

Outrageous Conspiracy Theories: Popular and Official Responses to 9/11 in Germany and the United States

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Opinion polls conducted in Germany in 2003 indicated that one in five Germans believes that the U.S. government was behind the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, with one-third of Germans under the age of thirty believing in the theory.¹ A 2004 poll found that half of New York City residents believe that U.S. leaders “knew in advance that attacks were planned on or around September 11, 2001, and that they consciously failed to act,” and a 2006 Scripps-Howard poll revealed that more than one-third of Americans believe that it is likely or very likely that the U.S. government either actively assisted in the September 11 attacks or deliberately allowed them to happen because it wanted to go to war in the Middle East.² What are we to make

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1. For details on the polls see “Panoply of the Absurd,” *Der Spiegel*, September 8, 2003, online edition, www.spiegel.de/international/spiegel/0,1518,265160,00.html. See also “9/11 Conspiracy Theories Dominate Frankfurt Book Fair,” October 10, 2003, www.dw-world.de/dw/article/0,,993523,00.html.

2. Zogby International, “Half of New Yorkers Believe U.S. Leaders Had Foreknowledge of Impending 9-11 Attacks and ‘Consciously Failed’ to Act,” August 30, 2004, www.zogby.com/news/ReadNews.dbm?ID=855; Thomas Howard, “Third of Americans Suspect 9/11 Government Conspiracy,” Scripps-Howard, August 1, 2006, www.scrippsnews.com/911poll. Opinion polls recording

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of these increasingly popular conspiratorial beliefs? What is the relationship between these alternative conspiracy-minded versions of events and the official discursive construction of 9/11? What are the similarities and differences between American and German conspiracy speculations? Are 9/11 conspiracy theories merely a continuation of existing patterns of conspiracy theories, or do they represent a new development? This article argues that, for all their challenges to the official version, 9/11 conspiracy theories have much more in common with the orthodox account than their proponents would like to believe; that is, the official discursive construction of 9/11 and the “war on terror” is much closer than one might think to the “outrageous conspiracy theories” (as President Bush called them).³ In particular, the official and the unofficial constructions of 9/11 share a similar demonological structure of explanation that usually apports all responsibility to an evil enemy (George W. Bush or Osama bin Laden), a view underpinned in both cases by an ideology of American exceptionalism. However, this article also argues that the use of new media techniques in some of the 9/11 conspiracy speculations (Mathias Bröckers’s “World Trade Center Conspiracy” blog and Paul Thompson’s “Complete 9/11 Timeline” online database, in particular) creates strategies of representation that begin to push to the very limit—and even at times undermine—the traditional epistemological structures embedded in conspiracy theories that make them so attractive to believers seeking the refuge of humanist certainties in an increasingly posthumanist age: namely, nothing happens by accident, nothing is as it seems, everything is connected.⁴ In short, they end up creating portraits of highly interconnected but also decentered and deterritorialized networks of vested interests that are not necessarily the product of individual or collective intentionality, producing in effect a picture of what might paradoxically be termed “conspiracy without conspiring.” Before considering the significance of the imagination of conspiracy in both the official and the unofficial accounts, I briefly sketch out the emergence of 9/11 conspiracy theories and describe their main features.

belief in conspiracy theories are particularly unreliable, because they often function as a way for people to express a generalized suspicion rather than a hard-core belief. In the case of the Scripps-Howard poll, a figure that more accurately represents the full-blown scale of 9/11 conspiracy belief is the 16 percent who suspected that it was “very likely” or “somewhat likely” that the twin towers were brought down by controlled explosives.

3. President Bush speaking before the U.N. General Assembly, October 11, 2001, www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2002/09/20020912-1.html.

4. This trinity of conspiracy beliefs is discussed in Michael Barkun, *A Culture of Conspiracy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).

From Urban Legends to the Truth Movement

Compared with other much-discussed events such as the death of Princess Diana, conspiracy theories about 9/11 emerged quite slowly. Indeed, most professional conspiracy theorists in the United States—normally so ready to interpret events through the lens of conspiracy—seemed to be as shocked as the rest of the public, with one Web site, for example, proclaiming that

it is a sad day today. Twenty thousand people died in a terrorist attack. The world trade center is reduced to rubble. I wish we could formulate in our minds a conspiracy to mask the horror of what we've seen, but I'm afraid that there aren't any scheming government goons, there aren't any plots, and no double crossing. Only the cold hearted killing of innocent people. I ask you all to give a moment of silence to those who died. It is the least amount of respect we can give them.⁵

When a few conspiracy-oriented theories did emerge in late 2001 and early 2002, most of them focused primarily on anomalies in the official account and publicly available evidence (such as the supposedly gravity-defying speed of the towers' collapse or the lack of the hijackers' names on the passenger manifests), with researchers only later tending to develop more full-blown theories about the ultimate source of an alleged plot.⁶ Amid all the other passionate debate about the meaning of the attacks in the months following September 11, 2001, these conspiracy-minded speculations attracted little support at first, partly because of the overwhelming rallying around the flag (in the United

5. Posted on September 11, 2001, on www.conspiracy-web.com. Alex Jones, one of the most prominent 9/11 conspiracy theorists (and the host of a conspiracy-oriented talk radio show and Web site before September 11, 2001), is keen to remind his audience that he predicted something like 9/11; see www.infowars.com. Conspicuous by their comparative absence in the immediate aftermath of 9/11 were conspiracy theories from the religious Right in the United States; most other contemporary events are instantly interpreted through the lens of a conspiracy-infused form of numerology and end-times prophecy, in which the Illuminati, the Antichrist, and the New World Order are the buzzwords. On the (slow) development of such theories about 9/11 see Barkun, *Culture of Conspiracy*; and Martin Durham, "The American Right and the Framing of 9/11," *Political Quarterly* 75 (2004): 17–25.

6. Probably the first researchers to push the idea that 9/11 was an "inside job" were Jared Israel and Illarion Bykov on the "Emperor's New Clothes" Web site (aimed mainly at challenging mainstream media reports on Yugoslavia and the Serbs), www.tenc.net. Michel Chossudovsky (a Canadian who runs the Center for Research on Globalization) likewise published influential early articles alleging that the U.S. intelligence agencies had far more forewarning than they claimed. See www.globalresearch.ca; some of his work has also been published in book form as *America's "War on Terrorism": In the Wake of 9/11*, 2nd ed. (Toronto: Hushion House, 2005). Some in the 9/11 Truth Movement are now interested in documenting the historical development of 9/11 conspiracy theories, voicing suspicions that later popularizers are plagiarizing early researchers; see, e.g., members.iinet.net.au/%7Eholmgren/history.html.

States) and the strong expressions of solidarity (from elsewhere) in the initial aftermath, but also because some with a penchant for conspiracy theory were keeping their powder dry until the publication of the findings of an official inquiry into 9/11.

One conspiracy allegation that did achieve early prominence was the rumor widely circulated by e-mail and on the Web that not a single Jew had been killed in the attack and therefore that the attacks must have been the work not of Islamic terrorists but of Mossad. This conspiracy-minded urban myth with its anti-Semitic overtones rapidly spread through cyberspace, and although the rumor was soon rejected in the United States and Europe (in part because it was shown to have originated from an anti-Zionist Web site in Lebanon), it soon became widely accepted as fact in the Arab world. In addition to the “four thousand Jews” rumor, the first wave of book-length conspiracy speculations emerged in France and Germany.⁷ These included Bröckers’s blog; the “Hunt the Boeing” Web site and subsequent book by the French author Thierry Meyssan, director of a left-leaning think tank; a book by Andreas von Bülow, former German state minister of the late 1970s; and a television documentary and subsequent book by Gerhard Wisniewski.⁸ Although immensely popular in Europe (and soon translated into Arabic), these early conspiracy accounts were treated by the U.S. media with either bafflement or amusement and were dismissed by the U.S. government as the product of

7. The “four thousand Jews” account was echoed by some other rumors that had an anti-Semitic bent, such as the story that five Israeli art students had been arrested in New York for filming the events while laughing and the theory that Larry Silverstein, the owner of the World Trade Center with a conspicuously Jewish name, must have collaborated in a plot to bring the towers down because he stood to profit from the insurance claim. For a detailed account of these theories and their dissemination see Anti-Defamation League, “Unraveling Anti-Semitic 9/11 Conspiracy Theories,” www.adl.org/anti_semitism/9-11conspiracytheories.pdf, and the follow-up report, “9/11 Anti-Semitic Conspiracy Theories Still Abound,” www.adl.org/main_Anti_Semitism_Domestic/9_11_conspiracy_theories.htm. Most scholarly research on the rhetoric of conspiracy has concentrated on Europe, the United States, and the classical world. Exceptions include Daniel Pipes, *The Hidden Hand: Middle East Fears of Conspiracy* (New York: St. Martin’s, 1996); and Harry G. West and Todd Sanders, eds., *Transparency and Conspiracy: Ethnographies of Suspicion in the New World Order* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003).

