

# AMONG THE TRUTHERS



A JOURNEY THROUGH  
AMERICA'S GROWING  
CONSPIRACIST UNDERGROUND

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## Preface

**A**t 9:40 on the morning of November 1, 1755, Portugal was rocked by the most deadly earthquake in the recorded history of Europe. In Lisbon alone, more than thirty thousand people perished. Many victims were entombed in their churches, which collapsed around them as they celebrated All Saints.

The scene that emerged when the earth stopped shaking was one of Last Days. A tsunami swallowed the city's harbor, killing many of the survivors who'd assembled on the shore. A fire at the Royal Hospital roasted hundreds of patients alive. Gallows sprouted up on the city's hilltops, from which were hanged the desperate looters trying to survive amidst the ruins.

In purely quantitative terms, death on this scale was not uncommon in eighteenth-century Europe, which often was ravaged by wars and plagues. But the sudden, spectacular nature of the Great Lisbon Earthquake filled Europeans with a special kind of terror. Indeed, the impact of this horrific event on European thought and culture has sometimes been compared to that of the Holocaust. Most significant, perhaps, was the space that opened up for radical challenges to the authority of the Church, as Enlightenment philosophers asked how the benevolent God of the Christian Bible could permit such a catastrophe.

One of those men was François-Marie Arouet, better known by his pen name, Voltaire. In his 1756 "Poem on the Lisbon Disaster," he pronounced his despair—"Oh unhappy mortals! Oh wretched earth! Oh dreadful gathering of so many dead!"—but also his anger, aimed at contemporaries who depicted the event as just another mysterious subplot in God's master plan:

Come, ye philosophers, who cry, "All's well,"  
And contemplate this ruin of a world.  
Behold these shreds and cinders of your race,  
This child and mother heaped in common wreck,

These scattered limbs beneath the marble shafts —  
A hundred thousand whom the earth devours,  
Who, torn and bloody, palpitating yet,  
Entombed beneath their hospitable roofs,  
In racking torment end their stricken lives.  
To those expiring murmurs of distress,  
To that appalling spectacle of woe,  
Will ye reply: “You do but illustrate  
The Iron laws that chain the will of God”?  
Say ye, o’er that yet quivering mass of flesh:  
“God is avenged: the wage of sin is death”?  
What crime, what sin, had those young hearts conceived  
That lie, bleeding and torn, on mother’s breast?  
Did fallen Lisbon deeper drink of vice  
Than London, Paris, or sunlit Madrid?

Three years later, in *Candide*, Voltaire satirized this superstitious attitude through the character of Pangloss, a philosopher who greets every unspeakable tragedy—including the Great Lisbon Earthquake itself—with fatuous syllogisms aimed at proving ours to be “the best of all possible worlds.” Throughout their shared adventures, Candide holds Pangloss in awe. Only in the book’s final pages, as the two men find themselves tending a subsistence farm in an obscure corner of the Ottoman Empire, does a skeptical Candide glimpse the truth that life can be cruel and random, and that the best course is simply to muddle through, using our wits as well as practically possible.

Or as Candide put it in the book’s last line, in response to one of Pangloss’ particularly ambitious flourishes: “Excellently observed. But let us cultivate our garden.”

In the two and a half centuries since Voltaire helped usher in the Enlightenment, Western societies gradually, fitfully have come to embrace rationalism and skepticism. We have separated church and state, enshrined science, questioned God, elevated materialism over

piety, swept aside the divine right of kings, and otherwise followed the skeptics' claim that our world is shaped by human agency, in all its cruel imperfection, not some grand blueprint imposed from on high. America itself, founded by rational deists, has long been considered the crown jewel of the Enlightenment.

Yet there are risks inherent in the rationalist project, as the philosophers themselves sometimes acknowledged. A little learning is a dangerous thing, wrote Alexander Pope—a reminder to those who embraced the ideal of universal enlightenment that human reason remains an imperfect tool and that skepticism can be a two-edged sword. Even now, the intellectual edifice we've built on these foundations occasionally teeters, shaken by the tectonic social forces set in motion by depression, war, and terrorism. "Let us cultivate our garden" may be persuasive advice in normal times. But when skyscrapers crumble, when great powers are laid low, we demand a grander narrative than mere chaos, and grander villains than mere criminals and lunatics. In France after the French Revolution, on America's Great Plains following the depressions of the late nineteenth century, in Germany after World War I, and across the Western world in the shadow of Cold War hysteria, JFK's death, the Vietnam War, Watergate, and the rise of the 1960s counterculture—these have been the moments when shrieking prophets and conspiracy theorists found their followers. Americans now are living through another such moment, one that began with the collapse of the Twin Towers, and has continued through the aftershocks emanating from Afghanistan, Iraq, the 2008 financial crisis, and the crippling recession that followed it.

On the op-ed pages of the *New York Times* and on the airwaves of NPR, America's respectable intellectuals reassure one another that we are merely passing through a transient phase—a rekindling of populist agitation that comes and goes with the political tides. It's just a matter of waiting it out. But the evidence suggests that America's state of intellectual agitation in the aftermath of 9/11 isn't a temporary phenomenon. Like the Lisbon Earthquake, it has had far-reaching social, political, and psychological consequences that have yet to be fully absorbed or understood.

The reason for this goes in part to the nature of terrorism itself, which—after eliciting a brief spasm of patriotism and national solidarity—inevitably shrinks a society’s common political center. Since 9/11, America has been implicitly divided between those who believe the country had provoked its enemies, and those who don’t; between those who believe America needs to retreat from the world stage, and those who want to project freedom and democracy more aggressively than ever; and, in the purely domestic arena, between those who embrace the romantic project of returning America to its original “pure” libertarian social contract, and those who see its future in the image of the modern, multilaterally encumbered European welfare state. Like an earthquake, 9/11 produced a great fissure through the heart of America’s political center—with two increasingly polarized ideological camps sniping at one another on radio, cable TV, and blogs from either side of the divide.

It is not just politics that separate these two camps, but the very manner by which they answer fundamental questions about the world. Is the earth getting hotter, or is global warming a hoax engineered to bring America into a UN-controlled One World Government? Is America led by a brilliant visionary—or a fifth columnist intent on bringing America down in the name of some sinister Afrocentric, Islamist, or communist agenda? Is socialized medicine necessary to make America a humane society, or is it a Malthusian plot to put Granny before a death panel? Which is to say: The basic building blocks of our political reality.

Many books have been written about the geopolitical fallout from 9/11. This book is about its seismic effects on the country’s collective intellect—9/11’s *cognitive* consequences.

In the past, such rifts have been healed by America’s intellectual and political establishment, which has thrown bridges across the political spectrum at several critical historical junctures. A century ago, the extremes of populism gave way to progressivism, and then the New Deal. The Depression ended in FDR’s war economy, and then the prosperous, relatively apolitical Pleasantvilles of the 1950s and 1960s. Even as late as the 1990s, American scholar Francis Fukuyama was predicting that ideological conflict itself was becoming

a thing of the past, thanks to the universal embrace of core Western values. Ten years after 9/11, not even America (much less the world) seems anywhere near Fukuyama's "end of history," in large part because the institutions that we once counted on to discourage radicalism and guide our society toward common ground—organized religion, a vibrant academy, an influential mainstream media, and a respected central government—no longer command the public trust.

