The War Against Conspiracy Theories

Regular readers will know that we consider the prevalence of **conspiracy theories**, both in the West and among its enemies, to be a major and grossly under-recognised cause of the current world crisis.

We have also **remarked** that the real alliances, the real loyalties and the real conflicts in world affairs are not between states, nations or religions, but between subcultures defined not only by their values, but also by how they think the world works. This has always been true, but it is especially true of the current war.

Much has been written about the deficiencies of the term 'War on Terrorism'. Terrorism is a method not an enemy. And yet the alternative names that have been proposed – such as the War Against Islamism – are equally inaccurate. The Maoist terrorists of **Nepal** are not Islamists. Nor are the rulers of North Korea.

Putting all these ideas together, we have come to the conclusion that the only accurate term for the current war is **The War Against Conspiracy Theories**. It is a war between conspiracy-theory-based subcultures and those based on truth and reason. It is a war between those who judge 'narratives' according *whom* they validate, and those who seek explanations that correspond to reality. Every perpetrator of violence against the West (or against Americans, or Jews, or even Christians) today is possessed by an utterly false causal explanation of how the West works and what the West is. Every other person, however well-meaning, who gives credence to such an explanation is in some measure an ally of those murderers.

In a recent **opinion poll**, nearly half of New Yorkers said that people in the United States Government "knew in advance that attacks were planned on or around September 11, 2001, and that they consciously failed to act". Everyone reading this must know people whose political thinking is similarly tainted by, if not utterly based on, conspiracy theories at least as insane as that. Go out and persuade them. Persuade them not only that their particular conspiracy theory doesn't make sense but that the underlying world view isn't true. That it is no more than a nasty little fantasy that is hurting and crippling them even as it offers them the specious simplicity and comfort of blaming others. That the world is better

than that and that if they choose to, they can be part of its

improving further. Persuade them because in the long run, if you fail to persuade them, they will kill you.

Thu, 09/02/2004 - 23:12 | **digg** | **del.icio.us** | **permalink**

Please explain

What is the the difference between a conspiracy theory and a valid theory? e.g.: "The US went to Iraq for the oil." vs. "The US went to Iraq so as to use it as a base to attack terrorist sponsoring states."

Both theories explain motives in terms other than what the official government position is. Or are both of these conspiracy theories? Or neither?

by a reader on Fri, 09/03/2004 - 02:21 | **reply**

click on links

the world wrote, and linked, a whole series on the matter

-- Elliot Temple
http://www.curi.us/

by **Elliot Temple** on Fri, 09/03/2004 - 04:04 | **reply**

Not Quite

I don't think "**The War Against Conspiracy Theories**" is quite right.

Perhaps it's **The War Against Conspiracy-Theory-Inspired Violence**. We shouldn't fight wars against people who are merely wrong. We actually encourage an environment where various theories (sound and unsound) can be peacefully held, expressed and debated. What we are at "war" against are those who use conspiracy theories as justification to threaten and attack others, and the idea that this is ok.

I think the intellectual battle against many sorts of fantasy thinking is worthy also, but it's something other than this war.

Gil

by **Gil** on Fri, 09/03/2004 - 15:48 | **reply**

Re: Not Quite

Our conclusion was: 'persuade them before they kill you', *not* 'kill them before they kill you'.

The war and the persuasion are intimately connected. One cannot hope to succeed in either without the other.

by **Editor** on Fri, 09/03/2004 - 17:23 | **reply**

The West

I am struck by the idea that "The West" is in itself a geographic conspiracy theory against global ignorance found upon three corners of the earth's surface, although i have no other word to describe it. There is no West without an East, a South, a North. However "The West" could be what we call it, another word for enlightenment thought wherever and whenever it is found.

Gil's point is well taken.

by a reader on Sat, 09/04/2004 - 00:22 | **reply**

Re: Not Quite

I agree that the two are related. But, I don't like referring to the ideological conflict itself as a "war". I really don't like conflating it with this war.

We don't have to persuade them to drop their conspiracy theories, in order to win this war. We just have to persuade them that there are better ways to live than killing people over those theories.

If we have to persuade them to drop their conspiracies in order to win this war, then I'm afraid we're doomed. I'll believe that that can be done right after someone successfully convinces everyone to drop their theistic theories (which are also related to this problem).

I understand that Daniel C. Dennett is going to try with his upcoming book.

I wish him luck.

Gil

by **Gil** on Sat, 09/04/2004 - 00:35 | **reply**

Re: Not Quite

The problem is: ideas have consequences.

Fortunately, that is also the solution.

by **Editor** on Sat, 09/04/2004 - 00:56 | **reply**

Re: Not Quite

Persuasion is not just about talking to people. It's also about getting people to listen to you in the first place. The war part of the war on terror is the battle against not even being *able* to communicate: the brick wall of unlistening that Islamists have around their core values. That this is not the same thing as theism is evidenced by the fact that Jews, Christians and Hindus are not instigating horrors upon either each other or the secular values of the West. Attacking theism as a way of attacking terrorism is like banning guns to stop violent crime: not the point, won't work.

