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THE  
JOHN O'SULLIVAN MEMORIAL LECTURE SERIES

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ENEMIES WITHIN:  
THE CONSPIRACY  
CULTURE OF  
MODERN AMERICA

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# ABOUT THE JOHN O'SULLIVAN MEMORIAL LECTURE

In the spring of 2004, a group of senior citizen students at Florida Atlantic University paid tribute to John O'Sullivan, a beloved professor of history who died in 2000, by establishing a Memorial Fund to support an annual lecture in his honor.

In keeping with John's commitment to teaching, research, and community outreach, the mission of the John O'Sullivan Memorial Lectureship is to broaden and deepen public understanding of modern U.S. history. The Memorial Fund — which is administered by the Department of History — sponsors public lectures and classroom seminars by some of the most distinguished scholars and gifted teachers of American history. The lectures typically focus on topics relevant to Professor O'Sullivan's specialties in 20th Century U.S. history, including: World War II, the Vietnam War, the nuclear age, the Holocaust, peace history, political and diplomatic affairs, and other topics.

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2010

# E<sub>NEMIES WITHIN:</sub>

## THE CONSPIRACY CULTURE OF MODERN AMERICA

I WOULD LIKE TO TALK ABOUT CONSPIRACY THINKING in recent American history; to talk about the who, how, and why of conspiracism. Particularly, I would like to spotlight the conspiracy theories that have emerged in the wake of the tragedy of 9-11. Befitting this lecture series, it speaks to a topic vital to an understanding of our society and to the health of our American Republic.

But first let me say that I am honored to deliver the 2010 John O’Sullivan Memorial Lecture. Professor Sullivan was a distinguished historian of twentieth century America. His professional life was dedicated to his discipline and university. I want to thank the Department of History of Florida Atlantic University and especially Professor Ken Osgood for this opportunity to share my research. It is my hope that it will raise higher this memorial to Professor O’Sullivan.

In preface, let us recall the words of television commentator Stephen Colbert: “I love the truth; its facts that I’m not a fan of.”<sup>1</sup>

We live at a time in American history when conspiracy thinking permeates and colors our culture, beliefs, and speech; our very interpretation of history and current events. Understandably, many would point to the tragic events of 9-11 in explanation. Conspiracy thinking obsesses Americans because of the attack on the World Trade Center and Pentagon and subsequent acts of terrorism around the world. Make no mistake. 9-11 was a conspiracy in which at least nineteen men, and certainly many more, were involved in the murder of more than 3,000 innocent Americans. This act of aggression has had and continues to have major

consequences: a war in Afghanistan against the conspiracy's base of operations and a war in Iraq which was alleged to have had links to the Al Qaeda conspirators.

Yet, conspiracy thinking is not a recent phenomenon in American history. Nor will it dissolve as the pain and memory of 9-11 ebbs. Rather, it has deep roots in American life. It was and is a persistent and American tradition. Since our Anglo-European and African ancestors arrived in the New World, since colonies were planted in the seventeenth century, Americans have entertained visions of plots, conspiracies, subversions, and secret alliances to destroy their communities and nation. These fears burn brightly, more intensely, and become more convincing when we recall that real conspiracies occasionally arise and threaten us.

Here is the general scenario. Hidden groups, intelligent, diabolical, and cunning, move and shape American history. Financial catastrophes, assassinations, terrorism, and deceit are their means. Wealth and power are their ends. Nothing is random or the matter of coincidence. Conspiracy theorists give no credence to chance, bureaucratic process or miscalculation. For the conspiracy-minded, everything can be explained; all the dots can be connected. Their world is coherent and ordered, with a vengeance. Their world is void of mistakes, ambiguities, and misunderstandings. For them, the devil is always in the details.

Review the list of those targeted as conspirators and subversives in American history: Salem witches, British ministers, Native Americans, Catholics, Jews, Mormons, slaves and slaveholders, Masons, Bolsheviks, Wall Street bankers, Japanese Americans, African-American radicals, student protestors, federal authorities, and even presidential candidates. All in their turn and among many others, they have been cast in the plotter's role.