Voltaire is venerated for rebelling against the suffocating religiosity of Pangloss, which required a total, fatalistic submission to the whims of God. But the Christian intellectual monopoly that the Enlightenment overturned at least provided society with a shared frame of reference. Moreover, it also provided a cosmic explanation for evil—the main preoccupation of the secular conspiracy theorists who have proliferated in our own age. Voltaire himself understood all this, which is why he detested atheism even as he challenged the power of the Church. "The man who believes in God will recover from his excitement," Voltaire wrote. "He can be violent but for a moment, while the atheist is a monster all his life."

In the postmodern marketplace of ideas, there is little check on popular "excitement." Gaian environmentalism, healing crystals, and dilettante variations of Asian spirituality are claimed to be coequal in status to established Western faiths; and a wave of aggressive atheists—from Christopher Hitchens to Richard Dawkins—treat religion as a species of mental illness. Certainly, America remains home to legions of deeply observant Christians. But increasingly, they regard themselves as besieged combatants in an endless culture war against everyone else, with no shared moral language with which to negotiate an armistice. As for the dwindling tribe of equally embattled rationalists who take comfort in atheist tracts, it must be pointed out that attacks upon religion are not the same as the enlightened defense of reason originally offered by such figures as Bacon and Descartes.

Far from healing this growing cognitive rift, the secular academy has fetishized it: Many of the most revered liberal arts scholars of the postwar era have cast doubt on the very idea that language can act as a bridge between people holding different viewpoints. Thanks to the rise of identity politics, it is imagined that words—and even facts—



have no meaning independent of the emotional effect they produce on their audience: Everyone feels entitled to their own private reality. And so the idea of rationally negotiating a consensus truth about the way our world works came to be seen as not only impossible, but undesirable—a trap created by society's privileged caste to justify their position. "There is one thing a professor can be absolutely certain of: Almost every student entering his university believes, or says he believes, that truth is relative," wrote Allan Bloom in his 1987 book *The Closing of the American Mind*. "The study of history and culture teaches that all the world was mad in the past; men always thought they were right, and that led to wars, persecutions, slavery, xenophobia, and chauvinism. The point is not to correct the mistakes and really be right; rather, it is not to think you are right at all."

Yet even Bloom would have been astonished by the intellectual balkanization created by the World Wide Web. For the first time in history, ordinary people now can spread their opinions, no matter how hateful or eccentric, without them first gaining the approval of editors, publishers, broadcasters, or paying consumers. At the Web's birth in the mid-1990s, it was imagined that these new information technologies would usher in an Enlightenment dreamworld of mutual understanding and rationalism. Instead, the opposite has happened: Rather than bring different groups into common discussion, they instead propelled radicals into their own paranoid echo chambers. They have also provided a stage for the most megalomaniacal of these radicals to act out their conspiratorial scripts—such as WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange, whose publication of hundreds of thousands of classified documents apparently was motivated by his desire to undermine Washington's ongoing "authoritarian conspiracy" against "a more just society."

Perhaps most worrying of all is the general disrepute into which authority figures of all stripes have fallen—especially our government and elected officials. The proportion of Americans who say that they "basically trust their government" has dropped from a high of 73 percent in 1958, when pollsters first asked the question, to just 22 percent in 2010. And there is a direct line from this statistic to the men and women profiled in this book. "I am old enough to remember having

to sign up for selective service during the Vietnam War and also vividly remember the denied ‘conspiracy theory’ that Johnson and the military staged/lied about Tonkin Gulf,” a Boston, Massachusetts–based conspiracy theorist named Mark McKertich told me. “Forty years later, we now know it was a theory based in fact. A lot of us have no patience to wait forty years for the truth about 9/11 to be revealed.”

Indeed, a series of blows to official credibility, including the unsatisfying Warren Commission Report on the JFK assassination, the secret bombing of Cambodia and the military cover-up of My Lai, a program of foreign coups and assassinations by the CIA, and other questionable activities officially denied and only brought to light after the fact have all but destroyed Americans’ faith in the pronouncements of their government.

The media fares no better: Many Americans now regard journalists with the same jaded skepticism that they apply to pop-up Internet ads and infomercials. In part, this is because the major news organizations—formerly represented by the reassuring face of Walter Cronkite, the most trusted man in America—are now dominated by Ivy League elitists and California Google jockeys. In part, it is because cost pressures have dumbed down broadcast media to a format so compressed that the crawl text on some headline news services doesn’t even allow space for verbs. And in part it is because Americans now are simply more sophisticated consumers of news, for the obvious reason that they have more sources than ever to compare.

But the larger problem for the media is that, since the 1960s, they have been undermined by a dual critique that comes (ironically) from both the left and right. Conservatives increasingly see the media as a liberal-elitist establishment that is complicit in a whole range of partisan sins—including the uncritically reverential treatment accorded Barack Obama during the 2008 presidential campaign. (As Bernard Goldberg put it in his 2009 book, *A Slobbering Love Affair*: “I could not remember a time when so many supposedly objective reporters had acted so blatantly as full-fledged activists for one side—and without even a hint of embarrassment.”) Many liberals, meanwhile, see the media through the lens of a left-wing critique whose central text is Noam Chomsky’s *Manufacturing Consent*, a staple of liberal-arts

reading lists that presents corporate-owned news media as lackeys to society's wealthy stakeholders. Even if the two angry poles of the political spectrum agree on nothing else, their attitude toward the media has fused together in a common posture of aggressive skepticism. Moreover, the media's failure to take this two-pronged assault seriously enough to respond to its major assertions—and more important, perhaps, its refusal to acknowledge the grain of truth in these critiques—has further compromised its authority as an arbiter of what is “true” or “real” in American life.

In sum, the media have ceased to be the source of an accepted common vision of events and have come to be seen instead as interested partisans manipulating public perceptions for hidden commercial or ideological ends. Even if a majority of Americans do not actually share these suspicions, the generalized mistrust of the “official version” of events has made many of them less critical of formerly outlandish explanations, which are now entertained as equally plausible “alternative narratives.”

The result of all this is nothing less than a countercultural rift in the fabric of consensual American reality, a gaping cognitive hole into which has leaped a wide range of political paranoiacs previously consigned to the lunatic fringe—Larouchites, UFO nuts, libertarian survivalists, Holocaust deniers, and a thousand other groups besides. Even conspiracy theories that were discredited generations ago suddenly have sprung back to life, as if animated by electroshock. Explaining his decision to run a 1999 cover story questioning “who in fact was the bard, the usual suspect from Stratford, or Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford?” *Harper's* then-editor Lewis H. Lapham—the very caricature of a coastal, salon-dwelling sophisticate, which is to say, someone who should know better—recalled that his interest in the controversy was first piqued in 1972, “not a year conducive to belief in the masterpieces of the official doctrine.” Such talk is eerily reminiscent of Orwell's reflections on the nature of totalitarian propaganda.

