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## Conspiracy!

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**In the internet age, conspiracy theories seem to be an accelerating phenomenon. MATT PHILP looks at the best-known, both at home and abroad.**

On the afternoon of Saturday, November 23, 1963, United States Air Force Colonel L. Fletcher Prouty was passing through Christchurch on his way home from assignment in Antarctica when he picked up the Christchurch Star's "extra" edition devoted to the breaking story of the assassination of John F. Kennedy.

The coverage was electric, comprehensive – way too comprehensive, in Prouty's mind, to be anything other than a CIA put-up job.

How, he asked, could a newspaper that hit the streets even before the alleged assassin, Lee Harvey Oswald, was arraigned carry so much background about the gunman unless the bio was written up in readiness before the shooting?

Prouty kept asking, even after his "impossible" timeline was explained away. That's Prouty you see immortalised as the twitchy military depththroat "Mr X" in Oliver Stone's film, JFK, picking up his Star at Christchurch airport, and later exhaling frosty riddles on a park bench in Washington. And thus, this good city was assured of a place for ever in a dark corner of America's murkiest conspiracy theory.

Good for Prouty. As the authors of the newly published Rough Guide to Conspiracy Theories observe: "Entering the world of conspiracy theories can be as disorienting as underwater diving. But this is not the only danger: it's just as easy to be lured by their seductive intricacy."

The Rough Guide is a recitation of some of the most seductive intrigues of the past 3000 years, from the tomb of Tutankhamun to the alleged Roswell UFO crash and film footage to the idea that the Apollo Moon landing was faked.

The authors posit that in the internet age, conspiracy theories have become an accelerating global phenomenon.

To make their point they planted a conspiracy theory of their own online– a take on the London train bombings – and watched it take hold.

Not that we need help. Paranoia percolates throughout New Zealand. We are wise to the chem-trails in our skies; we sense the hollowness beneath our feet, an entire suppressed archaeology of pre-Maori settlements and hidden seaplanes.

Any list of local conspiracy theories ought to include:

\* The CIA killing of Norman Kirk:

This was reanimated on the eve of the 1999 Apec conference by then Labour Party president Bob Harvey, who urged Jenny Shipley to ask Bill Clinton to open the CIA "Kirk files". Harvey's thesis was that Labour Prime Minister Kirk was viewed as far too independent – "I think you will find there would

be files saying this guy is real trouble" – and that the CIA poisoned him during an overseas trip.

"He was not a well man," said Harvey, "but how he got unwell and how his death arose is a mystery."

Maybe not: Kirk had an enlarged heart, was grossly overweight, worked long hours, ate poorly and in the time before his death from sudden heart failure was reportedly being treated for diabetes, goitre, irregular heartbeat, water retention and had a blood clot lodged in his lungs from a previous operation on varicose veins.

Nevertheless, Harvey's speculation struck a chord with many suspicious of American power and who suspect that the CIA has never had qualms about offing troublesome foreign leaders.

\* The murder of Paul White:

The rich and powerful threw the "conspiracy theory" slur to muddy the water, but in the Winebox Affair there really was a conspiracy – even if the chief exposé, Winston Peters, probably did overplay his hand and there was no high-level attempt to pervert the course of justice or laws broken.

But for some, the official inquiry didn't even get close to penetrating the murky depths of our worst big-business scandal.

The most alarming theory is that Paul White, the Auckland computer dealer who ignited the affair when he bought some Citibank floppy disks and who later died in a car accident, was murdered. Peeling that onion takes you to CIA banking schemes, the Saudis, the election of George W. and, should you peel far enough, Osama Bin Laden.

\* The Kaikoura lights:

At five minutes past midnight on December 21, 1978, a Safe Air Argosy transport plane was off the Kaikoura coast when several bright objects appeared alongside.

