

9/11 Conspiracy Theories

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Abstract (summary)

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The weekend conference is the Chicago meeting for 911truth.org, one of the most visible organizations within a larger coalition known as the "9/11 Truth Movement," and most of the crowd in the meeting believes that the US government planned and orchestrated the terrorist attacks of Sep 11, 2001. Mole discusses the 9/11 conspiracy theories.

Full Text

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Headnote

The 9/11 Truth Movement in Perspective

AT THE HYATT REGENCY O'HARE NEAR Chicago, a crowd of approximately 400 people has gathered on a pleasant summer evening. Some are old and some are young; some are dressed in colorful tie-died shirts while others wear dress shirts and slacks, but most seem cheerful and friendly. We are all waiting for the opening of the main lecture hall for the evening's event, the first of many scheduled talks during a weekend-long conference. We hide some time by looking at the items for sale: DVD copies of Michael Moore's Fahrenheit 9/11, the anti-Karl Rove documentary Bush's Brain, and the more recent Walmart: The High Cost of Low Price.

There is nothing especially unusual here, since all of these are available at the Borders or Best Buy near you. But then as the doors to the main hall are about to open, one anxious attendee tries to start a chant of "9/11 was an Inside Job." A few people join in before another attendee tells him, quite emphatically, "we already know!" The weekend conference is the Chicago meeting for 911truth.org, one of the most visible organizations within a larger coalition known as the "9/11 Truth Movement," and most of the crowd believes that the United States government planned and orchestrated the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001.

The statement "we already know!" well summarizes the attitude of the conference attendees toward the material presented during the lectures. Many at the conference do not seem to be looking for new information that might lead to more accurate perspectives about the events of 9/11. A fellow sitting near me admits, "We already know this stuff; we're here to reconfirm what

we already know." The conference is a way for attendees to consolidate their group identity, and try to bring their message to those people at home and abroad who believe the "official story" of 9/11. As someone who does not share the views of the 9/11 Truth Movement, I have another objective. I want to listen to their arguments and view their evidence, and understand the reasons why so many likeable and otherwise intelligent people are convinced that the United States government planned the murder of nearly 3,000 of its own citizens.

The Collapse of World Trade Center Buildings 1 and 2

When most of us recall the events of 9/11, we think of the image of those two seemingly indestructible World Trade Center towers crumbling to the ground. Not surprisingly, their collapse is also a central issue for the 9/11 Truth Movement. An overwhelming amount of the organization's talks and publicity materials address the fall of Buildings 1 and 2. But as these materials show, 911truth.org does not believe the official story that the primary damage to the WTC occurred when two airplanes hijacked by terrorists crashed into the towers. Rather, they maintain that the towers fell due to a controlled demolition, planned in advance by the United States government.

Why do they think this? A primary reason seems to be that the collapse of the towers looks like the result of a controlled demolition. Since there is no structural resistance to gravity in a controlled demolition, the building collapses straight into its own footprint, with each floor "pancaking" onto the floors below at or near the speed of a free fall. Many of the presenters at the Hyatt Conference compared videos of the collapse of the towers with videos of known controlled demolitions, noting the similarity in both the appearance and speed of collapse. 911truth.org maintains that if actually hit by an airplane, the steel structure of the WTC buildings should have provided at least some resistance to the weight of the floors above, causing the falling structure to pitch over to one side rather than pancake straight down. They further argue that fires caused by burning jet fuel from the crashed planes could not have caused the collapse, since jet fuel burns at a temperature of no more than 1500° Fahrenheit,¹ while a temperature of approximately 2800° is needed to melt steel. David Heller makes the point in a widely read article:

The official story maintains that fires weakened the buildings. Jet fuel supposedly burned so hot it began to melt the steel columns supporting the towers. But steel-framed skyscrapers have never collapsed from fire, since they're built from steel that doesn't melt below 2750° Fahrenheit. No fuel, not even jet fuel, which is really just refined kerosene, will burn hotter than 1500° Fahrenheit.²

Since burning jet fuel is not hot enough by itself to melt steel, reports that melted steel was observed at Ground Zero suggest to **conspiracy** theorists that some other incendiary substance must have been introduced.

Finally, many of the leaders of the movement claim that demolition "squibs" can be seen in videos of the WTC collapse just before and during the time the towers began to fall. In professional demolition lingo, a "squib" is an explosive device used to weaken building structure during a controlled demolition. Several presenters at the conference pointed out small bursts of debris spraying out horizontally from the towers during collapse, and identified these as "squibs" secretly detonated to fell the buildings.

