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Friendly Fascists

The Far Right tries to move in on the Left

BY CHIP BERLET

After the Alaska Green Party held its convention last March in Fairbanks, the newly elected chair, Ronnie Rosenberg, began to poke around. She wanted to figure out what was behind several convention resolutions with unusually idiosyncratic themes and why individuals who clearly had their own peculiar agendas were showing up at Green Party meetings. She discovered the Greens had attracted a new constituency. "These people were clearly not from the progressive movement, and some didn't even know what was in our party platform," says Rosenberg. "They were against big government and distrustful of bureaucracy and authority, and they clearly wanted to build alliances with us."

What most concerned Rosenberg was that some of the would-be Greens who seemed wound up in their own conspiracy theories might be involved with Far Right groups.

"We want to give people a fair hearing and we don't want to close ourselves off from sincere new members since we do want to build coalitions," says Rosenberg. "But we don't want to be used as a vehicle for some hidden right-wing agenda."

Rosenberg, active with the Canada-Yukon Greens, wants to be sure that sincere people don't get co-opted. "I guess we just have to keep our eyes open," she says.

Other progressive activists nationwide report similar encounters, and like the Greens in Alaska, they wonder how to

build coalitions when shared antigovernment sentiment is prompting a courtship of the political Left by the political Right. There is nothing intrinsically wrong with building coalitions with conservatives or libertarians around issues of common concern, but what if the persons seeking to join have racist, anti-Jewish, or antidemocratic agendas?

Besides being morally offensive, these groups often peddle scapegoating theories that can divide existing coalitions. Such considerations are not abstract or irrelevant to the people who have found themselves in the following situations:

¶ Antiwar activist Allen Ruff discussed the pros and cons of the Persian Gulf war on a panel in Verona, Wisconsin, a suburb of Madison. Also on the panel as an antiwar speaker was one Immanuel Branch, who later appeared on the primary ballot as a candidate for the Democratic Presidential nomination.

"Suddenly I heard Branch saying the

war was the result of a Zionist banking conspiracy," Ruff recalls. "I found myself squeezed between prowar hawks and this anti-Jewish nut. It destroyed the ability of those of us who opposed the war to make our point."

Protesters against the Gulf war witnessed many attempts to turn legitimate criticism of U.S. intervention into blanket denunciations of Jews.

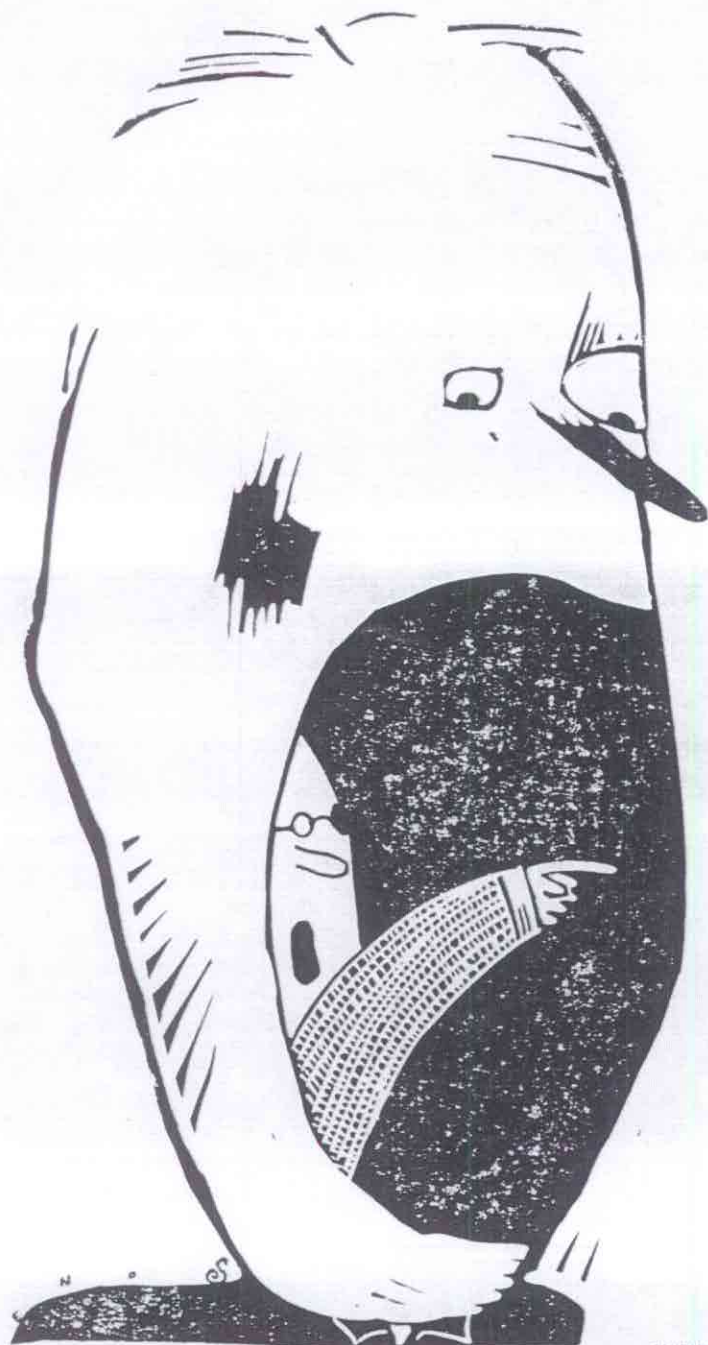
¶ During the Gulf war, the ultraconservative and conspiracist John Birch Society distributed antiwar leaflets at Merrimack College in Massachusetts and at a downtown Boston antiwar rally. The Birch Society, which is promilitary, opposed war against Iraq while warning that George Bush's New World Order would lead to a world socialist government run by the Trilateral Commission. Unlike some others on the Right, Birchers reject anti-Jewish theories, asserting instead that most governments are controlled by secret elites they dub "The Insiders."