The mere mention of the word "conspiracy" – the act of two or more individuals to break the law or even plan to commit an illegal act – conjures up drama. The Latin root is "conspirare," which means to breathe together. The image evokes secret places, desperate men, and nefarious deeds. It also suggests a deeply rooted past. Long before there was ever an America, conspiracy thinking was a prominent feature on the mental maps of Europeans. Alleged plots by Jews, Catholics, and Protestants pepper European history. Perhaps, Nazi Germany in the

1930s and Soviet Russia under Stalin were the most dangerous practitioners of the conspiracist art. Today, the most avid conspiracists live in the Middle East. There, conspiracy thinking colors the news, informs government policy, and plagues the minds of large numbers. This is suggested in a recent poll that noted that while 93% of Americans believe 9-11 was the work of Arab terrorists, only 11% of Kuwaitis agree.<sup>2</sup>

If not unique, conspiracy thinking has adapted and developed new traits in the American environment. Three factors are important. For Americans, conspiracy thinking draws power from our sense of mission. As a people, past and present, we have convinced ourselves of our special role on the world stage. In our colonial period, we undertook an errand into the wilderness to raise up the kingdom of God, to create a shining city upon a hill that would serve as a beacon to all of the world. In the nineteenth century, we heard and heeded the cry of Manifest Destiny and made haste to create a continental showcase from sea to shining sea. Today, a sense of mission powers us to go abroad to spread and defend liberty, justice, and democracy. How can we explain our involvement in World War I, World War II, Korea, Vietnam, the Gulf War, and subsequent wars in the Middle East without summoning up this sense of mission? And Americans respond to such calls, sending their children to fight against the evildoers and the godless. As Americans know, doing God's work and civilization's will awakens the enemies of the divine plan – Satan, the Anti-Christ, and all members of the axis of evil.

A second critical factor is American diversity – our strength as an amalgam of peoples. Yet, for the suspicious and wary, diversity is a curse. The enemies now are within the gates, with allegiance to foreign lords, gods, and doctrines. Disloyal and dangerous, these enemies are within and in wait. As a note on this, recall a uniquely American word – Un-American. There are no unFrench, or UnSwedish, or UnIsraeli counterparts. Americans harbor this suspicion, the danger of betrayal from within, by those welcomed with open arms, or those who simply come in search of a new life.

There is a final factor in this conspiracist equation. It was nurtured and developed during our colonial years. It built with the growing authority of the

federal bureaucracy in Washington, D.C. during the twentieth century. It is a fear of the growth and concentration of power in a central government far removed from the local community. If there is any quotation that Americans can recite by heart, it is Lord Acton's remark that "power tends to corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely." When power is given to ministers of government they grow greedy for more authority and control; they develop an arrogance of power. American liberty depends on vigilance, even suspiciousness. The warning has been sounded for generations. It came from Tom Paine and Thomas Jefferson. Barry Goldwater and Ronald Reagan echoed the call. Citizens must always be alert and prepared to check and balance official ambition and feared usurpation of power. Without constant vigilance, all liberties and rights that we cling to and hold dear may perish.

Such attitudes about mission, diversity, and central authority make fertile ground to raise up repeated crops of conspiracy theories.

This is not simply a matter of history, of a past behind us. This is a history that does not end; it shadows our present and future. In fact, in the last fifty years, in the decades since World War II, there has been an increase in the drumbeat of conspiracy theories. There are growing numbers of messages and carriers. The conspiracy narrative has become persuasive and legitimate to an expanding number of believers. It is now a mainstream phenomenon; so everyday and common. At the supermarket checkout counter, shoppers can select from diverse tabloids that offer revelations about the assassination of John F. Kennedy, or government cover-ups of alien contact, or the evolving plot of the Anti-Christ. On television, cable channels tempt viewers with pseudo-documentaries about subversion and conspiracy. Even the History Channel feeds the hunger further disguising fact from fiction.

How many conspiracy layers can you peel away from recent American history? The death of Marilyn Monroe; the assassinations of Malcolm X, John and Bobby Kennedy, and Martin Luther King, Jr.; the moon landing; the affairs of the Clinton presidency; 9-11; the birth place of President Obama. Past events have become conspiratorial puzzle pieces that stand apart from the normal workings of history. Terms like the "grassy knoll," "New World Order," and "Area 51" are now

incorporated into our national lexicon. Conspiracy theories are no longer litmus tests of paranoia, but icons of enlightened skepticism.

