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Debunking conspiracy theorists

By Gerard Holmgren, debunker@hotmail.com, Wednesday 12 February 2003, 1:28pm

Astute observers of history are aware that for every notable event there will usually be at least one, often several, wild conspiracy theories which spring up around it. "The CIA killed Hendrix," "The Pope had John Lennon murdered," "Hitler was half werewolf," "Space aliens replaced Nixon with a clone," etc, etc. The bigger the event, the more ridiculous and more numerous are the fanciful rantings which circulate in relation to it.

So its hardly surprising that the events of Sept 11 2001 have spawned their fair share of these ludicrous fairy tales. And as always, there is—sadly—a small but glibble percentage of the population eager to lap up these tall tales, regardless of facts or rational analysis.

One of the wilder stories circulating about Sept 11, and one that has attracted something of a cult following amongst conspiracy buffs is that it was carried out by 19 fanatical Arab hijackers, masterminded by an evil genius named Osama bin Laden, with no apparent motivation other than that they "hate our freedoms."

Never a group of people to be bothered by facts, the perpetrators of this cartoon fantasy have constructed an elaborately woven web of delusions and unsubstantiated hearsay in order to promote this garbage across the internet and the media to the extent that a number of otherwise rational people have actually fallen under its spell.

Normally I don't even bother debunking this kind of junk, but the effect that this paranoid myth is beginning to have requires a little rational analysis, in order to consign it to the same rubbish bin as all such silly conspiracy theories.

These crackpots even contend that the extremist Bush regime was caught unawares by the attacks, had no hand in organizing them, and actually would have stopped them if it had been able. Blindly ignoring the stand down of the US air-force, the insider trading on airline stocks—linked to the CIA, the complicit behavior of Bush on the morning of the attacks, the controlled demolition of the WTC, the firing of a missile into the Pentagon and a host of other documented proofs that the Bush regime was behind the attacks, the conspiracy theorists stick doggedly to a silly story about 19 Arab hijackers somehow managing to commandeer 4 planes simultaneously and fly them around US airspace for nearly 2 hours, crashing them into important buildings, without the US intelligence services having any idea that it was coming, and without the Air Force knowing what to do.

The huge difficulties with such a stupid story force them to invent even more preposterous stories to distract from its core silliness, and thus the tale has escalated into a mythic fantasy of truly gargantuan proportions.

It's difficult to apply rational analysis to such unmitigated stupidity, but that is the task which I take on in this article. However, it should be noted that one of the curious characteristics of conspiracy theorists is that they effortlessly change their so called evidence in response to each aspect which is debunked. As soon as one delusion is unmasked, they simply invent another to replace it, and deny that the first ever existed.

Eventually, when they have turned full circle through this endlessly changing fantasy fog, they then re-invent the original delusion and deny that you ever debunked it, thus beginning the circle once more. This technique is known as "the fruit loop" and saves the conspiracy theorist from ever having to see any of their ideas through to their (il)logical conclusions.

According to the practitioners of the fruit loop, 19 Arabs took over the 4 planes by subduing the passengers and crew through the use of guns, knives, box cutters and gas, and then used electronic guidance systems which they had smuggled on board to fly the planes to their targets.

The suspension of disbelief required for this outrageous concoction is only for the hard core conspiracy theorist. For a start, they conveniently skip over the awkward fact that there weren't any Arabs on the planes. If there were, one must speculate that they somehow got on board without being filmed by any of the security cameras and without being registered on the passenger lists. But the curly question of how they are supposed to have got on board is all too mundane for the exciting world of the conspiracy theorist.

With vague mummings that they must have been using false ID (but never specifying which IDs they are alleged to have used, or how these were traced to their real identities), they quickly bypass this problem, to relate exciting and sinister tales about how some of the fictitious fiends were actually searched before boarding because they looked suspicious.

However, as inevitably happens with any web of lies, this simply paints them into an even more difficult corner. How are they supposed to have got on board with all that stuff if they were searched? And if they used gas in a confined space, they would have been affected themselves unless they also had masks in their luggage.

