



# When 9/11 Conspiracy Theories Go Bad

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Please stop sending me those emails. You know who are. And you know what emails I mean ... Okay, I'll spell it out -- those forwarded emails suggesting, or flat-out stating, the CIA and the U.S. government were somehow involved in the horrific September 11 attacks.

There are emails about a fellow imprisoned in Canada who claims to be a former U.S. intelligence office and who supposedly passed advance warning of the attack to jail guards in mid-August. There are emails, citing an Italian newspaper, reporting that last July Osama bin Laden was treated for kidney disease at the American hospital in Dubai and met with a CIA official. There are the emails, referring to a book published in France, that note the attacks came a month after Bush Administration officials, who were negotiating an oil deal with the Taliban, told the Afghans "either you accept our offer of a carpet of gold, or we bury you under a carpet of bombs."

Get the hint? Washington either did nothing to stop the September 11 attacks or plotted the assaults so a justifiable war could then be waged against Afghanistan to benefit Big Oil.

One email I keep receiving is a timeline of so-called suspicious events that "establishes CIA foreknowledge of [the September 11 attacks] and strongly suggests that there was criminal complicity on the part of the U.S. government in their execution."

I won't argue that the U.S. government does not engage in brutal, murderous skulduggery from time to time. But the notion that the U.S. government either detected the attacks but allowed them to occur, or, worse, conspired to kill thousands of Americans to launch a war-for-oil in Afghanistan is absurd. Still, each week emails passing on such tripe arrive. This crap is probably not worth a rational rebuttal, but I'm irritated enough to try.

It's a mug's game to refute individual pieces of conspiracy theories. Who can really know if anything that bizarre happened at a Dubai hospital? As for the man jailed in Canada, he was being held on a credit card fraud charge, and the only source for the story about his warning was his own word. The judge in his case said, "There is no independent evidence to support his colossal allegations." But a conspiracy-mongers can reply, wouldn't you expect the government and its friends in Canada to say that?

So let's start with a broad question: would U.S. officials be capable of such a foul deed? Capable -- as in able to pull it off and willing to do so. Simply put, the spies and special agents are not good enough, evil enough, or gutsy enough to mount this operation. That conclusion is based partly on, dare I say it, common sense, but also on years spent covering national security matters. (For a book I wrote on the CIA, I interviewed over 100 CIA officials and employees.)

Not good enough: Such a plot -- to execute the simultaneous destruction of the two towers, a piece of the Pentagon, and four airplanes and make it appear as if it all was done by another party -- is far beyond the skill level of U.S. intelligence. It would

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require dozens (or scores or hundreds) of individuals to attempt such a scheme. They would have to work together, and trust one another not to blow their part or reveal the conspiracy. They would hail from an assortment of agencies (CIA, FBI, INS, Customs, State, FAA, NTSB, DOD, etc.).

Yet anyone with the most basic understanding of how government functions (or does not function) realizes that the various bureaucracies of Washington -- particularly those of the national security "community" -- do not work well together. Even covering up advance knowledge would require an extensive plot. If there truly had been intelligence reports predicting the 9/11 attacks, these reports would have circulated through intelligence and policymaking circles before the folks at the top decided to smother them for geopolitical gain. That would make for a unwieldy conspiracy of silence. And in either scenario -- planning the attacks or permitting them to occur -- everyone who participated in the conspiracy would have to be freakin' sure that all the other plotters would stay quiet.

Not evil enough. This is as foul as it gets -- to kill thousands of Americans, including Pentagon employees, to help out oil companies. (The sacrificial lambs could have included White House staff or members of Congress, had the fourth plane not crashed in Pennsylvania.) This is a Hollywood-level of dastardliness, James Bond (or Dr. Evil) material.

Are there enough people of such a bent in all those agencies? That's doubtful. CIA officers and American officials have been evildoers. They have supported death squads and made use of drug dealers overseas. They have assisted torturers, disseminated assassination manuals, sold weapons to terrorist-friendly governments, undermined democratically-elected governments, and aided dictators who murder and maim. They have covered up reports of massacres and human rights abuses. They have plotted to kill foreign leaders.

