

OUTLOOK

Commentary and Opinion

If History Is a Lie

America's Resort to Conspiracy Thinking

By Charles Paul Freund

LET'S SAY that everything you know is not only wrong, it is a carefully wrought lie. Let's say that your mind is filled with falsehoods—about yourself, about history, about the world around you—planted there by powerful forces so as to lull you into complacency. Your freedom is thus an illusion. You are in fact a pawn in a plot, and your role is that of a compliant dupe—if you're lucky. If and when it serves the interests of others, your role will change: Your life will be disrupted, you could go penniless and hungry; you might have to die.

Nor is there anything you can do about this. Oh, if you happen to get a whiff of the truth you can try to warn people, to undermine the plotters by exposing them. But in fact you're up against too much. They're too powerful, too far-flung, too invisible, too clever. Like others before you, you will fail.

It's the secret vice of the rational mind: the titillation of conspiracy. Often hovering between the truth and the absurd, simultaneously offering both explanation and expiation, the conspiratorialist view of the world suggests that little if anything is as it seems.

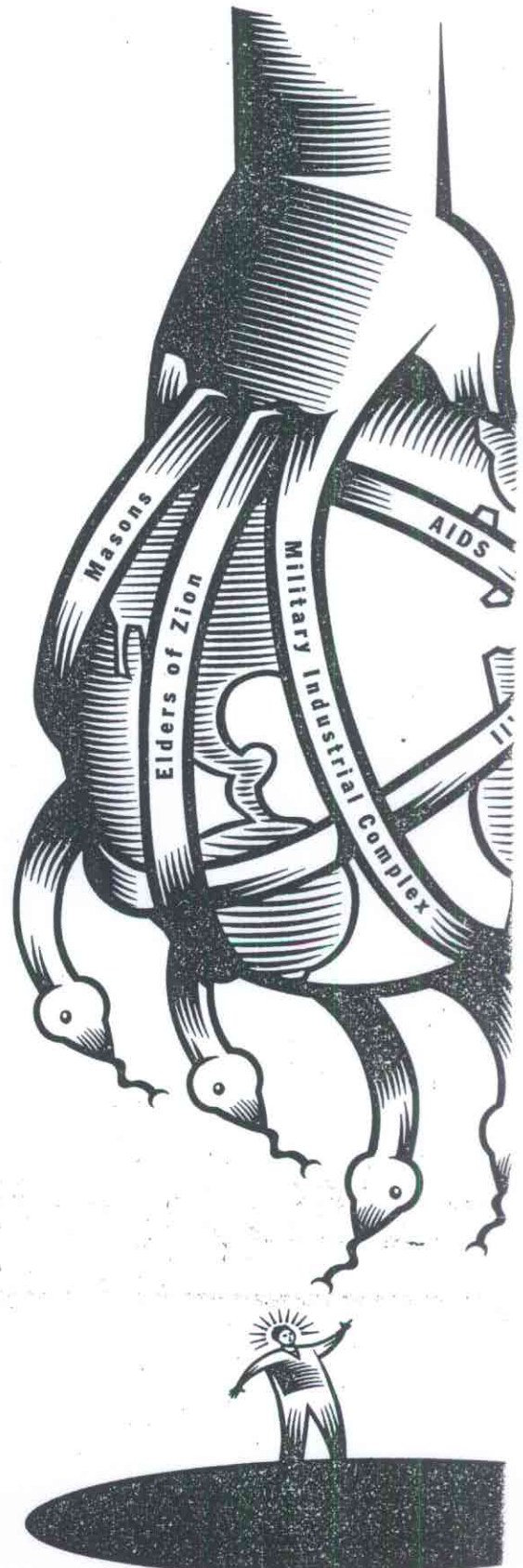
Behind the often mystifying appearances of things, goes this view, are powerful forces acting in secret, forces whose actions on their own behalf account for presumed injustice, for historical wrongs, for apparent evil perpetrated on the rest of us, whoever the "rest of us" happen to be.

There are few who have not, at some point, attributed their difficulties to other groups whom they believe to be plotting against them. Sometimes they're right; often they're not. But either way the result is a historical chain of fear: Blacks have feared the machinations of whites; white Protestants have feared the supposed plots of the Vatican; Christians of all denominations have feared the presumed power of the world's Jews. Americans have feared a succession of presumed conspiracies, from Wall Street financiers to the military-industrial complex, from the Eastern Liberal Establishment to the Western Oil Establishment, from the international communist conspiracy to the international conspiracy of "Insiders," consisting of such supposedly powerful forces as the Trilateral Commission, the Bilderberg group and the Council on Foreign Relations.

