

Right in Your Own Backyard

It was December of 1985 and I had just accepted a staff position with *THE NEW AMERICAN*. I would be leaving New Orleans for Belmont, Massachusetts in a matter of weeks, and I had a sneaking suspicion that my fiancée would try to throw a surprise party for me before I left.

I had reason to be suspicious. Just three months earlier I had successfully thrown a surprise birthday party for her (she never had a clue!), so it stood to reason that she would be out to get me back. Moreover, since being surprised is one of the few things I absolutely cannot stand, it happens also to be one of the things that friends and relatives of mine take special delight in. But, what really convinced me that I was about to be victimized by a cabal of compatriots was that when I challenged my wife-to-be, accusing her point-blank of planning a surprise party, she flatly denied it!

That cinched it;

Arthur Schlesinger's mind might have been put at ease, but I knew something was up.

A conspiracy! That's what it was. My family, my friends, my old colleagues at the advertising agency — they were all in on it. I didn't know where or when it would be, or what pretext would be used to get me there, but I knew it was coming.

Realism or Paranoia?

As the day of my departure drew closer, I grew both more confident and more uncertain. More confident, because the odds of my exposing the conspirators increased as their opportunity for

catching me unawares diminished. More uncertain, because I began to wonder if my fiancée really did have no intention of throwing a party for me — and the one thing more intolerable than having someone get the best of you is finding out that no one cares enough to try.

On the Thursday before my Monday departure, a friend of mine, the general manager of a big band radio station, called to tell me that he would be unable to make the farewell racquetball game that we had scheduled for that evening. "But," he said, "I'll see you tomorrow night."

"Tomorrow night?" I repeated, for we had made no plans for the following evening. There was a long pause. He hemmed and hawed, and made a valiant effort to dissemble, but it was too late; he had exposed the conspiracy.

Though I was delighted to have finally had my suspicions confirmed, my poor friend was disgusted with himself for having "ruined" the surprise. What

would my fiancée do when she found out that he had spilled the beans?

"She'll never know," I assured him. "I'll

pretend to be surprised." And so we planned our counter-conspiracy — which, thanks to some modest theatrical ability on my part, went off without a hitch.

Everyday Conspiracies

Granted there is nothing of any great consequence at stake in the staging of a surprise party; nevertheless, the collaboration of the participants in a scheme to conceal their inten-

tions and to deceive the guest of honor does indeed constitute a conspiracy. Most of us at one time or another have been either the victim or one of the perpetrators of such a conspiracy, and this is but one of many small-time conspiracies that we will encounter, or participate in, in the course of our lives.

Children will conspire with their siblings to obtain parental approval for something they desire, or to avoid parental reprimands for something they should not have done. Students will conspire with classmates to obtain the answers in advance for an upcoming exam. Employees will conspire with their co-workers to gain favor with their superiors by claiming credit for the accomplishments of others, or by sabotaging their rivals. And married men and women will conspire with each other to deceive their spouses.

In addition to the many conspiracies that we will encounter personally in our lives, we will read and hear about hundreds of others — the college athletes who conspire to shave points in a sports event, the brokers who conspire to engage in insider trading, the contractors who conspire to defraud government agencies, the politicians who conspire to misrepresent themselves to their constituents, the junior officers who conspire to stage a coup d'état — the list goes on and on.

A careful review of history should convince any objective student that there has never been an age that was not dominated by conspiracies. But we need not be scholars to reach this same conclusion. We need only open our eyes to see conspiracies all about us. And, if we are willing to acknowledge that our neighbors, friends, and associates are constantly engaged in various low-stakes conspiracies, why then do we hesitate to believe that the very highest stakes — the conquest of an entire planet and all of its inhabitants — would also inspire conspirators? ■

