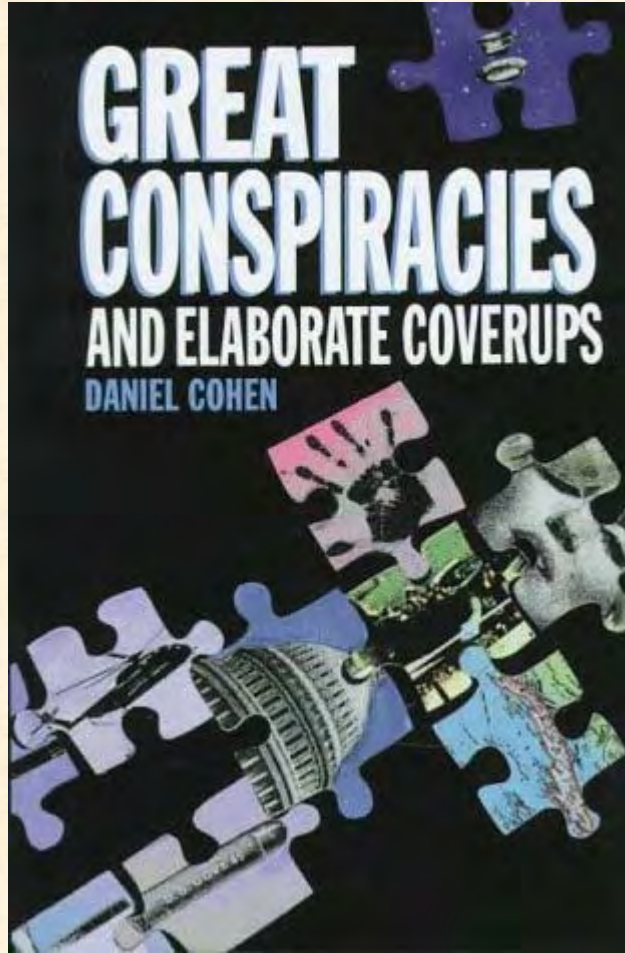


GREAT CONSPIRACIES AND ELABORATE COVERUPS

DANIEL COHEN



Great Conspiracies and Elaborate Cover-Ups

Daniel Cohen

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To RAP, who knew. Or did he?
D.C.

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Introduction:

What You Don't Know about Black Helicopters, Masonic Secrets, and the Murder of Marilyn Monroe

Did you know that the United States is regularly being crisscrossed by mysterious black helicopters? They have chased motorists, appeared mysteriously in the vicinity of grisly crimes, exchanged gunfire with angry citizens, and sprayed unknown chemicals that have killed pets, plants, and livestock. Government agencies regularly deny that such vehicles exist.

Despite hundreds or thousands of these sightings the major media never report on them. Have the media been silenced about this phenomenon? Is there a conspiracy? Is there a cover-up?

Did you know that the core of Washington, D.C., is laid out according to a "secret Masonic ritual"? By studying street maps of Washington you can find an entire pentagram traced out focusing on the White House, and a satanic horned goat traced around the Capitol. These are symbols that are used to conjure up evil spirits, and open a "spiritual door to the occult, a planned invasion of the powers of darkness," and the nation has "been under siege from the first day our first president walked into the Oval Office."¹

Did you know that despite the "official" finding that Marilyn Monroe committed suicide by swallowing an overdose of barbiturate pills, no trace of them was found in her body? Did you know that hundreds of hours of secret tape recordings of Marilyn that had been made by the powerful and unscrupulous head of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), J. Edgar Hoover, have mysteriously disappeared, and Marilyn's diary and other incriminating evidence were removed from the house before police arrived on the scene? And, most shocking of all, did you know that Robert F. Kennedy, attorney general of the United States and brother of President John F. Kennedy, was at Marilyn's house when she died?

Perhaps you didn't know all the details of the invasion of black helicopters, the Masonic secrets of Washington, and the murder of Marilyn Monroe, but I'll bet you've heard rumors. These are the sorts of tales that are hard to avoid, even if you want to. And these tales are so strange, so sinister, and yet so exciting that few of us try to avoid them.

Accounts of the appearance of mysterious unmarked "black helicopters" have been around for several decades now. But in recent years the accounts have increased in frequency and have become an integral part of the lore of many antigovernment groups, who are convinced that there is some sort of federal government or international conspiracy to deprive them of their freedom. The black helicopters are the air force of the conspiracy.

Nation of Islam leader Louis Farrakhan must have surprised and puzzled many of his listeners at the Million Man March in Washington, D.C., in October 1995 when he talked about the strange Masonic origins of Washington. And the description of Washington architecture as downright satanic was contained in material distributed by the Free the Masons Ministries of Washington State.

At least four books and scores of articles have been published describing the "murder" of Marilyn Monroe and pinning the crime on the Kennedys, the Mafia, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), the FBI, or all of the above. Someone might tell you the story and then add, with a knowing wink, "Of course it's all been covered up."

Usually you don't hear about these conspiracies on the evening news, or read about them in the leading newspapers and magazines. They don't appear in your history textbooks either. Author Jim Hougan, who wrote a couple of books on conspiracies, said that there are two kinds of history: the safe, sanitized "'Disney version,' so widely available as to be unavoidable . . . and a second one that remains secret, buried and unnamed."²

Authors Jonathan Vankin and John Whalen quote Hougan admiringly in their *50 Greatest Conspiracies of All Time*. They add that the second and secret version of history does have a name—it is "conspiracy theory." The "Disney version" they call "the New York Times version," "the TV news version," or "the college textbook version." They report, however, that they were "heartened" to discover the "openness" that so many people have to conspiracy theories. Openness is hardly the word for it. In America today large numbers of people positively rush to embrace any one of a huge number of conspiracy theories.

Sometimes it looks as if the nation, indeed the entire world, is awash in conspiracies and cover-ups, and that nothing is as it

seems. Often the same set of facts is made to fit half a dozen different, and diametrically opposed, conspiracy theories. Usually the theory a person chooses to believe depends not so much on the available information as on what that person already believes. Most conspiracy theories are flexible enough to fit many different points of view. For those on the political right, President John F. Kennedy was killed by a left-wing political conspiracy. For those on the left, it was a right-wing conspiracy.

One problem in discussing this subject is that there really have been and doubtless still are conspiracies and cover-ups. Groups of individuals, organizations, corporations, and governments have gotten together and tried to do things, usually shameful or unlawful, in secret. Stories have been suppressed, and information burned, shredded, and buried.

The Watergate affair during the presidency of Richard Nixon certainly comes to mind. So does the more recent Iran-Contra affair. Information about the decades-long efforts by tobacco companies to suppress data about the effects of cigarette smoking on health is still being slowly revealed. But the real conspiracies and cover-ups are rarely as grand, all-encompassing, or diabolically clever as those proposed by the conspiracy theorists. President Nixon and his associates conspired to pull some pretty dirty political tricks, and then tried to cover up what had been done. But they didn't plan the assassination of President Kennedy as has sometimes been alleged.

Conspiracy theories really aren't anything new in American history. Fears about the conspiratorial powers of the secretive Freemasons, or Masons, were at their height during the presidency of Andrew Jackson.

Some conspiracy theories, like the one that Elvis Presley faked his own death and is hiding in the FBI witness protection program because his life had been threatened by drug dealers, are harmless and actually quite funny. Others are not. The theory that the world is really controlled by a small cabal of Jewish bankers helped to inspire Hitler and the Nazis, with cataclysmically tragic results.

It's really impossible to say whether belief in conspiracies and cover-ups is more common today than it was in the past. While it seems as if these theories attract more followers than ever before, belief can't be measured accurately. However, what we can say with great certainty is that the belief in conspiracies and cover-ups is still very much with us today.

In order to try to understand some of these beliefs, where they came from and why they are so popular, we will look in detail at some of the more widespread conspiracy theories. And we will start with the most widely discussed conspiracy theory in modern American history, the one in which almost the only people who believe the "official" explanation are the officials themselves.

1

The JFK Assassination Conspiracy

Virtually everyone in America who was more than ten years old on November 22, 1963, remembers exactly where he or she was when first hearing the news that President John F. Kennedy had been shot in Dallas, Texas.

I was just returning to the office where I worked on West 57th Street in Manhattan when I saw a group of people gathered around a newsstand listening to the radio. Groups were gathered everywhere around radios or just talking, exchanging the latest bulletins from Dallas.

Pretty soon stores, offices, and theaters began to close down. I went back to the office for a short time, then I went home. No one ever announced the office was closing, we all just left.

The initial reaction was not sadness—that came later. The first reaction was shock or more accurately, surprise. How could the young and vigorous Jack Kennedy be dead, and how could he have been killed—in America!

Other American presidents had been assassinated, most notably Abraham Lincoln. But the last U.S. president to be assassinated before Kennedy was William McKinley, and that was way back in 1901. By 1963 the vast majority of Americans hadn't even been born when McKinley was assassinated. There had been serious assassination attempts on the lives of Presidents Franklin Roosevelt and Harry Truman, but few remembered them. The JFK assassination seemed not only terrible but a singular and utterly improbable event in American history, even though it wasn't.

Over the next few days the feeling of improbability grew stronger as the drama continued. A suspected assassin was arrested within two hours of the killing. He turned out to be an obscure little malcontent named Lee Harvey Oswald—a nobody. And he was supposed to have carried the killing out with a cheap mail-order rifle.

Two days later Oswald himself, surrounded by guards and TV camera crews, was shot while being led by guards through the basement of a Dallas jail. The killing was shown live on national television. The killer was Jack Ruby, owner of a seedy Dallas nightclub—another nobody. There never was a trial for Oswald, and while there were a number of investigations none of them ever seemed very satisfactory. Ruby



This is a photograph of Lee Harvey Oswald as he was being transferred from the city prison to the county jail. Just moments after this picture was taken, Oswald was shot and killed. Photographers and cameramen from across the nation recorded the unbelievable sequence of events.

was tried, found guilty of murder, and sentenced to death. He died before his appeal was heard.

To most of us it seemed not only improbable but downright unnatural that one of the most convulsive events in modern American history could have been created by such unimportant people. And it was in this atmosphere that the most vigorous of all American conspiracy theories grew and still flourishes to this day.

More than two thousand books have been written on the subject of the Kennedy assassination. There have been countless magazine articles and television shows. The assassination has been one of the most popular subjects for discussion on radio talk shows and on the Internet. Groups discussing every conceivable and many inconceivable aspects of the case communicate via e-mail, fax, telephone, letters, and well-attended conventions. As a result, more than four out of five Americans do not believe the official conclusion that Oswald was the lone assassin. 1^ The most widely held opinions are that Oswald was framed or that he was part of a much wider conspiracy.

Suspicious and rumors about the Kennedy assassination began to circulate almost as soon as the news broke, and they simply exploded after Oswald was killed. A Gallup Poll taken a week after the assassination showed that only 29 percent of the American public believed that Oswald had acted alone.²

The initial suspicion was that the Communists, Soviets, or Cubans were behind the plot. Oswald himself was a highly suspicious character. Though he had enlisted in the U.S. Marine Corps, Oswald was an outspoken Marxist, an ideological Communist though not actually a member of the Communist party. A short time after his discharge from the Marines in 1959 Oswald departed for the Soviet Union. He was reasonably well treated in the Soviet Union, where defectors from the United States were rare. He worked in a Russian factory and married a young Russian woman. Within two years, however, he was ready to come back to the United States with his wife.

The Soviet Union apparently had disappointed Lee Harvey Oswald, but he had not become disillusioned with the theory of

communism. After returning to the United States, Oswald was associated with a pro-Castro Cuban group and made inquiries about going to Cuba. All of this information was known almost immediately and naturally led to early suspicions that the assassination was a Communist plot.

The Soviets and the Cubans realized that if they were implicated in the killing of an American president the result could easily be war. Both countries went to extraordinary lengths to deny any association with Oswald and to offer whatever proof they could that there was no conspiracy. At first a lot of people, particularly people in the CIA, didn't believe them. Perhaps some still don't. But in the more than three decades since the assassination not a shred of credible evidence indicating a Communist plot has turned up. And this in spite of an incredibly intensive investigation by members of the intelligence community who were sure the assassination was a Communist plot. With the collapse of communism many of the records of the clandestine activities of the Soviet government have become public. They contain not a hint of a plot.

Strangely, though, it wasn't the idea of a Communist conspiracy that came to grip the American public. The most commonly repeated story was that the president had fallen victim to a right-wing plot.

At the time Kennedy was assassinated his popularity had been rising steadily. But there were plenty of people in America who disliked and even hated JFK. He was a president who stirred deep political passions, pro and con. Kennedy's most vocal foes were on the political right, and Dallas was a conservative city and home to many right-wing groups.

The atmosphere of speculation and rumor had grown so intense and so dangerous that within a week the new president, Lyndon Johnson, appointed a commission headed by Earl Warren, chief justice of the U.S. Supreme Court, to fully investigate the assassination. The Warren Commission had an unlimited mandate and virtually unprecedented powers. It was supposed to answer all of the public's questions about what had happened in Dallas on that fateful day. The final 888-page report was issued on September 27, 1964, some ten months after the assassination.

The Warren Commission conclusion was that Lee Harvey Oswald had fired the shot that killed Kennedy and that he had acted alone—there was no conspiracy. The initial media reaction to the Warren Commission report in the United States was highly favorable. But the public at large was far more suspicious of "official explanations," and soon critics were picking the report to pieces.

In the months following the assassination a whole network of amateur investigators sprang up. They collected and shared information and often misinformation about the assassination, and they passionately believed and argued that all the questions had not been answered. The list of unanswered questions and alternative theories compiled by these "assassination buffs" was formidable and, as far as the general public was concerned, very impressive.

The Warren Commission hurt its own credibility in a variety of ways. The commission was supposed to have had access to all relevant information. As it turned out this was not the case. Both the CIA and the FBI withheld significant material from the commission. For example, the CIA did not disclose to the commission the fact that it had plotted with members of the Mafia to kill Fidel Castro. That would certainly have given Castro a motive to have Kennedy killed. In the end, the information that had been withheld would not have changed the Warren Commission conclusion that Oswald had acted alone. But the fact that such information had been withheld led conspiracy theorists to ask, not unreasonably, what else was being hidden.

The most outrageous, gaudiest, and meanest of the conspiracy theories was the one promoted by New Orleans district attorney Jim Garrison. Oswald had been born in New Orleans, and though he had moved frequently he had returned to the city from time to time, including a visit shortly before the assassination. Oswald's New Orleans connections had been closely investigated by the FBI and the Warren Commission as well as by the assassination buffs.

Garrison was the sort of politician who is most politely described as "controversial." He was known for making sensational charges and then being unable to follow them up with evidence. Garrison had taken an active interest in the assassination from the start. In late 1966 the district attorney shocked the nation and his own staff when he said that he was going to investigate Clay Shaw, a prominent New Orleans civic leader, as a key figure in the plot to assassinate Kennedy. He contended it was a homosexual plot, a sort of "thrill killing." Shaw was known to be a homosexual.³

The whole homosexual plot idea grew out of stories told by some unbelievably unreliable witnesses that Oswald was a homosexual. Later Garrison was to assert, without a single shred of credible evidence, that Jack Ruby was also a homosexual.

