

September 11th through Conspiracists' Eyes

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Prepared for presentation at the
Critical Incident Analysis Group (CIAG) conference,
“Terrorism, Intelligence and Democracy,”
University of Virginia, Charlottesville,
April 7-9, 2002.

In an influential analysis of the Pearl Harbor attack, published 40 years ago, Roberta Wohlstetter made her well-known distinction between “signal” and “noise” in the evaluation of intelligence. The signal, which conveys information about an enemy action or intention, may be lost, obscured, or distorted by noise in the form of disinformation, rumors, hoaxes, and a variety of other useless or misleading material. Further, the mind-set of the interpreter may prevent correct separation of the signal from the noise, particularly when the noise supports the interpreter’s preconceptions.

In the post-September 11th situation, we are likely to think of this as a largely international or inter-cultural problem, where we must extract useful information from a welter of reports and data encoded in languages, cultural understandings, and belief systems that are in every sense foreign to us.

There is, however, also a domestic dimension to the signal-noise issue.

In its simplest form, the signal-noise distinction implies an organization that scans its environment for external threats. This derives from our conception of the state as an entity living in a world made dangerous by other, potentially hostile, states, and by hostile non-state actors, such as terrorist groups. This simplified model of the state as the intelligence gatherer is made more complex when multiple governmental organizations collect and interpret intelligence in competitive and often contradictory ways.

The complexities, however, do not end there. There are also private domestic groups that purport to gather and interpret intelligence, groups which are often suspicious of and potentially hostile to the federal government. These “shadow intelligence systems,” as I shall call them, can be more than mere nuisances. Those who comprise them are conspiracists, who view history as a plot engineered by secret manipulators. As is now well known, September 11th conspiracy stories have circulated widely in the Islamic world. What is less well appreciated is the sheer volume of such material in the United States – sometimes with the same alleged perpetrators (Mossad and the CIA, for example), but often with other stock villains from the conspiracist repertoire, such as the Bush family and the Illuminati.

For example, a website called “Conspiracy Planet” characterizes the attacks as “fake terror...a gigantic and deadly hoax.” Another website absolves Osama bin Laden and the Taliban as mere pawns of a shadowy organization called “the Old Order of the Illuminati.” Norman Olson of the Michigan Militia, never one to take a vow of silence, argues that because, in his words, “People do not trust the government to protect them,” militia groups should reconstitute themselves as “the Citizen Anti-Terrorist Force.”

Because these ideas lie somewhere between eccentricity and delusion, they seem to have no implications for public policy, but their absence from mainstream media should not lead us to infer

that they have no consequences. The World Trade Center attacks and the anthrax scare generated an astonishing array of urban legends, most of them unreported in newspapers or on television, but spread, contagion-like, on the Internet. Conspiracists not only see plots behind the terrorist attacks; they also have future expectations that predispose them to fear many potential counter-terrorism measures, a subject to which I shall return.

American conspiracism since the 1960s has offered explanations for disturbing events, such as the assassination of John Kennedy. While conspiracy theories that focus on single events can still be found, an increasing proportion of conspiracism asserts that all of history has unfolded as a result of conspiratorial manipulation. Hence, for the conspiracist, nothing happens by accident, everything is interconnected, and appearances are always meant to deceive.

Most conspiracy theories identify a master-plot called "the New World Order," the currently fashionable name for a plan to impose a global dictatorship. The final imposition of this New World Order will supposedly be brought about by UN troops who will destroy American institutions. New World Order scenarios have struck roots in at least three subcultures: among Protestant fundamentalists, who identify it with the end-time reign of Antichrist; among so-called "Christian patriots," encompassing militias, tax resisters, and white separatists; and, somewhat surprisingly, even among believers in UFOs, who view the New World Order as a power-grab by extraterrestrials and their earthly confederates. Regardless of the differences, there is a common demonization of such groups as international bankers, the Trilateral Commission, and the Council on Foreign Relations.

