

Conspiracy Theories – 3: Unseen Events

When George Mikes (the humourist and author of **How to be an Alien**) was very young and not yet able to read, he formulated a theory to explain his experiences. It was that *no one can read*: older people were merely pretending to see meaning in random squiggles of ink on paper, and were secretly laughing at his gullibility.

This had all the formal **attributes of a conspiracy theory**: it alleged that significant events in Mikes' life (adults reading to him, and trying to teach him to read) were part of a secret plan that involved the conspirators' lying to him about facts and about their own motives, in order to benefit at his expense (in this case merely by being amused). It also explained away his own relative *ineffectiveness* (his inability to read, compared with other people's apparent ability to), in terms of his *powerlessness* and their power over him. This is another very common theme of conspiracy theories. His theory differed from a standard conspiracy theory mainly in the way he held it: in particular, in the way he abandoned it.

He did not say how he first came to doubt it, but we can guess what must have been involved: simply *taking it seriously as an explanation of reality*. Perhaps at some point he noticed that different adults were able to read the same story out of a given book. Such observations would not have proved anything, but they would have multiplied the invisible events that must have been happening if the no-one-can-read theory was true: now, instead of merely laughing at him behind his back, the adults must have been learning stories by heart, and coordinating which ones they were going to pretend were contained in which book. They must have been pretending to find their way to unfamiliar places by reading road signs, feigning frustration when they left the shopping list at home, pretending that mail contained information from distant relatives, and so on. To maintain all those pretences would have involved hidden processes of great complexity, centring on the young Mikes, and laboriously hidden from him.

So what? Nature is full of hidden processes of great complexity; people do often hide things laboriously from other people – not least from children. Mikes was not wrong to be sceptical: initially, he could not have distinguished what he was told about reading from what he was told about Santa Claus and the Tooth Fairy. What

was essential, though, was that he be just as sceptical of his own alternative explanation. And more: he needed to be seeking a true explanation, to care whether reality did or did not conform, even in unseen ways, to whatever explanation he adopted. Though his no-one-can-read explanation could never have been *proved* false, he was not looking for proof. He had not proposed it in order to create an unassailable dogma, but simply because he had a problem imagining a reality in which all those squiggles meant something. But then, given the role that he could see that alleged meaning playing in the lives of the people around him, he would soon have realised that postulating a further slew of apparently meaningless behaviour (the conspiracy) in the reality beyond his immediate perceptions did nothing to solve that problem. In effect it merely raised it again, but all the worse for being projected off the page and out into the wider world.

So, when he thought about the evidence available to him, though he would never have faced disproof, he would have faced a choice: try again to understand the hidden meanings in the squiggles – which might be difficult and, for all he knew, might never work – or attribute everything he saw to the hidden conspiracy. The latter option was guaranteed always to be available. Yet, at some point, he must have realised that the world could not be understood in those terms.

This is the choice which conspiracy theorists make differently and irrationally. They do care about *some* invisible events: the relatively small number that they love to think about, such as President Bush and his inner circle discussing their evil plan to seize the Iraqi oil fields. But they don't care enough to follow through the implications for the host of other invisible events that would also have to be happening if those were – such as how the conspiracy would recruit its members and how it would agree upon a new plan, and what exactly the conspirators' reward is and how it gets to them. We shall say more about this in the next instalment, but in general terms: conspiracy theorists chronically fail to form a serious model of what reality would be like if their theory of it were true. They paint on a large canvas with only a tiny area of detail, always preferring the security of familiar patterns of thought that are guaranteed to provide the semblance of an explanation, to the uncertainty and difficulty of trying to understand what the facts really are.

Part 4

Thu, 08/28/2003 - 08:39 | [digg](#) | [del.icio.us](#) | [permalink](#)

When will 9.11

be Investigated?

Sur UBL was it, but WHO HELPED HIM??????

America WAS never that DEFENCELESS like it was on 9.11.

WAKE UP.

Ask question, dont try to protect the terrorist, but try to find those who helped the terrorist.

by a reader on Fri, 08/29/2003 - 07:05 | [reply](#)

Clean, Clear and Incisive

I thank you for your excellent dissection and (pre-autopsy?) of Conspiracy Theories.

I've sensed various aspects of your explanations myself, but I never felt moved to trace the rational path you've taken here, to such powerful and positive ends!

Very fine work, and I really appreciate it, although I'm okay[Ⓐ]
knu2.com

by a reader on Mon, 09/01/2003 - 06:20 | [reply](#)

Nice work

<http://www.ericblumrich.com/buddy.html>

Also a nice about the same thing.

by a reader on Mon, 09/01/2003 - 12:25 | [reply](#)

When will 9/11 be investigated

The investigation is done. The result is easy and clear : USA is the lone government who is able to make that kind of huge action and to hide it from the world. More details and proofs are on my web page <http://users.swing.be/muhammadcolumbo/>

Your comments are wellcome

When you will be sure on the autors of 9/11, you will be able to stop its repeat.

by **Muhammad Columbo** on Thu, 05/12/2005 - 17:47 | [reply](#)

i disagree!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

i think you're projecting the above anecdote on everyone who has thought for themselves about 9-11, and you've got it backwards. might i suggest that YOU are the baby; you are the one with the pre-set conclusion ("there's no conspiracy") and you refuse to acknowledge that we adults can indeed read for ourselves!

i am a very rational american and i have seen enough to know that i can point the finger at george tenet and a slew of bush administration officials. i know the way i've been told to think by the new york times et al. i have read enough to know not to buy that programming.

i have heard your smug argument before. have you considered that

you're labeling a lot of people you have never met as "conspiracy theorists" and calling them all crazy. that's nuts! how large does that group have to be before you see that YOU'RE the insane one here?

