



Selected articles from
VOL. 19 NO. 4 SPRING 2007

911: A Conspiracy of Dunces?

By [Bill W. Hall](#)

In *A Confederacy of Dunces*, John Kennedy Toole's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, the delusional and Quixotic hero Ignatius J. Reilly attempts to organize a workers' revolt, writes ridiculously revisionist history, and in general battles those he deems the reigning dunces in society. I could not help but think of this tragicomedy during the December 2006 meeting of the Tampa Bay Skeptics.

The topic of that meeting was the 911 conspiracy movement, which promotes the claim that the attacks of September 11, 2001, were not perpetrated by Muslim terrorists, but were in fact the product of a massive conspiracy orchestrated by the Bush administration in order to generate widespread public support for its planned military invasions in the Middle East.

The meeting was attended by TBS members as well as several invited guests from the local chapter of the "911 Truth" movement. What transpired was fascinating. The self-proclaimed proponents of truth ([their website](#) describes them as "Dedicated to Rational Scientific Inquiry, Education, and Activism") seemed little interested in rational evaluation of the evidence. [Note: At press time, their site was down with an "Account Expired" notice at the top.] The skeptics present continually pointed out numerous factual errors, interpretive flaws, logical inconsistencies, and fallacious reasoning inherent in the 911 conspiracy theorists' thinking, but the proponents seemed unfazed by the facts, unconcerned by the logical analysis, and uninformed by the scientific perspective. Ignatius J. Reilly would have admired their vigorous tilting at windmills.

Guest Mia Hamel, the leader of the "911 Truth" local chapter, began the discussion with a twenty-minute overview of the basic 911 conspiracy theory. She initially veered off into other conspiracies involving the pharmaceutical industry, cholesterol myths, and the military-industrial complex, but TBS moderator Jack Robinson pulled her back to the topic at hand, which she then presented in a concise fashion. She covered the standard litany of claims well publicized by major conspiracy

theorists like Steven E. Jones, Alex Jones, James H. Fetzer, and Dylan Avery. She discussed claimed anomalies in the attack on and subsequent collapse of the WTC twin towers, the attack on the Pentagon, the crash of United Airlines Flight 93, and the collapse of WTC building seven, which Mia contended was the most problematic of the related events. She also discussed why 911 conspiracy theorists believe the Bush administration was motivated to murder thousands of Americans in those coordinated attacks. I will not repeat all these claims here -- interested readers can easily access them via Mia's group's and myriad other websites, including the main www.911Truth.org.

After Mia spoke, TBS member Glenn Thompson briefly talked about how he had gotten interested in the subject via a friend who had been convinced by the 911 conspiracy theorists' claims. Glenn shared his frustrating attempts to convince his friend that the official explanation of the 911 attacks was the more rational one.

I was next on the agenda, and took a few minutes to explain what I thought was the biggest problem with the 911 conspiracy theory: its logical absurdity. I pointed out that such a massive conspiracy would have necessarily involved hundreds, maybe thousands, of participants, and would have required careful timing and expert execution. The idea that such a grand, coordinated effort could have worked without any leaks among the many conspirators stretches credulity far beyond the breaking point. TBS chairman Terry Smiljanich echoed my sentiments when he pointed out that the Nixon administration could not even keep the Watergate break-in and subsequent cover-up a secret for very long, and it involved far fewer people than the 911 conspiracy would have needed.

I also raised the logical issue of motivation, by pointing out the relative ease with which the Bush administration could have achieved the same result (i.e., getting the American public to support planned U.S. military actions in the Middle East) with a vastly smaller conspiracy involving a dirty bomb exploding at a U.S. seaport, or even on a ship en route to the U.S. The same Middle Eastern scapegoats as were claimed to have been fraudulently blamed for the 911 attacks could have easily been blamed for such a staged attack, and a dirty bomb explosion would have been far simpler to plan and implement than a series of coordinated attacks involving commercial airliners, multiple skyscrapers, and a crucial U.S. government building.