8. Thierry Meyssan, *The Big Lie: The Pentagon Plane Crash That Never Happened* (London: Carnot, 2002); Andreas von Bülow, *Die CIA und der 11. September: Internationaler Terror und die Rolle der Geheimdienste* (Munich: Piper, 2003); Gerhard Wisniewski, *Operation 9/11: Angriff auf den Globus* (Munich: Knaur, 2003); Wisniewski, *Mythos 9/11* (Munich: Knaur, 2004). See also Mathias Bröckers, *Verschwörungen, Verschwörungstheorien und die Geheimnisse des 11.9* (Berlin: Zweitausendeins, 2002), published in English as *Conspiracies, Conspiracy Theories, and the Secrets of 9/11* (Joshua Tree, CA: Progressive, 2006).

anti-Americanism.⁹ For example, in response to Meysan's book, the FBI issued a statement in April 2002 declaring that "to even suggest that AA77 did not crash into the Pentagon on September 11 is the ultimate insult"; in July 2005 the U.S. State Department published a document refuting Meysan's work, identifying it as a form of anti-American misinformation akin to Soviet disinformation campaigns. Although many of the European tracts were skeptical about the official construction of 9/11 and the war on terror, the questions they posed cannot merely be dismissed as knee-jerk anti-Americanism—not least because American 9/11 skeptics are now asking the very same questions. The irony is that Europeans have often viewed Americans as exceptionally prone to conspiracy belief, and the central premise of Bröckers's work, for example, is that the official version of 9/11 is itself a conspiracy theory, very much in the American tradition of scapegoating, in which all blame is cast onto a demonized enemy.¹⁰

By 2004 conspiracy theories had begun to gain ground in the United States as existing research became much more widely publicized, with the mainstream media finally taking note of the increasing popularity of the theories in several articles published around the fifth anniversary of the attacks.¹¹ The ideas are no longer confined to a specific location or ideological position

9. See, e.g., Ian Johnson, "Conspiracy Theories about Sept. 11 Get Hearing in Germany," *Wall Street Journal*, September 29, 2003, online edition, online.wsj.com/article/0,,SB106479068042179400,00.html.

10. Since Richard Hofstadter's and Bernard Bailyn's pioneering work in the 1960s on the "paranoid style in American politics," much of the discussion has had an implicit exceptionalist underpinning, shaped by the conviction either that the United States has a peculiar propensity for conspiracy or that, unlike other nations (such as Germany and Russia), it saw the paranoid style confined largely to the cultural realm in the twentieth century. See Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics, and Other Essays* (London: Cape, 1966); and Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967). For a roundup of these positions see Peter Knight, "A Nation of Conspiracy Theorists," in *Conspiracy Nation: The Politics of Paranoia in Postwar America*, ed. Peter Knight (New York: New York University Press, 2002), 1–17. For strong arguments for an underlying connection between American ideology and conspiracy theory see, e.g., Timothy Melley, *Empire of Conspiracy: The Culture of Paranoia in Postwar America* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000); and Jeffrey Pasley, "Conspiracy Theory and American Exceptionalism from the Revolution to Roswell," conspiracy.pasleybrothers.com/CT_and_American_Exceptionalism_web_version.htm.

11. See, e.g., Lev Grossman, "Why the 9/11 Conspiracy Theories Won't Go Away," *Time*, September 3, 2006, www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1531304,00.html; Will Sullivan, "Viewing 9/11 from a Grassy Knoll," *U.S. News and World Report*, September 3, 2006, www.usnews.com/usnews/news/articles/060903/11conspiracy.htm; and Nicholas Lemann, "Paranoid Style: How Conspiracy Theories Become News," *New Yorker*, October 16, 2006, 96–106.

of anti-Americanism but have become thoroughly international and are now as popular in the United States as elsewhere. The speculation that “9/11 was an inside job” has been promoted via books, magazine articles, blogs, Web sites, mainstream films such as Michael Moore’s *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004), and—probably the most influential in terms of reach—sophisticated homemade videos that can usually be downloaded for free. The latter include *Painful Questions*, *In Plane Sight*, *Press for Truth*, and, above all, *Loose Change*, a video made on a laptop by two young men from a small town in upstate New York. At one point in 2006 *Loose Change* was the most popular item on Google Video; it has been downloaded more than ten million times to date, bringing 9/11 conspiracy theories to the MTV generation.¹² With the loss of support for the Bush administration as the Iraq war began to falter, the 9/11 conspiracy theorists began to organize themselves into a loose coalition of pressure groups under the umbrella term “9/11 Truth Movement.” Various activist groups have staged demonstrations at Ground Zero in New York, and in both the United States and Europe they have organized public meetings, lectures, lobbying campaigns, and media appearances from the major spokespeople of the movement, such as Alex Jones, Michael Ruppert, and Jim Marrs (all longtime prominent conspiracy theorists), and academics such as David Ray Griffin, Steven Jones, and James Fetzer, the latter two professors leading the “Scholars for 9/11 Truth” group.

The conspiracy theories have begun to sediment into two broad categories: “Letting It Happen on Purpose” (LIHOP, as the acronym used by the Truth Movement has it), the view that the Bush administration let it happen despite warnings; and “Making It Happen on Purpose” (MIHOP), the more controversial claim that elements of the U.S. government and its intelligence agencies actively conspired to make the events happen.¹³ The basic assumption of both theories is usually that the Bush administration and oil corporations had much to gain from the subsequent invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq and were looking for—perhaps even willing to engineer—a modern-day Pearl Harbor to gain support for their preexisting war plans.

Some theories, for example, concentrate on the evidence that there might well have been far more forewarnings than the Bush administration

12. On the *Loose Change* phenomenon see Nancy Jo Sales, “Click Here for Conspiracy,” *Vanity Fair*, August 2006, www.vanityfair.com/ontheweb/features/2006/08/loosechange200608.

13. For an outline of the two positions see Rowland Morgan and Ian Henshall, *9/11 Revealed: The Unanswered Questions* (London: Constable and Robinson, 2005).

initially admitted and that the plans for an Afghanistan invasion were laid in advance. Other theories have focused on the plane crashes. Often the theorists point to small but troubling inconsistencies, such as the lampposts that appear to be intact in photos of the Pentagon crash site (despite the plane's supposed flight just above the ground); or the fact that cell phones seemed to have worked on board some of the planes at an altitude that official reports deem impossible; or the fact that jet fuel burns at a temperature lower than the melting point of steel, leaving many puzzled as to the cause of the twin towers' collapse. Meyssan even questioned whether the crash hole in the Pentagon was big enough to have been caused by a Boeing 757; he speculated that a missile rather than a plane hit the building (and consequently that the actual plane and its passengers must have been secreted away somewhere else). Reexamining television footage and eyewitness statements, some of the most prominent theories focus on the possibility that the twin towers and World Trade Center 7 were brought down by controlled demolition. Another set of theories deals with the military's failure to shoot down the planes once it was known that they had been hijacked, while other theories concentrate on puzzling aspects about the nineteen hijackers, such as their poor flying skills, their connections with the Pakistani intelligence services, and the possibility that some of those accused by the FBI are still alive.

The Kennedy Assassination of the Twenty-first Century?

Although unfathomable to most mainstream commentators, in many respects 9/11 conspiracy theories merely extend a preexisting conspiracy culture, broadly familiar in epistemological structure, political outlook, and social organization.¹⁴ Indeed, it is fair to suggest that the 9/11 attacks have rapidly become the Kennedy assassination of the twenty-first century. Like the development of Kennedy assassiology but in a much shorter time frame, the 9/11 conspiracy theory began with a few isolated individuals finding puzzling anomalies in the orthodox version of events, rather than a fully formed account of a conspiracy. After a lull prior to the release of the government's findings, in each case the final report only spurred further conspiracy research on discrepancies in the official version, whose inadequacy soon became regarded as

14. For overviews of pre-9/11 conspiracy thinking see Mark Fenster, *Conspiracy Theories: Secrecy and Power in American Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999); and Peter Knight, *Conspiracy Culture: From the Kennedy Assassination to "The X-Files"* (London: Routledge, 2000).

evidence in itself of a far-reaching conspiracy that could orchestrate such a high-level cover-up.¹⁵ Out of the varied research on puzzling aspects and inconsistencies a rough consensus began to emerge in each case, with increasing agreement that in some shape or other the event was an “inside job,” with the intelligence agencies coming under the closest scrutiny (fingers have also pointed to oil barons in both cases).¹⁶ Intriguingly, in both the Kennedy assassination and 9/11 the first full-length book studies emerged from France and Germany, causing commentators in the United States in each case to dismiss the idea of conspiracy thinking about events as suspiciously un-American, possibly part of an enemy disinformation campaign.¹⁷ Apart from President Bush’s initial angry dismissal, the U.S. government was at first slow to refute 9/11 conspiracy theories (in comparison, the Warren Commission report specifically tackled conspiracy rumors in an appendix). But the State Department Web site now has a section that disputes the “top September 11 conspiracy theories,” as well as a user-friendly fourteen-point FAQ to accompany the release of the monumental forty-three-volume report by the National Institute of Standards and Technology on the collapse of the twin towers.¹⁸ The site also has a two-page “beginner’s guide” to conspiracy theories and urban legends: “Does the story fit the pattern of a conspiracy theory? Does the story claim

15. Cf., e.g., David Ray Griffin, *The 9/11 Commission Report: Omissions and Distortions* (Redford, MI: Olive Branch, 2004); Edward J. Epstein, *Inquest: The Warren Commission and the Establishment of Truth* (London: Hutchinson 1966); and Sylvia Meagher, *Accessories after the Fact: The Warren Commission, the Authorities, and the Report* (Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill, 1967). Staff on the 9/11 Commission were determined to prevent the kinds of conspiracy theorizing that had come in the wake of previous controversial commissions. Although they did make an effort to hold some open meetings (in contrast to the closed sessions of the Warren Commission), they also avoided engaging directly with conspiracy theories. As 9/11 Commission executive director Philip Zelikow explained: “When we wrote the report, we were also careful not to answer all the theories. It’s like playing Whack-A-Mole. You’re never going to whack them all” (Carol Morello, “Edgy Online Sites Feed Conspiracy Theories to a Distrustful Public,” *Washington Post*, October 9, 2004). See also the memoir by commission chairmen Thomas M. Kean and Lee H. Hamilton, *Without Precedent: Inside the 9/11 Commission* (New York: Knopf, 2006).

