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Conspiracies Lurking Everywhere

■ Culture: The tendency to suspect unseen schemes at work isn't solely a proclivity of crackpots and paranoids. Experts say we're all susceptible.

By DON OLDENBURG
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Every day since 1968, William Bennett Edwards has grown more certain something secret, something sinister, is growing around the rocky acreage of copperheads and poison ivy on top of Afion Mountain, where he lives outside Waynesboro, Va.

He and his wife, Virginia Davis Edwards, say they have witnessed over the years the world's richest and most powerful people motoring past their modest house just off the shoulder of Route 250. They say they've seen Ted Kennedy driving Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis. They say the Queen of England sped by once during a state visit when she was supposedly touring Monticello 20 miles away. They have seen Henry Kissinger regularly; the same for other Kennedys and the Rockefeller.

Their list of drive-bys pushes the boundaries of belief: Spiro Agnew, Gerald Ford, H.R. Haldeman, Pope John Paul II, Lady Bird Johnson, Idi Amin, CIA and corporate big shots, Margaret Thatcher

and Elizabeth Taylor, among others. "Mostly they just passed by in cars and turned their heads and hid their faces," says Virginia Edwards.

Their destination: Less than a mile past the Edwardses' house on this undeveloped stretch of the Blue Ridge is Swannanoa, a peculiar mansion with English gardens, and a coat of arms in its foyer. Open to the public, it is said to be the historic home of the late Walter Russell—inventor, artist and friend of Franklin Delano Roosevelt.

Bill Edwards is convinced Swannanoa is owned by the royal family of England and serves as the secret meeting place of the agents of the Council of 30—supposedly an all-powerful cadre that has manipulated world economies, incited wars and ordered assassinations for its own financial advantage throughout recorded history. An intelligent and seemingly reasonable man, Edwards, 64, believes he has uncovered a conspiracy of international and millennial dimensions that is unfolding right outside his door.

"I can't say there's evidence," says Edwards, who is proprietor of the Gold Rush Gun Shop, imports collectible firearms and also writes for gun magazines. "But without even apprehending or comprehending the nature of what was going on, you turn over a stone and see the maggots." Conspiracy

theorists all too often are easy targets for ridicule. Their near-obsession with interpreting the big events of history—or sometimes what's happening down the street—through the complexities of their theories seldom earns them the kudos and criticism lately aimed at "JFK" director Oliver Stone. More typically, they live obscure lives balanced between the urge to reveal what they think they know and the reluctance to expose themselves to the label of kook.

Certainly some conspiracy theorists are permanent residents of the lunatic fringe. But the tendency to suspect unseen schemes at work in everyday dilemmas, disappointments and catastrophes isn't solely a proclivity of crackpots and paranoids.

In fact, conspiracy theory fascinates most of us. Why, for instance, has no one been able to satisfy much of the American public that Lee Harvey Oswald acted alone? For what possible reason were findings of the House Select Committee on Assassinations embargoed from the public? How much of a logical leap are some conspiracy theories from documented CIA brainstorms to murder Fidel Castro? To recruit Nazi spies after World War II?

"There is a definite thrill to the

'Real' Stories That 'They' Don't Want Us to Know . . .

A sampling of the basic plot lines of popular conspiracy theories today:

■ That AIDS is a "designer disease" created in top-secret laboratories by U.S. government scientists for eugenic purposes and for the genocide of homosexuals, drug users, blacks and the underprivileged.

■ Popularized by Oliver Stone's "JFK": That John F. Kennedy's assassination was A) a CIA-fostered plot stemming from the President's interference with an all-out invasion of Cuba and his efforts to control the U.S. intelligence community; B) a Mafia hit, with or without the blessings of the CIA or FBI, in part as revenge for the President unleashing his brother, Atty. Gen. Robert Kennedy, on the mob; C) a conspiracy of a small corps of CIA renegades and anti-Castro Cuban operatives; D) all of the above.