I am told that conspiracy theories are the province of the American fringe, the extremists. But, opinion polls find that 75% of Americans believe that John Kennedy was killed in a conspiracy. One third are certain that alien beings landed at Roswell, New Mexico in 1947 and that 70% are convinced that the federal government knows more about the incident than it is revealing. One third of Americans also assert that the AIDS virus was developed in a government laboratory. Sixty percent of African Americans charge the federal government with flooding their neighborhoods with guns and drugs. Such results suggest that the tide of conspiracy thinking has risen, breeched the fringes, and engulfed the mainstream. Conspiracy thinking has become the conventional wisdom.

Let me talk briefly about conspiracy theorists. Often, they are dismissed as marginal men and women, disoriented, disturbed, suffering from paranoia with only a tenuous grasp on reality. My conversations with them suggest that it would be more valuable to think of them as entrepreneurs in search of customers. They live and die by the sale of their merchandise. Conspiracy entrepreneurs, sincere and otherwise, sell products – books, tapes, discs, and newsletters. They command handsome speaking fees. They have well-tuned business skills and their presentations are carefully scripted rhetorically. They are capable producers and directors of films. They have done their marketing research well and have a finger on the pulse of the American public.

Conspiracy theorists also work from an advantage. They are tuned to the American tradition of conspiracism and the urgency of fresh fears. They also remind us of, and use as evidence, the real conspiracies that dot history. No one can deny that Julius Caesar, Crown Prince Ferdinand, and Abraham Lincoln were each assassinated in conspiracies. The Boston Tea Party and John Brown's raid on the federal arsenal at Harpers Ferry were conspiracies. In the last few years, conspiracies have taken a financial turn with the debacle at Enron and the frauds of Bernie Madoff and a cast of many other characters. Most recently, ten sleeper agents were arrested for spying for Russia in the New York City area and pleaded guilty to

conspiracy as a prelude to an exchange for four American spies. Such real examples give sustenance to fears that history is conspiracy.<sup>3</sup>

Yet, conspiracy theorists, if important, are only part of the answer to the question: “Why are their products so attractive to Americans? A sole spotlight denies the historical and social context in which they operate. Key to understanding why a culture of conspiracy exists in America are the other actors who shape ideas, opinions, and fears.

In creating a culture of conspiracy, we must focus on the power of the media – television and Hollywood – whose agents have learned to entertain us with fears of subversion and plot making. From the first blockbuster film *Birth of a Nation* in 1915 to *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* in 1939 to *Vanilla Sky*, *Sum of All Fears*, *JFK* and more recently *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy, *DaVinci Code*, *State of Play*, *Fahrenheit 9-11*, *The Informer*, *XIII: The Conspiracy*, *Sherlock Holmes*, *Ghost Writer*, *Green Zone*, and even *Robin Hood* we have learned that conspiracies exist, have power, threaten us, and have infiltrated the government. The silver screen is critical in the formation of opinion about past and present. In fact, the most influential historians of the twentieth century are filmmakers. Americans also get a weekly dose of conspiracism in the runs and reruns of the *X-Files* and the many programs replicated in its image. Viewers this season have been prompted to watch *Rubicon*, a series that entices with the tag line, “Not every conspiracy is a theory.”<sup>4</sup> With market shares so high, television revels in the sensational and is always eager to line up the evildoers.

A third actor is also essential in the conspiracy drama. Former wrestler and governor of Minnesota Jesse Ventura spotted the enemy in his new book *Conspiracies: Lies, Lies, and More Dirty Lies the Government Tells us*.<sup>5</sup> The book ranked 172 on the Amazon.com bestseller list and of course, Ventura’s story morphed into a television series. Federal authorities raise suspicions in three ways. In a quest for power, officials have played the conspiracy card against opponents. They cried subversion against German Americans during World War I, members of the Communist Party in the 1940s and 1950s, and black radicals and student protesters in the 1960s. First lady Hillary Clinton decried the “vast right wing

conspiracy” against her husband during the impeachment crisis. Under the George W. Bush presidency, America was summoned to fight the evildoers of Islam.

