

## The Rising Tide Of Insanity

We said some time ago that the War on Terror would be more accurately called the **war against conspiracy theories**. And we have occasionally pointed out how conspiracy-theoretic thinking is becoming common in the mainstream of political debate.

Things are still getting worse. According to a recent **opinion poll**,

More than a third of the American public suspects that federal officials assisted in the 9/11 terrorist attacks or took no action to stop them so the United States could go to war in the Middle East

Note the characteristic **conspiracy-theoretic** allegation that powerful malevolent people are acting ostensibly with one agenda (protecting Americans from harm) that has popular support, while secretly pursuing a different and incompatible agenda that does not have popular support (because it involves mass-murdering Americans). And hence that the people who support the current policies because of their *ostensible* purpose (such as ourselves) are dupes.

In a structurally similar conspiracy theory regarding Israel, the Washington Post reporter Thomas Ricks – a Pentagon correspondent, no less – has claimed that during the recent fighting in Lebanon, Israel **purposely left Hezbollah missile launchers intact**, so that they would be used to murder Israelis and hence provide public-relations justification for Israel's incursions into Lebanon, whose ostensible purpose was to prevent precisely such murders.

Those two conspiracy theories share a degree of detachment from reality that is so extreme that if it occurred outside the political arena it would uncontroversially count as insanity. And yet they enjoy mainstream acceptance, and respect even from many who do not (yet) share them. But there is worse: these delusions are not random. They are focused – on evil – in a manner, and to a degree, not condoned in the West since the 1930s.

By this measure, the war is being lost. We can only repeat the call we made before: Persuade them. Persuade them because in the long run, if you fail to persuade them, they will kill you.

## Re: Persuade Them

I try.

Good post.

-- Elliot Temple

<http://www.curi.us/blog/>

by **Elliot Temple** on Fri, 08/18/2006 - 00:37 | [reply](#)

## Immigrants

In my observation, the situation is getting particularly worse among middle-eastern immigrant communities in the West. The less assimilated they remain, the worse this sort of thinking becomes too. And the more "intellectual" among them are also more likely to be reading and relating to the likes of Chomsky and hence be influenced by them. So, I see it as partly an identity problem, and partly irrational intellectualism.

-- Cyrus Ferdowsi, <http://libiran.blogspot.com>

by **Liberal Iranian** on Fri, 08/18/2006 - 20:20 | [reply](#)

## Like that one about..

Nazis starting the Reichstad fire. C'mon gimme a break!

by a reader on Sat, 08/19/2006 - 00:41 | [reply](#)

## Is Wikipedia correct on the h

Is Wikipedia correct on the history surrounding these events?

by a reader on Sat, 08/19/2006 - 10:35 | [reply](#)

## Reichstag fire

The Wikipedia article on the Reichstag fire currently includes the assertion "During the election campaign, the Nazis had run on a platform of fervent anti-terrorism". But in reality the platform of the Nazis (see, for instance, the **Program of the NSDAP**) was not based on anti-terrorism but on irredentism, antisemitism, conspiracy theories, victimhood-based nationalism, and totalitarianism. Reinterpreting Nazism, or Nazi claims to be preventing a Communist revolution, as "fervent anti-terrorism" is no more than a pathetic present-day attempt to justify the 'Bush=Hitler' trope and the associated conspiracy theories.

The alleged relevance of the Reichstag fire to the discussion here is presumably this: if it is insane to believe that the Bush Administration was complicit in the 9-11 attack, why was it

reasonable to suspect that the Nazis were responsible for the

Reichstag fire? The answer is that although the two theories have superficial similarities - they both allege conspiracies by governments to destroy buildings - the latter does not have any of the attributes that make conspiracy theories irrational (and so is not a conspiracy theory in the usual sense of the term). In particular, secretly setting the Reichstag fire (or secretly persuading a single dupe to set it, as the case may be) would not have involved any dedicated Nazi in doing anything contrary to the Nazis' publicly defended ideology. Therefore it does not require the Nazis to have had a secret ideology that violently conflicted with their overt one, does not entail an impossible recruitment system, dupe-management system, and so on.

