

Suspicious Minds

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By Sheldon Appleton

The weird world of conspiracies

Several weeks after September 11, Gallup Pakistan reported that nearly half the adult Pakistanis it had interviewed claimed Israel was responsible for the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, four times as many as attributed them to Osama bin Laden. News reports from other Muslim nations suggested this belief was widespread and often accompanied by the assertion that 4,000 Jews had failed to show up for work at the World Trade Center that day.

Never mind that Osama himself had praised the attackers. Never mind the problem of getting notice to 4,000 people without a leak. Never mind that if the attack had been postponed a few days it could have been carried out on the Jewish New Year, when many observant Jews would have been away from work anyway. Never mind the

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obituaries that appeared in *The New York Times* for the many Jews killed in the blast.

None of these mere facts could shake the belief in a Jewish conspiracy—covered up by the United States government, despite the country's loss of thousands of lives and hundreds of billions of dollars.

Even after the release of a videotape showing Osama taking credit for the attacks and gloating over them, Thomas Friedman could write in the *Times* on January 25:

On the way back from Kabul, I passed through Pakistan, the Persian Gulf, London and Belgium, where I had a variety of talks with Arab and Muslim journalists and business people and Muslim community leaders in Europe. All of them were educated, intelligent and thoughtful—and virtually none

of them believed that Osama bin Laden was guilty.

Months later, following the release of another bin Laden video, Gallup still found large minorities in Indonesia, Iran, Kuwait, Lebanon and Pakistan denying that the attack had been carried out by Arabs.

How could intelligent people swallow such obvious fictions? We do not need to go far to learn why—because many Americans have proved willing to buy into theories of conspiracies and governmental coverups that are no less farfetched.

A cursory visit to the internet suggests that such beliefs are as American as apple pie. In the summer preceding September 11, Yahoo.com listed 231 websites devoted to "conspiracy," 59 of them detailing government conspiracies. Alta-Vista.com boasted nearly 350,000 pages. "Conspiracies" involving the

death of one-time Clinton aide Vince Foster alone accounted for more than 20,000 pages.

Borders.com showed 1,000 matches for “conspiracy,” including 239 videos or DVDs. Among the book titles displayed were *Black Helicopters Over America: Strike Force for the New World Order*, and *The Virtual Government: CIA Mind Control Operations in America*.

Not even the world of sports is immune. In the same week last July in which it ran a large ad proclaiming that “The UN takes overall political control of the world on or before August 23, 2001,” *USA Today* published two articles about sports conspiracies. One recalled the charge by a star NBA player that the league was conspiring to allow the opposing team to win a playoff series. The second related accusations that Dale Earnhardt Jr.’s win at the Daytona track where his father had recently been killed while racing had been arranged by the NASCAR authorities. Reporter Erik Brady ventured “We are becoming a nation of Oliver Stones, joylessly searching out conspiracy theories every time a story seems too good to be true.”

No doubt many of these notions are subscribed to by only tiny minorities of Americans. But surveys offer ample evidence that tens of millions inhabit a mental world teeming with conspirators and government coverups. Many conspiracy theories are accepted by clear majorities of adult Americans.

John F. Kennedy’s assassination spawned a virtual industry of conspiracy theorists. Literally thousands of books dealing with the Kennedy assassination have been published and more than a million pages of government documents released as a result of several official investigations.

From the beginning, a majority of Americans doubted the deed had been

the work of Lee Harvey Oswald alone, and, except for a brief period following the issuance of the Warren Commission report, dozens of surveys have shown increasing majorities doubting the official version. By the late 1990s, no more than 10% of Americans credited the lone gunman explanation and, according to CBS surveys, two-thirds to three-quarters concluded that there had been “an official coverup to keep the public from learning the truth.”

In 1969, a year after the killings of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Senator Robert Kennedy, Gallup and Harris surveys noted that 82% thought King’s assassination was the work of a conspiracy, while more than a third felt the same was true in Kennedy’s case. Over the next 20 years eight more surveys showed no more than a fourth believing King had been felled by James Earl Ray alone, while the portion doubting that Sirhan Sirhan alone had murdered Kennedy grew to a 55% majority.

Substantial minorities—from a fifth to more than a third—also insisted

that society was controlled by mostly Jewish international bankers and atheistic Communists.

