

**Into the Ring with *Counterpunch* on 9/11:
How Alexander Cockburn, Otherwise So Bright,
Blanks Out on 9/11 Evidence**

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The first thing to say by way of preliminaries—and I'd better get it in quickly before someone suggests that I've turned up late or over-weight for a pre-match weighing-in—is that I'm not overjoyed with the pugilistic metaphor of my title.

But some sort of response to the volley of attacks on 9/11 researchers and activists with which the *Counterpunch* website marked the fifth anniversary of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 seems called for.

Counterpunch co-editor Alexander Cockburn set the tone of these pieces with an article describing theologian and ethicist David Ray Griffin, the author of *The New Pearl Harbor* (2004) and of *The 9/11 Commission Report: Omissions and Distortions* (2005), as a “high priest” of the “conspiracy nuts”—whom Cockburn denounces as cultists who “disdain all answers but their own,” who “seize on coincidences and force them into sequences they deem to be logical and significant,” and who “pounce on imagined clues in documents and photos, [...] contemptuously brush[ing] aside” evidence that contradicts their own “whimsical” treatment of “eyewitness testimony and forensic evidence.”

It's a characteristically forceful performance, if at times slipshod. (One small sign of carelessness may be the manner in which Cockburn slides from calling 9/11 skeptics a “coven” to comparing them, a few sentences later, to “mad Inquisitors [...] torturing the data—as the old joke goes about economists—until the data confess.” Readers brought up to think that the victims and perpetrators of witch-crazes have not customarily been the same people may find this unintentionally amusing.)

Despite the sometimes distinctly nasty tone of this polemic, the idea of exchanging even metaphorical blows with Cockburn and his colleagues is unappealing.

The overall quality of the essays that he and Jeffrey St. Clair publish in *Counterpunch* makes it easy on most days of the week to agree with *Out of Bounds Magazine's* description of it—trumpeted on *Counterpunch's* masthead—as “America’s best political newsletter.” And I’ve admired Cockburn’s own political essays for many years: he’s written movingly, sometimes brilliantly, on a wide range of subjects¹—even if his flashes of brilliance sometimes alternate with breathtaking pratfalls: among them his dismissal, as recently as March 2001, of the evidence for global warming; his scoffing, in November 2004, at the rapidly gathering indications that the US presidential election of 2004 had been stolen; and a year later, his mockery of the well-established theory of peak oil and his adherence to the genuinely daft notion that the earth produces limitless quantities of abiotic oil.² One can forgive a journalist’s slender grasp of the rudiments of scientific understanding. But given his self-appointed role as defender of the progressive left against a horde of fools, it’s dismaying to find him sliding as frequently as he does into positions that seem not just quirky but—dare I say it—unprogressive.

Figurative punch-ups? Frankly, I’m not over-fond of boxing, either in itself³ or as a source of metaphors. A sport whose fullest measure of success is an opponent stretched out senseless on the canvas doesn’t provide any very adequate model for the processes of

¹ Most recently on that deliquescent warmonger Christopher Hitchens: see Alexander Cockburn, “Chortles in the *New Yorker* for Slaughter’s Cheerleader, C. Hitchens,” *Counterpunch* (11 October 2006), <http://www.counterpunch.org/>. Though this may just be a matter of long familiarity, my favourite among Cockburn’s books remains *Corruptions of Empire* (London: Verso, 1987).

² See Alexander Cockburn, “Greenhouse Gas and Global Warming: The Grand Delusion,” *The Free Press* (21 March 2001), <http://www.freepress.org/columns/display/2/2001/551>; “The Poisoned Chalice: Sapping the Empire,” *Counterpunch* (20-21 November 2004), <http://counterpunch.org/cockburn11202004.html>; and “Ayatollahs of the Apocalypse,” *Counterpunch* (15-16 October 2005), <http://www.counterpunch.com/cockburn10152005.html>.

³ I’ve only once entered an actual boxing ring with hostile intent—forty years ago, in the annual Recruit Boxing Tournament of the Royal Military College of Canada—and with inglorious results. (Had there been a special category for the very tall, bony and underpowered, I might have done better, but at over 175 pounds I was just another heavyweight. My opponent, an artless but muscular football lineman, led with his right and was wide open to every stringbean punch I could throw, but thanks to my weakness and the balloon-like 12-ounce gloves, took little damage beyond a bloody nose. Once I got too tired to hit him any more, he dusted me up thoroughly.)

rational argument and persuasion I'd like to envisage—which might ideally lead, not to oblivion and brain damage, but rather, given a modicum of interpretive clarity, to at least the possibility of mental expansion, illumination, and a change of mind. And if I'm right in thinking that Alexander Cockburn's understanding of the events of 9/11 and the current state of research into those events is both one-eyed and befuddled, it would hardly seem sporting to 'enter the ring' against so disadvantaged an opponent.

Yet if one wants to take exception to serious deficiencies in *Counterpunch's* treatment of 9/11 evidence and interpretations, the website's own metaphor seems hard to avoid.

What of my subtitle, then—which I'm afraid is wordy as well as impolite? It sets out to parody the scarcely less elephantine subtitles of two of the three recent *Counterpunch* articles that I'm going to be commenting on here (read 'em yourself, and weep):

Alexander Cockburn, "The 9/11 Conspiracy Nuts: How They Let the Guilty Parties of 9/11 Slip Off the Hook," *Counterpunch* (9-10 September 2006), <http://www.counterpunch.org/cockburn09092006.html>;

Joshua Frank, "Proving Nothing: How the 9/11 Truth Movement Helps Bush & Cheney," *Counterpunch* (11 September 2006), <http://www.counterpunch.org/frank09112006.html>.