YOU are the person who labels the views of people who ARE thinking for themselves "insane". we don't call ourselves "conspiracy theorists", we who have looked a little deeper than you have so far dared to look. and we don't have disrespect for other views; we INVITE skeptics to challenge our alternative hypothesis (didn't that one guy offer a \$100,000 reward if the OFFICIAL explanation could be proven?)

some of the people in your comments have it right:
BEGIN A REAL INVESTIGATION OF 9-11!!!!
AND NOTICE WHO HAS BEEN BLOCKING ONE!!!!

-j

by hmddd on Sat, 12/03/2005 - 17:34 | [reply](#)

Does a '9-11 conspiracy' theory pass 'the test'?

Here's another test that all potential conspiracy theories should be able to pass:

Put yourself in the position of the beneficiary, before the alleged event takes place (e.g. Bush before 9-11).

Assume that you wish to achieve his/her aims (e.g. to 'get your hands on Iraqi oil', or 'start a war with Afganistan', etc. etc.)

What possible courses of action are available to you? Which are likely to work, and would be quick, easy, safe, cheap? Which course of action would you take?

Would the alleged 'conspiracy' be anywhere near the top of the list of possible plans you would come up with?

E.g. - if Bush wanted to get his hands on Iraqi oil - what could he do? Why not cut a deal with Iraq? America stops maintaining sanctions, and leans on the UN to lift them completely. In return, Iraq has to ditch all existing agreements and sign up long-term deals with certain American oil companies on American terms...

If you can come up with half a dozen alternate plans to your 'conspiracy theory', which are:

- (a) much simpler
- (b) much more likely to succeed
- (c) less politically damaging if you are found out
- (d) much 'cheaper' (financially, politically, etc.)
- (e) in character (i.e. the course of action has been taken in the past by this group of people - publically and successfully)

then you must conclude that it is highly unlikely that smart, powerful, careful world leaders would choose the more dangerous, more difficult 'conspiracy' plan!

And before you question the intelligence of the 'conspiracy' leaders - if you credit them with enough intelligency, foresight and power to fool or manipulate everybody in the world over a period of years, then you have to credit them with the intelligence to pick the right plan in the first place!

by Mark on Mon, 08/21/2006 - 09:46 | [reply](#)

Re: Here's another test

Good point.

by [Editor](#) on Mon, 08/21/2006 - 10:54 | [reply](#)

Disrespect and sanity (or not)

"YOU are the person who labels the views of people who ARE thinking for themselves "insane". we don't call ourselves "conspiracy theorists", we who have looked a little deeper than you have so far dared to look. and we don't have disrespect for other views"

LOL. You can't have visited Dewdney's rantings on this matter. Dewdney isn't a scientist, but he mocks scientists who take apart his pathetic attempts to 'prove' by way of 'physics' that the CIA (or sometimes Mossad) organised 9/11.

by [Yoni](#) on Sat, 09/09/2006 - 22:50 | [reply](#)

Syllogisms

"USA is the lone government who is able to make that kind of huge action and to hide it from the world"

So the syllogism goes:

A can do B

Hence, A must have done B.

Yees ... right ...

Nobody says it was done by any one particular government.

Capish?

by [Yoni](#) on Sat, 09/09/2006 - 22:52 | [reply](#)

both sides of this argument are doing exactly what...

the article says people who believe in conspiracy theories do.

Neither of you are willing to consider evidence which doesn't fit into your already drawn conclusion.

by [Jay Aziza](#) on Wed, 12/20/2006 - 17:30 | [reply](#)

The test.

We could have negotiated with the USSR and Cuba, too.
Oil may be a major factor, but its not the only one.
If they want more power, both domestically and internationally, a weak showing of negotiating with Saddam would not further that goal.

Please list the 6 alternate plans which are: simpler, more likely to succeed (if the conspiracy theory turned out to be true, then it did succeeded), less politically damaging (if it was all verbal agreements, how could anyone ever "find out"?), cheaper, and in character?

I would ask that you apply the same standard to the Islamic hijackers.

If they were smart enough to execute this plan against the richest most powerful country in the world, would they not have been smart enough to realize the consequences? Would they have wanted to have the US destroy thier entire way of life? Would that have been the best way to achieve thier goals of less US presence in the mid-east?

In the long run, who gained more of thier goals from 9/11, Islamic fundamentalists or the PNAC?

-What history teaches is this – that people and governments have never learnt anything from history, or acted on principles deduced from it.

by **Jay Aziza** on Wed, 12/20/2006 - 17:37 | [reply](#)

Not Analogous

It's easier for a few hijackers to keep a secret than a president working to attack his own country!

And more likely for a few hijackers to be wrong about how to achieve their ends.

by a reader on Wed, 12/20/2006 - 23:57 | [reply](#)

Failed test?

Jay tried to apply the same test as **Mark's** to Islamic fundamentalists' conspiracy to hijack and crash the planes on 9/11. But he did not reach the right answer.

The hijackers had declared their motives before, so there are no hidden motives. This is plainly on display for all to see. In fact, they are trying to convert the world to it. They had also announced their intentions to attack the US. They honour dying in order to achieve this goal, which they hold to be for Allah and sacred. And they believe that they will be rewarded for their actions in Heaven. So there is no "conspiracy theory" here. The conspiracy only exists before 9/11 for what the hijackers had to do in order to make it happen.

What other ways did they have to achieve their goal? More or less

nothing else! Their goal was to attack the US. With no army, they were rationally reduced to using isolated acts of violence with whatever they can make do. So they indeed pass Mark's test.

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

by **Liberal Iranian** on Thu, 12/28/2006 - 09:06 | [reply](#)

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