As soon as Garrison's investigation was announced, he became a media star, not only in New Orleans but throughout the country. And he was a celebrity and major focus for the legion of assassina-



In the film *JFK*, the actor Kevin Costner stars as Jim Garrison. When the film was released, many critics charged that it was irresponsible of Oliver Stone to have produced a major motion picture based upon the twisted and sometimes downright untrue allegations of Jim Garrison.

tion buffs. As time went on, Garrison expanded his conspiracy. At one point he said it "was a Nazi operation whose sponsors included some of the oil rich millionaires in Texas."⁴

At other times, Garrison targeted the right-wing Minutemen, the CIA, the FBI, White Russians, and anti-Castro Cubans. Anyone who disagreed with him or his investigation automatically became part of the conspiracy and cover-up. This included President Lyndon Johnson, the Warren Commission, and even the murdered president's brother Robert Kennedy. "It is quite apparent to me," Garrison said, "that for one reason or another, he [Robert Kennedy] does not want the truth to be brought out."⁵

For years, Garrison went around floating ever wilder conspiracy tales before a fascinated American public. Finally, early in 1969, Clay Shaw was brought to trial, and Jim Garrison had to present his evidence in court and not on the Tonight show. The trial lasted about five weeks. Jury deliberations took forty-five minutes. Shaw was acquitted on the first ballot. Garrison's case was revealed as a complete sham.

But still this wasn't the end. Two days later, Garrison had Shaw rearrested on perjury charges. It was another two years before a federal court issued an injunction against Garrison from prosecuting Shaw. Garrison appealed to the Supreme Court. When he was turned down he said that he was being made a "scapegoat," that the CIA had murdered Kennedy, and that the Supreme Court decision "puts the final nail in John Kennedy's coffin." When Garrison was not reelected as district attorney, he complained that the CIA and FBI had conspired to bring about his defeat.

Clay Shaw was never convicted of anything, but he spent years under a legal cloud and was bankrupted by his legal bills. He filed a multimillion-dollar lawsuit against Garrison and his financial backers. A group of wealthy New Orleans residents had raised money for the Garrison investigation. But Shaw died in 1974, before his case could be brought to trial. He was a broken man, and a completely innocent one. The Garrison investigation was a shameful episode, and it grew out of public fascination with conspiracy theories.

Despite his defeat, Jim Garrison went on to write a book, *On the Trail of the Assassins*, in which he recycled all of his theories. This book itself wasn't very successful, but it became the basis for Oliver Stone's extremely successful 1991 film *JFK*. Kevin

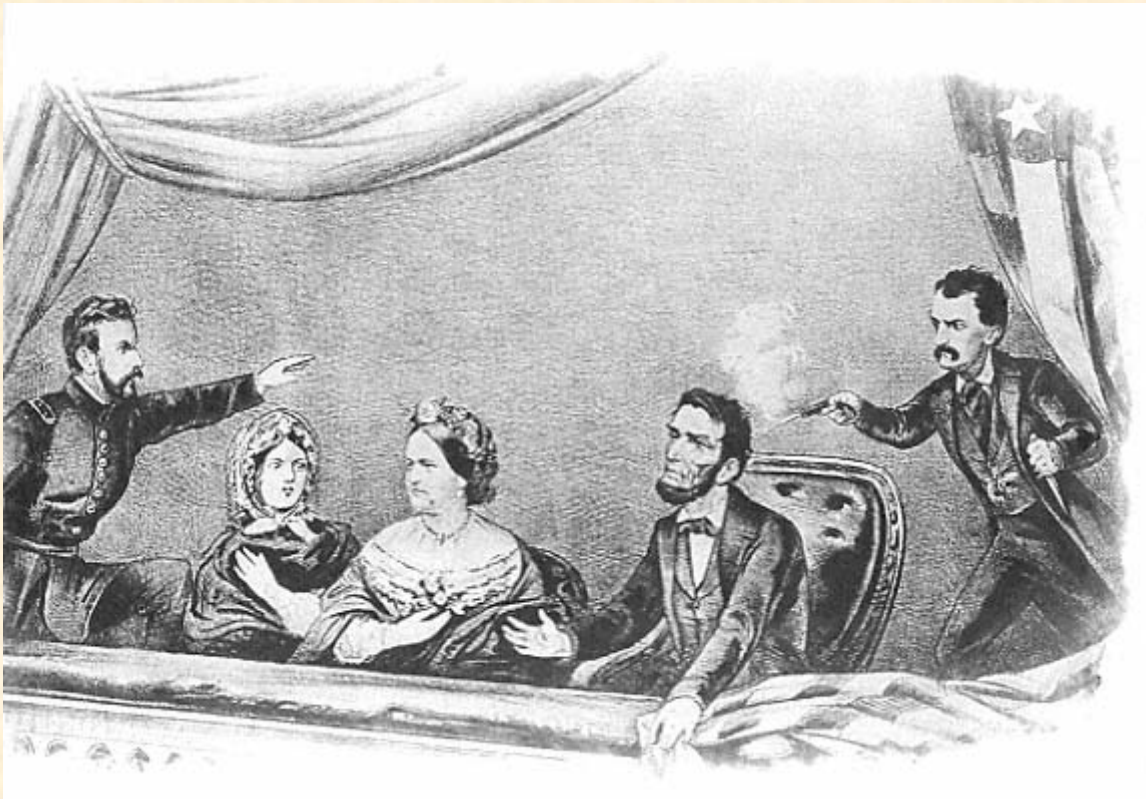
Costner played Jim Garrison as a hero, and Garrison himself appeared in a bit part. An entire generation learned much of what it knows about the Kennedy assassination from that film. And the film, which is extremely powerful and persuasive, is also dead wrong.

The more serious conspiracy buffs had become disillusioned with Jim Garrison and his phony prosecution. But they continued to peck away at the Oswald-as-the-lone-assassin explanation. In 1976 a special congressional investigation was launched to look into the assassinations of President Kennedy and Martin Luther King, Jr. The investigation took more than two years and cost over five million dollars. The conclusion was that a conspiracy in the King assassination was likely and that a conspiracy in the Kennedy assassination was a possibility. The most probable conspirators in the Kennedy killing according to this report were members of the Mafia. The reason the Mafia wanted to kill the president was that they hated his brother Robert Kennedy, who as attorney general was waging a campaign against organized crime. Jack Ruby was also supposed to have mob connections, and his killing of Oswald "had all the earmarks of a mob hit."

For a while the Mafia replaced the CIA and the Cubans as chief suspects. A whole flock of alleged hit men have either been accused of the killing or have actually confessed to it. But there is absolutely no solid evidence linking the Mafia to the assassination. Historically the mob has no scruples about killing their rivals or people who owe them money or who have double-crossed them. But they don't assassinate judges, FBI agents, or even reporters. It's just too risky. It is unthinkable that they would even consider killing a president, no matter how much they hated his brother.

Every year about six million people visit Dealey Plaza in Dallas where the assassination took place. Some of them pay seven dollars to visit the Conspiracy Museum, which opened early in 1995. The aim of the museum, according to its director Tom Bowden, is to get people to think. "Maybe that way we can correct the textbooks so that they contain information about the larger conspiracy."⁶

The Kennedy assassination has become an obsession and nearly a religion to many as well as a moneymaking business for some. Nonetheless, a good number of Americans cling to the assassination conspiracy theory simply because it helps to make sense out of an otherwise senseless event.



This illustration, produced for one of the many illustrated weekly newsmagazines of the mid-1860s, shows the artist's rendition of Booth shooting Lincoln in the box at Ford's Theatre.

2

The Lincoln Assassination Conspiracy

Before the Kennedy assassination, there was the assassination of Abraham Lincoln. To many Americans there is an almost mystic connection between the two awful events. Both the names Lincoln and Kennedy contain seven letters. The two murdered presidents were succeeded by vice presidents named Johnson. Lincoln was elected (to his second term) in 1860. Kennedy was elected a century later in 1960. However, the Abraham Lincoln assassination really was the result of a conspiracy. The question is, how large a conspiracy and who was really behind it?

First, the known facts: On April 14, 1865, President Abraham Lincoln, newly inaugurated for his second term, attended a performance at Ford's Theatre in Washington, D.C. During the performance John Wilkes Booth, a well-known actor and a member of America's leading theatrical family, walked unquestioned into the president's private box, pointed his derringer behind the president's ear, and shot. He then jumped to the stage in what he must have visualized as a triumphant, dramatic leap. But the spur of Booth's boot caught on some bunting that decorated the president's box and he landed awkwardly, fracturing his shin. In the general confusion he still managed to escape from the theater. Lincoln was carried to a nearby house, where he died a few hours later.

The conspirators had planned a triple assassination. George Atzerodt got drunk and didn't even attempt to kill Vice President Andrew Johnson. Lewis Paine stabbed Secretary of State William H. Seward and seriously wounded him, but Seward recovered.

Booth and an associate, David Herold, managed to flee to Maryland, where a doctor, possibly a member of the conspiratorial group, set his leg. After twelve days Booth and Herold were finally surrounded by soldiers in the barn of Garrett's Farm in Bowling Green, Virginia. Herold surrendered. "I'll shoot it out with the whole damned detachment," Booth cried. The barn was set afire, and Booth was shot by Sergeant Boston Corbett.

A few months later the conspirators who had been arrested went on trial and were convicted. Four were hanged and others given prison sentences.

The version of the Lincoln assassination that has come down to us through most history books is that it was entirely the work

of Booth—an egomaniacal, drunken, and fanatical actor. All the others were a motley crew of drunkards and fools under the control of the half-crazed Booth. And there is considerable truth to this version.

Booth was undoubtedly both self-centered and unbalanced. The Maryland-raised actor was a heavy drinker and a fanatic supporter of the Confederate cause—not fanatic enough, however, to abandon his lucrative acting career in the North and join the Confederate army during the Civil War. None of his associates was particularly bright and some, like the loutish Atzerodt, could easily be considered of below average intelligence. The flamboyant actor dominated and controlled them.

But from the moment the news of the president's assassination spread, there were hints, and sometimes shouts, of a wider and more sinister conspiracy. In order to understand this reaction it is necessary to understand the time. Just a week before the assassination, Robert E. Lee had surrendered. The war was essentially over, though some fighting continued. Although Washington was the nation's capital, it was located on the border between the North and South, and was really more of a Southern city. It was loaded with Southern sympathizers and spies. Passage between North and South, even during the height of the war, was quite easy.

At the time it was assumed that the conspiracy to Kill Lincoln involved many more individuals than Booth and the handful of nonentities who were ultimately convicted and punished for the crime. In fact, Jefferson Davis, president of the Confederacy, and a few other high Confederate officials were originally indicted as part of a conspiracy, but these indictments were eventually dropped.

John Surratt, one of the conspirators who managed to escape to Europe, told friends that the plot had been hatched on the orders of Davis. Surratt was captured in Europe two years after the assassination, brought back for trial in the United States, and acquitted on a technicality, although his mother, who had far less to do with the plot, had been hanged.

Booth had met with Confederate agents in Canada before he planned the assassination. A number of the other conspirators were known to be Confederate agents. Confederate codebooks and other incriminating materials were found in the possession of some of the conspirators. It was also said that Booth was a member of a secretive underground group called the Knights of the Golden Circle, who were fanatical Northern supporters of the Confederate cause. But little is known of the group.

If the Lincoln assassination had been a large and well-planned conspiracy, then it is reasonable to assume that Booth and the others would have had a well-planned escape. Clearly this was not supposed to be a suicide mission. Incredibly, Booth was able to escape from the city of Washington and ride south; he did get some help from Confederate supporters and perhaps some co-conspirators along the way. But basically he was on his own.

Perhaps there had been a broader plan once—but after Lee's surrender that would have collapsed. All the evidence indicates that in the end Booth and his followers did not have much organized support.

John Surratt, his mother, and several others involved in the assassination conspiracy were Catholic. When Surratt first escaped from the United States, he was hidden by some priests in Canada. In Europe he went to Rome and joined the papal guard under an assumed name. However, after he was identified, the pope's chancellor had him arrested and returned to America. In the mid-nineteenth century, anti-Catholic feeling ran strong in predominantly Protestant America, and there was a widespread belief that the Vatican was somehow responsible for the Lincoln assassination. For some in America it seemed as if the Vatican was responsible for every evil deed in the world. However, a Vatican conspiracy behind the Lincoln assassination was an idea that never really got off the ground.

Booth, incidentally, was an Episcopalian and as a young man had been a member of the virulently anti-Catholic Know Nothing movement.

Most people have assumed, and still assume, that there was a wider Confederate conspiracy behind the assassination. At the very least there is a belief that Confederate higher-ups had some knowledge of what Booth planned, but did nothing to stop it. This may have been covered up by a victorious federal government more anxious to heal the wounds of war than simply to punish the enemy. But this is not a very sensational theory.

What has grabbed the public imagination is the theory that some of Lincoln's own government, his Cabinet members, his friends, and even his family were part of a conspiracy and a cover-up. There are a number of troubling and suspicious elements in the Lincoln assassination. First and foremost is the poor security. Booth was able to walk into the president's box and shoot him.

The outbreak of war hardly improved matters. Death threats arrived almost daily, and there were a couple of serious attempts

on Lincoln's life. It was later discovered that one of these attempts was made by John Wilkes Booth, who actually managed to shoot the president's famous top hat off. Yet when Lincoln went to Ford's Theatre that fatal evening, there was only one guard assigned to him, and this guard had wandered off in search of a drink.¹

The guard was a policeman named John Parker. He had a reputation as an incompetent and a drunk, yet just a week before the assassination he had been recommended for duty at the White House by Mary Todd Lincoln, the president's wife. For some reason Parker's possible role in the assassination, if any, was not investigated, or if it was the results were never made public. Mary Todd Lincoln was not a popular figure in Washington, and there were even rumors that she was a Southern sympathizer—rumors that are totally unfounded.

Shortly before his own death in 1926, Lincoln's son Robert Todd Lincoln burned a large mass of his father's papers. He told a friend that the documents contained evidence of the treason of a member of his cabinet and he thought it was best for everyone that such evidence be destroyed. There has been no way to verify this intriguing statement.

After shooting Lincoln, Booth was able not only to get out of the theater without anyone stopping him, but to get clean out of Washington without being seen. The city was still under wartime conditions and the exit roads were guarded, yet none of the guards reported seeing Booth.

On the night of the assassination the commercial telegraph lines in Washington—controlled by the government in wartime—went dead, delaying news of Booth's escape.

The search for Booth was so badly organized that it reads like a catalog of errors. It's not unreasonable to conclude that if the assassin had not injured his leg jumping from Lincoln's box he might well have gotten clean away.