16. For a summary of the JFK conspiracy theories see Peter Knight, *The Kennedy Assassination* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007).

17. In a footnote to his classic article on the “paranoid style,” Hofstadter reassured himself and his readers that “conspiratorial interpretations of Kennedy’s assassination have a far wider currency in Europe than they do in the United States,” with the suggestion that only a handful of unhinged and un-American writers would promote such a preposterous theory (*Paranoid Style*, 7). On the possibility that some of the early Kennedy assassination studies were the work of Soviet disinformation see Max Holland, “How Moscow Undermined the Warren Commission,” *Washington Post*, November 22, 2003.

18. usinfo.state.gov/xarchives/display.html?p=pubs-english&y=2006&m=August&x=20060828133846esnamfuaK0.2676355, and wtc.nist.gov/pubs/factsheets/faqs_8_2006.htm.

that vast, powerful, evil forces are secretly manipulating events? If so, this fits the profile of a conspiracy theory.” Conspiracy theories, the State Department kindly informs us, “are rarely true, even though they have great appeal and are often widely believed. In reality, events usually have much less exciting explanations. The U.S. military or intelligence community is a favorite villain in many conspiracy theories.”¹⁹ The article then discusses how conspiracy theories that identify the American government as the archvillain are often the work of deliberate disinformation campaigns (e.g., it cites Soviet disinformation about the conspiratorial origin of AIDS and also mentions campaigns by Saddam Hussein), creating in effect a conspiracy theory of the origin of conspiracy theories—a good example in itself of how conspiracy theories are often developed to divert attention from potential dissent, motivated in part by a self-righteous inability to understand “why bad things happen to good people.”²⁰

The 9/11 Truth Movement has also quickly evolved into similar versions of the arcane subspecialisms that mark the JFK research community. Where members of the latter concentrate on ballistics or the Soviet period of Lee Harvey Oswald, for example, the former has experts in forensic metallurgy or the standard operating procedures for air defense. In each case, those involved in the research are motivated partly by a self-professed patriotic desire to find out what really happened but also partly by the satisfactions to be gained from becoming a self-taught expert challenging the establishment. The two conspiracy communities also make persistent use of the Freedom of Information Act to obtain otherwise inaccessible government documents. Each has its “smoking gun” documents. Kennedy assassination researchers have latched onto NSAM 263, the document that supposedly reveals that JFK was going to withdraw from Vietnam, which is therefore taken as evidence that he was killed in a coup d’état to prevent this possibility. In the

19. usinfo.state.gov/media/Archive/2005/Jul/27-595713.html.

20. There is even the suggestion in a recently declassified policy document setting strategies for fighting terrorism that conspiracy theories themselves lead to terrorism: “The terrorism we confront today springs from: . . . Subcultures of conspiracy and misinformation. Terrorists recruit more effectively from populations whose information about the world is contaminated by falsehoods and corrupted by conspiracy theories. The distortions keep alive grievances and filter out facts that would challenge popular prejudices and self-serving propaganda. . . . In place of a culture of conspiracy and misinformation, democracy offers freedom of speech, independent media, and the marketplace of ideas, which can expose and discredit falsehoods, prejudices, and dishonest propaganda” (www.whitehouse.gov/nsc/nsct/2006/sectionV.html). On the inner structural psychology of conspiracy theories see Dieter Groh, “The Temptation of Conspiracy Theory; or, Why Do Bad Things Happen to Good People . . .” in *Changing Conceptions of Conspiracy*, ed. Carl F. Graumann and Serge Moscovici (New York: Springer, 1987), 1–37.

case of 9/11, theorists often point either to *Rebuilding America's Defenses*, a 2000 report by the neoconservative think tank Project for the New American Century (PNAC), that refers to a “new Pearl Harbor” (an event that in conspiracy theorists’ eyes was either deliberately planned or allowed to happen), or to Operation Northwoods, a top-secret U.S. military plan from 1962 (declassified in 1997) that aimed to generate public support for an attack on Fidel Castro’s Cuba, in a selection of sinister scenarios including a fake or even a real shooting down of an airplane over Cuban airspace.²¹ The two groups share patterns of activist organization, with a mixture of prominent public speakers, conventions, and popularizations of the major findings in mass media. The similarities between the two movements can also be explained in part by the continuity of key players who might be termed professional conspiracists. For example, Marrs, a prominent figure of the JFK research community (and later the UFO community), has now published two books on 9/11, while Fetzer has shifted his attention from a supposedly scientific reexamination of the Kennedy case to orchestrating Scholars for 9/11 Truth.²² As with the Kennedy assassinologists, there are already signs of rifts in the Truth Movement, with accusations of infiltrators spreading deliberately preposterous theories about the event as part of a covert government disinformation campaign; there is also now a backlash from skeptics who are scientists keen to point out the mistakes in the 9/11 conspiracy

21. For the conspiracy interpretation of the PNAC report see David Ray Griffin, *The New Pearl Harbor: Disturbing Questions about the Bush Administration and 9/11*, 2nd ed. (Aldershot: Arris, 2005). Although the conspiracy theorists have read the much-quoted passage (“Further, the process of transformation, even if it brings revolutionary change, is likely to be a long one, absent some catastrophic and catalyzing event—like a new Pearl Harbor”) as an admission that the Bush administration knew that a more aggressive, imperial foreign policy would not be achievable without a dramatic event stage-managed to engineer public support (for this is how conspiracy theorists have read Pearl Harbor), the report as a whole discusses the need for a “revolution in military affairs,” a transformation of the armed forces from an overweight bureaucracy left over from the Cold War to a more agile organization led by information technology. Donald Rumsfeld was brought in precisely to oversee this transformation of the Pentagon along the lines of corporate restructurings of the 1990s. The other event that conspiracy theorists often invoke—erroneously—in their argument that there are historical precedents for 9/11 as a “false-flag” operation is the burning of the Reichstag. Operation Northwoods was originally revealed in James Bamford, *Body of Secrets: Anatomy of the Ultra-secret National Security Agency* (New York: Doubleday, 2001). The declassified documents are now widely reproduced on 9/11 conspiracy Web sites.

22. Jim Marrs, *Inside Job: Unmasking the 9/11 Conspiracies* (San Rafael, CA: Origin, 2004); Marrs, *The Terror Conspiracy: Deception, 9/11, and the Loss of Liberty* (New York: Disinformation, 2006). For an example of Fetzer’s JFK work see his edited work *The Great Zapruder Film Hoax: Deceit and Deception in the Death of JFK* (Chicago: Catfeet, 2003); his 9/11 work is available online at 911scholars.org (in late 2006 the Scholars for 9/11 Truth split into two factions, with Steven Jones establishing his own group).

theorists' work.²³ Finally, it remains to be seen whether the political sincerity of the Truth Movement will lapse into more apolitical forms of conspiracy scandalmongering, as happened with the Kennedy assassination and the never-ending supply of sensationalist books and television specials.

The Unofficial Version

It might seem at first that the 9/11 Truth Movement poses a radical political challenge to the official version of events with its charge that the conspiracy reaches to the highest levels of government and business whose corruption knows no moral bounds. However, many 9/11 conspiracy theories stem from a deeply conventional view of American history that has much in common with the official version of events they reject. The underlying ideological assumption of much 9/11 conspiracy theory is that things would be fine if only a cabal of ruthless plotters deep within the government, the intelligence agencies, the military, and the oil corporations had not engineered events for their own gain.²⁴ For all their embittered skepticism about the cynical corruptness of American leaders, 9/11 conspiracy theories (more so the American ones than their European counterparts) often maintain an abiding faith in American innocence and the fundamental soundness of the system of government. Given the Bush administration's eagerness to present 9/11 conspiracy theorists as un-American, the Truth Movement's members have been keen to portray themselves as the only real patriots remaining, calling up ideas of dissent as a properly American tradition. On an online discussion board following the publication of the Scripps-Howard poll, for example, one poster summed up the view that the American institutions were still fundamentally sound, despite a mammoth conspiracy: "America is and can be again a great nation, it just needs a little house cleaning."²⁵ If members of the Truth Movement

23. On the accusation of disinformation campaigns within the movement see, e.g., www.oilempire.us/bogus.html; and angieon911.com. The most prominent skeptic work is David Dunbar and Brad Regan, eds., *Debunking 9/11 Myths: An In-Depth Investigation by "Popular Mechanics"* (New York: Hearst, 2006).