These were horrendous activities, but, in most instances, the perps justified these deeds with Cold War imperatives (perverted as they were). And to make the justification easier, the victims were people overseas. Justifying the murder of thousands of Americans to help ExxonMobil would require U.S. officials to engage in a different kind of detachment and an even more profound break with decency and moral norms.

I recall interviewing one former CIA official who helped manage a division that ran the sort of actions listed above, and I asked him whether the CIA had considered "permanently neutralizing" a former CIA man who had revealed operations and the identities of CIA officers. Kill an American citizen? he replied, as if I were crazy to ask. No, no, he added, we could never do that. Yes, in the spy-world some things were beyond the pale. And, he explained, it would be far too perilous, for getting caught in that type of nasty business could threaten your career. Which brings us to....

Not gutsy enough. Think of the danger -- the potential danger to the plotters. What if their plan were uncovered before or, worse, after the fact? Who's going to risk being associated with the most infamous crime in U.S. history? At the start of such a conspiracy, no one could be certain it would work and remain a secret. CIA people -- and those in other government agencies -- do care about their careers.

Would George W. Bush take the chance of being branded the most evil president of all time by countenancing such wrongdoing? Oil may be in his blood, but would he place the oil industry's interests ahead of his own? (He sure said sayonara to Kenneth Lay and Enron pretty darn fast.) And Bush and everyone else in government know that plans leak. Disinformation specialists at the Pentagon could not keep their office off the front page of The New York Times. In the aftermath of September 11, there has been much handwringing over the supposed fact that U.S. intelligence has been too risk-averse. But, thankfully, some inhibitions -- P.R. concerns, career concerns -- do provide brakes on the spy-crowd.

By now, you're probably wondering why I have bothered to go through this exercise. Aren't these conspiracy theories too silly to address? That should be the case. But, sadly, they do attract people.

A fellow named Michael Ruppert, who compiled that timeline mentioned above, has drawn large crowds to his lectures. He has offered \$1000 to anyone who can "disprove the authenticity of any of his source material." Well, his timeline includes that Canadian prisoner's claim and cites the Toronto Star as the source. But Ruppert fails to note that the Star did not confirm the man's account, that the paper reported some observers "wonder if it isn't just the ravings of a lunatic," and that the Star subsequently reported the judge said the tale had "no air of reality." Does that disprove anything? Not 100 percent. There's still a chance that man is telling the truth, right? So I'm not expecting a check.

Conspiracy theories may seem more nuisance than problem. But they do compete with reality for attention. There is plenty to be outraged over without becoming obsessed with X Files-like nonsense. Examples? There's the intelligence services's failure to protect Americans and the lack of criticism of the CIA from elected officials. Or, General Tommy Franks, the commander of military operations in Afghanistan, declaring the commando mis-assault at Hazar Qadam, which resulted in the deaths of fifteen to twenty local Afghans loyal to the pro-U.S. government, was not an intelligence failure. (How can U.S. Special Forces fire at targets they wrongly believe to be Taliban or al Qaeda fighters, end up killing people they did not intend to kill, and the operation not be considered an intelligence failure?) More outrage material? A few months ago, forensic researchers found the remains of people tortured and killed at a base the CIA had established in the 1980s as a training center for the contras. The U.S. ambassador to Honduras at the time is now the U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, John Negroponte.

There are always national security misdeeds to be mad about. They may not be as cinematic in nature as a plot in which shady, unidentified U.S. officials scheme to blow up the World Trade Towers to gain control of an oil pipeline in Central Asia. But dozens of dead Hondurans or twenty or so Afghans wrongly killed ought to provoke anger and protest. In fact, out-there conspiracy theorizing serves the interests of the powers-that-be by making their real transgressions seem tame in comparison. (What's a few dead in Central America, compared to thousands in New York City? Why worry about Negroponte, when unidentified U.S. officials are slaughtering American civilians to trigger war?)

Perhaps there's a Pentagon or CIA office that churns out this material. Its mission: distract people from the real wrongdoing. Now there's a conspiracy theory worth exploring. Doesn't it make sense? Doesn't it all fit together? I challenge anyone to disprove it.

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