¶ Jon Hillson, an organizer for the Socialist Workers Party, was flabbergasted when he saw students taking seriously the antigovernment theories peddled by Lyndon LaRouche devotees who showed up in the Cleveland area at college meetings organized to protest the Gulf war.

"I was shocked," says Hillson. "But then I realized most students had never heard of LaRouche."

Hillson recalled that LaRouche followers had physically assaulted socialists in the 1970s, and urged the students to disavow any collaboration with the LaRouchians "because of their past ties to

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government agencies" and "their homophobic, racist, sexist, and anti-Semitic agenda."

¶ At the April 1991 conference of the respected Latin American Studies Association in Washington, D.C., a panel on Panama included Carlos Wesley, the LaRouche organization's Central America operative. The LaRouchians have been trying for years to penetrate the movement

against U.S. intervention in Central America, and despite their penchant for bizarre and lunatic theories alleging centuries-long conspiracies, they have had some success.

Their pitch to students is that LaRouche, currently serving a prison sentence for tax evasion and mail fraud, is the victim of abuse by U.S. intelligence agencies. They also pretend that former U.S.

Attorney General Ramsey Clark, whom they hired to write appeals briefs seeking to overturn LaRouche's conviction, supports their politics.

¶ Sara Diamond, author of *Spiritual Warfare: The Politics of the Christian Right*, was discussing the growing popularity of right-wing conspiracy theories last summer on Mama O'Shea's radio program at KPFA-FM in Berkeley, California. When Diamond mentioned that one newly discovered KPFA guest expert, Craig Hulet, was echoing paranoid theories of the John Birch Society, she was puzzled to find herself ostracized by Hulet supporters at the station, a Pacifica network affiliate.

Later, Diamond discovered that Hulet had become KPFA's most popular guest, and that audiotape sales of his programs had raised tens of thousands of dollars for the station, even though most of Hulet's highly vaunted credentials turned out to be phony.

These are manifestations of a periodically recurring historical phenomenon that has flourished since the Gulf war and that was recently given further impetus by the release of the Oliver Stone film *JFK*. Many on the Left have assumed that the conspiracism promoted in *JFK* stems from a progressive critique of elite domination and intelligence-agency abuse. But homegrown conspiracy theories have usually sprouted from Far Right, nativist movements rather than from the liberal or radical Left.

