prymak ran with that accusation, writing a full article entitled "The Craving for Press Adulation." The column was printed on the first page of the newsletter. Prymak cast Gillespie and TIGHAR as unserious and attention-hungry writing, "It's sad that the serious Earhart research community has to take a back seat while Gillespie basks in the glow of world-wide press and public adulation."²⁶ The February 1994 AES newsletter included another column from Prymak in which he discussed the different group of people and researchers "chasing Amelia" and seeking to find an answer to the riddle of her fate. In it he wrote, "TIGHAR, regrettably, does not qualify, since the AES does not sanction the use of the name Amelia Earhart where personal profit, or the hunger for media adulation transcends our primary mission...the search for truth."²⁷ However, lengthy reports on the *Unsolved Mysteries* episode and other documentaries on Earhart shows that Prymak and other AES members *were* concerned about media coverage. Possibly, they resented TIGHAR and Gillespie for taking up more space in the press than AES ever did or could.

The Amelia Earhart Society waned in the late 1990s. This was in part due to their inability to achieve the same press and public attention as their predecessors of the 1960s and 1970s or of TIGHAR's in the late twentieth century. Since many of the organization's members joined as a post-retirement hobby, most of them were advanced in age and began to limit their involvement. Several key figures passed away around the turn of the twenty first century. Buddy Brennan, whose book *Witness to the Execution*

²⁶ The Joseph Gervais Papers, "Amelia Earhart Society, Mar-Sept 1992."

²⁷ The Joseph Gervais Papers, "Amelia Earhart Society, 1994 Feb-Nov."

helped to launch AES years earlier, passed in early 1997.²⁸ Joseph Gervais died in 2005, followed by Rollin Reineck in 2007. Reineck, however, continued his research up until his death and finally published a book on his extensive research in 2003. Bill Prymak survived longer than most of the other active members and died in 2014. By the time Joseph Klaas died in 2016, the Amelia Earhart Society was long defunct.

The shrinking number of researchers and AES's lack of traction with the press and public resulted in lighter, more redundant newsletters by the late 1990s. Most of the "articles" printed within the quarterly publication's pages were copies of old letters, newspaper articles, and research notes. There was little new content published. However, the Society's collective resentment for TIGHAR lived on and, at times, even intensified. Prymak wrote and printed a eighteen-page article attempting to "debunk" TIGHAR's findings and detailing Gillespie's four trips to Garnder/Nikumaroro in detail. In the front page quarterly updates in the November 1997 newsletter, the organization criticized Gillespie's research, which he saw as wasteful and questionable, "Col. Rollin Reineck again tangles with TIGHAR as Gillespie once more attempts to justify his past four trips to NIKUMARORO with yet another blitzkrieg of misinformation and massaged facts to collect enough money for still one more trek! The fourth was ballyhooed as 'positively the last...once and for all.'"²⁹ The March 1998 newsletter opened with a letter from an AES member *again* bashing Gillespie's operation, "You must understand that Mr. Gillespie's underlying theme and method of operation: THEATRE & OPM (other people's money; theatre somehow speaks for itself.)"³⁰ The animosity between AES and

²⁸ The Joseph Gervais Papers, "Amelia Earhart Society, 1997 Jan-Nov."

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ The Joseph Gervais Papers, "Amelia Earhart Society, 1998 Mar-Nov," Folder 9, Box 21, Series III, Special Collections Department, McDermott Library, The University of Texas at Dallas.

TIGHAR went both ways, however and mutual resentment between Earhart researchers was not uncommon then or now. In 1996, Gillespie's organization printed a list of books written about Earhart in their own newsletter. The document called Fred Goerner's *The Search for Amelia Earhart* "a conspiracy classic." Gervais and Klaas' *Amelia Earhart Lives* was listed as "best read as fiction." Vincent Loomis' *Amelia Earhart, The Final Story* was "contradictory" and Randall Brink's (an associate of AES) *Lost Star* was "the most disingenuous of the conspiracy books" and "thoroughly discredited."³¹

At the turn of the twenty first century, Bill Prymak returned to his "threat" to end the AES newsletter, but for a different, more benign reason. The rise of the Internet made sending hard copy newsletters to dozens of subscribers obsolete. In October 1999, he wrote, "There has been a tremendous groundswell emerging among the AES group that the onset of broader communications via the internet might reach people who they have previously not been able to reach and who could come forward with a fresh view or fresh evidence."³² The spring 2000 issue consisted largely of copies of emails received by AES from individuals interested in their research.³³ The March 2000 AES newsletter was the last printed. Later newspaper evidence, which will be discussed at length subsequently in this chapter, showed that the group continued to exist and likely communicated through email. Those records, however, are not accessible as the largely consist of personal emails received and sent by AES members who have since passed on.

³¹ "The Amelia Earhart Library and Film Festival." The International Group for Historic Aircraft Recovery. 1996. Accessed May 27, 2020. https://tighar.org/Publications/TTracks/1996Vol_12/festival.pdf

³² The Joseph Gervais Papers, "Amelia Earhart Society, 1999 Feb-Oct," Folder 10, Box 21, Series III, Special Collections Department, McDermott Library, The University of Texas at Dallas.

³³ The Joseph Gervais Papers, "Amelia Earhart Society, 2000 Mar," Folder 11, Box 21, Series III, Special Collections Department, McDermott Library, The University of Texas at Dallas.

Did the Amelia Earhart Society have any impact on the dissemination of the Japanese Capture Theory? Sort of. They were probably bolstered more in the continuous interest in the Earhart disappearance mystery, and its unsolved nature, rather than any one action they undertook. AES members and their allies published several books on the topic which received spotty press coverage. Their involvement with a handful of television documentaries and Reineck's congressional lobbying also helped to spread the theory to larger groups of people. However, all in all, the Japanese Capture Theory faded in the 1990s and early 2000s, despite the persistent efforts of the Amelia Earhart Society and others. In the late 1980s, an upsurge in public interest in Earhart's life, rather than her disappearance, shoved the Japanese Capture Theory on the back burner. In addition, the Gardner/Nikumaroro hypothesis was better funded than any effort to perpetuate AES's pet theory. Outside of the Japanese Capture Theory, it was the first coherent, yet still intriguing, theory about Earhart's disappearance to emerge since 1937. The Japanese Capture Theory did not die off completely, however. Oddly, the theory received occasional mentions in opinion columns, television shows, and scholarly publications, either as a foil to the Gardner/Nikumaroro theory or in another context entirely. The role of cultural institutions in Atchison, Kansas and the Internet in keeping the theory alive will be discussed later in this chapter.

One of the first books published by an AES member during the organization's lifespan was Buddy Brennan's 1988 book *Witness to the Execution*. As mentioned previously, Brennan was occasionally interviewed for television documentaries on Earhart's disappearance, which gave him a conduit through which he could spread his research. His theory was a familiar take on the Japanese Capture Theory – Brennan

believed that Earhart and Noonan crash landed in the Marshall Islands, were taken to Saipan, where they were executed. The press coverage of *Witness to the Execution* was sparse and often not positive. Outside of the previously mentioned *Washington Post* coverage, it only received a handful of mentions, mostly in small and medium sized newspapers. For example, the *Lincoln Journal Star* in Nebraska printed a review from columnist B. Rogers who asked and answered the question, “Last Word on Amelia Earhart? Probably not.”³⁴ That one article – and a few others published in similarly sized newspapers – was the extent of the coverage.

In the early 1990s, two additional books presented the Japanese Capture Theory from individuals not active with the Amelia Earhart Society. Henri Keyzer-Andre’s book, *Age of Heroes: Incredible Adventures of a PAN AM Pilot and his Greatest Triumph, Unraveling the Mystery of Amelia Earhart*, was often recommended in the pages of the AES newsletter. The subtitle was a bit of a misnomer, however. Only two chapters of his book focused on Earhart’s disappearance; the rest was personal memoir. Keyzer-Andre adopted a theory similar to Joe Gervais’ in *Amelia Earhart Lives*, believing that the Japanese “Zero” fighter plane was based upon a plane Earhart had flown and that the Japanese had stolen the plans upon her “capture” in 1937.³⁵

Randall Brink’s ties with the Amelia Earhart Society were deeper and his book *Lost Star: The Search for Amelia Earhart*, released in 1994, received significantly more attention than Keyzer-Andre’s work. Brink was close with Joe Gervais, and even stayed at his home for a time. His version of the Japanese Capture Theory, although based upon

³⁴ “Last Word on Amelia Earhart? Probably Not.” *Lincoln Journal Star*, August 21, 1988.

³⁵ Henri Keyzer-Andre and Hy Steirman. *Age of Heroes: Incredible Adventures of a PAN Am Pilot and his Greatest Triumph, Unraveling the Mystery of Amelia Earhart*. (Mamaroneck, New York: Hastings House, 1993), 235.

much of Gervais' early research, differed from his mentor's. Like Gervais, Brink believed that the American and Japanese governments "covered up" details behind Earhart's disappearance and suspected that she may have been a spy.³⁶ He relied heavily on Bilimon Amaron's claim that he saw, and helped treat, a "man and a woman who had been picked up on a reef near Mili Atoll."³⁷ Brink didn't provide a "final solution" to the Earhart mystery, but believed that she and Noonan were taken to Saipan, where they were held for a significant period of time as prisoners. He remained open to the possibility that Earhart could have been taken to Japan and perhaps had returned to the United States but did not center his theory around Irene Bolam or anyone else specifically.³⁸

Randall Brink sat down for an hour-long profile on *Eye on America* with Connie Chung in January 1994 to discuss *Lost Star* and his theories about Earhart's disappearance. The interview was cut short, however, because of more pressing news. The Amelia Earhart Society reported the preemption in the February 1994 newsletter, "The Connie Chung Eye on America seen January 20th was a bust...a full hour was scheduled for some terrific footage on Earhart, but the L.A. quake and Nancy Kerrigan's boo-boo took priority."³⁹ Despite that disappointment, *Lost Star* was covered by several major outlets. Brink's book garnered a review from Herbert Mitgang in the *New York Times* "Books of The Times" section on February 15, 1994, where Mitgang appeared to buy into Brink's "spy" theory. While he argued that Brink "sometimes" fell into "wild speculation," he still believed the book was "captivating" and its thesis "convincing."⁴⁰

³⁶ Randall Brink, *Lost Star: The Search for Amelia Earhart*, New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1994.

³⁷ Brink, *Lost Star*, 153.

³⁸ *Ibid.* 182.

³⁹ The Joseph Gervais Papers, "Amelia Earhart Society, 1994 Feb-Nov."

⁴⁰ Herbert Mitgang, "Amelia Earhart a Spy? Author Answers Yes," *New York Times*, February 15, 1994.

The *Chicago Tribune* reviewed Brink's book and it received scattered coverage in dozens of newspapers including the *Albuquerque Journal*, the *Montgomery Advertiser*, and the *Honolulu Star-Bulletin*.⁴¹ Margot Mifflin of *Entertainment Weekly* displayed interest in Brink's book, writing on February 18, 1994, "Nothing, however, will put a spin on the Earhart legend like Randall Brink's *Lost Star*, which unpacks convincing new evidence that Earhart took her last flight not as a civilian adventurer, but as a spy for the U.S. military, sent under orders from FDR to investigate Japanese military outposts in the Pacific."⁴²

Brink's *Lost Star* helped to spread the Japanese Capture Theory to new audiences in 1994 because of the fair amount of press coverage it received. Even so, the theory was largely overshadowed in the 1990s by a growing interest in Earhart herself – her life, her politics, and her accomplishments - rather than her disappearance. Associate Press special correspondent Jules Loh discussed the growing "Earhart hysteria" in a 1994 column published in dozens of newspapers nationwide.⁴³ She asked, "Why the sudden spurt of interest in Amelia Earhart? And in her contemporary, Charles Lindbergh? Some heroes, it seems, become a part of the national mythology and are not allowed to leave. In the case of the former, however, the question now has become not where is Amelia Earhart, but who?" Susan Ware, a social historian at NYU told Loh, "Everywhere I look, Amelia keeps popping up, and not just in books and on the tube. Here's a Gap ad, for heaven's sake, and there's Amelia looking terrific in Khaki pants." Loh focused mainly on contemporary biographies of Earhart, but devoted time to discuss the persistent interest in

⁴¹ See bibliography

⁴² Margot Mifflin. "Lost Star: The Search for Amelia Earhart," *Entertainment Weekly*, February 18, 1994.