The subtitle of Cockburn's diatribe is no doubt meant to be inflammatory—though if I've understood him rightly, he's not literally arguing that the perpetrators of 9/11 would all be behind bars if it weren't for those 9/11 wackos. Frank's subtitle might also border on the category of fighting words, were it not that his essay, as he himself predicts, proves nothing. (Students of political rhetoric will note, in passing, how precisely Cockburn's and Frank's subtitles exemplify the trope of unintended consequences that Albert Hirschman in his classic study of *The Rhetoric of Reaction* calls "the perversity thesis," which "reactive" or reactionary thinkers since Joseph de Maistre at the time of the French Revolution have deployed to argue that the actions of their

deluded opponents “will produce, via a chain of unintended consequences, the *exact contrary* of the objective being proclaimed and pursued.”)⁴

After the appearance of these two pieces on successive days, *Counterpunch* honoured a familiar boxing rhythm (quick left and right, pause, sucker-punch) by leaving a gap of several days before releasing a third broadside against 9/11 researchers:

Diana Johnstone, “In Defense of Conspiracy: 9/11: In Theory and Fact,”
Counterpunch (15 September 2006),

<http://www.counterpunch.org/johnstone09152006.html>.

Johnstone’s essay is more substantial than the preceding two. But any reader lured by its title into thinking that *Counterpunch* was actually permitting real debate on the subject of 9/11 would indeed be suckered. And there is again a problem with subtitles. As I intend to show, this piece offers little in the way of facts, and is defective—though instructively so—in its theorizing.

1. Alexander Cockburn: beyond table-thumping to the evidence

Alexander Cockburn’s attack on “The 9/11 Conspiracy Nuts,” though rhetorically skilful, is vacuous in substance. It is in large part devoted to arguing that a “devout, albeit preposterous belief in American efficiency” is the “fundamental idiocy” which leads “conspiracy nuts” to think that there must be something suspicious about the massive failures of the US air defense system on 9/11. Anyone even remotely acquainted with military history, Cockburn asserts, would know “that minutely planned operations—let alone responses to an unprecedented emergency—screw up with monotonous regularity, by reason of stupidity, cowardice, venality, weather and all the other whims of providence.”

I’m not interested in defending the efficiency of the American military—or of anyone else’s military, for that matter. (In fact, I could supplement the little catalogue of military ineptitudes that Cockburn presents with some choice additional ones drawn from the period of my own brief spell decades ago with the Canadian navy—among them an incident in which an American destroyer contrived to get itself cut in half by the

⁴ Albert Hirschman, *The Rhetoric of Reaction: Perversity, Futility, Jeopardy* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1991), p. 11.

Australian aircraft carrier *Melbourne*.) Yet if we attend for a moment not to Cockburn's overheated rhetorical questions and table-thumping repetition of the capitalized word "CONSPIRACY," but rather to the established and uncontroversial evidence, it is at once obvious that what is at issue is not primarily, as Cockburn thinks, the gap between his own expectations of bungling incompetence and David Ray Griffin's understanding of what a normal air defense response should have been.

As anyone who presumes to hold forth on this aspect of the 9/11 evidence should know, what is really incriminating about the failure to intercept the aircraft which were flown on that day into the Twin Towers and (by the official account) into the Pentagon is not the simple absence of fighter-interceptors over New York and Washington, but rather the fact that that absence was ensured by a series of concurrent military exercises which had transferred most of the available interceptors out of the northeastern region, and which for a crucial period that morning left the military air traffic controllers responsible for vectoring the remaining fighters into position unable to determine which of the many blips appearing on their radar screens represented actual as opposed to simulated threats.⁵ We can add to this what seems the no less incriminating testimony of Transportation Secretary Norman Mineta to the 9/11 Commission, which suggests very strongly that Vice President Cheney had ordered a stand-down of missile defenses protecting Washington DC.⁶

Cockburn's failure to mention this important and well-known evidence tells us one of two things. Either he is unaware of it, in which case one must ask why he thinks it appropriate to hold forth angrily on subjects about which he has not bothered to inform himself; or else he does know about it—in which case he ought to be asking himself what standard of intellectual integrity governed his decision to refrain from mentioning this crucial evidence to his readers.

⁵ See Michael C. Ruppert, *Crossing the Rubicon: The Decline of the American Empire at the End of the Age of Oil* (Gabriola Island, BC: New Society Publishers, 2004), pp. 308-436.

⁶ See David Ray Griffin, *The New Pearl Harbor: Disturbing Questions about the Bush Administration and 9/11* (2nd ed.; Northampton, MA: Olive Branch Press, 2004), pp. 174-75; and Griffin, *The 9/11 Commission Report: Omissions and Distortions* (Northampton, MA: Olive Branch Press, 2005), pp. 207-08, 219-23.

Midway through his essay, Cockburn offers a curious little detour into the complexities of the JFK assassination, telling us that in his view,

the Warren Commission, as confirmed in almost all essentials by the House Committee on Assassinations in the late 1970s, had it right and Oswald fired the fatal shots from the Schoolbook Depository. The evidentiary chain for his guilt is persuasive, and the cumulative scenarios of the conspiracy nuts entirely unconvincing. But of course—as the years roll by, and even though no death bed confession has ever buttressed those vast, CIA-related scenarios—the nuts keep on toiling away, their obsessions as unflagging as ever.