Indeed, if the Bush administration were behind the 911 attacks, then it truly *was* a conspiracy of dunces, because only idiots would have preferred such an elaborate deception when a relatively simple con would have sufficed.

After I spoke, there was a spirited, open discussion during which TBS members disputed Mia's claims. I found this part of the meeting to be the most interesting and the most revealing. Mia struck me as a sincere, passionate advocate for her position. She is a true believer who has dedicated herself to the cause, but like most true believers, she does not like having her beliefs questioned. She repeatedly became incensed when TBS members challenged her claims, sometimes even yelling at her skeptical disputants. This reached comic heights when, at the subsequent post-meeting lunch at Steak and Ale, she vehemently accused TBS founder Gary Posner of being a paid disinformation agent of the government, hired to actively oppose Mia and her group. The idea that anyone would need to be paid to challenge the claims of the 911 conspiracy theorists is akin to the notion that agents would have to be paid to oppose the claims of the International Flat Earth Society. Had he been there, Ignatius J. Reilly would have doffed his green hunting cap at Mia's fulmination.

One final thought comes to mind about all this. On the one hand, the 911 conspiracy theorists believe the Bush administration was capable of successfully orchestrating, executing, and covering up a massive conspiracy. On the other hand, they believe the same administration was apparently so inept that it left numerous gaping holes in its plan that ordinary folks like Mia could easily see through. Which is it? Are the claimed conspirators stupendously competent and evil puppeteers, or stupendously incompetent dunces? Perhaps only the Ignatius J. Reillys of the world can answer that one.

Escape into Fiction

By Valerie Grey

Years ago I was engaged to a fellow with a serious drinking problem that did not combine well with his experiment with big-rig truck driving -- he got arrested for DUI. Coincidentally, earlier that very day, I had told his parents that I couldn't take it any longer and was going to break the engagement. Then I got the collect call from a jail in Arizona, and, well, you just don't abandon someone at the very bottom of his fortunes.

Needless to say, it was a real mess. And to my astonishment, I found myself experiencing an intense desire -- more intense than I had ever felt before in my life -- to escape into reading fiction, particularly science fiction and other blatant fantasy (the non-drinker's substitute for alcohol?). It was a kind of revelation to realize, perhaps for the first time in my life, what the mental consequences could be of feeling trapped by insurmountably powerful external forces. (We won't discuss what kind of escapism is involved in writing fiction!)

If you have read my previous articles, you know I'm big on analogies, however weak. Hence, it has occurred to me to wonder if there isn't an analogous situation for other people in bad circumstances in which they, too, wish desperately to escape -- in their case submitting to the wishful-thinking "alternate reality" pronouncements of an authority promoting the power of positive thinking, prayer, faith healing, astrology, life after death, or the like.

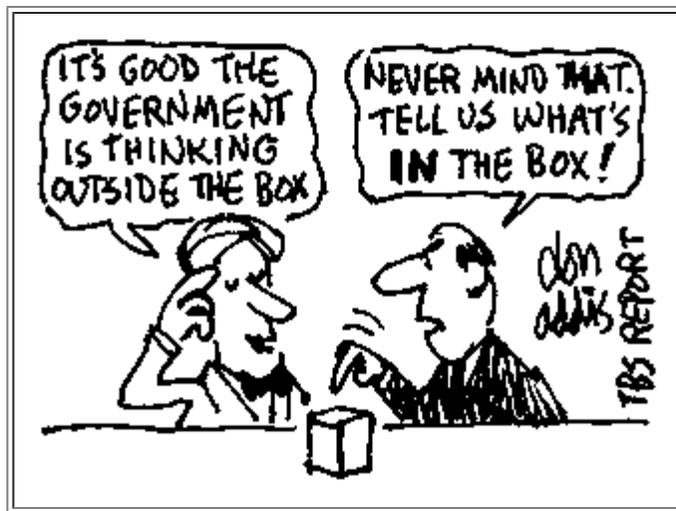
In my case, I was very uncomfortable in the current reality and sought refuge in an "alternate reality." But, of course, I was fully aware that *my* "alternate reality" was *unreal* and destined to be only temporary. In contrast, those others who abdicate responsibility for independent judgment, instead submitting to authoritative-sounding but unsubstantiated claims of the mystical and paranormal, are not *temporarily* indulging in make-believe, but *buying into* the different reality.