When the pursuing soldiers finally trapped Booth and his companion, they were under strict orders to take the actor alive if at all possible. The barn was set afire in order to smoke Booth out, but before that could happen the assassin was shot. The man who claimed credit for killing Booth was Sergeant Boston Corbett, the Jack Ruby of the Lincoln assassination. He was a strange man—a genuine religious fanatic who said he killed Booth on orders from God. Despite disobeying orders about taking the assassin alive, Corbett was given a reward and briefly became a well-known and popular lecturer. He got a job as sergeant at arms for the Kansas legislature, but one day he went completely berserk and began shooting up the chamber. He was confined to a mental institution, but then escaped and disappeared.

The best witness to the Lincoln assassination—the assassin himself—was dead, and anything he could have told investigators about the plot was lost.

But Booth was carrying a diary. This was taken to Washington, turned over to the War Department, and then it seems to have been lost for years. When it finally turned up again, it created a storm because eighteen pages—the critical pages covering events leading up to the assassination—had been torn out. The soldiers who found the diary swore that it had been undamaged when they first turned it in.

These are just some of the strange and suspicious events surrounding Lincoln's assassination. They can all be explained away as the result of confusion, coincidence, and incompetence. But true conspiracy theorists do not recognize confusion, coincidence, and incompetence—they see only a massive and smoothly running conspiracy. In 1937, historian Otto Eisenschiml announced that the man behind the plot was Lincoln's secretary of war, Edwin M. Stanton.

There is no doubt Stanton was a powerful man. He was primarily responsible for protecting the president, so the failures in protection may ultimately be laid at his doorstep. He was also in charge of investigation of the assassination and the apprehension of the conspirators. Indeed, in the days and weeks following Lincoln's assassination, Stanton exercised near-dictatorial powers. And he made mistakes—but were they just mistakes? ask the conspiracy theorists.

Why would Stanton have wanted Lincoln killed? The theory is that Stanton, a radical Republican, opposed Lincoln's conciliatory policies toward the defeated Confederacy. He wanted to see the rebels severely punished. But what possible connection could there be between such a man and the fanatic Confederate supporter Booth? Conspiracy theorists generally avoid this fundamental question.

The fallback position is that while Stanton and Booth did not actually conspire together, the secretary of war knew of Booth's plans and allowed the assassination to take place. That is slightly more plausible but still far-fetched. There is, in fact, evidence that Stanton did not want Lincoln to go to Ford's Theatre on the fatal night, but that the president brushed aside his concerns. Lincoln was a fatalist. He believed that if someone really wanted to kill you, then they would probably do so. He was

notoriously unconcerned about his personal safety.

One of the most intriguing allegations of the Lincoln assassination conspiracy theory is that John Wilkes Booth was not shot at Garrett's farm—that the dying man dragged from the burning barn was someone else. Booth was said to have escaped. He was placed in locations as diverse as the American Southwest, Mexico, and Europe and most improbably India, where, it was said, he lived to a comfortable old age on a large and secret government pension.

Women claiming to have been Booth's wives, men and women swearing they were Booth's children, and several old men claiming to have been Booth himself surfaced regularly in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. During the 1920s the mummified remains of a derelict painter named John St. Helen were trucked around the carnival circuit as the remains of John Wilkes Booth. This gruesome relic may still be on display somewhere.

In 1996 a lawyer petitioned to have the remains of John Wilkes Booth exhumed and subjected to DNA testing to see if the man buried in the grave was really Booth. This request was rejected, but it did get a lot of press coverage.

The theory that there was a vast conspiracy and a vast cover-up of the Lincoln assassination has become a permanent part of American lore.

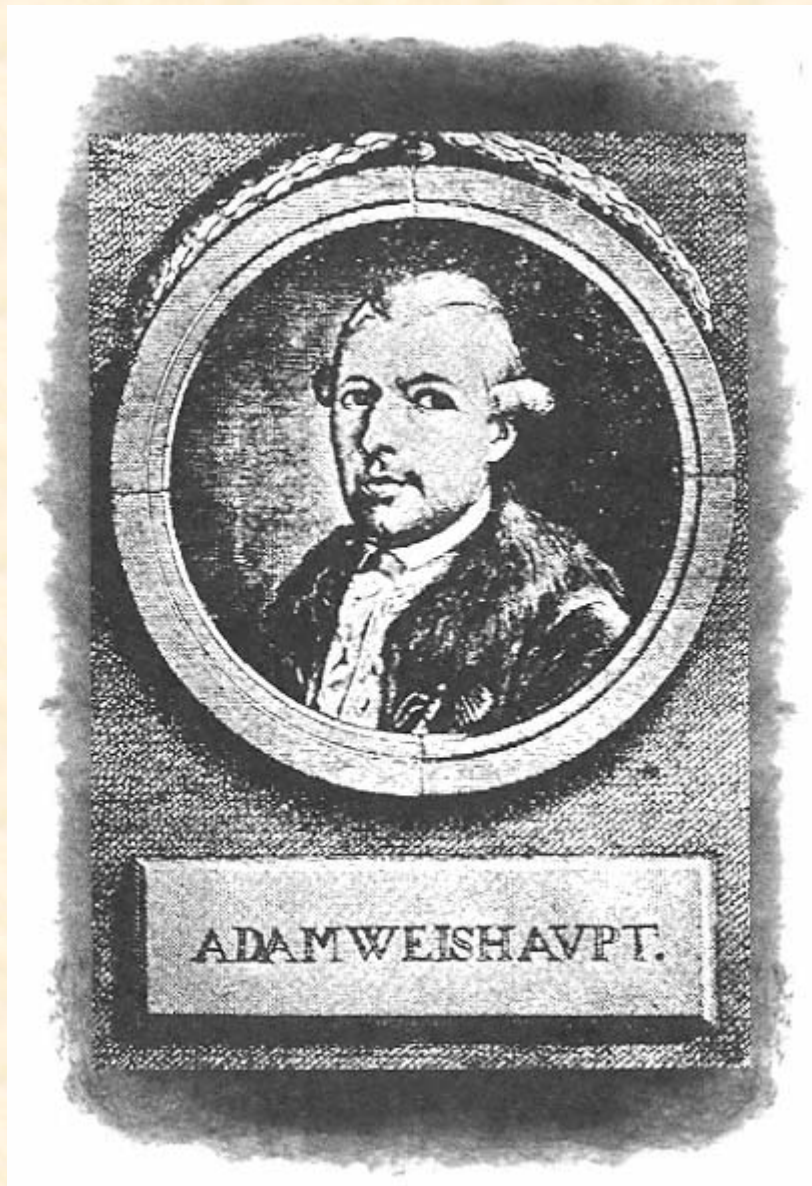
3

The Illuminati Conspiracy

What may be the longest-running conspiracy theory in American history began on Sunday morning May 9, 1798, when the Reverend Jedidah Morse electrified and terrified his parishioners at the Congregationalist First Church of Charlestown, Massachusetts. He warned them that there was a secret group of evil men that were plotting to destroy Christianity and all legitimate governments. Their agents, he said, were already at work in the United States infiltrating schools, political clubs, newspapers, even the U.S. post office. Their aim was to erode religious faith and patriotism.

Who were these evil men? According to the Reverend Morse they were the Order of the Illuminati.

It is not known how many, if any, of those who listened to the sermon on that May morning had ever



Adam Weishaupt, founder of the Order of the Illuminati.

even heard of the Illuminati. But within just a few months nearly everybody in the new United States had heard of them, and a genuine panic developed, particularly in New England.

The group called the Order of the Illuminati (illuminated or enlightened ones) was formed about 1776 by Adam Weishaupt, a professor of canon law at Ingolstadt University in Bavaria, Germany. Inspired by freethinking philosophers like Voltaire, the group's stated aim was to free humanity from "tyranny." For the Illuminati, this meant replacing Bavaria's church-state hierarchy with an egalitarian society based on "reason."

Weishaupt also had a mystical side and was heavily influenced by the Freemasons, or Masons (more about them in Chapter 4). The Order of the Illuminati was a secret society with a strict hierarchy. Weishaupt devised elaborate rituals and secret signs for his group, and he attempted to recruit members from Masonic lodges. Just how large the Order of the Illuminati became is difficult to determine. Deeply committed members may have been limited to Weishaupt and a few friends. There are some estimates that at its height the Illuminati may have had as many as 2,500 members, but the records are so foggy and unreliable that no one really knows.

In 1784 the highly conservative Duke Karl Theodor became Bavaria's chief of state, and he began an investigation of the Illuminati, the Freemasons, and other suspect organizations. Weishaupt lost his position at the university and fled the country. In 1787 the duke came down hard on the Illuminati. The order was banned, and those who were members faced exile or, in some cases, death. At this point the Illuminati simply disappeared from the historical record, probably because the organization disintegrated in the face of the onslaught. Weishaupt himself was ultimately reconciled with the Catholic Church before his death.

Why did this obscure European organization create a conspiracy scare in the United States some eleven years after it ceased to exist? The reason was the French Revolution of 1789, which really did overthrow church and state and traumatized many in Europe and the United States as well. But there were many persons who, rather than trying to understand the vast and complicated interplay of forces that brought about an event as momentous as the French Revolution, found it simpler and more satisfying to blame a conspiracy.

James Robison, a well-known Scottish scientist and mathematician, gathered together all that had ever been said about the Illuminati primarily by its enemies, added his own paranoid notions, and came up with a book called *Proofs of a Conspiracy Against All Religions and Governments of Europe*. It is a masterpiece of conspiracy theory.

Robison said that the Illuminati had not really been crushed in 1787, but had merely gone underground, and the obscure Bavarian professor was the sinister genius behind the French Revolution and practically everything else that was plaguing Europe. The book was filled with all sorts of sensational charges. It said that the Illuminati had developed a detailed plan for killing all the aristocrats and priests in Europe, and that the order possessed an arsenal of what would have then been considered high-tech weapons like exploding boxes and poison gas.

Many Americans, particularly conservative clergymen like the Reverend Morse, blamed the French Revolution for a rising tide of religious skepticism in America. For them Robison's book, which first appeared in America in 1789, struck a responsive chord.

Morse's sermon touched off a genuine Illuminati panic. Soon anti-Illuminati preachings came from pulpits throughout New England. The editor of the influential *Porcupine's Gazette* said that every living man should read *Proofs of a Conspiracy* because "it unravels everything that appears mysterious in the progress of the French Revolution."¹ *The New York Spectator* told its readers that they must choose between "INDEPENDENCE and SUBMISSION."²

Among those who thundered against the evils of the Illuminati was President Timothy Dwight of Yale. He said the Illuminati would turn American churches into Temples of Reason, cast the Bible into the bonfire, grind Christian virtues underfoot, and make concubines of Christian women.

The Illuminati excitement had a political side as well. The conservative Federalist party pointed to Vice President Thomas Jefferson, a driving force in the liberal Democratic-Republican party, as a possible Illuminati conspirator. Jefferson was an outspoken defender of France, and his religious views were anything but orthodox.

The Quakers, or Society of Friends, who were often persecuted in early America, were singled out as probable members of the conspiracy because of their egalitarian views. The United Society of Irishmen was also viewed with grave suspicion.

Ironically the Freemasons, who were so central to the European ideas of the Illuminati conspiracy, were treated very gingerly at first. The Masons had many powerful members in the new United States. One of America's leading Masons was George Washington himself, a revered, almost godlike figure in that era of American history.

There were no riots or deportations of suspected Illuminati. But those who feared the conspiracy waited anxiously for the plotters to make their move. A year went by and nothing happened. So the Reverend Morse climbed back into his pulpit on April 25, 1799, and said that he now had "complete and indisputable proof" of the Illuminati conspiracy against the United States—and this time the Freemasons were central to the story.

Morse had been given documents indicating that the Grand Orient, France's largest Masonic lodge, controlled a network of some sixteen American lodges plus a seventeenth in Santo Domingo. Most of those in the lodges were recent French immigrants. Only the truly paranoid could find anything sinister in these perfectly routine documents. But Morse and his supporters found conspiracy nonetheless. For example, the new French-dominated lodge in Santo Domingo, which had been the scene of a successful slave revolt, was called Perfect Equality. From that it was—to Morse at least—only a short leap to a belief that there was to be a French-led invasion from Santo Domingo in order to stir up rebellion among American slaves.

Another charge was that Weishaupt had escaped to America, where he had been able to successfully impersonate George Washington, the real Washington having been assassinated by Illuminati agents!

As the Illuminati conspiracy theories became more widely known, they inevitably began to encounter more serious opposition. In Europe, scholars were able to show that Robison's *Proofs of Conspiracy* was not only wrong, it was utter nonsense. Journalists compared Morse's obsession with the Illuminati to the Salem witch trials. By the end of 1799 the Reverend Morse and his supporters either changed their minds or just shut up in the face of critics, and what Jefferson called their "bedlamite ravings" came to an end.

And that should be the end of the Illuminati conspiracy story. But it's not. Once an idea, no matter how ill-founded and downright loony, enters the stream of conspiratorial thinking, it will resurface again and again in one form or another.

The influential nineteenth-century mythologist Lewis Spence tried to give the Illuminati an ancient history. Instead of beginning in Bavaria in the late eighteenth century, Spence traced their history back to Gnosticism, an early Christian heresy. He said that the ideas really took root in Spain while it was still under Muslim influence, and that later many Illuminati fled to France to escape the Spanish Inquisition. Attempts to trace secret conspiratorial groups back hundreds and sometimes thousands of years are common. Spence's theory is colorful, almost thrilling, but there is not one shred of reliable historical evidence to support it.

Far more sinister than Spence's speculations are the writings of the popular conspiratologist Nesta H. Webster in the early-twentieth-century. In a series of books she attempts to link a number of secretive movements like the Illuminati to all manner of revolutionary upheavals. One was the French Revolution, of course, for she relies heavily on Robison's writings, and another was the Russian Revolution of 1917.

Webster's 1924 book *Secret Societies and Subversive Movements* concludes ringingly:

"For behind the concrete forces of revolution—whether Pan Germanic, Judaic, or Illuminist—beyond the invisible secret circle which perhaps directs them all, is there not yet another force, still more potent, that must be taken into account? In looking back over the centuries at the dark episodes that have marked the history of the human race from its earliest origins—strange and horrible cults, waves of witchcraft, blasphemies, and desecrations—how is it possible to ignore the existence of an occult power at work in the world? Individuals, sects, or races fired with the desire of world-domination have provided the fighting forces of destruction, but behind them are the veritable powers of darkness in eternal conflict with the powers of light."³

Webster's books are still in print and still on the recommended reading lists of a variety of conspiracy-minded organizations.

In the 1960s the Illuminati made another and quite bizarre reappearance. In occult circles the rumor spread that an ancient and secretive brotherhood of Illuminati was now "controlling world events." No one seemed to know who the Illuminati were or whether they were supposed to be good or evil.

Two centuries after an obscure professor was chased out of his native Bavaria, and the tiny and short-lived organization he founded dissolved forever, the Illuminati lives on in the world of the conspiracy theorist.



The Jack the Ripper case was front-page news for *The Illustrated Police News*. This appeared after the fifth murder.

4

The Jack the Ripper Conspiracy

One of the most bizarre and colorful theories in recent times involves a famous English murderer. What makes the theory so interesting is that the conspirators are supposed to be . . . but no, why spoil the surprise. First let's set the scene.

