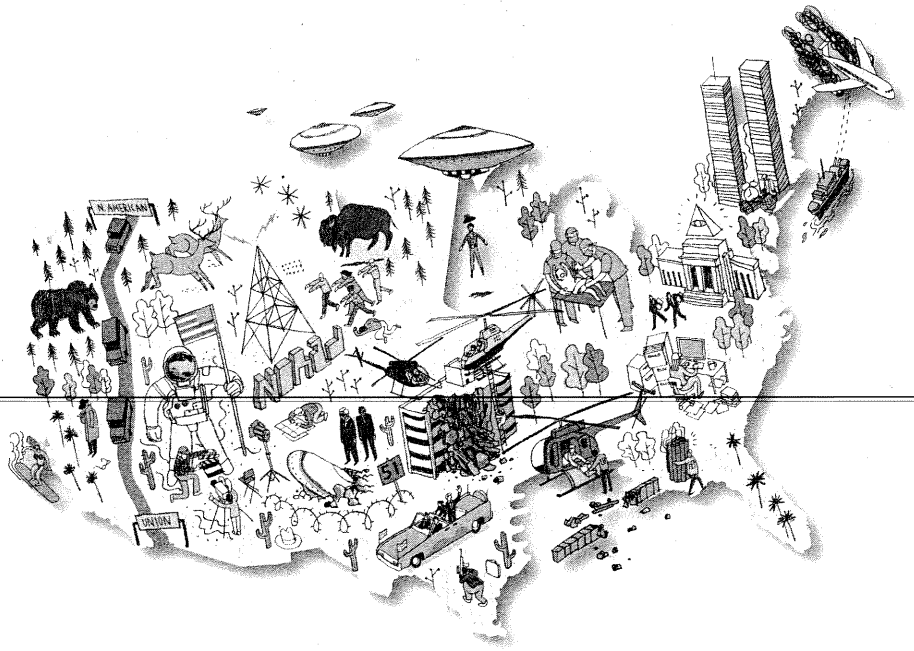
AMONG THE TRUTHERS



A JOURNEY THROUGH AMERICA'S GROWING CONSPIRACIST UNDERGROUND

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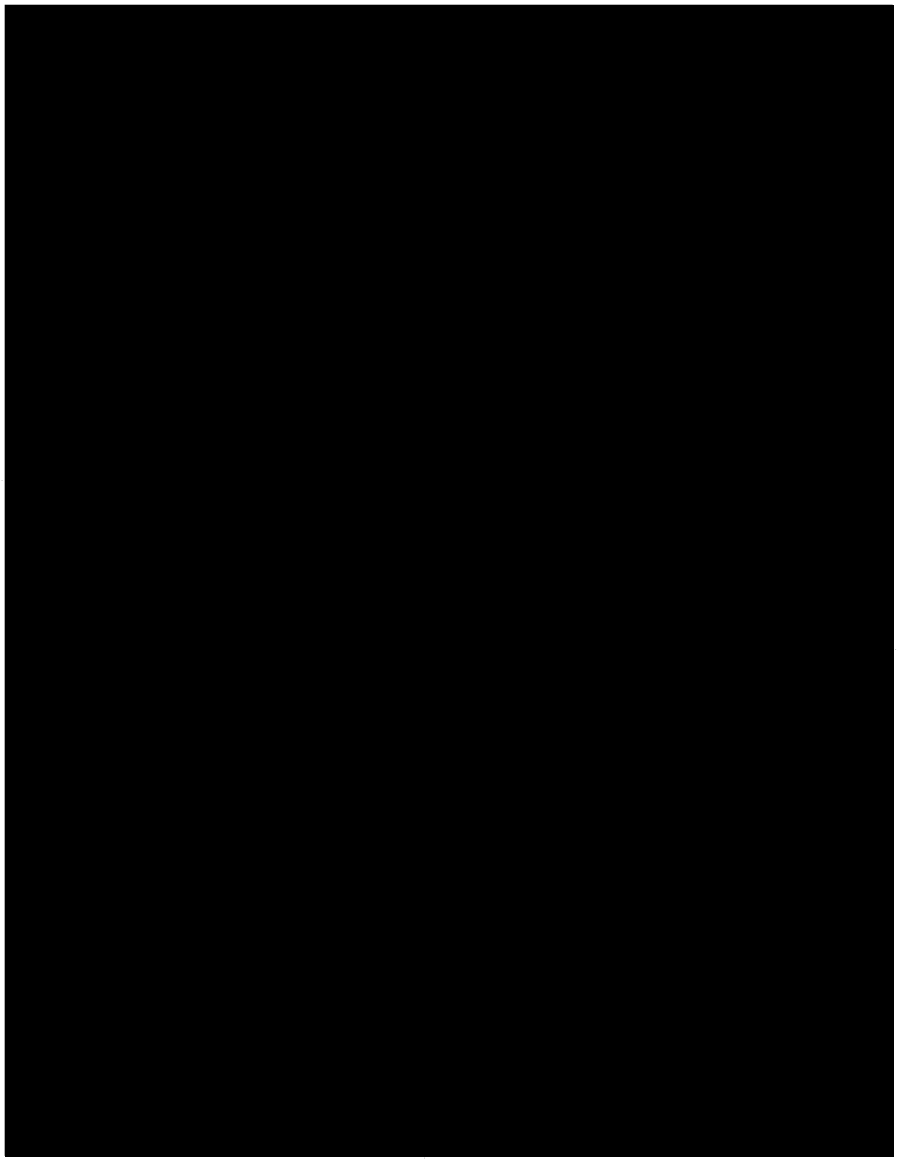