But I do agree with Gil's distinction between ideas and actions. The

ability to discuss one's ideas is predicated on the idea that not all ideas do actually necessitate certain kinds of unthinking immediate action: and that is why I personally would characterise the evil out there, whatever one wants to call it, not by its wrong-thinking but by its *lack* of thinking. It is not flawed ideas that are the problem, but the failure of flawed ideas to grow by coming into contact with other ideas (criticism and improvement).

Not everyone who believes conspiracy theories therefore decides to strap explosives on their body and go and murder schoolchildren. This is a huge and fundamental difference between New Yorkers and Chechen "rebels". Western liberals may be mistaken in implicitly supporting the bad guys, but they are not the *cause* of the war: in order to end terrorism, we have primarily to attack not the conscious ideas of liberals or Islamists, but the unconscious culture of non-growth that prevails in the Islamic world. This is a deeper thing than the higher-level conspiracy theories it includes about the way the rest of the world works.

If you argue with A Western liberal for long enough, well enough, then eventually you may cause some improvement in his world view. But this is not going to happen between you and a terrorist hell bent on beseiging a school. To persuade the people at the bottom of the trouble (not exactly the same thing as the "root cause", but not dissimilar- more like the most active enactors of the theories, or the leading troublemakers) you have to get *those* people (and all potential would-bes) to listen.

This is done by force, and force is very different from persuasion. Democracy is not, in itself, growth or better ideas than Islamism- it can, potentially, allow for all kinds of ideas, including tyranny. But it doesn't generally, because democracy *allows for* the growth of ideas within its debate-based traditions, and this tends to happen quickly as soon as it is set in process.

The idea that everything human beings do, including war and political systems, is theoretical, is, I think wrong: there is a real material world out there, and we do interact with it, whether or not our theories recognise that fact. Therefore, the war is fundamentally not against any theoretical idea: it is a war against destructive *activity*, born of lack of growth protected by other destructive activity. As terror is an active verb, I think it is not a bad name for this. Islamism, which is the enactment of certain Islamic religious ideas in a certain way, embodies both belief and action in its meaning, and is, I think, also appropriate.

In other words, actions are more fundamental than theories. This is why we fight this war instead of being pacifists: you can't persuade anyone of anything once you've had your head sawn off.

Alice

by a reader on Sat, 09/04/2004 - 05:05 | **reply**

The West doesn't exactly have "secular" values

nt

-- Elliot Temple
http://www.curi.us/

by **Elliot Temple** on Sat, 09/04/2004 - 16:28 | **reply**

Ideas or actions?

Certainly there's a huge difference between doing something and merely advocating it. And another difference between advocating it and merely believing it to be right. And these are just three points on a continuum.

It is also true that how people act depends on their situation as well as their ideas (broadly construed). But how a person behaves in a given situation depends on nothing other than those ideas. If one denies that, one runs straight into the **homunculus fallacy**. So if a person with (say) President Bush's ideas becomes President, he *will* behave as President Bush does. There is no further decision required - no possible state of having those ideas but somehow not acting accordingly. That would be the homunculus fallacy again. And the same is true of someone with the ideas of a terrorist who happens to be given an opportunity to become one.

by **David Deutsch** on Sat, 09/04/2004 - 20:22 | **reply**

Re: Ideas or actions?

i agree, but i don't follow how it's the homunculus fallacy in particular.

-- Elliot Temple
http://www.curi.us/

by **Elliot Temple** on Sun, 09/05/2004 - 00:39 | **reply**

Re: Ideas or actions?

Well, if you think in terms of something more causing a person's behaviour than ideas - if you think of ideas as something a person has rather than is, then you'll think in terms of someone (the real inner you, the homunculus) making the decision whether to act on your ideas.

by **David Deutsch** on Sun, 09/05/2004 - 01:40 | **reply**

Re:Please Explain

I haven't heard the second theory advocated before as the primary explanation for the war. As such it does seem to satisfy the conditions for being a conspiracy theory. But if one is merely asserting that this was one of the many possible contingencies that were being planned for, then I disagree that it requires the government's motives to be different from what they claimed and

so I disagree that it's a conspiracy theory. They are open about

wanting regime change in other states, and open in refusing to rule out pre-emptive force if they deem a regime to be a threat. Obviously, once it was decided that Iraq should be next after Afghanistan, any such contingency plans would involve using Iraq as a base.