In the fall of 1888 a serial killer brutally murdered five women in the Whitechapel district of London over a period of three months. The killer, who was never caught, became known to history as Jack the Ripper.

While the crimes were savage there have, unfortunately, been even worse crimes in history. The victims themselves were not famous; they were prostitutes, desperately poor women, and most were alcoholics. They were the sort of people who are murdered all the time—and no one really notices. The fact that the murders remain unsolved gives them a certain fascination, but there are lots of unsolved crimes.

Yet the obsession with the Jack the Ripper case has endured for well over a century. Perhaps it's the time and place, the streets of fog-shrouded late Victorian London, the city of Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. Perhaps it's the sinister name given to the killer—Jack the Ripper. Whatever the reason or reasons, these are the most famous murders in modern history. Will people still be discussing the O.J. Simpson case in the middle of the next century? Personally I doubt it. There have been hundreds of books, movies, television dramas, and plays about Jack the Ripper. There is a regular journal of "Ripperology," which examines and reexamines every minute detail of the case. A tour of the Jack the Ripper sites is an

increasingly popular tourist attraction in London today.

And it is inevitable that there are those who must believe a case this famous cannot just have happened by accident, it can't be an ordinary murder, it must be something else—something is being covered up—there must be a conspiracy here.

After the first two murders the police were under a great deal of pressure to find the murderer—to "do something." Several different police agencies as well as private groups were literally falling over one another in attempts to catch the murderer and prevent further crimes.

Then on the night of September 30, 1888, there was another Ripper murder—in fact, two of them in a single night. About a five-minute walk from the scene of one of the murders, police found a piece cut from the victim's apron and above it a blurry message chalked on a wall. It read:

The Juwes are not
The men that
Will be
Blamed for nothing ¹

When Sir Charles Warren, commissioner of the Metropolitan Police, arrived on the scene he declared that the message was "meaningless" and ordered that it be washed away, even before it was photographed. This was the act that first triggered suspicions that the police were covering something up.

There was a lot of graffiti chalked on the walls of Whitechapel, and there is no solid evidence that this message had anything to do with the Ripper murders. The fact that it was said to be "blurry" indicates that it may have been on the wall long before the killings. And the idea that a man who has just committed the second of two brutal murders in an area that he knows is swarming with police would hang around and chalk a message on a wall seems more than a bit far-fetched.

Still, destroying a potential piece of evidence is not good police work, and Warren probably was trying to cover something up—but his motives may not have been sinister in the least.

The area in which the murders were committed was home to large numbers of poor immigrant Jews.

A chief suspect in the murders was someone known as "leather apron," thought to be a kosher butcher. There was a great deal of tension in the area and Warren believed, with good reason, that if the Ripper murders were linked to the Jews, a riot could easily break out. He may have wanted to avoid inflaming local passions.

The last known murder by Jack the Ripper took place on November 9, 1888. Within a very short time after that, the police essentially closed down their investigation. The special patrols were withdrawn, and the civilian "vigilance" group was disbanded. Some of those involved in the investigation hinted that they knew who the Ripper was, and that he had either committed suicide or had died in an institution. The threat was over.

But very quickly another rumor began to spread: The police knew the Ripper was not some obscure homicidal maniac, but a Very Important Person, whose crimes were being covered up by the authorities. One of those whose name came up in the speculation was Prince Albert Victor, Duke of Clarence. He was a Very, Very Important Person, for Prince Eddy, as he was generally called, was the grandson of Queen Victoria and eldest son of the Prince of Wales. He was therefore in direct line to become king of England. You didn't get much more important than that.

By most accounts Prince Eddy was a rather dimwitted and spiritless young man whose name had been connected with a couple of earlier scandals.

When he died unexpectedly of influenza in January 1892 there doubtless were private sighs of relief mixed with public expressions of sorrow. At least the monarchy would be spared the embarrassment of such an obviously unfit individual becoming king.

It was many decades before Prince Eddy's name really hit the headlines as a Ripper suspect. In 1970, Dr. Thomas Stowell, a retired surgeon, made public the results of research he had made forty years earlier. He had examined the private papers of Sir William Gull, Queen Victoria's physician. Stowell did not actually name a suspect, calling him only "S," but the clues were unmistakable. He said the papers indicated that "S" had not died of influenza as reported, but of syphilis, which had affected his brain and transformed him into an insane murderer.

After the excitement broke, Stowell said that he had not meant to implicate Prince Eddy, but would not say whom he had meant to implicate and refused to explain all the obvious points of comparison between "S" and the heir to the throne. About a week after issuing this denial Stowell died, and his family immediately destroyed all his papers, so his evidence, if there really was any, could not be examined.

The name of Dr. William Gull had come up before in connection with the Ripper murders. Robert Lees, a journalist and psychic at the time of the murders, insisted that he had visions of the murders and that he knew where the murderer lived. He allegedly led police to the home of a prominent physician who lived in an elegant West End house. And Dr. Gull was a prominent physician who lived in an elegant West End house.

It was the next step, however, that elevated the Jack the Ripper story from a simple cover-up to the higher realms of conspiracy theory. In 1973 the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) was preparing a television special on the Ripper case. They interviewed an elderly artist named Joseph "Hobo" Sickert who had a very strange tale to tell. Back in the 1880s, Sickert's father, Walter, had been quite a well-known artist who had many aristocratic friends.

According to Joseph, his father said that Prince Eddy had been sent to him for social and artistic tutoring. While visiting the artist's Bohemian studio the prince met and fell in love with a Catholic girl named Anne Elizabeth Crook, who worked in a nearby tobacco shop. The pair were secretly married and had a child, a girl called Alice Margaret.

When Buckingham Palace and the Cabinet got word of this, they were horrified. A secret marriage to a commoner, and a Catholic to boot, might have brought down the monarchy. Royal agents were dispatched to separate the pair. The prince was sent to his family and told in no uncertain terms that he would never see Anne and his child again. Anne apparently was kidnapped and confined to an institution, where she eventually died a pauper and a lunatic.

The child, however, escaped in the company of her nursemaid, an Irish Catholic girl named Marie Jeanette Kelly. Walter Sickert was able to place the child with some poor relatives. Eventually she became Sickert's ward and ultimately his mistress and the mother of Joseph Sickert. She died in 1950.

Now here's where the Ripper conspiracy comes in. Nursemaid Kelly went back to Whitechapel, where she was reduced to alcoholism and prostitution. With the aid of three of her cronies she decided to blackmail the government. The prime minister, Lord Salisbury, feared that the story not only would topple the monarchy but also that it would curtail the influence that the Freemasons had over the British government. Salisbury was a high-ranking Freemason, and in order to eliminate the blackmailers he turned to some of his brother Masons.²

The Masons (or Freemasons) are a secret society that began in England in the seventeenth century. Masonic lore holds that the origins of the order can be traced back to biblical times, but there is no evidence of this. Today the center for the Masons is the United States. The order is generally accepted as a fraternal businessmen's organization. The "secret" rituals and paraphernalia, which are not all that secret, are now regarded by most outsiders as either harmless or silly.

But at some times and in some places the Masons have been viewed with genuine suspicion and real fear.

In Britain some have accused the Masons of having undue political or business influence, but there have been no widespread anti-Masonic panics as have occurred in France, Italy, or Spain.

Chief of the Masons enlisted to get rid of the blackmailing women was a physician, Sir William Gull, and Sir Robert Anderson, one of the police officials in charge of the Ripper investigation. Also involved was a seedy coachman named John Netley.

The three Masons roamed Whitechapel in Netley's coach killing the women one by one. There were supposed to be only four victims, the former nursemaid and her three friends, but one innocent woman was killed because of a confusion of names. The final victim, and the one who was most horribly mutilated, was Mary Jeanette Kelly—the nursemaid herself.

According to Joseph Sickert the killings and mutilations were carried out in accordance with a Masonic ritual. They were to serve as a warning to all who would challenge the power of the Freemasons. There was a suspicion that the killings were more brutal than necessary because Gull had lost his mind. Officially, Gull died in 1890, but there were rumors that he had become a raving madman and was secretly confined to an institution, where he died a few years later.

All of this, of course, was covered up by high-ranking Masons in the police force.

At first glance this story seems to be absolutely absurd. And that is what the BBC program concluded it was. But a young reporter named Stephen Knight was sent by his paper to interview Joseph Sickert.

Knight claims he was very skeptical in the beginning, but the old man was so obviously sincere that he began his own investigation.

Knight was a diligent and resourceful researcher. He was able to obtain Scotland Yard documents on the case that no one had ever seen before, and the result of his researches, [i]Jack the Ripper: The Final Solution, is a genuine masterpiece of conspiracy theorizing. It has everything: the royal family, a famous and horrible series of murders, an enormously powerful secret society, a high-level government cover-up. The book was an instant sensation because it read like a piece of thriller fiction.

There is, however, quite an ugly side to Knight's work. He relies heavily on a document called *The Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion*. This document has a notorious history. It was fabricated by the police in Czarist Russia early in the twentieth century. It was supposed to be the plan of a secret cabal of high-ranking Jews to gain absolute power in the world by treachery and violence. It became a cornerstone of Nazi propaganda and is still central to much anti-Semitic conspiracy theory today.

Knight, however, simply calls the *Protocols* a Masonic document, and says that it shows that at least some Masons would stop at nothing—absolutely nothing—to gain and keep power. He does not discuss the sinister history of the document.

Regarding the notorious Jewes graffiti that Police Commissioner Warren ordered washed away, Knight insists the word is not a misspelling of Jews, as everyone else believed. The word, says Knight, comes out of Masonic lore. It stands for *Jubela*, *Jubelo*, and *Jubelum*, three apprentice masons who were supposed to have murdered the Grand Master Hiram Abiff, the mason in charge of building Solomon's Temple. In Masonic myth the three were tracked down, killed, and mutilated by other Masons as a warning to those who would betray the secret brotherhood. The mutilations, says Knight, were similar to those carried out on the Ripper's victims.

A complicated theory of this kind often has a weak link. In this case the weak link turned out to be Joseph Sickert, the man who had started the whole thing. In June 1978, two years after Knight's book was published, and endorsed by Sickert, the old man gave an interview to the *London Sunday Times* in which he said: "It was a hoax, I made it all up . . . a whopping fib." Sickert stuck to the story about his parentage, but the Ripper story he said was pure fantasy. "As an artist I found it easy to paint Jack the Ripper into the story."³

Knight, however, refused to back down. He shot back saying that Sickert was incensed because during his researches he had discovered that the third man in the murderous trio was not Sir Robert Anderson but Walter Sickert. Far from being a protector of some of those threatened by the Masonic killers, Joseph's father was one of the killers himself.

Both Stephen Knight and Joseph Sickert are now dead, and the controversy between them will never be resolved, but the unsupported and wildly unlikely theory of a Masonic conspiracy lives on. New books about the case, and they appear regularly, almost always contain a serious discussion of the theory. Knight's own book is still available, as is a video based on the book.

And if you want to see the case solved, find a copy of the 1979 film *Murder by Decree*. It is quite a gripping film in which Sherlock Holmes uncovers the terrible Masonic conspiracy behind the Jack the Ripper murders. It's all fiction, of course, as it should be.

5

The Conspiracy King

In the world of conspiracy theorists there is no one quite like Lyndon LaRouche. It's not that he holds the most bizarre theories—though he does believe that Queen Elizabeth of England is head of the international drug trade—for others have promoted even stranger ideas. It is that LaRouche has turned conspiracy theory into a cult and a business. Lyndon LaRouche is truly the Conspiracy King of the world today.

With his large bald head and thick rimless glasses, LaRouche looks more like a retired insurance salesman than a wild-eyed fanatic. His paid televised political speeches are delivered in such a flat and boring style that a casual viewer could easily miss the absolutely nutty things he says.

LaRouche's odyssey in the world of conspiracy has been a strange one. He came from a Quaker background, and his pacifism led him to become an army medic rather than an active soldier during World War II. After the war he drifted into a variety of left-wing groups. For a time he took the name "Lyn Marcus," after Lenin and Marx. During the upheavals of the 1960s he formed his own group, called the New York Labor Committee.

But LaRouche's left-wing associates began to view him with increasing suspicion. He formed a new group called the National Caucus of Labor Committees, and declared war on his enemies, real and imagined. Some of his followers began beating up members of other left-wing groups. The followers were often arrested for assault, while LaRouche himself remained safely in the background and out of jail.

By the mid-1970s, LaRouche proclaimed that the CIA, along with the Soviet KGB, British Intelligence, the New York City police department, and the Rockefeller family, were out to assassinate him. They were going to kidnap some of his followers, brainwash them, and turn them into robotlike assassins who would be triggered by code words to kill him.

The outside world got a glimpse into the paranoid and violent world of Lyndon LaRouche in January 1974, when a young woman named Alice Weitzman sailed a paper airplane out of the window of her New York City apartment. The plane landed at the feet of a mother and child out for a walk. When the woman unfolded the paper she found it contained a desperate note. Alice Weitzman said she was being held prisoner in her apartment, and that her captors were about to move her to some other secret location. When the mother looked up she saw the young woman waving frantically from her window. She decided it was no joke and contacted the police. Forty minutes later, when the police arrived at the apartment, they found that the note indeed was no joke.

Weitzman had been a member of LaRouche's group, but she had begun to express some skepticism. It was then that the group decided that she had been programmed to kill. She wasn't the first. The group had already tried to "deprogram" several other members. One of them was sent to the hospital when he was found running through the streets screaming, "Decontrol me! Decontrol me!"

When *New York Times* reporter Paul L. Montgomery interviewed members of the group, he found that they "seem incapable of talking about anything but the conspiracy . . . there seems to be anxious expectation about who will be singled out as a brainwashing victim. Mr. Marcus [LaRouche] has told them they are not responsible for their thoughts or actions because of the 'programming.'"

By the early 1970s, LaRouche's view of his own mission had become quite grandiose. "The human race is at stake. Either we win or there is no humanity. That's the way she's cut."

By the mid-1970s, LaRouche had moved from far-left politics to the other end of the political spectrum. He insisted that his earlier alliances with the left had only been "tactical." He formed a close alliance with the Ku Klux Klan and the far-right Liberty Lobby. And he sent his followers to receive militia-like training at a far-right enclave in Georgia.

His conspiracy theories took on a familiar far-right anti-Semitic tone. He announced that Zionism was an evil cult, that a cabal of Jews controlled organized crime, that the Holocaust was mythical, and that the Jewish organization B'nai B'rith "resurrects the tradition of the Jews who demanded the crucifixion of Jesus Christ."¹

LaRouche has an even more overarching conspiracy theory. He sees all history as a conflict between an evil "oligarchy" and what he has called the force of "neo-Platonic humanism," whose leaders have included Alexander the Great, Charlemagne, and more recently Lyndon LaRouche. The "oligarchy," which includes everything that LaRouche does not like, has committed every imaginable crime.

There is a generous helping of genuine neo-Nazi racism in LaRouche's theories. He says his followers are a sort of superrace of "golden souls," while the enemy, the "Zionist-British organism which must be destroyed so that humanity might live," is really a separate biological species. He wants to see a dictatorship established in the United States and a "total mobilization" in preparation for the "total war" that is sure to come.