Through the Internet's Looking Glass

In 2005, Harvard Law School professor Cass Sunstein and two other researchers performed an experiment involving sixty Colorado adults. Sunstein divided the participants into two sets of small groups—one conservative, one liberal—based on their responses to a screening questionnaire, and then asked them to discuss three contentious questions: (1) "Should states allow same-sex couples

to enter into civil unions?" (2) "Should employers engage in 'affirmative action' by giving a preference to members of traditionally disadvantaged groups?" (3) "Should the United States sign an international treaty to combat global warming?"

Not surprisingly, the self-identified conservatives were more likely than self-identified liberals to answer no to all of these questions, both before and after their discussions. But Sunstein noted another interesting pattern: In virtually all of the groups, members ended up embracing more polarized positions following fifteen minutes of conversation with their ideological bedfellows—a phenomenon he describes in his research as "group polarization."

These results help demonstrate why modern electronic communication tools have done little to break down ideological divides—and, in many cases, have helped exacerbate them.

When the Internet became a truly mass medium in the late 1990s, there was a widespread belief that it heralded a golden age not only in communication, but in human relations: With so much information available for free from all around the world, futurists gushed, human beings would come to understand one another as never before. Like the ham-radio enthusiasts of yesteryear, we would spend our days conversing with people from other continents and opposite points on the ideological spectrum, building bridges of knowledge and understanding.

The result has been just the opposite: The Internet actually has exacerbated the human instinct toward parochialism, tribalism, and conspiracism.

Most web surfers, it turns out, have little interest in meeting pen pals in faraway places. Instead, people tend to use the web for work, school, shopping, entertainment, celebrity gossip, cute videos, photo-sharing, and chatting with people they already know. (It's notable, for instance, that MySpace, which facilitates social networking between strangers, has for years been losing market share to Facebook, which is designed to create virtual networks out of real-life flesh-and-blood friendships.) When using the Internet

to access news, most of us tend to consult a small set of sites that cater to our preexisting ideological niche. Politically active leftists, for instance, tend to get their news from sites such as Huffington Post, Daily Kos, Democratic Underground, *The Guardian*, and CounterPunch; while those on the Right go to Instapundit, National Review Online, Free Republic, and FOX News. Among bloggers and cable TV talking heads, the need to get noticed amid the din of competing voices has had a centrifugal effect, pushing commentary to the outer fringes on both sides of the Left-Right spectrum. According to a principle known as Godwin's Law, attributed to famed Internet lawyer Mike Godwin, every argument on the Internet always ends up with one side being compared to Adolf Hitler. Thanks to Glenn Beck, Godwin's Law may be observed on your TV screen as well.

Many true conspiracy theorists I've met don't even bother with web surfing anymore—they rely for their news on the menu of stories that are delivered automatically to their email accounts through RSS feeds, daily email newsletters, and Facebook groups. From the very instant they first boot up their computer in the morning, their inboxes comprise an unbroken catalog of outrage stories ideologically tailored to their preexisting obsessions.

The image of the world that emerges from this catalog bears little resemblance to the world most of us know. It is a dark, conspiratorial place where (to take the right-wing sites as an example) Christianity is under siege, political correctness has gone amok, militant gay activists have taken over every school board, and the White House flies the green flag of Islam. A sampling of WorldNetDaily news alerts from late 2009 and early 2010, for instance, presented readers with this itemized description of the state of America: "Lesbian awarded custody of Christian's only child," "Fistgate: Obama chief 'knew' of 'disgusting' sex subjects," "Christian fathers put in jail for shunning explicit sex ed," "Obama's Christmas tree has Chairman Mao, transvestite," "Girl Scouts hiding secret sex agenda?" and "Banished! City forbids Bible studies in homes."

Overtorqued as WorldNetDaily's stories may be, they qualify as blue-chip journalism compared to much of what gets passed around on peer-to-peer email networks. In late 2008, for instance, a message declaring that Barack Obama was a secret Muslim made its way into millions of inboxes. Another popular claim was that the U.S. government was going to create a 9/11 memorial that was crescent-shaped, in tribute to the Islamic faith of the terrorists—a myth that effectively tapped into conservatives' (not entirely baseless) belief that the nation's media and government were bending over backwards to avoid offending Muslims. Such tall tales typically remain popular on the Internet for months or even years at a stretch—the Internet-era equivalent of medieval folk legends. In all cases, it would take the credulous recipient just a few seconds to check these rumors against a reputable website such as Snopes or Wikipedia. But if the rumor accords with his or her preexisting conspiracist fears, he often will simply assume it is true and forward it to his friends.