Conspiracy theories, the subject of this book, are both a leading cause and a symptom of this intellectual and civic crisis. When a critical mass of educated people in a society lose their grip on the real

world—when they claim that George W. Bush is a follower of Nazi ideology, that Barack Obama is a Muslim secretly plotting to impose Sharia law on America, that the United States government is controlled by Israel, or that FEMA is preparing to imprison political dissidents in preparation for a totalitarian New World Order—it is a signal that the ordinary rules of rational intellectual inquiry are now treated as optional. It is not unusual for intellectuals and politicians to reject their opponents' arguments. But it is the mark of an intellectually pathologized society that intellectuals and politicians will reject their opponents' *realities*.

As I argue in Chapter 5—my field guide to the different breeds of conspiracy theorist—people come to their paranoias for all sorts of complicated reasons. Some of the figures profiled within this book are Marxists. Others are anti-Semites, or radical libertarians, or religious fantasists. Some defy ideological categorization. But they are all bound together by one increasingly common trait: They have spun out of rationality's ever-weakening gravitational pull, and into mutually impenetrable Manichean fantasy universes of their own construction. Much of this book is devoted to the task of exploring those fantasy universes and delving into the minds of those who create them—an inquiry that is a critical first step in defending the rationalist tradition.

It is important to concede that some conspiracies are very real. Watergate was no myth. Neither was Iran-Contra, or the Teapot Dome scandal. There is always a tiny grain of truth at the core of popular conspiracy theories, even in the case of concocted ones. Or at least some vexing question. *How did Adolf Hitler exterminate European Jewry without the Allies finding out about it earlier? How was Lee Harvey Oswald able to shoot JFK twice within such a short period of time? Why does the U.S. flag appear to flutter in the moon-landing footage?* In most cases, experts can provide persuasive answers. But sometimes, the truth is that we simply don't know. The world is a complicated place, and some aspects of even the most heavily scrutinized historical events always will remain fissures in society's intellectual foundations. In normal times, those fissures remain small and inconsequential—fodder for campus crackpots and late night AM call-in shows, perhaps, but nothing more. But in a society whose public

intellectual foundations have been compromised over decades, those cracks will spread until the entire edifice is threatened.

That is what has happened to the United States, a place where millions of American “Birthers” accuse their president of being a foreign-born illegal alien. Other right-wing conspiracists, including no less a political celebrity than the Republicans’ 2008 vice-presidential candidate, accused Barack Obama of creating “death panels” that would send the old and crippled to early graves. In bookstores and movie theaters, Dan Brown became a cultural force of nature by peddling discredited fantasies about Christian conspiracies, freemasonry, and secret societies.

Most infamously, there is the 9/11 “Truth movement,” whose members have concluded that the September 11 attacks were actually part of an “inside job” hatched by ultra-hawkish elements within the U.S. government in order to secure a pretext for war abroad and draconian repression at home. In the Truther vision of America, our elected government is nothing but a smokescreen for Deep State actors—arms dealers, oil companies, neoconservative ideologues, Strangelovian Pentagon warmongers—who pull our elected politicians’ puppet strings, and control our society at all levels through bribery, murder, and extortion.

Despite this otherworldly premise, the 9/11 Truth movement has become a mass phenomenon in the last ten years, spawning best-selling books, conferences, a pseudo-academic journal, and dozens of heavily surfed websites. A 2006 Scripps Howard poll of over one thousand U.S. citizens found that 36 percent of Americans believe it was either “somewhat likely” or “very likely” that “federal officials either participated in the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, or took no action to stop them.” About one-sixth of the respondents also agreed it was at least “somewhat likely” that “the collapse of the twin towers in New York was aided by explosives secretly planted in the two buildings.”

For some Truthers, including many of those I’ve interviewed for this book, the idea that elements within the Bush administration used self-inflicted mass murder as a launching pad for geopolitical adventurism has become a full-time, all-consuming obsession. They include white-

collar professionals like Richard Gage, a mild-mannered California architect who spent twenty years designing office buildings and strip malls before giving up everything—his wife, his home, his job—so he could travel the world preaching the gospel that the Twin Towers were felled by controlled demolition; and Steven Jones, a famous Brigham Young University physicist renowned for his work with cold fusion back in the 1980s, who then went on to lead a group called Scholars for 9/11 Truth and Justice. Actor Daniel Sunjata is a Truther (and even was permitted to deliver an in-character Truther monologue during a 2009 episode of the FX Network television drama *Rescue Me*). So is former pro wrestler and Minnesota governor Jesse Ventura, who went on to host a TV series dedicated to conspiracy theories; Charlie Sheen, who in September 2009 published a lengthy Truther-themed pseudo-interview with Barack Obama; Van Jones, the presidential advisor who was forced to quit his post after it was disclosed that he'd signed a petition seeking a new investigation into 9/11; Jared Loughner, the gunman who shot Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords; as well as Fidel Castro and Hugo Chavez. In November 2010, as I was preparing final edits for this book, FOX News Channel analyst (and former New Jersey Superior Court judge) Andrew Napolitano told his audience: "Twenty years from now, people will look at 9-11 the way we look at the assassination of JFK today. It couldn't possibly have been done the way the government told us."

Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad is a Truther, too, naturally. In September 2010, he told the United Nations General Assembly that the 9/11 attacks were staged by elements within the U.S. government in order "to reverse the declining American economy and . . . save the Zionist regime." Just a few days later, he visited Yale University, where he lectured a graduate seminar on "U.S.-Iranian Diplomacy." Hillary Mann Leverett, the senior research fellow who organized the event, claimed Ahmadinejad's smooth performance at Yale demonstrated that he is "not a crazy, irrational leader." On the modern American campus, accepting the truth of 9/11 (not to mention the Holocaust—which Ahmadinejad also doubts) apparently is no longer a prerequisite for "rational" thinkers.

Despite all this, the 9/11 Truth movement mostly has been ignored

by the mainstream media. In some scattered instances, Truthers have appeared on television (usually, on community access), and a few popular left-wing columnists (such as Robert Fisk of Britain's *Independent*) have expressed skepticism of the conventionally accepted account of the 9/11 attacks. But in general, mainstream authors and publishing houses have shunned Truthers. To provide them with any sort of media platform, the theory goes, is to "dignify" their position as respectable—the "other side" in a debate we should not even be having.

But having spent the last three years interviewing Truthers, reading their literature, attending their events, and surfing their discussion forums, I've come to a different conclusion. The Truther phenomenon—like the broader intellectual trend it epitomizes—is simply too important to ignore. Truther theories may be nonsense, but the disturbing habits of mind underlying them—a nihilistic distrust in government, total alienation from conventional politics, a need to reduce the world's complexity to good-versus-evil fables, the melding of secular politics with apocalyptic End-Is-Nigh religiosity, and a rejection of the basic tools of logic and rational discourse—have become threats all across our intellectual landscape. Moreover, journalists' refusal to engage intellectually with conspiracy theorists only serves to justify their claim—made on both sides of the political spectrum—that the mainstream media is nothing more than a trade shop for establishment propagandists.