24. The equivalent assumption in the Kennedy case—at the heart of Oliver Stone's *JFK*, for example—is that the tragedies of American history since 1963, such as Vietnam and Watergate, are all a result of a coup d'état that deviated the course of manifest destiny; see Knight, *Kennedy Assassination*.

25. In a similar vein, a relatively new Web site called Patriots Question 9/11 (www.patriotsquestion911.com) seeks to publicize a roll call of respectable military and political leaders who have made comments that (in the eyes of the Web site) voice doubts about aspects of the official version. In my experience of attending a 9/11 Truth Movement public meeting in the United Kingdom in 2005, there were understandably few appeals to American values; instead, the mainly student-age crowd was made up in roughly equal measure of ecological and antiglobalization protesters (many citing the "Peak Oil" argument), antiwar activists, and the merely curious.

tend to be critical of the war on terror in general and the Iraq war in particular, it is not because they regard the whole adventure of neoliberal imperialism as immoral but because the provocation for the war is in their view shrouded in skullduggery. It is therefore fitting that the Truthers are keen to draw attention to the attacks of September 11, 2001, as a false-flag conspiracy that parallels Pearl Harbor, because it leads implicitly to the same conclusion: even if the initial provocation for the war was unjust (in the conspiracy version of Pearl Harbor), the overall thrust of the war on terror is justified. The Bush administration has likewise been only too keen to compare 9/11 with Pearl Harbor (albeit with a very different reading of that event) in an attempt to evoke comparisons with a war still widely perceived as just.²⁶

Although there are signs that some of the newer representational strategies of 9/11 conspiracy theories are straining to the limits the conventional logic of conspiracy thinking, for the main part the 9/11 conspiracy theories also rely on a traditional model of highly efficient individual intentional action, in addition to their abiding faith in American exceptionalism. When the Truth Movement develops a full-blown MIHOP theory of who or what is behind the events—and it does not always do so—it tends to rely on a portrait of a tight-knit cabal within the highest reaches of government, involving the CIA, perhaps even the president and his neocon cronies themselves, motivated by the lust for oil, money, or imperialist power. In the picture of conspiracy that emerges, the plotters display awesome ruthlessness and preparedness, anticipating and acting on every last detail. Some of the theories about controlled demolitions, for example, lead to the conclusion that the plotters bypassed security and tens of thousands of workers in the towers to plant explosives while ensuring that the air-traffic-control procedures were stood down and that the planes crashed at precisely the right time and location (which often then leads to the speculation that they must have been remote-controlled). The plan was perfect, the argument goes, except for telltale details that the conspirators and the 9/11 Commission overlooked but that the eagle-eyed amateur conspiracy researchers have spotted, such as the puffs of smoke visible on the television footage in slow motion that are supposedly evidence of explosives detonating in sequence.

The Official Version

If conspiracy theories of 9/11 have set themselves up in opposition to the official version, so too has the rhetorical construction of 9/11 and the war on

26. On the often questionable appeal to World War II in the official discourse of the war on terror see Richard Jackson, *Writing the War on Terrorism: Language, Politics, and Counter-terrorism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005).

terror by the government, the media, and popular culture explicitly distanced itself from conspiracy theories deemed beyond the pale of reason. In a speech to the U.N. General Assembly just one month after the September 11 attacks—and well before conspiracy theories had become a significant oppositional voice—President Bush made a preemptive attack: “We must speak the truth about terror. Let us never tolerate outrageous conspiracy theories concerning the attacks of September the 11th, malicious lies that attempt to shift the blame away from the terrorists themselves, away from the guilty.”²⁷ For all Bush’s insistence on the fundamental difference between the official interpretation of events and conspiracy rumors, there are strong rhetorical and structural parallels between the two versions—even in Bush’s very rejection of conspiracy theories as “outrageous.” By insisting that any view that does not take a black-and-white position on blame is beyond discussion, the Bush administration from the outset forcefully rejected any suggestion of culpability—even through negligence—on its part or even on the part of the Clinton administration, whether for failing to act on the warning signs or for blunting the attacks once under way.²⁸ In this kind of comment, the world is rhetorically divided into the totally innocent and the irremediably guilty with no shades of gray in between, a view of all-or-nothing agency shared by many conspiracy theories. In each

27. Nor was Bush’s an isolated comment. For example, Paul Wolfowitz, speaking on ABC News on December 9, 2001, about the recently released Osama bin Laden “confession” video, hammered home the message that blaming anyone other than bin Laden as the personification of pure evil was an affront to moral sensibility: “It’s repugnant. I mean here is a man who takes pride and pleasure from killing thousands of innocent human beings. This confirms what we already know about him. There’s nothing new or surprising in there. It’s only a confirmation. And I hope it will finally put a stop to these insane conspiracy theories according to which in some way the United States or somebody else are the guilty parties” (quoted in Meyssan, *Big Lie*, 104). Although it is possible that Bush was talking about the “four thousand Jews” rumor and was therefore implicitly making a plea for ethnic tolerance in the Middle East, it seems that the main focus of his ire was any suggestion that the United States in general and his administration in particular might have been to blame for the attacks, either through misguided foreign policy or through the failure to heed warning signs. In effect, he was dismissing any critical view as a conspiracy theory, a rhetorical maneuver that ended discussion. (In contrast, Bröckers—finding a hidden, conspiratorial reason behind Bush’s vehemence—suggests that it was an anxious, guilty reaction to a report in the *Times of India* that Mohammed Atta had received one hundred thousand dollars shortly before the attacks from General Mahmoud Ahmed of the ISI, the Pakistani secret services [*Conspiracies*, 115].)

28. The Bush administration’s angry rejection of anything other than total innocence was also shared, for example, by Americans responding to articles in the *London Review of Books* in the immediate aftermath that suggested that the reason for the attacks was not purely an effect of the United States’ supposed identity as the embodiment of freedom but was partly a result of its foreign policy actions. For a detailed analysis of how a complete and bipartisan rejection of blame for 9/11 (to create a commitment to “national unity”) was from the very beginning vital to the construction of a consensus on the war on terror see Stuart Croft, *Culture, Crisis, and America’s War on Terror* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), chap. 2.

case, America is seen as an innocent victim of a catastrophic event that came out of the blue and that can be explained only by the existence of an all-powerful conspiracy motivated by pure evil or lust for power, whether orchestrated by bin Laden or by Bush.²⁹ Just as with the Kennedy assassination, the only choices are a lone-gunman theory or a conspiracy theory, both of which rely on a fantasy of highly efficient agency, so with 9/11 it seems at times that one is forced to believe that it was carried out either by a highly organized and centrally controlled conspiracy of terrorists or by a highly organized and centrally controlled cabal of government and intelligence agents. This stark choice creates a false dilemma that makes a truly alternative view to the consensus view of the war on terror still harder to assert.³⁰

It is even arguable that the official rhetorical construction of al-Qaeda as a vast, highly organized conspiracy, as opposed to a loose, decentered network, is not merely the result of a vague ideological disposition toward understanding causality and responsibility in terms of pure intentional agency but a concerted effort to construct the enemy as a centralized conspiracy that would more easily dovetail with political and military strategy. First, to prosecute the leaders of al-Qaeda in absentia in the trial held in the United States after the East African embassy bombings of 1998, the U.S. government needed to portray al-Qaeda as a corporate, coordinated organization with bin Laden as the mastermind—a conspiracy in the legal definition—under the terms of the RICO (Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations) Act, passed in 1970 to enable the prosecution of Mafia bosses for crimes committed by lower-level members.³¹ As

29. In their rejection of any strong statement of culpable negligence or move to prosecute specific omissions, the 9/11 Commission also followed the quickly established national consensus that no real blame could be laid at the feet of Bush, Clinton, or federal agencies. However, as the appeal to “national unity” has begun to collapse, it has emerged that the 9/11 commissioners were angry that they had been lied to by the Pentagon and were even considering recommending criminal prosecution as they wrapped up their inquiry in 2004. See Dan Eggen, “9/11 Panel Suspected Deception by Pentagon,” *Washington Post*, August 2, 2006, www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/08/01/AR2006080101300.html.

30. On the false dilemma in the Kennedy case see Melley, *Empire of Conspiracy*, chap. 4. Several commentators on the progressive left in the United States have lamented that although some of the accusations about official complicity are important, some of the energy of the antiwar movement has been sucked into the 9/11 Truth Movement. See, e.g., Christopher Hayes, “9/11: The Roots of Paranoia,” *Nation*, December 25, 2006, www.thenation.com/doc/20061225/hayes.

31. Unlike the traditional statutes of criminal conspiracy that require evidence that the accused had actively conspired with the perpetrator of a crime, RICO makes it sufficient to prove merely that a suspect belongs to an organization that displays a pattern of coordinated, illegal activity. Since its initial application to the Mafia, RICO has been used in civil suits against anti-abortion terrorist groups and even the Los Angeles Police Department (see the entry on RICO in Peter Knight, ed., *Conspiracy Theories in American History: An Encyclopedia* [Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2003], 619–20).

