

9/11: The Conspiracy of the Millennium

by Lauren Chun

By this time, it goes without saying that September 11th, 2001 changed the nation. Since that day, a tangible sense of fear can be sensed throughout the country, permeating the daily lives of its citizens. The official story was that terrorists had hijacked and piloted four planes, successfully crashing three of them into their chosen targets. However, in the years following the attacks, rumors have claimed that the attacks were everything from the fulfillment of ancient prophecies to the work of secret organizations. One of the most widespread of these stories, and the focus of my research, is the conspiracy theory that claims the attacks were planned, or at least allowed to happen, by our own government.

In doing my research, I did not investigate the theories most would consider to be on the fringe of 9/11 conspiracy theories. I was concerned with those theorists that took great care in presenting themselves as credibly as they could in order to attract the everyday, educated American. Part of my purpose in this investigation was to see whether or not the theories of past conspiracy scholars could still be applied to this group of theorist who were unlike the fringe groups most often studied. The members of this group were not protesting against society, but rather, wanted their ideas to be accepted by it. They were not militant or violent. They often called for the confessions of the guilty parties, grassroots movements for government reform, or challenged the government to provide the response they asked for. More specifically, my research centered on the group behind 911Truth.org, and on the prominent 9/11 theorists Steven E. Jones, David Ray Griffin, and Peter Dale Scott.

The aspect of these theories that initially intrigued me was that they dealt with a subject which in recent years has had a sort of taboo placed upon it. For example, when the movies *United 93* and *World Trade Center* opened, many were wary of their appropriateness even though they were released five years after the attacks. Any discussion about 9/11 is expected to be respectful. The existence of a conspiracy theory that directly opposes what most people believe about September 11th in this environment stands out as a huge anomaly. What does it do for the people who believe it? In his book, *A Culture of Conspiracy*, Michael Barkun makes a statement about what conspiracy theories could do for their followers, saying, “In an odd way, the conspiracy theorist’s view is both frightening and reassuring. It is frightening because it magnifies the power of evil [.] At the same time, however, it is reassuring for it promises a world that is meaningful rather than arbitrary” (4). Although this statement may hold true for other theories, it does not seem to explain all of the aspects of 9/11 theories, or at least, the theories supported by my particular group of theorists. It is true that 9/11 theories magnify the power of evil as Barkun says. The story that they propose, if correct, would mean that the government, which is supposed to work in the favor of its citizens, had consciously and coldly decided to kill them. However, because the theory provides a much more terrifying situation, the question is how it would provide additional reassurance and a “world that is meaningful rather than arbitrary”. The official story provides an acceptable explanation to millions of other Americans. The conspiracy theory however, raises more questions than answers. If the theorists needed reassurance, why would they choose this theory over the official story? Furthermore, scholars like Barkun say that the conspiracy theorists’ claims are untestable, that “the theory becomes

nonfalsifiable, because every attempt at falsification is dismissed as a ruse” (7).

However, the theorists want a response from the government. This makes it seem that they want to regain trust in their America. A proper response from the government, according to David Ray Griffin, a 9/11 theorist and philosophy professor, would “contain at least the following elements: (1) an acknowledgment that these suspicions exist; (2) a summary of the main kinds of reports and alleged facts cited as evidence by those who have promoted these suspicions; and (3) an explanation of why these reports and alleged facts do not really constitute evidence for complicity by the Bush administration”

(*Globalresearch.ca*). What do these discrepancies between this particular group of theorists and past conspiracy theorists tell us? What are their goals and their values? What makes them embrace this theory?

Robert Alan Goldberg, would agree with Barkun’s thoughts about conspiracy theories giving “meaning” to their believers. He claims that conspiracy theories can serve to “find purpose in tragedy and clarity in ambiguity” (*Enemies Within*, 240), but goes on to say that, “For many, conspiracy thinking proves an antidote to powerlessness. It lifts the despair of vulnerability and arms believers with the knowledge to understand and defeat the enemy” (240). This explanation better fits the situation the 9/11 theories present. In creating grass roots movements and calling for reform, the theorists are indeed exercising power against what they believe is the enemy. In fact, the exercise of power against an oppressive enemy can be seen as part of the American tradition. In support of this, Tom Engelhardt, who teaches journalism at the University of California, Berkeley, argues that part of American identity is based on having an enemy to fight and defeat (*The End of Victory Culture*). Goldberg also states “Conspiracy imaging draws