In some cases, Internet rumor-mongering—or even just the fear thereof—has served to reverse government decisions and policies. In October 2010, for instance, Barack Obama canceled a scheduled trip to the Sikh Golden Temple in Amritsar, India, because Sikh tradition would have required the president to wear a head covering before entering the temple; and the resulting photo-op would have encouraged rumors that Obama is Muslim. (Americans often confuse the Islamic and Sikh faiths. Four days after 9/11, in fact, a murderer gunned down a Sikh gas station attendant in Mesa, Arizona, believing him to be Muslim.)

In Texas, an Internet-based conspiracist campaign helped preempt one of the largest infrastructure projects in U.S. history—the Trans-Texas Corridor (TTC), a four-thousand-mile road-and-rail transportation network that would parallel Interstate 35 and US 59, both of which have become congested in recent years thanks to the increased flow of goods to and from Mexico. The tipping point came after a business coalition called North America's SuperCor-

ridor Coalition (NASCO) put out a stylized map showing how the TTC would anchor a spine of road-and-rail arteries extending from southern Mexico to Montreal, Winnipeg, Edmonton, and Vancouver. The most strident critics of the TTC—including WorldNetDaily writer Jerome Corsi, who included a chapter on the subject in his 2007 conspiracist book *The Late Great USA: The Coming Merger With Mexico and Canada*—seized on the image as proof that the plan actually was part of a larger plot (hatched by the Council on Foreign Relations) to destroy America's national sovereignty by creating an EU-style "North American Union"—complete with a new currency (the "Amero") and a secret "shadow government" created under the auspices of the American-Canadian-Mexican Security and Prosperity Partnership. These conspiracy theories became so popular in the latter years of the Bush presidency—almost entirely on the strength of web-circulated propaganda—that legislatures in eighteen states actually introduced resolutions condemning the mythical "NAFTA Superhighway" of which the TTC supposedly was a part; and Lou Dobbs denounced it on CNN. In the end, the TTC plan became so politically toxic that it fizzled.

Mainstream journalists have been known to turn their noses up at the Internet's rumor mill. But the paranoid character of the blogosphere has, without a doubt, rubbed off on them. During the Bush administration, *New York Times* op-ed columnists Frank Rich and Paul Krugman became celebrities by portraying George W. Bush and Dick Cheney as outright liars seeking to turn the United States into a warmongering theocracy. On the Right, FOX News host Glenn Beck—whom a Gallup poll identified in December 2009 as the fourth-most-admired man in America (between Nelson Mandela and Pope Benedict XVI)—has described President Barack Obama as "a guy who has a deep-seated hatred for white people or the white culture," likened Democratic health care plans to the content of *Mein Kampf*, and warned that the

United States is headed toward "totalitarianism beyond your wildest imagination." (For a time, Beck even spread the notion that FEMA is building concentration camps in the United States to jail "dissidents.") Seized by the same spirit, Rush Limbaugh has suggested to his listeners that Barack Obama might cancel the 2012 elections, and that environmentalists might have blown up BP's Deepwater Horizon offshore drilling rig in the Gulf of Mexico as a plot to derail offshore oil exploration. ("The Constitution has just been ripped to shreds, so why is anything safe?" he asked listeners.) In this overheated media environment, with extremists from both sides cheering one another on in their self-selected echo chambers, the stigma against conspiracism enforced by the professional journalist guild of the postwar era is eroding.

Thanks to the way information is accessed on the Internet, even the most prosaic inquiries can lead users down the path of conspiracism. Columbia University Shakespeare expert James Shapiro was appalled to learn, in 2009, that "Nine of the top 10 hits in a recent Google search for 'Shakespeare' and 'authorship' directed the curious to sites that called into question Shakespeare's authorship." Anxious parents who enter "vaccines" and "autism" into Google's search engine will find prominent links to sites that promote the debunked link between vaccine "neurotoxins" and autism. Enter "9/11" into Google, and you will find links to Truther conspiracy sites. Google "WTC 7," and the very first site is a Truth site—which means it will pop up automatically using Google's "I'm feeling lucky" option.

The problem is that Google, the most popular search engine, generally ranks sites according to their popularity—not their reliability. So a flashy, well-traveled site peddling discredited conspiracies will be featured more prominently in Google's search results than, say, a government website full of accurate information about the same subject. In many cases, the most authoritative information doesn't turn up in a Google search at all—because it is buried in "deep web" repositories such as subscription-only scientific

journals, journalistic archives, court records, and government databases.