The federal government is already believed to be largely in the conspirators' hands, although until now they have been compelled to act cautiously in order to forestall popular opposition. According to conspiracists, the plotters will strike by creating a crisis in order to provide a pretext for seizing total power. This gambit -- what might be termed the "Reichstag Fire model" -- will be used as an excuse for the imposition of martial law and the suspension of constitutional protections. This will be followed by the incarceration of dissenters in concentration camps operated by the Federal Emergency Management Agency. The unincarcerated population will be made docile and manageable by an army of high-technology "mind control" methods, techniques ranging from drugs to brain implants.

These views proliferate in books, periodicals, videotapes, and innumerable websites. They seep into popular culture through television and films. Indeed, any fan of "The X-Files" will recognize familiar conspiracist motifs.

Since the conspirators are said to be diabolically cunning and nearly all-powerful, they can produce the extraordinary, the shocking, and the misleading. As far as conspiracists are concerned, therefore, anything that suggests the conspiracy does not exist is a ruse. In practice, this makes conspiracy theories nonfalsifiable. These closed systems can be oddly reassuring, for they suggest that the world is an orderly place, in which actions are purposeful, and where the causes of events can be precisely identified, if only one cracks the code. Those who think they have found the key quickly interpret ambiguous evidence in ways consistent with their fixed ideas. Military personnel with foreign accents or unfamiliar uniforms, exercises by emergency personnel, individuals with Arab names, and the famous black helicopters are all subject to such interpretations. This is hardly a new phenomenon. In the 1950s, for example, American paramilitary groups were certain Soviet troops were stationed in Mexico, waiting to invade. What distinguishes the current period is the possibility that comparably bizarre ideas will stimulate action.

Conspiracists' reaction to September 11th was that the hijackers were merely pawns carrying out the orders of hidden masters. The U.S. government, conspiracists are sure, either planned the operation or had advance knowledge of it. Its purpose was to provide cover for the further extension of the New World Order.

These fears have become notably stronger during the debate about homeland security. Proposals for “smart cards” and screening through biometrics have convinced many conspiracists that we are on the verge of the New World Order’s triumph. Suggested expansion of FEMA’s role in emergency preparedness they take to be a step toward the concentration camps embedded in militia fantasies. Since they live in a world in which there are no coincidences, they quickly note that it was the President’s father who popularized the phrase “New World Order” more than a decade ago. Because the phrase “mind control” is so imprecise, conspiracists easily slide from “smart cards” to the feared microchip implants. A morbid fascination with microchips first emerged among fundamentalist conspiracy theorists in the 1980s, who saw it as a fulfillment of the famous “mark of the Beast” passage in the New Testament Book of Revelation and was quickly picked up by the more secularly minded.

While conspiracism after 9/11 may appear to be a fringe phenomenon, it has clear implications for counter-terrorism measures. The mind-set I have just outlined can translate into unintended consequences. Precautions that seem appropriate may generate unexpected domestic opposition, while groups and individuals already fearful of the federal government will regard their fears as justified. Neither result is likely to seem obvious in a period characterized by high national unity. While the sense of common purpose is real, it is not uniform, nor does it offer a “blank check” for policy change.

As indicated earlier, devotees of New World Order conspiracy theories generate detailed predictions about the future. Indeed, to the extent that some of the theories are driven by religious beliefs, they carry the authority of prophecy for believers. Even secular conspiracists consider a New World Order dictatorship almost certain. Remember, too, that conspiracy theories combine claims of certainty with a structure that makes them impervious to contradiction. Hence even non-religious conspiracists can hold beliefs with religious conviction.

The debate about such measures as identification cards with embedded microchips often revolves around civil liberties and privacy questions. Conspiracists, however, place them not in this familiar legal framework, but rather in the context of a cosmic battle between good and evil.

These fears have been amplified by other factors as well. For example, the continuity of government project led by the Vice-President inadvertently taps into potent emotions on the anti-government right. A large fringe literature has been built around a mythology about secret underground installations where the conspiracy is alleged to work, so that the presence of officials in subterranean secure locations is perceived as yet another fulfilled prediction. The very term used to describe the Cheney operation -- “shadow government” -- coincidentally resonates with what conspiracists commonly refer to as the “secret government,” that is, the hidden power structure that allegedly runs the country.