power by merging with and reinforcing traditional American values and beliefs: a sense of mission [and] concern about encroachments on liberty” (20). This is clearly evident in the mission statement of 911Truth.org which emphasizes “absolute protection for the natural rights and liberties of human beings; the rise of popular sovereignty over polity and economy”. Members of 911Truth.org fear that these values, like unalienable rights and American democracy, as well as the institutions which are supposed to be protecting them (like the legal system or the system of checks and balance) are now being threatened in post-9/11 society. However, to fully understand these theorists and their beliefs, it is not enough to simply rely on the research of past conspiracy theorist scholars. A deeper investigation of the moment in which these theories circulate as well as an investigation of the personal and social imperatives of the theorists is necessary to fully understand the unique and unprecedented situation created by 9/11 conspiratorial thinkers. This investigation shows that this group of 9/11 theorists are acting in the American tradition of the defense of democracy and the reassertion of power among the majority, but also are responding to feelings of anxiety fueled not only by the terrible tragedy of 9/11, but also preceding events that bred uncertainty for the future. They are not paranoid crazies, nor aggressive revolutionaries. They are concerned citizens who want the redemption of their beloved America. Furthermore, this investigation suggests that conspiracy theories should not always be looked at as characteristics of an irrational or paranoid subculture. As an investigation of this particular group of 9/11 theorists shows, their views can be seen as the evolution of mainstream thoughts and fears into something else: a conspiracy theory.

The most common conspiracy belief surrounding September 11th is that the towers collapsed not because of the fires started by the airplanes, but by explosives placed there beforehand. There are some variants among the stories. Some say that missiles can be seen on the undersides of the planes. A popular story about the Pentagon attack claims that a missile, not a plane had been used. There are also some discrepancies surrounding Flight 93. Some say that it landed safely elsewhere, others say it didn't exist. However, the discrepancies mostly exist because of differences between eye witnesses. They all share the belief that the government was behind it all. The picture painted by this theory is that the government planned to kill thousands of people, that it basically trapped them inside a cage like animals. Every part of the theory portrays the government as an indifferent, cold entity, uncaring about human life, its powers so out of control that it couldn't be stopped.

To have a valid theory, the conspiracists need to prove that there was a clear motive behind the attacks. Most often, theorists allege that the attacks served as an excuse to go to war and as a way to profit financially. By further analyzing the implications of these alleged motives, we can better understand the fears and world views of the theorists themselves. Theorists often cite a report by the Project for the New American Century (or the PNAC), entitled *Rebuilding America's Defenses*. The report calls for increased defense spending as well as the creation of Homeland Security. The report says that "some catastrophic and catalyzing event – like a new Pearl Harbor" (51) would facilitate these changes. According to 911Truth.org, "Principals in U.S. foreign policy under the current Bush administration (including Cheney, Rumsfeld, Wolfowitz, Perle and others) have been instrumental in developing long-running plans for worldwide

military hegemony, including an invasion of the Middle East, dating back to the Ford, Reagan and Bush Sr. administrations”. Fear of a small group pulling the strings is a characteristic of most conspiracy theories, most notably those concerning Masons, Skull and Bones, and the Illuminati. What all these groups have in common is that they are the elite of society, the rich and the powerful. Now, it seems that the Bush Administration has been added to the list of these groups. The fact that the theorists name the Bush Administration as an enemy because of its extensive power and self-serving practices reveals how highly they value democracy and rule by the majority. In other words, the Bush Administration represents the opposite of democracy, the result of what happens when we don’t protect American values. Joseph P. Firmage, a member of Scholars for 9/11 Truth (of which Jones, Scott, and Griffin are members), says in regard to the goals of the movement, “I believe that the republic will be radically strengthened: its citizens will be smarter, its laws will be respected, its transparency will be reestablished, its policies will be restructured, its relations will be restored and its honor will be reclaimed.”(47). This shows idealization of the past as a time when American values were honored, in contrast to the America as the theorists now see it.

Motives based on financial gain are also prevalent in 9/11 theories. For example, on its top forty reasons to question the official story, 911Truth.org lists “Unknown speculators allegedly used foreknowledge of the Sept. 11th events to profiteer on many markets internationally - including but not limited to ‘put options’ placed to short-sell the two airlines, WTC tenants, and WTC re-insurance companies in Chicago and London. In addition, suspicious monetary transactions worth hundreds of millions were conducted through offices at the Twin Towers during the actual attacks”. This is evidence that the

theorists not only distrust the Bush Administration, but also those concerned with wealth. The bad guys in their story are all accused of valuing power and money over human life.

Peter Knight stated in his book *Conspiracy/Theory*, “Since the 1960’s, conspiracy theories have become far more prominent, no longer the favored rhetoric of backwater scaremongers, but the lingua franca of many ordinary Americans” (2). Since that time, events such as the JFK and Martin Luther King Jr. assassinations, the Watergate scandal, and the Vietnam War not only helped shaped the course of history, but also changed several generations’ perspectives on the U.S. government. More importantly for conspiracy theory scholars, these events shaped the evolution of American conspiracy theories. Over time, as scholars such as Knight and Goldberg point out, these theories became part of the American consciousness, they became mainstream.