What can we make of these allegations? First, let's examine the similarity in appearance between the collapse of the World Trade Center towers and the collapse of buildings destroyed through planned demolitions. In controlled demolitions, detonating devices weaken or disrupt all major support points in a building at the same time. Therefore, once the collapse begins, all parts of the building are simultaneously in motion, free-falling to the ground. However, this is definitely not what happens during the collapse of WTC Buildings 1 and 2. Carefully review footage of the collapses, and you will find that the parts of the buildings above the plane impact points begin falling first, while the lower parts of the buildings are initially stationary.³ The parts of the towers below the impact point do not begin to fall until the higher floors have collapsed onto them. This is not what we would expect if the towers collapsed from a controlled demolition, but it is exactly what we would expect if the building collapse resulted from damage sustained by the impact of the planes and subsequent fire damage. A **conspiracy** theorist may counter that the buildings were rigged to begin falling from the top down, but what are the chances that those planning such a complicated demolition would be able to predict the exact location the planes would impact the towers, and prepare the towers to begin falling precisely there?

Additionally, footage of the collapse of the South Tower, or Building 2 reveals that the tower did not fall straight down, as the North Tower and buildings leveled by controlled demolitions typically fall. Instead, the tower tilted toward the direction of the impact point, and then began to pancake downward with the top part of the building tilted at an angle. The difference between the two collapses can be explained by the different way each airplane struck the buildings. The first plane struck the North Tower (Building 1) between the 94th to 98th floors and hit it head on, burrowing almost directly toward the core of the building. The second airplane struck the South Tower between the 78th and 84th floors, but sliced in at an angle, severely damaging the entire northeast corner of the building.⁴ Compared with the North Tower, the South Tower sustained

damage that was both less evenly distributed and significantly lower on the building's frame, requiring the weakened point to support more upper building weight than the corresponding crash site on the North Tower. This explains both the tilt of the building as it fell toward the weakened corner, and the fact that the South Tower fell first despite being struck after the North Tower was struck. Again, this scenario makes good sense if the buildings fell due to damage inflicted by the plane crashes, but makes very little sense if the buildings fell due to a planned demolition.

The 9/11 Truth Movement often states or implies that steel would have needed to melt in order for the structure to collapse at the speed of a free-fall. While there are varying assessments of the temperature of the fire at WTC, most agree that the temperature probably reached 1,000° Fahrenheit and possibly higher than 1,800° F. Flames of this temperature would be far short of the approximately 2800° F needed to melt steel, but they would have been sufficient to severely reduce the structural integrity of the metal. Best engineering estimates tell us that steel loses 50% of its strength at 650° C, (1,200°F) and can lose as much as 90% of its strength at temperatures of 1,800°F.⁵ Even if we assume temperatures of no higher than 1,000° F during the fire, we would still have more than enough reasons to expect damage severe enough to result in eventual collapse.

The unique structure of the WTC towers exaggerated the problems caused by the weakened steel. The towers had a lightweight "perimeter tube" design consisting of 244 exterior columns of 36cm square steel on 100 cm centers, with 95% of the structure's interior consisting of nothing but air (see top right).⁶ Within this perimeter tube design there was a 27m by 40m core, designed to provide additional support to the tower. Steel trusses, or joists, connected the outer beams to the core at each story, and provided much of the overall support to the weight of each floor. The impact and explosion of the airplane crashes probably knocked off most of the insulating material intended to fireproof the steel beams, considerably increasing their vulnerability to flames. The heat of the flames reduced the steel to a fraction of its initial strength, while also causing the steel trusses to expand at each end until they no longer supported the weight of the building's floors, triggering the collapse. The expansion and warping of the steel would have been particularly significant due to temperature differences within the burning structure.⁷ Thus, the trusses went limp much like a slackened laundry line, providing little or no resistance to the weight of the floors overhead.

What about the "melted steel" that 9/11 conspiracy theorists claim was at Ground Zero? Dr. Steven Jones' popular article cites several anecdotal sources speaking about flowing or pooled

samples of melted steel found at Ground Zero.⁸ However, the sources in question are informal observations of "steel" at Ground Zero, not laboratory results.⁹ To many people, any grayish metal looks sufficiently like steel to call it "steel" when speaking informally. To actually establish that the substance in question is steel, we need analytical laboratory results using atomic absorption (AA) or another suitable test. It seems far more likely that the metal seen by the contractors was aluminum, a component of the WTC structural material that melts at a much lower temperature than steel and can look superficially similar to it. As for the "squibs" conspiracy theorists claim to see in videos of the WTC collapse, these are plumes of smoke and debris ejected from the building due to the immense pressure associated with millions of tons of falling towers (see Figure 1). Videos of the WTC collapse show that these plumes do not begin until after the towers begin falling and increase in intensity as the collapse continues-this is not the scenario one would expect if the plumes were actually explosives used to cause the buildings to fall.

