

*In **Conquest of a Conspiracy**, an aggressive regime defies limits to its ambition for world dominance. Its leaders hatch a conspiracy to bring America to its knees. Schemes spanning five continents employ diverse factions, aligned only by their quest to suppress Western nations. An eminent talented scientist is recruited to defeat the conspiracy before it wreaks havoc on the global economic power balance. Their offensive transcends rules of geo-political engagement and exploits risky advanced technologies.*

Conquest of a Conspiracy

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Conquest of a Conspiracy

By

Ron Swonger

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1.

Ambition Asphyxiated

Central Capital Area, Beijing, China

A dark persistent aura of gloom was hanging over the offices and conference rooms in the large drab building housing the People's Strategic Planning Council. That cloud had not moved noticeably for a month or more. No end was in sight. The mood was paralyzing to the bright young teams of economics majors struggling in their first jobs

The voluminous arrays of numbers and graphs that had been rolling out of the computers day after day kept telling roughly the same dismal story. No-one was going to want to have to take that story to the Central Committee, much less see it raised to its inner circle, the Politburo Standing Committee. Something had to be changed. The council was charged by the all-powerful Central Committee with the duty to put together the detailed projections for the Committee's ambitious declared plan for the Great Next 5-Year Leap, or whatever the national propagandists would decide to call it next. The ambition was based on politically motivated wishful goals, not on any hard data at all. Now it was the Council's mandated task to make the data projections validate the wishes. Furthermore, the data had to be credible to both domestic and international audiences.

The Council's obvious overwhelming problem derived directly from all of the estimates and assumptions that the council had at its disposal, whether created by itself or supplied by the other agencies for their scope of national responsibility and authority. When taken together, the economic models forecasted that the Great - - -Leap was just as likely to be a Great - - Stumble. Everyone in the Central Planning Council organization knew that answer was going to be unacceptable

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to the powers on high. That could place their individual livelihoods and careers and the entire planning organization in jeopardy. Organizations had disappeared before for smaller failures than this.

The amount of data – estimates, forecasts, predictions, wild guesses, and edicts – came from a host of different sources. Many of the sources were unknown or hidden, but it would nevertheless be career-threatening to question their validity. Some involved essentially unpredictable world events. Some involved the laws and regulations that were promulgated from the very same Central Committee that was now demanding that the Council's plans validate their edicts. Still some others would be heavily affected by what the powerful Central Committee, and the military organization that controlled it, might decide to do in the coming months or years. The planning organization had no intrinsic power over anything. How could it ever cope with all of factors that were imponderables or were beyond its ability to predict, much less control?

The number of variables was huge that had to be fed into the planning models. Just naming them all took many pages of tables. Each implied some answer to one of a very long list of questions, starting with:

1. What would be the nation's agricultural production over the next 5 years, by crop type and season?
2. What would the government do about its imposed restrictions on the allowed number of children per family?
3. What would be the GNP or all of the countries buying goods from the People's Republic?
4. What would be the pressures for increasing the wages of the country's workers and how would the government respond to those pressures?

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5. What would be the military situation between the country and its immediate or now-dormant but awakening adversaries? What will military budgets cost?
6. What will be the sources, the amounts, and the costs of domestic and imported energy to fuel the decreed future economic growth and internal stability of the country?
7. What severe natural disasters may impact the country's economics- including production and relief costs?
8. What developments in the country's infrastructure will be required to sustain any plan and what will they cost?

The list was much longer - enough to stagger any one analyst who might be so bold as to try to defend or question any set of input estimates. But the bottom line output result of the models was the same in every case examined. For every set of remotely believable values chosen for the huge set of input variables, the Central Committee's directed Great Next 5-Year Leap plan goals were not even close to being achievable.

