

February 12, 2008

**Understanding
Conspiracy Theory:
Common Conspiracy Motifs in the
9/11 Controversy**

A Cultural Approach to Conspiracy Theories

(held over from previous presentation)

- ◆ Conspiracy theory as a literary genre (type of story).
 - CTs are narratives, must be read & interpreted like any other story or literary text.
 - Conspiracy theories as modern folklore, close to “urban legends”
 - CTs fall into stereotyped patterns, employing a number of common motifs, rhetorical strategies, and story elements, often merely rearranged according to the specifics of time, place, culture, and “villain” of choice.
- ◆ Examples of common motifs in American conspiracy theory
 - Children in jeopardy
 - Sexual corruption
 - Threats to free will or individuality
 - Suppressed miracles
 - Inversion
 - Sympathy for the Overdog
 - Mysterious Death Lists (killing off the witnesses)
- ◆ We will analyze CTs as stories, debunk many of them, but also examine real fears that inspire them and cultural-political needs CTs fulfill.
- ◆ Basic lesson in advance: CTs are dangerous because they tend to confuse people about their real problems and the most effective ways to deal with them.



Introducing the Wonderful World of 9/11 Conspiracy Theories

- ◆ Origins in well-founded distrust of government (especially the Bush administration) regarding its own (in)competence & War on Terror/Iraq, and disbelief that such a thing could happen
 - Fueled by Bush exploitation of 9/11 for wars & aided by mainstream media that promoted both conspiracy questions and Bush's subsequent wars and often bogus justifications for them
 - Even more by the Internet: 9/11 was first major national trauma of the Internet era, when hearsay, amateur sleuthing, and urban legends are more widely & quickly disseminated than ever before
 - 9/11 Commission: decent job compared to Warren Commission but still undermined by its orientation toward calming fears rather than investigating
- ◆ Reminders and examples
 - Questions of 9/11 families: clip from *9/11 Press for Truth*
 - Twin Towers collapse [timeline](#)
 - A left-wing not quite conspiracy version: Clip from Michael Moore's *Fahrenheit 9/11*
- ◆ Rise of the conspiracy theories and the "Truth Movement"
 - Racist views: urban legends of the Muslim cab drivers or the 4000 Jews [Arab world: Mossad did it, as usual]; larger disbelief that Arabs with box-cutters could have accomplished such a thing
 - Fixation on supposedly puzzling evidence, or "too good" evidence, and questionable science (Steven Jones & Scholars for 9/11 Truth, the steel melting controversy, seismograph readings)
 - Just how evil is the Bush administration? [LIHOP vs. MIHOP](#) theories
 - ❖ LIHOP: The "stand-down" order/slow response
 - ❖ Either: "Controlled demolition" of Twin Towers, an "inside job"
 - ❖ MIHOP: Thierry Meyssan; [Pentagon Strike](#) video (no airliner at Pentagon); "[bumble planes](#)" ► faked phone calls, holographic planes, etc.
 - ❖ Fear that popular "no airliner" theories might really be "[trojan horses](#)" or disinformation designed to kill off the "Truth Movement"

9/11 Conspiracy Theory Motifs

- ◆ **Proportionality:** Huge, impressive event is assumed to come from a huge, impressive source
- ◆ **“Who benefits?”:** beneficiaries of an event must have caused it
- ◆ **The Evil That Institutions Do:** Diabolical secret government experiments, plots, and research projects are the normal way that governments & corporations do business
- ◆ **The Provocation Motive:** to justify war or repression
 - Logic leads to *X-Files* or David Icke thinking: conspirators are so inhuman they must actually not be human
- ◆ **Legendary historical precedents**
- ◆ **Negative subjunctive reasoning, or argument by anomaly**
- ◆ **Occam’s Razor in Reverse:** the most complicated explanation is best
 - Earliest, least consistent reports are always best

