Will the Real Paranoids Please Raise Their Hands?

by Butler Shaffer

When one dares to dig beneath the surface of governmental programs to reveal undisclosed purposes, he or she is usually met with charges of being a "paranoid" defender of "conspiracy theories." More often than not, such an accusation silences the questioner, as it is designed to do. I long ago came to the conclusion that those who chastise others for spouting "conspiracy theories" tend to do so because they don’t want the implications of their own schemes revealed to the public. "Pay no attention to that man behind the curtain!," intoned the Wizard of Oz, an admonition designed to intimidate the inquisitive into silence.

I, for one, gladly admit to the embracing of any conspiracy theory for which there is credible evidence. But those who condemn me for my views never seem interested in examining the evidence, their purposes being more to prevent the raising of discomforting questions. Having read a good deal of history over the years, I ask my critics to account for the countless foreign intrigues, plots, assassinations, alliances, and other cabals that have been at the heart of so much of the history of the world. Do Shakespeare’s tragedies — almost all of which are grounded in conspiracies of one kind or another — have nothing to teach us about the machinations of human behavior?

A Jewish acquaintance once criticized me for my views, adding "there are no conspiracies." "May I quote you on that?," I asked. He could not understand my purpose in wanting to do so, so I told him: "because it’s not often one hears Jewish people denying the Nazi holocaust the way you just did." After advising him that the "Nazi holocaust" requires a conspiracy of German government officials, he was prepared to modify his statement to allow for the kinds of conspiracies that he believed in.

One of my colleagues, who teaches antitrust law, attacked me for defending even the idea of "conspiracies," until I asked him if he intended to reduce his course from three units to one. "Since so much of antitrust law consists of ‘conspiracies’ to restrain trade, or fix prices, or divide up markets, or monopolize an industry, or engage in such more subtle ‘conspiracies’ as ‘conscious parallelism,’ I assume that, since you do not believe in conspiracies, you will take the lead in condemning such specious theories."
Conspiracy theories abound in our society, and are widely accepted, . . . provided you are identifying the "politically correct" conspiracy. World War II was conducted, in part, on the premise that the so-called "axis powers" were conspiring to take over the world. But if one tries to offer evidence that FDR secretly manipulated the Japanese into an attack on Pearl Harbor in order to serve his political agenda, the "anti-conspiracy league" quickly appears to attack not the evidence, but the state of mind of the accuser. When World War II ended, the "international communist conspiracy" was hurriedly rushed onstage to justify the commitment of trillions of dollars of wealth and hundreds of thousands of lives to fight a "Cold War." When the "Cold War" critics began to speak and write about how this campaign was designed to serve American corporate-state interests at the expense of the American people, the "anti-conspiracy league" was again called into action.

For those who are paying attention, the incongruity of the critics of conspiracy theories should be apparent. "We are busy conducting wars against sinister foreign conspiracies," they might argue, "and anyone who suggests that we might be engaged in conspiracies of our own, are 'paranoids.'" "They" conspire, in other words, but "we" do not. A childishly simple explanation for consumption by childishly simple minds.

"Paranoia" consists not in a fear of others, but in a baseless fear. Would one regard a Jew, in Nazi Germany, as "paranoid," because he thought the government was out to do him harm? If so, how would we characterize the state of mind of another Jew, similarly located, who did not see any threat from his government? When one further considers how preoccupied government officials are with protecting themselves from those they imagine themselves to represent – to the point of routinely having bomb-sniffing dogs, armed security guards, and military helicopters and soldiers accompany their public appearances – it should be asked: just who is being "paranoid?"

It is interesting to observe the psychological projection that takes place in such dynamics. The defenders of statism attack their critics as "paranoids" while, at the same time, fostering an endless supply of "enemies" against whom they promise us protection! Politics thrives on the mobilization of the fear of others. President Bush’s unilateral declaration of a permanent war against the rest of the world can only be premised upon the most paranoid assumption that everyone else is involved in a conspiracy against American interests!

It has always been comforting to most people to imagine, albeit unconsciously, that the "dark side" of their personality – i.e., the capacity for violence, dishonesty, bigotry, etc. – can be severed from themselves and projected onto others, against whom punitive action can then be taken. All that occurs in such behavior, of course, is the punishment of the others who stand in as scapegoats for the feared shortcomings of
those engaged in projecting. This kind of thinking has produced the current Bush-induced mindset that when America bombs other countries – killing innocent men, women, and children in the process – it is a force for "good" defending "freedom." When these other countries retaliate for such attacks – killing innocent men, women, and children in so doing – they represent the forces of "evil" engaged in "terrorism." That grown men and women can internalize this kind of playground logic, particularly when the consequences are so deadly, is indeed frightening.

This war – whose name is ever-changing – has moved far beyond simply retaliation against those responsible for attacking the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on September 11th. It has become more of a self-righteous "holy crusade" against nations that are unprepared to acknowledge America as the rightful ruler of the entire world. Neo-conservative zealots have exploited the September 11th tragedy to pursue a much broader agenda of American hegemony. It is no longer sufficient to track down the perpetrators of that attack, the war must be expanded to include nations whose identities seem to have been selected from someone’s Rolodex file of place-names! "Who shall we attack next?" has been the operative question around Washington. After months of bombing Afghanistan, President Bush was quick to declare an "Axis of Evil" as the broader enemy, suggesting that North Korea, Iraq, and Iran were engaged in some conspiracy, apparently of satanic dimensions, against America. Soon, new candidates were offered up for public consumption: the Philippines, Indonesia, Somalia, the Sudan, Colombia, and perhaps other Middle Eastern or African nations. The candidates for inclusion on this list may include anyone unprepared to genuflect before American interests. (The list will presumably not include China, which would likely offer deadly resistance.)

Let us suppose that some criminal has engaged in a violent attack upon your Uncle Willie’s home. Let us suppose, further, that Willie has undertaken a campaign to discover – and bring to account – the perpetrators of this offense. This would be a perfectly rational response on his part, for which the rest of us would likely lend our support. But suppose that Willie goes further than this and, not being able to discover the criminal, begins going through his neighborhood shooting anyone about whom he has become suspicious, or against whom he has long harbored a grudge. Would your response be to jump on his bandwagon and assist his undertaking, or would you want him confined to some facility that could provide him with a whole lot of couch time?

It is time for sane men and women to put down their flags and begin to recognize the current war-mania not simply as a misguided adventure, but as the collective psychopathic disorder that it has become. When those in power tell us that they are engaged in an endless war against endless enemies, it is time to say "enough!" We have a responsibility to maintain the conditions upon which life may flourish on this planet, not to follow the madness of those who have no greater vision than to
commit all of mankind to a state of universal and eternal warfare in
furtherance of their delusions. It is time for intelligence and human
decency to transcend the frenzied jingoism now prevailing upon the land,
and for intellectual honesty to expose the schemes of those who conspire
against life itself.

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