We urge you to read our [series on conspiracy theories](#).

by [Editor](#) on Sat, 08/19/2006 - 12:24 | [reply](#)

### In other words .....

"[The World](#)" has the only "true" interpretation of the facts. All other theories should be discounted.

by a reader on Sun, 08/20/2006 - 22:51 | [reply](#)

### Other Words

I think that those are not just other words, but a false assertion of the implications of the original words.

[The World](#) responded to an assertion that the commonly accepted theory that Nazis started the Reichstag fire was similar to the conspiracy theories that they criticize, by explaining why the theories are different.

The reader ignores the argument and implies that [The World](#) claims some sort of unique authority over interpretation of facts. This is in direct conflict with the evidence and is not only misleading, but rude.

### Gil

by [Gil](#) on Mon, 08/21/2006 - 00:08 | [reply](#)

### Re: Immigrants

Welcome, Liberal Iranian.

What you have observed is no doubt representative - a very sad and worrying fact. However, there must be something more to it than "partly an identity problem, and partly irrational intellectualism". For that does not, in itself, seem to explain the focus on evil. In the past, silly intellectuals with or without identity problems have believed in all sorts of silly things like spiritualism, telepathy, Esperanto, Freud, Jung, muesli, flower power, yogis, and murderous totalitarian tyranny. Moreover, generally, only a small proportion of all irrationality descends to the level of insanity. Now

it seems to be murderous totalitarian tyranny all the way down, and insanity is mainstream.

by [Editor](#) on Mon, 08/21/2006 - 00:51 | [reply](#)

## Re: Other Words

1. If the Nazis were indeed "secretly" behind the fire doesn't that imply that their publicly stated objective were different? Why go to the bother of doing it secretly? Why couldn't the Nazis just publicly say: "Let's burn down the Reichstag!"?

2. **The World** implies that the US government could not possibly be involved in 9/11. (btw, I am not implying that it absolutely was involved) Like any good detective examining a crime, one has to ask: Who stood to benefit from the crime? One of the obvious answers is: government officials.

3. There is a good deal of evidence that the US government did know about Pearl Harbor beforehand and had been trying for some time to provoke such an attack. Let's assume for a second that this was an absolutely proven fact. Gil, would you be outraged by such a conspiracy? My guess is no. Because you believe US participation in WWII was a good thing anyway. Similarly, my guess is that if you had evidence that the US government (hypothetically) allowed 9/11 to happen that you would sit on it. Because, even though you were appalled by 9/11, you are happy to see the US (and more broadly the west in general) involve in a war on the Arab/Islamic world

by a reader on Mon, 08/21/2006 - 04:48 | [reply](#)

## Outrage

I would indeed be outraged by a conspiracy to allow the Pearl Harbor attack to be successful, as a means to get into the war (and, btw, I have been outraged by this possibility for quite a few years). The government has an obligation to defend the country, and this would have been a massive betrayal regardless of the ends desired. I would think, by the way, that the fact that the attack was attempted at all would have been sufficient for propaganda purposes, even if the attack was met with a successful defense.

I would feel similarly about complicity with the 9/11 attack.

I am absolutely **not** "happy" to see the US involved in a war.

I *do* prefer that actual threats be recognized and addressed earlier rather than later, to help minimize them before more casualties are necessary. But, I don't think that this recognition requires, or justifies, mass murder.

If I knew of such a crime, I would not sit on it, but I would do what I could to bring the facts to light and the criminals to justice.

For some reason, I still have enough confidence in most people to

trust them to handle the truth reasonably. I think they can distinguish between criminal internal conspiracies and real external threats.