Massive conspiracies, sometimes extending over centuries, have been posited to control History itself: the conspiracy of Freemasons, of the Bavarian Illuminati, of the League of Just Men, of the Elders of Zion, of the Knights Templar. Some of these may be the same unimaginably powerful groups changing their identity over generations of secret warfare for the control of the world. Perhaps postwar American history is really the story of the secret Yankee-Cowboy War, as author Carl Oglesby has it; perhaps world history since the Enlightenment is really a struggle between the Knights Templar and the Illuminati, who may have perpetrated, among

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Charles Paul Freund writes for Outlook.



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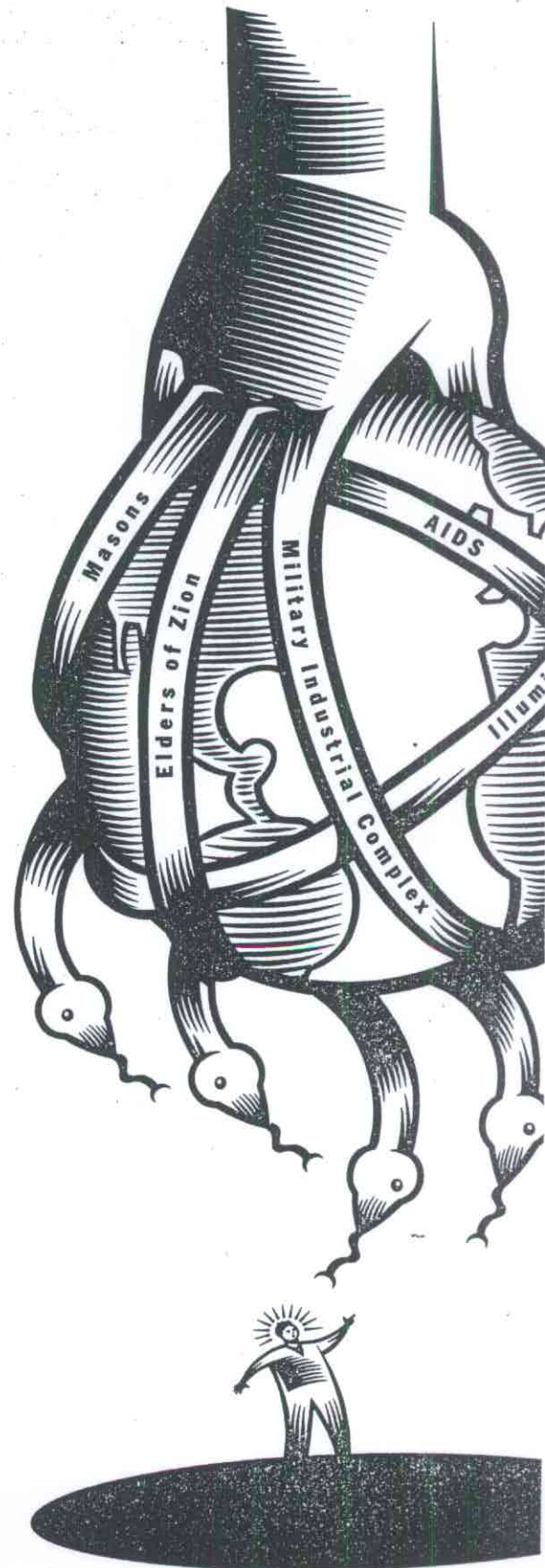
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PETER S.

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CONSPIRACIES, From C1

their other fraudulent gambits in the game, communism.

In recent times, receptivity to this sort of thing in America has been limited to a conspiratorial underground. But the '90s are showing real promise as the decade of the conspiracist revival. We are seeing an international outburst of conspiracy-mongering and -theorizing of striking proportions. More important, we are witnessing a resurgent American receptivity to conspiracism. And we are already exhibiting an ability to shrug off the phenomenon of conspiracism, to allow it to go unremarked-upon. We are getting used to it; it's becoming a political reflex we are all coming to share.

America right now seems awash in conspiracies, both at the political extremes where they have always flourished, and in the political center as well. Politically, historically and socially, the fix is apparently in. Not only does the Kennedy assassination have the country's attention, as it has cyclically since 1963, but Lincoln's murder and even the death of Zachary Taylor have come under suspicious scrutiny again.

The so-called October Surprise theory, in which the Reagan campaign purportedly conspired with Iran about the release of American hostages, has been the subject of sufficient debate that it too may become the subject of a commercial film.

The death last year of free-lance writer Danny Casolaro, who had been investigating the alleged theft by the Justice Department of software from the Inslaw company, overnight became the subject of wild speculation that Casolaro had been murdered because he had uncovered an international political-criminal "octopus" that linked the Inslaw case with the BCCI scandal and the Iran-contra affair. There was in fact no real evidence to support such speculation, but there was a palpable willingness to take seriously the possibility that powerful-secret forces had silenced Casolaro.