Meanwhile, authorities stoke fears by engaging in a cult of secrecy that denies access and accountability. In 1995, three million federal employees were tasked with classifying as secret as many as 10,000 documents each day. In 2000, it was estimated that the federal government had accumulated ten billion pages with secrecy stamps. These figures denote the security stockpile before 9-11 and the Patriot Act. Even under the Obama Administration and an announced “new era of open government,” the Department of Homeland Security has detoured requests for federal records, delayed disclosure, and even probed for information about individuals seeking government materials.<sup>6</sup> Recently, leaks of classified materials about the conflict in Afghanistan have given momentum to those who charge that the federal government has down played casualties totals, covered-up Pakistan’s collusion with the Taliban, and misled the American people about the state of war.<sup>7</sup>

Finally, in recent American history, federal authorities have appeared to suffer an arrogance of power. Leaders have taken the nation down a path of deception marked by broken promises and lies that have eroded public faith and trust. The signposts are well known: Vietnam, Watergate, the Iran-Contra Affair, the missteps of the Clinton Presidency, Iraq, and now Afghanistan. These events hardened the tradition of distrust about central government and deepened the credibility gap. Said filmmaker Oliver Stone: “Our lifetime as Americans is about betrayal.”

Since the 1950s, opinion pollsters have asked Americans the question: Do you trust the government to do what is right? Almost three-quarters of those polled in 1958 observed that they trusted government all or most of the time. In mirror image, that figure dropped to 25% in 1980 and stands at 22% today. This decline in faith in the federal government also encompasses other national institutions like the universities, corporations, and the courts that similarly registered a low 22% rating.<sup>8</sup>

Thus, in combination, conspiracy theorists, media actors, and government authorities have taught Americans the how, why, and who of conspiracism. As

teachers and role models, they have strengthened a powerful tradition and make conditioning hard to break.

There are several generalizations that can be made about our time of conspiracy thinking. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the conspirators were imagined as outsiders without authority. Catholics, Jews, slaves, and Mormons were threats to combat but the means of coercion remained in white Protestant hands. In the twentieth century the enemies of America have allegedly organized and taken control of key institutions and even captured the federal government. Thus, John Kennedy's assassination was plotted in the headquarters of the FBI and CIA and even in the Oval Office. The New World Order has made the FBI and CIA its agents and the President its pawn. A special unit of the Department of Defense covered up the Roswell incident in the New Mexican outback. "ZOG," the Zionist Occupation Government, reigns over Washington D.C. and is one element in the Jewish plot for world conquest. Conspiracy theories have interbred and become interlocking. In their telling, Jews are engineering the New World Order. The Anti-Christ is working his plot through the United Nations, the World Trade Organization, and the Council on Foreign Relations. President Kennedy was assassinated because he was planning to expose the extraterrestrial control of the federal government.

As in the 1850s and 1950s, two decades of hothouse conspiracism, rival political and news media elites now model and encourage conspiracy thinking. Conspiracy scripts have been espoused on the floor of Congress; on television news networks like CNN, FOX, and MSNBC; and by partisan national advocacy groups. This intense chatter of conspiracy has spurred and guided grassroots mobilization around black and white solutions that have sharply divided our nation.

Conspiracy theories have become easier to circulate, access, and are more resistant to change. In this regard, the Internet is particularly significant. The Internet has created a global network of linked conspiracy thinkers. Click on a website and enter a conspiracist universe with links to confirming sites and related conspiracy theories. In this parallel world, conspiracy replaces history and orders life. On blogs and in chat rooms the initiated self segregate to seek not information, but confirmation. These are echo chambers, tailored to individual needs where only

the like-minded are encountered and no dissonance is found. Researchers find that men and women who are reinforced and find agreement, becoming more determined in their beliefs. They may even shift to more extreme positions when validated. Such does not bode well for a nation rooted in compromise and the free exchange of ideas.<sup>9</sup>

With this context, let us turn to a case study of conspiracy thinking in our time. Let me first raise a caution flag. As Professor O'Sullivan surely knew, there is a special burden to twentieth century history. If all historical research is instructive, twentieth century historians are well aware of the issue of relevance in their work. What they write about, potentially, has impact beyond the discipline and classroom. It touches the interpretation of an evolving present. While that confers a sense of self-importance, it also brings a greater risk. That is, the meeting of minds with an audience of women and men who lay strong claim to an understanding of their own time and place in history.

My book, *Enemies Within: The Culture of Conspiracy in Modern America* was published in November 2001. Critics found it interesting as HISTORY. But they wrote, it has been eclipsed by events. My discussions of the Kennedy assassination, New World Order, the Rise of the Anti-Christ, the alleged Jewish global conspiracy, and the Roswell Incident were not relevant in a post-9-11 world. In fact, one reviewer took me to task for not having a chapter on the real conspiracy of 9-11. My concerns about the dangers of conspiracy thinking were judged overblown and irrelevant. The reasons were obvious. In the wake of 9-11, they argued, the world had changed forever. There was a new national temper. The people's faith in government had been restored. Suspicion, skepticism, and the loss of trust were relics of the 1990s, of the past century. Now, Americans had rallied around the flag and taken on the evildoers in not one, but three wars – Afghanistan, Iraq, and the war on terror. The Patriot Act was necessary and had strong public support.

