

Our history of looking under the bed

By Jack Fuller

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

On the one hand, the gaddy independent investigator felt the nomination substantiated predictions he'd been making for weeks on his recorded telephone message, "Holline 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 shall they believe there lay dark and brooding conspiracies that aim to strike at the underbelly of America's most cherished allies.

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 it 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 tabloid 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 Garrison Davis, one of the country's most highly

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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.

The 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



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last year several popular motion pictures have sketched a terrifying vision of irrepressible conspiracy.

"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 supremacist 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 control of vast farm acreage. Unlike the traditional American detective, who cynically cuts such schemes and brings the perpetrator punishment, in "Chinatown" Nicholson disastrously. The conspiracy is too powerful for him.

And in "Parallax View" and ultrapsychological testing firm uses its six find cultural misfits who are willing to commit political assassinations and whose beliefs will be attributed to individual psychopaths (like Lee Harvey Oswald or Sirhan) rather than to diabolical plots.

The hero in "Parallax View" is a male newspaper reporter with all the usual tributes of a movie-style private eye. He end he uncovers the plot but never gets credit because the plotters kill him and humously frame him as a political murderer.

THOMAS PYNCHON, one of America's novelists, has made a career playing on increasing paranoia in American society. In his latest work, "Gravity's Rainbow," he says, is the feeling that everything in the world is connected and personal. The only antidote, Pynchon in his latest work, "Gravity's Rainbow," is his latest work, "Gravity's Rainbow," "antiparanoia where nothing is connected 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 of increasingly complex forces that result in mediate and personal discomfort such as winter's gas shortage, people will find "it's easier to believe in sinister forces than chaos." And Davis adds that since events and are not likely to end soon, "we're probably for some real honeys of conspiracy theories in the near future."