(File Photos)

Conspiracies so vast

The Boston Globe

Conspiracy theory was born in the Age of Enlightenment and has metastasized in the Age of the Internet. Why won't it go away?

By Darrin M. McMahon, 2/1/2004

HOWARD DEAN SPECULATES on National Public Radio that George W. Bush may have been warned of 9/11 "ahead of time by the Saudis." University professors imply with an air of sophistication that the war in Iraq was a plot to fill contracts for Halliburton. Radio shock-jocks rant against the machinations of the United Nations and the "New World Order." And the conservative pundit Ann Coulter makes the rounds of the talk shows with a book, "Treason," built on the claim that the vilification of Joseph McCarthy was the "greatest Orwellian fraud of our time." The man who warned famously of a "great conspiracy" of communists, it seems, was himself the victim of a plot by "liberals" to blacken his good name.

Hillary Clinton may have given up her talk about the "vast right-wing conspiracy." But there are plenty of others on both sides of the political divide anxious to continue the conversation. In today's popular culture and even the elite media, plots lurk behind every door.

Nor is the anxiety confined to the United States. Last month, the British government opened official inquests into the deaths of Princess Diana and Dodi Fayed, fueling ongoing speculation that the couple was murdered in a secret plot. In France and Germany, books by the once-mainstream political analyst Thierry Meyssan ("L'Effroyable Imposture" -- The Big Lie) and the former Social-Democratic cabinet minister Andreas von Bulow ("Die CIA und der 11 September") have climbed bestseller lists with their shocking revelations that 9/11 was a plot by rogue elements within the US government. Uncle Sam, they claim, framed Osama. Meanwhile, major media outlets throughout the Islamic world charge that Israel, or an international Jewish cabal, were behind the World Trade Center attacks and countless other nefarious deeds.

It is tempting just to laugh at these views, dismissing them as the ranting of a lunatic fringe or the naive cynicism of the overeducated. But they are simply too prevalent to be ignored. The clearing house www.conspiracy-net.com, one of the many websites devoted to the subject, boasts over "one thousand searchable conspiracies," from child abductions in Nigeria to the invention of AIDS in CIA laboratories to the real motivations behind President Bush's proposed mission to Mars.

Are we living in a golden age of conspiracy theory? And if so, what stands behind this apparent upsurge in global anxiety? Fortunately, no shortage of observers has turned their attention to such questions. As Syracuse University political scientist Michael Barkun writes in "A Culture of

Conspiracy: Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary America" (California), the latest in a recent spate of academic studies on the subject, "obsessive concern with the magnitude of hidden evil powers" is just what one might expect in a turn-of-the-millennium culture "rife with apocalyptic anxiety."

* * * * *

Conspiracies have been around for as long as there have been people to plot. Yet the courtly coups and palace intrigues that animate the pages of Machiavelli's "The Prince" were very different from the more generalized *theories* of conspiracy that first began to circulate, ironically, in that crucible of modernity known as the Age of Reason. The 18th-century Enlightenment saw the emergence of vague, shadowy rumors of international machinations, lurid accounts of the collusion of Freemasons, Jesuits, or radical philosophers, ghastly tales of plots hatched in cells throughout the world to infiltrate governments, topple kings, eradicate religion, and corrupt morals and beliefs.

Whereas the older plots were usually localized (and often genuine), reflecting a face-to-face world in which public life was controlled by the actions of powerful individuals, the newer variants tended to be open-ended and elusive in their aims. Titillating, consoling, and disturbing all at once, these were accounts well-suited to the newly expanding print culture of the 18th century, which brought together formerly isolated groups into virtual communities of opinion now sharing the same newspapers, novels, placards, and pamphlets. The new conspiracies also traveled well by word of mouth -- thriving among the 18th century's rapidly growing populations, in which distrust was fueled by the anonymity of urban environments and insecurity heightened by mobility, dislocation, and bewildering socioeconomic change.

In many cases these new tales were entirely fictitious, like the rumors that consumed Paris in the 1750s that servants of the crown were snatching vagrant children to provide baths of blood for King Louis XV. In other instances they were more immediately plausible, as with the widespread conspiracy rhetoric among American colonists, who drew on decades of distrust of Georgian kings and colonial agents.

In still other cases, conspiracy theories metastasized from an original germ of truth. Fears of the Illuminati, for example, still invoked to this day, were originally fed by the discovery in the 1780s of an actual conspiracy led by a Bavarian professor at the University of Ingolstadt, Adam Weishaupt. His brotherhood of "enlightened ones," the Society of the Illuminati, aimed to infiltrate established Masonic lodges throughout Europe with the goal of disseminating republican and anticlerical beliefs. The conspiracy was discovered long before it could have any real effect. But this did nothing to stem the alarm that spread in its wake.

