

# Conspiracy theories and the fight for truth

**NEW YORK, JULY 22, 2005** – Remember the “Jersey Girls?” That’s a phrase we haven’t heard in a while, a reference to several New Jersey-based widows who lost their husbands in the attack on the World Trade Center on 9-11. They were ordinary a-political suburbanites, mostly with Republican leanings, who did an extraordinary thing in questioning the Administration’s version of the attack and demanding that their government do so as well.

That led, after nearly a year of well-informed, frustrating and persistent lobbying, to the launch of the 911 investigation formally known as The National Commission On Terrorist Attacks Upon The United States.

Recall that the Bush Administration initially opposed its formation but was forced to reconsider because of the grass roots campaign led by the emotional firepower of the Jersey Girls and victim families who had never done anything like it before.

Bush then tried to undercut it by appointing that master of cover-ups Henry Kissinger as its chairman and later withheld documents and cooperation, the President insisting that Dick Cheney testify with him that no transcript be released. The Commission was given subpoena power but did not use it.

It’s now been a year since that Commission, finally led by former Republican New Jersey Governor Thomas Kean and co-chaired by former Democratic Congressman Lee Hamilton, published its best-selling and novel-like report offering an official conspiracy theory naming the Osama bin Laden-run Al Qaeda as the solo perpetrators.

Not surprisingly, at a time when deception seems to have become government’s tool du jour, not everyone buys its conclusions. Instead, there is a tsunami of unanswered questions and challenges to what passes for official truth about what happened that day and why it happened.

This seems to be a time when conspiracies are capturing once again the public imagination. Press reports last week documented how Presidential sevensgali Karl Rove and I. Lewis Libby, his counterpart in Dick Cheney’s office,

were scheming to get then CIA Director George Tenet to discredit charges that the Administration was lying about Iraq made by former Ambassador Joe Wilson.

Saturday also marked the third anniversary of the publication of the Downing Street Memo that documented the fixing of intelligence related to Iraq. There were 150 protest events nationwide discussing Downing Street over the weekend. If intelligence could be fixed on a war, why not on a terrorist attack?

With 911 back in the spotlight, a trifecta of issues challenging the Administration's truthfulness is now on the agenda.

Some see a conspiracy behind the 911 Commission's conspiracy finding, noting that that body was never really independent, but was controlled by staff director Phillip Zelikow, a Republican intelligence professional, who had previously worked and co-authored a book with Condoleezza Rice. It was also peopled by commissioners and staffers with clear conflicts because of their links to policymakers, the defense industry and oil interests. That included chairman Kean who was, bizarrely enough, tied into a Saudi Arabian oil enterprise run by two Bin Laden relatives. He sold his shares two weeks before he began chairing the Commission.

None of that seem to matter at the time because the news coverage was rarely analytical. The Commission's findings were embraced by most of the mainstream media even as the press proved out of step with the public. Several public opinion surveys found that as many as half of the people questioned believed the government either wasn't telling the whole story, or had foreknowledge and didn't act, or, worse, had something to do with it.

First anniversaries like this are often occasions for looking back at what was done. That's precisely what the sprawling decentralized band of activists that calls itself the 911 Truth Movement organized this past weekend in Washington with forums and protests. The central event was a day-long citizens hearing in the Caucus Room of the Cannon House Office Building presided over by the outspoken maverick Congresswoman Cynthia McKinney, whose earlier suspicions about government complicity in 911 had, with the help of active help of GOP money and manpower, got her bounced from Congress,

For many on the right (and even on the left), raising questions about 911 is still a no-no and a province for nuts and kooks. When McKinney first raised

concerns about 911 in a radio interview she was demonized. Rupert Murdoch's Weekly Standard called her a "representative for the loony."

"It was all downhill from there," wrote Matthew Continetti earlier this year. "On April 12, 2002, a synopsis of the interview appeared in the Washington Post. Democrats began distancing themselves from McKinney. She released a statement admitting she was "not aware of any evidence" proving "President Bush or members of his administration have personally profited from the attacks of 9/11," but "a complete investigation might reveal that to be the case." Then again, it might not. For that matter, McKinney might have had no idea what she was talking about."

The many smears like this did not, in the end, frighten her from voicing her concerns. She continues to publicly raise questions that others in Congress only discuss in whispers. To the 911 movement, which has been ostracized and marginalized for so long, getting heard in the hallowed halls of Congress was the closest they have come to legitimation even if McKinney often stands alone. 911 Citizens Watch organizer Kyle Hence called her in-Congress forum a "real victory for our movement."

