

8

CONSPIRACIES: WAITING FOR “THE MAN”

“Conspiracism serves the needs of diverse political and social groups in America and elsewhere. It identifies elites, blames them for economic and social catastrophes, and assumes that things will be better once popular action can remove them from positions of power.”

—Frank P. Mintz, *The Liberty Lobby and the American Right*, 1985

“Conspiracism assigns tiny cabals of evildoers a superhuman power to control events [and] uses demonization to justify constructing the scapegoats as wholly evil while reconstructing the scapegoater as a hero.”

—Political Research Associates, *Public Eye*

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN UNDERDOGMA RUNS amok, when those who hold positions of power are reflexively distrusted, feared, and ascribed almost supernatural abilities, when the world's problems are blamed on groups of elite and powerful overdogs who are bent on pulling the world's strings? Conspiracies abound, as do conspiracy theorists.

“More than a third [of Americans] believe in a broad smorgasbord of conspiracy theories including the [9/11] attacks, international plots to rig oil prices, the plot to assassinate President John F. Kennedy in 1963 and the government’s knowledge of intelligent life from other worlds.”

—Scripps Howard News Service/Ohio
University poll, November 23, 2007

Conspiracy theorists view themselves as the underdogs; the good and noble champions of the little guy who have the courage to stand up to The Man. The University of East Anglia study “Critical Thinking about Conspiracy Theories” found that conspiracy theorists tend to “canonize” the victims of conspiracies (championing of the underdog) while “demonizing” the all-powerful conspirators (scorn for the overdog) and granting them “remarkable powers and properties, their wickedness clearly magnified.”¹

Which sounds a lot like Underdogma.

I asked Dr. Patrick Leman of Oxford and Cambridge, a researcher on the psychology of conspiracy theorists, if he knew of any conspiracies that did not feature a powerful overdog person or institution at the top, pulling the strings. “No,” he replied, “all are powerful.”

Big, powerful overdogs are essential to conspiracy theories. The Illuminati: a secret society that controls world events by controlling world governments. The Bilderberg Group: a powerful group working to build a “One-World Empire.” Freemasons: bent on world domination since

¹“Critical Thinking about Conspiracy Theories,” Jerry Goodenough, University of East Anglia

the 1600s. The New World Order: a secretive and powerful global elite that conspires to rule the world. And, when conspiracy theorists fail to find big, powerful overdogs manipulating world events, they invent them, as Jerry Goodenough of the University of East Anglia wrote, by “*exaggerating the power and nature of organizations.*”²

One of the organizations whose power is often exaggerated by conspiracy theorists is the government: the all-seeing eye of Big Brother. Never mind the fact that Big Brother had a hard time keeping his all-seeing eye on tuberculosis carrier Andrew Speaker in 2007, in what was called “‘an across-the-board meltdown’ in border safeguards.”³ Mr. Speaker managed to pass through numerous airport security checkpoints and fly from the United States to Europe and back—and cross the Canada/U.S. land border “despite a lookout alert issued to all border posts”⁴—all without being detected by Big Brother’s all-seeing eyes. Government conspiracy theorists must also avert their eyes from the fact that twenty-three-year-old terrorist Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab—whose own father put him on a “US watchlist of terror suspects”⁵—almost blew up a passenger jet over Detroit on Christmas Day 2009 after he “walked through airport security with explosives hidden on his body,”⁶ unseen by Big Brother’s big eyes. Despite all the evidence that Big Brother is either incompetent or that

² Ibid

³ “TB Patient: No One Said I couldn’t Travel,” CBS News, June 6, 2007

⁴ Ibid

⁵ “Detroit Terror Attack: US Admits It Failed Over Terror Plot,” *Telegraph UK*, December 28, 2009

⁶ “Lonely Bomber Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab’s Religious Angst Posted Online,” *The Australian*, December 30, 2009

his all-seeing eye is blind, or both, millions of Underdogmatists continue to look at the government and think “Big Brother conspiracy”—from the belief that President Roosevelt had foreknowledge of the Pearl Harbor attack to the UFO “cover-up” at Roswell to the assassination of JFK to the moon landing “hoax” to the belief that the CIA manufactured AIDS and released it into the black community.

