

Cui Bono?

Conspiracy Theories: A Rothbardian Perspective

by Justin Raimondo



Anatol Woolf

During the debate over our unnaturally extended presidential election, David Corn, associate editor of the *Nation*, appeared on CNN's *Crossfire* and took up the cudgel in defense of Gore and his fellow coup-plotters. The smarmy Corn parried his opponent's contention that Al Gore and the Democrats were trying to steal the election with a gleeful cry: "You don't expect me to believe this conspiracy theory, now, do you?" A smile slithered across Corn's face, and his eyes lit up with the certainty that he had backed his Republican opponent into a corner: The argument, as far as he was concerned, was over. After all, who could possibly believe that the power-lusting Gore and his army of lawyers would want to seize power by using the judiciary to bypass the Constitution?

Corn's triumphant smirk was largely due to the bad press conspiracy theories have received over the years. Conservatives have been tarred with this particular brush ever since the early 1960's, resulting from the nationally orchestrated hysteria over the alleged "threat" of "right-wing extremism" (represented by the John Birch Society). Back in those days, you only had to "come out," so to speak, as a conservative, and you would be interrogated. The first question inevitably was: "So, you think President Eisenhower was a communist, eh?" Since the early 1950's, at least, the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith has been trying to tar conservatives as either practicing or incipient antisemites—adherents to a conspiracy theory so obviously debased and irrational that it discredits every element of their worldview. Once, all that was required to dismiss an idea or person out of hand was an arch of the eyebrow and a reference

to the "black-helicopter crowd."

But the tide is turning. In the perfervid political atmosphere of the present day—after the open conspiracy of Al Gore and his fellow bonapartists to seize the White House on the strength of a few thousand dimpled chads—that is no longer enough. The smug complacency of David Corn and his ilk, who sneer at the very idea that Prince Albert planned to seize the crown and place it on his own head, has thoroughly debunked the anti-conspiracy theorists, who were similarly disoriented by Watergate and the Vietnam War, when the whole course of American domestic and foreign policy seemed to be one dark and evil conspiracy against common sense and human decency.

Many conspiracy theories are, of course, absurd or even evil; but this can hardly mean that they all should be dismissed or denounced as hate crimes. Every organized effort, from a political campaign to an attempted *coup d'état*, can, in some sense, be called a conspiracy, depending on who is making the call. The term is subjective, infinitely elastic, and ultimately meaningless when applied to anything short of a criminal cabal. Human beings act (often in concert) to advance their own interests—in politics and in life. Who can deny it?

This is, perhaps, less obvious when the differences between the left and the ostensible right are narrowed down to microscopic arguments over prescription-drug policy. In such a case, there are no longer any white hats or black hats in Washington, D.C., or San Francisco—only the grey centrism of the mushy middle. It follows, then, that there are no conspiracies, since practically everyone is neither good nor bad but a morally neutral technician firmly grasping the levers of power. In our era of bipartisan bliss and ideological convergence, when the prefix "neo" is attached—like a "for sale" sign—to all of the old ide-

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ologies, we are expected to believe that the actions of politicians and parties are undertaken for the good of the country rather than the vulgar self-interest of the participants. No ordinary person believes this (especially these days), but this civic conceit is still ritually invoked by the three major interest groups supported by the state: big business, big labor, and big media. Of these, the third is most vital in keeping the present order together, for it is the job of the intellectuals to confer legitimacy on those who rule, introducing what the Marxists used to call “false consciousness” among the producing classes. Their role is to lull the producers to sleep—how else could the tax-eating classes feast without interruption?—and convince them that they never had it so good. I include in this group not just the kept pundits and journalists but also an academic wing: the court historians, the economic planners, the various and sundry theoreticians and hagiographers of power whose every utterance justifies the actions of the state and glorifies the ruling elite at its helm.