"Excuse me sir, why do you have a boxcutter, a gun, a container of gas, a gas mask and an electronic guidance unit in your luggage?"

"A present for your grandmother? Very well sir, on you get."

"Very strange", thinks the security officer. "That's the fourth Arabic man without an Arabic name who just got on board with a knife, gun or boxcutter and gas mask. And why does that security camera keep flicking off every time one these characters shows up? Must be one of those days I guess..."

Asking any of these basic questions to a conspiracy theorist is likely to cause a sudden leap to the claim that we know that they were on board because they left a credit card trail for the tickets they had purchased and cars they had rented. So if they used credit cards that identified them, how does that reconcile with the claim that they used false IDs to get on to the plane? But by this time, the fruit loop is in full swing, as the conspiracy theorist tries to stay one jump ahead of this annoying and awkward rational analysis. They will allege that the hijackers' passports were found at the crash scenes. "So there!" they exult triumphantly, their fanatical faces lighting up with that deranged look of one who has just a revelation of questionable sanity.

Hmm? So they got on board with false IDs but took their real passports with them? However, by this time the fruit loop has been completely circumnavigated, and the conspiracy theorist exclaims impatiently, "Who said anything about false IDs? We know what seats they were sitting in! Their presence is well documented!" And so the whole loop starts again. "Well, why aren't they on the passenger lists?"

"You numbskull! They assumed the identities of other passengers!" And so on...

Finally, out of sheer fascination with this circular method of creative delusion, the rational sceptic will allow them to get away with this loop, in order to move on to the next question, and see what further delights await us in the unraveling of this marvelously stupid story.

"Uh, how come their passports survived fiery crashes that completely incinerated the planes and all the passengers?" The answer of course is that its just one of those strange co-incidences, those little quirks of fate that do happen from time to time. You know, like the same person winning the lottery four weeks in a row. The odds are astronomical, but these things do happen...

This is another favourite deductive method of the conspiracy theorist.

The "improbability drive," in which they decide upon a conclusion without any evidence whatsoever to support it, and then continually speculate a series of wildly improbable events and unbelievable co-incidences to support it, shrugging off the implausibility of each event with the vague assertion that sometimes the impossible happens (just about all the time in their world).

There is a principle called "Occam's razor" which suggests that in the absence of evidence to the contrary, the simplest explanation is most likely to be correct. Conspiracy theorists hate Occam's razor.

Having for the sake of amusement, allowed them to get away with with the silly story of the 19 invisible Arabs, we move on to the question of how they are supposed to have taken over the planes.

Hijacking a plane is not an easy thing to do. Hijacking it without the pilot being able to alert ground control is near impossible. The pilot has only to punch in a four digit code to alert ground control to a hijacking.

Unconcerned with the awkward question of plausibility, the conspiracy buffs maintain that on that Sept 11, the invisible hijackers took over the plane by the rather crude method of threatening people with boxcutters and knives, and spraying gas (after they had attached their masks, obviously), but somehow took control of the plane without the crew first getting a chance to punch in the hijacking code. Not just on one plane, but on all four. At this point in the tale, the conspiracy theorist is again forced to call upon the services of the improbability drive.

So now that our incredibly lucky hijackers have taken control of the planes, all four pilots fly them with breath taking skill and certainty to their fiery end, all four pilots unflinching in their steely resolve for a swift meeting with Allah. Apart from their psychotic hatred of "our freedoms", it was their fanatical devotion to Islam which enabled them to summon up the iron will to do this. Which is strange, because according to another piece of hearsay peddled by the conspiracy buffs, these guys actually went out drinking and womanizing the night before their great martyrdom, even leaving their Korans in the bar -really impeccable Islamic behavior—and then got up at 5am the next morning to pull off the greatest covert operation in history. This also requires us to believe that they were even clear headed enough to learn how to fly the huge planes by reading flight manuals in Arabic in the car on the way to the airport. We know this because they supposedly left the flight manuals there for us to find.