These sentences are a close rhetorical analogue to that fighter’s tactic—more in use among half-crooked bar-room brawlers than boxers, it must be said—known as leading with one’s chin. The “conspiracy nuts” Cockburn sneers at include D. B. Thomas of the USDA Subtropical Agriculture Research Laboratory in Texas, who after analyzing the acoustical evidence of gunshots preserved on a Dallas police department recording from Dealey Plaza at the time of the assassination, concluded in a peer-reviewed study published in 2001 by the journal *Science & Justice* that the recording “contains five impulsive sounds that have the acoustic waveform of Dealey Plaza gunfire,” and that “One of the sounds matches the echo pattern of a test shot fired from the Grassy Knoll.”⁷ So much for the Warren Commission’s three (and no more) shots fired by Oswald from the Texas Book Depository: more than three shoots, and more than one shooter, means a conspiracy. And by the way, it’s not strictly true that the 1979 *House Select Committee on Assassinations Report* confirmed the *Warren Commission Report* “in almost all essentials,” since the *HSCA Report* did in fact conclude that the assassination was probably organized by a conspiracy.⁸

⁷ D. B. Thomas, “Echo correlation analysis and the acoustic evidence in the Kennedy assassination revisited,” *Science & Justice* 41 (2001): 21-32. Thomas finds that “A conservative estimate of the true value of the probability that the putative Grassy Knoll shot is attributable to random radio noise is no greater than 0.037.”

⁸ *House of Representatives Select Committee on Assassinations, House Report Wo. 95-1828* (Washington, DC, 1979), p. 95; quoted by Thomas, “Echo correlation analysis,” 22.

Cockburn is welcome to cling, if he wants, to what I'd term the Lone Ranger theory of the Kennedy assassination—but on condition that he devote a short meditation to the name of the Lone Ranger's native sidekick.⁹

There is more in Cockburn's essay on the 9/11 evidence: he has a brief fling at the people who doubt that a Boeing 757 could have hit the Pentagon,¹⁰ and exercises his ironic wit for several paragraphs at the expense of the reality-disdaining nuts who think that the towers of the World Trade Center were brought down by planned demolitions. Cockburn scoffs at the paranoid folly of those who believe that

The WTC towers didn't fall down because they were badly built as a consequence of corruption, incompetence, regulatory evasions by the Port Authority, and because they were struck by huge planes loaded with jet fuel. No, they fell because Dick Cheney's agents methodically planted demolition charges in the preceding days. It was a conspiracy of thousands, all of whom—party to mass murder—have held their tongues ever since.

Perhaps (although he doesn't share it with us) Cockburn has evidence that the Twin Towers were so incompetently built as to be especially liable to explosive disintegration into showers of cut steel and pyroclastic clouds of fine-particle dust. But like the 9/11 Commission, he manages quietly to forget about the collapse of WTC 7 late in the afternoon of 9/11: this 47-storey steel-framed tower, which was damaged by debris from the North Tower but not struck by any aircraft, collapsed at free-fall speed into its own footprint in what half a dozen different videos show to have been a classic implosion demolition. Significantly, FEMA and NIST have failed to offer any plausible alternative explanation of this collapse.

As to the questions of how, when, or by whom demolition charges may have been planted: there is evidence, though Cockburn may not be interested in exploring it, of activity on unoccupied floors of the Twin Towers just prior to 9/11 that is consistent with

⁹ The name "Tonto" is not derived from any native language, but from Spanish: it means "stupid."

¹⁰ Readers may find it instructive to compare Cockburn's punditry on this subject with a study by mechanical engineer Michael Meyer, "Pentagon C Ring Exit Hole Mystery," *Scholars for 9/11 Truth: Articles* (10 June 2006), <http://www.st911.org/>.

the placing of such charges.¹¹ Why don't we try replacing the gag orders that have silenced 9/11 whistleblowers like Sibel Edmonds with an independent criminal investigation, and see what crawls out of the woodwork?

But refuting this rhetoric at length would be tedious. I would prefer instead to quote Paul Craig Roberts' magisterial rebuke:

The explanation that the three WTC buildings collapsed as a result of damage and fire is a mere assertion. The assertion is not backed up with scientific calculation to demonstrate that the energy from the airliners, fire and gravity was sufficient to collapse the buildings. A number of independent authorities believe that there is a very large energy deficit in the official account of the collapse of the buildings. Until this issue is resolved, the official explanation is merely an assertion no matter who believes it.

The Canadian scientist Frank R. Greening has made the only independent scientific attempt of which I am aware to show that a gravity driven collapse of one of the buildings, WTC 1, was sustainable. His paper is published in *The Journal of 9/11 Studies*, Vol. 2 (August 2006) and is available online. It is a reply to earlier calculations by Gordon Ross, who concluded otherwise, and is answered in the same issue by Ross, who shows that Greening's work actually demonstrates the existence of an energy deficit.

It is instructive to read this exchange between competent authorities. Few readers will be able to follow the application of scientific principles and the calculations of the required and available energy. However, it will be clear that the issue is a scientific matter that is over the heads of members of a political commission, pundits, and bloggers, and that it is inappropriate for a pundit, who himself is

¹¹ See *What's the Truth? How Indeed did the Twin Towers Collapse?* A Dem Bruce Lee Styles Film, available at *911 Podcasts.com* (1 July 2006), <http://www.911podcasts.com/display.php?cat=9997&med=0&ord=Name&str=0&vid=95&epi=0&typ=0>; and linked at <http://www.st911.org>.

incapable of following such a discussion, to call those participating in it “conspiracy nuts.”¹²

Elsewhere in the same essay, Roberts notes that Ross is far from being the only scientist to criticize and reject the official explanation of the WTC towers’ collapses. This is indeed the case. Evidence—to my mind conclusive—that the official accounts are physically impossible, and that the three towers of the World Trade Center (the 47-storey WTC 7 as well as the 110-storey Twin Towers) were destroyed by controlled demolitions, has been assembled by physicists, mechanical engineers and other scientifically qualified researchers in a series of recent studies, some of them published in the peer-reviewed *Journal of 9/11 Studies*.¹³ These analyses are supported by the testimony of fire department personnel to secondary explosions in the Twin Towers,¹⁴ by video and photographic evidence that structural steel in the South Tower was being cut

¹² Paul Craig Roberts, “Where Is The Evidence?” *VDARE.com* (14 September 2006), http://www.vdare.com/roberts/060914_evidence.htm. (Roberts mistakenly states that the articles of Greening and Ross appear in volume 3 of the *Journal of 9/11 Studies* [September 2006]; I have silently corrected this error.)