The deadline approached for reporting their results. The atmosphere of gloom in the People's Strategic Planning Council building turned to doom and then finally, out of absolute desperation, to a more rational decision. The council entire staff would focus, instead, on preparing a detailed quantitative analysis of exactly which factors or assumptions were limiting the country's ability to satisfy the edicted planning result. The desperate hope of each man and woman there was: *That will at least throw the problem back "over the wall" to the Central Committee. After all, weren't they the ones who controlled the country and could change most of the controlling variables? At least they could control some of those variables and perhaps even more other factors than the planners could perceive.*

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Within days of intense analysis by dozens of bright Ph.D.'s and their assistants, the answer had become vividly clear and unassailable:

It's the energy, stupid! Unknown factor question number 6 in the compiled long list! That is the limiting factor!

The ability of this exploding population to grow, and the nation that controlled it, was limited more than anything else by its dependence upon its sources of energy. Those sources had to be mostly foreign and to grow rapidly. While domestic production of energy was growing, it could not and would not be able to grow fast enough to meet the ambitious plans of the government and its military leadership. No amount of credible changes in assumptions that the council planners imagined could paint a different picture. The domestic sources were limited, the costs and time to develop them were high, the global competition for petroleum was too great, and the geo-political alliances of the West were too strong. The Central Planning Council had built its case. The conclusion was silently aired in each individual mind in the building with relief: *Let the all- powerful Central Committee grapple with finding an answer if they think that they can do so. It's great to want things. It's another matter to see how to make them happen.*

It was most unlikely that any academic economics major employed to be a planning analyst for the Council ever imagined what could possibly be done to change the results of these analyses. Much less would he or she have been able to foresee any change in the final plan goal. So they would never begin to imagine the significant and long-lasting effects on world affairs that were yet to come, all resulting from the report delivered by their organization days later and to which they had each contributed.

2.

Live Free

Bow Lake, Strafford, New Hampshire

As smooth as glass! The way he always remembered it and how he wanted to always remember it forever. As sunrise was about to occur again on an October morning, it seemed that nothing could break the tranquility. Loon Island thrust up from the center of the Bow Lake mirror and tiny Treasure Island stood alone resisting, as always, the imperceptible erosion that ate away at it year by year. Someday, maybe a century from now, it would disappear below the plane of the Lake's exquisite reflection of the sky. At this hour, Roland could barely hear the soft lapping of the minute ripples on the shore only a few feet from where he sat gazing across at the Eastern hills.

Such a difference from the chaos of D.C.! Such a relief from the constant conflict of corporate politics and intrigue! It had been like ascension to a new plane of existence. Here the most active competition observable was the occasional spray of a lake bass snapping at the few remaining water bugs or the eerie call of the remaining loons preparing to depart New Hampshire for warmer winter climes. Now it seemed another good time to slide the canoe off of the sand and take another pass along the beaches of the deserted cottages. Those seemed to wait patiently like silent sentinels for the diminishing next rounds of weekenders from Durham, Boston and beyond. Soon the snow would bind them all to a winter sleep waiting for the next spring to start the annual cycle again.

Later the firewood would need to be supplemented. There would need to be a call for refilling the propane before the road through Brown's Pasture became too muddy and rutted for the tank truck

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driver to want to come out and deliver the winter supply. If that happened, things could get uncomfortable. Or worse yet, he might have to grit his teeth and retreat back to the urban noise and bedlam. *Not going to happen!*

Roland's toes mashed down into the cool wet gritty sand filled with its granite particulates on the tiny strip of beach. He pushed the canoe out, clambered in, and skirted the old mossy "diving rock", as it had been called all his life. Most of the swimming rafts were pulled up out of the water as he slowly paddled southeast along the shore. A few were not and their owners would pay the price when the ice tore them apart in January. A raccoon watched him approach from a rock just a few cottage waterfronts away and then scampered off to peer out from a safer point in the pines. A couple of turtles on the rocks across the inlet barely raised their heads, being more interested in the approaching sunlight. Its rays would temporarily warm them for a few more days until their genes and instincts drove them to seek the best spot to bury themselves in the sand and mud of the lake bottom for 6 months or more.