When Barack Obama’s preacher Jeremiah Wright said, “the government lied about inventing the HIV virus as a means of genocide against people of color,”⁷ he was preaching to a rather large choir. A 2005 study from Oregon State University and the nonprofit think tank Rand Corp. found that “a significant proportion of African Americans embrace the theory that government scientists created the disease to control or wipe out their communities,” “nearly half” believed HIV was man-made, and a “majority said they believe that a cure for AIDS is being withheld from the poor.”⁸ I asked conspiracy researcher Dr. Patrick Leman about this phenomenon. His reply went straight to the heart of Underdogma and conspiracy theories when he spoke about the plight of the power have-nots in relation to big, powerful overdog conspirators.

A NOTE FROM DR. PATRICK LEMAN
(OXFORD AND CAMBRIDGE)

The term [conspiracy] has almost been appropriated to commonly refer to nefarious activity by big, powerful or-

⁷ “Obama’s Pastor’s Sermon: ‘God Damn America,’” FoxNews.com, March 14, 2008

⁸ “Study: Many Blacks Cite AIDS Conspiracy,” *Washington Post*, January 25, 2005

rganisations. Psychologically, beliefs in conspiracy theories have an awful lot to do with power (or a sense of powerlessness). In terms of raw data, minority groups in the US show higher levels of belief in conspiracy theories ... I did just collect some data showing the same ethnic pattern in [the] UK. But, in the same study, I also found that beliefs were highest amongst those who rated their own income as below average—it was quite striking to find this strong link to the idea of power and being marginalised from decision-makers in society. One straightforward explanation is that, if you are not part of the decision-making process, you will always be left wondering what is going on inside the group.

Among those “left wondering what is going on inside the group” are conspiracy theorists known as the “9/11 Truthers,” who believe that 9/11 was an “inside job.” The “9/11 Truth” movement aims to spread the “truth” about what happened on September 11, 2001. What “truth”? An “awakening to the fraudulence of the ‘official 9/11 story,’”⁹ praise for the “heroes and heroines who have courageously faced that truth,”¹⁰ (underdogs) and scorn for the U.S. government (overdogs), which used 9/11 to obtain “irresistible political power to increase inequality, repression [and] corporate domination.”¹¹

Praise for the underdog heroes, scorn for the power-hungry overdogs. It sounds a lot like Underdogma.

Are these “Truthers” relegated to the outer fringes of public discourse? Perhaps at first they were. But lately their ideas have begun to seep into mainstream culture. In 2006, “more than a third of the American public

⁹ 911truth.org

¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹ Ibid

suspect[ed] that federal officials assisted in the 9/11 terrorist attacks or took no action to stop them.”¹² A year later, nearly *two-thirds* of Americans believed the U.S. government had “specific warnings of the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on New York and Washington, but chose to ignore those warnings.”¹³

The purpose of this book is not to disavow Truthers of their (actual) beliefs that the U.S. government somehow staged the 9/11 hijackings, intercepted the hijacked aircraft, removed all passengers, transferred them to new planes, impersonated their voices in fake phone calls back to their families, then flew them to their deaths in the Atlantic Ocean while taking the original planes and flying those, via remote-control, into their targets where the government had, over the previous months, tunneled through the interior walls of the World Trade Center buildings—without any of the office workers noticing—and planted thousands of pounds of explosives so they could be detonated to bring the Twin Towers down (which, if true, would make the whole airplane hijacking plot a bit unnecessary).