There are also more recent events that have contributed to the evolution of 9/11 conspiracy theories. For one, the November 2000 Presidential Elections stands out. The election was seen by many as evidence of fault in American democracy. How could it be democratic that the man running the country was not the one chosen by a majority of Americans? With such a shaky start and without the blessing of the great deal of Americans who had not voted for him, it is no wonder that Bush’s administration has been marked with disapproval and distrust.

Furthermore, the 9/11 attacks came little over a year since the beginning of the new millennium, a time marked by fear and uncertainty, most notably the Y2K scare. In addition, the time had been marked with both religious and secular fears about the apocalypse. Most notable among secular apocalyptic fears was the fear of annihilation by nuclear war. In *The End of the World As We Know It*, Daniel Wokcik says “At the

turn of the millennium, the nuclear bomb remains the most concrete embodiment of humanity's potential for global self-destruction, continuing to fuel fears and fatalism about inevitable apocalypse" (101). The fear of nuclear war is not unfounded, at least not according to *The Bulletin of Atomic Scientists'* "Doomsday Clock". From 1998 to 2002, the "clock", has moved two minutes closer to midnight, indicating a greater risk of nuclear war. Evidence of this fear's influence on 9/11 conspiracy theories can be seen in the theorists' claim that Bush's motivation for the attacks was an excuse to go to war with Iraq.

The aftermath of the attacks also play a part in the proliferation of the theories. First of all is the fear and anxiety generated by the attacks themselves. The sense of vulnerability and impotence the attacks produced led to the need for the restoration of power and control among Americans. In addition, the eventual war against Iraq raised even more anxieties. As stated in their book *Terror, Culture, Politics: Rethinking 9/11*, history professor Daniel Sherman and political science professor Terry Nardin say "war is the enemy of a civil order, corroding its rights and liberties from within as it is remade to serve the imperatives of defense" (6). In war, they say, individual rights are threatened. The conspiracy theorists, concerned with the preservation of American freedom and democracy, can be seen as acting in response to this war, which threatens individual liberty. In addition, after the September 11th attacks, the controversial Patriot Act was put into effect. According to a Gallup Poll, as of April 2005, 45% of Americans thought that the Patriot Act went too far. The most common concern about the Patriot Act was that it was endangering civil liberties. This is evidence of close parallels between mainstream thought and conspiracy thinking.

Sherman and Nardin also point out that in a war, one's country represents goodness while the enemy represents evil. Therefore, anything done against the enemy is always good. "[T]his view of 9/11 puts us right back in an all-too-familiar world in which barbarism emerges inside the community that sees itself as defending civilization" (5). The theorists are probably responding to this barbarism. For example, on 911Truth.org, "9/11 is supposed to provide carte-blanche for an open-ended, global and perpetual 'War on Terror', against any enemy, foreign or domestic, that the executive branch chooses to designate, and regardless of whether evidence exists to actually connect these enemies to 9/11". Absolute disgust for the Bush Administration is stated even clearer by David Ray Griffin in *The Destruction of the World Trade Center: Why the Official Story Cannot be True*. He says "the values reflected in that horrendous event have been reflected in the Bush administration's lies to justify the attack on Iraq, its disregard for environmental science and the Bill of Rights, its criminal negligence both before and after Katrina, and now its apparent plan not only to weaponize space but also to authorize the use of nuclear weapons in a preemptive strike". Clearly, they see the U.S. taking too many liberties and using unnecessary violence, actions that the government accuses its enemies of. According to a poll in 2005, CNN announced that 59% of Americans did not approve of the war. The theorists' criticism of government then, is not so different from the views of many other Americans.

Of the 9/11 theorists, Michael Barkun says, that they "alert us to the existence of significant subcultures far outside the mainstream. Surfacing in times of crisis and bound up with [...] radical politics, and fringe science, they have had a long-standing and sometimes potent influence in American life" (2). However, the theorists I am most

concerned with exhibit neither radical politics nor fringe science. 911Truth.org states that, “Beyond issues of factual content, we prefer to disengage from individuals who employ vitriol or highly-charged rhetoric. We value positive and sober approaches over heavy-handed ones that might alienate potential allies”. Although it is true that this may be said by any conspiracist group, I did find that 911Truth.org did in fact distance itself from individuals known for such “highly-charged rhetoric” such as Alex Jones or Ward Churchill. As for fringe science, the theorists are conscious to not make claims without using evidence such as a video of an event or a calculation by someone in the appropriate field like Steven E. Jones.