He smiled and thought: *This is the best time of the entire year! No power boats jockeys showing off their horsepower as if it was their manhood; No humid mornings; Crisp, cold silence; No interruptions; No crises; Nothing but peace, quiet and almost ageless surrounding beauty!*

He swept slowly around the Southeast inlet in a wide smooth arc, barely disturbing the water with the spreading ripples from the canoe and the dripping eddy's from the paddle. Now the rising sun was at his back and starting to apply a warming glow through his flannel shirt. The far-off conifers on the western shore glowed back with the subtle reflection of that same source of perpetual energy. The maples and oaks on the higher ridges glowed, delivering the brilliant red, orange and yellow hues of the annual spectacular Northern New England frost-driven autumn transition toward winter.

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Roland knew that this place was in his blood. It had been captured into his DNA for over a half century. He would never forget the days and years and events that could now never fully return, but there was so much that remained unchanged, so he reveled in just being here. *No more skinned knees from hopping like a frog across the rocks on the shore. Too much arthritis for that!* He would not chop his way into a hornet's nest again having once learned how painful that could be. He would forego tramping down into the swamp up by the dump and picking high-bush blueberries by the gallon (until the landowner kicked him out). But all of that didn't detract from the tranquility that the lake still washed over him. New Hampshire maple syrup was in his blood. The New Hampshire cool breezes were in his lungs. The pungent fragrance of the white pines was all around him when the breezes paused. Nothing would take those precious elements away.

His own shadow slowly shortened from out beyond the front of the canoe as he leisurely cut a clean groove through the glass. After several minutes, he sidled up to his short strip of beach, hopped out and dragged the canoe up onto the sand far enough to ensure that any later wind-driven breakers would not hijack it away. Too many times over the years, he had found that a Northeast gale had made off with his canoe or boat and he had to borrow a neighbor's craft to hunt his own down around the lake shore. He would always eventually find it bobbing against some other point on the shore, somewhat worse for the merciless action of the rocks. More than once, that had led to some essential repair work. The gales of October were not considerate at all of anyone's carelessness

Now sitting again on the edge of the severely weather-worn dock, the calm cold water soothed his dangling feet. If it had been July or August, a sunfish or two might have cautiously approached and nibbled harmlessly at his toes. But now they were somewhere else, probably having sought out the deepest regions of the lake to preserve what miniscule amount of warmth that they could.

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Roland reluctantly reminded himself that he was soon going to have to pull up the dock off of the concrete pilings on the lake bottom which held it in place for most of the year. If he left it in place all winter, the foot or more of ice covering the lake by February would have twisted and broken the dock to the point where major repairs or replacement would be the only option. The forces of a 6-square-mile plate of ice, driven by the winds and the weather-driven rise and fall of the lake surface, would deliver much more force than could be resisted by a simple wooden structure of pine two-by-fours and one-by-sixes. Left to combat the ice on its own, his dock would be nothing but a pile of scrap kindling by next March.

The daydreams inevitably returned again to remind him of those days long past when a young boy dove off of similar docks and leaped along the rocky shore of one or another cottage along this lakeside. His parents had long ago rented those here for a few weeks each summer. When he closed his eyes, he conjured up the image of his dad sitting in a ragged canvas chair on the end of the dock casting for the fish that he never caught. Now he now momentarily scanned his eyes across the sand and pebbles on the beach. He was searching for some small flat granite stones. He used to skip those out across the water on the quiet days when its surface took on the quality of a perfect mirror reflecting the sky, clouds and shoreline trees. *This place was as exquisite then as it is now – it was just a lot more innocent then and totally unfettered by thoughts of the past and the unknowns about the future.* He finally shook himself back to reality with the scolding thought: *Maybe I need to spend less time resurrecting the past and decide what to do now. or not. Maybe I'll do that tomorrow. It can wait.*

3.

