



## Interview

### The Conspiracy Theory Theorist

Independent scholar DANIEL PIPES throws light on paranoia.

PHOTO-ILLUSTRATION: THOMAS BEHNHETT

**A**t Daniel Pipes' office on Chestnut Street, the doors are tightly locked. "Do you have an appointment?" shouts a secretary through the glass portals. Pipes was a well-known but ordinary Middle East scholar (he edits the *Middle East Quarterly*) until this winter, when the *Free Press* published his *Conspiracy: How the Paranoid Style Flourishes and Where It Comes From*, a book that has prompted unwanted visits from the followers of arch-conspiracist Lyndon

LaRouche (who viciously panned *Conspiracy* in his own journal). But conspiracy theorizing is no longer the province of kooks alone. As Pipes documents, everyone's spouting a conspiracy theory these days, from O.J. Simpson's lawyers to Hillary Clinton to *Oliver Stone*. —Bill Gifford

**What exactly is conspiracism?**  
I define "conspiracism" as the belief that things are not as they appear to be, but that some group planning behind the scenes

to take over the world is running the show. There are real conspiracies, but there are many fewer conspiracies than there are conspiracy theories. That's because, basically, a conspiracy is not a very good way of effecting a plan. **How do you tell a conspiracy theory from a real conspiracy?**  
Ultimately, you have to fall back on your common sense. If it's too elaborate, too detailed, if it requires too many leaps of faith, then basically you have to say no, this is fantasy. In the Kennedy assassination, there are some 20



## Daniel Pipes

or 30 parties who stand accused, all of them with elaborate explanations: the Texas oil barons, the CIA, the FBI, the Mafia and many others. After a while, you come away thinking this doesn't make sense. On the other hand, this act fit into Lee Harvey Oswald's worldview, it fit into his own personal record of having tried to kill someone earlier, he had a gun and he was in the area. Why read him out of the story and blame someone else?

### **And yet most Americans say they doubt Oswald acted alone.**

They do. I distinguish two kinds of conspiracy theories in the United States. One comes from thrill-seeking, the other from discontent. The discontent is somewhat easier to explain, as in black people who have a distrust of the system, but it's also rife on both ends of the political spectrum. The thrill-seekers, or aesthetic conspiracists, are somewhat different. They're people who are not doing badly. I mean, Ross Perot is hardly a malcontent. And the consumers of the movies and novels are not unhappy in their circumstances, but there seems to be something very enticing about a conspiracy theory, something evocative, intriguing, that captivates the imagination.

### **Is there a point where thrill-seeking becomes dangerous?**

What I found interesting was how these theoretical, large conspiracies come to dominate people's lives. Joseph Stalin, who was obsessed by fears of a conspiracy, would have his intimates in his leadership circle test his food: "Look, here are the giblets, Nikita. Have you tried them yet?"

### **He was hardly a powerless person.**

No, you don't need to be. In fact, two of the foremost, most powerful figures of the 20th century, Stalin and Hitler, were both possessed with conspiracy theories. In comparison, conspiracy theorists in this country are minor-leaguers. The most prominent American conspiracy theorists, say a Senator McCarthy, are inconsequential compared with Hitler and Stalin. Or today, Saddam Hussein is obsessed with conspiracy. But never have American lives been truly affected by American conspiracy theorists.

### **Has Hillary Clinton's life been affected?**

My rule of thumb is, when you hear someone talking about a conspiracy, take a hard look at their actions, because it's a window into their own mind. I found an intimate connection between conspiracy theories and actual conspiracies. If you're someone who believes in conspiracies, then it's likely that you yourself will tend to engage in them.

### **Your father, of course, is the well-known retired Harvard history professor Richard Pipes, and you yourself have two Harvard degrees. Why did you opt out of the typical university professor track?**

I like being in the world of politics, and while it's possible to do that at a university, I find it easier to do so outside the university. Also, my views are such that most universi-

ties find them unpalatable. Most professors don't agree with me.

### **Because you're too conservative?**

One reason is being conservative. Another is that on Middle East issues, my specialty, I'm basically pro-Israel, and most professors of this subject are anti-Israel. There's a lot of disagreement between me and most of my academic peers.

### **Who was the first conspiracist?**

Unquestionably, the most important book was a big four-volume study by the French Abbot Barruel, 200 years ago. It is to conspiracy theories as Adam Smith is to economics—the key founding document. But while Smith remains in circulation, Barruel has been forgotten. He *hated* the French Revolution, and he developed a mad but brilliant theory to explain it, blaming it on the Jacobins, the Philosophes, the Masons and others. He created a field of thought. There's a body of literature, with its texts and authorities, but it's all spurious and not very logical. A beautiful example is Pat Robertson's *The New World Order*, which came out in 1991 and is almost exactly a modernization of Barruel. The ideas are all the same.

### **And yet Robertson's a semi-respectable political figure.**

Robertson is odd in that he can turn conspiracism on and off. In 1988, when he ran for president, there wasn't a whisper of conspiracism. And then he unwrapped it three years later. I've watched his television show, and it's perfectly okay, premised on conventional assumptions. Whereas his book is in a completely different dimension. Normally, people are consistent. Lyndon LaRouche would be an example of someone who sees a conspiracy from top to bottom and all the way around.

### **So most conspiracists don't have that self-control?**

It would seem. But there are cases where people realize it's in their interest to tamp down. Saddam Hussein is one. When he was trying to make an approach toward the United States in the 1980s, conspiracy theories basically disappeared from his speeches. Then, after he ended his war with Iran, in 1988, out popped his conspiracy theories. The whole invasion of Kuwait was premised on a conspiracy theory, that the Kuwaitis were going to drive down the price of oil.

### **What's it like to have to read the writings and speeches of Saddam Hussein or Lyndon LaRouche or Abbot de Barruel?**

The reading goes from distasteful to repulsive. It is sometimes fascinating, but not always. *The Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion* is extremely well-known, so you might think it'd make for exciting reading. But it's got all these strikes against it: It's a forgery, it's turgid and it's illogical. Fortunately, it's only 80 pages long.

### **It must have been a relief to finish all that.**

Yes! But my reading hasn't improved that much. Now I'm doing a book on Islam in America, so I'm reading the complete oeuvre of Elijah Muhammad, which is also quite mad. I've gone from the frying pan to the fire. ■■