You can't defeat the Enlightenment's enemies unless you understand them. And that is the project I ask my readers to embark on as they read this book. Those of us who continue to adhere to the rationalist tradition must commit to its defense, as though the year were 1755 and not 2011. For if the Great Lisbon Earthquake can be said to have inaugurated the Age of Reason, 9/11 and its consequences may yet prove to mark its end.

## Introduction: Stumbling on the Truthers

What is madness? To have erroneous perceptions and to reason correctly from them.

—Voltaire

**D**avid Rockefeller owns several homes. So it is hard to say whether he was at his East Sixty-fifth Street double-wide Manhattan townhouse during the afternoon of September 10, 2009. But if he was, he would have seen a remarkable spectacle on the curbside below: A hundred young protestors wearing black T-shirts emblazoned with the words, “INVESTIGATE 9/11.” Their leader, a Brooklyn College student and full-time rabble-rouser named Luke Rudkowski was screaming at the man’s home: “*You will never have a NewWorld Order!*”

Many Americans probably are unaware that the ninety-six-year-old Rockefeller is still alive (as of this writing)—much less that he is leading the fight to create a one-world government. But for Truthers, the Rockefeller family is an enduring obsession. David Rockefeller chaired the organization that initiated the creation of the World Trade Center in 1960, with backing from his late brother, Nelson, then-governor of New York. Since the Rockefeller family helped create the Twin Towers, the Truther theory goes, they must have given the green light for their destruction.

After lecturing the nonagenarian for a while, the group walked over to the Council on Foreign Relations building on East Sixty-eighth, whereupon they broke into alternating chants of “Down with the CFR!,” and then, apropos of nothing, “No vaccines! No vaccines!” At one point, the ringleaders screamed out to the CFR president, “Come out Richard Haass!” (He never complied.) Banners were unfurled, and passing motorists were invited to honk in support. Many of the protestors carried stacks of black-and-white leaflets titled “Ten Reasons For Starting A New 9/11 Investigation,” and enthusiastically handed them out to passersby.

Most people in the crowd were teenagers and twentysomethings.



But there were a few older, eccentric types—including one memorable specimen in glasses and purple track pants. Several were holding “Ron Paul for President” and “End the Fed” signs, in tribute to the various enduring conspiracy theories about the Federal Reserve. (According to radio host Alex Jones, who is profiled later in this chapter, JFK was murdered because he tried to dismantle the Fed.) One neatly trimmed man in his thirties, who told me he was a professional graphic designer, had produced a slick-looking placard with the images of Adolf Hitler, Josef Stalin, and Barack Obama side by side, emblazoned with the words “It Begins With Hope & Change.”

Screaming the loudest was a short, tattooed, dreadlocked fellow named Craig Fitzgerald—a man described to me as a “32nd-degree Scottish Rite Mason.” Fitzgerald occasionally took breaks from slogan-chanting so that he could lecture fellow protestors about the Illuminati. “Hegel was *possibly* a member—it’s hard to be sure,” he told one. “But [Johann Gottlieb] Fichte—there’s no question. He was in the group. You have to do your research. A lot of the patterns and sequences we’re seeing now descend from Bavaria.”

Then it was up Fifth Avenue and on to Michael Bloomberg’s house on Seventy-ninth Street. Unfortunately, no one seemed quite sure where the place was. And so for a while we ended up milling about around the Ukrainian Institute of America, a beautiful French Gothic-style mansion on the south side of Seventy-ninth, passing out more leaflets to pedestrians. (Inside the Institute, confused Slavs looked out from behind curtains, wondering what exactly their countrymen had done to bring down the Twin Towers.)

Later on, the whole group would reconvene at a Flatiron-district bar called Slate for speeches, as well as a recitation of poetry dedicated to 9/11 first responders, written by a middle-aged fellow named Jerry Mazza:

How do you do this to them,  
Lady of Liberty,  
take theirs away, their freedom  
to work and be again.  
these giant people whose inner

steel melted finally from thermate  
and poisons in the air,  
the steel blown up in a cloud  
that stole the sky and the streets.

As I sat there observing this surreal scene, nursing my beer, and scribbling down as many of Mazza's earnest lyrics as I could, my mind gradually began to drift. I wondered, not for the first time: "How exactly did I end up here?"

## **Don't Call Them "Nutbars"**

My introduction to the 9/11 Truth movement came through an unlikely avenue: the staid world of Canadian politics.

In the run-up to Canada's 2008 federal election, the center-left Liberal party (Canada's version of the U.S. Democrats, or Labour in the UK) was low on money and staff. Fundraising efforts had been subpar. As a result, many candidates got their party's blessing before receiving a thorough background check.

One of the grass-roots party members who slipped under the radar was Lesley Hughes, an earnest middle-aged mother and community activist running under the Liberal banner in the midwestern city of Winnipeg. Like most Liberals, Hughes was decidedly left of center on foreign policy issues. But as one local blogger discovered with a Google search, her views went beyond her party's standard cant: A 2002 column she'd written for an obscure publication argued that sources known to her "suggest[ed] CIA foreknowledge and complicity of highly placed officials in the U.S. government around the attacks on the World Trade Center."

She also wrote that "Israeli businesses, which had offices in the Towers, vacated the premises a week before the attacks, breaking their lease to do it," suggested that the war in Afghanistan was part of a U.S. plot to seize natural gas and drugs, and cited reports to the effect that Osama bin Laden had been treated at an American hospital in Dubai.

Following the revelations, Hughes was turfed from her party. In the

process, she became a sort of lightning rod and martyr for North America's Truther movement—something I discovered when I wrote a brief blog entry on my newspaper's website casually criticizing Hughes' "nutbar" opinions. Within hours, my inbox was stuffed with comments from irate Truthers, slamming me for my naïveté.

Wrote one typical U.S.-based correspondent:

Let's set aside name-calling, and dare to follow facts and evidence. I would prefer the scenario that Muslim extremists were responsible for attacks on my country. That would be easier on me. However, as an American, I have allowed the 'military industrial complex' as President Eisenhower warned of, to align agendas with the neo-cons . . . Any actual clear-minded research leaves one with the revelation that such an event could not possibly have been orchestrated, directed, and carried out exclusively by Al-CIAduh . . . Do your own research, and the conclusion cannot be avoided: The events of, and since, 9/11/2001 were and are the actions of a global coup d'état. Having the courage to follow the evidence wherever it leads is not easy. It requires facing an ugly situation and sharing the responsibility for correcting it. I salute Lesley Hughes for answering the call to duty.

Like most journalists with a public email address, I find a lot of conspiracy-mongering in my inbox every day—mostly from isolated paranoiacs raging against landlords, ex-spouses, and municipal politicians. Sometimes, they send me thick sheaves of legal documents, proving how this or that governmental agency had conspired for decades against them; or hand-typed screeds all in caps about such and such a minority group. From the micrographia scrawled around the margins of these documents, and often on the envelope itself, you can tell before reading a word that you are dealing with a damaged mind.

Moreover, this was 2008, a time when large swathes of the West were in the grip of what Charles Krauthammer described as Bush Derangement Syndrome—"the acute onset of paranoia in otherwise

normal people in reaction to the policies, the presidency—nay—the very existence of George W. Bush.” As an editorial board member at a pro-American Canadian newspaper (one that had endorsed the invasion of Iraq, no less), I had grown inured to the many readers who accused me of being an apologist for a war criminal.