For those who accept the above theories as true (and they are actual beliefs held by 9/11 conspiracy theorists), there is no factual argument that can disavow them of their beliefs. Truthers already have all the evidence and facts they need to disavow themselves of such nonsensical beliefs right now, and yet they still believe these convoluted conspiracies anyway. Just for fun, here is another

¹² “Third of Americans Suspect 9-11 Government Conspiracy,” Thomas Hargrove, Scripps Howard News Service, August 2, 2006

¹³ Ibid

bit of truth for the Truthers to ignore. As someone who has spent more than a decade as a “government insider”—including time spent in the White House one month before the attacks of 9/11—I can tell you (not the Truthers, because they will never believe a word of it) that there is no possible way that government could have planned or executed a 9/11 “inside job.” Why? Because the truth is that the government, and those who work in government, frankly lack the talent and creativity to come up with such a dastardly plan, and they especially lack the institutional competence to execute such a plan—perfectly and consistently, over long stretches of time, with not a single person involved leaking a word of it to anyone, ever. Then, these thousands of government conspirators would have to decide, independently of each other, that the biggest story of our time (which would have been damaging to George W. Bush) should be the one and only damaging story about George W. Bush that nobody ever leaked to anyone in the media. Then, the Obama administration (with “Green Jobs Czar” Van Jones on staff, who “signed a 2004 petition supporting the so-called ‘9/11 Truther’ movement”¹⁴) would have to independently decide to join this conspiracy—an act that would destroy the Democratic Party’s entire base of political support—in order to protect the reputation of George W. Bush, when barely a day went by in the first year of the Obama administration

Uncover the truth in Underdogma’s CONSPIRACY THREAD at www.under-dogma.com.

¹⁴“Van Jones to Glenn Beck: ‘I love you, brother,’” *Washington Examiner*, February 27, 2010

when it did not publicly scorn George W. Bush. As Richard A. Clarke, antiterrorism advisor to four consecutive U.S. Presidents, said, “anyone who’s ever worked in government will tell you two things: that the government doesn’t have the competence to do a large-scale conspiracy like this and, number two, it can’t maintain secrecy. There’s almost nothing that I know of, in thirty years of having top-secret clearances, that hasn’t come out in the *Washington Post* and *The New York Times*.”¹⁵

“And what are the chances that an operation of such size—it would surely have involved hundreds of military and civilian personnel—could be carried out without a single leak? Without leaving behind a single piece of evidence hard enough to stand up to scrutiny in a court? People, the feds just aren’t that slick. Nobody is.”

—“Why the 9/11 Conspiracy Theories Won’t Go Away,” *Time* magazine, September 3, 2006

But, as we have already discovered, truth and facts matter little to 9/11 Truthers (or to Underdogmatists). If truth and facts mattered to conspiracists, they would look at the examples of Big Brother failing to catch people on government watch lists as they passed through some of the world’s most heavily monitored government checkpoints (airports) while carrying potentially deadly diseases and explosives. If truth or facts mattered, conspiracists would recall their own personal experiences with government incompetence and quickly realize that there is no way that the same government behind the DMV and the United States Postal Service

¹⁵“The Conspiracy Files,” Richard A. Clarke, BBC, July 6, 2008

could pull off something like 9/11. Conspiracy theorists have an answer for that, too, with their impossible-to-reason-with argument that Big Brother government only *pretends* to be incompetent so that it can pull off government conspiracies without anyone suspecting the government. As the University of East Anglia study on conspiracy theories observed, “the more extreme conspiracy theories may argue that such organisations are only pretending to be inefficient, in order to fool the public about the true level of their efficiency. Such a position is, as [Karl] Popper would no doubt have pointed out, not open to refutation.”¹⁶

This is why Underdogma helps us to better understand conspiracy theorists in general, and 9/11 Truthers in particular. Because Underdogma is a reflexive belief system, tied to power imbalances, which has the power to override truth, facts, and rational thought. Which is an apt description of the psychological profile of conspiracy theorists—and of Underdogmatists.

Why 9/11? What is it about the 9/11 attacks in particular that leads “hundreds of millions of people around the world [to] become convinced that the perpetrators of this monumental evil were not al-Qaeda terrorists, but elements within the U.S. government”?¹⁷ I corresponded with *National Post* Managing Editor Jonathan Kay, who “embedded” himself in the 9/11 “Truther” movement for his book *Among the Truthers*. Kay observed that the American character itself, which is built on the narrative of an underdog revolution against powerful government forces,

¹⁶ “Critical Thinking about Conspiracy Theories,” Jerry Goodenough, University of East Anglia

¹⁷ “Among The Truthers” website, Amongthetruthers.com, Jonathan Kay

makes Americans more naturally distrustful of powerful governments and therefore more susceptible to believing in government conspiracies.