The Collapse of WTC Building 7

"Not so fast," the 9/11 Truth Movement might say. How do you explain the collapse of WTC Building 7, which was not struck by an airplane? Many 9/11 conspiracy theorists maintain that the collapse of this building at about 5:20 PM on 9/11 would not have occurred unless it was already prepared for demolition. The conspiracy theorists assume that damage sustained by WTC 7 during the attack was not sufficient to trigger its collapse. The site wtc7.net claims that "fires were observed in Building 7 prior to its collapse, but they were isolated in small parts of the building, and were puny by comparison to other building fires." They further claim that any damage from falling debris from WTC 1 and WTC 2 would have needed to be symmetrical to trigger the pancaking collapse of WTC 7.¹⁰

These arguments only reveal the assumptions of their authors. First, the fires burning in WTC 7 were extremely extensive, as Figure 3 shows. The reason this is not obvious from 9/11 Truth Movement presentations and documentaries is that they tend to only show the north side of WTC 7, selectively causing the building to appear both far less ravaged by fire and structural damage than it actually was (see Figure 4).

Firefighter Richard Banaciski notes the difference in appearance between the north and south sides of the building in his first-person account:

We were told to go to Greenwich and Vesey and see what's going on. So we go there and on the north and east side of 7 it didn't look like there was any damage at all, but then you looked on the south side of 7 there had to be a hole 20 stories tall in the building, with fire on several floors.¹¹

Emergency response workers at Ground Zero realized that extensive damage to the lower south section of WTC 7 would cause collapse as early as 3 PM on 9/11, a fact reported on news broadcasts at the time.¹² Video footage shows that when collapse occurred, the south wall of the building gave in first, which is exactly what we would expect based on the location of the most extensive damage. As noted for the collapse of the South Tower, the mechanics of the building's fall are completely consistent with the nature of the damage sustained. The planned demolition hypothesis, on the other hand, fails to explain why collapse would begin at exactly the point where damage was inflicted, since the conspirators would have had to be able to predict exactly where debris from the fallen North and South Towers would strike WTC 7. And while the makers of the documentary Loose Change comment that WTC 7 "fell straight down, into a convenient pile," the truth is that the pile of debris was 12 stories high and 150 meters across, hardly the kind of "convenient pile" described by **conspiracy** theorists.¹³

For those who believe that Building 7 fell due to controlled demolition, some of the most powerful "evidence" seemingly comes from WTC leaseholder Larry Silverstein's alleged "confession" that he authorized the tower's destruction. The quote in question comes from a September, 2002 PBS Special called America Rebuilds, in which Silverstein says:

I remember getting a call from the, er, fire department commander, telling me that they were not sure they were gonna be able to contain the fire, and I said, "We've had such terrible loss of life, maybe the smartest thing to do is pull it." And they made that decision to pull and we watched the building collapse.¹⁴

To **conspiracy** theorists such as Alex Jones at prisonplanet.com, this quote seems to be a "smoking gun" because they interpret the phrase "pull it" to be "industry jargon for taking a building down with explosives."¹⁵ Silverstein seems to be saying that he and the firefighters decided to pull (destroy) Building 7, and watched it fall after authorizing the demolition. No building could be controllably demolished so quickly, the **conspiracy** theorists go on to argue, so WTC 7 must have been prepared for demolition long in advance.

On closer inspection, this supposedly devastating evidence does not seem to mean what the 9/11 Truth Movement thinks it means. There is far from unanimous industry agreement that the phrase "pull it" always signifies a controlled demolition with explosives-more specific phrases

such as "pull away" would be used to designate the specific operation to be performed.¹⁶ And of course, "pull" has many common language uses quite separate from demolition lingo. But if Silverstein wasn't describing a decision to destroy WTC 7, what could the words "pull it" mean? A good place to seek the answer is this September 9, 2005 statement by Mr. Dara McQuillan, a spokesperson for Larry Silverstein:

In the afternoon of September 11, Mr. Silverstein spoke to the Fire Department Commander on site at Seven World Trade Center. The Commander told Mr. Silverstein that there were several firefighters in the building working to contain the fires. Mr. Silverstein expressed his view that the most important thing was to protect the safety of those firefighters, including, if necessary, to have them withdraw from the building.

Later in the day, the Fire Commander ordered his firefighters out of the building and at 5:20 p.m. the building collapsed. No lives were lost at Seven World Trade Center on September 11, 2001.