President Bush tellingly noted in his major speech of September 20, 2001, “Al-Qaeda is to terror what the Mafia is to crime.”³² Second, the image of a vast, tightly knit, hierarchical, and centrally controlled terrorist conspiracy that linked a huge number of groups and cells in various countries was not a new idea but a reworking of a theory developed during the Reagan administration about the Soviets as puppet masters behind seemingly unrelated and local terrorism. However, it turned out that this idea of a conspiratorial terror network was the product of a CIA disinformation campaign that had been taken for reality by a journalist and then by Reagan.³³

As several scholars have ably documented, the interpretation of the 9/11 attacks by political and media elites as well as in popular culture as the work of an enemy that personifies evil is not common sense but a construction that arises out of and gels with a well-established ideological outlook. In effect, the Bush administration quickly capitalized on 9/11 to promote the idea of a “decisive intervention” as the appropriate response to the attacks.³⁴

32. President Bush, address to a joint session of Congress, September 20, 2001, www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010920-8.html.

33. The original book that propounded the terror network theory in the 1980s was Claire Sterling, *The Terror Network: The Secret War of International Terrorism* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1981). The argument about the network’s status as a fabrication is put forward forcibly in Adam Curtis’s documentary *The Power of Nightmares*, BBC Television, 2004. There is by now, of course, a vast literature on al-Qaeda. Works such as Jason Burke, *Al-Qaeda: The True Story of Radical Islam*, rev. ed. (London: Penguin, 2004), set out to debunk the idea of al-Qaeda as a centralized organization. Books such as Lawrence Wright, *The Looming Tower* (London: Penguin, 2006), offer intriguing detailed evidence of the group’s structure, describing, for example, how al-Qaeda “had developed a management philosophy that it called ‘centralization of decision and decentralization of execution’” (318).

34. The best of these works are Jackson, *Writing the War on Terrorism*; Croft, *Culture, Crisis, and America’s War on Terror*; and Curtis, *Power of Nightmares*. There is, of course, a fine but important distinction between capitalizing on the attacks after they happen to pursue political objectives that have already been articulated and deliberately allowing them to take place to promote a hidden agenda. Jackson and Croft are careful to distinguish their views from a more conspiratorial interpretation; Croft, for example, argues that “the ‘war on terrorism’ is an instance of a deliberately and carefully constructed discourse. . . . The fact that the construction of the ‘war on terrorism’ has meshed so closely with the pre-existing policy agenda of the neo-conservatives within the Bush administration also suggests it was deliberately formulated in pursuit of those goals. This is not to say that the Bush administration was necessarily being disingenuous or deliberately misleading—that there was some kind of conspiracy. We know from insider accounts that President Bush and his cabinet genuinely believe what they say publicly about terrorism. . . . It is not that there was some kind of plot to manipulate and deceive the public; rather, administration officials deliberately deployed language to try to persuade the American people of the logic, reason and rightness of their decisions” (*Culture, Crisis, and America’s War on Terror*, 26–27). Curtis likewise makes clear that his documentary does not put forward a conspiracy theory: “The use of fear in contemporary politics is not the result of a conspiracy, the politicians have stumbled on it. In a populist, consumerist age where they found their authority and legitimacy declining dramatically they have simply discovered in the ‘war on terror’ a way of restoring their authority by promising to protect us from something that only they can see” (news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/programmes/4202741.stm).

The mainstream discourse used to explain 9/11 and justify the need for a war on terror is marked out by a tendency toward apocalypticism and heated exaggeration; a sense of urgent crisis and imminent threat to a specifically American way of life from an all-pervasive hidden enemy; the portrayal of America as an exceptional victim; the reassertion of traditional American values and a call to national unity in response; a Manichaeian insistence on dividing the world into Them and Us; the demand that America lead an epic to-the-death fight against the plotters; the casting of all blame onto the enemy; and the portrayal of the enemy as completely alien, inhuman, all-powerful, and, above all, evil.

If the argument is correct that the official discourse of 9/11 has much in common rhetorically and structurally with the conspiratorial unofficial version that it derides, it should come as little surprise that the above list coincides almost point for point with Richard Hofstadter's classic description of the rhetorical features of the paranoid style in American politics.³⁵ Although Hofstadter's article is helpful in identifying significant stylistic and ideological features that the official and unofficial versions of 9/11 share, his explanation for the emergence of conspiracy thinking and demonology is less useful. Hofstadter argues that American politics has been beset by waves of paranoid fear, but these delusions have usually been confined to those far from the center of power who are merely creating a symbolic expression of their powerlessness. This is obviously not the case with 9/11 and the war on terror, because political and media elites (echoed by influential voices in film, television, and other pop cultural forms) have led the way in constructing a mainstream version of 9/11 that partakes of the paranoid style. As critics of Hofstadter have pointed out, the discourse of countersubversive demonology is instead often promoted to serve the all-too-real vested interests of those in positions of power, rather than merely project their innate fears.³⁶ According to this counterargument, popular fears about terrorism have their origin not in the delusional and idiosyncratic paranoid psychology of the masses, as Hofstadter argues, but in the elite's deliberate rhetorical constructions that serve their vested political and economic interests. Although it is all

35. Hofstadter, *Paranoid Style*, 3–40.

36. What might be termed the "elitist theory of moral panics" has been articulated most powerfully by Michael Rogin, "American Political Demonology: A Retrospective," in *Ronald Reagan, the Movie* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987); and Corey Robin, *Fear: The History of a Political Idea* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004). For discussions of the problems with Hofstadter's still influential thesis see Knight, *Conspiracy Culture*, intro.; and Fenster, *Conspiracy Theories*, chap. 1.

too easy to focus on 9/11 conspiracy theories as symptoms of mass paranoid delusions (as many of the media articles on the fifth anniversary of 9/11 did), it is far more important to recognize that the official version equally draws on the rhetoric of paranoia and that its version of events and the policy choices entailed are neither natural nor inevitable.

But what should we make of popular suspicions not of terrorism but of government involvement in 9/11? Although the elitist theory of moral panics can provide a powerful account of how popular fears are manipulated through mainstream discourse, we also need to consider the political and social functions that the alternative discourse of 9/11 conspiracy serves, as well as the satisfactions it affords its believers. To begin with, it is important to recognize that 9/11 conspiracy theories gained significant popular support in the United States only in 2004, whereas the conspiratorial challenge to the official American version was widespread in Europe well before then. It is therefore arguable that the real engine driving the 9/11 Truth Movement to popularity in the United States has been not the discovery of new or more compelling evidence, or even its more user-friendly presentation in videos such as *Loose Change*, but the reelection of Bush in 2004 and the slowly disintegrating American mission in Iraq, which has prompted many Americans to rethink the official version of the road from 9/11 to war in the Gulf. In short, as with the belated flowering of Kennedy assassination conspiracy theories in the late 1960s, the troubling reality of contemporary events provokes the need to posit retrospectively a primal scene of conspiracy as a symbolically necessary origin for present woes.

Although the antiwar and anti-Bush sentiment has contributed to the rapid growth of the 9/11 Truth Movement, we also need to recognize 9/11 conspiracy theories as an almost inevitable counterreaction—however misguided—not only against the distorted official version, which sought to directly connect al-Qaeda and the “axis of evil,” but also against the lack of transparency and honesty many detect in the official 9/11 Commission investigation. Subsequent revelations of spin doctoring and outright lying by federal officials have fueled the conspiracy theories. The obvious examples include the claim about the existence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq; the too easy acceptance of apparently forged documents purporting to show that Saddam had attempted to purchase yellowcake uranium ore from Niger; the belated release in 2004 (under pressure from the 9/11 Commission) of the Presidential Daily Briefing of August 6, 2001, which included the section “Bin Laden Determined to Strike in US”; and recent reports that NORAD lied to the

9/11 Commission.³⁷ Whatever else we might think about 9/11 conspiracy theories, it is worth remembering that they played an instrumental role in convincing various 9/11 pressure groups that there were many unanswered questions, which in turn led to the pressure on the White House to rethink its initial opposition to a full investigation and its initial appointment of Henry Kissinger as chairperson.³⁸

New Models of Conspiratorial Connectedness

Although the official version and the rival conspiracy theory have much in common structurally and rhetorically, it is arguable that some of the popular conspiracy discourse begins to develop models of connectedness, causation, and complicity—almost in spite of itself—that represent significant departures from traditional forms of conspiracy thinking. The representational strategies used in some of the 9/11 conspiracy discourse in effect challenge the common assumption that conspiracy theories produce a comforting and simplified interpretation of current affairs. Fueled by a desire to find the hidden connections behind all events, these newer forms of conspiratorial representation instead attempt to explain not just a few anomalies in the official version but a whole geopolitical backstory. In connecting the dots of policy, procedure, and world affairs that are often obscured in the mainstream version, they end up creating an infinite regress of connectivity. These hyper-connective conspiracy theories also necessarily call up gradations of negligence and complicity that are hard to shoehorn into the traditional conspiracy-minded Manichean division of Them and Us, guilty and innocent. For example, Griffin's *New Pearl Harbor*, one of the most prominent 9/11-conspiracy-theory books, sets out eight possible points on a scale of complicity that covers the full range from MIHOP to LIHOP to complete ignorance.³⁹ In short, some conspiracy theories on 9/11 attempt to see it not as an attack out of the blue, a view favored both by the exceptionalist reading of American history that underpins the mainstream version and by many of its challengers, but as an event related to a much larger story of U.S. foreign policy that

37. These and other stories are covered in more detail in Frank Rich, *The Greatest Story Ever Sold: The Decline and Fall of Truth from 9/11 to Katrina* (London: Penguin, 2006); and Michael Isikoff, *Hubris: The Inside Story of Spin, Scandal, and the Selling of the War in Iraq* (New York: Crown, 2006).