As we know, 9-11 patriotism did not cool the fires of conspiracy thinking for long. In fact, conspiracism proved resistant and theorists actually incorporated 9-11

into traditional plot lines. This should have come as no surprise. The new patriotism ran up against long and powerful American traditions: sense of mission, diversity, and suspicion of a central government. In fact, these very concepts - when viewed through 9-11 - actually provoked and intensified the hunt for subversion.

Early on, the nineteen Arab terrorists were dismissed as patsies, a favorite term of conspiracy theorists. The hunt began immediately for the real perpetrators. Who was behind this new day of infamy? Who gained? The usual suspects were summoned. The word went out in the United States, Europe, and the Middle East that 9-11 was a Jewish conspiracy, the work of Zionist agent provocateurs. Allegedly, Israel's Mossad in league with the CIA had lured unwitting Arabs into a plot designed to incite Christian Americans into a jihad against the Muslim world. Not only had Israel orchestrated the attack, its agents supposedly contacted the 4,000 Jews working in the World Trade Center and ordered them to stay home from work on 9-11. Note that hard data like numbers act to authenticate plot lines. Note also, the perceived power of the Jews and their unity in conspiracy. Theorists maintain that the 9-11 attack had been outlined a century before in the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, a document long ago exposed as a forgery. There was even a back-up plan if the attack failed to turn Christians against Muslims. The Mossad was prepared to engineer a bio-warfare strike on an American city and blame it on unsuspecting Arabs. Blowing up the Dome of the Rock Mosque in Jerusalem was also in the cards and could be made to fit evangelical Christian end-of-the-world scenarios. Some theorists went further back in time to pick up another story line. Said the Reverend V.S. Herrell: "This might turn out to be like the death of John F. Kennedy, now clearly linked to the Jews and the Jewish Mossad."<sup>10</sup>

Reverend Texe Marrs knew the Jews were involved, but he focused on an even more formidable foe. In the smoke that billowed from the towers of the World Trade Center he and other evangelicals bore witness that they saw the face of Satan. According to Marrs, Satan and his son the Anti-Christ were in league with the Masonic Order, Illuminati, Vatican, Mafia, CIA, and UN and had plotted 9-11 in a quest to seize world power. Still in the planning stage were tools to consolidate their control: microchip implants, mind control experiments, and concentration camps.

Even more mainstream Christian leaders saw the cosmic significance of 9-11. Baptist Minister Jerry Falwell condemned abortionists, gays and lesbians, and feminists for provoking God to lift his protection from his chosen people.

For those fearful of the coming New World Order, 9-11 was an obvious global play for power. Leaders of the John Birch Society charged that federal authorities had prior knowledge of the attack and did nothing to prevent it. Why? 9-11 was the first step in a plot against American freedom. Like the Nazis' burning of the Reichstag in 1933, the attack would act as a pretext to create a police state with "Gestapo-like powers." The plotters would suspend the Constitution in the emergency, deny the Bill of Rights, and disarm patriots and send them to detention centers. In the end, American sovereignty would be sacrificed and the nation would become a province of the global New World Order.

Conspiracy theories also came from the left side of the political spectrum. Congresswoman Cynthia McKinney, a Democrat from Georgia, accused President Bush of having advanced warning of the attack yet standing down and allowing innocent people to be "needlessly murdered." Convinced that 9-11 was not an intelligence failure, she charged that Bush failed to act because he wanted his father and friends in the oil and defense industries "to make huge profits" from the subsequent war on terrorism. Others who subscribe to variants of this plot line include Dennis Kucinich, Michael Moore, Ralph Nader, and Rosie O'Donnell.<sup>11</sup>

Thierry Meyssan's book *The Big Lie*, published in 2002 and now available in twenty-eight languages is richer in detail and quite influential. For Meyssan, what he calls "contradictions" in the official narrative immediately convinced him that U.S. authorities were engaged in a cover-up of the real story of 9-11. He asks: Who had the expertise to conduct such an operation? Who profited from the crime? The answer was simple: it was an "inside job" and President Bush and his staff were mass murderers. He maintains that radio beacons installed by the American military guided the airplanes into the World Trade Center towers. An Air Force missile, not an airplane, struck the Pentagon and by transmitting a friendly code did not provoke a counter missile barrage.