In *The Paranoid Style in American Politics*, historian Richard Hofstadter described the phenomenon as a persistent belief in "the existence of a vast, insidious, preternaturally effective international conspiratorial network designed to perpetrate acts of the most fiendish character." Movements based on paranoid conspiracy theories have surfaced from time to time in the American Right. Among them were the anti-Masonic hysteria of the late Eighteenth Century, the anti-Catholic bigotry of the Nineteenth, and the xenophobic Palmer Raids and anticommunist hysteria in this century.

While hard evidence does exist for some criminal conspiracies undertaken by Government agents, paranoid right-wing conspiracy theories blend a grain of truth with much unsubstantiated, often opportunistic speculation to blame selected scapegoats for complex and troubling societal problems. Typically, proponents of conspiratorial theories remain an isolated minority except in times of economic or social stress, when demagogic appeals tend to attract a larger following.

In paranoid philosophies, the world is divided into us and them. Evil conspirators control world events. A special few claim to have been given inside knowledge of this massive conspiracy, and they see it

as their solemn duty to spread the alarm across the land, a task that acolytes accomplish with uncommon zeal.

Groups scapegoated at various times as participants in the global conspiracy include Jews, bankers, Catholics, communists, black militants, civil-rights activists, anarchists, the Bavarian Illuminati Society, Jesuits, Masons, the Rockefellers, the Council on Foreign Relations, Israeli secret police, Trilateralists, the Bilderberg banking group, the Federal Reserve, and Soviet KGB agents. That is the short list.

Conspiracy theories are often attractive as explanations for the otherwise inexplicable, and are undeniably entertaining. But they ultimately distract people from serious institutional and economic analysis.

The major engine behind right-wing conspiracism in the United States at this time is a network of four related organizations controlled by Willis Carto, a successful but shadowy businessman. They are Liberty Lobby, the *Spotlight* newspaper, Noontide Press, and the Institute for Historical Review (IHR).

IHR publishes a journal devoted primarily to arguing that the common understanding of the Holocaust is largely a Jewish hoax. Other articles praise Nazi collaborators or suggest Bolshevism was a Jewish movement. At IHR conferences, speakers and attendees discuss the "Holohoax" and make crude jokes about "alleged" gas chambers, missing Jews, and extermination policies.

Noontide Press is a mail-order book distributorship and small press featuring such titles as *Adolph Hitler: The Unknown Artist and Hitler at My Side*. Noontide reprints a number of racist classics promoting Nordic supremacy, the purity of Aryan blood, and the contention that Africans and African-Americans are biologically inferior to whites. There is a special focus on banking conspiracies, including *Lindbergh on the Federal Reserve* by Representative Charles A. Lindbergh Sr. (father of the famous flyer who helped launch the isolationist America First Committee in the 1930s), and *Lincoln: Money Martyred*, which even Noontide describes as a "hearsay account of the assassination of Abraham Lincoln by a banker's conspiracy."

Spotlight, with a weekly circulation of more than 100,000, praises neo-Nazi skinheads and Hitler's Waffen SS while suggesting that "dual loyalist" Jews control CIA covert operations and the U.S. banking system.

The Liberty Lobby, with offices in a Washington, D.C., townhouse a few blocks from the Capitol, is described by scholar Frank P. Mintz as "spanning the fringes of neo-Nazism to the John Birch Society and the radical Right."

These groups are accurately called neo-fascist because of their reliance on au-

thoritarian solutions, demagoguery, scapegoating, and xenophobia. Other peddlers of paranoia on the Far Right include the Populist Party and the followers of Lyndon LaRouche.

LaRouche, a minor socialist theorist in the 1960s, switched tracks in the mid-1970s and began embracing fascist themes, pulling along 1,000 followers, some of whom were ordered to engage in physical assaults against political rivals.

LaRouche intelligence operatives briefly advised the staff of Ronald Reagan's National Security Council, but when they fell out of favor, one of several criminal investigations proceeded to indictments; LaRouche and a few followers have been convicted and imprisoned for engaging in illegal fundraising and financial schemes.