But the Truthers who contacted me were different. They were neither street corner paranoiacs nor standard-issue political partisans. Most were outwardly “normal,” articulate people who kept up with the news and held down office jobs—but who also happened to have become obsessively fixated on very particular, and very radical theories about the people running the U.S. government. My initial batch of correspondents included: a mechanical engineer working at a nuclear reactor, a Finnish IT expert, a doctor, an explosives specialist, the president of a financial corporation, and several university professors. One woman I corresponded with, Elizabeth Woodworth, was formerly the head librarian at the British Columbia Ministry of Health Library and had since devoted herself to becoming a “voluntary assistant” to David Ray Griffin, a superstar Truther who placed forty-first on the *New Statesman*’s 2009 list of the world’s most influential people (more on him later in the book).

These people, I learned, aren’t the loners of *X-Files* stereotype. Just the opposite: Like other dot-com-era conspiracists, Truthers have collaborated on the Internet to produce a dense mythology with a professional, even scholarly, gloss. And they know how to stay on message: Scrolling down through my incoming correspondence, I was struck by how faithfully Truthers hewed to the movement’s main talking points:

- 9/11 was a secret plot led by Dick Cheney, Donald Rumsfeld, and Paul Wolfowitz as an excuse to launch imperial wars of conquest and seize the world’s dwindling oil and natural gas supplies;
- Osama bin Laden is a patsy of the U.S. government, and al-Qaeda is a wholly controlled subsidiary of the CIA;
- Ill-trained al-Qaeda pilots could never have executed the

maneuvers required to fly commercial jetliners into the World Trade Center and Pentagon;

- NORAD was intentionally made to “stand down” on 9/11 so that the hijacked planes could reach their destinations;
- Preplanted bombs brought down the World Trade Center buildings after they’d been hit by aircraft;
- Liquid metal observed flowing from the World Trade Center was molten steel—the result of an exotic high-temperature, government-manufactured pyrotechnic explosive called thermite;
- The puffs of air and dust emitted from the lower floors of the Twin Towers as they fell, plus the neat free-fall collapse of the buildings into their own ground-level footprint, demonstrate the use of a planned demolition sequence;
- World Trade Center leaseholder Larry Silverstein publicly admitted that one of the WTC buildings had been “pulled down” by internal demolition;
- Stock-trading data show that multimillion-dollar bets were made on airline companies in advance of Sept. 11, 2001, suggesting investor foreknowledge of the 9/11 attacks.

I’d long assumed that abnormal theories came from abnormal minds. But these people couldn’t be dismissed as freaks. Outwardly, in fact, they looked and sounded a lot like me. And when I look back at the genesis of this book, I think that was the crucial fact that drew me to them, and made me curious about what made them tick. Like many of the Truthers who emailed me, I, too, have a weakness for narrow, geeky pursuits—tabletop war games, chess problems, sports statistics, Internet flame wars. During a previous phase of my life, when I was pursuing my master’s degree in metallurgical engineering, I would often spend sixteen hours a day in front of a computer, writing a mathematical simulation that perhaps two dozen other people in the world would find useful.

In other words, I know what it is like to become enmeshed in all-consuming intellectual exercises that the people around you simply cannot understand—and perhaps even disdain. But for me, it was

always a hobby or an academic pursuit—never a worldview or a political philosophy. This is the line these people had crossed. And I wanted to find out why.

**A**t first, I didn't take Lubo Zizakovic seriously.

In his lengthy email to me, the man claimed to be all sorts of things—a successful investment banker, a software entrepreneur, an award-winning business scholar who'd once shared a podium with George Bush Sr., a walk-on member of the University of Maryland basketball team, and, most memorably, a former defensive end with the New York Giants. When I reluctantly took Zizakovic up on his offer to meet for lunch at a sushi restaurant near my office, I expected to meet a confused man inhabiting a world of fantasy.

As soon as I walked into the restaurant, I knew otherwise. Lubo Zizakovic is six foot eight, trim as my wife's yoga instructor, with hands as large as small desk fans. No surprise that such a specimen would be able to make a career on the gridiron.

Despite his intimidating appearance, Zizakovic is no goon. During our meal of raw fish, he put me at ease, describing his experiences in professional football, the state of the global economy, his volunteer work for the Special Olympics, and the joys of raising a family on his large rural estate. The accomplishments he described to me are real, as is his career as an investment banker. And by all appearances, he's good at what he does.

But every once in a while, as he became animated about one point or another, I would see flashes of the 280-pound defensive end who drove opposing quarterbacks into the turf during the 1990s. Underneath his genteel, well-dressed investment banker exterior, Lubo Zizakovic harbors a lot of anger—anger that's been his constant companion since the defining historical event of our time.

"I was at [an investment banking] training session at Bricket Wood just outside London [on 9/11]," he told me. "When a trainer came in to inform us of the first plane hitting [World Trade Center] 1, we all immediately reacted as if this were a curve ball being thrown at us as

part of the training session. It was that outrageous.

“Once I realized that the attacks were for real, my first reaction was, ‘My God! How could a group pull this off with such efficiency? Three out of four direct hits? Four of four hijacked planes? Where was NORAD? Where were the air defense systems?’ I did my undergraduate work at the University of Maryland, so I spent a lot of time in the D.C. area, and I drove past the Pentagon often. I couldn’t imagine how someone could pull this off.”

In the days following 9/11, the Bush administration blamed al-Qaeda for the attacks, and even identified the nineteen hijackers who’d been on the four doomed airliners. But for Zizakovic—a man of Serbian ancestry whose distrust of the U.S. government became a fixation when NATO took sides against Slobodan Milosevic during the Balkan wars of the 1990s—the official explanation didn’t hold up. In fact, it only heightened his suspicions.

“The U.S. government apparently had it all figured out immediately,” he told me. “That was the first time I smelled a rat. [And] when the United States turned the entire world’s sympathy to extreme hatred in such a short time, I knew something was wrong. When they attacked Iraq under false pretenses and found no WMD, I knew in my heart that a bunch of guys living in caves in Afghanistan didn’t do 9/11.

“The clincher was listening to Bush say that Bin Laden might never be found. The U.S. military, with all of its modern satellite equipment and military might can find a needle in a haystack—but not a guy isolated in a single region? Common sense pointed to a cover-up early on, and I just had to spend some time finding concrete evidence . . . I [now] know beyond a shadow of a doubt that 9/11 was a criminal act executed by elements of the U.S. government—let’s call it the shadow government—against its own citizens.”

**M**ichael Keefer epitomizes what most of us imagine when we hear someone described as “an academic.” Tall, thin, bearded, gray-haired, and mild-mannered, Keefer shares a large century-old brick house in Toronto’s West End with his wife, an acclaimed novelist.

Bookshelves line the rooms, each crammed with classic texts accumulated over a four-decade career as a professor of English literature.

