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Cox: Opening Remarks

Opening Remarks

Encounters with Conspiracy Theorists

The train careened through the dawn mist of the Welsh countryside as the sun began its climb into the sky. From my window seat I could see steam clouds puffing from the cooling towers of a nuclear power plant in the distance. I'd spent the night before on a ferry crossing the Irish Sea and was dog tired. The morning already had a surreal feel to it, but turned decidedly stranger when a self-proclaimed "old-age pensioner" sat down next to me and began talking about Armageddon. "You know about the Trilateral Commission and the multinational banks, don't you?" she asked. "If you're ever going to fight anything, fight a one-world monetary system. That will be the end."

She spouted quotes from the *Book of Revelations* and insisted that computers were the beginning of the end. At one point, she instructed me to look at my bank cards and examine bar codes. "A lot have '666' on them—the sign of the devil," she said. "Coincidence?"

Great, I thought. No sleep, and now I've got Mrs. Nostradamus sitting next to me. Truth be told, the whole scene smacked of craziness. After all, there I was—bleary-eyed, exhausted, and not exactly functioning at optimal brain power. And here was this woman, jabbering in my ear about the apocalypse as the sky took on an eerie glow and the nuclear power plant loomed more ominous in my mind. Fortunately for me, the woman soon slipped off the train. "We can't win," she said while departing. "We're doomed."

At first I had hoped the experience was just a sleep-deprivation-induced hallucination. Then, as my imagination stretched, I wondered: "Was that woman for real—or some kind of sign from the Almighty above?" Nope, just another conspiracy theorist spreading gospel from the tattered fringes of civilization, I figured.

It wasn't my first encounter with a pontificating citizen distortionist, nor was it my last. This, of course, makes me contemplate whether I have a look about me that attracts these folks. I don't have a bumper sticker that says, "Honk If You Believe Oswald Had Help," or clothing declaring, "My Wife Visited Area 51 And All I Got Was This Lousy Radioactive Alien T-shirt." In fact, I tend to be skeptical about information generated by late-night talk radio, Internet chat rooms, gossips, or paranoid people with political motives. Yet how can anyone automatically dismiss the hand of the government or military when their track records include such notorious cover-ups as Watergate, the My Lai Massacre, and the Tuskegee Experiment?

Conspiracy theorists have plenty of fodder for their cannons. But how they rally around far-fetched beliefs—including vulgar hate-group views that justify racism and anti-Semitism—boggles my mind. In "Harbingers of Hate" (page 22), three Syracuse professors share insights on these groups. Some of the information is downright frightening. Such notions often give these people a common ground, the professors say. Apparently, once you accept one disturbing idea, buying into the whole package becomes part of the bargain.

Even after reading the article, I still wonder how a seemingly pleasant former neighbor of mine could turn a casual conversation into a bigoted tirade that encompassed everything from the Trilateral Commission and David Duke to an imminent Russian invasion of the U.S. mainland. He liked to call me a "Boston liberal," though I was neither from Boston nor a liberal. But it sure sounded better than anything I would have called him, which certainly would've revealed my role in the conspiracy.



JAY COX
EDITOR