The LaRouchians maintain that the world is controlled by a sinister global conspiracy of evildoers. LaRouche traces this conspiracy back to the Babylonian goddess society, and says the historical battle between good and evil is exemplified in the philosophical division between Platonic order and Aristotelian chaos. Among the Aristotelian conspirators are the Queen of England, the Fabian Society and George Bernard Shaw, *Playboy* magazine, Milton Friedman, Fidel Castro, Jesuits, Masons, and the AFL-CIO.

In the LaRouchians' lurid rhetoric, Jimmy Carter is "a hundred times worse than Hitler." In a 1978 editorial, LaRouche's *New Solidarity* proclaimed that "America must be cleansed for its righteous war by the immediate elimination of the Nazi Jewish Lobby and other British agents from the councils of government, industry, and labor."

The Populist Party borrows some anti-elite themes from the Populist movement of the late 1800s, which mixed egalitarian democratic ideals with xenophobia. But today's Populist Party was created by refugees from the Ku Klux Klan, neo-Nazi groups, and defunct segregationist parties. A principal founder of the Populist Party was Willis Carto.

The party's current Presidential nominee is retired Lieutenant Colonel James "Bo" Gritz, a Vietnam veteran whose ferocious military exploits and highly publicized (though unsuccessful) attempts to locate POWs and MIAs in Asia inspired *Rambo* and other popular blood-and-gore movies. Scores of liberal and alternative FM radio stations have broadcast Gritz's allegations of sinister cabals lurking behind official misconduct. Gritz, who briefly served as David Duke's 1988 running mate, lectures on Government complicity in drug trafficking.

A book published in 1973 sparked much of the current resurgence of conspiracism. *The Secret Team: The CIA and Its Allies in Control of the United States and the World*, by retired Air

Force Colonel L. Fletcher Prouty, criticized the CIA's penchant for counter-insurgency and clandestine operations. Prouty argued that by discouraging direct military engagement, the CIA prolonged the war in Vietnam and brought about the unnecessary deaths of many U.S. soldiers.

Prouty was the Pentagon contact through which CIA requests for military assistance were channeled, first for the Air Force and eventually for the entire Department of Defense. With his expertise, Prouty became an influential critic of the agency and gained an audience across the political spectrum.

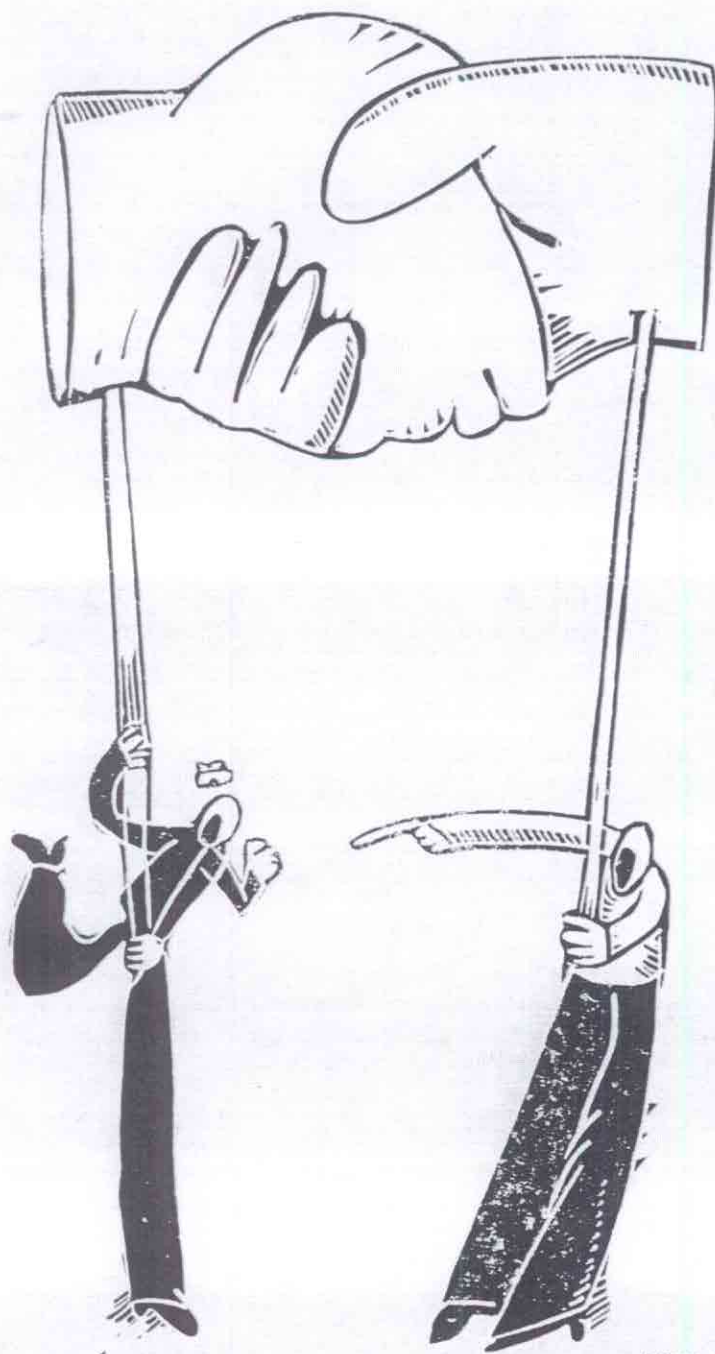
The Liberty Lobby's *Spotlight* newspaper superimposed Prouty's original thesis on its own conspiracy theory regarding Jewish influence in U.S. foreign policy. Sometime in the 1980s, a number of right-wing critics of U.S. intelligence operations, including Prouty, began to drift toward a working alliance with *Spotlight* and Liberty Lobby. They began to feed information from their sources inside the government to publications and groups that circulate conspiracy theories alleging Jewish influence and control over world events. They also began feeding tips to CIA critics on the Left.