Bookish as he is, Keefer hails from a long line of fighters. His father—an elder in the Presbyterian Church—landed at Normandy. His grandfather was nearly killed at Gallipoli, and went on to serve in the Burma Corps during the Second World War. Keefer himself took a degree at Canada's Royal Military College in the late 1960s. As we talk in his living room, he directs my gaze to a portrait of an especially fierce-looking Keefer over the mantelpiece. "That's my double-great grandfather," he says. "His father and uncle and grandmother were booted out of New Jersey after the American Revolution. The family eventually moved to the Niagara Peninsula."

After graduation from RMC, Keefer became an officer in Canada's naval reserve, and then earned a doctorate at Sussex University in England. His thesis, researched during five years spent poring over Renaissance texts in Latin and German, was about the ideological origins of the Faustus myth. In time, he became an authority on both William Shakespeare and Christopher Marlowe, and published an exhaustive article on the philosophy of René Descartes.

And yes, he is a Truther.

Something about Keefer's personality had always lent itself to activism: Early in his career at Guelph University, he engaged in an unsuccessful four-year campaign to save a local heritage bridge from demolition. His awakening to more global causes began in the 1990s, when he organized fellow faculty members at Guelph in opposition to Canada's participation in the first Gulf War and the sanctions regime that followed. "It seems clear to me that what [the allies] had done in 1991 [were] war crimes," he told me. "Two UN guys resigned in protest over sanctions in Iraq—both denounced them as criminal. I was collecting information about stuff like that."

"Starting in about 2002," he tells me, "I'd begun noticing that computer security people were raising red flags over U.S. voting systems. On election night in 2004, I was carefully collecting exit-polling information from CNN. The next morning, I noticed that all of the key exit poll numbers had been changed overnight from what they'd



been at midnight. They'd changed to correspond to the final vote tally. I proved that the numbers had been fiddled, and published [my analysis] on the Internet. The piece had fourteen thousand hits within a week. My article basically argued that the 2004 election was stolen."

As he continued to research the 2004 election, Keefer found more dots to connect—including what he describes as evidence that the crucial Ohio results were sent to the office of Michael Connell, a Karl Rove confidante, before being certified by Ohio's Secretary of State. "Connell died in a plane crash in December [2008]," Keefer notes dryly. "It quite possibly was linked to the election shenanigans."

Based on these investigations, Keefer became more convinced that nothing announced by the U.S. government was as it seemed—including the "official" account of the September 11, 2001, attacks.

In the years following 9/11, Keefer—who'd formerly stuck to the world of academic journals and faculty meetings—began to surf the web, forging contacts with other left-wing authors and theorists. He became particularly influenced by the work of Michel Chossudovsky, a radical critic of the United States and globalization.

Keefer's theory of 9/11? "I concluded that a highly placed group within the U.S. government wanted to energize the U.S. public into support for a radical program of redrawing the map in the Middle East and Central Asia. And I think they felt the only way they could get support for this geopolitical program was through some kind of mighty shock to the U.S. psyche. These people—whoever they were—both organized the absence of the American air defenses and the destruction of the World Trade Center towers."

As our lengthy interview unfolded, Keefer began to detail his theory—as if supplying footnotes in one of his carefully researched academic papers on Renaissance-era philosophy: the timing of NORAD military training, suspicious plumes of smoke emanating from the North Tower, the behavioral oddities of 9/11 hijacker Mohammed Atta ("purported hijacker" is how Keefer describes him). All of this he recites calmly, methodically, authoritatively—as if what he was saying were not even controversial, let alone radical.

Then, suddenly, the conversation turned, and we found ourselves once more discussing Faustus, Descartes, and the frustrations of

university politics. Within a few minutes, I'd half-forgotten that the brilliant scholar on the other side of my coffee cup imagined the U.S. government to be guilty of mass-murdering three thousand innocent people on a sunny morning in 2001.

When we parted ways, it was with a friendly handshake and a smile: Like most Truthers I'd met, he didn't begrudge the fact that I rejected his views. He was pleased that I'd taken the time to listen to him, and hoped that I'd eventually come around to the capital-T Truth.

**K**eefer and Zizakovic are just two of many conspiracy theorists I've met. I've chosen to include them in the first chapter because they exemplify the penetration of conspiracism into the well-educated middle class. Zizakovic is a respected and successful banker responsible for multimillion-dollar investment decisions. Keefer is an eminent author and university professor who is entrusted with the education of hundreds of young minds. Neither fit the stereotype of the antisocial conspiracy theorist scribbling out his obscure theses in a dingy student apartment.

They are alike in another way, too: For Keefer and Zizakovic, as for most Truthers, 9/11 is just the tip of the iceberg—a symptom of a far larger metaconspiracy organized by the world's secret elites.

In interview after interview, a conversation about 9/11 would inevitably come back to the same group of apparently disconnected individuals and corporations—Henry Kissinger, the Carlyle Group, David Rockefeller, the Rothschilds, George Soros (who seems to be considered, by Glenn Beck and others, a sort of honorary Rothschild in modern conspiracist lore), Unocal, Halliburton, the Bilderberg Group, the U.S. Federal Reserve, the Council on Foreign Relations, the International Monetary Fund, Dick Cheney, the CIA, the Mossad, Pakistan's ISI, Adnan Khashoggi, E. Howard Hunt, Zbigniew Brzezinski—along with theories linking them in complex and tantalizing ways. In the mind of the committed conspiracist, such theories multiply until they encompass literally every aspect of human life, from the water we drink (filled with fluoride, a “deadly neurotoxin” developed by the

Nazis to “pacify concentration camp prisoners”), to the air we breathe (polluted by government-engineered “chemtrails” emitted by jet engines as they pass overhead), to the blood pumping through our veins (poisoned by government-mandated vaccines).

Keefe, for instance, suspects that 9/11 is but one chapter in a continuing saga of “false flag” operations hatched by elements within, or allied to, the United States government—including the bombing of the Bologna train station in 1980. He also believes there is evidence that “the occupation of Afghanistan is linked to U.S. government participation in the global drug trade”—an echo of 1980s-era charges that the CIA was trafficking cocaine in Central America as part of its campaign against Nicaragua’s Sandinista regime.

When you talk to a conspiracy theorist, you can never be sure where your conversation will end up. One of the very first Truthers I met—a charming, New York-based former newspaper columnist named Dallas Hansen, who’d lost his job as a result of his controversial views about the World Trade Center attacks—connected September 11 to a range of particularly jaw-dropping theories, spanning the assassination of JFK to the likely target of the next false-flag terrorist attack.

“My great-grandfather owned a bus line in Holland and hid Jews in his country home,” he tells me. “My grandfather was a teenager who participated in ambushes of Nazi supply trucks . . . I’m not the first person to compare 9/11 to the Reichstag Fire, nor to notice a sort of fascism-lite has emerged. The news abounds with tales of police-state tyranny, from [people] being Tasered to death . . . to police forcibly withdrawing blood from ‘drunk driving suspects.’ ”

Most memorably, he speculated that George W. Bush would retire to Paraguay so that he could enjoy the protection and fraternity of former Nazis. “Why in the world would he do that?” I asked. He responded that the fortunes of the Bush family have long been intertwined with those of the Nazis—and then described financial links between George Bush’s ancestors and Hitler’s regime.

