

# Paranoia (or Is It Conspiracy?) in

By Mark Harris

As time passes history flattens, as if photographed with a telescopic lens. Unrelated events seem to merge. A network of connection extending from the Texas School Book Depository in 1963 to the Watergate in 1972 gains plausibility daily; persons and agencies appear and reappear as if the two crimes were of the same order, committed by the same hands and whitewashed by the same confederates — John Connally, riding in the 1961 Lincoln convertible with John F. Kennedy, signaled to the window above (Connally was later indicted for bribery after switching party affiliation from Democrat to Republican), brought down the gunfire, and was eventually found innocent by a commission including Chief Justice Warren, who was appointed to the Supreme Court by President Eisenhower on the recommendation of then-Vice President Nixon, thus paving the way for Nixon's victory over the Warren forces in California, his subsequent winning of the presidency prior to Watergate, and his eventual appointment of Gerald Ford to the presidency. Ford, then representative from Michigan, was a member of the Warren Commission!

A conference called "Conspiracy in America" was held at UCLA upon the occasion of the first anniversary of the killing of six members of the Symbionese Liberation Army associated with Patricia Hearst of good family. Several hundred people at-

tended. Most of them were college students or of student age; many were of good families, and their political direction was clearly left.

The conspiracy conference was one of several recently assembled, and it promised, in California and elsewhere, "follow-up meetings . . . attempting to mobilize a national movement against the

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developing police state" in America. "From Dallas to Watergate: Official Violence and Cover-up — A Campaign for Democratic Freedoms Conference. Films. Panels. Workshops on Assassinations. Intelligence. Community/Labor Representation."

The first person I met was a young black man at a table in the corridor collecting signatures for a petition in his own defense. He had been accused of murdering a policeman. Since he seemed to me so sweet and gentle, I could not believe he had committed murder, and I signed his petition.

Inside the auditorium, I was soon swept up by orators and visual demonstrations emphasizing the

theme that Lee Harvey Oswald (if he was involved at all) was only one of several conspirators in the murder of John Kennedy. The proof seemed to lie in the fact that various documents showed a discrepancy in Oswald's height. One speaker said that "the Warren Report gave" Oswald's height as 5 feet 10 inches. I knew Oswald wasn't that tall and I thought that, if the Warren Report were that wrong, perhaps we were onto something, after all.

Afterwards, I noticed in the Warren Report that Oswald's height was given (estimated) at 5 feet 10 inches, indeed, but not by the authors of the report; rather by a steamfitter named Howard L. Brennan, who had been watching the presidential motorcade roll by somewhere on Elm Street, and who "promptly told a policeman that he had seen a slender man, about 5 feet 10 inches, in his early 30s, take deliberate aim from a sixth-floor corner window . . ."

Many of the documents or speeches upholding conspiracy theory are the results of people having read badly or hastily, consciously or otherwise. Brennan, who was not the Warren Report, had guessed wrong as to both inches and years. In a poor reading, conspiracy theorists had failed to distinguish between the authors of the book and a character in it.

The continuing conference on conspiracy is a form of education. For

## Our Midst

that reason, after all, UCLA houses it. If such a conference is not the ideal definition of education it may be transitional to one that is better. Its appeal on the left is directed to students sincerely devoted, as far as they know, to justice and equality. Since they are students they are in the process of learning, and a great deal of their credulity may turn to skepticism even as the proceedings advance.

The better-prepared the student, the sooner his or her skepticism asserts or manifests itself, for the language and mode of the theorists, whether left or right, constantly exposes itself to its own vacancies. In Los Angeles I met students at the luncheon intermission whose belief in conspiracy theory had already dwindled somewhat during the morning.

But many of them are not wholly educated, or have not yet achieved a level of intellectual skepticism and, for this and other reasons, they are willing believers. Often, the young man or woman of the left feels excluded, angry, desperate, unable to participate in the decisions of life as he or she feels entitled to do, still student, still underling, still graded by someone else, unfairly denied the things he thinks he ought to have, including the right to decide the course of the world.