Fanned by the terrible upheavals of the French Revolution, tales of the Illuminati flourished, taking their place alongside the dastardly accounts of "Monied Interests," Masons, Jacobins, Rosicrucians, Jesuits, and Jews. When the President of Yale, Timothy Dwight, preached a sermon before alarmed undergraduates in 1797, warning of the machinations of the Illuminati conspiracy in the New World, he was merely adding an early Yankee voice to what would soon become a full-blown national panic. The American Bavarian Illuminati scare of 1798-1800 swept up the likes of Alexander Hamilton, and brought the country to the brink of civil war.

Dwight and Hamilton were in good company. From Voltaire and Rousseau to David Hume and Edmund Burke, some of the century's finest minds were ready to countenance conspiracies of one form or another. That fact makes it difficult to dismiss the Enlightenment's fascination with these dark developments as simply irrational aberrations. On the contrary, as the Pulitzer Prize-winning historian Gordon S. Wood has argued, Enlightenment conspiracy theories may have represented a transitional step on the way to a more nuanced and "scientific" understanding of the world.

For an age in the process of demystifying Nature, to attribute cause and effect to magic or Fate, the Devil or the hidden hand of Providence was no longer sufficient. Searching for rational patterns to explain the laws of humanity as they explained the laws of the natural world, Enlightenment observers ran up against the complexity and contingency of human affairs.

Large-scale phenomena like the transition to capitalism, or the American or French Revolutions, did not readily lend themselves to simple patterns. Conspiracy was a way to ascribe order to the seemingly chaotic, make an irrational world appear rational without ascribing agency to nonhuman forces. Conspiracy, in short, was comforting, even if that comfort could have dark

consequences.

* * * * *

Might such insights hold a clue to understanding the fascination with conspiracies in our own time? The work of a number of contemporary scholars would seem to suggest as much.

Peter Knight, a professor of American Studies at the University of Manchester, who has written widely on conspiracy culture, points out that today's conspiracy language is "often a form of popular sociology, a way for people to talk about cause, agency, blame, and structure" in a bafflingly complex world. Globalization in particular "breaks the [perceived] connection between cause and effect" by multiplying the array of economic and social forces acting on our lives. Conspiracy theories piece these connections together, expressing a psychologically reassuring "reason, a structure, a force behind events."

The tremendous increase in access to information (and disinformation) generated by the Internet also bears comparison to the Enlightenment's knowledge revolution and its attendant creation of virtual communities and disembodied publics. In the same way that conspiracy theories united 18th-century audiences in shared fascination and horror, conspiracy theories today are an integral part of the entertainment industry, providing a mysterious and tantalizing twist on the daily spin. At the same time they feed on a post-Watergate distrust of elites that has close analogues with Enlightened suspicion of authorities of all kinds -- be they clerics, aristocrats, intellectuals, or kings.

In "A Culture of Conspiracy," Michael Barkun points to another important factor: the end of the Cold War. Until 1989, he observes, we lived in a "neat, dichotomized moral universe" with a clearly defined enemy. Much as the secularizing forces of the Enlightenment made it more difficult to see the world as the exclusive battleground between God and Satan, the demise of communism has infinitely expanded the field of potential plotters. Where we once saw only commies and capitalist pigs, we now see a more varied and complex array of enemies.

Which is not to suggest that our modern fascination with conspiracies is indicative of newly enlightened times. On the contrary, conspiracy theories are often used as cover for the worst sort of scapegoating and demonization.

David Cook, an assistant professor of religious studies at Rice University, points out that many of the modern conspiracy theories that have flourished in the Middle East since the 18th century tap into even older sources -- such as medieval accounts of the Jewish Blood Libel, the insidious anti-Semitic myth that the blood of Gentiles is used in the preparation of Passover matzos. Barkun notes a similar trend in Western conspiracy rhetoric, especially in America, where themes from the Protestant millennial tradition are often fused with contemporary actors and events to create lurid dramas of the coming Apocalypse and the reign of the Anti-Christ.

Some postmodernist critics argue that contemporary conspiracy obsession is in fact symptomatic of the bankruptcy of reason. Political theorists like Jodi Dean, author of "Aliens in America," a study of contemporary UFO conspiracy theories, and several of the contributors to the recent essay collection "Transparency and Conspiracy: Ethnographies of Suspicion in the New World Order" (Duke), tend to adopt this line. They argue that attempts to disprove conspiracy theories are just efforts to impose dominant ideological views on those defined as "backward," "irrational," or "superstitious." In this "replay of the Enlightenment with a vengeance," observe two of the contributors to "Transparency and Conspiracy," hegemonic reason once again seeks to crowd out all competing perspectives.

Many will conclude that such claims throw out the baby with the bath water, while forgetting that bathtubs can all too easily be filled with blood -- in fact as well as in fiction. That the latter sometimes bleed together is clear. But that we should continue to seek to distinguish them in our accounts of the workings of the world is as vital and unfinished a task today as it was in the 18th century. Call it, if you like, a conspiracy of truth.

Darrin M. McMahon is an associate professor of European history at Florida State University.

© Copyright 2004 Globe Newspaper Company.

© Copyright 2004 The New York Times Company