⁴³ Jules Loh, "Earhart Revival: America Finds a Heroine in Amelia." *Lincoln Journal Star*, February 19, 1994.

her disappearance, a major reason why the Japanese Capture Theory still existed in the 1990s. Both books she identified as examples of recent publications on Earhart's disappearance were part of the Japanese Capture Theory canon – books from Randall Brink and Henri Keyzer-Andre. Historian Tom Crouch of the National Air and Space Museum provided comment, stating “Anytime you heard the name Amelia Earhart you thought only of her disappearance. The cult of the mystery caused everyone to lose sight of Amelia the person.”⁴⁴ That “cult of mystery” was strong, and a main driver behind the theory's continued existence. Yet, in the 1990s, scholars like Crouch and the public alike began to bring “Amelia the person” back to the forefront.

By the time Apple chose Earhart as one of the faces of their “Think Different” campaign in 1997, the aviator's story had already appeared numerous times on television, in film, and in the media. Starting in the late 1980s, a series of Earhart biographies were published which either criticized the Japanese Capture Theory or disregarded it entirely. The most notable Earhart biographies published during this time were Mary S. Lovell's *The Sound of Wings* (1989) and Doris Rich's *Amelia Earhart: A Biography* (1989). Rich's book was a straightforward biography about Earhart's accomplishments and feminism. *Publisher's Weekly* called it “fast-paced and richly detailed.”⁴⁵ The *New York Times* published a joint review of Rich's and Lovell's books, calling them both “vivid” depictions of Earhart's life and struggles with fame. Although the two-page review heralded the recently-published biographies, the Japanese Capture Theory – which neither writer supported – was referenced. In his review, David M. Kennedy wrote,

⁴⁴ See bibliography for additional citations for Loh's February 1994 article.

⁴⁵ “Amelia Earhart: A Biography,” *Publisher's Weekly*, November 1, 1989.

“Was her fatal flight really a spy mission to reconnoiter Japanese military installations in the Caroline Islands? Did she make it ashore in the Marshall Islands, only to die of dysentery or at the hands of the Japanese? Did a diabolically clever American Government spirit Earhart away to a new identity in New Jersey, after having faked the whole ‘emergency’ so as to conduct, under the guise of a search for her body, a vast reconnaissance of Japanese-held territories in the Pacific?”⁴⁶

The Japanese Capture Theory was largely dismissed by Rich, Lovell, and the book reviewers writing about the two biographies, but that did not mean it was not still a useful hook.

Mary S. Lovell took the Japanese Capture Theory to task in the appendix of her 1989 biography, *The Sound of Wings*. Her book was one of the first to provide a thorough, though not complete, history of the Japanese Capture Theory. Her discussion of the theory is brief, but grounded. She argued that *Flight for Freedom* likely inspired the “Earhart as spy theory” and that during the Second World War, “Rumors eddied and swirled...that Amelia had, either deliberately or accidentally, flown over Japanese-mandated territory, been forced to land, and had been taken prisoner.”⁴⁷ She mentioned Thomas E. Devine, Paul Briand, Fred Goerner, Joe Gervais, and Vincent Loomis as some of the primary purveyors of the theory. In the end, she concluded, “No *hard* evidence has ever been found or presented, in spite of countless thousands of research hours in American and Japanese military archives, and after millions of words have been written on the subject by scores of authors, to prove that Amelia and Noonan survived an

⁴⁶ David M. Kennedy. “She Was Betrayed by Fame,” *New York Times*, November 26, 1989.

⁴⁷ Mary S. Lovell. *The Sound of Wings*, (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1989.)

emergency landing in the ocean in the vicinity of Howland Island.” However, Lovell wrapped up the discussion with an assumption that soon proved to be premature. She wrote, “the theory that Amelia was a spy is now almost dead.”⁴⁸ It was not an unfair assumption at the time, but books like *Lost Star*, television shows like *Unsolved Mysteries*, and the work of the Amelia Earhart Society would help to keep the theory clinging to life until it was fully revitalized in the twenty first century. As long as Earhart was still missing, theories about her disappearance would remain.

Additional Earhart biographies were published in the early 1990s that are worthy of mention, many of which focused on Earhart’s feminism and fight for women’s rights. Susan Ware published *Still Missing: Amelia Earhart and the Search for Modern Feminism* in 1994, in which she argued that the public has an “ongoing fascination” with Earhart’s disappearance, leaving many aspects of her life understudied.⁴⁹ In 1997, Susan Butler published *East to the Dawn: The Life of Amelia Earhart*, another bestselling Earhart biography, which was similarly covered in the *New York Times* and other large outlets. Butler also did an interview on C-SPAN’s “Book TV” around the time of the book’s release.⁵⁰ Amelia Earhart’s life was the subject of the 1997 book *I Was Amelia Earhart*, a *Publisher’s Weekly* bestseller by Jane Mendelsohn.⁵¹ The book is a fictitious account of Earhart’s last flight and “crash landing” on a deserted island following her disappearance. Throughout the book, “Earhart” struggles to survive, falls in love with her co-marooned navigator Noonan, and reminisces about her childhood and early career.⁵²

⁴⁸ Lovell, *The Sound of Wings*, 360.

⁴⁹ Susan Ware, *Still Missing: Amelia Earhart and the Search for Modern Feminism*. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1994.)

⁵⁰ Susan Butler, “East to the Dawn: The Life of Amelia Earhart,” C-SPAN video, November 13, 1997. <https://www.c-span.org/video/?95192-1/susan-butler-east-dawn>

⁵¹ “Best Sellers,” *The Indianapolis Star*, May 26, 1996.

⁵² Jane Mendelsohn, *I Was Amelia Earhart*, (New York: Random House LLC, 1997.)

Although the book dabbled in speculation about Earhart's whereabouts, it did not engage the Japanese Capture Theory.

Although Earhart's disappearance was occasionally the subject of 1990s television fodder, so was her life. In 1993, PBS released an episode of *The American Experience* about Earhart. The episode was narrated by Kathy Bates and based upon Doris Rich's 1989 biography.⁵³ Dominick A. Pisano reviewed the documentary in *The Journal of American History* following its release. He wrote, "Until a few years ago, the public obsession with Amelia Earhart focused on the unresolved question of what happened to her on July 2, 1937, when she was reported missing over the Pacific Ocean." Like his journalist contemporary Jules Loh, Pisano argued that the documentary itself was one of many signs Earhart's life was finally coming to the forefront, "Despite the cranks and publicity seekers, there are encouraging signs that Earhart may have been more interesting in life than in death."⁵⁴ Earhart's life was also the subject of a 1994 TNT made-for-tv movie, *Amelia Earhart: The Final Flight*, starring Diane Keaton in the titular role. The film was a biographical overview of Earhart's life and final flight and did not dabble in speculation about her disappearance. Although the film received mixed reviews, Keaton received a *Golden Globe*, *Emmy*, and *Screen Actors Guild Award* nomination for her portrayal of Earhart.⁵⁵

Diane Keaton may have played Earhart in a movie, but aviator Diane Finch hoped to follow Earhart's path in reality. In 1997, Finch completed a trip around the world,

⁵³ "Amelia Earhart: The Price of Courage." Directed by Nancy Porter. Written by Nancy Porter. PBS, October 11, 1993

⁵⁴ Dominick A. Pisano, "Amelia Earhart." *The Journal of American History* 81, no. 3 (1994): 1405-1406. Accessed May 13, 2020. Doi: 10.2307/2081626

⁵⁵ *Amelia Earhart: The Final Flight*. Directed by Yves Simoneau. Avenue Pictures Productions, 1994.

following Earhart's original route. The attempt was covered widely around the country. Finch, a pilot from Texas, told the *Los Angeles Times*, "I believe Amelia set the records...to teach us that we too can do extraordinary things." Her trip was chronicled at worldflight.org, where spectators could keep up with each of her stops.⁵⁶ Earhart's hometown of Atchison, Kansas took notice, awarding Finch the inaugural "Amelia Earhart Pioneering Achievement Award" at the very first Amelia Earhart Festival in July 1997.⁵⁷

Although widescale Earhart celebrations in the 1990s overshadowed efforts by the Amelia Earhart Society and others to publicize the Japanese Capture Theory, the theory itself often appeared in a throwaway comment in the context of other publications discussing Earhart, or even out of context entirely. Recall Dominick Pisano's reference to the theory in his article in *The Journal of American History*. The *Los Angeles Times* piece on Finch's flight is also a good example. In it, the author briefly covered the various disappearance theories about Earhart writing, "Some Earhart disappearance theorists contend that Japanese military forces, suspecting her flight was a cover for a spy mission into an area where they were building secret bases, captured and executed her."⁵⁸ Although the article did not concern the Japanese Capture Theory or any rival theories about Earhart's disappearance, its mere mention helped to keep it alive.

Some references to the Japanese Capture Theory printed in the 1990s appeared in publications completely unrelated to Amelia Earhart. In his September 1992 syndicated

⁵⁶ "Pilot Sets Out to Finish What Earhart Started." *Los Angeles Times*, March 18, 1997.

⁵⁷ "First Pioneering Achievement Award Won." *The Iola Register*, July 3, 1997.

⁵⁸ "Pilot Sets Out to Finish What Earhart Started." *Los Angeles Times*.

column, William F. Buckley criticized Senator John Kerry's role on the United States Select Committee on POW/MIA Affairs writing,

“What the senator is engaged in is headline-hunting for which he has a guaranteed clique, namely the pathetic kinfolk of the MIAs, who welcome any revisitation of the drama involving their late brothers and husbands and sons. They greet any discussion of the question as a ray of hope, as breathlessly as so much of the world continued to welcome any flying saucer that suggested that Amelia Earhart might really still be alive on one of those little Pacific atolls.”⁵⁹

Publications about Saipan occasionally tossed out a reference to the theory that Earhart had once been held prisoner on the island. A 1988 *Los Angeles Times* article about Saipan's history included the sentence, “There are ruins of an old Japanese prison, where one legend has it that pioneer aviator Amelia Earhart was imprisoned after she disappeared in 1937 while attempting her round-the-world flight near the Equator.”⁶⁰ A 2006 article in the journal *The Contemporary Pacific* again about Saipan's history included a similar phrase, “The past was all around: The Sugar King Monument, the jail where Amelia Earhart was said to have languished and died.”⁶¹

Many of the media references to the Japanese Capture Theory betrayed an annoyance or disregarding of the theory. A 1989 *Chicago Tribune* article about air historian Roy Nesbit's attempts to prove that Earhart “simply ran out of gas” and crashed into the Pacific Ocean mentioned the theory. His version disregarded the Japanese

⁵⁹ William F. Buckley, “Headline-Hunting Senator Exploits Hopeful Survivors.” *Tampa Tribune*. September 26, 1992.