The world itself is a conspiracy to ignore him, defame him, put him down. Under certain circumstances,

if he becomes too troublesome (tells too many truths about their rotten system), "they" will punish him, frame him, kill him, dupe him, put a gun in his hand, give him a perch to shoot from, and leave him to his fate.

Whom did Lee Harvey Oswald shoot, after all, but a rich Harvard son of Establishment? Some part of the left theorist finds identity with Oswald, who floundered, tried Russia, floundered, returned, sought exile again and for a moment was the one-man office of the New Orleans chapter of the Fair Play for Cuba Committee. And yet to identify too directly with the doomed Oswald is to exclude oneself from the possibilities of the future.

The paradox is enraging, and when one's situation begins to become clear one struggles with supreme energy against any self-revelation which will vault one from certainty to doubt: At the UCLA conspiracy conference I was struck by the volume of laughter that greeted the sarcastic speculation that Fidel Castro (hero) may have been in league with the Dallas Police Department (villain); or, again, that an action of the left on a particular occasion could have resembled an action of the U.S. Marines.

The police, according to this cast of mind, are, at the command of the Establishment, out to murder the young. Such theorists can accept this because at the base of belief must lie the disposition to believe, and many of the persons gathered in the name of the exposure of conspiracy seem to possess their own personal causes, complaints, fears and mental struggles, which they seek to submerge in the abstract, and so dissolve.

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I asked the proprietor of the Birch Society's American Opinion Book Store in North Hollywood if his shop carried information on conspiracy. He replied, "We got information on conspiracy like you'll never believe." True, I count at least 22 American Opinion bookstores in Southern California, and I understand that more than 400 exist throughout the nation. They serve as the principal gathering places for conspiracy theorists of the right and as centers for the dissemination of their last-1000-films

and tapes. Of the stores I have been in, each one looks like the others, perhaps because they carry identical stock.

Theorists of the right, unlike those of the left, support their local police while tending to believe that the federal police, or military force, is "preparing the way for the end of the United States as a nation." In *Henry Kissinger Soviet Agent*, a book of the right, we are told that "Kissinger and his intellectual colleagues want international order, which would consist of World Government in a World of Disarmament." This is bad. It is "a surrender of nationhood."

The right theorist believes that Kennedy was killed by Communists. A pamphlet, *The Killers: Assassination to Order*, tells us that almost every death of a political person during the last 25 years was "part of a deadly operation managed with great skill by the International Communist Conspiracy." The caption of a photograph showing Ruby shooting Oswald at the Dallas jail explains, "Communist assassin Lee Harvey Oswald was silenced by Jack Ruby, a Castroite who died in 1965 from cancer." Ruby was certain that the disease had been induced. In June 1968 Sen. Robert Kennedy was murdered by Sirhan Sirhan, a Communist trained in assassination at the Qataneh camp outside Damascus."

Alan Stang, in another pamphlet, *Arthur Bremer: The Communist Plot Kill George Wallace*, asserts that:

"The attempt to kill Gov. George C. Wallace was a conspiracy . . . a Communist conspiracy. It could well involve agents of Communist China. And the Central Intelligence Agency might have had something to do with it. Here are the facts. Judge for yourself." Bremer was no "one fanatic," writes Stang, providing many statistics relating to Bremer's life. Stang claims to have "gone into the underground for the facts," although the facts appear to be nothing more than what one may obtain from public record and the newspapers, as Clifford Irving obtained the facts of the life of Howard Hughes.

Real conspiracies have occurred. But all other theories are conspira-

cies. Conspiracy theory explains some things. But the momentum or accident of history explains a great many more.

For America the great danger of conspiracy theory lies in its weak powers of discrimination. Thus, it is easily available for widespread exploitation of anxieties. The worst of the exploitation is not that hucksters make money but that conferences on conspiracy shall replace education, and our whole past shall be warped and denied. Nobody will remember that we are in significant ways a free people. Indeed, we are threatened less, in my opinion, by conscious conspirators than by those defects of both education and media which make conspiracy theories possible in the first place.