Coughlin accused President Franklin D. Roosevelt of being anti-God and a liar and betrayer. He also believed Roosevelt himself to be a Jew. In his 1996 book *Radio Priest*, Donald Warren calculated from Gallup polls that by 1938 Coughlin reached an audience of about 16 million. Close to half of these listeners—10 to 13% of the total Gallup sample—expressed approval of his broadcasts.

Many other conspiracy theories appeared in the years that followed, some of them reflecting the simple questioning of government leaders fostered by our country’s founding ideology, others more bizarre:

- At the close of World War II in 1945, 69% of Americans refused to believe that Adolf Hitler was dead. Even two years after Germany’s defeat, 45% told Gallup interviewers that—despite

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conspiracies were involved in the attempts on Governor George Wallace of Alabama in 1972, President Gerald Ford—twice—in 1975, and President Ronald Reagan in 1981.

The fascination with conspiracy theories is not a recent phenomenon. As far back as the beginnings of modern survey research in the 1930s, Father Charles Coughlin propagated extensive conspiracy theories on the radio. Until silenced by Vatican and public pressure after the outbreak of World War II, Coughlin repeatedly claimed that American so-

official assurances to the contrary—they thought Hitler was still alive. And, of course, many denied, and continue to deny, that the Holocaust had occurred. As late as 1994, 6% of a Gallup sample—perhaps 10 to 12 million Americans—expressed this view.

- Of the 78% of Americans who said in 1950 that they had heard of Senator Joseph McCarthy’s accusations that Communists had infiltrated the US State Department, 40% believed them.

- Despite Ronald Reagan’s popularity, 69% of Gallup respondents in

1986-87 felt his administration had covered up the Iran-Contra affair, and majorities believed Reagan himself had lied to the public about it. A 45% plurality doubted Vice President George Bush's insistence that he had been "out of the loop."

- In 1995 and again in 1999, 6% of a Gallup sample—close to 12 million Americans—insisted that the US government had faked the moon landings. Another 5 to 11% were unsure.

- As early as 1994, a majority of Americans agreed that President Bill Clinton was engaged in a coverup of his and his wife's dealings in the Whitewater affair. By 1997, they believed this by an almost three-to-one margin. When the Monica Lewinsky scandal broke, a slender majority immediately asserted that Clinton was covering up information about it. But even after Clinton admitted he had lied, Hillary Clinton's accusation of a "vast right-wing conspiracy" against him was accepted by 44% of a Gallup sample.

- Gallup surveys taken in 1996 and 1997 revealed that almost a third of Americans believed a spacecraft from another planet had crashed in Roswell, New Mexico, in 1947. Only 25% accepted the government's denials. Similarly, 48% believed UFOs were real—12% professed to have seen them—and 71% said the government was covering up information about them.

- Only 44% in 1997 and 56% in 1999 bought the finding of government investigators that the crash of TWA Flight 800 was the result of mechanical failure. More than a fourth insisted the plane had been felled by a US Navy missile.

- And in January 2002, even with trust in government apparently surging and President George W. Bush's approval

rating soaring at 82%, a CBS News/*New York Times* poll showed two-thirds of Americans saying the Bush administration was hiding something or lying about its dealings with Enron executives prior to the company's bankruptcy.

Why are so many Americans ready to accept conspiracy theories—sometimes even outlandish ones? First and most obviously, there *are* real conspiracies, and government officials clearly *have* engaged in coverups and, at times, in some pretty outlandish behavior. The stranger-than-fiction September 11 tragedy *was* the work of an insidious international conspiracy. The Johnson White House tapes published in Michael Bechloss' *Taking Charge* reveal that Lyndon Johnson himself immediately suspected President Kennedy's assassination *was* part of a conspiracy and "might be the forerunner of a surprise, Pearl Harbor style attack by the Soviet Union against the United States."

The lies told during the Vietnam War, Watergate, and the Iran-Contra episode *were* all too real, as were Bill Clinton's assurances that he hadn't had a sexual relationship with "that woman," Monica Lewinsky. Why shouldn't the public doubt the words of a government which has often tried to mislead it? How are we to tell when our public officials are really telling us the truth?

Furthermore, belief in a conspiracy might help us avoid the discomfort of confronting the fact that, for instance, some of our co-religionists have been driven by their faith to commit despicable acts, such as the September 11 attacks.

Personal failures, too, may predispose people to embrace conspiracy theories. Donald Warren notes that during the Great Depression Father Coughlin's "radical right-wing conspiracy theories appealed to many average, middle-class citizens. These victims of economic catastrophe needed to blame someone—some group or malevolent cabal—for destroying their chance to achieve the American dream."

