

Finding conspiracy everywhere

Theories fulfill need to explain unexplained

BY DON OLDENBURG
The Washington Post

Every day since 1968, William Bennett Edwards has grown more certain something secret, something sinister, is growing around the rocky acreage on top of Afton Mountain, where he lives outside of Waynesboro, Va.

He and his wife, Virginia Davis Edwards, say they have witnessed the world's richest and most powerful people motoring past their modest house just off the shoulder of Route 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.

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.

Their destination: Less than a mile past the Edwardses' house 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 Council of 30 — supposedly an all-powerful cadre that has manipulated world economies, incited wars and ordered assassina-



John F. Kennedy
... Council victim?



Robert Kennedy
... strange shots

tions 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. "I can't say there's evidence," says Edwards, who is proprietor of the Gold Rush Gun Shop. "But without even apprehending or comprehending the nature of what was going on, you turn over a stone and see the maggots."

A real fascination

Conspiracy theorists 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 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 on Assassinations embargoed from the public? How much of a logical leap are some conspiracy theories from documented CIA brainstormings to murder Fidel Castro? To recruit Nazi spies after World War II? "There is a definite thrill to the idea of conspiracy theories," Jonathan Vankin says. "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.

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Conspiracy

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"I went into it curious," Vankin says. Once immersed in maffificent, 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? "The more you think like that . . . the way you see things starts to change, and it all looks a lot different than before."

Satisfying a need

Sacramento psychologist Terence Sandbek 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," Sandbek says. "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."

Such thinking tends to be selective in the facts used, tends to ignore contrary evidence, and uses

The most popular plots

Some of the basic plot lines of today's popular conspiracy theories:

- 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 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 Rockefeller and the Council on Foreign Relations that spawned the Trilateral Commission, and with the "Southwestern Establishment" of Texas oil barons and anti-communist right-wingers suspected of playing a role in the Kennedy assassination.

That AIDS is a "designer disease" created in secret laboratories by U.S. government scientists for eugenic purposes and for the genocide of homosexuals, drug users, blacks and the underprivileged.

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

lopes arrive already opened. And their telephones crackle with interference. "They sent a hit man once," laments Virginia Edwards, a pianist who is writing a book to be titled *Conspiracy of 30: Their Misuse of Music from Aristotle to Onassis*.

"We're the bottleneck," Bill Edwards says, 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

genocidal plot. (Often coupled with the theory of a systematic assassination of black leaders, including Malcolm X, Martin Luther King Jr., Black Panther Fred Hampton.)

That human beings are "property" of a superior extraterrestrial civilization manipulating events. (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 the disintegration of communism in the former Soviet Union is a KGB plot to lull Americans into a false sense of security.

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

In the thick of it

The Edwardses say they don't have to look farther for conspiracy than their mailbox, where enve-

as fact information that simply isn't true, Sandbek says.

Yet Sandbek says small doses of this can be good. "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."