Meysan conjectures these scenarios because he has no evidence that the beacons or anti-missile missile system existed. Nor does the missing American Airlines plane that he denies crashed into the Pentagon puzzle him. In his telling, Osama Bin Laden is an American patsy and potentially a CIA asset. He concludes that 9-11 was masterminded by the military industrial complex and the major oil companies. The oilmen wanted war so that they could build a pipeline across Afghanistan to deliver oil and natural gas supplies into American hands. The armed forces planned war to expand the defense budget and purchase new weapons systems. The CIA joined in believing it would get carte blanche in pursuing terrorists around the world. For those who enjoy American films, this plot should sound familiar. It was the story line of Oliver Stone's film *JFK*. Like Meysan, Stone accused members of the Military Industrial Complex of plotting John Kennedy's death. It was the oil companies, the defense establishment, and the intelligence community that aligned to continue the arms race and Cold War, halt the withdrawal from Vietnam, and protect the oil companies from regulation and higher taxes. Like Stone, Meysan must rely on conjecture, circumstantial evidence, fabrications, and leaps in logic to make his case.

Without a smoking gun and new evidence, the trail of the "real" conspirators has gone cold. Mirroring the hunt for John Kennedy's assassins, the Truthers' investigation of conspiracy clues has shifted from the who and why to the forensics of how and what. Theorists have analyzed the mechanics of the tragedy, seeking to understand the engineering and physics of the fall of the World Trade Center and the attack on the Pentagon. As conspiracy theorists know, the trail of subversion can always be discerned by sifting through the devil's details. The documentary *Loose Change*, available on UTube, has received more than three million hits and has exposed many to the conspiracists' scientific claims. These efforts have sparked a counter literature from official and private sources. If the Kennedy assassination featured a magic bullet, a misaligned rifle scope, and conflicting autopsy reports, the 9-11 debates revolve around controlled demolitions, pancaking of building structures, the buckling point of steel, thermal expansion, pilot training, NORAD

(North Atlantic Aerospace Defense Command) rules and procedures, and the collapse of WTC Building 7.

For those who lack engineering and physics degrees, it is critical to maintain an open mind in reviewing the contending materials. *Loose Change* makes a powerful impression, but do not hesitate to go to [www.cc.dominoes.com](http://www.cc.dominoes.com) for a frame-by-frame critique of the film's analysis.<sup>12</sup> Read the report of the National Institute of Standards and Technology and consider the *Popular Mechanics* issue debunking 9-11 myths. Compare the expertise, reputations, and institutional affiliations of the antagonists. Vigilance in the defense of reason is no vice.<sup>13</sup>

Yet, such theories have proven popular and tenacious. They have birthed the Truther Movement, evolved into widely watched media presentations, and sparked a vast literature on the Internet and in the bookstores. Many have seen Michael Moore's *Fahrenheit 9-11*, the highest grossing documentary of all time. Google "9-11 conspiracy theories," and you can browse more than five million websites.<sup>14</sup> These theories remain persuasive. A 2006 Scripps Howard poll found that more than one-third of Americans are convinced that the federal government directed, aided, or took no action to prevent the attacks on 9-11.<sup>15</sup>

Conspiracy theories like those surrounding 9-11 offer much to believers. In the face of national crisis and human failure, conspiracy thinkers rush to find purpose and meaning in tragedy. Conspiracy theorists order the random and bring clarity to ambiguity. They respond to the traumatized, those who cry for vengeance and demand to know who is responsible. Conspiracy thinking poses as a cure for powerlessness. It lifts the despair of vulnerability by arming believers with tantalizing, secret knowledge to expose the enemy. Conspiracy theories appear so credible because they are filled with detail and hard data – names, dates, numbers, forensic information, scientific and engineering facts. They become even more believable through repetition, through the echo chamber of the Internet and talk radio. The resulting theory appears to reveal a seamless web of subversion, a truth that is at the same time, widely held, emotionally comforting, and empowering.

Conspiracy theories prosper in the broader context. In the face of a decline in faith and trust in institutions, conspiracy theorists pose as new authorities offering

the facts, the details of a new history, and a counter history of America. They tell us how and why America has lost its way. They reveal who has betrayed America's promise, traditions, and true beliefs. Thus, conspiracy theorists are engaged in a struggle for power and authority, a struggle for control of history and therefore the present and future.

