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## UFO UpDates Mailing List

### Re: Book Burnings & Conspiracies

From: Jerome Clark <[jkclark@frontiernet.net](mailto:jkclark@frontiernet.net)>  
Date: Thu, 27 May 99 08:44:41 PDT  
Fwd Date: Fri, 28 May 1999 08:11:50 -0400  
Subject: Re: Book Burnings & Conspiracies

>Date: Wed, 26 May 1999 09:35:11 -0500  
>From: Alfred Lehmborg <[Lehmborg@snowhill.com](mailto:Lehmborg@snowhill.com)>  
>To: UFO UpDates - Toronto <[updates@globalserve.net](mailto:updates@globalserve.net)>  
>Subject: Re: Book Burnings & Conspiracies

>>To: UFO UpDates - Toronto <[updates@globalserve.net](mailto:updates@globalserve.net)>  
>>From: Jerome Clark <[jkclark@frontiernet.net](mailto:jkclark@frontiernet.net)>  
>>Subject: Re: Book Burnings & Conspiracies  
>>Date: Tue, 25 May 99 12:09:58 PDT

>>>From: Greg St. Pierre <[StrmNut@aol.com](mailto:StrmNut@aol.com)>  
>>>Date: Sun, 23 May 1999 23:15:23 EDT  
>>>Subject: Re: Book Burnings & Conspiracies  
>>>To: [updates@globalserve.net](mailto:updates@globalserve.net)

>>>>To: UFO UpDates - Toronto <[updates@globalserve.net](mailto:updates@globalserve.net)>  
>>>>From: Jerome Clark <[jkclark@frontiernet.net](mailto:jkclark@frontiernet.net)>  
>>>>Subject: Re: Book Burnings & Conspiracies  
>>>>Date: Sun, 23 May 99 19:35:37 PDT >>

>>Suspecting that a few agencies of the U.S. government are  
>>concealing UFO secrets -- an entirely reasonable position --

>>>>>>Your argument, sir, seems to suggest that there is no  
>>>>>>conspiracy.

>>>>>>Precisely.

>It would appear that you want to have it both ways, sir. <not an  
>affectation but a sincere expression of respect. I owe everyone  
>initial respect.>You seem to admit to the tips of some very  
>dirty 'bergs.

I confess that with each passing posting, I understand less and less of what you're trying to say. Recently, you seemed to argue that because you'd never heard of the Protocols of the Elders of Zion (which I first learned of when I was in high school, while reading a book on political extremism and conspiracy theory) this amounted to evidence of a plot to keep such knowledge from you. Now you want us to believe that because governments keep secrets, they are by definition involved in extraordinary (and, needless to say, sinister) conspiracies. This is on par with your inability to discern the simple difference between exercising editorial judgment and burning books -- which in itself tells me that your ability to read phenomena in the world is impaired by poor vision. If you expect to be taken seriously, you'd better start employing arguments that make sense.

>>is not the same as believing in vast, sinister conspiracies.

>In as much as there is no real forthcoming way to know the  
>breadth and scope of the conspiracy you \_admit\_ to, your  
>preceding statement is meaningless, isn't it?

See above.

>>Of course all governments keep secrets;

>I believe you and I think it \_may\_ be possible to that this  
>prerogative has been \_richly\_ abused.

Most secrets are kept for the most trivial reasons, such as bureaucratic lethargy. Unfortunately, the very existence of secrets, however banal, gives conspiracy theorists the opportunity to richly abuse reason and evidence in service of paranoia.

>>For the difference between sane  
>>speculation on one side and mad fantasy on the other, just think  
>>of Donald Keyhoe as representing the former and the Dark Siders  
>>(Cooper, Lear, English, et al.) the latter.

>A division forgetting, for a moment, how the latter can gain,  
>maintain, and keep the popular attention, while the former  
>languishes in amused and unfounded ridicule. What's the  
>mechanism of that, sir? I'm sure the answer would surprise both  
>of us.

Again, I have no idea what you're talking about. All I can say is that if you want to attract attention, what you do is this: broadcast as loudly as possible the most extreme, absurd, paranoid claims, promote them fiercely, and shout with every breath that a vast conspiracy is keeping the "truth" from the citizenry -- and believe me, you'll have a whole herd of the terminally frightened among your paying customers. Keyhoe was too sane, too responsible, and too honest to play that game.

>>Contrails are the latest fad on the far right, perhaps soon to  
>>replace black helicopters as something to keep conspiracists up  
>>at night, weaponry in hand.

>And all of them basted in an ignorance that you won't cop to the  
>mechanisms for; all of them smelling smoke easily blown away by  
>a forthcoming unprevaricating breeze.

I'm glad that we agree that contrail believers are ignorant. (I am taking a benign reading of what you're trying to say here, of course. Your words are sufficiently muddled that they could be read either way, but I prefer to believe the best about you.) I confess that I don't understand all of the "mechanisms" that underlie paranoia and belief in conspiracy theories. One, however, may be a deep desire to simplify a world that is, in fact, hugely complex and unpredictable. Even a belief in an evil larger order is, in an odd way, comforting, because it implies that order can be imposed on the profoundly unsettling chaos of reality (and of course it holds out the hope that, once the sinister controlling forces have been vanquished, a benevolent order can take their place). As all of us who live in the real world know, it doesn't work that way.

In an interesting essay in *The American Prospect* (May/June 1999), Alan Wolfe looks back on sociologist C. Wright Mills's *The Power Elite* (1956), a now nearly forgotten but once highly influential book which sought, in effect, to posit an intellectually respectable version of a left-wing conspiracy theory. Mills was a particular influence on New Left thinking during the 1960s, but his ideas are now mostly discredited. Wolfe, himself a sociologist, points to the inherent problem of conspiracy theories (though he does not use the term; neither did Mills, who was too canny to do so):

"Only in a society which changes relatively little is it possible for an elite to have power in the first place, for if events change radically, then it tends to be the events controlling the people rather than the people controlling the events. There can be little doubt that those who hold the highest positions in America's corporate hierarchy remain, as they did in Mills's day, the most powerful Americans. But not even they can control rapid technological transformations, intense global competition, and ever-changing consumer tastes. American capitalism is simply too dynamic to be controlled for

very long by anyone."

Coincidentally, I happen to be reading a splendid book, John Lewis Gaddis's *We Know Now: Rethinking Cold War History* (1997). While reading it, I couldn't help thinking (1) how real scholarship, as opposed to the unfettered speculation we see in conspiracist polemic, is conducted and (2) how that scholarship shows how incredibly complex, varied, and vast are the forces that underlie and drive relationships in societies and among nations. The notion that they are, or even could be, controlled by a massive conspiracy -- one whose existence, moreover, can't even demonstrated to the satisfaction of reasonable people -- is as sensible as the belief that the earth is flat and rests on the back of an enormous turtle. (Or maybe that is what the conspiracy is about: to keep us ignorant of the turtle.)

>>>Where do I draw the line? Where do you?

>>I try to keep this principle in mind: the real world is bad >>enough.

>The real world is a lot badder than you know. "Enough" is just >wishful thinking.

Dream -- or, in your case, nightmare -- on, my friend. Meanwhile, while you and your friends are pursuing imaginary evils, the world's many real and terrible problems continue, ignored and unaddressed by you. To revive an old slogan: You're part of the problem, not part of the solution.

Jerry Clark

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