Under the interpretation where it is a conspiracy theory, it is a much less severe one than the oil theory, because it involves coordination among only a handful of people (in principle, it need not be a conspiracy at all: the President could be the only conspirator), it involves no spoils and therefore no coordination over them, and also because the purported motives and moral values would be very close to the conspirators' allegedly actual motives and values.

by **David Deutsch** on Sun, 09/05/2004 - 01:59 | **reply**

conspiracies need to be illicit

Note: technically the "second theory" is not a conspiracy theory (generic def.) because a conspiracy by def. is not just any old secret agreement, but a secret agreement to do something wrong/illicit. Creating/having bases from which to attack terrorists is not by itself illicit; depends on where/how those bases are created. In this context (ousting a dictator / having troops there to midwife a reasonably consensual gov't / which stay there for some time) I see nothing wrong with it. The "second theory" is less a "conspiracy theory" than a *strategy theory*. It is a theory that the invasion of Iraq was in accord with some secret *strategy*; were that strategy illicit, it could rise to conspiracy theory... but it's not.

It may however satisfy **The World**'s def. of a conspiracy theory (not sure).

Personally, I'd prefer to call this war **The War On What Ultimately Causes Conspiracy Theories To Flourish**. I mean a war against conspiracy theories per se... wouldn't it be better to fight what causes them?

But I say that mostly cuz I'd like to fish for **The World**'s take on what causes conspiracy theories to flourish... ;-)

--Blixa

by a reader on Sun, 09/05/2004 - 04:52 | **reply**

Oil theory:

A.President Bush wants to be re-elected.

B.A robust economy is a key factor in an incumbent president's re-election.

C.A cheap and reliable oil supply is a key factor in a robust economy.

D.Iraq has a large supply of oil.

Therefore: Iraq war.

Is this a conspiracy theory?

by a reader on Sun, 09/05/2004 - 15:34 | **reply**

war is expensive

the war costs more than the monetary gain from free trade with Iraq (at least in shortterm like a decade). if he just wanted strong economy, he could have spent the same money on taxcuts.

also, Iraq could choose not to sell us oil, so what does the supply being "stable" mean? if it just means someone less nuts than Saddam is in charge, then I guess this is one tiny tiny reason we went to Iraq. but it'd be an economic blunder if that was the reason, and this theory ignores Bush's proclaimed motives (he thinks it's right to free people, protect ourselves).

often people mean either the US will *steal* oil, or the US will control the Iraqi government to make sure the oil keeps flowing. those are conspiracy theories.

-- Elliot Temple
http://www.curi.us/

by **Elliot Temple** on Sun, 09/05/2004 - 16:52 | **reply**

changing situations

how a person behaves in a given situation depends on nothing other than those ideas

So changing people's situations is the answer. This seems to me to be the prime motive of the war; changing the situations that enable the enaction of terrorist ideas (as Blixa says). You can change people's situations: what can't be done is persuading people of different ideas when their situations render them deaf.

The situation than most helps the growth of terrorist ideas, is terrorist states (states which terrorise their own people). The situation which is worst for terrorism is democracy, because the process of debate enables good ideas to gain ascendancy. The primary target in the war is not bad ideas themselves, but the systems which are obstacles to the growth of ideas in general.

Alice

by a reader on Mon, 09/06/2004 - 03:01 | **reply**

Changing Ideas

"how a person behaves in a given situation depends on nothing other than those ideas"

So changing people's situations is the answer. This seems to me to

be the prime motive of the war; changing the situations that enable the enaction of terrorist ideas (as Blixa says). You can change people's situations: what can't be done is persuading people of different ideas when their situations render them deaf.

Changing people's situations is only part of the answer. But it is conspiracy theories that drove the likes of Timothy McVeigh and Terry Nichols. And to a large extent, it is conspiracy theories that hamper those of us who have the capability for changing other people's situations from doing so. Ideas must change first. The systems which are obstacles to the growth of ideas are in fact just systems of ideas.

by a reader on Mon, 09/06/2004 - 08:13 | **reply**

if systems are systems of ideas...

... then what is the difference between those and situations, as in:

*how a person behaves **in a given situation** depends on those ideas* (my bolds) ?

I can rephrase my entire comment substituting "system of ideas" for "situation", but that would be boring.

Now, if only *ideas* need to change, how does bombing cities and changing governments help? Is that not precisely *changing a situation* (slash "system of ideas")?

Bombing a weapons factory is not the persuasion of human beings to believe different things than they believed the day before the bombing. It may lead to people changing their ideas but it is not in itself *the changing of ideas*.

Is the priority in dealing with terrorism persuasion, or is it *making persuasion more possible* (which is what has happened in Iraq, with the replacement by force of the terrorist government that murdered people for dissent, with some kind of democratic system that allows for debate and therefore the growth of ideas)?