As noted above, when Mr. Silverstein was recounting these events for a television documentary he stated, "I said, you know, we've had such terrible loss of life. Maybe the smartest thing to do is to pull it." Mr. McQuillan has stated that by "it," Mr. Silverstein meant the contingent of firefighters remaining in the building (emphasis added).¹⁷

McQuillan's response also indicated that firefighters were present at WTC 7 to evacuate tenants, and worked at the site until late in the afternoon shortly before the collapse occurred. There is in fact abundant evidence that firefighters were present in and around WTC 7 in evacuation and rescue missions until late in the day on 9/11. According to Fire Department Chief Daniel Nigro:

The most important operational decision to be made that afternoon was [that] the collapse [of the WTC towers] had damaged 7 World Trade Center...It had very heavy fire on many floors and I ordered the evacuation of an area sufficient around to protect our members, so we had to give up some rescue operations that were going on at the time (emphasis added) and back the people away far enough so that if 7 World Trade did collapse, we [wouldn't] lose any more people. We continued to operate on what we could from that distance and approximately an hour and a half after that order was [given], at 5:30 in the afternoon. World Trade Center collapsed completely.¹⁸

Another first responder adds that there were "tremendous, tremendous fires going on. Finally they fnilled (emphasis added) us out."¹⁹ The first-hand accounts of rescue operations at WTC 7 tell a consistent story, and the latter quote also uses the word "pull" to describe the removal of

firefighters from the vicinity of the building, just as McQuillan's statement does. Indeed, there is large agreement between McQuillan's response and the testimony of the firefighters, including the fact that: (a) firefighters were in fact in the vicinity of WTC 7 on 9/11; (b) their activities involved evacuation and rescue missions; (c) firefighters remained near WTC 7 until late in the afternoon of 9/11; (d) firefighters realized that WTC 7 would probably fall by approximately 3 PM on 9/11; and (e) firefighters pulled back from the building shortly after this realization, and watched the building collapse at approximately 5:20 PM. Despite the objections of conspiracy theorists, the "official story" is both logically coherent and supported by evidence.

By contrast, the story told by the 9/11 Truth Movement is riddled with holes. It assumes that Larry Silverstein destroyed WTC Building 7, presumably in order to claim a huge insurance payoff. But if this is so, why would he tell the world of his plot on a PBS special? Furthermore, what relationship does Silverstein have with the United States government who, according to conspiracy theorists, destroyed the WTC buildings in order to terrorize its citizens into accepting domination by a police state?²⁰ And if the government controlled the demolition of the WTC buildings in order to strike fear into its citizens, why in this one case would it wait until all of the tenants were evacuated from WTC 7 so that there were no reported casualties?²¹ The government's strategy appears wildly inconsistent in the Truth Movement account—killing nearly 3,000 people in the destruction of the two main towers, while allowing an entire afternoon for the tenants of WTC 7 to escape. We should also note that the alleged 9/11 plot was needlessly complicated, since the building was wired for a controlled demolition and targeted to be hit by airplanes—why not just do the controlled demolition, ditch the airplanes and blame it on the terrorists of your choice?

There's also the problem that, as even the 9/11 Truth Movement admits, prepping a building for demolition takes considerable time and effort. Usually a building targeted for demolition has been abandoned for considerable time and partially gutted to allow explosives intimate contact with the structure of the building. But since all of the WTC buildings were occupied right up to 9/11, how did the government gain access to wire 3 towers for complete demolition without anyone noticing? Imagine trying to sneak wires and bombs into buildings while thousands of people are working in offices, riding the elevators and milling about in the halls—that scenario is unlikely in the extreme.

The Pentagon

Many people in the 9/11 Truth Movement believe that the Pentagon was not actually struck by Flight 77, as the "official story" claims. Instead, they believe that the United States government

somehow staged the damage, perhaps through the use of a bomb or strategically fired missile. This claim first attracted attention in French author Thierry Meyssan's book, *Pentagate*, which claims that the damage done to the Pentagon was too limited to have resulted from the crash of a Boeing 757.²² The documentary "Loose Change" claims that the hole left in the Pentagon by the alleged airplane was "a single hole, no more than 16 feet in diameter," and that no remains whatsoever of Flight 77 were found at the crash site.²³ To dramatically support this last point, conspiracy theorists cite CNN correspondent Jamie McIntyre's report from the crash site on 9/11, which says, "From my close-up inspection, there's no evidence of a plane having crashed anywhere near the Pentagon."²⁴

