

# Paranoia (or Is It Conspiracy?) in

By Mark Harris

As time passes history flattens, as if photographed with a telescopic lens. Unrelated events seem to merge. A network of connection extending from the Texas School Book Depository in 1963 to the Watergate in 1972 gains plausibility daily; persons and agencies appear and reappear as if the two crimes were of the same order, committed by the same hands and whitewashed by the same confederates — John Connally, riding in the 1961 Lincoln convertible with John F. Kennedy, signaled to the window above (Connally was later indicted for bribery after switching party affiliation from Democrat to Republican), brought down the gunfire, and was eventually found innocent by a commission including Chief Justice Warren, who was appointed to the Supreme Court by President Eisenhower on the recommendation of then-Vice President Nixon, thus paving the way for Nixon's victory over the Warren forces in California, his subsequent winning of the presidency prior to Watergate, and his eventual appointment of Gerald Ford to the presidency. Ford, then representative from Michigan, was a member of the Warren Commission!

A conference called "Conspiracy in America" was held at UCLA upon the occasion of the first anniversary of the killing of six members of the Symbionese Liberation Army associated with Patricia Hearst of good family. Several hundred people at-

tended. Most of them were college students or of student age; many were of good families, and their political direction was clearly left.

The conspiracy conference was one of several recently assembled, and it promised, in California and elsewhere, "follow-up meetings . . . attempting to mobilize a national movement against the

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developing police state" in America. "From Dallas to Watergate: Official Violence and Cover-up — A Campaign for Democratic Freedoms Conference. Films. Panels. Workshops on Assassinations. Intelligence. Community/Labor Representation."

The first person I met was a young black man at a table in the corridor collecting signatures for a petition in his own defense. He had been accused of murdering a policeman. Since he seemed to me so sweet and gentle, I could not believe he had committed murder, and I signed his petition.

Inside the auditorium, I was soon swept up by orators and visual demonstrations emphasizing the

theme that Lee Harvey Oswald (if he was involved at all) was only one of several conspirators in the murder of John Kennedy. The proof seemed to lie in the fact that various documents showed a discrepancy in Oswald's height. One speaker said that "the Warren Report gave" Oswald's height as 5 feet 10 inches. I knew Oswald wasn't that tall and I thought that, if the Warren Report were that wrong, perhaps we were onto something, after all.

Afterwards, I noticed in the Warren Report that Oswald's height was given (estimated) at 5 feet 10 inches, indeed, but not by the authors of the report; rather by a steamfitter named Howard L. Brennan, who had been watching the presidential motorcade roll by somewhere on Elm Street, and who "promptly told a policeman that he had seen a slender man, about 5 feet 10 inches, in his early 30s, take deliberate aim from a sixth-floor corner window . . ."

Many of the documents or speeches upholding conspiracy theory are the results of people having read badly or hastily, consciously or otherwise. Brennan, who was not the Warren Report, had guessed wrong as to both inches and years. In a poor reading, conspiracy theorists had failed to distinguish between the authors of the book and a character in it.

The continuing conference on conspiracy is a form of education. For

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that reason, after all, UCLA houses it. If such a conference is not the ideal definition of education it may be transitional to one that is better. Its appeal on the left is directed to students sincerely devoted, as far as they know, to justice and equality. Since they are students they are in the process of learning, and a great deal of their credulity may turn to skepticism even as the proceedings advance.

The better-prepared the student, the sooner his or her skepticism asserts or manifests itself, for the language and mode of the theorists, whether left or right, constantly exposes itself to its own vacancies. In Los Angeles I met students at the luncheon intermission whose belief in conspiracy theory had already dwindled somewhat during the morning.

But many of them are not wholly educated, or have not yet achieved a level of intellectual skepticism and, for this and other reasons, they are willing believers. Often, the young man or woman of the left feels excluded, angry, desperate, unable to participate in the decisions of life as he or she feels entitled to do, still student, still underling, still graded by someone else, unfairly denied the things he thinks he ought to have, including the right to decide the course of the world.

The world itself is a conspiracy to ignore him, defame him, put him down. Under certain circumstances,







somewhere of powerful persons privately talking. The Hollywood star system prevails. The processes of social accommodation were never so meticulously described as in the motion picture "The Godfather," in which death sentences are pronounced by "somebody" somewhere, in some smoke-filled back room, just as the conspiracy theorists say they are.

Colleges and universities, partly under their own financial pressures, partly in the spirit of democratic participation, increasingly view the student as a customer and give him "what he wants," which is likely to be an easier, simpler interpretation of events — and a better grade for mastering less. But the best defense against a paranoid citizenry may be a sound education in the grammar of those disciplines which fortify the mind against trickery.

The trouble with the mind of the conspiracy theorist left or right is its inability to carry more than one idea at once. It asks laws or principles governing all events, as if human affairs were motions of dumb bodies, but it ignores the one law that might serve — the idea that some things might be true upon some occasions and not upon other occasions. For example, although Watergate was clearly a "conspiracy" to defraud many citizens, the murder of John Kennedy may have been the dement-

ed act of one person.

Above all, it ignores the possibility of that mixture of accident and intention that is finally process. We are process. We are complexly. We are the products of our minds, singly and collectively.

Unable to endure slow motion, the mind of the conspiracy theorist is likewise unable to endure uncertainty. We may never know more than we know now of the truth of our several major political assassinations. We may know all that exists to be known, or we may be in the presence of a mystery: Not all crimes are solved, as they are on television.

Finally, it should be said that, despite the pitfalls he leads us into, despite the dangers, or simple discomfort, the conspiracy theorist seems to understand least his own importance. The paranoid contribution to decision must always have been great, integral to process, a noise and a clamor keeping lawmakers from slumbering in town halls and Congress, as children shape their parents, or as students stopped the war in Vietnam. The heat of paranoid instincts or intuitions warms the law with human concern.