In *Toward a Theory of Libertarian Social Change*, an unpublished book dealing with the strategy and tactics of the movement for a free society, the late Murray N. Rothbard defined the two great opposing classes by citing John C. Calhoun’s “happy distinction between ‘net taxpayers’ and the ‘net tax-consumers’ who constitute the State and its privileged and subsidized allies.” From a libertarian perspective, these are the bad guys—the leaders of the “tax-eating coalition”—while the good guys are their taxpaying victims. “In different times and places,” Rothbard writes, “who constitutes the ruling elite will vary from group to group: ranging from Chinese emperors to Rockefeller and Morgan to Communist parties. Who the ruling class may be at any given time depends on an empirical analysis of the concrete conditions of the real world.” This libertarian class analysis, which originated with the 18th-century French theorists of *laissez-faire* and was developed by Rothbard, is a prism that enables us to distinguish our friends—the great Middle American producing classes—from the enemies of liberty. Unfortunately, the good guys have never been good at this game, as Rothbard points out:

Contemporary libertarians and classical liberals have been battling the ruling class under a severe self-imposed handicap: a stubborn refusal to identify the specific members of the ruling class—in contemporary America a coalition led by certain big-business groups allied to technocratic intellectuals and union leaders.

Contemporary conservatives are open to the same charge. They spent the decades of the Cold War denying the existence of a ruling class in Washington and concentrating on the alleged threat from the competing gang in the Kremlin. Faced with the bloated arrogance and increasing lawlessness of their own ruling elite—made more apparent and ominous since the fall of the Berlin Wall—the American right is just beginning to distinguish friend and foe. The problem, at least in part, is precisely the contempt that the mandarins and intellectual gatekeepers—the David Corns of this world and their right-leaning equivalents—have for “conspiracy theories.” Too many on the right live in fear of this disdain. But perhaps an even bigger problem, avers Rothbard, is “that many libertarians believe that statism has grown purely as the result of intellectual error, or imbibing erroneous ideas about what set of governmental policies

will further the general welfare.” What we are facing, however, is not just “a tyranny in the service of abstract ideas,” but “a massive system of economic exploitation of the productive many by the parasitic ruling few.” Such people are not about to be “educated” and convinced to give up their thieving, rapacious, and (all too often) murderous ways. Rothbard argues that “statism is in the rational self-interest of the exploiters.” Cartels, government employees, unions, subsidized oligarchs—all these state dependents have a material and emotional stake in legitimizing and expanding state power.

The bold revisionism that so suited Rothbard’s temperament was backed by solid research, buttressed by his encyclopedic knowledge of diverse fields, and anchored in references to an astonishing range of works.

Of course, such a worldview is bound to be dismissed as “merely an exercise in ‘the conspiracy theory of history,’ ‘paranoia,’ ‘economic determinism,’ and even ‘Marxism,’” writes Rothbard—in spite of the similar methodology employed by Adam Smith, Ricardo, James Mill, Cobden, and Bright. Only modern opponents of big government have fallen into the trap of refusing, out of some peculiar squeamishness, to identify their oppressors. No wonder they are losing. Indeed, opines Rothbard, the only way to win is to name names, to expose continually the beneficiaries and supporters of the system as being one and the same. This is neither paranoia nor Marxism but “simply common sense.” Rothbard cites the example of a quota on steel imports, arguing that “only a moron would deny that the domestic steel industry . . . was the major lobbyist pushing for its passage.” If so, he asked, “why not extend this sensible analysis still further to more complex measures?” Foreign aid, the Federal Reserve, U.S. entry into two world wars—in all cases, we must ask, *cui bono?* Who benefits?