But for sheer outrageous goofiness, it is statements like this that have gotten LaRouche the most notoriety: "The entire world's drug traffic has been run by a single family since its inception." Since the statement is taken from a LaRouche publication entitled [i]Dope Inc.: Britain's Opium War Against the U.S., it will come as no surprise to find that he is talking about the British royal family as head of the dope trade.

The royal family can't do it alone, of course. They are aided by a vast collection of secret societies, private policy groups, and intelligence agencies. All the usual suspects are named. But there are also some unusual agents of the conspiracy as well. For example, LaRouche has named the rock group The Grateful Dead as a "British intelligence operation." It was spawned from the CIA's experiments with psycho-active drugs like LSD at Stanford University and similar far-out Bay Area institutions of higher education. "That was an Allen Dulles [a former CIA director] period operation which was run together with the Occult Bureau types in British intelligence, such as Aldous Huxley [a British author who experimented with drugs]." LaRouche continues:

"This is part of this satanism business. Call it counterculture. Call it the Dionysus model of the counterculture.

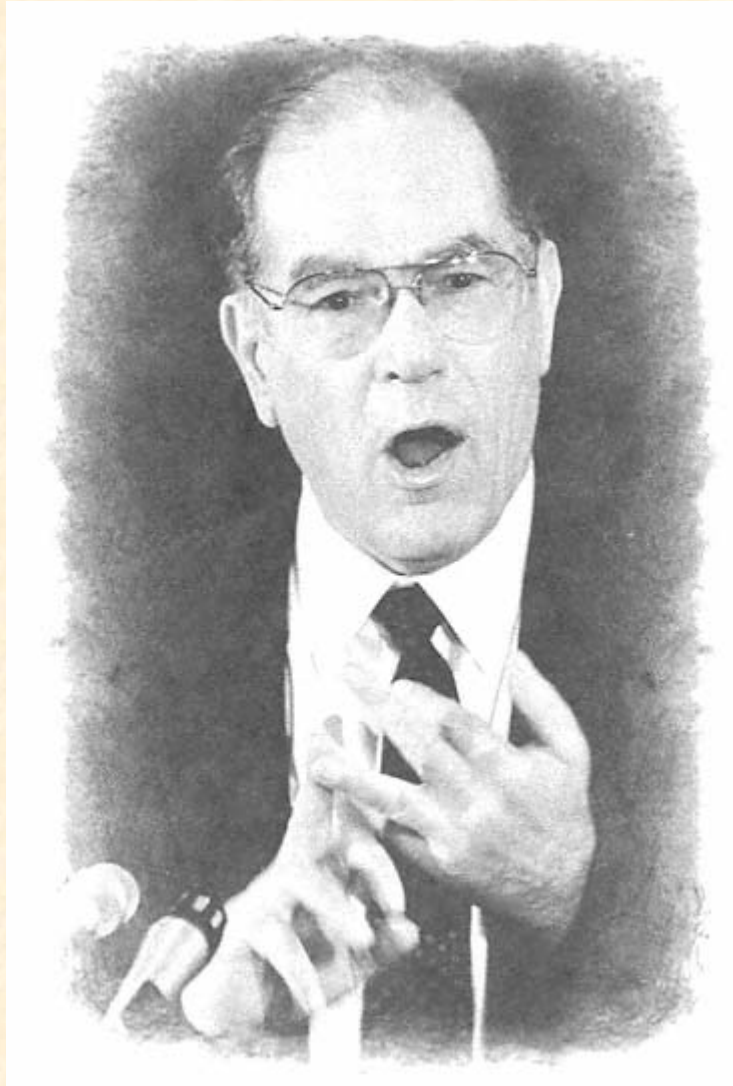
"Rock is essentially a revival of the ancient Dionysiac, Bacchic ritual. It does have a relationship to the alpha rhythms in the brain. If combined with a little alcohol and more, shall we say, mood-shaping substances with youth, with funny sex, this does produce a personality change of the counter cultural type."²

The notion that the "sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll" counterculture of the 1960s was brought about by some sort of conspiracy did not originate with LaRouche; that it is all the fault of the British royal family probably did. More recently LaRouche has suggested that the British government was somehow behind the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing.

In addition to being a dedicated conspiracy theorist, LaRouche is also a dedicated conspirator. There are a variety of LaRouche-sponsored organizations and publications that do not openly disclose their sponsorship. LaRouche followers have attempted to infiltrate and control other organizations—without a great deal of success—and LaRouche followers have often tried to run for public office, again without making their affiliations and their agenda public.

In 1986 a couple of LaRouche followers actually won in Illinois Democratic primaries for lieutenant governor and secretary of state. The reason they won is that they were attractive and articulate individuals, and they never told the voters what they really believed and who had sponsored their campaigns. Since the Democrats were given no chance to win the general election, little attention was paid to the primary election and people voted for the LaRouche followers assuming that they were regular Democrats.

This victory, however, was a mixed blessing for LaRouche. Once it was discovered, the national press



On April 9, 1986, Lyndon LaRouche addressed the National Press Club, and this photograph was taken. While he had been toning down his message in previous public speeches, at this session he characterized his political enemies as drug pushers, homosexuals, pro-Soviet, or insane.

suddenly began to examine what the man actually stood for. Lyndon LaRouche, who had up to that time been little more than an eccentric fringe figure, suddenly began to look a lot more menacing.

In his regular runs for president, usually in Democratic party primaries, LaRouche tries to hide his more odious ideas behind code words. For example, in a 1984 prime-time paid political broadcast on CBS, LaRouche did not engage in his usual anti-Semitic diatribes. He just spoke of the influence of "Kissinger and his friends." Former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger is Jewish. The reference might have slipped past a casual listener, but it was not lost on the leader of the Michigan Ku Klux Klan—who saluted LaRouche for "exposing the neo-atheist materialism of Kissinger to the dismay of the Talmudists."³

Lyndon LaRouche does not really respond to questions or criticism. Anyone who does criticize him is immediately attacked as a part of the conspiracy against him. For example, at a rare news conference in 1992 when a reporter asked him a question he didn't like LaRouche shot back, "I'm not going to talk to a dope pusher, like you."⁴ That reaction is typical.

LaRouche has a devoted, even fanatical following, but not a large one. There are probably not more than a few hundred or so hard-core LaRouchies. Yet he lives in a luxurious and well-guarded estate in Leesburg, Virginia, and his network of organizations seems very well funded. Where does the money come from? Some of it comes from wealthy supporters. His biggest catch to date is Louis Du Pont, a member of one of the richest families in America. In a well-publicized case, Du Pont's parents went into court to prevent Louis from giving everything he had to LaRouche. LaRouche supporters have also sold publications, often with innocuous and misleading titles, in airports and other public places.

But still, that didn't seem to account for the millions of dollars that the LaRouche organization raised. When the U.S. government looked into his finances, it was found that he had fraudulently solicited loans from his supporters, mainly elderly women, and never paid them back. LaRouche was tried, convicted of fraud and tax evasion in 1989, and sentenced to fifteen

years in a federal penitentiary. He said that this was all part of the conspiracy against him, and predicted that he would be assassinated in prison. Instead he was paroled in 1994. He walked out of prison uninjured and unrepentant, went back to Leesburg, began grinding out conspiracy theories once again, and filed as a candidate for the Democratic nomination for president in 1996.

LaRouche presents no particular danger to society. Though he has been around for decades, he has never been able to attract more than a small following, and advancing age will not improve his appeal. His theories, awful as they may be, are not original. Most would exist with or without him.

The real danger of Lyndon LaRouche is that he is probably the most active and effective publicist for conspiracy theories in the world today. LaRouche controls a variety of publications and has organizations in several different countries. He also has a dedicated staff of "investigators" and "researchers." These are individuals who collect clippings and rumors about anyone that Lyndon LaRouche doesn't like. That's practically everyone.

LaRouche is not particularly effective in spreading his grand theories. Besides, he is now so well known and notorious that no one with a shred of respectability wants to be associated with him in any way. LaRouche has been more effective working on smaller issues and working behind the scenes. It has often been charged that the LaRouche organizations have been used and even paid to dig up dirt and spread false rumors for others.

An example of this sort of activity surfaced in 1995. The U.S. Senate appeared poised to ratify an international treaty to preserve the Earth's biological resources. It had broad bipartisan support. But suddenly and unexpectedly problems arose. Senator Robert Dole called for a postponement of the vote, and ultimately the vote was never held.

Where did the opposition come from? Much of it crystallized around the idea that "biodiversity" was a new religion and the treaty was a threat to U.S. sovereignty, private property rights, control of natural resources, and individual freedom. And that theory came from an article written by a LaRouche associate and first published in a LaRouche magazine. The article was then widely distributed by a number of completely respectable organizations like the American Sheep Industry Association, which had opposed the treaty from the start but claimed that they had no idea of the origins of the alarmist information they were faxing to their senators.

The October 17, 1996, issue of The Washington Post quotes Columbia professor Manning Marable regarding a "budding alliance" between LaRouche and Louis Farrakhan, Nation of Islam leader and sponsor of the Million Man March in 1995.

Said the Post, "The LaRouche organization, which frequently advances global conspiracy theories, has worked with the Nation of Islam in the past. But since the march, that connection has grown tighter with former LaRouche vice presidential candidate and civil rights activist James Bevel frequently appearing with Farrakhan."

Lyndon LaRouche has been around a long time. He has dabbled in practically every branch of conspiracy theory. Many of his followers and former associates have gone on to their own careers in the small and murky world of conspiracy theory. His numerous publications have been used as sources for other conspiracy theorists. Lyndon LaRouche is truly the Conspiracy King.

"A Conspiracy So Immense"

For nearly half of the twentieth century a significant percentage of the American public believed that the United States was not merely threatened by the worldwide Communist conspiracy but actually controlled by it. This was the largest, most influential, and most pervasive conspiracy theory in modern American history.

Since the Bolshevik revolution in Russia in 1917, most Americans feared and hated communism. There was also a much smaller but not insignificant number of Americans who were sincerely attracted to the Communist ideology. Of these, some became genuine Soviet agents and spies. But to put matters in perspective, the United States had its own agents and spies within the Soviet Union. And the United States was never in any serious danger of being taken over by the communist conspiracy. However, you could never convince Joe McCarthy's followers of that. To hear them tell it, the Reds had already taken over, and only one man could save them.

For a few years in the early 1950s, Joseph R. McCarthy, junior senator from Wisconsin, was, if not the most powerful man in America, certainly one of the most feared. McCarthy had been elected to the Senate in 1946, but he didn't make much of an impact in Washington until he discovered the Communist conspiracy.

Most of McCarthy's biographers say that he didn't believe much of what he said, at least not at first. But he said it anyway because it got attention. McCarthy wasn't the first politician to raise the specter of the Red Menace, and he wouldn't be the last. But no one was ever louder, more extreme, and for a short time more effective.

McCarthy began his crusade against the Communist conspiracy with a speech in Wheeling, West Virginia, on February 9, 1950. He horrified his audience with the accusation that the State Department was "thoroughly infested with Communists." He said that he had a list with the names of 205 State Department Communists on it. In later speeches he used other numbers, but that didn't make any difference. The figures were completely imaginary. What made the difference was that McCarthy spoke with such assurance and was so specific about the conspiracy that the press began to pay attention to what he was saying.

Very quickly this once-obscure senator with poor reelection prospects became a national celebrity. The press would report every charge he made no matter how outrageous they knew it to be. Right-wing groups that already believed the country was in the grip of the Communist conspiracy had found their champion. The money poured in. A lot of politicians who knew that McCarthy was talking nonsense and genuinely disliked his tactics began backing him because they were afraid of angering his devoted followers.

The more attention and support he got, the wilder and more extreme became the charges he made. He could destroy careers and entire branches of government with a single speech. A high point, or perhaps a low point, in his "anti-Communist crusade," and certainly a low point in American history, came in mid-June 1951 when McCarthy went to the floor of the U.S. Senate and delivered a two-hour-and-forty-five minute harangue that was part of a 169-page attack. The most memorable part of the speech was where he attacked a "mysterious, powerful" figure who was part of "a conspiracy on a scale so immense as to dwarf any previous such venture in the history of man. A conspiracy of infamy so black that, when it is finally exposed, its principals shall be forever deserving of the maledictions of all honest men."¹

This "mysterious, powerful" figure was none other than the former secretary of defense, General George C. Marshall, a World War II hero, architect of the Marshall Plan (which many historians credit with saving Western Europe from communism after the war), and one of the most respected men in America. Marshall had his enemies and detractors, as everyone in public life does, but for McCarthy to stand on the floor of the Senate and charge that he was at the center of an immense Communist conspiracy was absolutely stunning. And McCarthy got away with it. Yes, he was denounced as "setting a new high for irresponsibility" and even as being "of unsound mind." But his millions of followers loved it. This is what they had believed all along, and now someone in the public spotlight was saying it for them. And many of those who didn't agree with everything McCarthy said assumed that there must be some truth in it. The notion that "where there is smoke there must be fire" is deeply embedded in our consciousness.

If McCarthy had been a clever politician, there is no telling how far he might have gone. But he wasn't very clever, and he alienated too many people, including the newly elected and immensely popular new president, General Dwight Eisenhower. Eisenhower had always hated McCarthy for attacking his old friend and former commanding officer General Marshall. Then

McCarthy overreached himself by directly attacking the U.S. Army. The result was a long televised hearing of McCarthy's charges in 1954. It was the first major live television coverage of a political event. McCarthy, who was generally unkempt and untelegenic, looked and sounded downright thuggish during the hearings, and while no conclusion was



On March 16, 1955, when this photograph was taken, Joseph McCarthy was still a senator but losing favor with his colleagues and the American public. For years he had exercised great power and influence by charging that many of the most prominent and respected people in America were either dupes or agents of a vast Communist conspiracy.

reached the junior senator from Wisconsin was clearly the loser in the court of public opinion. By the end of the year he was censured by an overwhelming majority of his Senate colleagues. He became the only senator in Washington who was never invited to the White House.

Yet—and this is important—in spite of all the disapproval, and in spite of the many times that McCarthy's conspiracy charges had been demonstrated to be absolutely false, he never lost his core following. Polls showed that even after the censure by the Senate, fully one third of the American public still believed that McCarthy was right and thought he was a courageous hero for exposing the Communist conspiracy. McCarthy did not create this group, and it did not disappear with his fall from political grace.

McCarthy was never able to do anything with his still immense popular following because he lacked the skill and perhaps the ambition to lead an independent political movement, and because he was a chronic alcoholic whose drinking had begun to spiral completely out of control. He died on May 2, 1957, from the effects of his drinking. By the end of his life he apparently had begun to believe many of the conspiracy stories that he had previously told. He repeatedly told friends, "They're killing me."²

After his death some McCarthy partisans claimed that he had never been a heavy drinker and that his death had been due to infectious hepatitis or something else unconnected with alcoholism.