As for radical politics, a study of the views and values of the theorists gives no indication that they are radical. While Bush has been vilified by the conspiracy theorists, he has been supported by right-wing conservatives, usually those who are very religious. This contrast suggests that the theorists are the opposite: left-wing, non-religious liberals. However, to say that religion does not hold a place in the ideals of these theorists would be going too far. Steven E. Jones was a professor at Brigham Young University, an institution known for being very religion-oriented and conservative. He himself is a practicing and devout Mormon. David Ray Griffin too, is a Christian theologian. He even gives advice to religious people on how to become involved with the 9/11 Truth movement. At the end of his lecture, *911 And an American Empire: How Should Religious People Respond?* Griffin says, “I will close with the observation that, insofar as Americans participate in this anti-imperialist movement, their activities will be deeply patriotic, because they will be seeking to call our nation back to its moral ideals, which stand diametrically opposed to the values implicit in the global domination project”. This

shows that religion and religious people are not seen as part of the problem. In fact, Griffin also says in his lecture that what the government has done goes against the values of many religions. “Thou shalt not covet thy neighbors' oil. Thou shalt not murder thy neighbors in order to steal their oil. Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbors, accusing them of illicitly harboring weapons of mass destruction, in order to justify killing them in order to steal their oil”. Furthermore, the theorists shouldn't be looked at as people who necessarily are opposed to conservatives. In fact, an article printed in *The American Conservative* is posted on the 911Truth.org website. Entitled *Hunger for Dictatorship*, by Scott McConnell the article criticizes the war, saying “the invasion of Iraq has put the possibility of the end to American democracy on the table and has empowered groups on the Right that would acquiesce to and in some cases welcome the suppression of core American freedoms. That would be the titanic irony of course, the mother of them all—that a war initiated under the pretense of spreading democracy would lead to its destruction in one of its very birthplaces”. By looking at their views, one sees that although the theorists are definitely critics of Bush and his administration, they should not be broadly characterized as far-leftists. Neither 911Truth.org nor Scholars for 9/11 Truth openly endorse any particular political party.

Interestingly, unlike believers in theories concerning government involvement in the AIDS and crack epidemics, these theorists are not disadvantaged minorities. Most of them are well-educated and white. They are not particularly critical of American society or wish to separate themselves from it. Even those such as Peter Dale Scott (who is known for being critical of America since the 1970's), still hold values like openness

from the government highly. They are Americans who care about their country and long to have their views accepted by other American citizens.

They are very similar to almost every other modern conspiracy theorist however, in the fact that they use the internet as the main channel through which they circulate their ideas. In order to truly market themselves to as many of their intended audience as possible, these theorists, most notably 911Truth.org, take care to build a strong web presence. As Barkun notes, “This gives to the rumors – and by extension, to Internet conspiracy accounts – a self-validating quality. The more a story is told, and the more often people hear it, the more likely they are to believe it” (13). This seems to be working as 911Truth.org and theorists with large web presences like Jones or Scott are often cited on other web pages. A single theorist might not be able to explain the physics of free fall or the chemistry behind jet fuel versus thermite explosives, but Steven Jones can help him out. Furthermore, as Goldberg says, “Conspiracy thinking does not thrive in isolation. It takes power in the resonance of community” (239). This can be seen in Scholars for 9/11 Truth and 911Truth.org which says that as a community, theorists can “boost the resources available for 9/11 truth activism, sharpen the message and coordinate actions, and conduct a national campaign for 9/11 truth”. By forming groups and communities online, the theorists gain strength against those who want to attack their credibility and further the work to make their ideas mainstream.

While other conspiracy scholars may put the study of these 9/11 theorists in the same group as other internet based, government-wary thinkers, they deserve a much deeper description than that. Unlike past conspiracy theorists who might have called for the downfall of society and the traditions of America, this group of theorists idealize

traditional American values and think that victory will come with the redemption of those values. By identifying themselves as scholars and non-radicals, they are showing that they want their views to be integrated into the thoughts of the mainstream. As we have seen, this would not be a huge step. The past years have been marked with fear of the unpredictable future and distrust in the actions of a powerful government. We have seen that the beginnings of this theory come not from a paranoid hermit, a self-proclaimed messiah, or an alien abductee, but out of the fears of a country.

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I, Lauren Chun, declare that I am the sole and original author of this work. This assignment was completed in compliance with the requirements of the course and The George Washington University's Code of Academic Integrity." The Code of Academic Integrity is available online at <http://www.gwu.edu/~ntegrity/code.html>