¹³ See for example “MIT Professor [Jeff King] Breaks Down WTC Controlled Demolitions,” *Google Video* (17 March 2006), <http://video.google.com/videoplay?docid=1822764959599063248>; Judy Wood, “A Refutation of the Official Collapse Theory,” (March 2006), <http://janedoe0911.tripod.com/BilliardBalls.html>; Steven E. Jones, “Why Indeed Did the World Trade Center Buildings Completely Collapse?” *Journal of 9/11 Studies* 3 (September 2006): 1-48; Frank Legge, “9/11—Evidence for Controlled Demolition: A Short List of Observations,” *Journal of 9/11 Studies* 1 (June 2006): 9-15, and “NIST Data Disproves Collapse Theories Based on Fire,” *Journal of 9/11 Studies* 2 (August 2006): 107-11; Gordon Ross, “Momentum Transfer Analysis of the Collapse of the Upper Storeys of WTC 1,” *Journal of 9/11 Studies* 1 (June 2006): 30-35, and “Reply to Dr. Greening,” *Journal of 9/11 Studies* 2 (August 2006): 14-19; and Kevin Ryan, “What is 9/11 Truth?—The First Steps,” *Journal of 9/11 Studies* 2 (August 2006): 1-6. An excellent compendium of key witness testimony and analysis of video evidence is available in the DVD *9/11 Mysteries—Part 1: Demolitions* (2006), available at <http://www.911weknow.com/911-mysteries-movie.html>.

¹⁴ See David Ray Griffin, “Explosive Testimony: Revelations about the Twin Towers in the 9/11 Oral Histories,” *9/11 Truth.org* (18 January 2006), <http://www.911truth.org/artice.php?story=20060118104223192>; and Graeme MacQueen, “118 Witnesses: The Firefighters’ Testimony to Explosions in the Twin Towers,” *Journal of 9/11 Studies* 2 (August 2006): 47-106.

and melted (probably by thermate charges) during the final minutes before its collapse,¹⁵ by videos and photographs of the collapses in which “squibs” (explosive horizontal ejections of dust and debris) are visible well below the lines of collapse,¹⁶ by numerous reports of molten steel under the ruins of the Twin Towers and WTC 7 weeks after their destruction,¹⁷ and by laboratory analyses of structural steel from the towers which reveal chemical transformations that could not have been caused by gravitational collapse or fire, but may well be effects of thermate cutting charges.¹⁸

2. Joshua Frank: a litany of complaints and rhetorical questions

Insofar as anything resembling an argument is to be found in Joshua Frank’s short article, it appears in the following litany of complaints and rhetorical questions:

While some BYU physicist rattles his brain over the intricacies of WTC #7’s collapse, our government is dropping toxic gas on poor peasants in Colombia in attempts to eradicate coca production. While David Ray Griffin pens his next best seller, forests in Alaska and Appalachia are being obliterated in the name of corporate profit. While so many truth seekers attempt to convince us [...] that the Jews who worked in the WTC were told ahead of time not to come to work on 9/11, Lebanon is being invaded and destroyed by Israel.

¹⁵ See “Shot from street level of South Tower collapsing,” *Camera Planet*, 2 min. 49 sec., posted 24 February 2003, <http://video.google.com/videoplay?docid=-2991254740145858863&q=cameraplanet+9%2F11>; and also two photographs reproduced by Jones in “Why Indeed Did the World Trade Center Buildings Completely Collapse?”

¹⁶ Squibs are visible in photographs of the collapses reproduced by Eric Hufschmidt, *Painful Questions: An Analysis of the September 11th Attack* (Goleta, California: Endpoint Software, 2002); see also Dylan Avery, Dir., *Loose Change*, available at <http://www.st911.org>; and *911 Mysteries—Part 1: Demolitions*. For an explanation of their significance, see Gordon Ross, “How the Towers Were Demolished,” <http://www.st911.org>.

¹⁷ See Jones, “Why Indeed...”

¹⁸ See J. R. Barnett, R. R. Biederman, and R. D. Sisson, Jr., “An Initial Microstructural Analysis of A36 Steel from WTC Building 7,” *Journal of the Minerals, Metals and Materials Society* 53/12:18 (2001); cited by Jones, “Why Indeed ...” Jones’s own analysis of steel samples from the Twin Towers is forthcoming.

What's the Truth Movement doing about the hundreds of thousands of poor non-violent drug offenders who are rotting in US prisons, or the thousands more who are decaying on death row? What are they doing for the teenage girls who slave away in sweatshops piecing together our clothes and sneakers? What have conspiracy theories ever proven, anyway?

Though a powerful sense of his own political virtue pervades these paragraphs, Frank's stance seems to me ethically wanting as well as logically weak. In saying this, I'm not referring primarily to his shabbily abusive references to Steven Jones and David Ray Griffin. Frank takes 9/11 activists to task for their putative failure to occupy themselves with US crimes in Colombia, ecological issues, the invasion of Lebanon, third-world sweatshops, and the appalling injustices of America's courts and its domestic gulag. But the same objections could be raised (for example) against the movement of solidarity with Haitian democracy.¹⁹ What have the people who labour in that movement done in support of any of these other issues? Or, as one might with equal force (or feebleness) inquire: How have activists against US crimes in Colombia and Israeli crimes in Lebanon contributed to alleviating the horrors inflicted on Haiti's poor, most particularly since the 2004 coup and the ensuing UN occupation?