The most extreme of the McCarthyites found a more sinister explanation for his death. William Loeb, editor of the ultraconservative but very influential *Manchester Union Leader of New Hampshire*, wrote shortly after his hero's death:

MCCARTHY WAS MURDERED BY THE COMMUNISTS BECAUSE HE WAS EXPOSING THEM. WHEN HE BEGAN TO AROUSE THE UNITED STATES TO THE EXTENT OF THE COMMUNIST CONSPIRACY IN OUR

GOVERNMENT, IN OUR SCHOOLS, IN OUR NEWSPAPERS, AND IN ALL BRANCHES OF AMERICAN LIFE, THE COMMUNIST PARTY REALIZED THAT IF IT WAS TO SURVIVE AND SUCCEED IN ITS CONSPIRACY OT SEIZE CONTROL OF THE UNITED STATES IT HAD TO DESTROY MCCARTHY BEFORE HE DESTROYED THE PARTY.³

Some even thought that the "assassination of Joe McCarthy" had been engineered by President Dwight Eisenhower and Vice president Richard Nixon. One dedicated McCarthyite insisted that the great man had been murdered not by the Communists but by the Illuminati!

In the minds and imaginations of the conspiracy theorists the Communists not only were going to take over our government, but our bodies as well. One of the more bizarre episodes of the Cold War era was the controversy over fluoridating the water supply to prevent tooth decay.

Putting fluorine, a pale yellow relative of chlorine gas, into the water supply was first tested in the 1940s. The tests showed quite conclusively that fluoridated water did help to prevent tooth decay in children. But some people complained that the fluorine also produced other effects, such as dizziness, nausea, and headaches. No scientific evidence of harmful side effects was ever found, but public-health controversies of this type are fairly common. Usually they are resolved quietly. Not so with fluoridation. Very quickly a large movement sprang up, claiming that the entire population was being force-fed a deadly poison. In high concentrations fluorine is a deadly poison. But so is chlorine.

Many who opposed fluoridation were motivated by a vague fear that their freedom was being eroded when the government introduced a chemical into their water supply. It was seen as a threat to their personal liberty; it was un-American. However, similar fears had not been expressed over the much more widespread use of chlorine to kill harmful bacteria in the water supply. To others fluoridation was a kind of "mass medication," a way of dosing the multitudes that might be the precursor of socialized medicine and a symptom of the looming Communist takeover.

To many, fluoridation was nothing less than an integral part of the Communist conspiracy, a "method of Red warfare"—a plot to drug Americans into submission. A speaker at an American Legion convention in New York claimed fluoridation was a "secret Russian revolutionary technique to deaden our minds, slow our reflexes, and gradually kill our will to resist aggression." According to the [i]Americanism Bulletin, fluoridation had been used by Germany's Weimar regime (the left-wing German government that fell to Hitler) and had also been used by the Russians to obtain phony confessions from prisoners. Fluoridation, the [i]Bulletin went on, was "more dangerous than atomic bombs."

Today most of the country's major water supplies are fluoridated. Because of that, you probably have fewer cavities, and in case you didn't notice, the Communists have not taken over—yet.

The New World Order

The collapse of Soviet communism in the 1990s left many in America feeling abandoned and adrift. It wasn't just the former Communists who felt that way either. Many of those on the far right, the most fanatical of the anti-Communists, suddenly found themselves without a focus for their fears or an anchor for their anger.

For decades they had been able to blame practically everything that went wrong in the world or in their lives on the international Communist conspiracy. Suddenly the Russian Communists were no more, and even the most fanatical persons could not convince themselves, or anyone else, that the Communist collapse was just another clever Commie ploy to confuse the true patriots and weaken their resolve, while secretly underground the Communists were still there, re powerful and more sinister than ever. Somehow the Communists in China, the most populous nation on Earth, just couldn't take the place of the old Soviet Communists. There was no denying it, no escaping it, the Communist conspiracy, which seemed to explain so much, was dead and gone.

But in a very real and personal way, little had actually changed in America. Those who had blamed the Communists were no richer or more powerful than before. Taxes were still high. The government was still trying to take away their guns. The rampant immorality that they had seen as being promoted by the Communist conspiracy was, if anything, more rampant than ever. Something was still wrong. To some very nearly everything was still wrong. A conspiracy to deprive them of what they needed and wanted was still out there. But what was it?

It was President George Bush who inadvertently give this conspiracy its new name. Shortly after the victory over Iraq in the Persian Gulf War, President Bush said, "I hope that history will record that the Gulf Crisis was the crucible for a new world order."

The New World Order (or NWO) has become sort of a catch-all phrase. It means that some sort of one-world government or international control is to be forced on the United States, destroying the nation's sovereignty and the constitutional freedoms of its citizens. Those behind the conspiracy are a shadowy but immensely powerful group that might be called the "Establishment" or the "Elite." Whoever they are they do not represent the ordinary folk who should be represented in a democracy like America. In this belief or fear both right- and left-wing conspiracy theorists often agree. Sometimes it is difficult to tell the difference between them, and sometimes there is no difference.

George Bush himself was just the sort of man to set the conspiracy theorists' bells ringing. He was a wealthy member of the Eastern political establishment, the ultimate Washington insider. Never mind that he had moved to Texas and had attempted to portray himself as the quintessential Texan. That pose fooled no one. While at Yale, George Bush had even been a member of the secret Skull and Bones Society. This Yale student group is secretive and may be both snobbish and silly, but it is hardly sinister. To some conspiracy theorists, however, the Skull and Bones is right up there with the Freemasons and the Illuminati.

Bush had been a member of several highly suspect internationalist organizations like the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR) and the Trilateral Commission (Trilat). He had even been a CFR board director. And, most damning of all, he had been director of the Central Intelligence Agency, every conspiratologist's favorite bogeyman.

In their book, *50 Greatest Conspiracies of All Time*, authors Jonathan Vankin and John Whalen describe the New World Order this way:

"The champions of the NWO are indeed a cadre of powerful industrialists, bankers, academics and politicians who for three quarters of a century have been a gray eminence behind the governance of Britain and America. More to the point perhaps they are the governors of the Western world. Call them what you will they are the 'Establishment.' Through vastly influential organizations like the Council on Foreign Relations and the Trilateral Commission, these elites formulate tomorrow's public policy today and staff the ship of state with their own.

"If this network is something less than the Red Devil depicted in many a right wing conspiracy theory, it is none the less the kind of big business cabal that helps the elite of the private sector if not 'rule the world' then at least run it like a business."¹

The most influential and respectable promoter of NWO conspiracy theory was the late Professor Carroll Quigley, a scholar

from Georgetown University. In his massive book [i]Tragedy and Hope, he wrote that there "does exist, and has existed for a generation, an international Anglophile [pro-British] network which operates, to some extent, in the way that the radical Right believes the Communists act."²

Quigley said that he had been close to this cabal of international manipulators, and that he even admired their goals—and had been allowed to examine "papers and secret records."

Quigley saw the international conspiracy as a relatively benevolent one whose goal is "nothing less than to create a world system of financial control in private hands able to dominate the political system of each country and the economy of the world as a whole." The result would be peace and prosperity, and of course great profit to those who pulled the strings.

Quigley represents a moderate, or centrist, conspiratorial view. The far right has adopted a much more menacing view. The John Birch Society, which during the 1960s and 1970s was considered the ultimate far-right conspiracy group in the United States, even thought that the internationalist elite controlled the Soviet Communists, and the Birchers hated the Communists. In the official John Birch Society ideology it was the internationalist capitalists who actually financed the Bolshevik revolution in Russia in 1917.

A popular John Birch Society book of the 1970s was Gary Allen's *None Dare Call It Conspiracy*. This was the sequel to the all-time Birch Society best-seller *None Dare Call It Treason*, which detailed the society's view of the Communist menace in America.

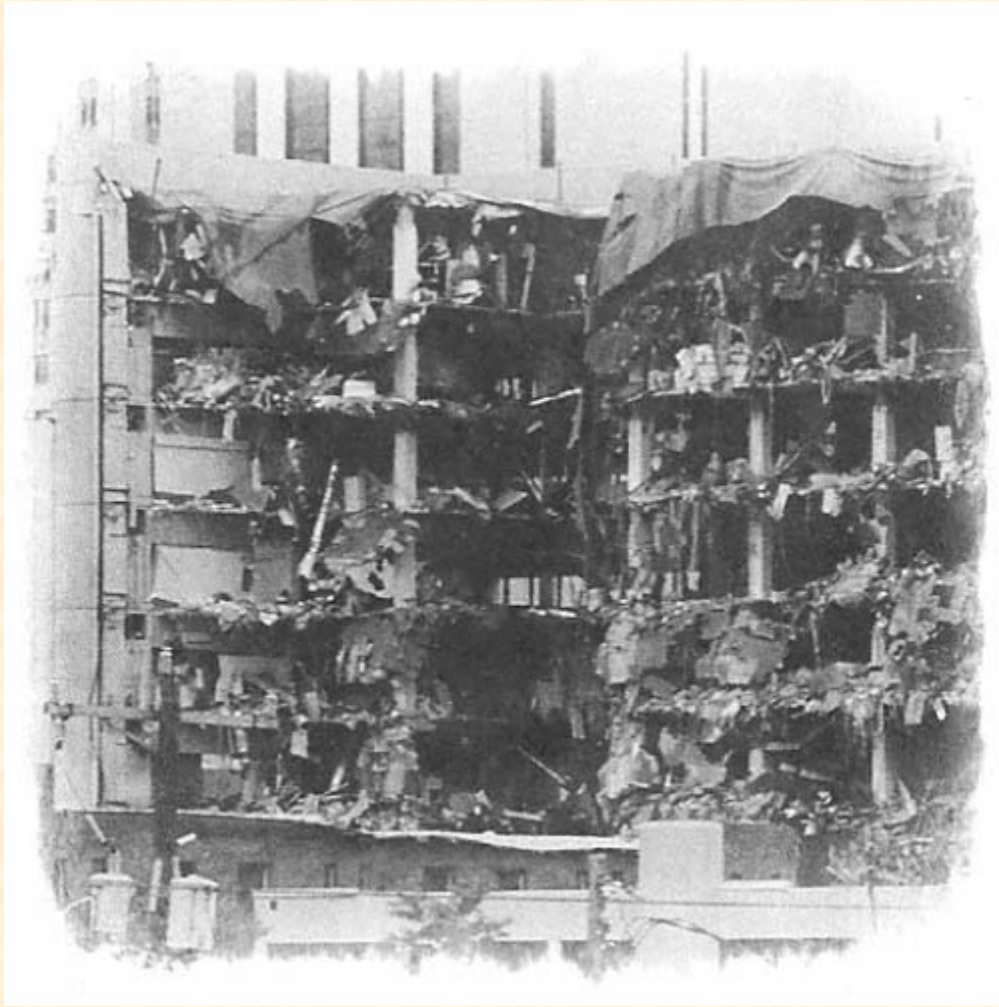
In Allen's opinion the first move that this internationalist elite made to control America and subvert the Constitution was to establish a central bank, the Federal Reserve System. Then came the income tax, and taking America off the gold standard. The 1929 stock market crash and the Great Depression that followed were "scientifically engineered" by the Establishment. So were the two world wars and the Vietnam War. The conspirators did very well for themselves by selling arms to both sides. Of course, the most fiendish creation was the United Nations—the hated "one world government" that will destroy America.

Right-wing conspiracy theorists have spent many hours compiling lists of powerful American political figures who are also members of the Council on Foreign Relations, the Trilateral Commission, or any of the other international establishment organizations. In President Clinton's administration, for example, the secretary of state, all five of his undersecretaries, and many of their subordinates as well as the national security advisor and head of the CIA were all members of the CFR.

Some conspiracy theorists with anti-Semitic leanings see an ever-threatening cabal of "international Jewish bankers" behind it all. Others look to the Illuminati, the Freemasons, or some even more esoteric, obscure, and probably quite imaginary secret society as the hidden hand controlling events.

While manipulation of the Federal Reserve system may be of compelling interest to some conspiracy theorists, it is not the sort of belief that gets most people excited. In truth, most people have absolutely no idea what the Federal Reserve system is and they don't really care very much. Invoking the Council on Foreign Relations and the Trilateral Commission is not going to create a great deal of excitement either. But fear of a New World Order does involve far more emotional issues—what the politicians call "red meat" issues.

The July 9, 1995, edition of [i]The Washington Post contained a long article by staff writer Serge F. Kovaleski on the bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City. Federal authori-



The north side of the Alfred Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City. Two people were eventually charged with detonating the bomb that destroyed the building and killed more than 150 people. One of them, Tim McVeigh, traveled the gun and weapon show circuit, at which dozens of books and pamphlets promoted the idea of governmental conspiracies.

ties indicted a couple of antigovernment ex-soldiers for the attack. For most of the public the evidence against the suspects seemed overwhelming. But Kovalski wrote, "Conspiracy theories about the Oklahoma City bombing have been flooding the Internet, fax machines, talk radio and militia meetings around the country, spun by deeply distrustful minds that cast a broad net of blame. . . ."3

These theories generally blame the federal government itself for the bombing and say that the two men charged are either innocent scapegoats or government-controlled "zombies" who were set up in order to discredit the militia movement and other patriotic right-wing organizations.

Kovalski writes, "A springboard for many of the Oklahoma City conspiracy theories is the contention that the federal government is engaged in a plot to destroy individual rights and liberties and hand over control of the country to the United Nations, which will oversee a 'New World Order.'

"Some theorists believe that proof of a planned U.N. takeover can be found on the back of a 1993 Kix cereal box which shows a map of the United States carved up into 11 regions. This, conspiracists say, is an illustration of the New World Order plot to reduce the country to departments after the conquest.

"By staging violent acts, like the bombing, and creating villains, the government can justify suspending the Constitution, declaring martial law and seizing people's weapons, the theory goes."⁴

The sinister and mysterious black helicopters, apparently the unofficial vehicles of the New World Order, were said to be seen hovering over the federal building at the time of the explosion. The most comprehensive book on this subject is Jim Keith's *Black Helicopters Over America*. The subtitle is *Strikeforce for the New World Order*.

Some analysts believe that conspiracy theories about the Oklahoma City bombing may soon eclipse the JFK assassination in conspiracy lore. True conspiracy theorists will of course dismiss Kovalski's article because it appeared in *The Washington Post*, which, they assert, is an establishment paper controlled by the New World Order.

Televised interviews with some militia members after the Oklahoma City bombing give an indication of just how paranoid some of the conspiratorial thinking has become. Some expect an invasion of the United States by United Nations (usually African) troops who are now being trained in Mexico. They will be carried to the United States in the notorious black helicopters. Some also talk about mind-controlling drugs or mind-controlling computer chips that are being implanted in unsuspecting individuals during routine surgery.

For individuals who are immersed in conspiracy theories this extreme, the world is a terrifying place. And they are sometimes tempted to strike back at their imaginary enemies. That is what makes life just a little more frightening for the rest of us.

8

The Extraterrestrial Conspiracy

According to some polls more than half of the American public today think that the Earth may have been visited by spaceships from other planets. These ships have been called Flying Saucers, Unidentified Flying Objects, or most commonly by the abbreviation UFOs (pronounced U-FOHZ by insiders). In addition many people believe rumors that the government has known about these visits for more than half a century, and, for some reason, has been covering up this knowledge. In short, there has been a vast and sinister conspiracy of silence about an invasion from outer space!