Like the previously discussed arguments about WTC 7 not being damaged enough to fall on its own, complaints about the size of the hole in the Pentagon left by Flight 77 rely on selective choice of perspective. 9/11 conspiracy theorists like to reference pictures of the damaged Pentagon in which the hole made by the plane appears to be small, but aren't as fond of the pictures accurately showing the full extent of the damage. Some conspiracy theorists also don't seem satisfied that the shape of the hole matches that expected for a crashed airplane. But the expectation that the plane should have left an immediately recognizable hole in the building is delusional—a speeding Boeing 757 will not leave a snow-angel style impression of itself in a concrete building (versus the mostly-glass exterior of the WTC buildings, which did leave an outline of a plane). And the contention that no remains of Flight 77 were found at the crash site is simply absurd. Many pictures taken of the area around the Pentagon crash site clearly show parts of an airplane in the wreckage. In an excellent article about 9/11 conspiracy theories in *Popular Mechanics*, blast expert Allyn E. Kilsheimer describes his own observations as the first structural engineer to arrive at the Pentagon after Flight 77 crashed:

I saw the marks of the plane wing on the face of the building. I picked up parts of the plane with the airline markings on them. I held in my hand the tail section of the plane, and I found the black box.

Kilsheimer's eyewitness account is backed up by photos of plane wreckage inside and outside the building. Kilsheimer adds: "I held parts of uniforms from crew members in my hands, including body parts. Okay?"²⁵

But if there is so much evidence that a plane crashed into the Pentagon, why did CNN correspondent Jamie McIntyre report that he could find none? The answer is that McIntyre did not report this at all, and the 9/11 Truth Movement is once again selectively manipulating evidence to fit their conclusions. When McIntyre noted that no debris from a plane was

observable near the Pentagon, he was responding to a specific question asked by CNN anchor Judy Woodruff during the segment. Flight 77 came in flying very low, and there had been speculation that the plane might have struck the ground shortly before reaching the Pentagon. McIntyre's response, when quoted in full, makes clear that he is saying that there was no evidence that the plane hit the ground before hitting the Pentagon, but he certainly does not deny that the plane struck the Pentagon itself.

WOODRUFF: Jamie, Aaron was talking earlier-or one of our correspondents was talking earlier-I think-actually, it was Bob Franken-with an eyewitness who said it appeared that that Boeing 757, the American jet, American Airline jet, landed short of the Pentagon.

Can you give us any better idea of how much of the plane actually impacted the building?

MCINTYRE: You know, it might have appeared that way, but from my close-up inspection, there's no evidence of a plane having crashed anywhere near the Pentagon. The only site is the actual site of the building that's crashed in [emphasis added], and as I said, the only pieces left that you can see are small enough that you can pick up in your hand. There are no large tail sections, wing sections, fuselage, nothing like that anywhere around, which would indicate that the entire plane crashed into the side of the Pentagon and then caused the side to collapse [emphasis added].²⁶

Note that McIntyre never questions that an airplane crash damaged the Pentagon, and indeed describes seeing many pieces of the aircraft around the crash site in an earlier section of the CNN transcript.²⁷ Of course, this has not stopped conspiracy theorists from picking and choosing the evidence to push their own agendas.

Right 93 and Other Alleged Anomalies

On April 5, 2006, the creators of the 9/11 conspiracy documentary "Loose Change" and their supporters decided to attend the premiere of the film "United 93," about the hijacked airplane that crashed on 9/11. They wanted to take the opportunity to expose the alleged lies about this flight, and in the words of one "Loose Change" forum member, to "bite these bastards where it hurts, and have this Flight 93 movie backfire on them."²⁸ To many Americans, the passengers on United 93 who fought back against the terrorists and caused it to crash before it could reach its target are heroes, but the 9/11 Truth Movement sees things differently. Depending on which conspiracy theorist you ask, you will either learn that Flight 93 actually landed safely, or that a US military jet shot the plane out of the sky.²⁹ The first claim stems from confusion in the initial

Associated Press (AP) reports between Flight 93 and Flight 1989, the latter of which did land at Cleveland's Hopkins Airport on 9/11. The AP subsequently corrected the error, but many conspiracy theorists have not followed suit.³⁰ The second claim rests largely on unsupported assertions that the main body of the engine and other large parts of the plane turned up miles from the main wreckage site—too far away to have resulted from an ordinary crash. This is incorrect, because the engine was found only 300 yards from the main crash site, and its location was consistent with the direction in which the plane had been traveling.³¹ Furthermore, the black box for the flight records the struggle onboard preceding the plane's crash. Conspiracy theorists are left with not only an evidentially worthless theory, but also a confusing one. Why would the same U.S. government that allegedly destroyed the WTC shoot down Flight 93 before it could cause similar damage to other buildings? Of course, this question assumes a standard of logical consistency that the 9/11 Truth Movement seems to lack.