It gets better. Their practical training had allegedly been limited to Cessnas and flight simulators, but this was no barrier to the unflinching certainty with which they took over the planes and skillfully guided them to their doom. If they are supposed to have done their flight training with these tools, which would be available just about anywhere in the world, its not clear why they would have decided to risk blowing their cover to US intelligence services by doing the training in Florida, rather than somewhere in the Middle East, but such reasoning is foreign to the foggy world of the conspiracy theorist, too trapped in the constant rotation of the mental fruit loop to make their unsubstantiated fabrications seem even semi-reliable.

Having triumphantly established a circular delusion in support of the mythical Arabs, the conspiracy theorist now confronts the difficult question of why there's nothing left of the planes. Anybody who has seen the endlessly replayed footage of the second plane going into the WTC will realize that the plane was packed with explosives. Planes do not and cannot blow up into nothing in that manner when they crash.

Did the mythical Arabs also haul a huge heap of explosives on board, and manage to deploy them in such a manner that they went off in the exact instant of the crash, completely vapourizing the plane? This is a little difficult even for the conspiracy theorist, who at this point decides that its easier to invent new laws of physics in order to keep the delusion rolling along.

There weren't any explosives. It wasn't an inside job. The plane blew up into nothing from its exploding fuel load! Remarkable! Sluggishly combustible jet fuel which is basically kerosene, and which burns at a maximum temperature of around 800 C has suddenly taken on the qualities of a ferociously explosive demolition agent, vapourizing 65 tons of aircraft into a puff of smoke. Never mind that a plane of that size contains around 15 tons of steel and titanium, of which even the melting points are about double that of the maximum combustion temperature of kerosene—let alone the boiling point—which is what would be required to vapourize a plane. And then there's about 50 tons of aluminium to be accounted for. In excess of 15lbs of metal for each gallon of kerosene.

For the conspiracy theorist, such inconvenient facts are vaguely dismissed as "mumbo jumbo". This convenient little phrase is their answer to just about anything factual or logical. Like a conjurer pulling a rabbit out of a hat, they suddenly become fanatically insistent about the devastating explosive qualities of kerosene, something hitherto completely unknown to science, but just discovered by them, this very minute. Blissfully ignoring the fact that never before or since in aviation history has a plane vapourized into nothing from an exploding fuel load, the conspiracy theorist relies upon Hollywood images, where the effects are are always larger than life, and certainly relies upon the intellects of these cretins.

"Its a well known fact that planes blow up into nothing on impact." they state with pompous certainty. "Watch any Bruce Willis movie."

"Care to provide any documented examples? If it's a well known fact, then presumably this well known fact springs from some kind of documentation—other than Bruce Willis movies?"

At this point the mad but cunning eyes of the conspiracy theorist will narrow as they sense the corner that they have backed themselves into, and plan their escape by means of another stunning backflip.

"Ah, but planes have never crashed into buildings before, so there's no way of telling," they counter with a sly grin.

Well, actually planes have crashed into buildings before and since, and not vapourized into nothing.

"But not big planes, with that much fuel," they shriek in hysterical denial.

Or that much metal to vapourize.

"Yes but not hijacked planes!"

"Are you suggesting that whether the crash is deliberate or accidental affects the combustion qualities of the fuel?"

"Now you're just being silly".

Although collisions with buildings are rare, planes frequently crash into mountains, streets, other aircraft, nose dive into the ground, or have bombs planted above them, and don't vapourize into nothing. What's so special about a tower that's mostly glass? But by now, the conspiracy theorist has once again sailed happily around the fruit loop. "Its a well documented fact that planes explode into nothing on impact."

Effortlessly weaving back and forth between the position that its a "well known fact" and that "its never happened before, so we have nothing to compare it to", the conspiracy theorist has now convinced themselves (if not too many other people) that the WTC plane was not loaded with explosives, and that the instant vapourization of the plane in a massive fireball was the same as any other plane crash you might care to mention.

Round and round the fruit loop...