**Gil**

by **Gil** on Mon, 08/21/2006 - 06:07 | [reply](#)

## The Israeli commando raid

**The Angry Arab** comments on the recent failed Israeli commando raid.

Interesting observation.

by a reader on Tue, 08/22/2006 - 08:01 | [reply](#)

## Thin line between naïve conspiracism and naïve cynicism

While some fall into the folly of assuming that every conspiracy-theory is meritorious simply because it is *possible*, even though it has no concrete support -- others run blindly to the other end of the spectrum and flippantly dismiss anything that even sounds conspiratorial, regardless of the amount of support it has. A good middle ground would seem to be to maintain a healthy suspicion toward any power-structure whose ability to operate clandestinely makes it largely unaccountable in the public sphere, while reserving final judgment until all of the facts of the matter have come to light (or as many as can be discerned given the nature of the case). And if one should question whether the USA has the ability to operate in such a clandestine manner in the global sphere, making bed-fellows out of our enemies only to use that alliance to a strategic advantage (while the public remains largely ignorant until after the fact), I might remind you of the Dixie Mission's approval of the Maoists, followed shortly by the US backing the KMT in the Chinese civil war; and Eisenhower's formal recognition of Castro, followed shortly by the Bay of Pigs invasion and Operation Mongoose. Money is a powerful motivator, and history shows time and again that it is often-times a more valued commodity than human life or civil rights.

by **MonkeeSage** on Thu, 08/24/2006 - 19:50 | [reply](#)

## The Rising Tide of Insanity

It is the height of insanity to call this The Rising Tide of Insanity. Height of insanity is said tongue in cheek. In fact this phenomenon has nothing to do with insanity. It has only to do with the easy sloppy habits of current argument.

The War on Terror is another fine example:

Please explain how you fight a War on Terror. Where for example do you place your army? Now to call this a War on Conspiracy Theories goes even one step further in ridiculous rhetoric. Call it what it is.

The Argument for Reason. The Argument Against Ideology. The Thinking Man's Guide to Thinking Rationally. Banish Such Banal Titles as The Rising Tide of Insanity. Please.

by a reader on Mon, 08/28/2006 - 04:36 | [reply](#)

## Re: The Rising Tide of Insanity

We shall, when we are convinced that there is a psychological difference between believing that the 9-11 attacks were perpetrated by the US Government, and believing that one is the Emperor Napoleon.

by [Editor](#) on Mon, 08/28/2006 - 15:16 | [reply](#)

## Fair Enough

Glad you set the record straight.

by a reader on Mon, 08/28/2006 - 23:55 | [reply](#)

## Re: Other Words

1. If the Nazis were indeed "secretly" behind the fire doesn't that imply that their publicly stated objective were different? Why go to the bother of doing it secretly? Why couldn't the Nazis just publicly say: "Let's burn down the Reichstag!"?

The Nazis' publicly stated objectives were the destruction of liberal democracy in favour of national socialism, i.e. - state control of the economy and enslaving or exterminating "non-Aryans". Setting fire to the Reichstag, blaming communists and using this as an excuse to murder or imprison their political opponents is entirely consistent with this ideology.

2. **The World** implies that the US government could not possibly be involved in 9/11. (btw, I am not implying that it absolutely was involved) Like any good detective examining a crime, one has to ask: Who stood to benefit from the crime? One of the obvious answers is: government officials.

The American government claims to want to save lives. Even the stupid actions they take that result in the deaths of many people seem to be taken with that objective in mind, e.g. - the War on Drugs. In terms of their stated values they did not benefit from 9/11. So your assertion relies on the American government having motives different from their stated motives.

3. There is a good deal of evidence that the US government did know about Pearl Harbor beforehand and had been trying for some time to provoke such an attack. Let's assume for a second that this was an

absolutely proven fact. Gil, would you be outraged by

such a conspiracy? My guess is no. Because you believe US participation in WWII was a good thing anyway. Similarly, my guess is that if you had evidence that the US government (hypothetically) allowed 9/11 to happen that you would sit on it. Because, even though you were appalled by 9/11, you are happy to see the US (and more broadly the west in general) involve in a war on the Arab/Islamic world

I would be disgusted by FDR's actions if I thought FDR had allowed Pearl Harbour to happen in order to get America into WW2. But the idea that FDR deliberately allowed Pearl Harbour is **false**. And as FDR never publicly expressed any wish to harm Americans as opposed to helping them again this is a conspiracy theory. FDR did plenty of stupid things for which we can justly berate him, allowing Pearl Harbour to happen deliberately was not one of them.

by [Alan Forrester](#) on Sun, 09/10/2006 - 21:19 | [reply](#)

## Logic 101

**Alan Forrester:** *"So your assertion relies on the American government having motives different from their stated motives."*

I do believe he's finally got it! Congrats, Alan. Most people are addicted to drugs, religion or some other ideology. There are a handful that are sober when they write something. I'm having a martini right now!