The thinking I have just described recapitulates a process common among extremist and millenarian groups. The group develops a detailed picture of future developments, particularly those associated with the behavior of evil forces. The government, ignorant of these expectations, acts in ways that resemble what the group anticipates. The coincidence of behavior and ideology has two effects: First, it legitimizes the ideology by validating the predictions. Second, the group, now convinced that movement towards a final battle has accelerated, adopts what it considers essential defensive measures. If the cycle is not broken, the result will be a spiral of provocative action and violent response.

Shadow intelligence systems, believing that they have correctly identified the signal, now become part of the intelligence environment for the official intelligence system. Complex relationships of mutual dependence and misunderstanding thus tie the shadow and official systems together. For the shadow system, the official system’s activities validate their own fears. For the official system, the shadow system represents potential signals of domestic terrorism as well as confusing sources of additional noise.

To put it somewhat differently, one group's signal can be another group's noise. This mirroring relationship exists not simply in the international milieu, where states and NGOs simultaneously understand and confuse one another. It also exists domestically, as could be seen in reactions to the anthrax cases and in suspicions about persons of Middle Eastern descent. Domestic conspiracists have believed all along that the true enemy was the enemy within and see this as their great opportunity to mount the barricades.

The less information we have in periods of crisis, the more information we want. But instead of making do with what we have, we seek to increase the supply. Since the conventional supply is insufficient, the gap is closed by strategies that substitute noise for signal. The questionable and the ambiguous come to be endowed with a confidence that would not be placed in them during normal times. While this degradation in quality occurs in both official and shadow systems, it can lead to particularly unpredictable results in shadow systems, which are already built on unrealistic assumptions.

An unintended consequence of such a dynamic can be "self-fulfilling prophecies," in which events that ordinarily would not have occurred are brought into being by the very act of being predicted. Normally, this occurs when those making a prediction cause it to come true, like the panicky depositors in a bank-run who all decide to withdraw their money at the same time. But the case I have been describing is different, for now we have two sets of predictions -- one made by the government, the other by those suspicious of it.

These are especially significant considerations when people act on the basis of firmly held beliefs. Whether those beliefs are religious or secular, the belief system constrains impulsive behavior, because it lays out a prescribed sequence of future events.

In effect, there are now two "scripts," and two sets of future expectations. Each side may behave in ways that fulfill the other's expectations. To the extent that the two are used to dealing with one another, the mutual fulfillment can be conscious and productive, as it is for such antagonists as labor and management or political parties. But where a gulf of misunderstanding and mistrust separates them -- as it does when there are sharp cultural, religious, or ideological differences they may do so unknowingly and with devastating results.

It is just this polarization that characterizes the present situation. Whether we have in mind terrorists and the state or the state and radical internal adversaries, there is a high probability that the two will misunderstand each other -- resulting not simply in mutual incomprehension, but possibly in the accidental fulfillment of the other's "script." We may find ourselves playing a part we were not aware we were playing, acting out a role in someone else's apocalyptic play.

The risk of falling into such a trap is especially great under conditions of high stress and inadequate information, when official and public anxieties produce demands for action. As Colin Gray observes in an important essay in the journal of the Army War College: "The temptation to do something, for the sake of being seen to be doing something -- even something strategically stupid -- can be politically irresistible." He draws from this the disturbing corollary that "asymmetric threats can wreak their greatest damage through ill-judged measures of response that we ourselves choose to undertake."

Even under the best of circumstances, counter-terrorism measures have uncertain benefits. Although they may succeed in allaying anxieties, they may not actually reduce risk. On the other hand, they may well contribute to what Harold Lasswell called a "garrison state," a society organized around the maintenance and management of the instruments of violence, a prospect which suggests that we would do well to temper our actions with an awareness of their potential consequences.