

The Plots Thicken

Conspiracy Theorists Are Everywhere

By Don Oldenburg
Washington Post Staff Writer

We lead more interesting lives than we think. We are characters in plots. . . . Our lives, examined carefully in all their affinities and links, abound with suggestive meaning, with themes and involute turnings we have not allowed ourselves to see completely.

—from "Libra" by Don DeLillo

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 Afton 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 Rte. 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 the other Kennedys and the Rockefellers.

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

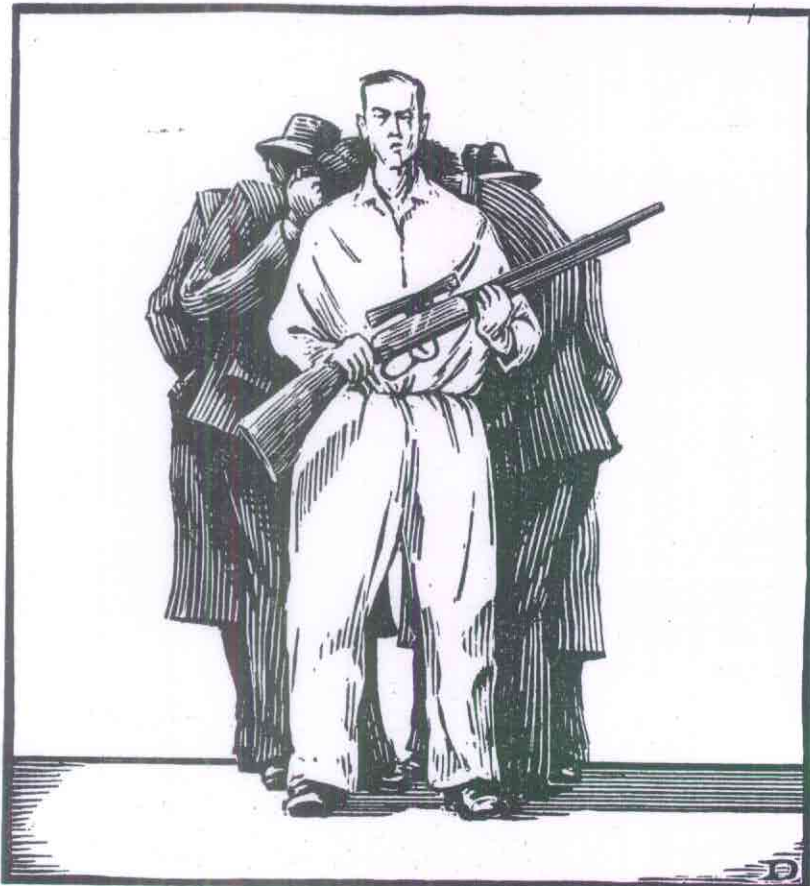
"Without even apprehending or comprehending the nature of what was going on, you turn over a stone and see the maggots."

—conspiracy theorist William Edwards

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

Style Plus



BY BOB DAHM FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

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 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?

"I consciously decided to question things like, what was the CIA doing at Jonestown?" says Vankin. "The more you think like that . . . the

way you see things starts to change, and it all looks a lot different than before."

Vankin calls that "the Revelation Sensation." He says it's addictive: "It's like a zap of adrenaline that shoots up your spine and into your brain, that you know something nobody else knows . . . and then you start to feel that it's your job to bring everyone up to speed."

"It is very appealing, this conspiracy stuff," says Sacramento psychologist Terence Sandbek. "On the face of it, I think the average person would say 'Why not?'"

At the American Psychological Association's convention in San Francisco last fall, 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. "A lot of people are very uncomfortable living in a world where there aren't a lot of explanations, where there is a feeling of instability and incompleteness."

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. And often the conspiracies tend to be all-encompassing. It wouldn't surprise me to hear that someone trying to solve JFK's assassination winds up throwing in the Franco-Prussian War. These grand conspiracies fit together like a Chinese puzzle. Once you start with a false assumption, you can build a whole universe out of it—one which is totally credible."

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 tried draining the brake fluid on the cars. They sent a hit man once," laments 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.

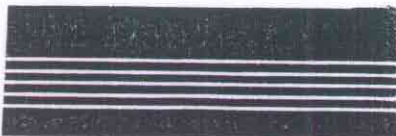
"We're the bottleneck," says Bill Edwards, explaining that he owns the right-of-way of eight miles of road in the Blue Ridge Mountains, which for 20 years has prevented the conspirators from developing 722 acres.

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 miner-

als and oil," Edwards says. "Watergate was a coverup for what Nixon was going to do on this. It goes on and on . . ."

"We hold many dubious beliefs," writes Thomas Gilovich, author of "How We Know What Isn't So: The Fallibility of Human Reason in Ev-

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eryday Life" (Free Press, \$19.95), "not because they satisfy some important psychological need, but because they seem to be the most sensible conclusions consistent with the available evidence. . . . They are the products not of irrationality but of flawed rationality."

A professor of psychology at Cornell University, Gilovich explores how people draw wrong conclusions from what they know and experience. He has shown statistically, for instance, that contrary to popular belief, couples who adopt a child aren't more likely to conceive soon after. "We don't always get the story right," he says. "The world is complicated. Reason is flawed."

Several principles of flawed reasoning may contribute to conspiracy theories, says Gilovich. One of them he calls Representativeness. "Most theories deal with big events, like the assassination of JFK, events that really change things," he says. "There's an intuition that causes should resemble their effects. You need something bigger in magnitude than the fact that there's this low-life character who changed the course of U.S. history."

William Domhoff prefers a sociological approach. "Conspiracy theorists tend to vastly overstate the cleverness of individuals and the cohesion of groups and the foresight members of the power structure allegedly have," says the professor of psychology and sociology at the University of California, Santa Cruz, and author of "Who Rules America."

"There is a power structure," he

says, "but there is no conspiracy. The United States is dominated by the owners and managers of large corporations and banks and law firms. There is a Trilateral Commission. . . . But the structure and the nature of their capability is not such that they could pull off a conspiracy. The power structure can be best described as only slightly less disorganized than the rest of us—and that's why they are the power structure."

Since completing his book, Jonathan Vankin says his thinking on conspiracies is almost "back to the bottom of the bell-shaped curve" from where he started. Yet the loopholes in history still bother him.

"This stuff is not being made up," says Vankin. "In a lot of cases, one interpretation is just as good as another."

"My new saying is 'Conspiracy is too important to be left to the conspiracy theorists.' There is something going on here, something we are not being told."

The Most Popular Scripts

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 and/or FBI, in part as revenge for the president unleashing his brother, Attorney General 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, then-Rep. Mickey Leland, 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 a "Manchurian Candidate" scheme of hypnotically induced and/or drug-controlled assassins is responsible for the deaths of John Kennedy (Lee Harvey Oswald was a mind-controlled dupe) and Robert Kennedy (glassy-eyed Sirhan Sirhan took the fall for the real killers), as well as the attempted assassinations of Gerald Ford (by brain-dazed Mansonette Lynette "Squeaky" Fromme to put Vice President Nelson Rockefeller in the Oval Office), and Ronald

Reagan (a foggy-minded John W. Hinckley Jr. tries to kill a figurehead president who'd gone too far with peace initiatives).

■ 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. Known as "The Conservative Conspiracy Theory," proponents range from John Birch Society members to televangelist and former presidential candidate Pat Robertson, whose recent book, "The New World Order," tracks the evil deeds of, among others, the Bavarian Illuminati, the Trilateral Commission, the Masons, and even the IRS.

—Don Oldenburg
