Query by Christopher Cox of the Boston Herald. He wants to know why conspiracy theories are so popular, such as the allegedly secret plot by the Masons in the movie, "National Treasure."

Query by Clint Conley of WCVB TV. He would like information for an upcoming program on the 50th anniversary of the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. He would like to know what psychological factors are behind the conspiracy theory that there was more than one shooter in Dallas.

Headers

Once deceived, forever suspicious.

Conspiracy theories enhance the significance of any event.

Seeing a conspiracy in "National Treasure" feeds our patriotism.

We are often attracted strongly to what we know. And since the public has experienced over the years a number of institutional deceptions, which are at the root of conspiracy, it is easy to see how people take to conspiracy theories like a duck to water. Whether it's a spy in a movie or a real-life politician or a church that covers up sex abuse by priests or collusion between a CEO and auditors, we are bombarded with lies which in the short term are successful and which put us in awe at the power of deception. And although we abhor those who conspire to deceive us, we're on the sidelines with voyeuristic intensity watching the show -- considerable anger mixed with a bit of secret admiration.

Aside from familiarity, a second reason why our attention is riveted by potential conspiracies is sheer curiosity. The mystery of whether the conspirators will succeed or get caught puts us on the edge of our chairs. And the more secret the conspiratorial group and the more complex the plot, the more we eagerly anticipate the outcome: Will the conspirators succeed or get caught?

There is a third thought pattern that is involved in the attraction to conspiracy theories. Some people are awfulizers and expect the worst to happen at any time. They don't trust anyone and any group. For them, a conspiracy fits their long-held beliefs of weltschmerz and fills their need to say, "I told you so." They wear the armor of pessimism to protect themselves from disappointment. Once deceived, forever suspicious. Since
disappointment results only from unmet expectations, you'll never be caught off-guard if you always expect deception. So, lower the bar and expect the worst -- lies, lies, and more lies -- and you effectively eliminate any pain from disappointment. However, the protection against surprise and disappointment for that one moment is costly -- a life filled each minute of each day of each year with chronic suspicion and discontent. Being enamored with conspiracy theories protects you in the short term -- you're always braced for betrayal -- but the suspiciousness is costly in terms of unyielding discontent for the long-term. It is better to be free of the wholesale acceptance of conspiracy theories and once in a while risk getting slugged psychologically by a conspiracy that emerges out of the blue.

Another attractive feature of conspiracy theories is that they may make an event seem more important than it actually is. Since a conspiracy implies a concerted effort by two or more individuals, whatever is the subject of the plot must have some significance. And so if only Harvey Lee Oswald killed President Kennedy in 1963, the presidency was effectively brought down by a punk and, by association, the presidency is demeaned. In effect, the death of a president lacks meaning. But the U.S. presidency is a highly important and respected position. Hence, the simplicity of the Oswald explanation doesn't fit our high regard of the U.S. presidency and there is a compelling need to reduce this cognitive dissonance. Enter conspiracy theory. If the Mafia and/or government officials were involved in a complex plot, then the efforts of these powerful groups give the assassination more meaning and more significance. Similarly, if Princess Diana was killed simply because the driver of her car was drunk, her death is common and is no different from any other vehicular death. But if British government agents were involved in a conspiracy to eliminate her as a source of embarrassment to the royal family of England, then her death becomes important. Conspiracy theories enhance the significance of any event.

Aside from these thought patterns, there are feelings that attract us to conspiracy theories. If the conspirators wear black hats, we gleefully wait for them to get caught and meet their punishment. There is a bit of schadenfreude in us all -- we want to see the bad guys slip on a banana peel and fall. Conspiracy theories are rich in fueling anticipation for this kind of justice. It's one thing to enjoy the benign happiness that radiates within us when we watch "It's a Wonderful Life." But there is something deliciously pleasurable in watching rogues get caught and punished. On the other hand, if the conspirators wear white hats, we root for them to succeed and wait with great anticipation the outcome of their plot. In "National Treasure" the mystery of whether the good guys can find the treasure puts us on the edge of our chairs because we want them to succeed.

Another emotional need that can be satisfied by conspiracy theories are feelings of patriotism. In "National Treasure", we can admire the creativity of the Masons and founding fathers of our country in their clandestine protection of a valuable treasure and we can feel patriotic about the country having been founded, nurtured, and protected by competent, albeit crafty, men. We can also admire their loyalty in the protection of our country as well as other countries by hiding the national treasure and not letting it fall into the wrong hands -- hands that would upset the balance of power in the world and
jeopardize the existence of the United States and humankind. The fact that the founding fathers turned their backs on the materialistic temptation to pocket the treasure and be wealthy and, instead, looked down the road at the serious long-term consequences of money and power being given to the wrong world leaders can only be admired and brings out our feelings of gratitude for wise, unselfish judgments. The founding fathers become saviors of humanity and, in their hands, conspiracy looks like a darn good tool.

In summary, we are attracted toward conspiracy theories for the thoughts and feelings they evoke in making us feel good about ourselves.

ENDNOTE. I want to acknowledge the contributions of three advisers who provided some of the ideas in this essay. Here is the gist of our conversations in the order of occurrence. Peter Tecce offered the idea that we are attracted to conspiracy theories partly because they enhance the importance of an event and he gave the example of President Kennedy's assassination. Anthony Tecce articulated the idea that we are attracted to conspiracy theories as exemplified in the film, "National Treasure", because the founding fathers of our country were patriotic and creative in devising a clever method of positioning the secret map to the national treasure on the back of the Declaration of Independence. Christopher Tecce presented the idea that we are attracted to conspiracy theories as exemplified in "National Treasure" because our founding fathers were altruistic in not turning a personal profit on the treasure and, instead, protected humanity by not letting it fall into the hands of potentially hostile countries.