Frank's complaints are clearly both inane and divisive. For most of us, it is not humanly possible to be doing A, B, and C, if at a given moment we are fully occupied in doing D. Of course, if this is a rule, there have been exceptions to it: St. Thomas Aquinas is reported to have made a practice of composing three distinct texts simultaneously, dictating sections of each in turn to three amanuenses. Perhaps Frank is similarly versatile and efficient, and is able to make significant parallel contributions to all of the important causes he names. But by his own logic, one could still assemble a list of other important causes that he has done nothing to further, and then reproach him for the fact. (It's an

¹⁹ I mean by this people who oppose the continuing consequences of the 2004 coup d'état, engineered by the US, Canada and France, that overthrew the elected government of President Aristide. For some context, see my article "Fraud and Scandal in Haiti's Presidential Election: Préval's Victory and the UN's Disgrace," *Centre for Research on Globalization* (3 March 2006), <http://www.globalresearch.ca/index.php?context=viewArticle&code=KEE20060303&articleid=2061>.

excellent recipe for producing disunity and mutual suspicion on the left, if that's your goal.)

Are 9/11 researchers and activists in fact the one-string Johnnies that Frank takes them for? My own limited experience would lead me to conclude otherwise. I am personally acquainted with only a handful of people who have been active on 9/11—all of whom however have worked, sometimes for decades and with distinction, on a wide range of social justice, anti-war and ecological issues, both domestic and international.

Yet of course what Frank means is that other kinds of activism are worthy and admirable, while inquiries into the truth of what happened on 9/11 and into the implications of that truth are simply idiotic. People who engage in such inquiries are mere zealots and pretenders: “how they can seek the truth when they already think they have all the answers is beyond me,” Frank says piously.

But not too far beyond him, it would seem. Frank himself concedes “that there are a lot of questions yet to be answered about that dark day five years ago. But of all the inquiries, *none*, in my opinion, if answered, would ever indicate the US government was behind the bloody affair.” So there it is: the questions may be unanswered, but they don't need to be, because Frank knows already what the only possible answers add up to.

If the illogic of this short piece seems tawdry, the mental laziness Frank's position authorizes is no less so. I don't mean to suggest that any activity labeling itself “9/11 research” is intrinsically virtuous. Anyone who has observed neo-Gnostic prophet David Icke gliding happily between assessments of 9/11 evidence and pronouncements about the “Illuminati conspiracy” and “reptilian entities in the positions of power [that] manipulate the peoples of the world to fight each other in the five-sense prison,”²⁰ or who has taken note of the vicious email blitzing inflicted by Nico Haupt, Gerard Holmgren and Rosalee Grable (alias ‘Webfairy’) on what they call “plane-huggers” (people naive enough to believe that actual aircraft struck the Twin Towers on 9/11),²¹ will know that some of what passes as “9/11 research” is silly, inept, and malicious. But only by an act

²⁰ David Icke, *Alice in Wonderland and the World Trade Center Disaster* (Wildwood, MO: Bridge of Love Publications, 2002), pp. 463, 478.

²¹ For a thorough refutation of the “no-plane theory” of Holmgren and others, see Eric Salter, “The WTC Impacts: 767s or ‘Whatzits’?” (5 November 2004, updated September 2005), <http://questionsquestions.net/WTC/767orwhatzit.html>.

of transparent bad faith can this be used to dismiss out of hand research that adheres to the principles of critical scholarship and the methods of scientific inquiry.

3. Diana Johnstone: problems of method

Diana Johnstone deserves credit for her abstention from the overheated rhetoric of Cockburn and Frank, and for her attempt to analyze the subject methodically. But it is precisely in her interpretive methodology that she goes astray.

Johnstone's basic error is a repeated assumption that suppositious interpretations of intention should be treated as the primary form of evidence. Thus she proposes, near the beginning of her article, that we attend to "the symbolism of the attacks." She then uses suppositions about intention to undermine what she calls "the Bushite conspiracy hypothesis":

Now, let us suppose that Bushite plotters designed the attacks so that Bush could use them to claim that "they want to destroy us because of our freedom". The choice of targets should support that claim. Suppose one of the planes had crashed into the Statue of Liberty; that would really carry the message that "they want to destroy our freedom". For ordinary Americans, it would be just as shocking as the World Trade Center, while costing a lot less to American capitalism (an old gift from France would hardly be missed). For good measure, to show that the terrorists want to kill as many people as possible, they could have crashed into a couple of packed football stadiums.

This approach is peculiar in two respects. First, although I don't object on principle to speculations about intention, I think they're more likely to be plausible when they have a more serious anchorage in considerations of political and economic advantage than Johnstone provides. Without dismissing her suppositions out of hand, I would note that she ignores other more material possibilities: for example, that intentions behind the WTC attacks could have included a desire to dispose of functionally obsolete and uneconomical buildings while making it possible to collect massively on their insurance, to generate large put-option stock market windfalls, and to dispose of evidence

held by the SEC in WTC 7 relating to the Enron and WorldCom scandals (all of which the attacks very definitely did).