Secret forces of some sort are supposedly everywhere. "Japan, Inc." is conspiring against us, humoring us with promises of trade concessions while flooding the nation with "dumped" merchandise and buying up the whole country from under our feet. Fears of a Vatican plot against America resurfaced last year when ads appeared in the Washington subway warning that Catholics were becoming a dangerous presence on the Supreme Court. False rumors swept the country last year that the president of Proctor & Gamble, a company long plagued by rumors of satanism, had ap-

peared on TV to confess that his company was indeed in the service of the devil. Holocaust revisionists, who argue that the record of Nazi mass murders are part of a Jewish conspiratorial fraud, have recently achieved enough prominence to be interviewed on network television.

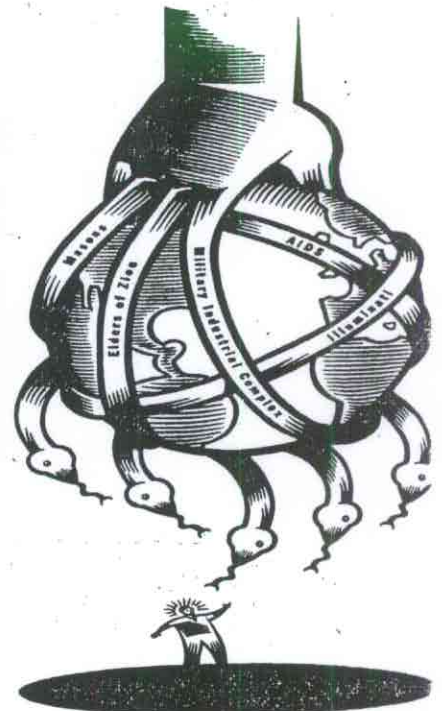
Even George Bush's public bout with the flu managed to have its conspiratorial moment. The question of whether there was or was not a videotape that offered a clear view of the president in the act of vomiting became, briefly, a debate over the public's right to know something or other that was being kept from it by somebody somewhere.

Certainly the flashiest apparent example of the current conspiracism is the continuing thunder over Oliver Stone's Kennedy assassination film, "JFK." Stone's film has brought forth a tidal wave of copy about the 1963 events in Dallas. Stone himself has labored to portray "JFK" as the courageous alternative to the Warren Report.

It's a false choice, and beside the conspiratorial point anyway. Stone has many critics, but the Warren Report has had almost no defenders. Most of Stone's critics readily concede their own belief in a conspiracy, as did the majority of Americans long before Stone's film appeared. What few people could agree on was the nature and purpose of the conspiracy they had come to assume. There are no political implications to such confusion.

That's the nature of the "JFK" controversy; not whether there *was* a conspiracy, but whether "JFK" is a case of classic conspiracist demagoguery. Stone appears to have started out with no ideas of his own on the matter; if he had any he wouldn't have blundered into a \$40-million glorification of New Orleans District Attorney Jim Garrison, who is not only irrelevant to Stone's ultimate point, but who may have been the best thing that ever happened to the Warren Report. (Garrison's case against Clay Shaw was so preposterous, notes Jonathan Vankin in his book "Conspiracies, Cover-ups and Crimes," that some skeptics of the Warren Report speculated at the time that Garrison was part of the cover-up, a sideshow intended to discredit the work of serious investigators.) But Stone did purchase the movie rights to the ideas of other people about the case's possible political implications, especially concerning the possible connection between the JFK murder and the war in Vietnam.

This is where Stone wants to take the debate over the film, and it is also where conspiracism meets politics. The rhetoric of the debate is already replete with many of the standard terms of conspiracist concern: You've Been Cheated



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(of Camelot); There's Widespread Conspiracy Against Us (in the press and elsewhere); The Conspirators Are Sexually Corrupt (New Orleans' gay underground); Our Present Government Is Corrupt (it's still covering up). This anticonspiracist typology was created in 1949 by Leo Lowenthal and Norbert Guterman, and based on their study of anticonspiracist speech making. Their full list is far longer, though most of the remaining appeals are nativist. Stone is not a nativist, and the accusations in his film may or may not turn out to be provable; what matters here is the manner in which movie hype may affect political rhetoric.

In the meantime, conspiratorial thinking has been intensifying notably within the black community, which has in the past been subject to numerous proven white conspiracies against it, and where the possibility that white America is now engaged in genocide is a matter of serious debate. Much of the current speculation centers around the AIDS virus, which according to a view prominently treated in the black media, is believed by some to have been created as a weapon against blacks. A prominent statement of genocidal intention is a soliloquy in John Singleton's popular film, "Boyz n the Hood," in which the film's most enlightened character, Furious Styles, cites the presence in black neighborhoods of guns, alcohol and drug as evidence of a plot to destroy black youth and make it impossible for the race to regenerate itself.