Once ensnared, Internet conspiracists often exhibit the same obsessive behavior patterns as people addicted to Internet gambling services, pornography, and video games: The material they crave is cheap (or free), unlimited, and accessible within the privacy of their own home. Like other kinds of addicts, they describe an initial period of addiction in which they remained glued to their computer screens for weeks on end. One former Truther, for instance, described this descent into addiction following a tip from a Rastafarian Truther who worked at his local "head shop": "Feeling very Matrix-ish, I watched *Zeitgeist* [a 2007 Truther film] and thought it made sense. I was poor and unsuccessful and here was why. The Federal Reserve, Bilderbergers, NWO, CENTCOM, Henry Kissinger, and Karl Rove were all keeping me down. Now that I was on Google Video, I had a whole library of CT movies to watch for free . . . I literally spent two weeks watching what I thought was a worldwide conspiracy being unveiled before my very eyes."

Internet conspiracism propagates itself using a cross-fertilization model: Facebook pages, email lists and blogs associated with a given conspiracist camp invariably become sympathetic sounding boards for related conspiracy theories. In the Summer of 2005, for instance, 9/11 Truth sites became inundated with theorists claiming that the London transit bombings were an inside job. And when the H1N1 virus hit in the fall of 2009, the established network of autism/antivaccine conspiracy theorists immediately incorporated the new vaccine drive into their propaganda.

Often, conspiracist propaganda appears just days, or even hours, after the underlying event—even before the "official" narrative has been fully developed in the mainstream media. On the afternoon of November 5, 2009, as I was writing this chapter, Nidal Malik Hasan walked into the Soldier Readiness Center at Ford Hood military base outside Killeen, Texas, jumped onto a desk, and began firing shots from a semiautomatic pistol. By the time

his rampage was over, thirteen people were dead, and thirty others were wounded. The circumstances of the killings—perpetrated by a military psychiatrist with a documented record of erratic behaviour and religious radicalism, and observed directly by dozens of surviving witnesses—hardly lent themselves to conspiracy theories. Yet shortly thereafter, a conspiracist narrative began taking shape on FederalJack.com, a self-described "user driven news source dedicated to exposing information and multimedia relating to the New World Order takeover of the United States and the rest of the free world":

> Ok, let's get this out of the way. Fort Hood—tragic. Now let's look at some reality. *One* guy shooting a hand gun killed *how* many people—and on a military base? Are you serious? And the one shooter is now in a coma? And, as of now at least, there's no surveillance camera footage? And he's a Muslim who also happens to be a serviceman with a mental disorder involving gunplay who did it with privately owned weapons? This thing could not have been scripted or casted better if Hollywood had produced it. Let's see: Private gun ownership demonized—check. Muslims demonized—check. Military personnel demonized—check. Base-dwelling troops at home terrorized by a fellow American—check. Yet another chance to distract the public—check . . . Thirteen killed and 30 wounded by one man with two pistols. Nearly a 50% kill rate. Ever fired a handgun? Ever tried aiming and firing two at a time? Under pressure? Ever reload a handgun under pressure? There were people shooting at him. That's a little pressure. We're talking about yet *another* superhuman performance by a 'lone gunman' who is conveniently not conscious to tell the tale . . . 'But the government would never do such a thing to its own troops!' Uh, excuse me. It's putting thousands of them through a meat grinder in a pointless, unwinnable charade of a war as we speak—in two countries, while gearing up for two more (Iran and Paki-

stan). Do you think the dead and wounded from overseas are any less dead and wounded [than the] victims from Fort Hood?

Links to the FederalJack site began popping up all over the established Truther groups I was monitoring, and the narrative was quickly assimilated into their mythology. For the web addicts who get their news from such sites, the official theory never had a chance.

In the real world, all of us learn—usually quite early in life—that some sources of information are more trustworthy than others; that some people are experts, and others are not, that some people lie, and other people tell the truth. When people try to convince us to buy something from them, or sleep with them, or take their advice, we scrutinize their faces, their clothes, their mannerisms, their backgrounds, for indicators of expertise and sincerity. But on the Internet, where disreputable sources can hide behind the anonymizing silkscreen of a professional-seeming website, all these age-old human safeguards are short-circuited—making it an ideal medium for conspiracists who, in person, often seem eccentric. In many cases, fringe conspiracy theorists even have managed to create professional-seeming "journals" that lend scholarly prestige to their fantasies, such as the "peer-reviewed" *Journal of 9/11 Studies.* Many of the Truthers I correspond with now back up their theories with citations from such publications, expecting that they be treated with the same seriousness as *Nature* or *Proceedings of the National Academy of Science.*

Like everything else discussed in this chapter, this toxic distortion of the marketplace of ideas has arisen from a supposed *virtue* of the Internet: its utility as a medium for "crowdsourcing"—defined by (what else?) Wikipedia as "the act of taking tasks traditionally performed by an employee or contractor, and outsourcing them to a group of people or community, through an 'open call' to a large group of people (a crowd) asking for contributions."

In many contexts, crowdsourcing can be an accurate and highly cost-effective means of collecting information. In James Surowiecki's influential 2004 book *The Wisdom of Crowds: Why the Many Are Smarter Than The Few,* he tells the story, borrowed from Francis Galton, about how the averaged estimates of random English fairgoers more accurately assessed the weight of a particular ox than estimates provided by individual cattle experts. Facebook members use the crowdsourcing principle when they put out a status-update inviting friends to suggest a good restaurant in a particular city, or a good doctor for their family. And then there's Wikipedia, a crowdsourced encyclopedia that in the space of just a few years has become perhaps the single most influential information resource on the entire planet.