Desperate Measures

Central Committee Headquarters, Beijing

The long conference room draped with flags and portraits had largely emptied, after a noisy and contentious session. Some drably uniformed elderly workers were cleaning off the remnants of a day-long meeting. The flasks of water and other beverages were being collected for disposal or re-use as appropriate. The drapes on the windows were being opened to let in sunlight that had been forbidden to detract the focus of the meeting attendees from the one intensely discussed topic of the day. Soon the room would be completely deserted as the incoming rays would slide across the room for the next hours and then disappear.

Immediately beyond the hall, through massive double doors, was the next ornately decorated large room with arched windows facing to the North. Two men sat huddled in one corner of the room away from the large desk that occupied its central position. They were closely reviewing several bound documents including planning analyses from the Central Planning Council. Occasional emotional, vocal and profane outbursts mixed with gestures of anger and frustration erupted as they pored over the maps, numbers, charts and characters in the documents. The dress of the two men, one in a military uniform and one in civilian dress evinced the highest ranks of government power. If any observers had been present, even ones unable to hear what they were saying, they would have inferred that their conversation was of utmost seriousness, intensity, and foreboding. Disagreements and challenges were apparent in the tones and gestures modulating the discussion.

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If that non-existent observer could have heard, but was not at all fluent in the language of the men who were completely absorbed in their discussion, only a few Anglicized words might have leaked through, but the scope of the conversation would still elude him or her. What subject was of such great concern to those who were obviously in positions of great power here? In the larger group that had just disbanded, Comrade Zhang Yu represented the powerful Ministry of Economics. Liu Weng likewise represented the National Energy Commission. These two had just now been given a most urgent assignment – it was clearly not a request, but an order. “Determine how to solve the problem that obstructs the New Great Leap that the People’s Committee has decided must be achieved.” The present discussion had begun immediately after the previous large meeting in the conference room next door had broken up, ending more than a small amount of dissension, loud and emotional orations, and some table pounding originating at different times from every side of the table in the long conference room. The two men now knew and agreed on one thing above all else. In translation: “The time has come when aggressive and determined action is required of us or our positions and influence will be in severe danger.”

As their meeting approached three hours in length, the debate transitioned from disagreement to increasing degrees of alignment. Nevertheless recurring expressions of apparent serious concerns, or even fear, showed in the universal body languages of shaking heads, sweeping hand gestures, pacing, and interruptions. Finally with some short lists having been written down in duplicate, the two men stood up and made a few parting and seemingly formal remarks. These lacked any visual evidence of friendship, happiness or optimism as they departed the now-darkened room.

A few days later shortly after sunrise, the same room became the venue for another meeting. The same two men, Zhang and Liu, were

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present along with a third balding Asian man dressed in military uniform. He visibly deferred to his hosts while at the same time displaying the mien of a confident and highly experienced officer. In addition to the officer, a bony middle-aged woman was present whose demeanor was one of a stern and strait-laced, even suspicious, administrative operative. She was one who would record and remember everything that was said and would be able to ensure that anything that was predicted or promised was documented. This would guarantee that later it could be confirmed whether what was promised actually occurred – or did not. One could imagine that she would be able to wield power well beyond what her gender and her superficial appearance might suggest.

The smallest details of this and later meetings recorded in Mandarin by the attending woman would find their way through discreet unseen channels to the most powerful senior members of the Central Committee. But at no later time would anyone admit to ever having had any advanced knowledge whatsoever of the plan that was now being conjured up. At the highest levels of the People's Republic, plausible deniability was always the best insurance against purges, blame and the much harsher fates that went with them.

After the briefest of formal pleasantries, the new additions to the room's recent meetings' agendas listened intently to a long dissertation alternately delivered by the two men who had met for so long a few days earlier. One of these would occasionally interrupt the other or interject an emphatic point with a thump of his clenched fist on the arm of his chair. As the presentation proceeded, there was a noticeable increase in the frequency with which the two new participants interrupted the presentation with apparent questions and frowns conveying visible expressions of doubt. Those were each dealt with by the presenters, usually with only some short word or phrase, indicating dismissal of any objections.