This is not the sort of conspiracy theory that generally sends people running to the hills with their guns or even causes them to change the way they vote. On occasion, however, the belief can become dangerously obsessive. In June 1996, members of a UFO group on Long Island, New York, were indicted for plotting to poison county officials with radioactive materials. According to the indictments the men believed that a UFO had crashed on Long Island and that county officials were trying to cover this up. The leader of the group also appeared to believe that government agents, including the local police, were plotting to kill him.

The firm conviction that there is some sort of a UFO conspiracy pops up regularly in books, on television and radio talk shows, and in films like the incredibly popular [i]Independence Day (1996), which became one of the biggest moneymakers in Hollywood history. Many reasons have been given for the success of this film. One certainly is that many in the audience are thinking, "Well, it might be true." Belief in UFOs is part of our culture, part of our mental landscape. We can hardly imagine a time when we didn't believe in UFOs.

I know how it all began because I was an eyewitness and in a small way even a participant in the beginnings of the extraterrestrial conspiracy belief.

For many years there had been reports off and on of strange objects sighted in the sky. But what came to be regarded as the age of flying saucers began on June 24, 1947. On that day a man named Kenneth Arnold, a private pilot, was flying near the Cascade Mountains in the state of Washington when he sighted nine objects streaking through the sky toward Mount Rainier. The lead object looked like a dark crescent; the other eight were flat and disc-shaped. They disappeared from view after about two and a half minutes.

On the following day Arnold told his story to a couple of local reporters. One of them put it on the Associated Press wire, and it was picked up widely. The Arnold sighting stimulated other sighting stories. In general, however, the Arnold sighting was regarded as what journalists call a "silly season" item, a marginally newsworthy story that was printed during the summer months when there was relatively little "hard," or important, news.

In the late 1940s there was also a pervasive atmosphere of suspicion and fear. The United States had emerged victorious from World War II. Almost immediately it was plunged into the Cold War, that long period of confrontation with the Soviets. The United States had already developed an atomic bomb, and everyone knew it was only a matter of time before the Soviet Union had its own atomic bomb. The fear was that the next war would be even more terrible than the last, that the human race might actually annihilate itself.

This atmosphere affected the way people began to think about UFOs in several ways. The U.S. government and particularly the military began to wonder if the strange things that people reported seeing might not be some sort of Soviet "secret weapon." Some of the things that people reported were actually secret U.S. military projects, and these were to be kept secret.

Much of the general public thought or at least hoped that the spaceships had come to help save the human race from itself. That was a popular theme in a lot of science fiction.

Flying saucers also had an active and effective promoter. He was Ray Palmer, editor of the pulp science-fiction magazines *Amazing Stories* and *Fantastic Adventures*. The covers of these magazines regularly featured semiclad girls being menaced by a BEM (Bug Eyed Monster). Though these were clearly lurid fiction magazines, the eccentric Palmer often ran long editorials promoting any number of truly bizarre theories or beliefs.

While much of the press first regarded flying saucers as a sort of joke, Palmer took up the cause in his editorial columns. But

the publishers got tired of Palmer's increasing use of the magazines as his personal soapbox. He quit or was fired over plans for an all-UFO issue. In the spring of 1948, Palmer began a new magazine, *FATE*, devoted to "true" tales of the strange and unknown. The cover story for the first issue was "The Truth About Flying Saucers" by Kenneth Arnold. Palmer himself probably wrote the article and a later Arnold book, *The Coming of the Saucers*. Palmer's breathless style was unmistakable.

Later, Ray Palmer edited a number of other flying-saucer magazines. He never became rich as a few UFO promoters have, but he stuck with the subject. Year in and year out, even at times when interest in UFOs seemed to have faded entirely, Palmer was still out there promoting. Astronomer Donald Menzel, an early critic of UFO theories, said that Palmer practically created flying saucers. That is an exaggeration, but he certainly helped to keep the interest alive.

Ray Palmer died in 1977. Right up to the end even his friends were not sure whether he believed anything he wrote.

In the late 1940s I was a young teen living in Chicago (where Palmer's magazines were first published), and I was a devotee of science fiction and "true mysteries." I was therefore an avid reader of Palmer's publications. Over the years I became disillusioned when the flying saucers I sincerely believed were going to land in some public place for all to see failed to do so.

Still, I can vividly remember the tremendous feeling of exhilaration of those early days. There was a small band of us who believed—no, we KNEW—an astonishing truth that the rest of the world was too blind to see. It made us feel very special, and it was a faith that was painful to give up. From personal experience I can say that the attraction of bizarre, even completely crazy, theories can be astonishingly powerful. I am never tempted to ask, "How can a sane person believe such nonsense?" I did and I like to think that I'm sane.

If an ordinary teen living in Chicago could know the truth about UFOs, then certainly the government with all its ability to monitor the skies should know it too. The only logical conclusion one could draw was that the government did know the truth but was covering it up. And in fact, the government was covering things up, but they were not the truths that I and my fellow flying-saucer buffs had imagined.

Once again the era of the Cold War must be kept in mind. While a few in the government and military were intrigued by the extraterrestrial possibilities of UFOs, that idea was not taken seriously for very long. What the U.S. government was really concerned about was that the Soviets might be developing some sort of "secret weapon," an aircraft or missile, and this was what people were seeing. A special panel was set up by the CIA to look into the possibility. The Soviet hypothesis was quickly discarded for total lack of evidence. However, the U.S. government itself was conducting some experiments that were mistaken for UFO sightings, and that was being covered up.

The Roswell incident, now far and away the most famous UFO event, is a case in point. In early July 1947, just a couple of weeks after the Arnold sighting, something crashed in a field of a remote ranch near Roswell, New Mexico. The owner of the ranch, William "Mac" Brazel, went into town a few days later and reported this to the local sheriff. The sheriff called nearby Roswell Air Base, and the Air Force sent out a team of officers to investigate.

The Air Force investigators picked up some of the debris from the ranch. It consisted mostly of highly flexible metallic-like fragments and pieces of a light but stiff material that appeared to be covered with strange writing or figures.



This photograph, dated July 8, 1947, shows Brigadier General Roger Ramey studying the remains of what the Air Force said in a press release was a "device used by air force and weather bureau(s) to determine wind velocity and direction" that had fallen near Roswell, New Mexico, a few days earlier.

On July 8 the public-relations officer at Roswell Army Air Base issued a press release stating that a "flying disc" had finally been found and that the debris was being sent to Fort Worth for examination. That story was a sensation, but a short-lived one. Within hours, in a news conference at Fort Worth, Army spokesmen dismissed the whole incident, saying what had fallen to Earth on the Brazel ranch were the remains of an ordinary weather balloon that had been destroyed in a thunderstorm.

Most people, including most UFO buffs, accepted the explanation. While interest in UFOs grew during the 1950s and 1960s, the Roswell story was almost entirely forgotten. It wasn't until the late 1980s that UFO enthusiasts rediscovered Roswell with a vengeance and began to reexamine the case.

Rancher Brazel was long dead, but others who were on the scene at the time or who now claimed that they had been on the scene, began telling their stories. Some of the stories indicated that the whole weather-balloon story was fraudulent and the government knew it. They said that Brazel and others actually had been told to keep quiet about what they had found or seen. "In 1947 when the government told you to shut up, you shut up," one witness recalled.¹

The stories got wilder—much wilder. There were rumors of a much larger crash near Roswell and of the bodies of several space aliens found on the scene and hidden away by a fearful U.S. government. It was usually suggested that they were hidden at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base outside of Dayton, Ohio.

The story kept gaining momentum. There were several books on Roswell. It was the subject of a very popular made-for-TV movie. There was even what purported to be a film of an "alien autopsy." The film was an obvious phony. At least it was obvious to many of us. But it was so widely watched that the Fox TV network gave it a repeat showing almost immediately, and copies of the film are still available for sale or rent.

There are now two UFO museums in Roswell (and not much else since the air base closed down). They are places of pilgrimage for UFO believers and some nonbelievers.

Then, in September 1994, the Air Force finally admitted that, yes, there had been a cover-up at Roswell—sort of a cover-up anyway. While what fell to Earth on the Brazel ranch was a balloon, it wasn't an ordinary weather balloon as the Air Force had

originally said. The balloon was part of a program called Project Mogul. It was aimed at putting sensors high into the atmosphere in order to detect possible Soviet nuclear tests. And in 1947 the project was top secret.

People had indeed been told to shut up—not about spaceships but about a top-secret project. "This won't lay it to rest," sighed Colonel Albert C. Trakowski, a retired Air Force officer who had run Project Mogul.

He was quite right. Said Walter G. Haut, who runs one of the Roswell UFO museums, "All they've done is given us a different kind of balloon. Then it was weather, and now it's Mogul. Basically I don't think anything has changed. Excuse my cynicism, but let's quit playing games."²

It is difficult to pinpoint just exactly where and when the government cover-up stories began. But they certainly started early in the flying-saucer era, and they were helped along enormously by something that happened about six months after the Kenneth Arnold sighting. This incident also involved a balloon, a cover-up, and tragically the death of an airman.

On January 7, 1948, Captain Thomas Mantell was killed when his National Guard F-51 crashed while pursuing what he believed was a flying saucer near Fort Knox, Kentucky.

Captain Mantell was leading a flight of four F-51s on orders to investigate a UFO sighted over Godman Air Force Base. Mantell radioed, "I'm closing in on it now to take a good look. It's directly ahead of me and still moving at about half my speed. . . . The thing looks metallic and of tremendous size."³

A short time later his plane crashed. The official explanation was that Captain Mantell had blacked out from lack of oxygen during the chase, which could have easily happened in a plane of that era. Of course, there were rumors that the wreckage of the plane showed that it had been shot full of holes or that the area of the crash had been found to be intensely radioactive. There were, however, no facts to back up such rumors.

But a vital question remained—what was Captain Mantell chasing? The initial Air Force explanation was that he was chasing the planet Venus. That is not as silly as it sounds. At certain times and under certain atmospheric conditions Venus can appear to be enormous, and it has fooled even experienced pilots. But at the time of the crash Venus was not in a part of the sky where it could possibly have fooled Captain Mantell. The explanation was quickly ridiculed, and the Air Force looked foolish or, worse, sinister.

It wasn't until 1951 that the Air Force admitted they knew what the pilot had been chasing, and they had known all along. He was chasing a giant Skyhook balloon. But in 1948, Project Skyhook was also top secret. Air Force officials deliberately misled investigators and suppressed reports from other observers who had identified the object as a balloon. By the time the Skyhook explanation became known, the damage had been done. Many assumed, quite reasonably, that if the Air Force had lied about an accident that killed one of its own pilots, it might still be lying, still covering up something more sensational than a secret balloon project.

It was impossible for the U.S. government not to respond to the widespread and growing public belief in UFOs and in a government conspiracy. But the response was clumsy and deceptive and simply fanned the fires of public disbelief and distrust.

After the death of Captain Mantell the Air Force initiated a string of "projects" that were ostensibly aimed at investigating and explaining the UFO phenomenon. They had names like Project Sign, Project Grudge, and finally Project Blue Book. At the start some of those involved in the Air Force investigations took the extraterrestrial hypothesis seriously indeed. But by the time Project Blue Book, the last and longest lived of the Air Force UFO projects, was established, the investigation had become little more than a public-relations effort. For most of its twenty-year existence, Blue Book didn't have the personnel or the funding to investigate much of anything. The staff, which consisted of a major, two sergeants, and a secretary, could not possibly handle the thousands of UFO sightings that were reported annually. They didn't even try. UFO buffs denounced Blue Book as a cover-up, and in a sense it was. What the Air Force was really covering up, however, was not secret information about space aliens, but the fact that they didn't take the whole subject seriously and were doing as little as possible about it.

Another red flag for believers was the early involvement of the Central Intelligence Agency in UFO investigations. In fact the CIA had been monitoring the phenomenon since 1949, despite statements to the contrary. In January 1953, after a major UFO flap, the CIA convened a scientific panel on UFOs headed by Dr. H. P. Robertson, a well-known California physicist. The panel apparently took its job seriously but quickly concluded that UFOs themselves represented no national-security threat. However, the Robertson panel reported, the public was developing "a morbid national psychology" that might induce "hysterical behavior and harmful distrust of duly constituted authority." The panel concluded that "immediate steps to strip the

Unidentified Flying Objects of the special status they have been given," should be undertaken.⁵ In brief, tell people as little as possible and downplay UFOs.

In 1953 the CIA was just beginning to acquire its reputation of enormous, almost omniscient power, in some eyes attaining the status of an invisible government. When the report of the Robertson panel was declassified with its suggestions that UFOs essentially be buried as far as the public was concerned, it was cited as yet another example of the ongoing conspiracy of silence.

By 1966 the Air Force was thoroughly sick of its involvement in the UFO controversy. The U.S. government wanted to get out of the UFO business completely. The chosen method was to convene a committee under the direction of a distinguished scientist who would review what had been learned over the previous twenty years and issue a definitive report. At first no major scientist or university wanted to touch the study, though there was a sizable financial grant attached.

Finally the job was taken on by Dr. Edward U. Condon, a physicist from the University of Colorado. At first Condon appeared the perfect choice. In the late 1940s and early 1950s he had come under severe attack from the House Un-American Activities Committee and Representative Richard Nixon, then a young and ambitious congressman from California who was making a reputation for himself as a fire-breathing anti-Communist. Condon was accused of "conorting with Communists." As a result his security clearance was revoked, but Condon fought back and ultimately was vindicated. So he had a reputation for independence and taking on the government, in addition to being a well-known and well-respected scientist.

I attended the press conference at which Condon's appointment as head of the study was announced. Condon declared that he was quite neutral on the subject of UFOs. This, of course, was untrue. Like most scientists Condon thought the extraterrestrial hypothesis was silly at best, though he didn't know much about the subject at the time. But he seemed quite serene in his belief that he would be able to produce a study with such overwhelming evidence that the public would be persuaded.

I talked to him after the news conference and told him that unless he produced the little green men from Mars, the UFO believers would skin him alive. He thought I was exaggerating. Several years later, after controversies left Condon both shocked at the reaction to his work and deeply embittered, he sent me a note saying that during the controversy he had often thought of our brief conversation. I was no seer. I had just been with the UFO world long enough to know how thoroughly the belief in a government conspiracy had gripped the believers. For them there was no such thing as honest disagreement. There was only conspiracy and cover-up.

Condon's problems started early, particularly after a memorandum from project coordinator Robert Low, stating that while the committee had virtually no hope of finding a UFO they would have to appear as if they were looking for one, was leaked to the press. As attacks from the UFO community increased and became ever more virulent, Condon, who had seemed so calm and collected at the initial press conference, became angrier and angrier. His denunciations of the UFO believers and their supporters became louder and more intemperate. A rumor swept the ufological community that Condon had gone mad. He was mad all right, but he had not gone mad.

