An American fascination

Our history of looking under the bed

By Jack Fuller

WHEN GERALD FORD picked Nelson Rockfeller as his Vice-Presidential nominee, Sherman Skolnick had mixed emotions.

On the one hand, the gadfly independent investigator felt the nomination substantiated predictions he'd been making for weeks on his recorded telephone message, "Hotline News."

But on the other hand, Skolnick felt queasy because his message had been that Rockefeller is out to take over the country and subvert the Constitution.

SKOLNICK IS one of thousands of Americans who believe that the events commonly accepted as current history in fact only compose the outer shell of things.

Within that shell they believe there lay dark and brooding conspiracies that aim to strike at the underbelly of America's most cherished values.

Their belief is not without a history of its own. From before the Revolutionary War to the present, fear of conspiracy has been a recurring part of the American political scene.

Oddly enough, the fact that the press and dedicated public officials uncovered a real conspiracy in the White House and brought down a President as a result did not assuage the fear.

"It's hard to convince people what's really going on because those who have read only the pablum put out by the media have been brainwashed," Skolnick says. "But still some people know that there are natural forces at large in America—some call them conspiracies—just as there have been since the beginning of the world."

YALE UNIVERSITY history professor David Brion Davis, one of the country's most highly regarded students of the history of conspiracy and political paranoia, is careful not to discredit totally those who have warned about sinister forces massing attacks on American values.

"I don't think any of these beliefs could last too long without some grain of truth to them," he says.

After all, Benedict Arnold did negotiate with British Maj. John Andre to turn over West Point for 20,000 pounds. And Aaron Burr unsuccessfully schemed to foment a secession movement in the western areas of the new American republic.

Tho Skolnick's charges have a scattergun quality, missing their target more often than not, he is in part responsible for the conviction of former Gov. Otto Kerner and the resignation of two Illinois Supreme Court justices whose malefactions Skolnick was the first to publicize.

Those who fear conspiracies have not always been obscure independent investigators and gadflies like Skolnick. George Washington warned that the British planned the literal enslavement of the American colonies.

Samuel Morse, inventor of the telegraph, warned against a great Catholic Jesuit conspiracy to take over the government.

The current upsurge of cultural paranoia might be worse than any of the earlier episodes, Davis says.

"I think we're getting into a period of confusion and doubt that may make this era qualitatively different than the past," he said. "Just the fact that today it's so easy for a small group to hijack a plane or, we're told, to hijack an atom bomb breeds a profound sense of insecurity."

IN ADDITION to the volumes of "assassination research" arguing that conspiracies lay at the root of the murders of the two Kennedy brothers, Dr. Martin Luther King, and the attempted murder of George Wallace, in the last year several popular motion pictures have sketched a terrifying vision of irrepressible conspiracy.

Sherman Skolnick . . . mixed emotions.

"Executive Action," written by Dalton Trumbo who was blacklisted for years as a result of McCarthy Era anti-subversive activities, was a thriller loosely based on the murder of President Kennedy. In it a group of Communist-fearing, white supremist oil barons plot the assassination and successfully cover their tracks with an intricate and improbable scheme.

In "Chinatown" actor Jack Nicholson plays a private detective with the heritage of Spade and Philip Marlowe behind him stumbles on an illegal plot to gain con vast farm acreage. Unlike the trad American detective, who cynically cuts such schemes and brings the perpetrat punishment, in "Chinatown" Nicholson disastrously. The conspiracy is too po for him.

And in "Parallax View" and ultrasophi ed psychological testing firm uses its sk find cultural misfits who are willing to c political assassinations and whose be will be attributed to individual psycho flaws [like Lee Harvey Oswald or Sirh rhan] rather than to diabolical plots.

The hero in "Parallax View" is a mal ed newspaper reporter with all the us tributes of a movie-style private eye. end he uncovers the plot but never get veal it because the plotters kill him an humously frame him as a political mur

THOMAS PYNCHON, one of America's novelists, has made a career playing c increasing paranoia in American society. anoia, he says, is the feeling that ever in the world is connected and pers threatening. The only antidote, Pynchon in his latest work, "Gravity's Rainbow "antiparanoia where nothing is connec anything, a condition not many of us can for long."

His insight is similar to that of his Davis who says that faced with a world f increasingly complex forces that result i mediate and personal discomfort such a winter's gas shortage, people will find "it's easier to believe in sinister forces t chaos."

And Davis adds that since events and c are not likely to end soon, "we're proba for some real honeys of conspiracy theor the near future."

Jack Fuller is a Tribune reporter.