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After most of an hour had passed, the presentation story apparently ran down. After a pause, the discussion turned to why the new participants were there. "Why were we invited to this meeting?" The papers from the previous meeting were opened up. In muffled tones, a series of instructions were laid out in great detail, repeated for emphasis, and repeated back again by the new recipients to ensure that the assignments, and their constraints and risks, were well understood by all. No instructions were provided in writing, so that their precise memorization and detailed understanding was essential. The repeated bowing of heads confirmed the acceptance of orders.

There would be two more such meetings occurring among the same parties in the same room over the following two weeks. Each meeting would cover much of the same ground, but more details, specific constraints, and names of people and places would become part of the discussions. As the secretive meetings continued, they spawned still other isolated encounters and contacts elsewhere to spread orders and plans. Each such iteration shielded a certain amount of information regarding the original objective and plan from the next layer of new participants or recruits into the web of intrigue that was being woven. A very few other agencies, each unaware of the others' involvement, became commissioned to play their operational, financial or logistical role that was intended to support the whole. The elements of the grand plan spread like the ripples in a pond when a stone is first cast into it, continually decreasing in observability as they move out from the point of origin until they become nearly invisible to any but the most alert, intent, and high-acuity watcher.

Shortly thereafter a small set of individuals became deployed into innocuous but carefully designed positions in selected cities across Eastern and Western continents. They would form a network of largely covert human sensors, and in a few cases eventually actuators, to enable execution of the long-range plans - not next week or next month, but over more than a half year – the two men

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who began this whole evolutionary process were patient, but they also had to face the compelling need for delivering results before it was too late.

A particular watershed day finally occurred one afternoon when an Asian man dressed as a military officer entered an inconspicuous office building in the central business district of Hong Kong. Several hours later, as evening had fallen, a man appeared out of the rear door of that same building dressed in a western-style business suit with the typical executive's attaché' case and small suitcase in hand. If alert enough observers had been in the front of the building that afternoon, and behind the building that evening, they might conceivably have thought that the man who had entered looked somewhat like the man who left. But, in fact, there was no-one there at either time or place to notice or compare those events or appearances. The businessman walked back to the next street, over two blocks to the East and then caught a taxi to the Hong Kong International Airport.

4.

Utopia Interruptus

Bow Lake, New Hampshire

“Damn!” The shrill sound of his ringing cell phone up in the cottage interrupted Roland’s reverie. It had been almost a week since that audio residue of his past encounters had disturbed his relaxation. It was not going to push him into action now. *Let it ring! It can’t be that important and the message will be there one way or another.*

This was exactly why he never took the cell phone with him in the canoe or on the daily hike along the paths up to the old spring on Brown’s Pasture Road. That reason was, of course, additional to the one of avoiding the risk of dropping it into the lake or on a rocky outcropping. He indulged the thought for a fleeting second: *Maybe that would actually be the best way to do way with the damn thing.*

If it wasn’t for the necessity of dealing with local suppliers and the desire to talk occasionally with a few family contacts, he wouldn’t have a cell phone at all. But the North shore of Bow Lake cottages had no cable connection for internet and the rugged terrain was not very conducive to TV and Internet satellite links. And the way that the U.S. mail service was likely to continue to deteriorate, there were few options for maintaining some degree of connection to the mad outside world.