⁶⁰ “Saipan: Peaceful Beaches and War Memories.” *Los Angeles Times*, Margaret Shapiro, Washington Times. December 18, 1988

⁶¹ P. F. Kluge, “Saipan: From Then to Now,” *The Contemporary Pacific* 18, no. 1 (2006): 89-100. Accessed May 13, 2020. www.jstor.org/stable/23721901

Capture Theory, particularly the espionage angle, entirely, “But Nesbit argues that there is no evidence that Earhart had a camera aboard. Under any conditions, he says, she could not have reached Mili.”⁶² Mili Atoll was the small piece of land in the Marshall Islands where some theorists believed the aviator crashed before being taken to Saipan by the Japanese. A January 1991 article by Michael Woods in the *New York Daily News* about TIGHAR’s attempts to find Earhart’s plane included a dismissive remark about the Japanese Capture Theory. Woods wrote, “Others argued that she was on a spy mission for the government and was captured and imprisoned by the Japanese. Some Earhart enthusiasts have even claimed that her plane was scooped into the belly of a flying saucer.”⁶³

In April 1991, the *Chicago Tribune* published an article from Ronald E. Yates entitled “Earhart Expedition Seeks to End Myths,” which discussed TIGHAR’s attempt to destroy the Japanese Capture Theory once and for all. Yates wrote,

“The most persistent theory about her disappearance says she did not perish while ditching her plane at sea or after landing on a tiny Pacific atoll. It says she was forced down and captured by the Imperial Japanese Army while on a spy mission for President Franklin D. Roosevelt, imprisoned on the island of Saipan and executed as World War II neared its end.”

Hiroshi Nakajima, the Executive Director of the Pacific Society, an academic organization that specialized in the study of the Pacific Islands was quoted as saying, “Ridiculous...unthinkable. It never happened.” Richard Gillespie complained, “Until we can show the American public a photo of Amelia’s plane resting on the bottom of the

⁶² “Earhart Mystery May Have Run Out of Gas.” *Chicago Tribune*, R.C. Longworth, February 7, 1989

⁶³ Michael Woods. “A Clue in Earhart Mystery,” *New York Daily News*, January 4, 1991.

ocean off Gardner Island, the theory that the Japanese executed her on Saipan will remain.” He continued, “The Japanese story is romantic...people want somebody to blame...it’s always better to have a villain in a case like this.”⁶⁴ Gillespie’s argument is valid, and it points to a major reason the Japanese Capture Theory lived on after its heyday – its narrative very much is a “romantic” explanation to a long-existent mystery, which has spawned decades of theories, and will continue to so as long as Earhart remains unfound.

To the Amelia Earhart Society and their fellow Japanese Capture Theory researchers, Gillespie himself was a villain in their story. His “publicity hungry” organization TIGHAR, they believed, distracted from the “truth” about Earhart’s capture and possible execution at the hands of the Japanese. As alluded to earlier, much of this resentment may have stemmed from the amount of press coverage Gillespie’s expeditions received. It greatly overshadowed any attempts by AES researchers to achieve significant recognition for their work. Gillespie’s initial expedition to Gardner/Nikumaroro Island was widely covered by the American press in 1989 and received coverage from several medium and large outlets, including the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, the *Indianapolis Star*, the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, and the *Tampa Tribune*.⁶⁵

In 1991, Gillespie proclaimed to *Reuters* that the Earhart “mystery” had been solved after his team found artifacts on Gardner/Nikumaroro, including the size 9 shoe.⁶⁶ The *Boston Globe* declared that “Amelia Earhart’s Airplane Reportedly Found.”⁶⁷ Although they were unable to confirm a match to Earhart’s plane, Gillespie’s team found

⁶⁴ Ronald E. Yates, “Earhart Expedition Seeks to End Myths.” *Chicago Tribune*, April 7, 1991.

⁶⁵ See bibliography.

⁶⁶ “Sleuth Says He Solved Earhart Mystery.” *Miami Herald*, March 17, 1992

⁶⁷ “Amelia Earhart’s Airplane Reportedly Found.” *Boston Globe*, March 15, 1992

a piece of a fuselage they believed was evidence she had crash landed on the island. In response to their apparent successes, TIGHAR received a \$200,000 donation from an anonymous donor later in 1991, which helped to fund their expeditions and research.⁶⁸ There is no evidence to suggest the Amelia Earhart Society ever received near that amount of outside donations during their entire lifespan.

The media coverage of TIGHAR continued apace throughout the 1990s and beyond, with the *Los Angeles Times* often covering them favorably. In 1992, Paul Richter of the *Times* reported on a TIGHAR press conference announcing new artifacts that had been found on Gardner/Nikumaroro.⁶⁹ And in 1998, the *Times* reported on the front page, above the fold that a new analysis commissioned by TIGHAR of the Gardner/Nikumaroro bones concluded that the skeleton belonged to a white female around Earhart's height.⁷⁰ That bombshell discovery helped to cement the Gardner/Nikumaroro theory as one of the most popular Earhart disappearance theories, and one of the most plausible, during the 21st century.

Although I have shown the factors that kept the Japanese Capture Theory from being seriously considered in the media as it had been in the 1960s and 1970s, I would be remiss if I did not mention the little coverage the theory and the effort of the Amelia Earhart Society *did* receive. Television programs previously discussed, including *Unsolved Mysteries*, provided AES and the Japanese Theory with a platform, as did books like Randall Brink's *Lost Star*. Most of the additional press was largely regional. Outlets in Hawaii kept tabs on Rollin Reineck's research and communications with the

⁶⁸ Kip Coons, "Search Still on for Amelia Earhart." *Hawaii Tribune-Herald*, September 27, 1991.

⁶⁹ Paul Richter. "Earhart Evidence Offered: Metal Sole, Bottle Cap." *Los Angeles Times*, March 17, 1992.

⁷⁰ "Old Data Put New Twist on Earhart Tale." *Los Angeles Times*, Thomas H. Maugh II, December 2, 1998.

State Department and Congress. In June of 1991, the *Honolulu Advertiser* printed a lengthy article about Reineck's research entitled "Stalking the Elusive Lady." It summarized his theories and gave credence to them. The author of the article wrote, "There seems to be little doubt among serious scholars that Earhart and Noonan were captured by the Japanese."⁷¹ Outside of Hawaii, Reineck's work with Congress and Senator Daniel Inouye received some attention in the Gulf Coast. In 1993, the *Tampa Bay Times* reported on the introduction of Inouye's bill, which was partnered by companion legislation in the House introduced by Representative Patsy T. Mink, also of Hawaii. The article even mentioned the Amelia Earhart Society by name but clarified that Senator Inouye "had not endorsed Reineck's theory." He simply believed that "there is still much to be learned about her disappearance."⁷² Henri Keyzer-Andre's book *Age of Heroes* received similar regional coverage in the *Tampa Bay Times* and the *Orlando Sentinel*.⁷³ It could not, however, break the national media barrier.

In the mid to late 1990s, the Japanese Capture Theory received additional attention on television. In July 1998, *ABC News Saturday Night* premiered a special hosted by Robert Krulwich entitled "What Happened to Amelia Earhart?" The episode considered a range of theories about Earhart's disappearance, including the Japanese Capture Theory.⁷⁴ Also in 1998, *History Channel* broadcast an episode of *History's Mysteries* entitled "The Mystery of Amelia Earhart." Interview footage from Buddy Brennan, Rollin Reineck, Elgen Long, Joe Klaas, Richard Gillespie and Fred Goerner

⁷¹ "Stalking the Elusive Lady." *Honolulu Advertiser*, Richard Sale, June 17, 1991

⁷² "Researcher thinks Files Hold Amelia Earhart Secret." *Tampa Bay Times*, July 11, 1993

⁷³ See bibliography.

⁷⁴ *ABC News Saturday Night*. "What Happened to Amelia Earhart?" ABC, July 2, 1998.

was included, with each of them discussing their respective research.⁷⁵ Like previous television documentaries *In Search Of...* and *Unsolved Mysteries*, *History's Mysteries* reruns routinely appear on television as recently as 2020, perpetually bringing the Japanese Capture Theory to new audiences.

What is likely the most impactful television appearances of the Japanese Capture Theory appeared three years earlier than *History's Mysteries*, in 1995. As evidenced by the 1988 *Chicago Tribune* article on Roy Nesbit's "crash and sink" theory and William F. Buckley's off-handed comment in 1992, a new Earhart disappearance theory appeared in the late 1980s and 1990s. A handful of amateur sleuths and researchers – albeit a small group – suggested that Earhart had actually been abducted by aliens. Although this theory has never been given serious scrutiny or thought, it made a splash in a 1995 episode of *Star Trek: Voyager*. So did the Japanese Capture Theory, oddly enough.

In the episode, "The 37's," Captain Kathryn Janeway and crew stumbled upon four cryogenically frozen people abducted from Earth in 1937. Two of those individuals were Amelia Earhart and Fred Noonan, played by Sharon Lawrence and David Graf, respectively. Although the episode theorized that the two were taken from Earth by aliens during their final flight, the fictional context of that flight is worth noting. During a conversation with Captain Janeway, "Amelia Earhart" reveals the "real" nature of the 1937 journey. The dialogue is as follows:

Janeway: *"Over the years there was a lot of speculation about your flight, including the rumor that it was financed by the government and may have been part of an operation to gather information on the Japanese."*

⁷⁵ *History's Mysteries*. "The Mystery of Amelia Earhart." Directed by Robert Beemer. Written by Robert Beemer. *History Channel*, 1998.

Earhart, clearly startled: “Where did you hear that?”

Janeway: “It’s somewhat common knowledge. You see, Japan attacked Pearl Harbor in 1941, drawing the United States into a massive world war. In retrospect, your journey was seen in a different light – perhaps as part of an intelligence mission devised by a government deeply concerned about Japanese war plans.”

Earhart: “No one was supposed to know about that.”

Janeway: “Maybe not in 1937. Now, it’s part of history.”⁷⁶”

In 2012, psychologists Stephan Lewandowsky, Ullrich K. H. Ecker, Colleen M. Seifert, Norbert Schwarz, and John Cook collaborated on a study published in *Psychological Science and the Public Interest* about the influence of misinformation. In it, they argued that “even works of fiction can give rise to lasting misconceptions of the facts.”⁷⁷ The 1943 film *Flight for Freedom* created the “Earhart as spy” myth, which still exists today. While it is difficult to ascertain the exact impact of this *Star Trek: Voyager* episode on the continued existence of the Japanese Capture Myth, it is fair to assume that it introduced the theory to some viewers who had not yet heard it. Captain Janeway’s comment “Now, it’s part of history” is particularly noteworthy. While most viewers likely understood the “alien abduction” plotline to be complete fiction, the same cannot be said of that line. As the story goes, Earhart was spying on the Japanese during her final

⁷⁶ *Star Trek: Voyager*, “The 37’s.” Directed by James L. Conway. Written by Jeri Taylor and Brannon Braga. Paramount Domestic Television, August 28, 1995.

⁷⁷ Stephan Lewandowsky, Ullrich K. H. Ecker, Colleen M. Seifert, Norbert Schwarz, and John Cook. 2012. “Misinformation and Its Correction: Continued Influence and Successful Debiasing.” *Psychological Science in the Public Interest* 13 (3): 106-131. doi: 10.1177/1529100612451018.

flight, it is “part of history.” It is not, but *Star Trek: Voyager* may have influenced some in its audience of millions to believe it is.

During the first two decades of the 21st century, the Japanese Capture Theory continued to be featured in numerous books and television shows. As did TIGHAR’s work. The Gardner/Nikumaroro Hypothesis continued to maintain more press coverage and funding than any individual or organization pushing the Japanese Capture Theory. Yet, because the mystery remained, it continued to show up in the media. A *Los Angeles Times* article printed in January 1999 about the perpetual existence of theories about Earhart’s disappearance wrote, “More than 60 years after Amelia Earhart disappeared over the Pacific Ocean, there are more theories in circulation about what really happened to the legendary aviator than there are sightings of Elvis Presley.” The piece provided a broad overview of several versions of the Japanese Capture Theory, asking, “Was she captured by the Japanese? Did she secretly return to America? Was she Tokyo Rose? ... Or did she die of dysentery on Saipan?”⁷⁸ The *Times* continued its fascination with the theory several months later. In October, the paper printed an article from Steve Padilla on the first page entitled, “Mystery of Earhart Endures, Captivates.” In it, he discussed a series of theories about Earhart’s disappearance, including the most recent research from TIGHAR. Padilla wrote, “The mystery may never be solved, which is probably just as well. It would be a shame to rule out some disappearance theories, even the fanciful ones.”⁷⁹ He had a point – the perpetual uncertainty about Earhart’s fate helps to keep each theory alive for both serious researchers and entertainment seekers.