Another alleged flight anomaly concerns the supposed "stand down" order given by the North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD) on 9/11 to allow the hijacked airplanes to reach their destinations without interference. The 9/11 Truth Movement believes that NORAD had the capability of locating and intercepting planes on 9/11, and its failure to do so indicates a government conspiracy to allow the attacks to occur. To support this assertion, they claim that NORAD could have quickly neutralized the hijacked planes because flight interceptions are routine, with 67 such intercepts occurring before 9/11.³² Significantly, this claim does not specify the length of time over which these alleged intercepts occurred, or tell us whether they took place near major cities or over, say, miles of open ocean. More specific and accurate information comes from the Popular Mechanics article, which states:

In the decade before 9/11, NORAD intercepted only one civilian plane over North America: golfer Payne Stewart's Learjet, in October 1999. With passengers and crew unconscious from cabin decompression, the plane lost radio contact but remained in transponder contact until it crashed. Even so, it took an F-16 1 hour and 22 minutes to reach the stricken jet. Rules in effect back then, and on 9/11, prohibited supersonic flight on intercepts.³³

It is not a quick or easy matter to locate and intercept a plane behaving erratically. NORAD personnel must first attempt repeated communication with the plane in question to rule out more mundane problems, and then must contact appropriate military personnel to scramble fighters and direct them to the appropriate location. The situation on 9/11 was further complicated by the fact that terrorists on the hijacked jets had turned off or disabled the onboard radar transponders. Without a transponder signal identifying the airplanes, each hijacked airplane would have been

only one moving blip among many others on NORAD'S screens, milking it much harder to track. Thus, even a direct NORAD decision to intercept any of the hijacked planes on 9/11 would have still entailed a significant amount of time to reach the jet-time that was simply not available on 9/11.

Various other **conspiracy** theories focus on the government's alleged foreknowledge of the terrorist attacks. One popular theory suggests there was a suspiciously high volume of "put" trading of airline stocks in the days just before 9/11. Since "put" trading is effectively a gamble that the price of a stock will decrease, **conspiracy** theorists surmise that trading "insiders" knew about the coming events of 9/11 and placed their bets accordingly. While this may look suspicious in isolation, the general volume of put trading on these stocks reached similar levels at earlier points in the year. The spike in American Airlines trading was the highest of the all airline companies involved, but that's hardly surprising considering that the company had just released a major warning about possible losses.³⁴ Indeed, general bad news about the airline industry prompted investment companies to advise their clients to take the put options, removing any need to blame the trading options on foreknowledge of the attacks.

Another theory alleges that the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) arrived at the World Trade Center on September 10, 2001, thus showing that the government knew about the coming disaster. This claim is based on a statement by Tom Kenney of the Massachusetts task force, who told CBS news anchor Dan Rather on September 13, 2001, "We're currently, uh, one of the first teams that was deployed to support the city of New York for this disaster. We arrived on, uh, late Monday night and went into action on Tuesday morning. And not until today did we get a full opportunity to work, uh, the entire site."³⁵ The rather mundane explanation for this quote is that Mr. Kenney confused his days—not an unusual occurrence for someone who had been working for more than two long days in emergency response activities. Thus, a straightforward interpretation of Kenney's response is that he arrived at Ground Zero on 9/11 (which he incorrectly identified as Monday, rather than Tuesday), went into action on 9/12 (mistakenly identified as Tuesday) and did not get a chance to work the whole WTC site until "today" (the day he was speaking to Rather, or Thursday, 9/13). Additionally, many sources document the arrival of FEMA on 9/11, and Kenney's wife confirmed the day her husband was dispatched to Ground Zero as 9/11.³⁶ The degree to which the 9/11 Truth Movement will exaggerate and exploit simple misunderstandings does not speak well of their concern for truth.