After 20 minutes, his curiosity finally got the better of him. *Which of my offspring would want to check up on my well-being today or to report on the latest events in their hectic urban lives? Or was this just another of those abominable telemarketing calls? Or have I forgotten about some inquiry I had made to a local Strafford or Northwood supplier in preparing for my solitary winter? Whatever it was, I supposed that it might as well be dealt with.*

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The steep, winding and rocky path up to the cottage was one he could almost have negotiated in his sleep - or at least he could have done that a decade or two ago. Now the arthritis and other artifacts of advancing age were presenting a few challenges. And it would only take one slip on a mossy rock to create the risk of a broken bone or a concussion. So the careful climb up to the wind-worn cottage's porch screen door took a few minutes. For most of the way he grumbled to himself: *It sure seems that there's no escape from civilization, even here in a New Hampshire hermit's Paradise!*

The best way to postpone accepting the demands of a phone message – which would be giving in to its imposed dictatorial control, would be a cup of coffee with the usual touch of Bailey's Irish Cream. As it brewed, he stared at the cell phone lying on its cradle and flashing its red LED belligerently at him as if to say: "What's the problem? Get with it!"

So finally, with one last snarl, he picked up the handset and pressed the two buttons to move down the menu to his voicemail messages. That would turn out to be the end of his peace and tranquility for a long time to come.

The message was short and terse. It was not one that produced any pleasant sense of relief or pleasure. Instead it jerked him out of a sunny October day, out of New Hampshire, and out of the present into the past.

"Hey Rol, you old brainiac! This is Karl. I finally found you! It wasn't easy. Give me a call ASAP. Don't make me come up there into the boonies and knock on your door. I can still outrun you and you know it. This is not optional. 202-921-8008. (click)".

Roland immediately recalled: *Karl always did seem determined to shorten the greeting to everyone who wasn't a superior officer down to just one syllable or initials.* Colonel Karl Simpson was not one to

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indulge in formalities. He ignored them whenever protocol would allow it. So Roland Foster became “Rol” or “R.F.”, depending upon the Colonel’s random choice and mood of the moment.

But the puzzle of this moment for Roland was not the choice of nicknames. *What the Hell was Karl bothering him for, three years after they had last shaken hands and warmly parted ways, supposedly forever?* All that Roland instinctively knew in an instant, considering the tone of Karl’s call, was: *It can’t be good!* Karl did not make calls to old associates just to shoot the bull and ask after the family. He wanted something and the next question bothering Roland was: *And what would that be? Whatever it is, it’s not going to interfere with my plans to sit right here, fish, write, enjoy my music, paddle my canoe, swim and hike.*

His mind roamed back to earlier years, about ten of them, when he would work with Karl on almost a daily basis except for periods when the colonel would disappear for weeks at a time. The Air Force kept Karl on the go, pursuing assignments about which almost no one, including Roland, had much of any visibility. The last time Roland knew, Major Karl Simpson was just about to get his promotion to Bird Colonel. He guessed that the dynamic mover and shaker had moved up another rank to full Colonel by now. *What was he up to now that would cause him to track down an old nerdy colleague in the New Hampshire woods and who was completely out of the Washington loop?*

As an undergraduate in much earlier years, Roland had started by earning multiple degrees in Environmental Science and Geology at the University of Michigan. Then after another period in graduate school, and a series of jobs in local government labs, he had undertaken responsibilities in the Department of the Interior, NASA, and eventually the Department of Energy. His niche of technical expertise was in analyzing and predicting the trends and the short term cycles in the availability of critical natural resources. That

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entailed drawing upon the technologies of multispectral remote sensing and seismography. It immersed him in complex computer models that related the supply, demand, costs and geographic locations of those essential stimulants of world economies. It was always a field dominated by competing interests: Global politics, economic cycles and the changing scene describing which resources were most important for driving which new sectors of all of the national and regional economies.

Roland's encounters with (then Major) Karl Simpson were occasional and brief at the time. But they also were collegial and each long enough to result in shared mutual respect, not to mention innumerable conversations over a beer or a black Russian (or three). The Major was interested in understanding how U.S. military needs for this or that resource – some rare metal or some other organic material whose use he would not divulge – could be met, or might be endangered if the supply dried up due to a conflict or change in the national government in some remote part of the world. Roland usually could provide the qualitative and quantitative assessments to answer those questions. To a very large degree, the information communication was one-way. The highly disciplined Major never was very forthcoming about the background reasons for his questions. But Roland could perceive that the questions and the answers were important.