⁷⁸ “Amelia, Meet Elvis: Theories on Earhart’s Fate Abound.” *Los Angeles Times*, January 9, 1999

⁷⁹ Steve Padilla, “Mystery of Earhart Endures, Captivates.” *Los Angeles Times*, October 19, 1999.

Several Earhart disappearance theories, including the Japanese Capture Theory, did “continue to captivate” in books published after 2000. Elgen Long finally published *Amelia Earhart: The Mystery Solved* in 2000, which provided an overview of his “crash and sink” theory.⁸⁰ TIGHAR’s research appeared in a similarly titled book in 2001, *Amelia Earhart’s Shoes: Is the Mystery Solved?* The book was written by Thomas F. King, Randall S. Jacobson, Karen Ramey Burns, and Kenton Spading, who hold doctorate degrees in archaeology, geophysics, forensic anthropology, and engineering, respectively.⁸¹ Richard Gillespie followed with *Finding Amelia: The True Story of the Earhart Disappearance* in 2006.⁸² As previously mentioned, Rollin Reineck published his research in *Amelia Earhart Survived* in 2003.⁸³ The Japanese Capture Theory continued to show up in unexpected places as well. In a 2010 book *The Rise and Fall of the Japanese Imperial Navy Air Service*, author Peter J. Edward included an entire chapter about Earhart disappearance theories, focusing heavily on any that concerned Japan.⁸⁴

A series of television programs produced about Earhart’s disappearance in the twenty-first century revealed the ongoing interest in the mystery. A 2003 episode of the *History Channel* program “Vanishings!” discussed Earhart’s disappearance and the various theories surrounding it.⁸⁵ A series of documentaries about Earhart’s

⁸⁰ Elgen Long and Marie K. Long. *Amelia Earhart: The Mystery Solved*. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000.)

⁸¹ Thomas F. King, Randall S. Jacobson, Karen Ramey Burns, and Kenton Spading. *Amelia Earhart’s Shoes: Is the Mystery Solved?* (Lanham, MD: Altamira Press, 2001.)

⁸² Richard Gillespie, *Finding Amelia: The True Story of the Earhart Disappearance*. (Annapolis, MD: US Naval Institute Press, 2006.)

⁸³ Rollin C. Reineck, *Amelia Earhart Survived*, (Orange, CA: The Paragon Agency, 2003.)

⁸⁴ Peter J. Edwards. *The Rise and Fall of the Japanese Imperial Navy Air Service*, (Barnsley, UK: Pen and Sword Books, 2010.)

⁸⁵ *Vanishings!* “Amelia Earhart.” Directed by Nicholas Wright. Written by Nicholas Wright. *History Channel*, September 20, 2003.

disappearance premiered in 2009. In July, *History's Detectives* on PBS featured an episode that largely discussed the latest version of the “crash and sink” theory, but included brief mention of the Japanese Capture Theory.⁸⁶ In October, *National Geographic* asked the question “Where is Amelia Earhart?” The special considered the three most prominent theories – TIGHAR’s Gardner/Nikumaroro hypothesis, the “crash and sink” theory, and the Japanese Capture Theory. Rollin Reineck’s research was heavily featured during the segment on the third hypothesis.⁸⁷

By 2009, the Japanese Capture Theory was the subject of numerous podcasts, including the popular *Stuff You Missed in History Class* podcast, hosted by amateur history buffs Holly Frey and Tracy Wilson. The hosts discussed several versions of the theory, including both the Saipan and Irene Bolam angles. Neither advocated for the Japanese Capture Theory as the “truth” of Earhart’s disappearance. However, they did seem to fallaciously assume that Earhart disappeared during the Second World War, which may have confused listeners and led to credence for the Japanese Capture Theory. While discussing the “crash and sink theory,” the hosts argued that finding Earhart’s plane would have been difficult for the 1937 search team because “there would have been debris from other ships from World War II.”⁸⁸ This, of course, would have been impossible as the Second World War did not start until 1939 and the United States did not enter until 1941. The television shows, podcast, and documentaries mentioned above are just a selection of the appearances of the Japanese Capture Theory in media during

⁸⁶ *History's Detectives*. “Amelia Earhart Plane.” PBS, July 26, 2009.

⁸⁷ *History's Secrets* “Where’s Amelia Earhart?” *National Geographic*, October 13, 2009.

⁸⁸ Holly Frey and Tracy Wilson, “The Amelia Earhart Mystery.” *Stuff You Missed in History Class*, June 29, 2009, accessed June 2, 2020.

<https://open.spotify.com/episode/3Wv98bSHj3Qwzvz9y4cItr?si=nOcB9wNeSwuzthQVXDnkYw>

the first decade and a half of the twenty first century. Many of them found a permanent home on the internet alongside tens of thousands of websites proclaiming that Earhart died at the hands of the Japanese, which will be discussed in the third section of this chapter.

In the twenty-first century, the Japanese Capture Theory was far from dead, as Mary S. Lovell declared in 1989. However, the theory itself was still dwarfed by interest in Earhart herself. In 2009 alone, two popular films featured the aviator – *Amelia* starring Hillary Swank, a biopic largely about Earhart’s relationship with her husband George P. Putnam and her later aviation career. The film had star power but was a box office disappointment. It had a \$40 million budget but made less than \$20 million worldwide.⁸⁹ *Night at the Museum: Battle of the Smithsonian* fared better. In the popular sequel, Amy Adams played a “statue” of Earhart who “came alive” in the Smithsonian Institution at night and assumed all the real-life Earhart’s personality, quirks, and accomplishments. The film had a \$150 million budget and made over \$413 million worldwide.⁹⁰ Both films emphasized Earhart’s career and accomplishments for women and did not advocate any theory of her disappearance.

The efforts of the Amelia Earhart Society and countless appearances of the Japanese Capture Theory in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries reveal a perpetual fascination with the mystery of Earhart’s disappearance, despite the fact that the theory’s heyday has passed. That is the first reason the theory still exists – the aviator’s fate is unresolved, mysterious, and intriguing. Uncertainty naturally begets

⁸⁹ “Amelia.” Box Office Mojo. Accessed June 4, 2020.

<https://www.boxofficemojo.com/release/r11413711361/>

⁹⁰ “Night at the Museum: Battle of the Smithsonian.” Box Office Mojo. Accessed June 4, 2020.

<https://www.boxofficemojo.com/release/r12070382081/>

speculation and rumor and as long as that uncertainty exists, theories will exist that exploit it.

II.

The Japanese Capture Theory also still exists because cultural institutions in Atchison, Kansas both directly and indirectly helped to keep the story alive. The hundreds of thousands of guests who have attended the Amelia Earhart Festival or toured the Amelia Earhart Birthplace in the last thirty years – myself included – would have multiple opportunities to learn about the theory. During the 1990s, Earhart’s birthplace, Atchison, Kansas, became a central location for anyone wanting to learn more about or to celebrate the famed aviator. These institutions were also a conduit through which the Japanese Capture Theory spread, intentionally and unintentionally, and are a reason why the theory still exists. In 1984, the Ninety-Nines purchased Earhart’s childhood home at 223 N. Terrace in Atchison and shortly thereafter, a local, Dr. Eugene J. Bribach contributed \$100,000 to assist with maintaining the home.⁹¹ In 1987, *Women’s Day* magazine mentioned Atchison in an article entitled “Travel U.S.A., noting that Earhart’s “just off the beaten path” birthplace was a worthwhile travel destination for individuals interested in local or Earhart history.⁹² In 1989, Louise Foudray, the museum’s caretaker, reported to the local newspaper that museum visitors totaled between 800 and 1,200 in the weeks between Memorial Day and Labor Day.⁹³ That number would continue to rise. By the 1990s, the historic home and museum was a frequent destination for

⁹¹ “Home as a Birthplace.” Amelia Earhart Birthplace Museum. Accessed May 26, 2020.

⁹² Donna Bosse. “Atchison Mentioned in National Magazine.” *Atchison Daily Globe*, April 9, 1987.

⁹³ Roy Muetting, “Depot, Regular Hours Attract Tourists.” *Atchison Daily Globe*, September 20, 1989.

schoolchildren, local history buffs, day-trippers from the Kansas City metropolitan area, and visitors from around the country and the world.

Atchison began hosting annual celebrations in Earhart's honor by the late 1980s, and in earnest by the late 1990s. In 1987, the city hosted the first "Amelia Earhart Days" in July in honor of the 50th anniversary of the aviator's disappearance. The event was sponsored by the Atchison Chamber of Commerce and organizers hoped it would become a yearly event.⁹⁴ Although Atchison had been a central location for Earhart memorialization for decades – there are numerous roads, sports stadiums, and buildings named after the aviator, not to mention the statues and artwork littered around the city – it wasn't until 1997 that an annual celebration was cemented. In 1996, the Amelia Earhart Birthday Centennial Committee announced the very first "Amelia Earhart Festival," scheduled to take place the following year in honor of the 100th anniversary of the aviator's birth. Organizers presented it as "the culmination of 25 years of work to revive and capitalize on the city's storied past." This effort to increase the city's tourist revenue led to an unintentional spreading of the Japanese Capture Theory, which will be discussed further on in this section. Among the projects planned for the inaugural Earhart celebration included a restoration of the Amelia Earhart Birthplace Museum and the creation of a "one-acre earthwork depicting the likeness of the world famous aviatrix."⁹⁵ Both were completed and the earthwork has become a permanent fixture of the yearly festivities. The first Amelia Earhart Festival was featured on *CBS News Sunday Morning* on August 2, 1997, a fact that was proudly announced in local newspapers.⁹⁶ The Festival

⁹⁴ "Amelia Earhart Days Planned for July 24-26." *Atchison Daily Globe*, May 13, 1987.

⁹⁵ "Earhart Festivities Unveiled." *St. Joseph News Press*, July 3, 1996

⁹⁶ "Atchison to be featured on CBS news show." *St. Joseph News-Press*, August 2, 1997

and Atchison were both profiled in the *New York Times* shortly before the inaugural festival as well.⁹⁷

According to Karen Seaberg, who has chaired the Amelia Earhart Festival for over two decades, members of the Amelia Earhart Society attended the festivities religiously for the first several years of its existence. She described the festival as their “Mecca.” All the prominent Earhart theorists have attended the yearly celebration, and most attended every year. Mike Campbell, Elgen Long, Rollin Reineck, Joe Gervais, Bill Prymak, and others all made appearances at the festival. Many spoke at the festival’s annual “Breakfast with Books” event, which features authors who have written books related to Earhart or aviation. Since most biographies of Earhart life, rather than her disappearance, were not published until the late 1980s, most individuals who had written about the aviator in 1997 had published books about her disappearance. When I asked Seaberg about which Earhart theorists had visited and spoken at the festival, she responded, “We’ve had all of them.”⁹⁸ A July 2001 article in the *Atchison Daily Globe* highlights this, reporting on the annual “Breakfast with the Books” celebration. Although the Amelia Earhart Society was already shrinking by 2001, it was still in existence and a handful of its members were invited to speak on a panel at the event. Panelists included Art Parchen, Tod Swindell, Ronald Reuther, Pat Ward, and Lou Foudray, the caretaker of the Amelia Earhart Birthplace Museum and AES member. Reuther was one of the founding members of the Western Aerospace Museum and Swindell was a prominent advocate of the Irene Bolam theory. All panelists shared their respective theories. Of the Amelia Earhart Society, Parchen said, “AES is composed of some of the most open-

⁹⁷ Shirley Christian. “Amelia Earhart Lived Next Door.” *New York Times*, May 25, 1997.