(To my shock, I later found that Hansen’s story had a germ of truth: A 2004 article in Britain’s *Guardian* newspaper reported that “George Bush’s grandfather, the late U.S. senator Prescott Bush, was a director and shareholder of companies that profited from their involvement with

the financial backers of Nazi Germany.” It was a classic example of an isolated historical factoid being used to justify an outlandish conspiracy theory—a pattern I would see repeated many times.)

As explained in more detail in Chapter 2, several common threads run through these theories, and they spooled over one another repeatedly during the course of my interviews. These include the belief that the path of history is controlled in secret by a small group of influential, fantastically wealthy people; that this power structure is murderous and morally corrupt; and that the political world we inhabit is fundamentally illusory, like the constructed reality in the 1999 film *The Matrix*.

“The world is ruled by an elite who make world events occur for their own benefit,” declared Zizakovic when I asked him to describe how 9/11 figured in the sweep of modern history. “Read *The True Story of the Bilderberg Group* by Daniel Estulin [an influential conspiracist book summarized in the next chapter]. In 1954, the ruling elite started coordinating their efforts. They are a global shadow government with influence and control of just about every major government in the world . . . Their objective, which can be argued might already be achieved, is a one government world with one currency where the masses have no real wealth and all of the resources are in [the elite’s] hands.”

When a conspiracy theorist held forth in this way, I would usually just put down my pen and listen as we dove together down the rabbit hole. There’s nothing else to be done: These metanarratives are so elaborate and ambitious that they essentially describe alternate moral universes—unrecognizable realms in which a Western government smashing airplanes into its own cities makes perfect sense.

Truthers’ arcane, detailed theories about internal demolition, NORAD complicity, and CIA–al-Qaeda complicity aren’t just paranoid fairy tales—they are foundational narratives in the construction of this alternate reality, told and retold at Truther gatherings in the same ritualized manner that psalms or Torah portions are read out at religious services. Like other radicalized political movements of our time, the Truth movement transcends activism: For many adherents, it has become the dominant spiritual force in their lives, a pattern described in detail in Chapter 6.

Certainly, the 9/11 Truth phenomenon cannot be explained as a merely political phenomenon. While I once supposed Truthers to be simply radical specimens of the anti-American, Bush-hating Left, many of the Truthers I've met actually turned out to be self-described conservatives who see 9/11 as part of a plot to strip Americans of their liberty, and transfer Washington's sovereign powers to the United Nations. With the liberal Barack Obama in power, this imagined day of reckoning only grows nearer.

**F**or Alex Jones, it all started with David Koresh and the Waco siege.

Jones grew up in the Dallas suburbs, just two hours' drive from the Branch Davidian ranch at Mount Carmel. In 1993, when Jones was barely out of high school, a seven-week Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms (ATF) siege ended in the incineration of seventy-six cult members. He remembers being transfixed by the congressional hearings into the fiasco, which were broadcast by C-SPAN. The episode turned Jones into a full-time crusader against the United States government.

Koresh and his followers, Jones believed, were harmless innocents who'd been murdered by Attorney General Janet Reno and cynical ATF agents looking to boost their agency's profile. "I remember watching the TV screen and seeing that famous footage of the ATF loading their video cameras before going in," Jones told me. "They were going to lose their funding. This was [a] PR stunt. They were about to be abolished. That's why they did it."

Two years later, Timothy McVeigh bombed the Alfred P. Murrah building in Oklahoma City, an act intended to incite a popular revolt against the U.S. government. But Jones concluded the bombing actually was a part of a conspiracy, hatched by the feds themselves, to quash the nascent states'-rights movement. By this time, his opinion mattered: The twenty-one-year-old Jones already had his own cable-access television program. A year later, he began airing on radio. By the time George W. Bush was in his second term he arguably had become the most popular and influential conspiracist in America. His

syndicated *Alex Jones Show* appears on dozens of AM, FM, and shortwave stations across the United States—a platform that gives him unparalleled influence within the Truther movement.

Jones believes that the 9/11 plot was an inside job, likely executed by using remote control technology to override the pilots of the commandeered aircraft. Under this theory, the nineteen hijackers were stooges who believed they were participating in a legitimate military exercise—though many of Jones’ followers believe the men are still alive, and have developed a rich literature detailing their sightings.

When you ask Jones about all of this, one of the first things he’ll tell you is that he “predicted” 9/11. What actually happened was this: On July 25, 2001, Jones warned viewers of his *Infowars* TV show that the U.S. government was planning a terrorist attack against its own citizens—flashing the White House’s phone number so that people could call in and beg the president not to go through with the dastardly plot. In the broadcast, which now circulates widely on the Internet, Jones does not identify the World Trade Center as a future target, but he does declare—in typically Jonesian language—that “the United States is a shining jewel the globalists want to bring down and they will use terrorism as the pretext to get it done,” and that Osama bin Laden is “the bogeyman [the government] need[s] in this Orwellian system.”

Talking to Jones is exhausting. He spits out every sentence as if he were calling the police to report a crime in progress—footnoting each eyebrow-raising claim with scattered (but oddly precise) references to Internet news sources. As *Radar* magazine writer Jebediah Reed put it, he speaks “in a gravelly baritone fit for the public address announcer at a monster truck rally—a voice so gruff it almost sounds like he’s faking it.”

He throws around acronyms like “PNAC” (Project for the New American Century, a Truther obsession described in more detail later in this book), and talks casually of NATO’s role in engineering “the 888 attacks” (his term for the brief 2008 war between Russia and Georgia). Jones has lived and breathed these sorts of conspiracy theories for years. It’s not clear that this New World Order prophet could turn his obsession off—though he claims he’d like to . . . if only the world would let him. “Once you discover reality, what is being admitted, all the

crimes, and you go around to the zombie-like media and tell people to read all this stuff, and they just giggle and say none of this exists, that government is good, it's upsetting, and so you try to wake people up," he tells me, slowing down the pace of his manic verbiage only slightly as he adopts the weary tone of a political martyr. "People laughed at us, and now it's all coming true. Even though I'm sick of doing this, I do it anyway. Somebody's got to do this."

One would have thought that the Republicans' across-the-board losses in the 2008 elections would have provided Jones with peace of mind: Surely, one of the first things that Barack Obama and incoming administration officials would do is unearth the murderous 9/11 lies of their ousted opponents.

But Jones—like other Truthers—scoffs at the illusion that Obama will ever willingly permit Americans to get at the truth ("smoking Democ-rack" many activists call it). When it comes to who calls the real shots in Washington, he tells me, there is no difference between Republicans and Democrats: "They answer to the same people. The president is nothing more than a pitch man—a Madison Avenue front." Like all committed conspiracy theorists, he is able to incorporate any new piece of information or historical development into a preexisting framework.