Yet, a tale well told and dramatic may disguise its weaknesses and dangers. Conspiracy theories are slippery in their logic and careless of facts and assumptions. Circumstance, rumor, hearsay, innuendo, and conjecture are given as evidence and are deemed sufficient for explanation. Conspiracy theorists think magically. They create antagonists who exercise power with complete foreknowledge and without restraint. They are beyond error and flawless in the execution of their plans. In regard to the 9-11 conspiracy theories, it must be asked if the men and women who led to war with Iraq after weapons of mass destruction could have so flawlessly plotted the attack on the World Trade Center and Pentagon? Chance and bureaucratic process have no place in these narratives. Proximity in time and place are always bent to create collusion.

To make their stories convincing, conspiracy theorists sometimes will invent incidents, create facts, and lie. Unlike scholars, the plot weavers begin with a premise of conspiracy and then focus with a vengeance on their suspicions. In pursuit of their conclusions, they reject inconsistencies and more plausible alternatives and explanations. Thus, 9-11 conspiracy theorists ignored the large number of Jewish names on the casualty lists of the disaster. They see Satan's face in the smoke of 9-11. Al Qaeda plays only a minor and supporting role, always lost in the shadow of American power. As in conspiracy theories about the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941, Washington is callously, flawlessly, and cold-bloodedly able to plan, perform, and conceal its role in another day of infamy. Finally, a fast-paced writing style suitable to the adventure and detective genres is combined with a prosecutorial flair to disguise further the logical leaps and gaps in evidence characteristic of conspiracy theories.

Remember also, that in all of this, conspiracy theorists do not act alone. Federal authorities help fuel and legitimize conspiracy theories. In the wake of 9-11,

federal actions have encouraged conspiracy thinking and made it more convincing. Briefly, Washington stimulated the intensity of counter subversion in three ways. Since the beginning of the twentieth century, American presidents have mobilized citizens with the rhetoric of conspiracy. President Bush was no exception. He declared jihad on the “evildoers” and quarantined the “axis of evil.” Dividing the world into good and evil, black and white. Follows the conspiracist script. The president’s role modeling of conspiracy thinking encouraged a culture of fear and insecurity that only made the conspiracy theorists task easier.

Further, after 9-11, efforts to relax security requirements in government were halted and reversed. There was a tightening of restrictions on the public release of information. The number of documents to rate classified status increased dramatically. Knowing of America’s traditional distrust of central authority, we should take to heart essayist Susan Griffin’s words: “Wherever there is a secret, there is a rumor.”<sup>16</sup>

Finally, for those who believed that there was a hidden agenda to 9-11, the passage of the Patriot Act raised the greatest fears of a police state eager to gut the Bill of Rights. The act bestowed on the state new powers of search and seizure, detention and arrest, and for gathering confidential, personal information. With all of this, the question arises, was 9-11 a failure because of a lack of information or the inability to locate, sift, and exchange it?

In their dance with the authorities, conspiracy theorists always take the lead. But, government leaders may become partners, even if reluctant ones. When authorities mimic critics and sound the alarm of conspiracy, deny candor, and instinctively practice rituals of secrecy, they provide the opportunities for conspiracy thinking to thrive.

Meanwhile, the media continues to entertain us with conspiracy thinking. Conspiracy sells with high market shares on television and blockbuster hits on the silver screen. Talk radio fills the hours with conspiracies large and small. We have become addicts of plot-driven entertainment.

Conspiracy thinking is not harmless. It is not merely wrong thinking and poor reasoning. Conspiracy theories are potentially dangerous because they

demonize public officials and erode faith in national institutions. Negotiation and compromise become impossible when charges of betrayal and treason pepper debate. The loss of trust in America's leaders and institutions has gone beyond healthy skepticism. Allegiance has become suspect and governance more difficult.