While the Liberty Lobby network was soliciting cooperation from Fletcher Prouty, Bo Gritz, long-time CIA critic Victor Marchetti, and assassination conspiracy researchers Mark Lane and Dick Gregory, the LaRouchians were probing Government misconduct and linking U.S. political elites to their global conspiracy theory. The LaRouchians, too, were beneficiaries of the information flow from right-wing anti-CIA circles. LaRouche's periodicals were among the first publications to cover aspects of the covert contra-aid network, although their reports included typical LaRouchian distortions. In the mid-1980s, many mainstream journalists heard from LaRouchians who offered assistance and documents to help research the Iran-contra story.

Unfortunately, certain individuals and groups on the Left apparently internalized some right-wing paranoid theories of U.S. Government misconduct. One example is the "Secret Team" theory of the Iran-contra scandal, which gained a wide following on the Left despite its origins as an allegation by an unidentified "right-wing military specialist," according to an affidavit filed in *Avirgan v. Hull* by Christie Institute attorney Daniel Sheehan.

This lawsuit, filed in 1986, is called the La Penca case, after the Nicaraguan town where a 1984 bombing killed three journalists and at least one contra and wounded dozens, including television camera operator Tony Avirgan and the intended target, contra leader Eden Pastora.

Christie no longer uses the term "Secret Team," which it employed for the first few years of its lawsuit, but critics of the case



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argue that undocumented conspiracy theories were inadvertently drawn into the suit's allegations. Tony Avirgan, one of the named plaintiffs in the Christic La Penca case, says, "There were, indeed, numerous undocumented allegations in the suit, particularly in Sheehan's Affidavit of Fact. As plaintiffs in the suit, Martha Honey and I struggled for years to try to bring the case down to Earth."

Some followers of the Christic line began to work with persons from the Far Right. A West Coast affiliate of the Christic Institute sells *The Guns and Drugs Reader*, edited by Prevailing Winds, a conspiracy-peddling group that distributes material from mainstream, progressive, and Far Right sources. Prominently featured in the publication is material by Bo Gritz, and information on how to order a

taped speech by Eustace Mullins, a viciously anti-Semitic conspiracy theorist.

Gritz has urged his right-wing constituents to recruit from the Left, and invited the Reverend Bill Davis of the Christic Institute to speak at a 1990 Las Vegas conference organized by Gritz's Center for Action. Other speakers included Gritz, Eustace Mullins, former CIA officer (now critic) John Stockwell, and author Barbara Honegger. Davis left the conference in disgust after hearing Mullins's speech, and Stockwell has spoken out against Gritz's views. Honegger says she rejects such coalitions, but her book *October Surprise* relies heavily on material from such LaRouche publications as *Executive Intelligence Review*.