The first witnesses were some stand-up Jersey girls, Lorie Van Auken and the eloquent Mindy Kleinbery, who expressed their disappointment with the performance of the Commission which was suppose to have relayed their questions to those testifying but didn't. They clearly felt co-opted and betrayed and said so. (You will recall that only former Terrorist Czar Richard Clarke had the guts then to apologize to them, and the other grieving families admitted their government failed to protect them.)

Others "testifying" in the half-full Chamber were former CIA employees, and a number of authors and analysts. The one I found most intriguing was Nafeez Mossaddeq Ahmad, a British-based researcher whose new book "The War on Truth: 911 Disinformation and the Anatomy of Terrorism" (Olive Branch Press 2005) offers many revelations and provocative details. In his appearance, he challenged the view that the 911 Hijackers were all puritan Islamic fundamentalists pointing to many published reports that placed them drunk in strip clubs, behavior inconsistent with devout Al Qaeda ideology. He also suggested that some of them had prior military training at US facilities.

There was testimony from authors with careful and compelling documentation that seeks to substantiate a case for official complicity in the 911 events. Their arguments are too detailed to summarize here but activists

recommend their books as the bibles for an emerging counter-narrative. They include Paul Thompson's 590 page "The Terror Timeline," a "year by year, day by day, minute by minute" comprehensive chronicle, ironically published by the Murdoch imprint Regan Books, and David Ray Griffin's new "The 911 Commission Report: Omissions and Distortions" (Olive Branch Press) which scrupulously refutes the findings of the Kean Commission. Griffin is an emeritus Professor of Religion and Theology at the conservative Claremont College and knows the difference between faith-based and fact-based information. He specializes in the former but seems to prefer the latter.

These books with major underground followings have all been ignored by major reviewers and the mainstream media. And so has the 911 Truth Movement's event. Of 1,460,000 listings of 911 Truth Movements on Google Saturday morning, I saw nothing listed for Friday's hearing. CSPAN was there but the rest of the press seemed to come from grass roots and progressive outlets like Pacifica and the Independent News Network.

Part of the problem was evident at a press briefing held at the National Press Club on July 22. There was no national press present as far as I could tell, perhaps because some of the self-righteous activists there make them uncomfortable. Many seemed to want a symposium on theories rather than a press conference on issues. There were many denunciations of the stupidity and ignorance of what they see as a monolithic press that largely ignores them even as their experts constantly quote from mainstream sources.

Peter Phillips of Project Censored probed into why this is, discussing a widespread psychological desire "for the 911 tragedy to be over." He pointed to the "natural resistance to naysayers" common in the public and the press alike. He referenced "dark closets in our socio-cultural consciousness that makes it difficult to even consider the possibility of certain ideas...we deny even the potentiality of their implied veracity – something is so evil it is completely unimaginable."

I attended as someone who wrote a book on news at a time of terror (Media Wars) and made two related films, *We are Family* on a cultural response to 911, and *WMD* (Weapons of Mass Deception) which argues that 911 was used as a pretext to the war on Iraq.

In a talk at the press club, I called on the 911 Truth activists to become more knowledgeable about how the press actually works and embrace the calls of the media reform movement for more diverse coverage lest their ideas never

be fully reported.

The reaction of some in the room shocked me for three reasons. First, I was troubled that Iraq War and the Downing Commission report were not mentioned.

Second, I was surprised to find some argued that the 911 Commission failed because it did not respond to their criticisms, as if that was its purpose.

And, third, I was amazed at how my largely supportive remarks for the need for truth were dismissed in the Q & A by people who prefer the sound of their own voices. One woman called me naïve, scornfully asking me how I could fail to see that we are living under fascism, making media reform impossible.

And a man went on and on trying to change the subject and deal instead with the minutia of conspiracy theories I hadn't even raised while totally ignoring what I did say.

A third denounced me bitterly, along with the whole alternative press, as a "war criminal" for not doing enough to spread his 911 theories. (I was honored to be lumped in with Amy Goodman.)

That press briefing was unfortunately a case study of why the 911 Truth Movement has to do so much better to get its issues before the American people, a public that might agree with them if they were better able to articulate their concerns and the media was more willing to hear and present them.

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