38. The story of the influence of Paul Thompson's time line on one group of 9/11 widows (known as the "Jersey Girls") and their campaigning for a full inquiry is told in the documentary film *9/11: Press for Truth* (dir. Ray Nowosielski and John Duffy; 2006).

39. Ultimately, Griffin concludes that 9/11 is better explained by a complicity theory than by either incompetence or coincidence.

is the work of a vast bureaucratic machinery not under the control of a single mastermind.

Bröckers is championed for being in the vanguard of the 9/11 Truth Movement, making public a host of conspiracy allegations, most of which are now common currency in conspiracy circles in Germany and the United States. The real significance of his blog, however, is that its new media format enables it to situate the emerging counterstory in a much wider, more self-reflexive discussion of the nature of conspiracy theories. Bröckers, a journalist and editor for *TAZ (Die Tageszeitung)*, began an online “conspiracy diary” for the online magazine *Telepolis* two days after 9/11. He was already working on a book about the history and function of conspiracy theories, having just translated into German *Everything Is under Control*, the veteran American novelist and countercultural guru Robert Anton Wilson’s compendium of conspiracy theories. The blog, which ran from September 13, 2001, to March 22, 2002, and was later published in book form, recorded Bröckers’s growing skepticism about the official version of 9/11, mixed with discussion of puzzling aspects of the event, links to potentially significant media reports detailing an alternative backstory, and more general speculation on the nature of conspiracy thinking.

Although Bröckers has now become a major voice of the 9/11 conspiracy theory camp, he insists that “my aim was not to father yet another conspiracy theory, but to reveal the ‘bin Laden/al-Qaeda’ theory that is blaring on all media channels for what it is—a conspiracy theory.”⁴⁰ He admits that at the beginning his questioning of the official version was motivated not by a certain knowledge of an alternative, conspiratorial scenario but by a suspicion that things did not quite add up (coupled with a prescient sense that the road from 9/11 might well lead to the invasion of Iraq, even if his initial hunch that Palestinians were involved was quickly discarded). “Something just did not seem right to me,” he recalls, “though I did not know what” (159). He felt obliged to dig deeper into the story and to turn to the self-published medium of a blog, because in his eyes the mainstream media had abdicated the duty to probe official pronouncements in their desire to rally around the flag (in the case of American journalists) or to demonstrate their sympathy with the United States (in the case of European writers).

Bröckers’s willingness to regard the official version as “nothing more than a pure, an unproven conspiracy theory” (9) that was designed to provide the public with easy but misleading answers results partly from the fact that he was in the middle of researching a history of conspiracy theories when the

40. Bröckers, *Conspiracies*, 183. Subsequent references are given in parentheses in the text.

attacks happened. Whereas some American 9/11 Truth Movement researchers began with the implicitly racist assumption that nineteen Arabs could not have conducted such a sophisticated operation on their own from a cave in Afghanistan, because of his research for his work in progress Bröckers was primed to interpret the unfolding events of September 11, 2001, as the latest episode in a long history of lying, paranoid suspicion, and knee-jerk conspiracy-mongering on the part of the U.S. establishment. His dismissal of the official version as an unsubstantiated theory about an al-Qaeda conspiracy is prompted in part by the familiar argument that conspiracy theories make the mistake of providing simple answers to complex situations through scapegoating and demonology.⁴¹ Conspiracy theories, Bröckers declares, “reduce complexity, disentangle what is confusing, explain the inexplicable” (77), not least because “in times of crisis, simple solutions are in demand, and nothing works better than a good conspiracy, a clear image of the enemy” (78).

Given his metacritical discussion of the logic of conspiracy, Bröckers is well aware that the suggestive links amassed in his blog to demonstrate that the official version is merely a cooked-up conspiracy theory might themselves form the building blocks of an alternative “inside job” conspiracy theory that is nothing more than a mirror image of the official conspiracy theory. He warns against replacing one scapegoating conspiracy theory with another, arguing that it is “hardly possible to trace complex events like the 9/11 attack and its consequences back to *one* cause or *the* mastermind—unless it’s simply for the sake of countering the official conspiracy theory ‘bin Laden’ with an unofficial one called ‘Bush’” (202). Yet for all his ironic commentary on the dangers of conspiracy theory, Bröckers displays a residual attraction to it as a valid mode of countercultural perception that can get at what really happened on 9/11. Indeed, the main purpose of the book he had been working on before the terrorist attacks was to rescue conspiracy theory from its usual fate of being pilloried as a degraded form of historical knowledge, to “repatriate conspirology from its banishment as a dirty, messy theory of cognition” (10). In place of official knee-jerk rejections of the possible existence of conspiracies, he puts forward “conspirology” as a new “critical science of perception” (45), an epistemology that can recognize the centrality of conspiring in the unfolding of human history. Pushing this idea to the extreme, Bröckers even suggests that life on earth itself is the result of molecules “conspiring” with other molecules to combine into DNA chains, with the further offbeat idea that conspiracy is the missing link in evolution-

41. On the idea of conspiracy theory as scapegoating see Chip Berlet and Matthew N. Lyons, *Right-Wing Populism in America: Too Close for Comfort* (New York: Guilford, 2000).

ary theory between the competing impulses of competition and cooperation. This is obviously a huge expansion of the traditional concept of conspiracy, which is usually taken to mean the plotting of a small group of agents to bring about illegal acts in secret.⁴²

What Bröckers is getting at is the difficulty of explaining how complex, coordinated behavior—whether at the level of molecular biology or in human history—can emerge from the unthinking, unplanned interaction of lower-level individual units, be they cells or people. The “conspiratorial” cooperation between RNA and protein to create cells with a nucleus containing DNA is not detectable in the information carried by these building blocks, Bröckers argues, just as complex conspiracies are not necessarily detectable from the actions of the low-level pawns who unwittingly carry out the stratagems of the conspiratorial organization (in contrast to the model of conspiracy evoked by the RICO statutes in which principals can be held responsible for the actions of their agents). “Like any perfect conspiracy,” Bröckers argues about the “conspiracy” of molecules, “we cannot uncover its structure by catching individual Mafiosi and forcing their confession” (24). In this account of what might be termed “conspiracy without conspiring,”⁴³ the central idea of intentionality is stretched to the limit, suggesting an infinite spectrum of complicity, collusion, coordination, and consonance, overturning the traditional notion of a conspiracy theory as the imagination of a tight-knit cabal of nefarious plotters with a clear plan for altering the course of history. Although some parts of Bröckers’s blog conjure up the familiar specter of a cabal of plotters deep within the U.S. government, the assemblage of newspaper reports he brings together also sketches out the multiple, conflicting intersections between al-Qaeda, Pakistan’s Inter-services Intelligence (ISI), the Saudis, the CIA, and the drugs and arms trade. Everyone is at least a double agent in this murky underworld of lying, spying, and shifting allegiances motivated—on the U.S. side at least—by the doctrine (credited to Carl Schmitt) that “my enemy’s enemy is my friend” (194).

On Bröckers’s model, conspirology as a form of heightened paranoid perception is required to discern the links and patterns that might not otherwise be visible through the lens of historical inquiry. For Bröckers, this is vital if, as Wilson puts it, conspiracy is “the completely normal continuation

42. However, it is ultimately unclear whether Bröckers is developing a theory of collusion in contrast to a theory of conspiracy, or expanding the analysis of conspiracy to the extent that he finds intentional plotting everywhere, even at the level of cells. The idea of a reinscription of a humanist understanding of agency and identity with the personifying of conspiracy at the cellular level (in the work of William S. Burroughs) is discussed in Melley, *Empire of Conspiracy*, chap. 3.

43. See Knight, *Conspiracy Culture*, chap. 6.

of our normal business and economic practices for completely normal purposes” (29), especially so in the age of globalization that Bröckers regards as an economic conspiracy-in-the-open. Following the counterculture hero Timothy Leary, Bröckers encourages readers to “Question Authority! Think for Yourself!” (59), with the recipe for success being to “Google Twice Daily” (15). Conspirology, according to Bröckers, requires a permanent skepticism, a profound questioning of all accepted truths, and an ability not to settle for simple explanations but to entertain numerous alternative scenarios simultaneously. In calling for a willingness to embrace chaos-theory-inspired fuzziness rather than clarity, Bröckers admits that the aim of his blog is not to develop a clear picture of what really happened on September 11, 2001, but to challenge the very idea of enlightenment rationality by encouraging a mode of “general uncertainty” (14). (Those hostile to 9/11 conspiracy theories in general and Bröckers’s blog in particular might see this as merely an excuse to give up on the painstaking work of investigative journalism.) Conspirology as virtually the inverse of normal conspiracy thinking becomes for Bröckers, in effect, an anticconspiracy conspiracy, a paradoxical form of inoculation against the fear induced by elite-inspired moral panics against undifferentiated terror or the overly hasty blame of scapegoated enemies.