But the only reason Wikipedia works is that its entries—particularly those relating to controversial subjects—ultimately are controlled by a corps of dedicated editors working in a traditional top-down hierarchy. When those editors step into the background, the site becomes just another free-for-all dominated by spammers and propagandists.

In the context of conspiracy theorists, the problem arises from the fact that the people with the most bizarre and extreme views tend also to be the most enthusiastic and prolific contributors to crowdsourced media—since those who hold conventional attitudes usually see little point in expressing the obvious.

This becomes clear if you peruse the "customer reviews" that pop up on the product-information screen for books sold on Amazon and other electronic bookstores. Here, a naïve reader seeking to gauge the veracity of a conspiracist tract usually will find an almost unbroken string of rave reviews—not a surprise, since the only people willing to plow through such books, let alone bother to post online about them, tend to be conspiracy theorists to begin with. In the spring of 2010, for instance, WorldNetDaily reporters Aaron Klein and Brenda Elliott published *The Manchurian President: Barack Obama's Ties to Communists, Socialists and Other Anti-*

American Extremists, a standard-issue catalog of Birtheresque guilt-by-association conspiracy theories panned by those few respectable media outlets that deigned to acknowledge the book's existence. Yet in the review section of Amazon, the authors are portrayed as nothing short of Woodward and Bernstein. As of mid-May 2010, more than half of reviewers gave the book a perfect five-star rating. Similarly, when I looked up Daniel Estulin's *The True Story of the Bilderberg Group*, on Amazon, the main page featured just a single negative review among the dozen or so on offer—and even that lone naysayer was upset principally by the fact that Estulin hadn't probed deeply enough into the Rothschild family and their "hidden agenda of the New World Order."

Because of the fleeting way in which many people consume the mass media, conspiracist causes can gain strength even when mainstream journalists seek to tackle the underlying subject in a professional and objective way.

In late 2009, I appeared on the CBC television documentary program *The Fifth Estate*, in an hour-long episode dedicated to the 9/11 Truth movement. The show gave plenty of airtime to various conspiracy theorists, but also provided an opportunity for me and other critics to debunk their claims and put their movement in historical context. The next day, a teacher at my daughters' school told me she'd seen the show, and found it interesting.

"All that stuff about the World Trade Center is pretty mind-blowing, huh?" she said off-handedly as I removed my youngest daughter's coat and boots. "Maybe there's something to it. What do you think?"

"Not really," I said. "Didn't that come through in the show?"

"I guess I missed that," she said, half-apologetically. "To be honest, I wasn't really listening that closely. I was on my cell phone."

Later that day, other friends and colleagues mentioned they'd seen the CBC show. When I asked them to describe their impressions, they also seemed to have only a vague idea about what actually had been discussed. Some confessed they'd been eating or

BlackBerrying while watching, or flipping from one channel to the next. In any case, the big deal, as they saw it, wasn't what I'd said, but simply that I'd been *on TV*—an accomplishment in its own right.

The teacher's words, "maybe there's something to it," worried me in particular. While the producers had intended the show as a profile of a conspiracy movement, she clearly saw it as part of a legitimate debate between two rival camps. Like me, the Truthers appeared on camera dressed in suits. Like me, they seemed confident about their position. More importantly, someone had made the decision to put them on television. And so their message must somehow be legitimate.

The idea that we should take seriously the viewpoint of anyone who appears on television, or who earns a high ranking on a Google search, or a stellar hit count for his YouTube video, is part of a phenomenon that might be called "informational relativism"—to complement the moral relativism that's been a feature of our cultural landscape since the 1960s. Genuine expertise now means little. Instead, we rely on what Internet pioneer Andrew Keen decried (in his 2007 book of the same name) as "the cult of the amateur."

"The 9/11 Truth movement is a perfect example of the disappearance of truth—or even a general agreement of what truth is," he told me in an interview. "If you throw enough garbage at the wall, some of it is going to stick. It reflects how media-illiterate people are. Even if you put a clear lie out there, it will be picked up and spread by the mob, virally."

Like the medical patients who now imagine they are qualified to diagnose their maladies just by plugging a list of symptoms into Google, modern conspiracy theorists imagine themselves better qualified to analyze the collapse of the World Trade Center, the medical effect of vaccines, or the machinations of the Federal Reserve Bank than accredited structural engineers, immunologists, and economists. Many 9/11 Truthers I spoke with told me they

were certain that the World Trade Center buildings were destroyed by explosives because the collapse looked somewhat like demolition jobs they'd seen in movies or on the news. In their propaganda videos, this point is "proven" by setting footage of WTC 7's collapse alongside implosion footage from professionally collapsed structures in other parts of the world. The fact that no legitimate expert on the demolition of large buildings has ever embraced their view is not seen as problematic: The conspiracist imagines his own native intelligence and instinctive suspicion to be a sufficient arbiter of truth.