All governments, Jones believes, use terrorism and staged acts of warfare to hoodwink their citizens and gain support for their agendas—from the sinking of the *Maine*, to the Reichstag fire (Jones' favorite historical reference), to Pearl Harbor ("*The Honolulu Advertiser* newspaper was telling readers the attack was coming seven days before it happened"). In the case of Obama, Jones sees dark hints of things to come in the mused-about carbon tax, the proceeds from which, he believes, will one day be paid to a global overlord. The same goes for Washington's bank bailout: In a full-length film he's produced—*The Obama Deception*—Jones alleges "international bankers purposefully engineered the worldwide financial meltdown to bankrupt the nations of the planet and bring in World Government.

"Bottom line, the future as I see it is this: 70 percent *Brave New World*, 30 percent *Nineteen-Eighty-Four*," he tells me. "There'll be lots of video games, drugs, Soma, Prozac, parties—but if you get out of

line, the SWAT team's coming.”

## Some Caveats

This is a book about American conspiracism's history and mythology (Chapters 1 through 4), psychological and religious roots (Chapters 5 and 6), propagation through modern media, academic and activist networks (Chapters 7, 8, and 9), and, more generally, the manner in which it erodes our society's collective grasp on reality. In Chapter 10, I offer suggestions for countering the spread of conspiracy theories—including a brief description of a hypothetical academic course that would give college students the tools needed to identify and debunk conspiracist ideologies.

Before proceeding further, let me offer five caveats about the way the material is presented.

First, this book focuses primarily on conspiracism in the United States and the Internet-based conspiracist culture that has grown out of it, with some coverage of prominent Canadian theorists who have taken an active role in promoting American conspiracist narratives. (True to its moderate stereotype, my native Canada has virtually no indigenous conspiracist culture of its own, except in regard to phobias of U.S. hegemony. And so its paranoiacs tend to co-opt American obsessions with JFK, 9/11, the USS *Liberty*, and the like.)

The 9/11 Truth movement is widespread beyond North America's shores—particularly in the Muslim countries of the Middle East and South Asia. But in these parts of the world, such theories are wrapped up in complicated ways with anti-Americanism, colonialism, and the long history of the West's interaction with what was once called the Third World—issues that lie beyond the scope of this book.

Second, this book is not intended as a rebuttal to conspiracists. Nor will I provide a complete recitation of their elaborate proofs. Those seeking a point-by-point rebuttal to the claims of the 9/11 Truth movement already have several fine resources at their disposal. In particular, I recommend the 2006 book *Debunking 9/11 Myths: Why Conspiracy Theories Can't Stand up to the Facts*, authored by the editors of *Popular Mechanics* magazine; Mark Roberts' *Links for 9/11*



Research; the websites 911 Myths, Debunking 911, and the blog *ScrewLoose Change*. Readers who wish to devote more time to the issue might also consider reading the *Final Report of the 9–11 Commission*, released in 2004; Lawrence Wright’s Pulitzer Prize–winning 2006 account of the history of 9/11, *The Looming Tower*, and, for those who share my interest in technical material, the National Institute of Standards and Technology’s exhaustive *Final Reports of the Federal Building and Fire Investigation of the World Trade Center Disaster* (a twenty-million-dollar effort that took three years to produce, and drew on the efforts of three hundred staff and external experts). I also recommend a brief, but highly illuminating 2006 paper by explosives and demolitions expert Brent Blanchard entitled *A Critical Analysis of the Collapse of WTC Towers 1,2&7 From a Conventional Explosives and Demolitions Industry Viewpoint*. It can be found on the website of the *Journal of Debunking 9/11*, which contains a number of other interesting articles aimed at helping laypeople refute Truther claims.

Third, a note about terminology: Throughout this book, I employ the terms “conspiracy theory” (and, interchangeably, “conspiracism”) to describe 9/11 Truth and similar movements. The phrase is defined by *Merriam-Webster’s* as “a theory that explains an event or set of circumstances as the result of a secret plot.” But that formulation is broad enough to encompass *actual* historical conspiracies, such as the plot to frame Alfred Dreyfus in the 1890s, the 1972 plot by members of the Committee to Re-elect the President to spy on the Democratic National Committee headquarters, and the actual al-Qaeda plot that led to 9/11. So instead, I adopt the narrower definition set out by Oxford University conspiracy theory scholar Steve Clarke and Brian Keeley of Pitzer College (formerly of Washington University): A theory that traces important events to a secretive, nefarious cabal, *and whose proponents consistently respond to contrary facts not by modifying their theory, but instead by insisting on the existence of ever-wider circles of high-level conspirators controlling most or all parts of society.*

Fourth, a caveat about the different types of conspiracy theories

discussed in this book: As political scientist Michael Barkun has noted, conspiracy theories usually can be classified as either “event” or “systemic.” In the former case, the conspiracist is merely seeking to explain a discrete event—such as, say, the moon landing, or a hypothetical Elizabethan plot to pass off Francis Bacon’s plays as William Shakespeare’s. In the case of systemic conspiracy theories, on the other hand, the theory purports to explain the operation of whole societies, and often the entire planet. This book deals primarily (though not exclusively) with systemic conspiracy theories, such as 9/11 Truth, since they are far more damaging to the marketplace of ideas. That said, I do not take pains in the text to assign conspiracy theories to one category or the other.

Fifth, a note about the people who are the subject of the case study at the heart of this book.

Many Americans view 9/11 Truthers as inherently contemptible. *Washington Post* columnist Charles Krauthammer, for instance, has declared that Truthers “derangedly desecrate” the victims of 9/11. While I understand why people hold that view, most Truthers I’ve met actually tend to be outwardly respectful of the innocent victims who perished in the World Trade Center and Pentagon attacks. In fact, many of the most prominent boosters of the Truther movement—including some of the so-called Jersey Girls—have themselves been 9/11 widows or first responders (a psychological phenomenon I describe in the “damaged survivor” subsection of Chapter 5). At Truther events I’ve attended in the New York City area, organizers have raised thousands of dollars for police and firefighters who became sick or injured on 9/11, and sometimes (though not always) there is plenty of genuine American patriotism on display.

Moreover, let it be said that not all conspiracy theories are equally malign.

Some of the conspiracist movements I discuss in this book—such as the Ku Klux Klan, *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, and Holocaust revisionism—are explicitly racist or anti-Semitic. By including these historical references, I am *not* suggesting that Truthers harbor any equivalent hatred. Most Truthers actually cast themselves as *enemies* of bigotry whose mission is to expose the truth about a

racist, white, imperialist war machine originally set into motion by the Christian crusader George W. Bush.

It also bears mentioning that the Truth movement is entirely nonviolent. Their meetings and literature typically are suffused with exhortations to tolerance and respect. When they demonstrate publicly, they get permits, and usually follow police instructions carefully. (I know this from eyewitness observations: I've marched with them several times, and have never seen anyone arrested.) Unlike hate-fueled conspiracist movements that fired adherents up by calling for pogroms against Jews or blacks (or even full-blown insurgency against the government), Truthers appeal to due process and the American Constitution. Their professed goal is to put America's leadership on trial according to the existing laws of the land.

The threat currently posed by modern conspiracists is not physical, but cultural. Like other groups that have effectively opted out of America's ideological mainstream, they threaten to turn the country into a sort of intellectual Yugoslavia—a patchwork of agitated cults screaming at one another in mutually unintelligible tongues. It's a trend that every thinking person has a duty to fight.