The exploitation of paranoia is easy enough. It is an old political and oratorical trick, and anyone can do it whose objectives are sufficiently self-serving. Orators of conspiracy are eloquent. Why not? They are unrestrained by doubts, hesitations or the absence of facts. They have settled upon their theories. They intend to qualify nothing, retract nothing, amend nothing. They charge guilt by association by means of connections from person to person, though the connections may be irrelevant even if true. They are masters of twisted definitions build into their grammar and certain to connect with the ready-made assumptions of their listeners.

The language and literature of conspiracy theory, left and right, is a nightmare of logical fallacy. "Sworn testimony" is not necessarily true testimony. An article in the *Congressional Record* is not necessarily true. An "identification" of someone by someone else is not necessarily accurate — even if the "identification" is made by such a grand-sounding intelligence as "the Internal Security Subcommittee of the Senate of the United States." Hearsay is not necessarily true. Sarcasm is poor argument. Name-calling is poor argument. Characterization is poor argument.

No person exists named the Establishment, in, for example, the

Establishment believes. "No persons exist named They, as in 'They won't let the truth come out.' For the college generation, suspended between childhood. . . . They are systematically destroying the evidence."

In adulthood, the yearning to hear the truth is all the more affecting in view of the difficulties of telling it. Truth is not specific and definite, like *The Guinness Book of World Records* — an extremely popular book among college students; as a matter of fact the truth may be dull, complicated and shredded with qualifications, more like the slow roundabout equivocations of older professors. It is not surprising, therefore, that the public lectures students attend, the books they optionally read and the media they consume tend to be those which deliver, above all, straight answers in a positive sound. Mind and body yearn to hear it from the inside, from someone who was there who can therefore, presumably, tell it like it was.

It is not surprising that John Dean was the speaker most in demand on the university lecture circuit during the recent season. Close behind Dean, according to the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, come those who deal with the occult and witchcraft, extrasensory perception, magic, UFOs, self-defense, science fiction. . . . The university lecture series is a form of popular entertainment, whose spokesmen now and then plausibly condemn reckless conspiracy theory even while they support those tendencies that feed it.

In a great deal of popular drama, especially on television, the line between fiction and non-fiction is badly blurred, if not erased: news is made dramatic and exciting, drama is made to sound true, authentic, factual.

News and drama alike focus upon individuals, seldom upon complicated forces or processes. It is, therefore, natural that young people and others whose experience is limited inevitably interpret events as the result of the actions of powerful individuals. Almost every crisis of television drama is resolved by gunfire or other violence, and every crisis of diplomacy is resolved by the meeting

somewhere of powerful persons privately talking. The Hollywood star system prevails. The processes of social accommodation were never so meticulously described as in the motion picture "The Godfather," in which death sentences are pronounced by "somebody" somewhere, in some smoke-filled back room, just as the conspiracy theorists say they are.

Colleges and universities, partly under their own financial pressures, partly in the spirit of democratic participation, increasingly view the student as a customer and give him "what he wants," which is likely to be an easier, simpler interpretation of events — and a better grade for mastering less. But the best defense against a paranoid citizenry may be a sound education in the grammar of those disciplines which fortify the mind against trickery.

The trouble with the mind of the conspiracy theorist left or right is its inability to carry more than one idea at once. It asks laws or principles governing all events, as if human affairs were motions of dumb bodies, but it ignores the one law that might serve — the idea that some things might be true upon some occasions and not upon other occasions. For example, although Watergate was clearly a "conspiracy" to defraud many citizens, the murder of John Kennedy may have been the dement-

ed act of one person.

Above all, it ignores the possibility of that mixture of accident and intention that is finally process. We are process. We are complexly. We are the products of our minds, singly and collectively.

Unable to endure slow motion, the mind of the conspiracy theorist is likewise unable to endure uncertainty. We may never know more than we know now of the truth of our several major political assassinations. We may know all that exists to be known, or we may be in the presence of a mystery: Not all crimes are solved, as they are on television.

Finally, it should be said that, despite the pitfalls he leads us into, despite the dangers, or simple discomfort, the conspiracy theorist seems to understand least his own importance. The paranoid contribution to decision must always have been great, integral to process, a noise and a clamor keeping lawmakers from slumbering in town halls and Congress, as children shape their parents, or as students stopped the war in Vietnam. The heat of paranoid instincts or intuitions warms the law with human concern.