The headings for the early chapters of pilot Bill Startup's eyewitness account, *The Kaikoura UFOs*, gets the excitement: *The Damned Thing's Right Behind You, They're Flying in Formation with Us, We Couldn't Believe Our Eyes.*

By contrast, the last chapters reek of letdown, official betrayal: *Not Convinced, Nobody Wants to Know, Now We'll Tell You What You Saw.*

It remains our most vivid UFO yarn. It also produced the world's most compelling UFO footage, courtesy of a TV crew who were aboard the Argosy shooting background footage and who filmed one bright orb flying in formation for 15 minutes. The RNZAF inquiry was unimpressed. Its verdict: lights from Japanese squid boats combined with atmospheric conditions.

"So began the official pooh-pooh campaign of apparently deliberate confusion, innuendo and half-truths which continues to this day," wrote Startup, who hints that the lights may have been aircraft belonging to some "friendly nation".

\* The Underground City beneath North Head:

What began as speculation that the abandoned Defence facility on Auckland's North Head included additional, concealed tunnels has since become a full-blown conspiracy theory involving a multi-level labyrinth and hidden seaplanes, among them the first two aircraft built by Boeing, previously believed to have been lost or destroyed and carrying a reward of \$US1 million.

Note, the argument is not that the tunnels are lost, but hidden, a suspicion reinforced when a military dig was suddenly called off, and unshaken by a subsequent Conservation Department archaeological investigation.

Why hidden? Because as well as seaplanes, the military had unwisely disposed of ammunition in the tunnels; ammunition which grows more unstable by the day.

In 2001, the conspiracy was dragged out of the shadows when documentary-maker John Earnshaw sued the Ministry of Defence for lost opportunity, arguing that the military stopped him searching for the planes. After 10 days of evidence and 40 witnesses, Judge Sian Elias's crushing verdict: "Suggestions of an underground city, of fully assembled aircraft sitting in tunnels are, I am satisfied, tricks of the memory."

The particulars of these intrigues may be indigenous, but otherwise there is nothing uniquely New Zealand about them. Conspiracy theories, like fairy stories, are archetypes. They also tend to be planetary – occasionally, interplanetary: that is to say, following the money usually takes you offshore, into the circuitry of real power.

Are we more prone to conspiratorial thinking? The Rough Guide authors hold that most conspiracy theories emanate from the extreme Right, because "people with absolutist, black-and-white world views tend to believe that the powerful operate in an equally absolutist way".

Which would suggest we are less prone. But perhaps all that distance from real power makes for fertile ground.

University of Canterbury philosopher Denis Dutton: "The best characterisation of conspiracy theories is the sophistication of the ignorant. It's part of the human impulse to find vast meaning in the world. People want big events to have big causes. The idea that some loser who's a pretty good shot could munch on some fried chicken in a building someplace and then blow out the brains of the President of the United States is just repellent to people.

"It's a mindset that wants to see history as meaningful, as opposed to the reality, which is often meaningless and totally random."

But not always. Otago philosopher Charles Pigden argues it is often appropriate to cite conspiracy when explaining historical events.

"If we know anything of history we know people frequently conspire. The reign of Elizabeth I is plots, plots, plots all the way. Conspiracies are part of the stock-in-trade of ordinary political life."

Pigden takes issue with the intellectual presumption against conspiracy theories, which draws from philosopher Karl Popper's attack on the "vulgar Marxist" view that large historical events are the product of the ruling class conspiring.

Popper's scepticism was a "useful corrective", says Pigden, but he went too far.

"There is nothing irrational about conspiracy theories per se, even though, of course, many conspiracy theories are irrational. If someone says 'oh, that is just a conspiracy theory', they are saying something stupid and probably dishonest. Because many people use this rhetoric to disguise their own conspiratorial activities."

He does agree that "some conspiracy theories are crazy. But the point is that they're not crazy because they are conspiracy theories, they're crazy because they're crazy.

"What's more, just because a particular conspiracy would be crazy to engage in, that doesn't necessarily make it crazy to believe in. Because when you are talking about the half-world, about spies, those people enjoy the skulduggery for its own sake."