Having warned against the dangers of traditional scapegoating, complexity-reducing conspiracy theory such as the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, Bröckers has to admit that there have recently been many cases of true conspiracies, such as the Italian Masonic secret society P2. He is also highly attracted to conspiracy theories about the links among the Skull and Bones secret society, the Bush family, and the Nazis, and he takes for granted the idea that the Kennedy assassination was the result of a conspiracy linked to the other political murders of the 1960s. In making a case for rehabilitating conspiracy theory as an indispensable mode of countercultural knowledge in the age of postmodernity, Bröckers self-consciously draws on a strand of American cultural politics typified by the works of Thomas Pynchon, William Burroughs, and Wilson, all of whom had championed in the 1960s and 1970s the idea of a mystical form of conspiracism as a necessary defense against the paranoia of the Cold War national security state and as a route toward a new mode of transcendental enlightenment.⁴⁴ In effect, Bröckers ends up in the

44. It comes as little surprise that, in addition to translating Wilson’s *Everything Is under Control*, Bröckers had previously published a work arguing for the positive value of the cannabis plant and the legalization of hemp, whose prohibition has been a favored conspiracy theory of the counterculture. There is thus a schizophrenic quality to the anti-Americanism of Bröckers’s generation, simultaneously drawn to the 1960s American counterculture as a model of freedom from tradition and convinced that the American government has been taken over by a vast conspiracy.

contradictory position—common to many post-1960s proponents of conspiracy theory—of regarding conspiracy theories as both harmful and beneficial: Our countercultural conspiracy theories are good, but Their demonological conspiracy theories are bad. Bröckers’s blog never resolves this dilemma.

This basic contradiction manifests itself in Bröckers’s 9/11 blog as a permanent struggle between a desire to reflect more abstractly on the larger cognitive structures of conspiracy thinking and an attraction to the specific, potentially explosive details that he and other 9/11 conspiracy researchers have unearthed in their Googling (e.g., the newspaper report that bin Laden was visited by a CIA agent while in the hospital in Dubai just before the September 11 attacks). There is a constant flip-flop between viewing from a skeptical distance the possibility of a vast, military-industrial-intelligence complex conspiracy theory and being sucked in by the intriguing details that emerge: between, in effect, producing theory about conspiracy and producing conspiracy theory. In tone, the blog is half ironic and half serious, particularly at the outset, when Bröckers is merely puzzled rather than angered by what he sees as the media’s complicity in the selling of the official “conspiracy theory” version. The first entry, for example, toys with numerology, suggesting that the events happened under “the sign, as it were, of the Illuminati,” based on the rather forced calculation (as he later admits) that produces the mystical number 23 beloved by Burroughs and Wilson: “ $9 + 11 + 2 + 0 + 0 + 1 = 23$ ” (52). Bröckers goes on to sketch out how a conspiracy theorist might interpret the events, noting (erroneously, as he later recognizes) that the World Trade Center belonged to the Rockefellers (a favorite bugbear of conspiracy theories about the so-called money power), as well as drawing attention to the parallels between the way that, according to countercultural conspiracy lore, Prescott Bush (the current president’s grandfather) aided Hitler and the role that George Bush Sr. played in supporting bin Laden. Although the numerology and Illuminati/Rockefeller/Prescott Bush interpretations are meant half in jest, they serve two contradictory functions. They ironically point up the equally arbitrary and absurd nature (in Bröckers’s eyes) of the official conspiracy-minded explanation, but they also express the sincere conviction that uncanny, symbolic coincidences defying rational explanation cluster around important historical moments. As the novelist Don DeLillo puts it in his account of the Kennedy assassination, “Powerful events breed their network of inconsistencies.”⁴⁵

The blog proceeds by documenting Bröckers’s reactions to, on the one hand, the continuing lack of evidence for the official version and, on the other, the emerging inconsistencies and suggestive details that gesture toward an

45. Don DeLillo, *Libra* (New York: Penguin, 1988), 15.

alternative “conspirology.” He continually sets up implicit comparisons between the official and alternative conspiracy-minded explanations and warns against the dangers of both theories relying on a oversimplified model of cause and effect (he is, however, much less skeptical about the alternative theories than he is about the official version). Instead, the blog builds up an alternative, fragmentary vision of a conspiracy as a decentered network, drawing on Bröckers’s work-in-progress speculations about forms of conspiracy that stretch our normal understanding of intentionality. The blog develops a picture of a conspiracy behind 9/11 that is not confined (in DeLillo’s phrase) to “silent nameless men with unadorned hearts”⁴⁶ but is dispersed through an “axis of influence” (117), a phrase that conjures up an alternative model of international relations to Bush’s notion of an axis of evil. Bröckers also argues that although investigators might uncover the smaller cogs in the machinery of interlocking vested interests that spread out both synchronically and diachronically, they will almost certainly never discover the larger structure, some of which is secret and some of which constitutes an “open” conspiracy. To avoid the “causality trap” (118) of attributing all events to the work of small clusters of intentional agents in a tightly linked chain of cause and effect, Bröckers suggests that the posited conspiracy is more like an open system that operates through dynamic rather than linear causality. A danger of conspiratorial thinking, Bröckers warns, “is to overestimate the causality of the conspirators’ direct and all-encompassing influence and of the linear process of cause-and-effect chains” (115). Causality is instead figured as the product of intersecting, overlapping, and even contradictory vectors of vested interests that might never be consciously articulated in the language of intentionality. Taking his cue from chaos theory (and echoing familiar analyses of the attraction of conspiracy theory as an all-too-human desire to attribute big events to correspondingly big causes rather than to randomness or incompetence), Bröckers argues that in both the natural world and the undercover world “things are not so linear, but much more chaotic and fuzzy than criminalistic logic would like” (115). Although he is amazed at the extent of the “gigantic, oil-fed financial network” (157), with its links back to the taboo subject of “direct and indirect financing of U.S. foreign policy via the illegal drug trade” (163), not to mention the complicated connections he discerns among the Bush family, *Skull and Bones*, the Nazis, the CIA, the ISI, and the bin Laden family, Bröckers insists that 9/11 cannot be explained by a simple conspiracy theory that names and blames a self-contained scapegoated group.

46. *Ibid.*, 440.

Under the model of the emergence of conspiracy without actual spoken-out-loud conspiring, researchers can only hope to uncover the symptomatic patterns of coordination and collusion, not the actual clues of covert, illegal agreement. Given the impossibility of ever fully representing the conspiracy, Bröckers proffers several alternative representational strategies.⁴⁷ The first is taken from quantum mechanics. If, like elemental particles, conspiracies are not detectable in themselves but can be inferred only from the traces they leave, then discerning what is really going on, in Bröckers's view, requires holding a probabilistic notion of historical reality rather than a strictly factual one. Although he raises the traditional conspiracy theorist's question of "Cui bono?" he immediately casts doubt on the two plausible answers he comes up with: "When we put two and two together—US geostrategic interests in the region and the pipeline plans launched in the early 1990s by Unocal and other oil companies—and second, 9/11 and the subsequent war against Afghanistan—are we jumping to conclusions by assuming a direct cause and effect for which there is no hard evidence?" (191). Instead, he offers a list of many plausible scenarios of the supposed conspirators' motives. But without any hard evidence he is forced to concede that each remains a mere statistical possibility; all are concurrently true to a certain degree.

Bröckers's other model for a strategy of representation that does justice to the notion of a decentered, nonlinear conspiracy whose existence can only be imagined rather than known is the uncontrolled and uncoordinated realm of the Internet. Like other utopian new technology gurus inspired by biological theories of emergent behavior, such as bird flocks and the collective "memory" of beehives, Bröckers sees the underlying architecture and social dynamism of the Internet as potentially creating a digital equivalent of the "Global Brain," a "self-organized network of living cells" (25). He hopes that the "decentralized control" of the Internet will produce a form of alternative, anarchic "decentralized 'Internet intelligence'" that in his eyes is a necessary and direct challenge to the CIA's *centralized* intelligence. Although these utopian aspirations for the democratic and decentralized potential of the Internet are somewhat naive

47. In effect, Bröckers unwittingly contributes to a debate about conspiracy theory as an attempt to map the totality of socioeconomic relations. Fredric Jameson dismisses conspiracy theories as "the poor person's cognitive mapping in the postmodern age," a "degraded figure of the total logic of late capital, a desperate attempt to represent the latter's system, whose failure is marked by its slippage into sheer theme and content" ("Cognitive Mapping," in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg [Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988], 356). In contrast, Jodi Dean argues that conspiracy theories now often express a sense of skepticism that there is a coherent big picture ("If Anything Is Possible," in Knight, *Conspiracy Nation*, 85–106).

