

LIFESTYLE: THE SUM OF ALL OUR FEARS

Conspiracy Mania Feeds Our Growing National

Paranoia

Aliens killed JFK. The CIA started the crack epidemic. Kurt Cobain was murdered. Who comes up with this stuff? And why do so many people believe it?

BY RICK MARIN AND T. TRENT GEGAX

Inside a beat-up white trailer home in the Nevada desert, Glenn Campbell sits leashed to his desk by a telephone headset. Faxes grind and modems screech while Campbell (no, not that Glen Campbell) runs the one-man government-watchdog station he calls the Area 51 Research Center. A giant black satellite dish out back points ominously skyward. The front yard is decorated with the tail of a crashed F-4 jet. Animal bones scattered in a macabre rock-garden formation separate the trailer from the dirt frontage road along Nevada State Route 375-a.k.a. The Extraterrestrial Highway. A sonic boom from the local air force base cleaves the heavens as Campbell hangs up with a deep military source. "We found a connection between Ron Brown's plane crash and Area 51!" he announces. "It's *all* linked together!"

He's kidding-- sort of. Campbell is a conspiracy theorist, not a conspiracy nut. A retired Boston software executive, he cashed out a couple of years ago at the age of 33 and relocated to the sun-baked hamlet of Rachel, Nev., to become the leading authority on Area 51. You know: the "secret" section of an air base that houses alien spacecraft. This is ground zero for UFOlogists convinced that the world has been controlled by aliens ever since the first flying saucer fell to Earth in 1947. "There is alien contact with the military," Campbell says, though, he admits, "I don't have proof other than what I hear from my sources at Area 51." Coincidentally, those sources commute from their homes in Vegas to the air base in a T-43 transport plane just like the one that carried Secretary Brown to his death.

[Campbell says the above quote is not his. See his [Letter to the Editor](#) to Newsweek.]

Conspiracy paranoia is surrounding us. A paranoid person might even say it's closing in, because these wacky theories aren't just spreading in the usual cheesy newsletters dense with type and craziness. Fomented on the Internet, mass-marketed by Hollywood ("The X-Files," "Independence Day"), conspiracism has become a kind of para-religion. Its vast flock ranges from casual believers to zealots who think O. J. Simpson was set up by the Japanese mafia and that Prince Charles is a puppet of the new world order, instructed by a computer chip planted in his royal buttocks. Wait until Pierre Salinger starts looking into that one.

This great nation has always had its share of conspiracy freaks. Hell, the country was founded by Freemasons, the ultimate secret society. (Who do you think put that weird eye-ball-and-pyramid symbol on the dollar bill?) But the ranks of the darkly deluded may be growing. A recent survey in *George* magazine indicated that three quarters of Americans believe that "the Government is involved in conspiracy." Depending on your level of venality, that statistic can be read as either mass psychosis or a marketing opportunity. This year, America Online started a "channel" called ParaScope, to attract devotees of the paranormal and the paranoid. Mel Gibson's next movie is called, simply, "Conspiracy Theory." He'll play a cabdriver who finds himself in trouble when one of his harebrained theories turns out to be true. Surprisingly, Oliver Stone is not directing. "There certainly seems to be a resurgence in sympathy toward conspiracy theory and an increasing strain of paranoia," says Kendrick Frazier, editor of *The Skeptical Inquirer*, a monthly devoted to debunking wacky theories. Clearly, something is heating up in the more tropical climes of the American psyche. So, herewith, a skeptical inquiry of our own.

Kurt Cobain's Suicide. The shotgun blast that killed the Nirvana front man was not self-inflicted, this far-out theory goes. The grunge martyr's widow, Courtney Love, is implicated, or at least that's how the rumor mill has churned it

through such national media outlets as The Dallas Morning News, Entertainment Weekly, Playboy and Westwood One Radio. (The national radio network has since retraced the accusations.) Private investigator Tom Grant was originally hired by Love to look into her husband's disappearance. He continued his own investigation after Cobain's death, making accusations in the media and on his Web site. The upshot: to many Gen-Xers, the death has taken on some of the mystery of Vince Foster's suicide.

Contrary to reports, Grant claims, Cobain did not set out his driver's license to help authorities identify his body. According to Grant, a cop told him he put the license out. In addition to the suicide note at the scene, Grant claims, Cobain left Love a Dear John letter: "He was retiring, leaving the music business, leaving his wife. That was a retirement note to his fans, not a suicide note." No note, however, has emerged to back Grant's assertion. The motive? "She was after his fan base. The motivation is greed and career" - the same motivation Grant has been criticized for by the Courtney camp. Love's attorney, Michael Chodos, dismisses the charges: "There is nothing to 'debate' about this issue. Mr. Grant's accusations (and whatever other similar accusations are out there) are false and defamatory, and that is that." Moreover, Seattle police spokesman Sean O'Donnell says, "I've had to respond to so many conspiracy theories, and I've refuted them consistently. There's just no information that would indicate this is anything other than a suicide.