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Prof. Leonard Jeffries of New York's City College set off a firestorm of debate last year when he charged that the Mafia and the Jews were engaged in a conspiracy to destroy blacks that was "planned and plotted and programmed out of Hollywood . . ."

Black politics and politicians are being similarly interpreted. The videotaping and arrest of former mayor Marion Barry at the Vista Hotel was seen by some as part of a broad conspiracy by the national white establishment to discredit black leadership; Barry's recent troubles over alleged sexual acts while in prison have also been attributed by his defenders to a continuing conspiracy against him. Indeed, much of Washington's postwar history has in recent years been subject to local conspiratorial revisionism. "The Plan," as it's popularly known, to return Washington to white rule is supposedly based on a midcentury urban-renewal document, never implemented, entitled "The Year 2000 Plan," which did indeed foresee sweeping Washington's black populace to the city's edges. There are those who believe it explains much about the city, from the redevelopment of Southwest, to recent patterns of gentrification, to the problems of local black politicians.

International conspiracism is on the rise as well. The Persian Gulf war was a boost to such speculation in the Middle East, an area that has always been thick with conspiratorial thinking. Specifically, the war confirmed for some the so-called "mosaic theory," in which outside forces would destroy pan-Arab fraternity by setting Arab groups against one another; in this case not only aligning Arab states against each other, but Shiite and Sunni Arabs as well. The 16-year-long Lebanese civil war, which at various points set Christians against Druze against Shiites against Sunnis, is a major showpiece of this theory (though it is one of many competing conspiratorial theories that purport to explain Middle Eastern politics). These outside forces are of course the Jews, who supposedly control, among much else, the United States.

The most striking revival of conspiracism is occurring in Eastern Europe. Paranoid fear of the Jews in Poland, based partly on Polish-Jewish involvement in that nation's old communist establishment, and exacerbated by traditional European antisemitism, actually became a major issue in Poland's first post-communist presidential campaign, where candidates had to swear that neither they nor their wives were either practicing or secret Jews.

The revival of conspiracy fears in both Europe and America is one popular reaction to the postcommunist New World Order (an old conspiracist phrase, by the way; it's in Latin on the back of the dollar bill, under the Masonic pyramid-and-eye). Freed from the social alignment dictated by the East-West confrontation, in which we were all in the fight against communism together, Americans can

now take their problems out on each other, and express more openly their long-submerged mutual hatreds.

Most people who subscribe to conspiracies do so to account for their difficulties; conspiracism is often an expression of helplessness, and its resurgence in America is a potentially troubling phenomenon, especially when so many conspiracies are not disprovable: Any contrary evidence is merely part of the clever plot.

But conspiracies are not only explanations, they are expiations too; they excuse the continuation of whatever difficulties they purport to explain. What is the point of trying to solve our problems when those responsible for them are so powerful?

And therein lies conspiracism's ultimate paradox. There are countless conspiracies—known, suspected and imagined—to account for evil (there are none to account for worldly good); the alternative to them is that, in moral terms, much apparent evil-doing would have no explanation at all, other than a universal amorality and indifference. Such a view would make suffering meaningless, life ridiculous. To posit evil, even triumphant, is, perversely, to assume the existence of a good, however futile, that it defeats.

A belief in conspiracies is thus an easy alternative to despair. Sometimes good men search for evil, and actual conspiracies—from Watergate to insider stock-trading to bank red-lining practices—are discovered, halted and punished. And sometimes evil men in their perverse search for good invest their faith in absurd conspiracies that can reap destruction and holocaust. It is a powerful force, the belief in conspiracy, and threatening to grow more so.

But let's just say that everything you know is a deliberate lie. That you are a pawn in someone else's plot. Can you escape?

No. There is no elsewhere; there's no way out. The press, the government, even the banking system belongs to them. You can't even defeat the system's control of you by dropping out and living on the streets. Not in Washington, at least. The very street grid of the nation's capital, write Michael Baigent and Richard Leigh in their 1989 book, "The Temple and the Lodge," was shaped in part to reflect mystic Masonic principles. L'Enfant's design for the city, these authors say, was "modified by Washington and Jefferson so as to produce specifically octagonal patterns incorporating the particular cross used as a device by Masonic Templars." This cross is not easy to see on a map, but if they are right, you are dupe not only of a prevaricating lapdog media, a puppet government and a fraudulent banking system, you are the prisoner of a sacred geometry you cannot hope to comprehend.