But the hurdles which confront the conspiracy theorist are many, and they are now forced to implement even more creative uses for the newly discovered shockingly destructive qualities of kerosene. They have to explain how the Arabs also engineered the elegant vertical collapse of both the WTC towers, and for this awkward fact the easiest counter is to simply deny that it was a controlled demolition, and claim that the buildings collapsed from fire caused by the burning kerosene.

For this, its necessary to sweep aside the second law of thermodynamics and propose kerosene which is not only impossibly destructive, but also recycles itself for a second burning in violation of the law of degradation of energy. You see, it not only consumed itself in a sudden catastrophic fireball, vapourizing a 65 ton plane into nothing, but then came back for a second go, burning at 2000C for another hour at the impact point, melting the skyscraper's steel like butter. And while it was doing all this it also poured down the elevator shafts, starting fires all through the building.

When I was at school there was a little thing called the entropy law which suggests that a given portion of fuel can only burn once, something which is readily observable in the real world, even for those who didn't make it to junior high school science. But this is no problem for the conspiracy theorist. Gleeefully they claim that a few thousand gallons of kerosene is enough to completely vapourize a 65 ton aircraft: have enough left over to burn ferociously enough for over an hour at the impact point to melt steel (melting point about double the maximum combustion temperature of the fuel): still have enough left over to pour down the elevator shafts and start similarly destructive fires all through the building.

This kerosene really is remarkable stuff! How chilling to realize that those kerosene heaters we had in the house when I was a kid were deadly bombs, just waiting to go off. One false move and the entire street might have been vapourized. And never again will I take kerosene lamps out camping. One moment you're there innocently holding the lamp—the next—kapow!

Vapourized into nothing along with the rest of the camp site, and still leaving enough of the deadly stuff to start a massive forest fire.

These whackos are actually claiming that the raging inferno allegedly created by the miraculously recycling, and impossibly hot burning kerosene melted or at least softened the steel supports of the skyscraper.

Obvious to the fact that the smoke coming from the WTC was black, which indicates an oxygen starved fire -therefore, not particularly hot, they trumpet an alleged temperature in the building of 2000 C, without a shred of evidence to support this curious suspension of the laws of physics.

Not content with this ludicrous garbage, they then contend that as the steel frames softened, they came straight down instead of buckling and twisting and falling sideways.

Since they're already re-engineered the combustion qualities of jet fuel, violated the second law of thermodynamics, and re-defined the structural properties of steel, why let a little thing like the laws of gravity get in the way?

The tower fell in a time almost identical to that of a free falling object, from that height, meaning that its physically impossible for it to have collapsed by the method of the top floors smashing through the lower floors. But according to the conspiracy theorists, the laws of gravity were temporarily suspended on the morning of Sept 11. It appears that the evil psychic power of those dreadful Arabs knew no bounds. Even after they were dead, they were able, by the power of their evil spirits, to force down the tower at a speed physically impossible under the laws of gravity, had it been meeting any resistance from fireproofed steel structures originally designed to resist many tons of hurricane force wind as well as the impact of a Boeing passenger jet tearing off course.

Clearly, these conspiracy nuts never did their science homework at school, but did become extremely adept at inventing tall tales for why.

"Muslim terrorists stole my notes, sir"

"No miss, the kerosene heater blew up and vapourized everything in the street, except for my passport."

"You see sir, the schoolbus was hijacked by Arabs who destroyed my homework because they hate our freedoms."

Or perhaps they misunderstood the term "creative science" and mistakenly thought that coming up with such rubbish was in fact, their science homework.

The ferocious heat generated by this ghastly kerosene was, according to the conspiracy theorists, the reason why so many of the WTC victims can't be identified. DNA is destroyed by heat. (Although 2000 C isn't really required, 100C will generally do the job.) This is quite remarkable, because according to the conspiracy theorist, the nature of DNA suddenly changes if you go to a different city.