Hemp Power Suppressed. Another Gen X and stoner favorite, since hemp (another name for cannabis) can be smoked as pot or turned into a fiber. In June actor Woody Harrelson was arrested when he planted four nonhallucinogenic, industrial hemp seeds in a Kentucky field. Such a Thoreau-like act of civil disobedience would have been unnecessary in 1938, when a Popular Mechanics cover story headlined hemp as the NEW BILLION-DOLLAR CROP. But something went wrong between 1937 and 1942," says Allen St. Pierre, deputy director of the National Organization for the Reform of Marijuana Laws (NORML). "I can't tell you that I've been able to find a conspiracy. But there was such a moneyed interest involved, it makes you wonder.

NORML claims to have documents showing that as part of the war effort the government set up hemp farms in Kentucky, Wisconsin, Indiana and Ohio. St. Pierre says hemp supplied superstrong twine for parachute cord and oil for war vehicles. "The U.S. forces were one big mobile hemp unit," St. Pierre says. During World War II, a "Hemp for Victory" newsreel featured fresh-faced 4-H kids sewing hemp seeds. It also made Levi's denim famously sturdy. What happened? St. Pierre blames Harry J. Anslinger, the nation's first drug czar, who he says needed a fresh target once Prohibition failed. "They made pot illegal for their own purposes," St. Pierre says, citing an Anslinger-Du Pont-Hearst triumvirate as the culprit. The Du Pont family feared cannabis could supplant many of their petrochemicals, and William Randolph Hearst needed a new moral high horse for his newspapers. Nonsense, says Bob Barker (no, not that Bob Barker) of the American Fiber Manufacturers Association. He says hemp doesn't even compete with textile and petroleum products: "It's kind of a nice, back-to-nature sort of thing to believe. Especially if you're baked.

The Klan in the 'Hood. The black community is a hotbed of this kind of suspicion and mistrust, some justified, some fantastical. In October, Rep. Maxine Waters convened a town meeting in South-Central Los Angeles between her constituents and CIA Director John Deutch. A heated debate ensued over reports speculating that the CIA had spread the crack epidemic by backing Nicaraguan drug dealers whose profits went to the contras. "Black-oriented talk-radio shows are rife with conspiracy stuff," says Dr. Jewelle Taylor Gibbs, a University of California, Berkeley, professor who has written extensively on race issues. At WVON in Chicago it's conventional wisdom among listeners that AIDS is a plot to wipe out African-Americans. Keisha Chavers, an executive producer at the station, says, "The common refrain is 'Just because you're paranoid doesn't mean they're not out to get you'." Such is the conspiracist's reflex mentality. It's often a reaction against authority among groups that feel they've been politically marginalized, socially isolated or economically oppressed. Gibbs agrees: "Invariably, blacks start asking if the government is against us. Once these urban myths take hold, you can't do much to disprove them." Like the myth that the Snapple Iced Tea label depicts a slave galley, reflecting the company's solidarity with the KKK. The picture in question is actually of the Boston Tea Party.

The New World Order. When Nation of Islam leader Louis Farrakhan and right-wing political extremist Lyndon LaRouche meet, they can agree on one thing: the malign, totalitarian power of the NWO and its executive arm, the Trilateral Commission. When President George Bush (a member of Yale's secret society Skull & Bones) proclaimed a new world order, he didn't tell us that "black helicopters" would be patrolling the night skies, monitoring our every move. Or that the government keeps a genetic record of every citizen in secret "DNA banks" (a hot topic in AOL's

ParaScope chat rooms). Oklahoma City bombing suspect Timothy McVeigh reportedly claimed that the U.S. Army (the military arm of the NWO) had implanted a computer chip in his buttock to control him. He didn't say whether he and the Prince of Wales had experienced any chip-to-chip contact.

These bizarre fantasies would seem safely ridiculous if they didn't occasionally turn out to be true. "My paranoia and mistrust of authority came of age during Watergate," says Chris Carter, creator of "The X-Files," TV's weekly conspiracy-geek bible. On "The X-Files, everything from who killed JFK to why the Buffalo Bills lose so many Super Bowls is traceable to a single master plan. "It helps when you pick up the paper every day and see how the government has lied to us," Carter adds, ticking off recent revelations about the cover-ups surrounding gulf war syndrome and President Clinton's apology for radiation experiments conducted on unwitting Americans as late as 1974. In "Journey Into Madness: The True Story of Secret CIA Mind Control and Medical Abuse" (Bantam, 1990) British journalist Gordon Thomas meticulously documents the brutal brainwashing of soldiers in the Korean War. Militia extremists who had been warning of a new world order for years felt vindicated when their president actually announced one. See! *They told you so*. As Glenn Campbell likes to tell people out at his trailer in the middle of nowhere, it's all linked together. He just can't quite prove it. Yet.