More significantly, Johnstone's approach inverts any properly analytical ordering of evidence. Unless there is other material, testimonial, photographic or documentary evidence that makes a "Bushite conspiracy hypothesis" or an "al Qaeda hypothesis" plausible, speculations about intentions that would support one or the other hypothesis are a pure waste of time. As I have already noted, there is strong material, testimonial, and photographic evidence that the World Trade Center towers were destroyed by controlled demolitions—which in turn indicates that people with privileged access to the buildings (whose security was contracted to a company with close Bush family connections) knew in advance that the planes which reached their targets with the help of what appears to have been a planned disabling of the American air defense system would in fact get through. This evidence is supported by analyses of many incriminating details of government foreknowledge, of the attacks themselves, and of the ensuing cover-up that have been published by Michel Chossudovsky and other researchers.²² Their work has been lucidly summarized in a series of books and articles by David Ray Griffin.²³ Only on a tertiary and supplemental level do questions of intention—among them the stated geopolitical aims expounded by senior members of the Bush administration in the

²² Michel Chossudovsky, *War and Globalization: The Truth Behind September 11* (Shanty Bay, Ontario: Global Outlook, 2002), and *America's "War on Terrorism"* (Pincourt, Québec: Global Research, 2005). See also Paul Thompson, *The Terror Timeline: Year by Year, Day by Day, Minute by Minute: A Comprehensive Chronicle of the Road to 9/11—and America's Response* (New York: HarperCollins, 2004); Webster G. Tarpley, *9/11 Synthetic Terror: Made in USA* (2nd ed.; Joshua Tree, California: Tree of Life Books, 2006); Nafeez Mosaddeq Ahmed, *The War on Truth: 9/11, Disinformation, and the Anatomy of Terrorism* (Northampton, Mass.: Olive Branch Press, 2005); and Paul Zarembka, ed., *The Hidden History of 9-11-2001* (Research in Political Economy, vol. 23; New York: Elsevier, 2006).

²³ Two of David Ray Griffin's books, *The New Pearl Harbor* and *The 9/11 Commission Report: Omissions and Distortions*, are cited in note 8 above; see also *Christian Faith and the Truth Behind 9/11: A Call to Reflection and Action* (Philadelphia: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006). Links to his most recent articles can be found at the website of Scholars for 9/11 Truth, <http://www.st911.org>. For a recurrently dishonest 'official' response to the lines of interpretation developed by works cited in this and the preceding seven notes, see David Dunbar and Brad Reagan, eds., *Debunking 9/11 Myths* (New York: Hearst Books, 2006).

documents published by the Project for the New American Century, and also, if you like, Diana Johnstone's more suppositious or novelistic speculations—become relevant.

Johnstone remarks that “the layman cannot easily judge” between “conflicting physical interpretations” of what happened at the Pentagon, “but can quite well use common sense to question motives and plausibility.” She treats the question of what caused the collapses of the WTC towers in the same manner:

The layman has no way to judge between these expert explanations—but neither do experts, since (as physicist Jean Bricmont points out) scientists cannot be sure of the cause of a single event that cannot be repeated experimentally. So we are back to the question of plausibility and motivation.

This is an openly irrationalist rhetorical move. Laymen can't do science, so we'll have to get along with common sense—but then scientists can't do science either, so common sense (untouched, it would seem, by any serious study of the evidence, since that might give it some whiff of the scientific) magically becomes the only set of wheels that anyone has.

One must hope, for Jean Bricmont's sake, that Johnstone is misquoting or misunderstanding him. In a strict sense, as he perhaps meant to say, every physical event in the universe is a singularity that can never be precisely reiterated. But that does not make iterability absurd, or science impossible—for scientific experiments and modellings do not aspire to precisely repeat (or anticipate) the physical interactions and structural relations they are designed to give us insight into; rather, they provide measurable controlled analogues to those processes. To claim that the collapses of the WTC towers cannot be physically and mechanically modeled, or that the remaining samples of the toxic dust and the structural steel cannot be chemically and structurally analyzed, is irrationalism of a low order.

It might seem surprising that a literary scholar and textual theorist like myself should object to Johnstone's proceedings—which after all amount to putting novelists and literary critics into the driver's seat. But I'm afraid bad science also makes bad hermeneutics—and bad hermeneutics results in feeble handling of the textual evidence.

4. *Looking away from the 9/11 evidence*

Why have otherwise admirable leftist journalists like Cockburn, Frank, and Johnstone been so strangely averse to attending to the evidence about 9/11 alluded to above? One reason may be that even the hypothesis of state complicity in the events of 9/11 entails confronting the possibility that we are living through a moment of major historical transformation and discontinuity.

It is one thing to accept, as an abstract proposition, that the United States may have moved from the end of its republican period into a state of imperial autocracy. Chalmers Johnson's diagnosis in *The Sorrows of Empire* is, after all, both scrupulous and unambiguous—as is his conclusion that the American people might conceivably

retake control of Congress, reform it along with the corrupted election laws that have made it a forum for special interests, turn it into a genuine assembly of democratic representatives, and cut off the supply of money to the Pentagon and the secret intelligence agencies [...] At this late date, however, it is difficult to imagine how Congress, much like the Roman senate in the last days of the republic, could be brought back to life and cleansed of its endemic corruption.²⁴

Johnson's analysis may well arouse in us a Virgilian sense of *lacrimae rerum*, of the grief of temporality, and the sadness of “states doomed to ruin,” *perituraque regna*.²⁵

But it is another thing altogether to confront in detail the manner in which the transition from republic to autocracy is being orchestrated—not just through the out-of-control militarism that Johnson so finely documents, but also through what Peter Dale Scott has called the “deep politics” of a ruling elite which is thoroughly habituated to reliance on covert agencies that are in no way answerable to democratic governance.²⁶

²⁴ Chalmers Johnson, *The Sorrows of Empire: Militarism, Secrecy, and the End of the Republic* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2004), p. 312.

²⁵ Virgil, *Aeneid* i.462, and *Georgics* ii.498, in *Publii Virgilii Maronis Opera*, ed. Fr. Dubner (Paris: Jacques Lecoffre, 1854), pp. 195, 113.