“There’s a great tradition within America of ordinary, courageous heroes, rising up and speaking truth to power against the elites who control society—whether they’re British, or whether they’re Masons or whether they’re bankers.”

—“The Unofficial Story,” CBC Television,
December 1, 2009

In his book *Empire of Conspiracy*, Timothy Melley finds further evidence that a part of the American character—tied to Underdogma’s “Axis of Power”—makes Americans more susceptible to conspiracy theories. In his exploration of conspiracy theories, “Melley proposes that conspiracy thinking arises from a combination of two factors, when someone: 1) holds strong individualist values and 2) lacks a sense of control [aka power].”¹⁸ No one holds stronger individualist values than Americans, with a Dutch study finding that “the United States ranks highest in individualism.”¹⁹ As Tony Robbins said in his interview for *Underdogma*, “self-esteem comes, to a great extent, from feeling like you have power over events, versus events and/or people have power over you.”²⁰ Therefore, when something happens that causes strongly individualistic Americans to feel a profound lack of control (power)—like the 9/11 attacks—all the necessary elements are in place for a descent into conspiracism.

¹⁸ “Paranoia, 9/11, and the Roots of Conspiracy Theories,” *Psychology Today*, September 11, 2008

¹⁹ MY SA News, November 28, 2008

²⁰ Tony Robbins, interview for *Underdogma*, April 6, 2010

“When fervent individualists feel that they cannot exercise their independence, they experience a crisis and assume that larger forces are to blame for usurping this freedom.”

—“Paranoia, 9/11, and the Roots of Conspiracy Theories,” *Psychology Today*, September 11, 2008

What is so bad about being distrustful of government power? After all, America was founded on a rebellion against government power. It feels good to raise a fist against Big Brother. Maybe these conspiracists are on to something. Is it such a leap of faith to think that Big Brother might be up to no good? As *Time* magazine observed, “there’s something empowering about just exploring such questions...you feel as if you are participating in the great American tradition of self-reliance and nonconformist, antiauthoritarian dissent. You’re fighting the power.”²¹

Which sounds a lot like Underdogma.

If a small group holds fringe beliefs, why should we be concerned? Because this “small group” is no longer small. According to a Scripps-Howard poll, “36% of Americans consider it ‘very likely’ or ‘somewhat likely’ that government officials either allowed the attacks to be carried out or carried out the attacks themselves. Thirty-six percent adds up to a lot of people. That is not a fringe phenomenon. It is a mainstream political reality.”²² In hard numbers, 36% of Americans equals 109 million people. That means the constituency that believes that 9/11 was an “inside job”

²¹ “Why the 9/11 Conspiracy Theories Won’t Go Away,” *Time* magazine, September 3, 2006

²² “Why the 9/11 Conspiracy Theories Won’t Go Away,” *Time* magazine, September 3, 2006

is almost double the constituencies that voted for either Presidential candidate in 2008:

JOHN MCCAIN: 59 million supporters

BARACK OBAMA: 69 million supporters

9/11 WAS AN “INSIDE JOB”: 109 million supporters

Underdogma has consequences. When America’s reflexive affinity for the underdog and scorn for those who hold power is swept up in a national identity of individualism and rebellion against power, Americans put themselves at risk of getting swept away and abandoning their rational minds—as 36% of Americans have already done. By turning against their own country this way, conspiracy-minded Americans show America’s enemies and attackers that they were right: it would only take nineteen men with boxcutters to strike the first blow. America would finish the rest of the job itself.

And, if you think America’s enemies do not understand this dynamic, see Chapter 13—OUR ENEMIES DO NOT PRACTICE UNDERDOGMA.

But, before you read Chapter 13, would you be interested in buying a new car (Cadillac or Toyota)? Or perhaps a bottle of cola (Coke or Pepsi)? Or a pair of running shoes (Nike or its anti-branded shoe Blackspot)? The way you answer these questions has a lot more to do with Underdogma than you may think, as revealed in the next chapter: Chapter 9—SELLING UNDERDOGMA.