■ That George Bush is the "ultimate conspiracy President," as author Jonathan Vankin puts it. Bush is equally at home with the "Eastern Establishment," the Anglophilic, Ivy, Yankee elitists long tied to the Rockefellers and the Council on Foreign Relations that spawned the Trilateral Commission (always suspect in these circles), and with the "Southwestern Establishment" of Texas oil barons and anti-communist right-wingers suspected of playing a role in the Kennedy assassination.

■ That the drugs-and-guns subculture threatening every major U.S. city and taking its biggest toll on black residents of poor neighborhoods is a genocidal plot. That's often coupled with the theory of a systematic assassination of black leaders, including Malcolm X, Martin Luther King Jr., Black Panther Fred Hampton and, most recently, Rep. Mickey Leland of Texas, who died in a mysterious plane crash in Ethiopia.

■ That human beings are "property" of a superior extraterrestrial civilization manipulating events that we consider history. By comparison, the popular theory that the U.S. government is covering up instances of extraterrestrial contact is only a piece of the puzzle.

■ That the disintegration of communism in the former Soviet Union is part of a sinister KGB plot to lull Americans into a foolish and false sense of security.

—DON OLDENBURG

idea of conspiracy theories," says Jonathan Vankin. "It's like a spy novel. There's the thrill that you have access to secret information."

The news editor at the alternative weekly newspaper the San Jose Metro, Vankin journeyed for two years into the world of grand-scale conspiracy theories to write the 1991 book "Conspiracies, Cover-Ups and Crimes: Political Manipulation and Mind Control in America" (Paragon House, \$24.95). Vankin didn't begin his research thinking conspiracy theorists are demented. He didn't end it thinking that either.

"I went into it curious," he says. Once immersed in maleficent, intricate plots whose origins are

traced back centuries to the Bavarian Illuminati, the medieval Knights Templar and ancient secret societies, Vankin recognized a kind of logic in the unanswered charges and hints of duplicity that footnote history. How, he wondered, could Robert Kennedy be killed by gunshot from inches behind his head when the convicted assassin, Sirhan Sirhan, was several feet in front of him?

At the American Psychological Assn. convention in San Francisco last fall, Sacramento psychologist Terence Sandbek delivered a research paper titled, "Hungry People Who Buy Imaginary Food With Real Money: Psychology's Response to Nonsense, Superstition

and the Paranormal." He sees an analogy between believers in ESP and astrology and the conspiracy theorists.

"One of the reasons people buy into paranormal irrationality, even though there isn't one scrap of evidence for its existence, is probably a need in the world to have things neat and tidy," says Sandbek.

And it may go beyond deep-seated psychological motive, says Sandbek. Such thinking tends to be selective in the facts used, tends to ignore contrary evidence, and uses as fact information that simply isn't true.

"I suspect that the zealots among the conspiracy people see the world in black-and-white terms—us and them," he says. "That fits with this need for total lack of ambiguity."

Yet Sandbek says small doses of this can be a good thing. "I think it is healthy for people to be skeptical of our government. You read non-fiction about the inner workings of government agencies like the CIA and it is unbelievable. You figure it has got to be only the tip of the iceberg."

The Edwardses say they don't have to look farther for conspiracy than their mailbox, where envelopes arrive already opened. And their telephones crackle with interference. "They sent a hit man once," says Virginia Edwards, a pianist who's writing a book about the conspirators' use of music to influence behavior, to be titled "Conspiracy of 30: Their Misuse of Music from Aristotle to Onassis."

"Little by little we put it together," she says. "We finally figured something really big was going on."

And they're in the middle of it.

"We're the bottleneck," says Bill Edwards, explaining that he owns the right-of-way of 8 miles of road in the Blue Ridge Mountains, which for 20 years has prevented the conspirators from developing 722 acres.

The scheme since World War II, he explains, has been to secretly mine those mountains and illegally export radioactive minerals. The plot signed John Kennedy's death warrant, he contends: The President made his memorable trip to Berlin to tell the Council to count him out. "Vietnam was about minerals and oil," Edwards says. "Watergate was a cover-up for what Nixon was going to do on this."