⁹⁸ Karen Seaberg, Zoom conversation with author, June 4, 2020.

mindful people on the subject of Amelia's disappearance and some of the strongest theories."⁹⁹

Under Seaberg's tenure as festival chair, the event has increasingly focused on Earhart's life and accomplishments, rather than her disappearance. Many of the festival's speakers are female aviators or other women who have made important strides for women's rights, just like the festival's namesake. However, for the first few years of its existence, Japanese Capture Theorists were more prominent at the festival. If it were just a small, regional celebration, the impact of their attendance would be more limited. Yet, yearly attendance at the Amelia Earhart festival ranges from 20,000-50,000 (Atchison's population hovers around 10,000).¹⁰⁰ Visitors come from all around the nation – and all around the world – to join the celebration. This provided a larger audience for these theorists and likely helped to diffuse the Japanese Capture Theory far from the shores of the Missouri River.

In 2017, there was an attempt to revive the Amelia Earhart Society with a small celebration in Atchison during the yearly festival, but it was largely unsuccessful. By all accounts, AES is mostly gone, and so are its most active members. Elgen Long and Richard Gillespie have both outlived their rivals. The Festival's growing emphasis on Earhart's life and accomplishments mirrors similar trends beginning in the early 1990s. However, the newest generation of Japanese Capture Theorists still make the yearly pilgrimage to the small Kansas town. And the rivalries still exist. During events like "Breakfast for Books," the rival theorists are civil, but choose to sit apart and rarely

⁹⁹ Trent Nelson, "Amelia Theories Aired During Breakfast with Books." *Atchison Daily Globe*, July 23, 2001.

¹⁰⁰ Karen Seaberg, June 4, 2020.

engage with one another.¹⁰¹ In 2005, Mike Campbell visited the Festival and distributed a document called “The Atchison Report,” which he called “an extensive debunking of the notorious and false Amelia Earhart-as-Irene Bolam theory.”¹⁰² But the Irene Bolam theory does still have its defenders. Tod Swindell, who runs the website irene-amelia.com, is a frequent guest in Atchison, Kansas.¹⁰³ He came to know Randall Brink and Joe Gervais in the mid-1990s, which helped to spark his interest in Earhart’s disappearance. Rollin Reineck’s 2003 book relied partially on a “forensic” examination of photos of Earhart and Irene Bolam. The “examination” was conducted by Swindell, who has a degree in Cinema Arts from the University of Arizona, and no expertise in forensics.¹⁰⁴ However, like Campbell, Swindell frequently visits Atchison, where he is able to further spread his version of the Japanese Capture Theory.

The Amelia Earhart Birthplace Museum, a popular destination for guests both during the Festival and throughout the year, is perhaps a far more effective spreader of the Japanese Capture Theory. The museum has welcomed guests through its doors for largely self-guided tours for around thirty years. The home was built in 1861 and was home to Earhart’s grandparents Judge Alfred Otis and Amelia Harres Otis. Amelia herself was born in a small bedroom in the residence on July 24, 1897. After it was purchased by The Ninety-Nines in 1984, the home was redesigned as a museum. It contains artifacts from the aviator’s life on prominent display as well as recreations of furniture, décor, and other material that belonged in the home during Earhart’s childhood.

¹⁰¹ Karen Seaberg, June 4, 2020.

¹⁰² “About Mike Campbell, Contact.” Amelia Earhart: The Truth at Last

¹⁰³ Karen Seaberg, June 4, 2020.

¹⁰⁴ “This Section: About Tod Swindell and his Epic Amelia Earhart Journey.” Amelia Earhart – “Too Cool To Be Forgotten.” Accessed June 5, 2020. http://www.irene-amelia.com/about_tod_swindell_and_amelia_earhart_id102.html

The museum's dedication statement – issued in July 1997 to mark the 100th anniversary of Earhart's birth – is as follows:

“We, the Ninety-Nines, Inc. and the citizens of Atchison, Kansas dedicate the Amelia Earhart Birthplace to this generation and future generations as a museum. We will continue to restore and preserve the home to the period when Amelia lived here, and to portray her life and those of other women aviators through educational interpretive exhibits, activities, and events.”¹⁰⁵

The Birthplace's original caretaker, Louise Foudray, was an active member of the Amelia Earhart Society. In fact, she was the “glue” that kept the group together, according to Karen Seaberg. Every year during the Amelia Earhart Festival, Foudray called Society members and invited them to Atchison. She even hosted them all for dinner annually.¹⁰⁶ However, the Society had maintained a relationship with Atchison from its inception, before the Festival's first year. In the inaugural AES newsletter, Bill Prymak encouraged members to contact the Atchison County Historical Society if they wanted to help ensure that the city would “become a permanent home for the majority of Amelia Earhart's memorabilia.”¹⁰⁷ The first mention of Louise (Lou) Foudray was printed in the July 1994 newsletter in an article about AES's attendance at a ceremony in The International Forest of Friendship in Atchison. The Forest of Friendship is “a living, growing memorial to the world of aviation and aerospace.” The Ninety-Nines were involved from the organization's inception in 1976 and it was created in Atchison because of its status as Earhart's birthplace. Each tree in the forest honors individuals

¹⁰⁵ “Home as a Birthplace.” Amelia Earhart Birthplace Museum. Accessed June 3, 2020. <https://www.ameliaearhartmuseum.org/>

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ The Joseph Gervais Papers, “Amelia Earhart Society Bylaws.”

who have contributed to aviation and/or aerospace. Honorees include Earhart, Charles Lindbergh, the Wright Brothers, Sally Ride, and Chuck Yeager.¹⁰⁸ In 1994, the Forest of Friendship unveiled a plaque recognizing the Amelia Earhart Society and their work. Members who attended the ceremony included Joe Gervais, Pat Ward, Ann Pellegrino, Art Parchen, and, of course, Lou Foudray.¹⁰⁹

The Ninety-Nines do not endorse any one theory of Earhart's disappearance. Foudray at times claimed the same, but often discussed the Japanese Capture Theory at the museum and in different contexts, therefore helping to spread it. In 2000, she attended the Amelia Earhart Society Symposium in Las Vegas. Among those in attendance included Bill Prymak, Joe Gervais, Ann Pellegrino, Joseph Klaas, and Irene Bolam (the younger). At the event, Foudray announced the brand-new website for the Amelia Earhart Birthplace Museum and relayed a story she had heard during her work at the museum, that "Earhart and Noonan lived in the desert in the U.S. under witness protection until Fred died. Amelia moved somewhere else and died in 1982, the same year Irene Bolam died."¹¹⁰ And Foudray did not only discuss the Japanese Capture Theory with her co-researchers. In 2001, the *Bismarck Tribune* printed a story discussing common theories about Earhart's disappearance, "Believers in the Japanese theory include the director of the Amelia Earhart Birthplace Museum in Atchison and a pilot who retraced Earhart's around-the-world flight for the 30th anniversary in 1967."¹¹¹ The article was reprinted in a few newspapers including the *St. Cloud Times* and the *Fort Collin Coloradoan*. Those to

¹⁰⁸ "International Forest of Friendship: About Us," International Forest of Friendship, 2019. Accessed May 30, 2020. <https://ifof.org/about-us>

¹⁰⁹ The Joseph Gervais Papers, "Amelia Earhart Society, 1994 Feb-Nov."

¹¹⁰ The Joseph Gervais Papers, "Amelia Earhart Society, 2000 Mar."

¹¹¹ "Earhart Mystery Fuels Three Theories." *Bismarck Tribune*, August 26, 2001.

“believers” are Lou Foudray and Ann Pellegrino. Their respective careers and accomplishments helped to add “credibility” to the theory. In 2006, Lou Foudray told the *Des Moines Register* in an article about the upcoming Amelia Earhart Festival, “Many believe Earhart was captured and executed by the Japanese. Others believe she was captured by the Japanese and used as a bargaining tool at the end of World War II and returned to the United States. Some believe she spied for Japan. Still others say U.S. forces rescued her from a Japanese island.”¹¹² In the twenty-first century, Foudray and Pellegrino continued their involvement with the Birthplace Museum, a time in which the Japanese Capture Theory found even more solid footing in Atchison.

As of this writing, materials about Earhart’s career and post-Atchison life are interspersed throughout the Birthplace almost randomly with items from her childhood. For example, the sitting room situated at the immediate left of the home’s entrance features photos of Earhart and her sister Muriel as children, photos of Muriel as an adult, and copies of letters sent from a servicemember on the *U.S.S. Colorado*, one of the ships that aided in the Earhart search in 1937. There are also movie posters scattered throughout the home of films featuring the aviator, including *Amelia*, the 2009 feature film starring Hillary Swank and Richard Gere. The Birthplace Museum has featured several Japanese Capture theorists and their books within its walls. In the gift shop, two of the only books available for purchase (the others are mostly children’s books) are by David K. Bowman. According to Birthplace staff, he has also spoken at the museum in the past. Bowman is a Vietnam War veteran, having served in the U.S. Naval Reserve. According to the biography printed in both his 2015 and 2018 books, he is a member of

¹¹² “Missing in Action.” *The Des Moines Register*, May 14, 2006

the Amelia Earhart Society as well. The Society was still largely defunct upon the publication of Bowman's books, but a few, loosely connected researchers still claim membership.

Bowman's first book, *A Search for Amelia Earhart in Modern Saipan* (2015), is a short account of his trip to Saipan in February of the same year. There is extraordinarily little text and most of the book consists of photos of his trip. There is scant narrative in the book and limited explanation of what his "search" for Earhart entailed. He does mention in the introduction, however, that he came across Fred Goerner's *The Search for Amelia Earhart* in college, which inspired him to research Goerner's belief that Earhart had ended up on Saipan.¹¹³ Although the book is clearly meant to imply that Earhart was imprisoned on Saipan, Bowman provided very little explanation of his thesis. Underneath a photo of a command post on Saipan, Bowman writes, "There is at least one eyewitness story which had Amelia Earhart being executed just before or at the start of the 1944 invasion of Saipan. Whether it's true or not is problematic. That's because there are multiple witness accounts. But it is reasonably certain Earhart ended up on Saipan."¹¹⁴ He never elaborated upon that contradictory statement. Bowman's 2018 book *Secret Saipan: A Search for Amelia Earhart in Modern Saipan and Secret Saipan* is nearly identical to its predecessor but included a few extra photos and biographical information about Earhart.¹¹⁵ Although both books proclaim to have been printed by "Vega Books" (a publication company without a website or address), their construction suggests they may be self-published. Text in the cover art bleeds so significantly that the

¹¹³ David K. Bowman. *Saipan: A Search for Amelia Earhart in Modern Saipan*. (Vega Books, 2015.)

¹¹⁴ Bowman, *Saipan: A Search for Amelia Earhart in Modern Saipan*, 16.

¹¹⁵ David K. Bowman. *Secret Saipan: A Search for Amelia Earhart in Modern Saipan and Secret Saipan*. (Vega Books, 2018.)

title is difficult to decipher, and the actual pages appear to have been printed on standard “printer paper.”