The members of the Condon committee examined in detail the evidence for most of the well-known UFO cases, and found nothing sensational. While a few sightings could not be adequately explained, the committee assumed that this was because of lack of evidence. They found no evidence of alien spaceships. The UFO buffs had discounted the Condon report even before it was written. When the massive 1,465-page report was finally issued in January 1969, it may have served the purpose of giving the government an excuse to get out of the UFO business, but it had virtually no effect on public opinion. Those who cared assumed it was just part of the cover-up. It was the same reaction that had greeted the Warren Report about the JFK assassination a few years earlier.

Implications of a UFO conspiracy and cover-up often reached well beyond the Air Force, the CIA, and even beyond the planet Earth. One that has been enshrined in public consciousness is the tale of the "men in black."

The beginning of this story is almost ludicrously mundane. In September 1953, Albert K. Bender, head of the grandly named but really quite tiny International Flying Saucer Bureau, announced in his publication *Space Review* that the flying saucer "mystery" had been solved. "But any information about this is being withheld by orders from a higher source."⁶

Bender concluded his statement with these words: "We advise those engaged in saucer work to please be very cautious." He then shut down his organization, stopped publishing [i]Space Review, and generally withdrew from the UFO field.

To his friends, Bender confided a few more details. He said that he had been visited by "three men in dark suits," later to be known as "three men in black," and that they had been "pretty rough" with him and essentially scared him off.

Generally his friends, most of whom were devoted UFO buffs, didn't believe Bender's story. They knew his organization had been losing money, and they figured that he was just looking for a dramatic excuse for abandoning UFOs. But the story of the men in black (MIB) began to take on a life of its own, and soon others who said they had UFO encounters reported that they too had been visited by the sinister and mysterious MIB.

Bender's original account makes the MIB sound like CIA or other government operatives. But in later accounts they take on a weirder and unworldly aura. They are sometimes said to have "glowing eyes," which are hidden by dark glasses. They arrive in large black Cadillacs that have a strange purple glow on the inside, and appear to be able to navigate dark roads without headlights. Or they show up suddenly at remote spots, apparently without the aid of any vehicle at all. Their speech is often strange and robotlike. But their universal aim seems to be to silence those who "know too much."

Despite the fact that there has never been a single bit of credible evidence to indicate that the MIBs even exist, much less what they are, they have become an integral part of the atmosphere of conspiracy that surrounds the UFO field.

Nor do all the conspiracy theories date from the early days of UFOs. In December 1984 a collection of what were supposed to be government documents surfaced revealing the existence of a super-secret group of scientists known as "Majestic 12" (MJ-12) that had been appointed by President Harry Truman to study the remains of aliens that had been found in a crashed UFO in 1947. The members of the group were all well-known scientists, many of whom had openly ridiculed the idea of spaceships. They were also all dead.

Initially the MJ-12 documents created quite a sensation. But on closer examination most people, including many UFO buffs, concluded that they were fraudulent. But the MJ-12 documents are still regularly cited as proof that the government "knows" and is "covering up." Like Roswell and the MIB, MJ-12 has become enshrined in UFO mythology.

A genuinely secret military facility in Nevada has now become the focus of conspiratorial speculation. The place is best known under the name Area 51. For a long time the military even denied that such a place existed at all. But it's there, and it's well guarded. Just exactly what is going on in Area 51 is unknown, but some of the more informed speculation is that one of the operations is disposal of extremely hazardous waste, which would certainly be a good reason for the military to want to keep the place secret. Until fairly recently, Area 51 has had no connection with UFOs. But there have been a fairly large number of UFO sightings in the area, and the connection between them and a secret government facility has proved irresistible. Somehow the two must be connected, though no one seems to know just how.

In 1995, Nevada State Route 375, a 100-mile (160-kilometer) stretch of secondary road that runs past Area 51, was officially designated the Extraterrestrial Highway. Nevada state officials cheerfully admit that this is kind of "a tourist ploy." And the tourists do come, and they buy souvenirs at the Little A'Le Inn, a combination gift shop, motel, and restaurant. Some of the more serious UFO buffs decry the commercialism and the frivolity.⁷

UFOs, government cover-ups, MIBs, secret facilities, and all the other conspiratorial trappings appear



The two stars of the enormously popular television show, *The X-Files*. Agents Dana Scully (Gillian Anderson) and Fox Mulder (David Duchovny) regularly investigate a dark and conspiracy-haunted world.

regularly in newspapers, magazines, and on radio and television. Much of what is produced is avowedly fiction, like the enormously popular TV series *The X-Files*. But it all contributes to the general feeling that "something is out there" and we are not being told the truth about it.

And remember that all of this—all of it—began with an obscure little "silly season" article back in 1947.

9

The Final Conspiracy

If you dig into practically any conspiracy theory, even the most skeptical person may find him or herself seriously wondering if there isn't "something to it" after all. Could all the apparent connections just be a series of coincidences? Could so much of the information simply be false? The answer to both questions is yes, but that can be a hard answer to accept.

A good conspiracy theory sounds reasonable. It appears to answer a lot of unanswered questions. It can also be exciting, far more interesting than mundane reality. For many, the conspiracy theory merely confirms what they already suspect or believe. And, of course, there is the fact that there have been conspiracies and cover-ups throughout history.

Two widely publicized conspiracy theories illustrate these points.

The first revolves around the death of President Bill Clinton's longtime friend and personal lawyer Vincent Foster. Foster had been a lawyer in Little Rock, Arkansas. He had worked closely with Hillary Clinton in the Rose law firm for nearly fifteen years, and he knew the Clintons well. After Bill Clinton was first elected president, Foster came to Washington to work as a deputy White House counsel and the Clintons' personal lawyer.

Between the time of Clinton's election and inauguration, Foster had helped negotiate the end of the Clintons' Whitewater partnership with Arkansas banker Jim McDougal. He was also involved with the White House's inept firing of the staff of the travel office. Both Whitewater and what came to be dubbed "Travelgate" became major problems for President Clinton, his wife, and his administration. Foster himself became the object of intense scrutiny.

Then on the afternoon of July 20, 1993, Vince Foster was found dead in Fort Marcy Park, Virginia, just a twenty-minute drive from the White House. Foster had been shot in the head. The fatal pistol was in his hand. His death seemed to be a suicide.

Immediately and inevitably, rumors began to spread. One rumor alleged that Foster's office had been sealed on orders of Hillary Clinton and his files purged of all incriminating material before investigators had a chance to look at them. Another, more sensational and persistent rumor was that Foster had not shot himself in the park, but had been killed elsewhere and his body had been transported to the park and arranged so that his death would look like a suicide. Here are what people have cited as evidence:

"Foster's whereabouts for a couple of hours before his body was discovered are unknown. No one saw or heard Foster shoot himself. No one even saw him enter the park." But Fort Marcy Park is an obscure and isolated spot that is often deserted. It is not surprising that he was not seen or heard.

"There was not enough blood at the scene." In fact, FBI investigators found a lot of blood at the scene.

"Foster's body was covered with carpet fibers . . . he had been rolled up in a carpet before his body was moved." Investigators concluded that the carpet fibers are unimportant. Carpet fibers are found nearly everywhere, and there were not enough fibers on Foster's body to indicate that he had been encased in a carpet.

"Foster was not suicidal." Though Foster had never openly talked about suicide, everyone knew he was a deeply troubled man. Moving from Little Rock to Washington apparently put him under pressures that he was unable to handle.

"Foster didn't leave a suicide note," or alternately, "his suicide note was a forgery." There is a common myth that every suicide leaves a note. This is not true. Some suicides leave a note, and some do not. Foster left no note. But a few days after his death, tron-up pieces of a note were found in his briefcase. It wasn't really a suicide note, but a sort of personal defense and complaint that he had written a little over a week before he died. In it he expressed his belief that no one in the White House had violated any laws. The last item said, "I was not meant for the job or spotlight of public life in Washington. Here ruining people is considered a sport."¹

Some insist that the handwriting on this note was not Foster's and that the pieces were planted in his briefcase to bolster the suicide theory. Foster's wife insists that she knew he had written such a defense, and the handwriting most certainly was that of her husband.

While investigators and most of the mainstream media have concluded that Vincent Foster did indeed kill himself, the story of a murder conspiracy and cover-up has been kept alive by a small group of journalists, most of whom are working for a multimillionaire named Richard Mellon Scaife. Scaife had contributed hundreds of millions of dollars to fund conservative causes. He dislikes Democrats in general and Bill Clinton in particular. He owns a small newspaper that has printed most of the articles questioning the Foster suicide. He also supports the Western Journalism Center, which has produced a video called *Unanswered: The Death of Vincent Foster*. Foster's death is a regular feature of some radio talk shows, and a Vincent Foster home page is even available on the World Wide Web.

The campaign has worked. As this is being written, there remain genuine unanswered questions about Whitewater, the travel-office firings, and other activities about which Vincent Foster might have had knowledge. But there should be no question about how Foster died—he committed suicide. Yet polls taken in 1996 indicate that about three quarters of the American public are not convinced of this.² Most Americans appear to believe that Foster may indeed have been "the man who knew too much" and that a conspiracy and cover-up have obscured the facts surrounding his death.

An even more insidious conspiracy theory surfaced—or to be more accurate, resurfaced—in August 1996. A series of articles in the San Jose Mercury News said that the CIA played a key role in launching the crack-cocaine epidemic. The articles revived an old charge that the agency aided cocaine smugglers during the Reagan administration's covert war in Nicaragua.

The story runs like this: In the early 1980s the Reagan administration had a near obsession with the left-wing Sandinista government of Nicaragua. The CIA, at the strenuous urging of its director, the late William J. Casey, was covertly and sometimes illegally supporting the Contras, a collection of rebel groups attempting to overthrow the Sandinistas. Some of the Contras were dealing cocaine in order to get money to support their army. In other cases individuals who were nothing more than drug dealers may have operated under a Contra cover. That much has been fairly well known and accepted for a long time.

The question is, how much did the CIA know about the drug dealing at the time, and did they just look the other way or actually participate in trafficking cocaine? The CIA has always denied such charges, but with a secret agency such denials are routine and just as routinely disbelieved.

The newspaper's articles set off a firestorm in the African-American community. Starting in the early 1980s a devastating epidemic of a cheap, solid form of cocaine called crack swept through black neighborhoods. The epidemic had been fueled by the availability of massive quantities of relatively inexpensive cocaine from South America. Was it possible that the CIA or some of its operative had actually allowed the deadly drug to be spread?

And there were even more ominous rumors. It was hinted that CIA involvement was not just the result of overzealousness in the cause of the Contras and indifference to the results, but part of a deliberate and genocidal conspiracy against African Americans.

On talk radio and across the Internet there was speculation about how the CIA first introduced crack cocaine into black areas and then had its agents spread the deadly drug across the country. It was said that this was a plot to subdue and ultimately destroy African Americans. These theories found a receptive audience in a community already deeply distrustful of government authority.

At the time of this writing, there were a number of ongoing investigations of the charges of CIA links to drug deals. So far no clear evidence of any such links has been found, but it is impossible to predict what future investigations might reveal. However, it is also impossible to imagine that evidence to support the grander conspiracy, that the CIA deliberately began the crack epidemic, will be ever be found, because it doesn't exist. The reality is that in the early 1980s huge quantities of cocaine were pouring into the country from many sources—most of which have never been linked to the CIA. Even if those drug dealers named in the [i]San Jose Mercury News articles had never existed, the use of crack cocaine would have spread in the same way. There was just too much of it out there already.

But none of that makes any difference anymore. No investigations, no rational discussion, will remove the fear and the anger that have developed. People will believe in this conspiracy for the same reasons that people have always believed in conspiracies—they want to, because it seems to explain the terrible things that have happened. The ideas of conspiracies and cover-ups help people make sense out of events, indeed out of a world, that often seems senseless, indifferent, or cruel.

However, conspiracy theories are not a look at the real or "hidden" history, but a flight from reality. And a theory, no matter how deeply one believes it, will not change that reality.

The best thing that you can do when confronted with a grand conspiracy theory is to step back and get a little historical perspective. Try to remember all the other conspiracies you have read about in this book.

Have the Communists taken over America?

Have the Illuminati?

Was John Wilkes Booth found alive?

Have flying saucers really landed?

Of course not. Yet conspiracy theorists of the past have confidently predicted all these things. Their predictions about what is going to happen in the future are not going to be one bit more accurate.

Some conspiracy theorists try to pass the whole business off as sort of a harmless intellectual game. They put out publications with names like *Paranoia*. "We just want people to think," says the director of the Kennedy assassination museum in Dallas. The authors of a popular conspiracy book call themselves The National Insecurity Council. They tell their readers to find their book "entertaining." They add, "But we also hope you'll take it seriously."³

They warn their readers not to be "carried away" and see conspiracies everywhere.

"We don't encourage that."

"However," they continue " . . . conspiracies have existed throughout recorded history. When you consider that conspirators deposed six Caesars in a row (starting with Julius), one American president by a conspiracy in Dallas is not so hard to believe."

What about those six Caesars? Julius Caesar was indeed stabbed by conspirators, but in a public place and everybody knew who the conspirators were. His successor Augustus had one of the longest and most successful reigns in history. He was virtually worshiped by the people of Rome and died of natural causes when he was an old man. Augustus's successor Tiberius was not nearly as successful or popular, but he died in his bed at the age of seventy-three. The next Caesar, Caligula, was seriously insane and was killed by his officers. Claudius Caesar was an old man when he died. He may have been poisoned, but this is by no means certain. Nero was overthrown in a revolt by the army, and he killed himself. The next three Caesars died in quick succession in the civil wars that swept Rome. A revolt and a civil war are not conspiracies.

That business about six Caesars being deposed by conspiracies came out of the Robert Graves novel *I Claudius*, or more probably from the popular television series made from the novel. It's very good drama, but very bad history. Nevertheless, a lot of people, including those who wrote this particular conspiracy book, seem to think that it is real history.

History, be it ancient Roman history or modern American history, is too complicated and too chaotic to be smoothly manipulated by a single grand conspiracy. Small and seemingly trivial events, like small and trivial people, can sometimes have enormous effects. And well-laid plans often have totally unexpected consequences.

In conspiracy theory everything works smoothly for the conspirators. No one messes up the plan. There are no conflicts among conspirators. No one spills the beans. There are no unforeseen events. But the real world doesn't work that way.

Not long ago I talked to a retired CIA official. He said that since the CIA was a secret organization, people who didn't know anything about it could claim that it did practically anything and there was no effective way to refute the claim. He thought that by and large that had been good for the agency, "because people didn't know how often we messed up."

And then he said, a little wistfully I think, "If only we had been as powerful as people thought we were."⁴

Conspiracy theory can be fun. It is entertaining and essentially harmless to speculate about UFOs in the Nevada desert or who is really buried in John Wilkes Booth's grave. But conspiracy theories can also produce horrifying results. If people are convinced that their government has secretly been taken over by hostile and alien forces that are out to deprive them of their freedom and perhaps their very lives, we should not be surprised when some of these people get "carried away" and try to strike back by shooting agents of the government or blowing up government buildings. That is not "entertaining" at all.

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