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Sixty years later, Joel Dyer in his book, *Harvest of Rage*, about the movement that spawned the Oklahoma City bombing, wrote,

The conspiracy theories being spun by today's anti-government movement are... designed to explain rural America's ongoing slide toward a 'Third World' existence.... [They] ease the pain of those who place their faith in the theories, allowing them to scapegoat the government for their problems.

Indeed, demographic breakdowns of the surveys cited consistently reveal that people with lower income and educational levels are more receptive to conspiracy theories. And those who endorse conspiracy theories in one case are more willing to accept them in other cases as well.

In addition, as any survey researcher can testify, most people do not have a good grasp on the laws of probability. They fail to appreciate how extraordinary events can occur as a result of chance factors. And Ameri-

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negative references, this view also appeared to be affected by the United States' response to the attacks in the week of October 3 to 9. As shown in Figure 3 on page 13, the percentages of references to the moral component of world opinion were fairly consistent over time during the study; at no time did they include a majority of the citations, instead varying between 33 and 47% of the references to world opinion.

By contrast, the pragmatic component was more evident in the first three weeks of the crisis, appearing in a majority of cases in two out of the three weeks. This pattern shifted sharply after October 3, when the percentage of pragmatic citations dropped below that of the moral citations. As with the positive references to the United States, the pattern recovered somewhat in the week of October 17, only to converge in the final week of the study.

It seems reasonable that the pattern of positive references to the United States and that of citations of the pragmatic component should appear so similar. Other nations could find common cause and a common interest with our country while the United States was viewed as a victim of these attacks; all countries could identify with the threat such actions pose to world order. Once the United States took aggressive action in

response, though, certain newspapers perceived that world opinion no longer reflected internationally shared interests, and instead focused upon the implications of seemingly unilateral action by our nation and Great Britain.

The changes in the foreign press' perceptions of world opinion over time do not appear to have been lost on the Bush administration. Early in October, prompted in part by the British, the administration released partial evidence linking Osama bin Laden to the attacks on the United States and providing the basis for their suspicion that Afghanistan was harboring him. This effort continued past the dates included in this study, with the release of videotapes of bin Laden discussing the attacks and rejoicing over the resultant loss of life.

Given the apparent importance of events to media perspectives on world opinion, it remains the province of future research to test whether this new evidence affected opinion toward the United States' actions in a more positive direction.

It is natural for citizens to react to a trauma like the attacks on September 11 by feeling under siege from a hostile world. It is also natural to seek to divide the world into our allies and our enemies, into those for us and those against us. The preceding analy-

sis suggests that these reactions, though natural, oversimplify the way other nations view the world's intentions towards the United States.

World opinion about this country, or on any subject for that matter, is an ongoing process that may potentially affect our international image and shift it in response to events. An international consensus might arise through a negotiation among the different perspectives on world opinion; the evidence here suggests, however, that such a consensus eluded American efforts, at least through October 31, 2001.

Assessing international attitudes toward the United States is a far more complex matter than merely asking whether the world "hates us." In the foreign press, "the world" is not seen as a place necessarily friendly or hostile to the United States. Rather, other nations' newspapers picture something akin to McLuhan's "global village," where sentiments must be courted and won to one's side through consistent effort. ●

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cans tend to believe in agency more than in luck. Close to three-fifths repeatedly disagreed with a Pew item asserting that "success in life is pretty much determined by forces outside our control." When spectacular developments occur, people tend to believe they were caused by powerful groups or forces.

Interpreting a survey taken within a week of the assassination of President Kennedy, Paul Sheatsley and Jacob Feldman remarked,

It is hard for most people to understand the psychic processes of a mentally ill person who seemingly acts at random; it is much easier to ascribe the event to an organized conspiracy with a conscious goal. Moreover, the conclusion that mentally ill people not responsible for their behavior are at large among us... is both bizarre and threatening. Presumption of some sort of conspiracy removes some of the caprice from the situation and thus provides a less threatening inter-

pretation, especially if one does not really take it too seriously.

Americans' readiness to believe in conspiracies and government coverups has consequences as well as causes. It is part of a vicious circle that both fosters and is nourished by the feelings of distrust and disengagement from civic life. In extreme cases, it can motivate destructive anti-social acts. It stokes a suspicion of government which contributes to keeping those most in need of assistance alienated from the public institutions which might be able to help them. ●