This is not merely a matter of history. It is our present. Witness that the Secret Service reported more death threats against Barak Obama than any other president-elect. Twenty-five percent of Americans have heard the rumor that Obama is the Anti-Christ. Obama has also been tagged as a racist, Muslim, usurper, radical communist, Hitler, and Manchurian Candidate in both conspiracist and mainstream circles. A Birther movement insists that he was born in Kenya and is ineligible to be president of the United States. Fifty-eight percent of Republican voters believe that President Obama is not an American citizen or are unsure. In an August, 2010 poll coinciding with Obama's birthday, 27 percent of Americans remained convinced that he was not or probably was not born in the United States. Eleven members of the U.S. House of Representatives have sponsored a bill requiring future presidential candidates to provide proof of citizenship. This despite repeated confirmations of his American citizenship, that hundreds of people would have to be in on the plot, and that a time machine would be necessary to plant false evidence. Yet, *CNN's* Lou Dobbs concluded, "questions won't go away."<sup>17</sup>

Conspiracy thinking will not go away. It is a long time American tradition. We must learn to inoculate ourselves from it by education. Do not accept the sensational, however tantalizing and emotionally soothing it appears. Do not deny your American birthright to question. Reach beyond easily answers. Read, question, and think. Conspiracy theories, must not by default, become the conventional wisdom.

## NOTES:

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in John Avlon, *Wingnuts: How the Lunatic Fringe is Hijacking America* (New York: Beast Books, 2010), 28.

<sup>2</sup> Cass Sunstein, *Going to Extremes: How Like Minds Unite and Divide* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 26.

<sup>3</sup> Peter Baker and Benjamin Weiser, "10 Plead Guilty in Spy Ring Case as Swap Unfolds," *New York Times*, July 9, 2010, 1A.

<sup>4</sup> AMC, August 3, 2010.

<sup>5</sup> (Sky horse Publication Company: New York, 2010).

<sup>6</sup> "Homeland Security filtered requests for information," *Salt Lake Tribune*, July 22, 2010.

<sup>7</sup> "The War Logs: The Afghan Struggle: A Secret Archives," *New York Times*, July 26, 2010, A1, A8-12.

<sup>8</sup> Mark Silva, "Pubic Distrusts D.C." *Salt Lake Tribune*, April 19, 2010, A7.

<sup>9</sup> Avlon, *Wingnuts*, 134-5, 140; Sunstein, *Going to Extremes*, 69, 81-83.

<sup>10</sup> For 9-11 conspiracy theories, see, Robert Alan Goldberg, "'Who Profited from the Crime?' Intelligence Failure, Conspiracy Theories and the Case of September 11," *Journal of Intelligence and National Security*, 19 (Summer, 2004), 249-61.

<sup>11</sup> Avlon, *Wingnuts*, 208.

<sup>12</sup> Accessed, August 3, 2010.

<sup>13</sup> Avlon, *Wingnuts*, 211. See, David Dunbar and Brad Reagan, *Debunking 9-11 Myths: Why Conspiracy Theories Can't Stand Up to the Facts* (New York: Hearst, 2006) that reprints the magazine issue in book form. And, see also a response, David Ray Griffin, *Debunking 9/11 Debunking: An Answer to Popular Mechanics and Other Defenders of the Official Conspiracy Theory* (Olive Branch Press, 2007).

<sup>14</sup> Accessed July 11, 2010.

<sup>15</sup> Avon, *Wingnuts*, 208.

<sup>16</sup> Susan Griffin, *A Chorus of Stones: The Private Life of War* (New York: Anchor, 1992), 16.

<sup>17</sup> Avon, *Wingnuts*, 15, 45, 47, 51-2, 66, 69, 123, 207; *Salt Lake Tribune*, April 23, 2010, A6; [www.foxnation.com/birthers](http://www.foxnation.com/birthers), August 4, 2010; *CNN*, July 20, 2009.



# ABOUT JOHN O'SULLIVAN

John O'Sullivan was a gifted teacher and scholar who devoted his entire academic career to Florida Atlantic University. He came to FAU in 1971 after receiving his Ph.D. from Columbia University. Since then he touched the lives of hundreds of FAU students with his brilliant and inspired teaching. An accomplished scholar, his publications included *The Draft and Its Enemies* (1974), *From Volunteerism to Conscription: Congress and the Selective Service, 1940-1945* (1982), *American Economic History* (1989), and *We Have Just Begun Not to Fight: An Oral History of Conscientious Objectors in Civilian Public Service during World War II* (co-authored with Heather Frazer, 1996). Before his death in 2000, John was working on a book project related to Medal of Honor recipients and another book project with Patricia Kollander, also an FAU faculty member, on a World War II veteran. That book was published in 2005: *I Must Be a Part of This War: One Man's Fight against Hitler and Nazism*.

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