²⁶ Peter Dale Scott writes, in *Deep Politics and the Death of JFK* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), p. xii, that “collusive secrecy and law-breaking are part of how the deep political system works.” He adds: “What makes these supplementary processes ‘deep’ is the fact that they are covert or suppressed, outside general awareness as well as outside acknowledge political processes.”

Yet if we're going to deal in historical parallels, perhaps we ought to strive for consistency. Rome's imperial-autocrats-in-the-making never hesitated to shed blood, whether of their compatriots or other nations: why should we imagine our own to be more fastidious, or less Machiavellian?

Another motive for aversion may also be involved: the fear of being mocked as a “conspiracy theorist” or “tin-foil hat wearer,” with a consequent loss of public credibility and professional respect. If such a fear were no more than what it seems, one might well ask what value there could be to markers of professional standing which block inquiry into historical truths and material realities—or what claims to courage or integrity could be made by public intellectuals who fold their tents at the mere threat of scurrilous handling by opponents. But something more profound may be at work. Peter Dale Scott, who like Chalmers Johnson indulges in what he calls the “clichéd analogy” of a comparison between the contemporary United States and Rome in the period of its transition from republic to imperial autocracy, remarks on the refusal of the Roman senatorial class to accept that “real power had migrated out of” the civic institutions in which they continued to participate, and had passed into the hands of “an imperial regime, the armies and the courts of the army commanders.” Their motive, though unacknowledged, was quite simple: “The self-respect of the senatorial classes depended on this denial.”²⁷

An analogous motive may be in play among our own class of academics and public intellectuals, for whom a migration of power into military, deep-political, and corporate-media hands may for similar reasons be difficult to acknowledge. István Meszáros has proposed that we are currently facing not merely a “conjunctural crisis” of the kind that occurred at intervals over the past century, but rather an all-embracing “structural crisis”—one which “affects the *totality* of a social complex” because it throws into question “capital’s mode of social metabolic reproduction” up to the ultimate limits of “the established global structure.”²⁸ It would be no novelty to argue that the Bush regime’s military aggressions, together with its evident contempt for the constraints of

²⁷ Scott, *Deep Politics*, p. 313.

²⁸ István Meszáros, “The Structural Crisis of Politics,” *Monthly Review* 58.4 (September 2006): 11-14, <http://www.monthlyreview.org/0906meszaros.htm#Volume>.

republican governance (the Bill of Rights and *habeas corpus* among them) and its ever-increasing reliance on deep-political manipulations, are part of the corporatist ruling elite's response to this structural crisis. Understandably enough, public intellectuals who are habituated to conjunctural crises in which their oppositional function was understood by all concerned, and who have in addition made a lifelong habit of ignoring or belittling political analyses which incorporate deep-political factors, have resisted the gathering evidence that these very factors have been decisive in the political transformations pushed through since 9/11.

And yet counter-forces are arguably at work against what Scott calls "the social function of denial in masking political change."²⁹ One of them, intellectual integrity, though it might seem a quaint abstraction to invoke in this context, has yet impelled conservative academics and public intellectuals like Paul Craig Roberts and Morgan Reynolds (who in addition to their university careers held senior positions in the Reagan and first George W. Bush administrations, respectively) into vehement opposition to the crimes of the present regime. Both have written powerful analyses of the present administration's folly and criminality, and both recognize the events of 9/11 as a key element of that criminality.

Another counter-force may be a growing recognition of the delegitimizing power of the 9/11 evidence.

5. Delegitimizing the Bush regime

When Joshua Frank says of the Bush regime that "this administration, like so many before it, needs to be stopped at once," I agree whole-heartedly with the sentiment (although the modifying phrase seems unfortunate: stopping the crimes of previous administrations is now something only time-travellers can hope to do).³⁰ Let's pause, then, to think about how the current US administration is to be stopped.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ This slight contortion of Frank's syntax seems interestingly symptomatic of a desire to avoid any recognition of discontinuity. I applaud his insistence that previous American administrations were also routinely guilty of war crimes. But why should it be beyond our dialectical powers to acknowledge both that continuity and also the qualitative

I would suggest that the concept of delegitimation should figure importantly in our reflections. People who have acquiesced in the actions of a government may be persuaded to withdraw their support and even to move into active opposition by evidence that those actions have been ill-judged, rash, or unprincipled. But evidence that a government has acted in ways that unambiguously violate the state's foundational covenant—in this case the US Constitution and Bill of Rights—and that unambiguously sunder the ruling elite's claims on the consent and loyalty of citizens and the obedience of state employees, whether civilian or military, cuts much deeper. What is at stake in this case is the legitimacy of the governing elite—and also, to the extent that people can recognize that elite's declinations from the nation's foundational democratic principles as systemic in nature, the legitimacy of the system of corporatized governance that has made it possible for such people to acquire and exercise power.

Since regular visitors to the websites of *The Centre for Research on Globalization*, or of *Counterpunch*, scarcely need to be told of the many ways, from electoral fraud to the abolition of *habeas corpus*, from unconstrained mendacity to military aggression, in which the administration of George W. Bush has demonstrated its illegitimacy, I'm not going to rehearse them all here. But the evidence that on every key aspect of the events of 9/11 the Bush administration has lied, and that the official version of what happened on 9/11 cannot stand up to critical inquiry, does not simply necessitate the development of alternative hypotheses: it also provides what must be one of the strongest and most inescapable arguments against this regime's legitimacy.

