

Conspiracy Theories

Re-phrased a bit, the whole thing sounded like Doctor Faustus on a bad day:

What would you do if an obscure fellow came along and told you that he'd heard from a convicted burglar that a man noted for telling a crucial truth in a season of blatant lies was really a spy set among the liars?

You'd tell him to go play his viola—at least, if you had any sense you would. But a good many people in Washington didn't. The nonsensical Alexander Butterfield-CIA yarn earned a lot of initial currency in this city because nearly everybody around here—and around the country—is hooked on conspiracy theories.

Such theories are, at their root, skepticism about the appearance of things. They incorporate the notion that the truth of critical events lies somewhere out of sight and that the system is trying to keep the rest of us from finding it.

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Aside from Watergate, we have had

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phony alarms in the Tonkin Gulf, secret bombings of Cambodia, revelations that the FBI burglars, that the Army and the CIA have been horsing around with LSD. The phones of Kissinger's aides were tapped, presidential candidates of both parties took illegal money. There have been shady grain deals, coverups of malfunctioning military hardware, beagle puppies mistreated in government laboratories, and you name it.

Traditionally, this country suspects—and tolerates—a certain amount of corruption in government. The snake that sells apples is never far from the powerful. Watergate was the great *intolerable* and, after it, all corruption and coverup were taken dead seriously.

The proven conspiracies give rise to the suspicion that any malpractice or misfortune of the system is due to other conspiracies. Thus, oil companies, the press, grocery stores, hospitals and scores of other institutions are assumed to be rotten. But the main focus of our cynical doubt is on government.

A great deal of this public, journalistic and political tendency to see slimy things under every paving stone of national life is irrational. But too much of it has proven valid. The conspiracy theory is now regarded as a sensible mode of American thinking and there's probably only one cure for it.

Somebody, somehow, has got to **make** government stop conspiring.