The situation is especially acute on the West Coast, where some talk-radio hosts have promoted fascists, conspiracists, and leftists as working together to expose the Government's corrupt maneuverings. Radio personality Craig Hulet has encouraged this belief in interviews by warning of attempts to criticize those who are "kicking George Bush." Hulet, in fact, specifically named Sheehan, Davis, Marchetti, Prouty, Gritz, and himself as researchers who needed to be defended against those who criticized coalitions between the Left and the Right.

People Against Racist Terror (PART) in Los Angeles issued a report on Gritz titled *Front Man for Fascism* that observed, "Leftists and even pacifists... have gone to hear him speak and... he has had substantial air time on Pacifica radio; representatives of groups such as the Christic Institute have made joint appearances with him." The report said that even if the relationship between Gritz and Christic supporters was unwitting, "Christic should take the lead in condemning the Gritz campaign, rather than demanding retractions from those who have raised criticisms and concerns." PART warned, "Unifying with Gritz would inevitably discredit the white Left with the movements for immigration rights, black empowerment, women's liberation, and gay and lesbian dignity."

Jonathan Mozzochi of the Coalition for Human Dignity, an antifascist group in Portland, Oregon, found himself condemned on a neo-Nazi telephone hotline after the Coalition issued a report warning about Gritz's and Hulet's attempts to woo leftists. The American Front Ministry of Information hotline claimed that Mozzochi and I were part of "the counterintelligence agency of the Jew S. of A. [rhymes with U.S. of A.] or ZOG." The Ministry alleged that ZOG (the slogan "Zionist Occupational Government" is popular on the racist Right) "is a group of well-financed Government agents who have not only infiltrated but absolutely control a great portion of the so-called Left wing in America. Their purpose is to make sure that these

self-styled progressive organizations don't actually take any action against the true enemy of the people, the U.S. Government."

Oliver Stone's *JFK* stimulated nationwide interest in conspiracies. Some right-wing paranoid theories are woven into the film, which is not surprising since Fletcher Prouty was an adviser to Stone and the basis for the film's fictitious "Mr. X." Several *JFK* themes echo conspiracist claims in a John Birch Society magazine article by the late Medford Evans that was first published in September 1967.

The article was reprinted in April of this year in the Birch magazine *The New American* to catch the wave of publicity around the Stone film. Evans discusses rumors that Lyndon Johnson may have engineered the Kennedy assassination, considers the assassination a coup d'état, and suggests that the American Establishment had JFK killed. The publisher complains, however, that "if Oliver Stone is seriously trying to indict the CIA, defense contractors, Big Oil, Big Business, the news media, and a host of others, he errs in suggesting that the whole business was a right-wing plot. These are not individuals of the Right."

The Right's conspiracy themes have been transposed by Prouty and Mark Lane and presented to the political Left. In his new preface to *The Secret Team*, recently republished by the Institute for Historical Review, Prouty writes of the "High Cabal" which coaches the "Secret Team" and controls the world.

Similarly, Lane's new best-selling book on the Kennedy assassination, *Plausible Denial*, is based on conspiratorial theories. Lane advanced during his legal defense of the *Spotlight* newspaper against a libel lawsuit. While both Lane and Prouty say they don't agree with the views of the Liberty Lobby network, both minimize the network's record of bigotry and promote variants of the same paranoid themes, although without any obvious anti-Jewish scapegoating.

Some progressives have been reluctant to discuss these issues. A new film by respected documentarians Daniel Schechter and Barbara Kopple, *Beyond 'JFK': The Question of Conspiracy*, features Lane and Prouty but makes no mention of the controversy surrounding their affiliations.

Passions can run high. In New York City, Pacifica radio station WBAI scheduled a debate on the journalistic issues raised by broadcasting conspiracy theorists and right-wing experts. One guest connected by telephone to the New York studio was KPFA-FM host Dennis Bernstein, dubbed that station's "conspiracy czar" by one local alternative newspaper. During the live program, Bernstein charged there were conspiracies to smear

and silence him and his guests, and then angrily slammed down the phone.