But for all Winston Peters' ferreting and fulminating, Pigden believes most of the conspiracy action happens elsewhere.

"I don't think many of the things that happen in New Zealand happen as a result of large-scale conspiracy – although I'm inclined to think that the New Right revolution of the 1980s was a partly conspiratorial business."

But conspiracy theories do have real effects. Just ask the health officials whose attempts to fluoridate the water supply were rebuffed by West Coasters.

Before the vote, there were a host of conspiracy theories circulating on the Coast. Among them: that fluoride was being used to pacify the population; that the authorities knew that fluoride was harmful but didn't want to lose face; that the authorities were hell-bent on fluoridation as a way to keep aluminium giant Comalco from quitting New Zealand (fluoridation being a capitalist ploy to allow the aluminium industry to dump its waste for a profit). In the last case, there was a logical flaw: the fluoride used here comes from overseas.

The fluoride debate became embittered, which is why health types who spoke to The Press wanted anonymity. One says that for the most part, the anti-fluoridation argument was made on points of science – "or pseudo-science". But the conspiracy theories exacerbated the climate of fear and distrust.

The conspiracy-theorist label also has effects.

Despite his part in the Sunday Star-Times' SIS-targets-Maori embarrassment – a story about a conspiracy which was itself the product of a conspiracy – Nicky Hager is viewed by many in power as an effective researcher with great contacts. But his revelations are inevitably denounced, at least in the first instance, as "mere" conspiracy theories.

Hager is wary of even discussing the subject.

"You can feel my reluctance to even be associated with the word, can't you?" he says. "Look, there are conspiracy theories that make any reasonable person roll their eyes. The difference has to be the strength of the evidence. That's why I always find it annoying when the argument is used against me. If someone is finding out things people with power would rather remain secret, then it's such an easy attack. It means you don't need to argue the issue."

It's said that conspiracy theories flourish best in minds without historical perspective. The Rough Guide remarks that "where there is no understanding of history, conspiracy theories tend to be sucked in to fill the intellectual vacuum".

Except that it is also true that many conspiracy theorists don't just read history, they practically ingest it. The problem is not one of information, but of method.

"Conspiracy theories have all the allure of history, but none of the argument," Rough Guide author James McConnachie told National Radio.

"Instead of showing how two things connect, they tend to just put them next to each other and let it ferment."

It's that faulty reasoning that interests University of Auckland philosophers Jonathan McKeown-Green and Matthew Dentith, who take their students to North Head to teach their respective papers.

McKeown-Green: "I call them 'just so' stories. If a story fits the data, people assume it must be right. To get a story that is seamless and is such that if it were true all the data would be true, people wrongly think is quite an achievement.

"Whereas, there are many stories that will fit, but only one will be true."

McKeown-Green asks students to think about the kind of reasoning that gives rise to speculation

about tunnels, the reliability of eyewitness accounts and how much weight ought to be given to expert testimony. They also examine some of the so-called evidence. The smell from the tunnels is alleged to be naphthalene, given off by decaying ammunition. But it turns out coal tar was used in the building, that it endures for years and smells of naphthalene.

"And people talk about 'The Plans'. Well, plans aren't maps. If a plan shows a particular structure, it doesn't mean the structure was ever built."

Dentith, who like his colleague grew up in Devonport, is fascinated by the way the North Head story evolved from local folklore into conspiracy theory, becoming increasingly convoluted and threatening. Initially, it fixated on the location of the seaplanes and it was presumed they had been blocked up to keep them dry. When the military denied their existence, it became a full-blown conspiracy theory.

"Why were they hiding these planes? Two rotting seaplanes doesn't seem like a good reason to keep an entire complex of tunnels hidden from public view, does it? So the story gets an added layer, the discarded ammunition theory.

"It's almost as if the story had to become as big as the hill itself."

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