I have a client -- horribly lonely and starved for attention -- who truly believes that when sodium-vapor streetlights cycle on as she passes by, it is her guardian angel saying hello. And I suspect that others with boring and tiresome lives, though less desperate than my client's, seek out the excitement and magic of ESP or UFOs to make them feel somehow special.

My mother's great claim to fame is that she once hosted an engagement party for Elizabeth Taylor. My mother wasn't a movie star, but she touched the hem of the garment of one. And, evidently, that

helped make her difficult life more bearable. "I shook the hand of the President, so kiss my ring." A little like collectors: "I paid a small fortune for all this arts and crafts stuff, so that makes me special." But none of them starred in anything, or created anything -- they just lived vicariously through it. Likewise, the UFO buffs have never visited an alien culture on another planet, but they once saw an unexplained light in the sky -- and to their mind that makes them special. Go figure.

Snippets



Newly declassified documents, released under the Freedom of Information Act, reveal that in 2002 the British Ministry of Defence recruited "psychics" to find Osama Bin Laden's hiding place. The MoD ran up a bill of £18,000 (\$35,000) in taxpayer' money testing their ability to "see" objects hidden inside envelopes, hoping that positive results would validate "remote viewing" as a way to locate Bin Laden's base (and also Iraq's missing weapons of mass destruction).

As has been the case with James Randi's foundation (as mentioned in [this article](#)), the MoD found that the more famous "psychics" -- those who advertised their talents online and performed them for a living -- all refused testing, and thus only "novice" volunteers were available.

Nick Pope, who ran the MoD's former UFO research program, said, "I don't think this was a waste of public money. Many people will say so, but I think it is marvelous that the Government is prepared to think outside the box."

Where are you when we need you, [Noreen](#)? This task should be a piece of cake for you. How about pinpointing Bin Laden's lair for James Randi's \$1,000,000 prize? Or, if that's too tough, we'll award you TBS's own \$1,000 prize for Dick Cheney's "undisclosed location."

(*London Daily Mail* online, Feb. 23)

According to Michigan State University professor Jon Miller, people in the U.S. know more about science now than they did two decades ago -- about the time Tampa Bay Skeptics was founded. That would seem to be good news, right? However, belief is also growing in such paranormal subjects as UFOs/aliens, lucky numbers, astrology, and creationism. Though the article does not advance the following cause-and-effect proposition, the inconvenient truth is as plain as the nose on Al Gore's face: TBS's efforts to advance scientific knowledge are resulting in cerebral warming and accelerated melting of the dunce caps, in turn causing the oceans of pseudoscientific slop to rise. Prediction: The U.N. will soon empanel a group of experts that will recommend a per-word skeptic tax on *TBS Report*.

(A.P. via *St. Pete. Times*, Feb. 18)

Another prediction: If you take \$32,000 in cash to the home of a "psychic" who advertises on the radio that she can bring you financial prosperity by "blessing" your money for 24 hours, the money -- and the psychic -- will be long gone by the time you show up to retrieve your money the following day. At least that's what happened to Manuel Lanaverde in Bradenton, and he was not the only victim.

(WTSP-TV 10 [Tampa] online, Feb. 5)

A TBS "\$1,000 Challenge" Candidate

TBS, along with a number of other groups offering cash awards, has received an inquiry from Carl David Ritchie of Malden, Missouri, who claims that he can detect water by use of a dowsing rod.

We have negotiated with Mr. Ritchie the protocol of a possible test of his alleged abilities, and may test him in the Tampa area later this year.

Return to [TBS Report Online](http://www.tampabayskeptics.org/v19n4rpt.html)

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