

Conspiracy!

One aspect of the unfolding Watergate testimony has not received much attention, but touches a sensitive Jewish historical nerve: the number of people who sincerely believe that we are all victims of a Great Conspiracy.

There has always been a close relationship between theories of Great Conspiracy, and political extremism. And there has usually been a close relationship between anti-Semitism and political extremism. It's as simple as that. The formula is simple, too: if your political opponents are engaged in a hidden and comprehensive conspiracy, they cannot be beaten in a fair fight. Therefore it is necessary to fight them unfairly. It is proper to suspend the rules and evade the laws of democratic restraint, when dealing with such opponents.



Raab

These are the sentiments one heard from the early witnesses before Senator Ervin's committee. The country was in a state of disruption; there was a widespread web of conspiracy to blow up officials, subvert the government, and so forth. It was not money, but sincere belief in this hidden danger that motivated so many of the Watergate participants.

It's an old syndrome. The first belief in the Great Conspiracy emerged in this country almost at its birth among people like Timothy Dwight, President of Yale; and the prominent Bostonian, Jedediah Morse. Morse spoke of hidden pernicious plotters:

"Among the fruits (of their endeavors) may be reckoned our unhappy and threatening political divisions; the increasing abuse of our wise and faithful leaders; the virulent opposition to some of the laws of our country, and the measures of the Supreme Executive . . . the industrious circulation of baneful and corrupting books, and the consequent spread of infidelity, impiety and immorality."

Sound familiar? But why should it touch a *Jewish* historical nerve? Well, usually when this theory of Great Conspiracy emerged in America, it promptly became connected with a prime piece of bigotry, in order to dramatically identify the source of the Conspiracy. Morse, for whom Jews were scarcely evident, chose as villains the Catholics and popery. Anti-Catholicism was the anti-Semitism of early America. But later in the 19th century, anti-Semitism became the anti-Semitism of America. Usually, whenever the conspiracy theory sprang up, the Jews were identified with it. It's not inevitable. Joe McCarthy didn't do it, with his feeble conspiracy theory and within the fresh memory of the war against the Nazis. But it's happened so often that Jews have developed a special fearful reaction to theories of Great Conspiracy.

Now, we have evidence that the Jedediah Morse tradition still flourishes for many people. But we also have evidence that, so far, the great bulk of the American people are repelled by that tradition. The polls show that there is not apathy to what's been revealed—but, by and large, roaring disapproval. Perhaps more vigorously than ever before, the majority of the American people have rejected the Great Conspiracy idea that the rules can be suspended, that democratic restraints can be thrown off, for the kinds of reasons that Jedediah Morse listed.

Why have Americans so far, showed a relatively high commitment to democratic restraint? There's no eternal guarantee of that commitment—and at times in the past, it's been shaky.

Evidence shows that people who have no stake, little hope for themselves in the society are most likely to abandon democratic restraint. That has to do with our society's treatment of the disadvantaged. But evidence also shows that, all other things being equal, education makes the difference. One survey showed that about twice as many of those who had only an eighth grade education, were ready to abandon democratic restraint, as those with college education. And about twice as many college graduates with a low quality education were ready to abandon democratic restraint as those college graduates with high quality education.

"Quality" is a vague word, but in this case it apparently has something to do with attention to hard non-vocational (sometimes called "irrelevant") subjects like literature and history.

All of this should have something to say to the public affairs agenda of the Jewish community.