Unlike the true expert, whose spurious leaps of logic might be spotted through the process of peer review, the conspiracist-minded amateur doesn't care about appearing ridiculous in the eyes of informed observers. In fact, he imagines that their ridicule proves his status as a freethinker, uncorrupted by the suffocating dogmas imposed by the credentialed intellectual establishment. He is completely satisfied merely to attract attention from other amateurs, which he accomplishes by providing a narrative that is more lurid and titillating than the informed technical fare served up by people who have earned degrees in the field.

The Revolution Will Be Televised

There is no medium of communications better suited to political propaganda than film. Literature and the spoken word can be used to bombard a person with facts. But only cinema can transport him wholesale into an invented world. Through the artful use of music, lighting, and shocking visual images, a propagandist can entirely control the emotional mood of his audience. Unlike an essayist, the propaganda filmmaker can short-circuit the rules of logic—or, preferably, ignore them entirely.

This can be done in a matter of seconds, a classic example being the 1964 *Daisy* TV ad for Lyndon Johnson: A small child counts

off the plucked petals of a flower as the camera zooms in on her face. Then comes another countdown—this one from an ominous male narrator. The screen is filled with a mushroom cloud, and the voice-over switches to Johnson: "These are the stakes! To make a world in which all of God's children can live, or to go into the dark. We must either love each other, or we must die." The target of the ad—Barry Goldwater, who had mused about using nuclear weapons in Vietnam—was never mentioned. It wasn't necessary, or even desirable. The purpose of the ad wasn't to make an argument, but to create emotional linkages—between a child's sweet face, LBJ's resolute voice, and the terrifying sense that the world, with all its cute little girls, will descend into apocalypse without him leading it.

On both sides of the Cold War, propaganda bore the indirect imprint of Nazi directors, who had pioneered the use of film as an instrument of brainwashing. As Philip Taylor wrote in *Munitions of the Mind: A History of Propaganda from the Ancient World to the Present Day* (quoting British American film historian Roger Mavell): "'Nazi newsreels were not informative, they were impressionist, emotive, all-conquering—a blitz in themselves of sound and image.' Their message was clear: German military superiority was plain for all to see and the ease with which victory was achieved was testimony to the superiority of the German race and the will of the Führer."

The best-known specimen of this genre is Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will*, which chronicled the 1934 Nazi Party Congress in Nuremberg. Like all the most effective propaganda of our own era, the film pressed its message by leveraging the inborn human impulse to make broad moral judgments about complex issues, even whole races of people, based on fleeting, emotionally charged human images. Not a minute goes by in which Riefenstahl does not remove the viewer from the mass spectacle of the Party Congress to focus on a single person, whether Hitler himself lecturing sternly from a stage, or one of the proud, confident, clean-cut

youth members in rapt attention. It is in their faces that her story is told: The planes, the flags, the architecture, and the spectacle are all presented as mere manifestations of their iron will and commitment to national glory. Riefenstahl's images, scored with themes from Wagner's *Götterdämmerung* and similar compositions, were so powerful that they effectively created our modern understanding of the prewar Nazi movement as a clockwork-precise machine, burying the reality of Hitler's amateurish, disorganized personality cult. And the same cinematic formula would be copied by other totalitarian movements—especially Stalin's Soviet propaganda apparatus, which filmed May Day parades and other set pieces in a recognizably Riefenstahlian manner.

George Orwell, the twentieth century's most insightful student of propaganda and its toxic effect on Western societies, understood that film could equally be used to vilify others to the point of murderous hatred. His lengthy description of "The Two Minutes' Hate" is one of the most memorable passages in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, and worth quoting at length:

> As usual, the face of Emmanuel Goldstein, the Enemy of the People, had flashed on to the screen. There were hisses here and there among the audience. The little sandy-haired woman gave a squeak of mingled fear and disgust. Goldstein was the renegade and backslider who once, long ago (how long ago, nobody quite remembered), had been one of the leading figures of the Party, almost on a level with Big Brother himself, and then had engaged in counter-revolutionary activities, had been condemned to death, and had mysteriously escaped and disappeared. The programmes of the Two Minutes Hate varied from day to day, but there was none in which Goldstein was not the principal figure. He was the primal traitor, the earliest defiler of the Party's purity . . . It was a lean Jewish face, with a great fuzzy aureole of white hair and a small goatee beard—a clever face, and yet somehow inherently despicable, with a kind of senile silliness in the long thin nose, near the end of which a pair of spectacles was perched. It resembled the face of a sheep, and the voice, too, had a sheep-like quality. Goldstein was delivering his usual venomous attack upon the doctrines of the Party . . . And all the while, lest one should be in any doubt as to the reality which Goldstein's specious claptrap covered, behind his head on the telescreen there marched the endless columns of the Eurasian army—row after row of solid-looking men with expressionless Asiatic faces, who swam up to the surface of the screen and vanished, to be replaced by others exactly similar. The dull rhythmic tramp of the soldiers' boots formed the background to Goldstein's bleating voice . . . In its second minute, the Hate rose to a frenzy. People were leaping up and down in their places and shouting at the tops of their voices in an effort to drown the maddening bleating voice that came from the screen . . . A hideous ecstasy of fear and vindictiveness, a desire to kill, to torture, to smash faces in with a sledgehammer, seemed to flow through the whole group of people like an electric current, turning one even against one's will into a grimacing, screaming lunatic.