It seems to me that the difference between those two is the difference between pacifism and rightness. Not everything in the universe is theoretical. Planet earth would not cease to exist if the human race died out. And if everyone in Iran decided they wanted democracy, they would still have to depose the government before setting up elections.

by a reader on Wed, 09/08/2004 - 08:30 | **reply**

Persuasion

Two good points. Changing a government and an economic system may make persuasion possible. However, removing an entire populace that has learned to live by ideas that are stalinist, control-persuade-purge, is not feasible. Changing minds takes time.

Democracy in the normal sense is as foreign an idea as "benign"

socialism when an entire country has experienced stalinism in its purest, harshest form. It will take some time to persuade people who have lived with very different practical ideas of what it means to stay alive and prosper under a stalinist regime, to understand that another idea of practical life is even feasible. Persuasion takes foresight and many many tools. Persuasion takes people within the country who have their own ideas of citizen inspired change and an extensive opportunity to practice them. Cultivation of a climate of persuasion must follow overthrow of even the worst dictator if there is to be any hope of sowing seeds of even the most rudimentary form of democracy. Ideas take time but they are all there is to work with when it comes down to change.

by a reader on Wed, 09/08/2004 - 14:21 | **reply**

Re: Conspiracies need to be illicit

Why? What if someone has a theory that their "great leader" has a secret weapon or strategy that will destroy their enemy? Isn't that a conspiracy theory? I would imagine that this was quite common among Germans when it was evident that they were losing WWII.

by a reader on Thu, 09/09/2004 - 01:31 | **reply**

yes and what

conspire: to join in a secret agreement to do an **unlawful or wrongful act** or an act which becomes unlawful as a result of the secret agreement

Yes I suppose Germans (and others) who thought Hitler was working on a 'secret weapon' were holding to a conspiracy theory. That conspiracy theory happens to have been correct as I understand it (not all conspiracy theories are incorrect, right?); the Germans were working on atomic weapons (though did not succeed).

Not sure why you (I infer) think this example a contradiction. Perhaps because you don't think the Nazis working on an atomic weapon to destroy the Allied Powers was a wrongful act. It most certainly was. But then again lotsa things the Nazis did were wrong. The Nazis' existence in power was wrong (even if it arose constitutionally), and much follows from that easily.

caveat - I may not be adhering to **The World**'s def. of conspiracy theory in any of this

--Blixa

by a reader on Thu, 09/09/2004 - 06:30 | **reply**

re: persuasion

Evil regimes do not brainwash every member of their populations. They brainwash some, they threaten the majority into conforming, and a few manage to conspire against the regime and not get hung

in the market square.

The difference between democracy and terrorist dictatorship is this: in terrorist dictatorship, only those who agree with the government have a public voice. Those with good ideas are silenced.

One of the vilest things about the antiwar left is their argument that ordinary Iraqis did not want the invasion. As there was no democracy in Iraq, it was more or less impossible to guage how many ordinary Iraqis wanted the invasion. But it took more than three or four to destroy all those statues of Saddam; cheer the American troops; run the new interim Iraqi democratic government. Let's see how many turn out to vote, and how many refuse to participate in democracy on the grounds that they prefer to live under dictatorship.

There are, of course, be some people in Iraq who think they want (or really do want) an evil terrorising dictatorship. Most of those want it because they want to *be* it. However, there are an awful lot of people who do not want that. All they have been needing is the opportunity to argue their ideas in the public arena without being murdered (ie, to argue their ideas in the public arena period).

All this is far, far more fundamental and important than *anything* to do with the actual nature of the ideas they want to discuss. Where there is debate, there can be political growth. Where there is no debate, it's impossible.

That is why this is a war on more than just ideas. It is a physical, material war, involving real deaths and real bombings: yes, *driven* by conscious thinking humans, with the ambition of enabling people's ideas to grow, but still a *war* and not a chat round a big round table (or on the internet). The difference between those two things is the difference between civilised growth and barbarism. In other words, we are having to act according to the rules of the barbaric in order to attempt to institute something better in the moral blackspots of the world, for the sake of everyone's future. It's not pretty, and it's not persuasion. But sometimes, civilised people have to meet barbaric people on the only ground those people are prepared to occupy, in order to defeat them. And that means, by the use of *force*. Not discussion.

Then the war (not really a war at all- a process of rational growth by the exchange of *ideas* instead of violence) on conspiracy theories can begin.

Alice

by a reader on Thu, 09/09/2004 - 09:01 | **reply**

v nice, alice

good post

-- Elliot Temple
http://www.curi.us/

by **Elliot Temple** on Thu, 09/09/2004 - 15:02 | **reply**

Re:yes and what

"Not sure why you (I infer) think this example a contradiction."

Because conspiracy is not illicit from the view point conspiracy theorist(in this case a German).

by a reader on Thu, 09/09/2004 - 19:22 | **reply**

doesn't matter

doesn't matter

by a reader on Fri, 09/10/2004 - 04:55 | **reply**

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