For if the emerging evidence of what happened on 9/11 is cogent enough to stand up in the face of the most rigorous critical examination—and a large part of it demonstrably is—the consequences for the legitimacy of the Bush government are quite literally shattering. If the government merely facilitated this terrorist atrocity through neglect or incompetence, then it abdicated its primary responsibility to protect the lives and property of its citizens. But if the evidence drives Americans to suspect that senior government officials may have been active parties in the catastrophic events of 9/11, and quite possibly their primary organizers as well as their most obvious beneficiaries, then

differences between the rampages of the Bush regime and the less unapologetic criminality of its precursors?

the truly appalling possibility is raised of a treasonous perversion of state power resulting in mass murder. One might well argue that only an independent and bona fide criminal investigation could determine whether the evidence supports such a hypothesis. But it should be evident that officials whose actions are believed by large numbers of people to merit criminal investigation are well on their way to losing political legitimacy.

Rather than arguing in the abstract for the delegitimizing power of the 9/11 evidence, let me give a concrete example of it. Robert Bowman, a retired USAF Lt. Colonel who holds a Ph.D. in physics, was director of Advanced Space Program Development for the USAF in the Ford and Carter administrations. Here's a part of what he had to say as a speaker at the DC Emergency Truth Convergence organized by the 9/11 Truth Movement in Washington, DC in July, 2005:

You know, our freedoms are not under attack from the remnants of Saddam Hussein's Baathist party. They're under attack by the likes of John Ashcroft, they're trampled by Donald Rumsfeld, they're disdained by Dick Cheney, and they're not even understood by George W. Bush. The battle to preserve our freedoms is not taking place in Baghdad and Tikrit and Fallujah. It's taking place in peace marches and demonstrations in Girardelli Park in San Francisco, in Memorial Park in Oklahoma City, and in Lafayette Park in Washington DC. [...] We, my sisters and brothers, are protecting this nation by speaking truth to power. [...]

And when we speak, this is the truth that we proclaim. This war in Iraq has nothing to do with national security, or freedom or democracy or human rights or protecting our allies or weapons of mass destruction or defeating terrorism or disarming Iraq. It has to do with money, it has to do with oil, and it has to do with raw imperial power. And it's based totally on lies. Those who forced this war on an unwilling world are guilty of violating the US Constitution, the UN Charter, the Nuremberg principles, and international law. What they have done is illegal, immoral, unconstitutional, and treason. [...]

This cabal of neoconservatives from PNAC who planned this war—Cheney, Rumsfeld, Wolfowitz, Perle, Jeb Bush—even before W. became president, they told us why they had to do it. They said we need to occupy Iraq permanently in order to dominate Iran, Syria, Saudi Arabia, and the southern Russian republics around the Caspian Sea. We need to control the entire Middle East and all its oil. [...]

[T]hey knew the American people wouldn't stand for it, and they said so in their documents—and they said, unless there's that new Pearl Harbor. Well, 9/11 did supply that—and we've been lied to not only about the war, but about 9/11 itself. They ignored the warnings: more than that, we have mounting evidence that—at least—they made it impossible for those planes to be intercepted. If our government had merely [done] nothing, and I say that as an old interceptor pilot—I know the drill, I know what it takes, I know how long it takes, I know what the procedures are, I know what they were, and I know what they've changed them to—if our government had merely done nothing, and allowed normal procedures to happen on that morning of 9/11, the Twin Towers would still be standing and thousands of dead Americans would still be alive. My sisters and brothers, that is treason!

As a combat veteran, I will not stand idly by and watch our security destroyed by a president who went AWOL rather than serve in Vietnam. As one who's devoted his life to the security of this country, I will not stand by and watch an appointed president send our sons and daughters around the world to kill Arabs for the oil companies. [...] I joined the air force a long time ago to protect our borders and our people, not the financial interests of Folgers, Chiquita Banana, Exxon, and Halliburton. We've had enough corporate wars! No more Iraqs, no more Kosovos, no more El Salvadors, no more Colombias! These are not isolated incidents of stupidity; they're part of a long, bloody history of foreign policy being conducted for the financial interests of the wealthy few. [...]

As a pilot who flew a hundred and one combat missions in Vietnam, I swore to uphold the Constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic—and that includes a renegade president! It's time for George W. Bush, Dick Cheney, Donald Rumsfeld, Condoleezza Rice, and the whole oil mafia to be removed from office and indicted for treason.³¹

6. Conclusion

The 9/11 evidence is evidently for Bowman neither isolated, nor inert, nor immobilizing. It forms part of what he has come to understand (as he says in this same speech) as “a new form of colonialism.” Though Bowman has been a forceful critic of Reagan’s “Star Wars” Strategic Defense Initiative and subsequent missile defense systems, and though his religious commitments as a lay minister may also have exposed him to forms of thought beyond the customary discursive range of air force officers, one might guess that 9/11, which he evidently believes to have been a planned catalyst in the Bush regime’s project of oil geopolitics and aggressive warfare, was also a catalyzing factor in the development of his own understanding of “corporate wars” and the “long, bloody history of foreign policy being conducted for the financial interests of the wealthy few.”

As I have already noted, Bowman is not the only conservative one-time senior member of the state apparatus to have been jolted into open opposition by 9/11 and the other crimes of the current administration.

Perhaps it's time that people on the left allowed themselves to be jolted as well—at the very least, into an honest and painstaking analysis of the evidence.

So, Alexander Cockburn: can we put these stupid boxing gloves away?

³¹ *What's the Truth? How Indeed did the Twin Towers Collapse?* A Dem Bruce Lee Styles Film, available at [911 Podcasts.com](http://www.911podcasts.com) (1 July 2006), <http://www.911podcasts.com/display.php?cat=9997&med=0&ord=Name&str=0&vid=95&epi=0&typ=0>; and linked at <http://www.st911.org>.

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