(and the intelligence failures of 9/11 revealed just how decentralized the CIA had become), Bröckers's blog format is arguably the most interesting thing about his speculations on the events of September 11, 2001. More than the mere fact that the online "Conspiracy Diary" allows him to create an alternative, homegrown take on events that is outside the control of a media conglomerate (a right he shares with conspiracy theorists of all stripes), the blog enables Bröckers to engage in shifting "conspirological" speculations that never solidify into a fixed, easily redacted conspiracy theory. (A less charitable account would see this merely as a license for woolly thinking and insinuation.)

The blog format also allows us to see how an alternative position such as the 9/11 Truth Movement emerged slowly and fitfully out of piecemeal research. The blog proceeds by accumulation, amplification, and repetition rather than by a strict assertion of a specific counterposition or an outright rejection of previous alternative conspiracy scenarios. (This, critics would argue, is also its weakness, in that few speculations are ever discarded, with the result that all manner of incommensurable scenarios are entertained at the same time, with little regard for internal contradiction. Disagreement and lack of resolution are also the hallmark of the conspiracy theories surrounding the Kennedy assassination, but in Bröckers's case contradiction and proliferation of theories are contained in a single work, not a whole subculture.) Like other early 9/11 conspiracy theories, Bröckers's blog rushes in with all manner of rumors to fill up the unconscionably long gap before Bush reluctantly agreed to a commission of inquiry. With the potential to link to the "evidence" that has been poached not from secret sources but from publicly available media (the "loose change" lying around in the culture), the blog's discussion is like a critical commentary on an ever-expanding text. Like the imagined model of a decentered and diffuse Bush/oil/CIA/al-Qaeda conspiracy itself, the concatenations of hyperlinks in the blog proliferate rhizomatically rather than in a clearly identifiable chain of cause and effect. As Bröckers comments, in starting his online "conspiracy diary" he had no idea that it would extend so far: "It was neither desired nor planned that this commentary should extend to a practically never-ending story" (159). In short, the blog is in danger of turning 9/11 conspiracy theory into a process, not a product, a project that leads to an infinite regress of suspicion, creating a perpetually deferred revelation that seems to undermine its overt promise of uncovering *What Is Really Going On*.

Another interesting example of the representation of interconnectedness that hovers somewhere among coincidence, complicity, and conspiracy is Thompson's "Complete 9/11 Timeline," a Web-based collaboratively researched

database of entries culled from the mainstream media.⁴⁸ The entries, brief summaries of relevant news reports with references to the original sources and cross-references to other themes, are grouped in threads such as “Before 9/11,” “Warning Signs: Specific Cases,” and “Day of 9/11.” As of October 2007, there were 3,699 entries. The 9/11 time line is joined on the Cooperative Research Web site by other time lines on similarly controversial topics, such as Hurricane Katrina and President Bush’s environmental record. While recognizing that “9/11 and terrorism generally are flashpoints for what people call ‘conspiracy theory,’” Thompson insists that “this 9/11 investigative project contains no conspiracy theories.”⁴⁹ The entries are indeed neutral in tone, but this has not prevented the time line from becoming a central resource for 9/11 conspiracy theorists. Although the individual entries are comparatively free of bias, the time line offers the building blocks for a conspiracy-minded interpretation that focuses in particular on the issues of forewarning and the complicity of U.S. intelligence agencies. Indeed, the time line has been mined by 9/11 conspiracy theorists for their different accounts. The time line in effect creates a vast—in theory, infinite—pattern of interconnectedness in the events before and after 9/11. Although it is possible to read all 3,699 entries in chronological order, the Web format allows and indeed encourages readers to jump from topic to topic, following a wide variety of narrative routes through the cross-referenced hyperlinks. Particular pathways through the material will doubtless lead some readers to an inside-job conspiracy theory, but others will plot out a story of staggering levels of official incompetence, or will document concatenations of crony capitalism and corrupt international dealings that fall short of a conspiracy in the traditional sense but are nonetheless scary enough in their own right. If there is a conspiracy theory in the time line, it has to be actively constructed by the reader.

Where Bröckers’s blog is noteworthy for its full-blown self-reflexive discussion on the very idea of conspiracy and causality, Thompson’s time line is significant for its lack of commentary. Indeed, it is arguable that the time line provides exactly the kind of collectively developed, Internet-based, “decentralized intelligence” that Bröckers was calling for. It also takes to the extreme the idea of uncovering the purloined letters of clues that are visible yet overlooked in the pages of the mainstream media. In contrast to Bröckers’s blog, which wound down after less than a year, Thompson’s time line is still expanding,

48. There is also a book version: Paul Thompson, *The Terror Timeline: Year by Year, Day by Day, Minute by Minute: A Comprehensive Chronicle of the Road to 9/11* (New York: ReganBooks, 2004).

49. www.cooperativeresearch.org/project.jsp?project=911_project.

with new entries continually adding richer detail to existing themes, bringing the time line up to date, and pushing the starting point for mapping the road to 9/11 even farther back in time. Even if some of its entries are suspect, the time line functions as a strong corrective to the rhetorical construction of 9/11 and the war on terror in official and popular discourse as a bolt from the blue that had no connection with prior geopolitical tensions. Yet in its “unspoken” commentary of hyperlinked juxtaposition, it ends up treating all connections as potentially equal, and without further research readers are always left guessing whether particular entries are genuinely significant or merely coincidental.

The issue of whether there can be a “complete” account is never addressed directly on the “Complete 9/11 Timeline” Web site. I would argue that the Internet’s endless connectivity opens up the possibility of an infinite regress of suspicion, and much contemporary conspiracy thinking is haunted by this idea: Just how many connections and associations are relevant? How far does the plot go? Who else is in the network? How are the nodes of the network connected? The problem has as much to do with strategies of representation as it does with fundamental understandings of responsibility and causality. Several contemporary conceptual artists are working within this problematic, and a cartoonist colleague of Bröckers has created a semispoof pictorial equivalent of mega-conspiracy theory haunting the “Conspiracy Diary.”⁵⁰

Conclusion

As Richard Jackson and Stuart Croft have persuasively argued, the mainstream interpretation of 9/11 and the subsequent call for a war on terror are neither natural nor inevitable but are part of a deliberately constructed discourse and therefore are amenable to revision. Does this mean that the Truth Movement’s conspiracy theory is a valuable form of counterknowledge, a popular and subversive critique of the establishment and official mendacity (as some scholars have argued for other forms of conspiracy culture)?⁵¹ I am not convinced that conspiratorial versions of 9/11 are necessarily the required alternative, not least because they often get hung up on trivial details, and they share many of the same ideological underpinnings about causality, blame, and American exceptionalism that prop up the orthodox account. Indeed, it is arguable that the

50. Gerhard Seyfried, “The Secret Diagrams,” www.seyfried-berlin.de/diagram-1.htm. See also Bureau d’Etudes, “Cartographies,” utangente.free.fr.

51. The case for the subversive potential of conspiracy theory is made, for example, in John Fiske, “Blackstream Knowledge: Genocide,” in *Media Matters: Everyday Culture and Political Change* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 191–216.

mainstream political and popular culture found it so easy to dismiss the anti-war protests mobilized around the “No War for Oil” stance precisely because of the whiff of a conspiracy theory about them, just as early 9/11 conspiracy theories from Europe had been so quickly rejected as mere anti-Americanism.⁵² It was no accident that President Bush preemptively dismissed any alternative interpretation on 9/11 as a conspiracy theory, a familiar rhetorical move that makes any dissenting view seem wildly irrational.

However, I have also been arguing that conspiracy theories should not necessarily be instantly dismissed, as they do not always function in the caricatured way that their critics imagine. Even if they are factually inaccurate, the rhetoric and the form of some 9/11 conspiracy theories—particularly the Web-based time lines and blogs—end up producing models of causation and complicity that undermine the last-ditch humanism and exceptionalism that structure both the traditional conspiratorial outlook and the official version of events. Often the conspiracy accounts of who is working for whom and why become horribly complicated. Despite the conspiracists’ attempts to name and blame a particular source of the imagined plot, often an infinite regress of suspicion opens up, as the location of the ultimate foundation of power is endlessly deferred. In other words, what these conspiracy accounts of 9/11 produce, almost in spite of themselves, is a portrait of power as decentered and dispersed into a vast network of interlocking vested interests within the wider process of globalization, a picture that cannot easily be pinned down to an evil cabal, even if at the surface level it is presented in those traditional terms. In some 9/11 conspiracy theory accounts of the complicated relationships among al-Qaeda, the CIA, and oil corporations, loyalty to a group or a company or a nation or a political stance is only ever temporary, and intentions are always ambiguous. We are a long way from the traditional model of conspiracy theory here.

52. In *Culture, Crisis, and America's War on Terror*, Croft concludes that the mainstream construction of the war on terror has held remarkably firm, despite challenges to it from antiwar and other protesters. In particular, Croft points out that many key points of the discourse were shared by Republicans and Democrats, with the argument revolving around tactics, not fundamental policy differences.