Much of this discussion has focused on explanations given by the 9/11 Truth Movement, but we should note that the explanations they don't give are just as problematic. I have not been able to

locate any significant discussion of al Qaeda, radical Islamic terrorists or the modern history of the Middle East in any of the 9/11 Truth Movement's writings. The most likely reason for this is that, like most other Americans, many of them simply didn't pay very much attention to the Middle East before 9/11. Yet, it is impossible to understand the threat of terrorism unless we also understand how the fall of the Ottoman empire, the fragmentation of much of the Middle East into new nations with largely arbitrary boundaries after WW II, Muslim reaction to the creation of the state of Israel, the birth of Islamic fundamentalism, conflict with and influence by Soviet Russia, and frustration over America's support for Israel have shaped the ideology and mission of groups like al Qaeda. Islamic terrorist groups arose in this context, and have actively and repeatedly targeted American interests for over two decades. The idea that Islamic terrorists would target U.S. buildings for attack fits well with recent events over the past two decades, including:

- * an attack by the radical Hezbollah faction on Marine barracks in Lebanon in 1983;
- * the hijacking of the Achille Lauro in 1985;
- * a truck bomb attack on the World Trade Center in 1993; killing 6 people and injuring over 1,000 more;
- * a thwarted attempt to blow up 12 planes heading from the Philippines to the U.S. in January, 1995;
- * an attack on Khobar Towers in Saudi Arabia in 1996, killing 19 U.S. military personnel and injuring hundreds more;
- * the bombings of U.S. Embassy buildings in Kenya and Tanzania in 1995, killing 12 Americans and 200 Kenyans and Tanzanians;
- * a thwarted attempt by Ahmed Ressam to attack Los Angeles International airport in late 1999;
- * a suicide boat bombing against the U.S.S. Cole on October 12, 2000, killing 17 sailors and injuring 39 others.³⁷

Additionally, there is well-documented evidence that Osama Bin Laden has repeatedly organized and prompted attacks against the United States. His role as a financier for major terrorist organizations and the leader of al Qaeda is well-established. Bin Laden issued a 1996 fatwa officially declaring a jihad against the United States, and a second fatwa in 1998 declaring "to

kill the Americans and their allies-civilian and military is an individual duty for any Muslim who can do it in any country in which it is possible to do it."38 Since bin-Laden and al Qaeda have officially claimed responsibility for the attacks of 9/11, and the evidence points in their direction there is no point in seeking alternative theories.39

The best explanation for the events of 9/11 is that it was the latest and most damaging attack yet in a series of attacks by radical Islamic terrorists who wish to end what they believe is an evil U.S. foreign policy. As a nation, we were psychologically and strategically unprepared for this attack due to our failure to acknowledge the seriousness of the threat. Sadly, the 9/11 Truth Movement continues to divert its gaze from the real problems, preferring the solace of delusions to reality.

Conclusion: The Power of Conspiracy Theories

This article has analyzed the arguments of the 9/11 Truth Movement and found them lacking. Yet, the 400 people who attended the conference and the thousands of others who support their efforts find these theories convincing, and the reason does not necessarily seem to be grounded in common political ideology. Based on my informal survey of the crowd at the Hyatt conference, I noted that attendees seemed to come from each extreme of the political spectrum. There were representatives of the far right who decry any form of government authority, but there were also members of the far left waging a tireless campaign against the perceived evils of capitalism and imperialism. We need to return to a question posed near the beginning of this discussion: Why do so many intelligent and promising people find these theories so compelling?

There are several possible answers to this question, none of them necessarily exclusive of the others. One of the first and most obvious is distrust of the American government in general, and the Bush administration in particular. This mistrust is not entirely without basis. The American government deceived its citizens about the real human costs of Vietnam, and resorted to military tactics that were ethically questionable even by the standards of war. The revelations of Watergate, the Iran-Contra scandal, and other nefarious schemes great and small have understandably eroded public confidence in government. Couple that with an administration that took office after the most controversial presidential election in more than a century, and one that backed out of international agreements such as the Kyoto Protocol, misled citizens about the science of global warming and stem cell research, initiated a war in Iraq based on unsupportable "intelligence" about weapons of mass destruction, and failed to respond inadequately to the effects of a hurricanes in the Gulf Coast, and you have strong motivations for suspicion.40

(Suffice it to say, admiration for George W. Bush is not my motivation for defending him against the claims of conspiracy theorists).

However, there are a few things to be said about suspicion. First, there is the simple philosophical point that suspicion alone demonstrates nothing-any theory needs evidence in its favor if it is to be taken seriously. Second, the mistakes made by our government in the past are qualitatively different from a conscious decision to kill thousands of its own citizens in order to justify the oppression of others. Most importantly, there is the fact that most of what we know about the bad decisions made by our government is only knowable due to the relative transparency with which our government operates, and the freedom to disseminate and discuss this information.

The full irony of this last point hit me while I was at the conference. Here was a group of about 400 people gathered to openly discuss the evil schemes of the U.S. government, whom they accuse of horrible atrocities in the service of establishing a police state. But if America really was a police state with such terrible secrets to protect, surely government thugs would have stormed the lecture halls and arrested many of those present, or would at the very least have conducted behind the scenes arrests and jailed the movement's leaders. Yet even the most vocal leaders of the 9/11 Truth Movement are still going strong, and no one at the conference seemed very worried about government reprisals. This fact seemingly indicates that at some level, the conspiracy theorists themselves don't really believe what they are saying.