Six decades after *Nineteen Eighty-Four* was published, video propaganda continues to lure viewers into extremist ideologies—but not in the way Orwell predicted. During the World War II and Cold War eras, video propaganda was the domain of governments and established studios—since only they had the money needed to rent studios, hire actors and film crews, and run media distribution networks. Riefenstahl, for instance, had a crew of 120 people, and an unlimited budget, for *Triumph of the Will*. During World War II, the U.S. War Department alone spent in excess of $50 million on film production. On the Soviet side, film propaganda was supervised by the well-founded Directorate of Propaganda and Agitation of the Central Committee—the origin of the term "agitprop." In his 1958 *Blue Book of the John Birch Society*, Robert Welch

devoted a scant two paragraphs to television, dismissing it as a tool for promoting his cause: "I know the fantastic cost of television programs. So let me point out that I do not think any early extensive use of television by us would be [wise] . . . Its separate impacts are glancing blows of little depth, compared, let us say, to that of a great book which can be read again and again."

In purely quantitative terms, moreover, there simply wasn't that much stock footage available for the era's conspiracists to cobble into their productions. Had JFK's assassination taken place in 2011, the event would have been recorded by dozens—possibly hundreds—of amateurs using camcorders and cell phones. Within hours, much of that footage would be uploaded to YouTube, Facebook, and other sites, where it would be dissected by conspiracists for "anomalies." In the case of the actual Kennedy assassination, the event was recorded by precisely one individual—dress manufacturer Abraham Zapruder. And even his 8mm footage was of limited use to conspiracists, since Zapruder had signed over the rights to *Life* magazine. It wasn't until 1975—twelve years after JFK was killed—that assassination researchers were able to show the Zapruder film on network television.

Beginning in the 1990s, the amount of amateur-available video surged radically thanks to the Internet and the widespread availability of digital imaging technology and video-editing software. Costs plummeted. In fact, many of the most widely distributed films now on YouTube were made for quite literally nothing—since they consist only of material shot by other people, and then edited using shareware software. One particularly popular video genre on conspiracist websites, for instance, is what might be called the Smoking Gun Mash-up—which consists of decontextualized video snippets in which some public figure, or group of figures, is made to seem as if they are repeatedly admitting to some shocking crime or secret. One popular ten-minute video, entitled *Obama Admits He is a Muslim*—which had been viewed about two million times by the time I saw it in the spring of 2010—consists of dozens

of such snippets from Obama speeches and interviews—many of them shorter than even a single sentence.

In many cases, conspiracists can even cast themselves as the stars of their own propaganda videos. As discussed, obsessive 9/11 street demonstrators such as Luke Rudkowski, for instance, habitually post YouTube videos in which they "confront" public figures with the Truth, a practice that generally involves harassing them with bullhorns at public events, or reciting manifestos during the Q&A sessions following speeches at colleges.

But some things haven't changed. Like Riefenstahl, or Orwell's imaginary Big Brother, today's Internet propagandists overwhelm viewers' intellectual defense mechanisms with the endless piling on of disconnected snippets of footage that build toward a single, overarching, spine-tingling capital-T Truth. Internet-circulated jihadi propaganda movies, for instance, usually consist of endless carnage scenes featuring dead and dying Muslims slain by American bombs or Israeli tank shells, interspersed with claims that Islam is being besieged on all sides by genocidal infidels. Where possible, the camera lingers on the dead child's face, the shrieking parents, the mangled corpses. The underlying circumstances of the killings are either ignored or fantastically misrepresented. Many terrorists have admitted that these videos were the most powerful factor in their indoctrination.

Compared to other forms of conspiracist video propaganda, 9/11 Truth material typically is more sophisticated—since both the creators and consumers tend to be technically minded college-educated Internet addicts. Instead of focusing on blood and gore, typical Truther films, such as the popular *Loose Change* series, intersperse shocking footage of the World Trade Center's destruction with stock footage of Bush administration officials looking menacing or smug. Meanwhile, an authoritative-sounding narrator recites a lengthy stream of unconnected facts that seem to tie the act and the administration together.

The narrator typically will linger, for instance, on the various

corporate, political, and family connections binding the World Trade Center buildings to the White House—such as the fact that George W. Bush's brother Marvin had once been on the board of directors for a company (Securacom) that provided security for the World Trade Center. None of these facts would have much meaning to a normal person who read them in a book, or heard them in a conversation. But strung together on video, they can be made to seem significant, even frightening.