“Follow the money”—in the Clinton era, this old adage took on new meaning. Conspiracy theories—involving everything from the mysterious deaths that haunted the Clinton White House to the alleged purchase of U.S. government secrets by Chinese communists—flourished during the eight insufferable years of the most corrupt administration since the 1800’s, and with good reason. Not since the Medicis and the Borgias had so much intrigue swirled around a ruling house and roiled its attendant institutions and satellites. Once decidedly “out,” conspiracy theories were back in—and not only on the right. When the Clintonistas blamed most (if not all) of their troubles on what the First Lady characterized as a “vast right-wing conspiracy,” a taboo was broken. What was new about the Clintons was not that they schemed, manipulated, and—yes—conspired to fill their coffers and sate their lust for power, but that they did it so carelessly and brazenly, as if they thought they could “spin” their way out of anything. How appropriate that this whole era

should culminate in Al Gore's beerhall *putsch*.

Employing the terminology of the Austrian School of economics (elaborated by Ludwig von Mises, his teacher and mentor), Rothbard put it this way:

The "conspiracy theorist," at his best, is simply a person who possesses basic praxeological insight: that men act, that they choose means in order to obtain certain preferred ends. The opponents of the "conspiracy theory of history" explicitly assume that all events in history are random, that they are never the results of human purpose and choice.

Of course, it is necessary to establish some relationship between the beneficiaries of a government action and those who originated and lobbied for its passage. This is a step—the careful gathering and correlation of empirical evidence—that too many conspiracy theorists skip, giving the rest of us a bad name. They merely identify the beneficiaries of a particular governmental policy and assume—or invent—the facts to fit their theory.

Rothbard never fell into this error. In his historical and economic writings that touch on this subject—for example, *The Case Against the Fed*, the four-volume *Conceived in Liberty*, the two-volume *Austrian Perspective on the History of Economic Thought*, and *Wall Street, Banks, and American Foreign Policy*—he practiced what he preached. The bold revisionism that so suited his temperament was backed by solid research, buttressed by his encyclopedic knowledge of diverse fields, and anchored in references to an astonishing range of works. Rothbard's books and articles were densely packed with pure fact: His footnotes alone are a veritable treasure trove for the inquisitive student. Yet, with all this information at his fingertips, he never became mired in the details of his subject but always saw the larger patterns, the overview that few had the originality, the daring, or the skill to uncover.

Rothbard's perspective on history and current events was summed up in his paean to historian and polymath Harry Elmer Barnes. Barnes, in his day, was the dean of the revisionist school that throws doubt on the "official" histories of two world wars. In his tribute, Rothbard explained that the rise of the garrison state and the threat of annihilation on an unprecedented scale was made possible by the power elites of the various states:

These consist of the full-time members and rulers of the State apparati, as well as those groups in society (e.g. arms contractors, labor union leaders) who benefit from the military and warfare systems. In particular, this reversion [to barbarism] has been made possible by the reappearance on a large scale of the "Court Intellectual"—the intellectual who spins the apologia for the new dispensation in return for wealth, power, and prestige at the hands of the State and its allied "Establishment."

Of his old friend, Professor Barnes, Rothbard wrote that, "when the records are in and the accounts are drawn, it will never be said of him that he was a Court Intellectual. Absolute fearlessness, absolute honesty, absolute independence have been his guiding stars." In writing those words, he might also have written his own epitaph. ^c

The Difference A Day Makes

by Charles Edward Eaton

The day lily bloomed and died
As if on a single day
It said all it had to say—
How many ways, words, of any living thing
abide?

It opens in the morning, takes a breath,
Speaks forthrightly of its yellow glamor.
There is no fuss or undue clamor
About brevity in time, life-in-death.

So is the lily more astute?—
We speak on and on until late evening
About joy, anger, anger, joy, and grieving:
Next day, the flower is simply shriveled, mute.

You cannot stop your full, loquacious mouth—
In just one ordinary week,
You could fill a book with what you speak
As if you feel that language may be facing drouth.

I know it takes such trouble, and much more, to cope
with time—
Still, you look, and give a final look
As if you wished to press the flower in a book
Just before it dies, unconcerned about the solitary
and sublime.

But on toward night I thought I saw the lily quiver
As it released its last fine careless rapture—
And you and I are left to talk on and on, and capture
The secrets in the flower's corpse, the closed and cabalistic
segments of forever.