Sara Diamond believes that "after twelve years of living as an anti-Administration, anti-Establishment subculture, many in the progressive movement know what they are against, but have lost sight of what they stand for." According to Diamond, this leaves progressives susceptible to allying with anyone else who attacks the Government.

"In part, it's desperation," says Diamond. "We have, in fact, lost influence and become marginal." And, Diamond adds, this happened "against a backdrop of political illiteracy."

Such political myopia has been shaped, in part, by a reliance on the electronic media for news routinely presented in ahistorical, sound-bite packages that fail to make connections or references even to recent history, much less to events that occurred earlier in this century. Too many Americans developed their understanding of fascism by watching *Hogan's Heroes* on television. Demagoguery of all political stripes flourishes in this environment.

Interviewer David Barsamian, who produces the syndicated *Alternative Radio* series from Boulder, Colorado, warns that radio personalities who harp on conspiracies are providing entertaining confusion rather than helping listeners focus clearly on complex issues. He warns progressives against succumbing to "Left guruism" in which sensational antigovernment theories are accepted without any independent critical analysis.

Barsamian believes some on the Left have been "mesmerized by the flawless dramatic presentation by Sheehan concerning the Christie claims," which distracted attention from the "substance of the allegations which don't all check out." This created a climate—even a demand—for elaborate conspiracy theories. "We all are longing for simple comforting explanations," Barsamian acknowledges. "but by focusing on the Secret Team or the Medellín Cartel, we ignore the institutions that keep producing the problems."

Author Jane Hunter, editor of *Israeli Foreign Affairs*, says she has encountered "an alarming increase" in conspiracy theories and anti-Semitism among the audiences she addresses. She worries that the rise of conspiracism on the Left undercuts activists. "If you keep looking for all the connections, all you are going to see is something so powerful that there is no way to fight it," she says. "We have to look at the system that produces these covert and illegal operations, not who knew so-and-so three years ago."

Russ Bellant, author of *The Coors Connection*, is critical of those who tolerate scapegoating or apologize for those who work with the Populist Party, the Liberty Lobby network, or the LaRouchians. "I

think you discredit yourself when you work with these bigoted forces," says Bellant. "and mere association tends to lend credence to these rightist groups because people assume the groups can't be that bad if a respected person on the Left is associated with them."

Doug Henwood, editor of *Left Business Observer* in New York City, editorialized in April about the resurgence of fascist ideas around the world and cited a fifty-year-old book by Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation*, which listed hallmarks of a country infected with fascism, including "the spread of irrationalist philosophies, racist esthetics, anticapitalist demagoguery, heterodox currency views, criticism of the party system, widespread disparagement of the 'regime,' or whatever was the name given to the existing democratic set-up."

Henwood writes that "the list is a good description of the political scene in much of the world today—the denunciation of Coca-Cola capitalism by German skinheads, chanted between attacks on Turks and Mozambicans; the racist welfare-baiting of our own demagogues; and ubiquitous, vague, and nihilistic denunciations of 'the system' that offer little hope for transformation."

Henwood is not surprised to see such symptoms appearing in the United States, but is dismayed that so many on the Left are unaware of the lessons already learned in this century.

The popular response to the film *JFK* suggests this may be an appropriate time to take a calm look at some hard questions involving the Warren Commission report, the Kennedy Administration, the Vietnam war, U.S. foreign policy, our burgeoning national-security apparatus, and economic justice. But surely we can have this discussion without uncritically circulating the conspiratorial scapegoating fantasies of the Far Right.

Monique Doryland of the Bay Area Pledge of Resistance has seen the group's office on Telegraph Avenue in Oakland vandalized this year by graffiti spray-painted across the walls. The group's answering machine has been loaded with messages including homophobic, racist, anti-Jewish, and anticommunist epithets. Members of a visible neo-Nazi movement in the Bay Area are the prime suspects.

Doryland was "appalled" when she heard persons suggesting "making common cause with the Far Right" as a technique to bring down the conservative center and George Bush.

"It seems so ridiculous to seriously suggest working with fascists," says Doryland. "That's not how you build an authentic response to either right-wing or mainstream Republican deprivation of social programs. We have to be clear as progressive people that fascists, no matter what their camouflage, are not our friends." ■