Another reason for the appeal of 9/11 conspiracies is that they are easy to understand. As previously mentioned, most Americans did not know or care to know much about the Middle East until the events of 9/11 forced them to take notice. (The brilliant satirical newspaper *The Onion* poked fun at this fact with its article "Area Man Acts Like He's Been Interested In Afghanistan All Along").⁴¹ The great advantage of the 9/11 Truth Movement's theories is that they don't require you to know anything about the Middle East, or for that matter, to know anything significant about world history or politics. This points to another benefit of conspiracy theories-they are oddly comforting. Chaotic, threatening events are difficult to comprehend, and the steps we might take to protect ourselves are unclear. With conspiracy theory that focuses on a single human cause, the terrible randomness of life assumes an understandable order.

The great writer Thomas Pynchon memorably expressed this point in his novel *Gravity's Rainbow*. "If there is something comforting-religious, if you want-about paranoia, there is still also anti-paranoia, where nothing is connected to anything, a condition not many of us can bear for long."⁴² The promiscuity of conspiracy theories toward evidence thus becomes part of their

appeal-they can link virtually any ideas of interest to the theorist into a meaningful whole. This point was illustrated nicely during the Q & A session following the conference screening of Rick Siegel's *Eyewitness: Hoboken*. An attendee wanted to know what role the Freemasons played in the plot, and seemed very concerned that Siegel's account had neglected them. After waffling on the answer for a few moments without appeasing his questioner, Siegel finally relented and said, "Sure, they're involved." And why not? With the standards of evidence used by **conspiracy** theorists, there is no reason why the Freemasons, the Bavarian Illuminati, or the Elders of Zion cannot also be involved in the 9/11 plot-it just depends on what you find the most solace in believing. As it turns out, some **conspiracy** theorists do throw one or more of these other parties into the mix, as a popular and bogus rumor that 4,000 Jews mysteriously failed to come to work on 9/11 shows.⁴³

Solace is something all of us needed after the horrible events of 9/11, and each of us is entitled to a certain degree of freedom in its pursuit. However, there is no moral right to seek solace at the expense of truth, especially if the truth is precisely what we most need to avoid the mistakes of the past. Truth matters for its own sake, but it also matters because it is our only defense against the evils of those who cynically exploit truth claims to serve their own agendas. It is concern for the truth that leads us to criticize our own government when necessary, and to insist that others who claim to do so follow the same rigorous standards of evidence and argument. 9/11 was a powerful reminder of how precious and fragile human life and liberty are-the greatest possible rebuke to those who would live in service to delusions.

Sidebar

Above: The unique structure of the World Trade Center towers consisted of two groups of columns connected by steel trusses. One group formed the inner core and the other formed the four outer walls.

In the rectangle above: a side view of how the floor trusses anchored the inner core columns to the outer wall columns.

Three column units were linked by spandrels. Floor trusses were linked to both spandrel and columns by a system of bolts and welded plates.

The way the airplanes struck the towers influenced which building failed first. Right: the first airplane hit the North Tower nearly dead on center. Column damage to the central core is indicated by the shaded circles. The second airplane hit the South Tower at an angle, destroying

the column support for an entire corner of the building. The second plane also hit lower on the building leaving the weight of more floors above a more severely weakened structure.

Sidebar

Left: extensive damage to the Pentagon is revealed during the cleanup and repair. Right: damage to the C-ring-the central ring of the Pentagon.

Sidebar

One of many pictures that show recognizable airplane debris on the lawn of the burning Pentagon on 9/11. Photos courtesy of Popular Mechanics magazine.

The crash site of United 93 and the location of engine debris, in rural Somerset county near Shanksville, Pennsylvania.

Sidebar

In addition to the specific sources cited above, readers seeking responsible analysis of the claims of the 9/11 Truth Movement can use the following general sources:

www.911myths.com

A great general source for all manner of **conspiracy** claims.

www.snopes.com

The Urban Legends Reference Pages, containing entries about **conspiracy** claims such as the put options, the alleged early arrival of FEMA and the Pentagon attack. The forum also contains some intelligent discussion of **conspiracy** theories.

<http://www.loosechangeguide.com/LooseChangeGuide.html>

This is a viewer's guide to the documentary "Loose Change," which contains many of the **conspiracy** claims discussed in this article.

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