

Birthers, Birchers and the paranoid style of politics

By Arthur Goldwag

More than half a century ago, the John Birch Society raised an alarm that Dwight Eisenhower wasn't the genial war hero and popular president he seemed, but rather "a conscious, dedicated agent of the Communist conspiracy." Bill Clinton, we were told in the 1990s, ran illicit drugs out of an airport in Mena, Ark., when he wasn't bumping off a long list of enemies and associates who knew too much about his other nefarious activities (Monica Lewinsky excepted, of course). The so-called 9/11 Truth Movement accuses George W. Bush, Dick Cheney, Israel, the Federal Reserve and the real estate industry—virtually anyone except Al-Qaida—of orchestrating the attacks on the Pentagon and World Trade Center, much as conservative journalist John T. Flynn indicted Franklin D. Roosevelt in the 1940s for treasonously sacrificing Pearl Harbor. A not inconsiderable slice of today's electorate (and many of its elected representatives) believe President Barack Obama not only harbors an implacable hatred for white people—and is seeking to euthanize their grandparents— but that he's not even an American citizen.

Conspiracy theorists—and by conspiracy theorists, I don't mean anyone who believes in particular conspiracies (which occur all the time), but rather those who maintain that a single vast conspiracy suffices to explain the better part of human affairs—claim to be hard-boiled realists, unsentimental skeptics who look past the deceptively bland surfaces of things and gaze unblinkingly at the awful truth. They characterize themselves as "open-minded" and their detractors as dogmatic proponents of groupthink.

But whether they are on the right or the left of the political spectrum, virtually all of them are creatures of faith. Like the Gnostics of old, who believed that the God of the Bible was a Satanic impostor, conspiracists believe they have been vouchsafed a revelation about the true nature of the world. As they see it, there are no tragedies, no accidents and mistakes, no good intentions gone awry—history is a battleground, an arena in which angels and demons are forever grappling, while the rest of us are borne unknowing toward Armageddon.

Of course you don't have to be certifiably crazy to believe bad things about America and its leaders. Lyndon B. Johnson might not have ginned up the Gulf of Tonkin Incident out of whole cloth, but he knew what a shaky *casus belli* it provided ("For all I know, our Navy was shooting at whales out there," he remarked privately a year after Congress ratified the resolution). Richard Nixon broke a host of laws and conspired to cover up the evidence. George W. Bush's administration didn't bring down the World Trade Center, but before the dust had settled they'd launched a war under false pretenses and rolled out a torture policy that would have scandalized George Washington.

America's ideologies and actions are all too often driven by cynical political calculations, weak moral characters, authoritarian impulses. But conspiracy theorists don't register such shades of gray; they have pitched their tents in a Manichean world of metaphysical absolutes. The reason that so many of them are determined to connect politicians they don't like to occultism—the Bushes to esoteric Freemasonry, the Nazis to the Thule Society, Obama to radical Islam (which many of them equate with devil worship)— is because "evil" isn't an adjective to them but a noun.

They believe Satan is an active participant in world affairs.

The idea that myriad greedy, incompetent, dishonest bankers, real estate agents, brokers, financiers, lobbyists and politicians, all of them pursuing their own selfish ends, could have precipitated a global financial meltdown—that a completely avoidable catastrophe could have been a product of synergy rather than conscious conspiracy— is not only mind-boggling, it's infuriating. What the late historian Richard Hofstadter famously called "the paranoid style in American politics" provides the disoriented, the deracinated and the dispossessed— the collateral casualties of our fast-changing world— with a restored sense of mastery. Take climate change. The prospect of melting ice caps, superstorms, tsunamis and worldwide famine is awful to contemplate; it's easier by far to accuse Al Gore and his liberal minions of perpetrating a fraud.

Or you can go to the opposite extreme, as believers in chemtrails do (chemtrails look like jet contrails but they are believed to have been sprayed in the sky by the government). Some are said to contain bio-agents designed to sterilize targeted ethnic populations or deadly pathogens like H1N1, so that pharmaceutical companies can raise their bottom lines by selling vaccines; some are thought to be compounded of aluminum salts or silicon carbide, a secret military project to weaponize the climate by accelerating the process of global dimming.

Either the weather isn't changing, or it's changing because bad people are doing it on purpose.

Neither scenario regards anthropogenic climate change as an inevitable byproduct of industrialism; neither requires us to make any hard sacrifices.

John Keats attributed Shakespeare's greatness as a poet to his capacity for "negative capability," which he defined as "when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts without any irritable reaching after fact and reason."

As illustrated by innumerable Zen parables, the ability not just to tolerate but to revel in mystery is a signature of enlightenment— an attribute no conspiracist, for all the privileged knowledge he or she claims to possess, can lay claim to. "The only true wisdom is knowing that you know nothing," said Socrates.

Conspiracism is the delusion that one knows everything.

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