Like most museums, the Amelia Earhart Birthplace Museum offers a selection of pamphlets to guests for free. Most of them feature other cultural institutions in Atchison, Kansas, or short biographical information on Earhart. One of the offerings, however, is a large map constructed by William H. Stewart, a “Saipan Military Historical Cartographer.” The pamphlet features a map of Earhart’s last flight, with familiar places like Saipan, Truk Lagoon, and Howland Island clearly marked. It is constructed to show how Earhart could have crashed over Japanese mandated territory. In the explanatory text, Stewart writes, “The possibility cannot be ignored that Earhart flew off course, strayed into air space over the Japanese Mandated Islands, ran out of fuel and was picked up by the Japanese and taken to Saipan.” The map was published by the Amelia Earhart Birthplace Museum.¹¹⁶

Although the Ninety-Nines proclaim not to take a position on Earhart’s disappearance, a journey through the Birthplace Museum might lead guests to assume the Japanese Capture Theory is either the only or the most credible theory of her disappearance. The museum does not sell any books on the “crash and sink” theory or TIGHAR’s Gardner/Nikumaroro theory. There are no posters, no letters, no photographs broadcasting either one. As of this writing, the bookshelf in the research room includes at least two books prominently featured on the Japanese Capture Theory. Mike Campbell’s *The Truth at Last*, which will be discussed in section three, is one. The other, oddly, is David K. Bowman’s *Legerdemain*, a 2007 work which “brings together all the significant

¹¹⁶ William H. Stewart. “The Mystery of Amelia Earhart.” Atchison, Kansas: Economic Service Counsel, 1994.

facts regarding the disappearance of Amelia Earhart in one volume.” In it, Bowman devoted space to “the psychic abilities of Amelia Earhart.”¹¹⁷

It is understandable that visitors to the Amelia Earhart Festival and Amelia Earhart Birthplace Museum remain fascinated by the aviator’s disappearance. As discussed in chapter one, speculation, which fuels the Japanese Capture Theory, will naturally continue so long as the mystery remains unsolved. Yet, the cultural institutions in Atchison played an additional role in the theory’s continued existence. Festival and museum guests have multiple opportunities to interact with Japanese Capture theorists, are recommended books that espouse the theory, and continuously bombarded with it in a myriad of ways.

III.

The third reason the Japanese Capture Theory still exists long after its heyday is technological. The rise of the Internet in the late 1990s provided a new medium through which the theory can spread and has introduced an entirely new generation to it. In his book investigating the myth that William Shakespeare did not write his own works, James Shapiro noticed a similar trend. He found that the democratization of the internet – positive for countless reasons – is an effective spreader of myth. He writes, “In this new battleground for hearts and minds, academic authority no longer counted for much; the new information age was fundamentally democratic.”¹¹⁸ Anyone with internet access and an idea has the potential to connect with millions of users online, regardless if whether or not their thoughts are factually correct or grounded in research. Gatekeepers are mostly

¹¹⁷ David K. Bowman. *Legerdemain*. Vega Books, 2007.

¹¹⁸ James Shapiro, *Contested Will: Who Wrote Shakespeare*. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2010), 2016.

obsolete. What matters on the Internet is what is popular and theories about Earhart's disappearance retain a nearly timeless popularity.

Additionally, older appearances of the Japanese Capture Theory have been revived on the Internet. In 1990, a viewer would have to watch *Unsolved Mysteries* live, during a re-run, or on a recorded VHS tape. Now, it's on YouTube and Amazon Prime.¹¹⁹ The 1976 *In Search Of...* episode about Earhart's disappearance is also available on YouTube.¹²⁰ The same is true of nearly every television show, documentary, and film produced about Earhart's disappearance in the last half century. A Google search for "What happened to Amelia Earhart" returns about 7.5 million results. The "answers" to that query are mixed. Many of the news articles on the first page of results discuss Richard Gillespie's most recent research and a 2017 documentary, *Amelia Earhart: The Lost Evidence*, on History Channel, which prompted the resurgence of the Japanese Capture Theory after its premiere and will be discussed at length later. Several of ten most popular search results mention the Japanese Capture Theory as well. Articles on *History*, *Time*, *Encyclopedia Britannica*, and *Popular Mechanics* all discuss the hypothesis.¹²¹ The internet remains a favored destination for serious Earhart researchers and casually interested individuals alike.

One of the most significant Earhart researchers of the 21st century is Mike Campbell, whose success has been largely fueled by his activity online. His website boasts the URL "Earhart Truth" and commonly appears in Google search results about

¹¹⁹ FilmRise. "Unsolved Mysteries with Robert Stack – Season 3, Episode 8 – Full Episode." YouTube Video, May 7, 2019 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=24tVE9S7kro>

¹²⁰ LionHeart FilmWorks. "'Amelia Earhart' – In Search Of – Classic 1977 Spy Mystery Episode." YouTube Video, November 21, 2019. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YCDfPo8PUyk>

¹²¹ See bibliography.

Earhart's disappearance. Campbell is a Navy Veteran who began corresponding with Thomas E. Devine in 1988. Their years-long communications resulted in the publication of a co-written book, *With Our Own Eyes: Eyewitnesses to the Final Days of Amelia Earhart*, in 2002.¹²² In 2012, Campbell published *Amelia Earhart: The Truth at Last*, and a second edition of the book was released in 2016. Both detail Campbell's now-familiar theory that Earhart and Noonan crash landed on Mili Atoll, were captured by the Japanese, and taken to Saipan, where they perished.¹²³ According to his website, Campbell considers Devine, Fred Goerner, Paul Briand Jr., Vincent V. Loomis, and Bill Prymak as his ideological forebearers and both of his books pull heavily from their early research. Campbell distains the Gervais/Klaas Irene Bolam theory completely and vehemently.¹²⁴ Campbell's *Truth at Last* is one of the most detailed, comprehensive books published on the Japanese Capture Theory. It is available on Kindle and he frequently republishes sections of it on his website, which is even more extensive than the book and has been updated on a near-daily basis for over a decade with detailed blog posts on his latest research.¹²⁵

Campbell's theory takes a far more explicit right-wing, anti-government narrative than his predecessors. In *Truth at Last*, he writes, "The widely accepted myth that the Earhart disappearance remains among the 20th century's greatest aviation mysteries is an abject lie, the result of eight decades of propaganda from a government determined to

¹²² Mike Campbell with Thomas E. Devine, *With Our Own Eyes: Eyewitnesses to the Final Days of Amelia Earhart*. (Athens, OH: Lucky Press LLC., 2002.)

¹²³ Mike Campbell. *Amelia Earhart: The Truth at Last*. (Mechanicsburg, PA: Sunbury Press, 2012.)

¹²⁴ Mike Campbell. "About Mike Campbell, Contact." *Amelia Earhart: The Truth at Last*. Accessed May 30, 2020.

¹²⁵ Campbell, Mike. *Amelia Earhart: The Truth at Last*. Accessed June 1, 2020.
<https://earharttruth.wordpress.com/>

keep this open secret out of the public eye.”¹²⁶ The final chapter of the book, “The Establishments’ Contempt for the Truth” posits that the “establishment” and this nation’s powerbrokers are covering up the “truth” about Earhart’s capture at the hands of the Japanese, which is the “only reason” it is not more widely known.¹²⁷ *Someone* is trying to prevent it from being revealed. That “someone” ranges from the federal government, to the military, to the mainstream media. In his “Earhart Disappearance Position Statement” on his website, Campbell reaffirms the theory presented in *Truth at Last* – that Earhart and Noonan had been held captive on Saipan, where they died. He writes,

“Because of its universal acceptance by the gullible, incurious masses, the false phraseology ‘Earhart mystery’ defines and dominates all public dialogue about the Earhart case, while the fact of Amelia’s wretched demise at the hands of the prewar Japanese on Saipan is ignored or labeled ‘conspiracy theory,’ advanced only by the fringe conspiracy lunatics of society. Among our media – even our so-called conservative media – few stories are as hated and demonized as the truth about Amelia Earhart and Fred Noonan’s untimely deaths on Saipan.”¹²⁸

Campbell also appears to believe that former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton is “in on” the coverup. He has repeatedly trumpeted an online review from a “reader” named David Martin entitled “Hillary Clinton and the Amelia Earhart Cover-Up.” The review, published in 2012, argues that Clinton’s praise of Richard Gillespie’s work was an intentional effort to distract from the “truth” of Earhart’s disappearance, which was

¹²⁶ Campbell, *The Truth at Last*, 122.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.* 7477.

¹²⁸ Mike Campbell “Earhart Disappearance Position Statement,” *Amelia Earhart: The Truth at Last*. Accessed June 1, 2020. <https://earharttruth.wordpress.com/position-statement/>

originally “covered-up” by the State Department, rather than a genuine interest in TIGHAR’s findings.¹²⁹

Mike Campbell could easily be dismissed as another internet Earhart conspiracist (and there are plenty of them) if it were not for his extensive online readership and his real-world relationship with the Amelia Earhart Birthplace Museum and Atchison, Kansas. He gives occasional addresses in both Jacksonville, Florida (where he retired in 2008) and throughout Kansas, including in Atchison. In 2014, he gave a presentation on *Truth at Last* in Wichita, Kansas to The Ninety-Nines, the organization that celebrates female pilots and currently owns the Amelia Earhart Birthplace Museum.¹³⁰ He has also spoken on more than one occasion at the Birthplace itself during the Amelia Earhart Festival. During a recent visit to the Birthplace Museum, the docent on duty told me all about Campbell’s theories and the “government coverup.” She then pointed me to the research room in a small breezeway in the Victorian home, which offers reading and archival material about Earhart for scholars and amateur researchers alike. There are a selection of primary sources and books available to peruse in the room, including Bowman’s books. In the very middle of the shelf, most prominently featured, is *Truth at Last* by Mike Campbell. It was recently featured by the museum’s Facebook page as one of several books to they would recommend reading during the COVID-19 pandemic.¹³¹

¹²⁹ Mike Campbell “David Martin Calls Out Media Earhart Propagandists.” Amelia Earhart: The Truth at Last. Accessed June 1, 2020. <https://earharttruth.wordpress.com/2018/03/23/david-martin-calls-out-media-earhart-propagandists/>

¹³⁰ Mike Campbell. “99s Welcome ‘The Truth at Last’ to Wichita.” Amelia Earhart: The Truth at Last. Accessed June 1, 2020. <https://earharttruth.wordpress.com/2014/10/04/ninety-nines-welcome-the-truth-at-last-to-wichita/>

¹³¹ Amelia Earhart Birthplace Museum. “Stuck at home and need an escape? Sit by the window and read.” Facebook, March 18, 2020. <https://www.facebook.com/ameliaearhartbirthplacemuseum/photos/a.933757276648416/3105186716172117/?type=3&theater>

The most dramatic example of the Japanese Capture Theory's survival on the Internet occurred in 2017, when it experienced a revival. In July, the *HISTORY* channel broadcast a documentary called *Amelia Earhart: The Lost Evidence*, which, as the title suggests, proclaimed to reveal "lost evidence" that would "solve" the Earhart mystery once and for all. The television special's "smoking gun" was a picture that had been found in the national archives by retired federal agent Les Kinney. *HISTORY* proclaimed in a report on their website, "the photo also shows a Japanese ship towing a barge with an airplane on the back, which evidence may be Earhart's Electra." The National Archives did not include a date on the photograph, but *The Lost Evidence* proclaimed that it was possibly taken after 1937 and pointed to two grainy figures who could have been Earhart and Noonan. It was marked "Marshall Islands, Jaluit Atoll, Jaluit Island, Jaluit Harbor." *HISTORY* and the team behind the documentary believed this photo – in addition to the "evidence" presented by previous Japanese Capture theorists – to "prove" that Earhart and Noonan crashed in the Marshall Islands and were taken prisoner by the Japanese, possibly on Saipan.¹³² The special was widely publicized by *HISTORY* on its website in the days and weeks leading up to the broadcast.