This is especially true in the case of viewers with altered states of mind. Mikey Metz, a graduate of SUNY Albany who runs a blog called *Confessions of an ex-Truther* ("The ranting and raving of someone who wasted a year of his life being sucked into the lies of the 9/11 Truth Movement") describes his years in the movement as a perpetual haze of marijuana addiction. "There were a lot of nights when someone would go off on revolutionary rants, and we would be all rah-rah and get excited," he told me. "At the time, I smoked a lot of pot with those guys. If you're doing it every day and watching propaganda, you're not going to be exercising your critical faculties. Over time, you get very paranoid. If you watch a propaganda film when you're high, you're susceptible." (Metz ended up abandoning the Truth movement just weeks after going clean.)

While conspiracy theorists often are stereotyped as excitable lunatics, creators of the most popular modern propaganda videos take the opposite approach: Narrators speak in a clipped, confident, understated just-the-facts-ma'am monotone, thereby suggesting that the material is dispassionate scientific analysis. (There is a notable exception, however: Medical-conspiracy-theory films aimed explicitly at parents—such as the vaccine-autism genre—usually feature an emotional tone and a heart-tugging soundtrack.) The best narrators—such as Daniel Sunjata, the professional actor who narrates the latest installment of *Loose Change*—wear the viewer down with their catalog of human evil. To augment the hypnotic effect, these films also typically feature metronomic soft-

techno soundtracks. (A Jungian therapist who'd seen *Loose Change* told me the soundtrack reminded her of the baroque music she used, toward the same effect, in her therapy sessions.)

The narrative of such propaganda films typically follows the same pattern: The first third of the movie or so is devoted to cataloguing the historical sins of the targeted cabal—be it the U.S. government, the United Nations, the pharmaceutical industry, or what not—using stock publicly available video footage. Once the viewers' mind is adequately softened, the film hits its crucial pivot point, and the narrator commences extrapolating the protagonists' villainy into the realm of fantasy. The 2009 film *Camp FEMA: American Lockdown*, for instance, commences with a lengthy (and largely accurate) description of the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II, followed by footage from the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. Only after a half hour or so do the producers get around to their main point: That the Federal Emergency Management Agency is plotting to imprison millions of Americans who oppose Washington's plan for a New World Order.

Similarly, in a video titled *Carbon Eugenics*, circulated in late 2009, a conspiracist named James Corbett took the viewer through a largely accurate discussion of Francis Galton and his nineteenth-century notions of eugenics. In the space of a minute, he deftly pivots from this theme to the notion that modern-day greenhouse-gas-reduction policies comprise a Galtonian scheme for a new Holocaust: "In the logic of the eugenicists, the meaning of human life is itself transformed. Instead of something valuable, something precious, something to be desired and nurtured, fought for and celebrated, humanity is re-imagined as a cancer, something inherently evil, the mere existence of which is a burden on the world. This, unsurprisingly, encapsulates the modern environmental movement's position almost perfectly: human life is no longer something to be treasured, but something to be measured in carbon and then reduced. In the manmade global warming myth, humans are merely an obstacle to the proper functioning of nature. In the eugenicist

fantasy, the earth is saved when people die. In both ideologies (if they really are separate) the ultimate genocide becomes thinkable."

History Belongs to the YouTube Victors

In September of 2009, after I'd marched around with a group of "We Are Change" Truthers on the anniversary of 9/11, I asked some of them what they thought about the day's activities. There had been a few hundred of us parading up and down Midtown Manhattan with our banners and leaflets. Yet none of the onlookers had seemed particularly interested. "Aren't you discouraged?" I asked.

Just the opposite, they told me: The day had been a massive success.

The whole event, they explained, had been filmed from start to finish, and a lot of the footage was already on the Internet. One "We Are Change" organizer, Matt Lepacek, had even shown up with a backpack of network-connected computer gear, and apparently had been simulcasting every second of it. The marchers I spoke with were particularly excited about a segment in which a Truther gave an excited speech to a bored-looking police officer. "That thing is going to be all over YouTube!" one exclaimed to me. "A million people are going to see it!"

That seemed to be an exaggeration. But the number was beside the point. What mattered to these people was that a million people *could* be watching—that their activities were part of the historical archive, and so would mark their role as prophets and pioneers when the revolution finally came.

Early in my research of the 9/11 Truth movement, I interviewed Philip Zelikow, the American diplomat and historian who served as executive director of the 9/11 Commission. At first, our conversation focused on the history of the Sept. 11 attacks, and the

various strategies that Truthers had used to distort the facts. But as we talked, Zelikow increasingly homed in on the aspect of the movement he found most bizarre and exasperating—the Truthers' obsession with video.

"Whenever these folks try to accost me, they always film it," he told me. "It happened in Chicago when I was trying to check in at a hotel—and someone accosted me. Or they'll stand up at a speech I'm giving, and someone will stand up and scare everyone by blowing a loud whistle, and then post it to YouTube. It's happened many times.

"By doing this, it makes their movement *real*," Zelikow adds. "They're basically trying to set themselves up as chroniclers of an alternative history, in which they are the key truth-tellers and their story is chronicling the story of how that truth unfolded. It's the same with all cult-like groups [in the modern era]—even al-Qaeda."