But what now? What could Karl want of me now that I am completely removed from the day-to-day, quarter-to-quarter flow of natural resources issues and developments? Roland was sure that others could now answer those old questions better than he could. *Something else is up.* Karl had always seemed to respect Roland's deep knowledge of the relationships, and data about the underlying technologies that processed the important natural resources world-wide. He wanted to understand who produced from them the immense variety of commercial, industrial and military products used

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by the world's economies. As far as Roland was concerned: *That's all past history! Time marches on - - doesn't it?*

Well, he thought, I suppose that there is no point in trying to guess what he wants. If I just let things simmer he may find someone else or forget about trying to contact me. That thought had barely escaped his silent musing when the phone again interrupted with its annoying ringing. With a sigh, he picked up the handset: "Roland here."

"Well, you old hermit, what's going on up there that's so damned important you can't return a call from an old friend? Do you have some country wench or native squaw up there entertaining you? Or are the fish just biting so fast that you just can't put down your fishing pole?" Karl's typical rough and cocky Air Force officer persona hadn't changed a bit. It still delivered the swagger that disguised a no-nonsense, get-it-done underlying demeanor and one intense S.O.B.

"Hi, Karl! It's none of the above. I was just reflecting on how the Air Force could give you enough idle time so that you would be inclined to call an old retired scientist 1000 miles away."

"Idle I'm not. It's taken me more than a day to track you down. I can't believe that you are letting your brain dissolve with no challenges and no fancy computer environmental modeling games to keep those neurons humming."

"So what does the Air Force need to think about today that you can't take care of with the younger crowd that is down at DOE or NASA? You know that knowledge depreciates rapidly in that field, just like in every other scientific sandbox – and along with every other bodily function, by the way."

"Let me cut to the chase as best I can over this phone. We need your depth of expertise and your historical perspective on several technical fronts. This is a big deal – bigger than anything that we have ever talked about. The 'younger crowd', as you call them,

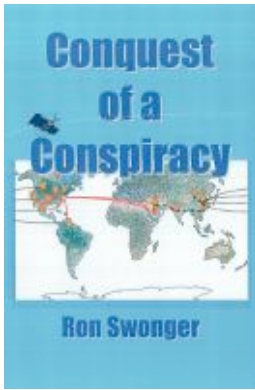
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doesn't have a clue about what we need now. We need some insights a mile deep and that's not just an analogy."

"Karl, I'm really past that entire scene. I'm more than satisfied – No, I'm in Utopia here, enjoying my favorite pastimes and surroundings. I really don't think you need me and I'd like to leave it that way. I'm flattered by your call, but want to pass up any return to civilization and the frenetic government world."

The voice on the other end of the line grew more serious and deliberate in tone. "Roland, this is more serious than I can talk about here. You have got to come visit me in Maryland. You have got to do that ASAP." Roland almost lifted off of his chair, noticing: *I just felt a snap of tension in my arthritic neck. Karl had never called me "Roland". And he never had implied that phone security was on his mind in our conversations. I think I'm being sucked into a black hole with frightening force.* He paused for a seeming eternity, trying to gather his thoughts.

Before he could muster any words to reply, Karl spoke again in a rapid series of one-line statements that seemed more like military commands than any he had encountered for a great many years. "You have an airline ticket waiting for you at the Manchester airport for the Southwest Airlines flight leaving at 9am tomorrow. Someone will meet you at BWI on your arrival holding a sign with your name. Plan to be gone for a day. You will get the complete scoop when you are here. Tell no one there where you are going or who you are visiting. We'll have someone check your place while you are gone." The phone connection went dead. All Roland could think for a few moments was: *This is going to be a damned long and difficult week!*



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