That's right! If you are killed by an Arab terrorist in NY, your DNA will be destroyed by such temperatures. But if you are killed by an Arab terrorist in Washington DC, your DNA will be so robust that it can survive temperatures which completely vapourize a 65 ton aircraft.

You see, these loonies have somehow concocted the idea that the missile which hit the pentagon was not a missile at all, but one of the hijacked planes. And to prove this unlikely premise, they point to a propaganda statement from the Bush regime, which rather stupidly claims that all but one of the people aboard the plane were identified from the site by DNA testing, even though nothing remains of the plane. The plane was vapourized by the fuel tank explosion maintain these space loonies, but the people inside it were all but one identified by DNA testing.

So there we have it. The qualities of DNA are different, depending upon which city you're in, or perhaps depending upon which fairy story you're trying to sell at any particular time.

This concoction about one of the hijacked planes hitting the Pentagon really is a howler. For those not familiar with the layout of the Pentagon, it consists of 5 rings of building, each with a space inbetween. Each ring of building is about 30 to 35 ft deep, with a similar amount of open space between it and the next ring. The object which penetrated the Pentagon went in at about a 45 degree angle, punching a neat circular hole of about a 12 ft diameter through three rings (6 walls). A little later a section of wall about 65 ft wide collapsed in the outer ring. Since the plane which the conspiracy theorists claim to be responsible for the impact had a wing span of 125 ft and a length of 155 ft, and there was no wreckage of the plane, either inside or outside the building, and the lawns outside were still smooth and green enough to play golf on, this crazy delusion is clearly physically impossible.

But hey, we've already disregarded the combustion qualities of jet fuel, the normal properties of common building materials, the properties of DNA, the laws of gravity and the second law of thermodynamics, so what the hell—why not throw in a little spatial impossibility as well? I would have thought that the observation that a solid object cannot pass through another solid object without leaving a hole at least as big as itself is reasonably sound science. But to the conspiracy theorist, this is "mumbo jumbo". It conflicts with the delusion that they're hooked on, so it "must be wrong" although trying to get them to explain exactly how it could be wrong is a futile endeavour.

Conspiracy theorists fly into a curious panic whenever the Pentagon missile is mentioned. They nervously maintain that the plane was vapourized by it's exploding fuel load and point to the WTC crash as evidence of this behavior.

(That's a wonderful fruit loop.) Like an insect which has just been sprayed, running back and forth in its last mad death throes, they first argue that the reason the hole is so small is that the plane never entered the wall, having blown up outside, and then suddenly backflip to explain the 250 ft deep missile hole by saying that the plane disappeared all the way into the building, and then blew up inside the building (even though the building shows no sign of such damage). As for what happened to the wings—here's where they get really creative. The wings snapped off and folded into the fuselage which then carried them into the building, which then closed up behind the plane like a piece of meat.

When it suits them, they'll also claim that the plane slid in on its belly, (ignoring the undamaged lawn) while at the same time citing alleged witnesses to the plane diving steeply into the building from an "irrecoverable angle." How they reconcile these two scenarios as being compatible is truly a study in stupidity.

Once they get desperate enough, you can be sure that the UFO conspiracy stuff will make an appearance. The Arabs are in league with the Martians.

Space aliens snatched the remains of the Pentagon plane and fixed most of the hole in the wall, just to confuse people. They gave the Arabs invisibility pills to help get them onto the planes. Little green men were seen talking to Bin Laden a few weeks prior to the attacks.

As the nation gears up to impeach the traitor Bush, and stop his perpetual oil war, it's not helpful to have these idiots distracting from the process by spreading silly conspiracy theories about mythical Arabs, stories which do nothing but play into the hands of the extremist Bush regime.

At a less serious time, we might tolerate such crackpots with amused detachment, but they need to understand that the treachery that was perpetrated on Sept 11, and the subsequent war crimes committed in "retaliation" are far too serious for us to allow such frivolous self-indulgence to go unchallenged.

Those who are truly addicted to conspiracy delusions should find a more appropriate outlet for their paranoia.

Its time to stop loony conspiracy theories about Sept 11.

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