Amelia Earhart: The Lost Evidence was massively successful and helped to revive the Japanese Capture Theory for an entirely new generation. Many young people – myself included – were not even alive when the theory was at the height of its popularity. According to the Nielsen Company, the special drew the "biggest audience on cable for

¹³² Sarah Pruitt. "Does this Photo Show Amelia Earhart After Her Plane Disappeared?" *History.com*, Published July 5, 2017. Updated August 29, 2018. Accessed June 4, 2020. <https://www.history.com/news/does-this-photo-show-amelia-earhart-after-her-plane-disappeared>

the week” and boasted 4.3 million viewers.¹³³ This does not include the (unknown) number of people who watched it online following its premiere. In the days before and after its July 9, 2017 broadcast, the special was covered online and in print by nearly every major television and newspaper outlet. *MSNBC*, *USA Today*, *Time*, *The Hollywood Reporter*, *Vanity Fair*, *Today*, *Entertainment Weekly*, *CNN*, *The Los Angeles Times*, and *Variety* all ran coverage on the special and the “lost evidence” it claimed to reveal.¹³⁴ It even received a significant mention in a *New York Times* profile on Atchison, Kansas’ yearly Earhart celebrations.¹³⁵ Newspapers around the country also printed stories about *The Lost Evidence*. *The Baltimore Sun*, *The Orlando Sentinel*, *The Philadelphia Enquirer*, *The Indianapolis Star*, and *The Sacramento Bee*, just to name a few, all covered the documentary.¹³⁶ Each of the regional stories were available online and in print.

HISTORY did not celebrate the documentary’s success for long – *Amelia Earhart: The Lost Evidence* was available for a mere 48 hours before it was essentially debunked. After the special’s premiere, two bloggers, Matt Holly and Kota Yamano, separately found the “bombshell” photo that the special declared was likely of Earhart and Noonan in a Japanese coffee-table book from 1935. The book has been digitized and is available online. Both Earhart and Noonan were in the United States in 1935, and therefore could

¹³³ *The Associated Press, THR Staff*, “History Channel Investigating Disputed Evidence in Amelia Earhart Documentary.” *The Hollywood Reporter*, July 12, 2017. <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/history-channel-investigating-key-evidence-amelia-earhart-documentary-new-claim-1020401>

¹³⁴ See bibliography.

¹³⁵ Mitch Smith. “In Amelia Earhart’s Hometown, Mystique Has Its Benefits.” *New York Times*, July 18, 2017.

¹³⁶ See bibliography.

not have been in the photo.¹³⁷ That piece of evidence was the linchpin of the documentary and without it, the entire thing fell apart.

HISTORY pulled the documentary and never showed it again on the network. It is also no longer available to stream online. An article published on their website in response to the criticism, “Exploring the Lost Evidence,” provided a half-hearted defense of the documentary:

“After the first airing of ‘Amelia Earhart: The Lost Evidence,’ questions began to surface about the date of the dock photo. Since then *HISTORY*’s researchers have been working to translate and analyze the new information, including a rare string-bound book that appears to contain the same photo. Ultimately historical accuracy is what is most important. We’ll continue to follow the evidence in an effort to get to the truth.”

The rest of the article listed possible “corroborating” evidence to salvage the documentary. These included photos of commemorative stamps issued in the Marshall Islands in 1987 in honor of the supposed 50th anniversary of Earhart and Noonan’s crash-landing near Mili Atoll. *HISTORY* claims that one of the stamps includes “the same Japanese ship that appears in the recently discovered dock photo of Amelia Earhart and Fred Noonan.”¹³⁸ No additional information was provided and as of this writing, the article is still available. The promised follow-up was never provided and anyone who

¹³⁷ Wakatsuki, Yoko and Ben Westcott. “Amelia Earhart Mystery: Photo Appears Taken 2 Years Before Pilot Vanished.” *CNN*, July 13, 2017. <https://www.cnn.com/2017/07/12/asia/amelia-earhart-photo-japan/index.html>

¹³⁸ “Exploring the Lost Evidence.” *HISTORY*, Accessed June 5, 2020. <https://www.history.com/specials/amelia-earhart-the-lost-evidence/pages/exploring-the-lost-evidence>

accessed the article now or in the future would not be aware that the special had been debunked without further research.

Unfortunately, the damage was already done. While most of the online outlets that originally printed stories on the special either printed a follow-up or correction, it is unlikely every person introduced to the Japanese Capture Theory sought them out, or even believed them, considering *HISTORY*'s wishy-washy response to the controversy. Most print newspapers did not print any follow-up or correction at all. This is somewhat understandable as it was not their mistake – it was *HISTORY*'s. Countless tweets and Facebook posts about the special and its proclamations are still online, and sometimes appear in Google search results. Furthermore, the television coverage of the special – and most notably of the photograph - is still available on YouTube, uncorrected. A clip from *TODAY* about the special has, as of this writing, received over 527,000 views.¹³⁹ The *Fox News* segment currently sits at over 108,000 views.¹⁴⁰ A clip from CNN entitled “Does photo show Amelia Earhart survived?” has received over 21,000 views.¹⁴¹ These are only a handful of the dozens of clips currently available on YouTube. These numbers only identify the number of viewers who have watched those specific clips since the special premiered. They do not include the people who watched the coverage in real time.

According to their Facebook page, the Amelia Earhart Birthplace Museum completed a brand-new exhibit in their research room on July 10, 2017 – the day after *Amelia Earhart: The Lost Evidence* premiered. The bulletin board display features a

¹³⁹ TODAY. “Amelia Earhart Mystery May Have New Clue in Never-Before-See Photo.” Youtube Video, July 5, 2017. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OaYpDopOSTE>

¹⁴⁰ Fox News. “Amelia Earhart Found?” YouTube Video, March 12, 2018. Accessed June 5, 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=04bmowQIkQ4>

¹⁴¹ CNN. “Does this photo show Amelia Earhart Survived?” YouTube video, July 5, 2017. Accessed June 5, 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1EST0r4iRis>

blown-up copy of the supposed Earhart/Noonan photo featured by the documentary. Supplementary text describes the details of the photo and explains why believers suspect the missing aviator and her navigator are in it.¹⁴² The original post included #amelialives, which connects it to similar posts utilizing the same hashtag. As of this writing, the exhibit is still on display and no supplementary information has been added to clarify the questions about the photo's origins. Therefore, visitors who observe the exhibit could be left with the false impression that the photograph and documentary provided a credible answer to the mystery of Earhart's disappearance.

A month after the controversy over *Amelia Earhart: The Lost Evidence* erupted, the massively popular online program *Buzzfeed: Unsolved* took on the mystery of Amelia Earhart's disappearance. The hosts discussed a range of theories, including the "crash and sink" theory, the Gardner/Nikumaroro theory, the alien abduction theory (which they traced to *Star Trek: Voyager*), and two different versions of the Japanese Capture Theory. One version was the "Earhart as spy" theory, which they credited to Rollin Reineck. They presented the Marshall Islands theory, quoting Thomas E. Devine's work. The hosts Ryan Bergara and Shane Madej also discussed the *Lost Evidence* photograph and its debunking. Neither Bergara nor Madej seemed to find any version of the Japanese Capture Theory credible, but the episode again introduced it to a new audience. As of this writing, the episode has received nearly 10.5 million views on YouTube.¹⁴³ The show was previously available on Hulu and is currently available for Amazon Prime customers.

¹⁴² Amelia Earhart Birthplace Museum. "We are putting the finishing touches on the new display at the Museum!" Facebook, July, 2017.

<https://www.facebook.com/ameliaearhartbirthplacemuseum/posts/1596915666999237>

¹⁴³ BuzzFeed Multiplayer. "The Odd Vanishing of Amelia Earhart." YouTube video, August 25, 2017. Accessed June 5, 2020. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y_v0aEgzO0

Streaming companies are notoriously tight-lipped about viewership numbers, so it is difficult to ascertain how many people watched the episode on those two platforms. However, considering the immense YouTube viewership, the numbers may be in the millions.

Like previous publications and documentaries featuring the Japanese Capture Theory, *Amelia Earhart: The Lost Evidence* preceded “new eyewitness claims” about Earhart’s fate. This time, however, they circulated rapidly online. In November 2017, *USA Today* reported a familiar tale from William “Bill” Sablan, whose claimed his uncle Tun Akin Tuho worked at a prison on Saipan in 1937 where Earhart and Noonan were held prisoner. According to Sablan, his uncle disclosed to him in 1971 (long after the Saipan theory became popular) that he had seen “an American woman and man taken to a Saipan prison in the mid-1930s by ship.” *USA Today* reported that the tale “fit” the theory presented by *Amelia Earhart: The Lost Evidence* but did not address the controversy surrounding the special until the second half of the article.¹⁴⁴

Newsweek picked up the story on the same day, reporting, “Amelia Earhart Mystery: Lost Pilot Spent Days in Prison Before Being Killed in Saipan, Says New Evidence.”¹⁴⁵ *DailyMail* ran an article on Sablan’s tale, also proclaiming that “Amelia Earhart ‘was executed by the Japanese.’” In an effort to “corroborate” the claim, they referred to comments given by the woman whose “eyewitness” story helped to create the Saipan theory - Josephine Blanco Akiyama. In July 2017, the 92-year-old former resident

¹⁴⁴ Jerick Sablan. “Amelia Earhart and Fred Noonan were Prisoners on Saipan and Killed, According to Uncle’s Tale.” *USA Today*, November 25, 2017. Accessed June 5, 2020.

<https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation-now/2017/11/25/amelia-earhart-and-and-fred-noonan-were-prisoners-saipan-and-killed-according-uncles-tale/894412001/>

¹⁴⁵ Summer Meza. “Amelia Earhart Mystery: Lost Pilot Spent Days In Prison Before Being Killed in Saipan, Says New Evidence.” *Newsweek*, November 25, 2017. Accessed June 5, 2020.

<https://www.newsweek.com/amelia-earhart-disappear-theory-saipan-722338>

of Saipan gave an interview to *NBC's Today*, retelling the same story about the “male and woman flyer” she’d repeated for decades.¹⁴⁶ Other large outlets, including *The New York Daily News* and *AOL*, also printed articles on Sablan’s “new evidence.”¹⁴⁷ The “evidence” was actually second-hand and no different from previous “eyewitness” statements, but to a twenty-first century online audience unfamiliar with the early days of the Japanese Capture Theory, the tale appeared groundbreaking.

Mark Twain famously said, “a lie can travel around the world and back again while the truth is lacing up its boots.” The same is true of Internet misinformation. When it comes to the Japanese Capture Theory’s apparent permanence on the Internet, corrections are still having a hard time catching up. Despite the coverage of *Amelia Earhart: The Lost Evidence’s* debunking, there’s reason to believe most people who saw the original story have yet to be corrected. A 2014 study from Chartbeat found that 55% of people who view an article or webpage online spent fewer than 15 seconds actively on a page. The same study discovered that “there is no relationship whatsoever between the amount a piece of content is shared and the amount of attention an average reader will give that content.”¹⁴⁸ This means that most people who saw stories about Earhart’s supposed capture in 2017 likely only saw headlines on Facebook or Twitter and did not engage with the actual articles, many of which included a clarification about the photograph after it was debunked. Headlines like “Did Amelia Earhart survive a crash landing?” (*MSNBC*), “Does this photo show Amelia Earhart after her plane disappeared?”

¹⁴⁶ James Wilkinson, Emily Crane, and Richard Shears. “Amelia Earhart ‘was executed by the Japanese’: New ‘witness’ account claims aviation pioneer was held in Saipan before being killed – and the US military collected her body and covered it up.” *DailyMail*, November 25, 2017. Accessed June 5, 2020. <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-5117527/America-hid-Amelia-Earharts-execution-Japanese.html>

¹⁴⁷ See bibliography.

¹⁴⁸ Tony Haile. “What You Think You Know About the Web is Wrong.” *Time*, March 9, 2014. Accessed June 5, 2020. <https://time.com/12933/what-you-think-you-know-about-the-web-is-wrong/>

(*HISTORY*), “Amelia Earhart Mystery: Lost Pilot Spent Days in Prison Before Being Killed in Saipan, Says New Evidence” (*DailyMail*), and “Amelia Earhart and Fred Noonan were Prisoners on Saipan and Killed, According to Uncle’s Tale,” (*USA Today*) were the only thing most people sa. And more than half of the few who did click to find out more information spent less than fifteen seconds on the page itself.