Many are stuck on a "good and just" America and can't even admit the other logical possibilities that aren't so happy and innocent. The same people that plead "logic" and "sanity" are the very people won't don't understand that logic is about working through *\*all\** existing possibilities methodically. Discounting possibilities without being able to disprove them is the true insanity. We don't teach critical thinking skills in schools because... we can't think critically.

In fact, assimilating a large network of political facts together requires an extensive hard drive in that cranium of yours so it's not surprising that people still running Windows 3.1 can't understand beyond the fluffy surface of happy-happy-joy-joy. Those people edit Wikipedia and believe that people tend to edit in "good faith", hahaha. Loooooneytooooooons. Do you hear windmills in your mind.

by [Easter Bunny from Hell](#) on Thu, 09/14/2006 - 08:36 | [reply](#)

## Loonies on the horizon

"Many are stuck on a "good and just" America and can't even admit the other logical possibilities that aren't so happy and innocent"

America is a human mental construct. America cannot be 'good' or 'bad': only people can be either.

The loonies who go around believing in the most complex and

unlikely theories simply because they are the most complex and unlikely, are the last people who should lecture the sane among us on critical thinking skills.

by [Yoni](#) on Sat, 09/16/2006 - 16:26 | [reply](#)

## Re: Logic 101

Many are stuck on a "good and just" America and can't even admit the other logical possibilities that aren't so happy and innocent. The same people that plead "logic" and "sanity" are the very people who don't understand that logic is about working through *\*all\** existing possibilities methodically. Discounting possibilities without being able to disprove them is the true insanity. We don't teach critical thinking skills in schools because... we can't think critically.

The title of your post is rather ironic as the one thing nobody could learn from it is logic. There are an infinite number of possible explanations, including an infinite number of theories in which the whole world is a dream in my mind. So I could not methodically work my way through all of the possible explanations. And as you are not running down the infinite list I can see that you don't take your own idea seriously. So let's move on to how we really can learn about the world. We can learn by proposing explanations and subjecting them to criticism. Sometimes we can even exclude a whole category of explanations because they are all susceptible to arguments of a particular form. I exclude all explanations that involve the external world not being a dream in my head without running through all of them by using a philosophical argument against solipsism, which may be found in [The Fabric of Reality](#), by David Deutsch. Basically the world I see around me is complicated and autonomous from me so all solipsism really does is relabel the external world as a dream. Similarly I exclude all conspiracy theoretic arguments by arguments which may be found [here](#).

by [Alan Forrester](#) on Thu, 09/21/2006 - 20:27 | [reply](#)

## Rising Tide of Insanity

Bravo!

by [Jeanie Starr](#) on Mon, 10/16/2006 - 09:20 | [reply](#)

## Test for Conspiracy Theories.

I suggest another 'test' that conspiracy theories should be held up to:

Assume that you are one of the ring-leaders, at the start of the planning phase of this conspiracy.

Assume that you wish to achieve their aims (according to the

conspiracy theorists) - power, wealth, a war with the Middle East, accessing Iraqi oil supplies, whatever.

What courses of action are open to you? How risky is each? How costly?

Given the various alternatives, is it possible that you would select 'the conspiracy theory' as a suitable way forward?

I believe that the USA-involvement-in-9/11 conspiracy completely fails this test. There are so many simpler, cheaper, and safer ways for the USA administration to achieve the nefarious aims attributed to them by the conspiracy theorists - if they wanted to. Which one depends on what you believe the USA's aims were.

E.g. - Getting their hands in Iraqi oil. It would have been so much easier for the USA to cut a deal with Iraq than to engineer a war. The USA was the driving force behind maintaining the UN sanctions, and could have had them lifted if they wanted to. They could have negotiated almost anything with Saddam - exclusive oil deals, US military bases on Iraqi soil, etc. Saddam was a pragmatist above all else. With the USA with him, rather than against him...

by Mk on Mon, 04/30/2007 - 13:39 | [reply](#)