That is one of the many reasons the Japanese Capture Theory has resurged on the Internet. The 2017 frenzy over the now-debunked photograph and documentary could be deemed what psychologist Nicholas DiFonzo calls a “digital wildfire.” “Digital wildfires” spread “uncontrollable” and often “destructive” information throughout the Internet.¹⁴⁹ Many start as rumors, such as the rumor that Amelia Earhart was captured and potentially executed by the Japanese. In fact, “digital wildfires” are similar to the “print wildfires” that spread the same theory in newspapers during the first two phases of the Japanese Capture Theory’s existence.

However, the Internet is unique in its ability to serve as a rumor conduit and rapidly spread misinformation. The previously mentioned study in *Psychological Science in the Public Interest* on internet misinformation suggests that the world wide web has “revolutionized the availability of information.”¹⁵⁰ Readers no longer have to purchase print newspapers, magazines, or books to access information. To use the cliched phrase, almost anything an internet user wants to know is “at their fingertips.” In 1966, readers interested in Fred Goerner’s Earhart theory would have to locate a newspaper with an

¹⁴⁹ Nicholas DiFonzo. “Rumor Research Can Douse Digital Wildfires.” *Nature* 493 (7431): 135. Doi:10.1038/493135a

¹⁵⁰ Stephan Lewandowsky, Ullrich K. H. Ecker, Colleen M. Seifert, Norbert Schwarz, and John Cook. “Misinformation and Its Correction: Continued Influence and Successful Debiasing,” 110.

article printed about it, purchase his book, or borrow the book from a library. Now, simply Googling his name will instantly provide a thorough background on his theory.

Misinformation spreads just as quickly, if not more so, than verified, credible information on the Internet. This is because the Internet “obviates the use of conventional ‘gate-keeping’ mechanisms, such as professional editors.”¹⁵¹ Anyone with an idea and Wi-Fi can present themselves as a credible “Amelia Earhart Researcher.” Neither Google nor YouTube search results are ordered based upon the veracity of each result. The internet runs on popularity. Therefore, a successful documentary like *Amelia Earhart: The Lost Evidence* and its successive online press coverage can sit at the top of search results, despite the misinformation communicated in the special. Although most scholarly, peer reviewed research on Earhart does not discuss disappearance theories, the ones that mention them briefly are typically not open access. Mike Campbell’s website, for example, is.

“Fake news” is typically more engaging than verified information. A 2019 study in *Research and Politics* found that in the time around the 2016 election “fake news stories received about two-thirds as many Facebook engagements as the 38 major news sites in our sample. Even after the post-election decline, Facebook engagements with fake news sites still average roughly 60 million per month.” The study concluded that the “absolute level of interaction with misinformation remains high and that Facebook continues to play a particularly important role in its diffusion.”¹⁵² A study from the Media Insight Project found that 62% of Americans get their news from social media. The rates

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

¹⁵² Allcott Hunt, Matthew Gentzkow and Chuan Yu. “Trends in the diffusion of misinformation on social media.” *Research and Politics* 6 (2): 103-108. April 2019. doi: [10.1080/17404622.2019.1625938](https://doi.org/10.1080/17404622.2019.1625938)

among Millennials are even more dramatic. The study discovered that 88% of that generation get their news from Facebook, 83% from YouTube, 50% from Instagram, 36% from Pinterest, 33% from Twitter, 23% from Reddit, and 21% from Tumblr.¹⁵³ As the *Research and Politics* study suggests, most of that social-media derived “news” is not news, but engaging misinformation or “fake news.” What is more “engaging” than a rumor that Amelia Earhart was captured by the Japanese? The internet – and more specifically, social media – helped to spread misinformation about Earhart’s disappearance in 2017, just as it has for the last two decades.

What happens when a story is corrected – as was the case with *Amelia Earhart: The Lost Evidence*? The *Psychological Science in the Public Interest* study found that “retractions fail to eliminate the influence of misinformation.”¹⁵⁴ If a correction is presented, it often appears in a “temporarily disjointed format.”¹⁵⁵ For example, many of the outlets that published stories about *Amelia Earhart: The Lost Evidence* posted a follow-up article about the bloggers’ findings, but the error and the correction were largely separate. Journalists are unable to follow up with every single person who reads a piece to direct them to a correction. And consider how many people saw the story through a Tweet or Facebook post. Based upon the incentive structure of social media – users are incentivized to publish engaging content and often exempt from accountability – those posts were never corrected or clarified and many posters probably never realized

¹⁵³ Deborah A. Eckberg, James Densley, and Katrinna Dexter. 2018. “When Legend Becomes Fact, Tweet the Legend: Information and Misinformation in the Age of Social Media.” *Journal of Behavioral & Social Sciences* 5 (3): 148-156.

<http://search.ebscohost.com.ezproxy.umsl.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=132625691&site=ehost-live&scope=site>

¹⁵⁴ Stephan Lewandowsky, Ullrich K. H. Ecker, Colleen M. Seifert, Norbert Schwarz, and John Cook. “Misinformation and Its Correction: Continued Influence and Successful Debiasing,” 112.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid. 114.

the information was incorrect. Furthermore, fake news is often “amplified” in the public area. Later corrections can become “lost in the shuffle of competing information, limited attention, or both. In part, this obscuring is because there is no single source that can send a correction or for a mistake.”¹⁵⁶ *HISTORY* pulled their documentary and some outlets printed updated articles about the debunked photo, but it was too late. There is no “single source” accountable for the Japanese Capture Theory, a rumor that crystallized into myth. Often, once information is posted on the internet, it is permanent, allowing for subsequent generations to be reintroduced to the Japanese Capture Theory repeatedly.

CHAPTER 3 CONCLUSION

Reports of the death of the Japanese Capture Theory have been greatly exaggerated. It appeared to be on the decline in the 1990s, but that was mere hibernation. It was challenged by new competition from researchers like Elgen Long and Richard Gillespie. And an uptick in interest in Earhart herself – her life, her politics, and her advancements for women – has also overshadowed the previously-dominant disappearance theories. The Japanese Capture Theory has waned since its height in the 1940s and 1960s but it still exists, partially because of a natural fascination with unsolved mysteries, which prompts speculation and conjecture. Atchison, Kansas has also proved to be a helpful agent in diffusing the theory. Finally, the Internet has revived the Japanese Capture Theory and given it a permanent home. As long as Earhart’s disappearance is unsolved, speculation will continue and find a home on new corners of the world wide web.

¹⁵⁶ Deborah A. Eckberg, James Densley, and Katrinna Dexter.. “When Legend Becomes Fact, Tweet the Legend: Information and Misinformation in the Age of Social Media,” 152.

CONCLUSION

Amelia Earhart was declared legally deceased three years before the Japanese Capture Theory emerged. The theory began not as a genuine hypothesis about her disappearance, but rather, was the product of wartime rumors and world events that occurred long after stories about the missing aviator faded from the American press. Fears of Japanese military expansion, anti-Japanese sentiment, and wartime propaganda sparked the rumors that provided the foundation for the Japanese Capture Theory. Nearly two decades after the conclusion of the Second World War, a group of amateur researchers and war veterans helped to perpetuate the theory by launching a series of “investigations” into Earhart’s disappearance and publishing books on their “findings.” Researchers like Fred Goerner, the author of the 1966 book *The Search for Amelia Earhart*, posited that the missing aviator and her navigator had been captured and held by Japanese forces on the island of Saipan, where they either perished of disease or were executed. Others like Joe Gervais also believed that Earhart had been held captive by the Japanese but survived the war and lived under the assumed name “Irene Bolam” for the remainder of her life. The rivalries between these two schools and the subsequent media coverage of their research kept the Japanese Capture Theory alive for decades. The theory found fertile ground during its heyday of the 1960s and 1970s because of two cultural forces – Cold War era paranoia, which spawned countless conspiracy theories, and a growing distrust in government. Together, they were the reason the theory reemerged long after the Second World War ended.

By the mid-1980s, the popularity of the Japanese Capture Theory began to fade. Within a decade, it was dwarfed by a competing theory from Richard Gillespie of

TIGHAR and an increased popular interest in Earhart's life, rather than her disappearance. While a group of Japanese Capture theorists aimed to reboot the theory through the infrastructure of the Amelia Earhart Society of Researchers in the 1990s, it was actually the advent of the Internet that helped the theory's resurgence. A 2017 *HISTORY* channel documentary, and its subsequent media coverage, increased the diffusion even more. As of this writing, the Japanese Capture Theory is alive and well on thousands of websites. Although it is not nearly as popular as it was during the 1960s and 1970s, the theory still exists. The nature of Amelia Earhart's disappearance, and the mysteries that surround it, organically produce theories that attempt to "solve" the mystery. Cultural institutions in Atchison, Kansas, helped to keep the theory alive, as did the advent of the Internet, where it seemingly has found a permanent home.

The Japanese Capture Theory grew into an elaborate captivity narrative over the course of the last eight decades. Countless researchers – mostly male and mostly members of the armed services – have tried and failed to solve the puzzle of Earhart's disappearance and symbolically "rescue" the fallen aviator and her trusty navigator. Like many myths, the Japanese Capture Theory took on a religious character. Contemporary researchers like Mike Campbell look back to the theory's patron saints like Fred Goerner and Tom Devine for guidance. Yearly pilgrimages to the Amelia Earhart Festival in Atchison, Kansas, have long symbolized devotion of Earhart and the mystery of her disappearance. And for the more devout adherents to the Japanese Capture Theories, alternate explanations (like Gillespie's Gardner/Nikumaroro theory) are dismissed as heretical. This religious fervor has added steam to the Japanese Capture Theory for decades and given it enough fuel that it still exists today.

This study of the Japanese Capture Theory is an important look at the long-term impact of “fake news,” as the myth began as wartime rumor that has survived for decades. Further research into theories of Earhart’s disappearance would be sufficiently valuable. An analysis of the Japanese Capture Theory reveals how wartime rumors created a decades-old myth that dramatically impacts the historical memory of Amelia Earhart herself. It also exposes exactly how such a myth was diffused over the course of several decades through the press, by competition between rival theorists, and within cultural institutions celebrating Earhart’s legacy. Myths can only be shattered through understanding and proper research. Additional research on competing Earhart disappearance theories – such as the “crash and sink” and Gardner/Nikumaroro theories – would be useful to juxtapose with the analysis in this document.

Something much more important than research is missing from this story, however. One voice has been long excluded from the decades-long debate over the Japanese Capture Theory – Amelia Earhart herself. Excessive focus on the aviator’s disappearance revokes her agency from the narrative of her life because she had no say in how her life would be retold in hindsight with a central focus on her disappearance. The narrative that undergirds the Japanese Capture Theory – that Earhart was a “casualty” of the Second World War – completely rewrites her story for the benefit of researchers’ popularity and book sales. Restoring Earhart’s voice in her own story is long overdue.

There are encouraging signs in Earhart’s hometown of Atchison, Kansas that her voice is truly being restored and her story is being re-centered around her own life, words, and accomplishments. In recent years, the organizers of the Amelia Earhart Festival have emphasized Earhart’s accomplishments in their programming and routinely

celebrate other women who have made strides in the fields of aviation and aeronautics. Within the next two years, the Amelia Earhart Hangar Museum is set to open in Atchison. The institution will be the second museum dedicated solely to Earhart and plans to emphasize the immensity of Earhart's accomplishments, particularly for women. Additionally, new documentaries, films, and books about Earhart's life appear nearly every year, which help to teach an entirely new generation about the late aviator and will hopefully serve as an inspiration for young women who aim to follow in her footsteps.

I grew up in Atchison, Kansas during a time when the Japanese Capture Theory and other Earhart disappearance theories were over-emphasized in local classrooms, cultural institutions, and festivals. As a young girl, I learned more about her disappearance than I did her life, as did my classmates. We heard less about the young girl who struggled to fit in her parochial small town or the grown woman who strove to break barriers seemingly insurmountable for women at the time. Earhart's character, her dreams, her views, and her accomplishments were lost in the mystery of her disappearance.

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