

The Faculty

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From the issue dated June 23, 2006

Professors of Paranoia?

Academics give a scholarly stamp to 9/11 conspiracy theories

By JOHN GRAVOIS

Chicago

Nearly five years have gone by since it happened. The trial of Zacarias Moussaoui is over. Construction of the Freedom Tower just began. Oliver Stone's movie about the attacks is due out in theaters soon. And colleges are offering degrees in homeland-security management. The post-9/11 era is barreling along.

And yet a whole subculture is still stuck at that first morning. They are playing and replaying the footage of the disaster, looking for clues that it was an "inside job." They feel sure the post-9/11 era is built on a lie.

In recent months, interest in September 11-conspiracy theories has surged. Since January, traffic to the major conspiracy Web sites has increased steadily. The number of blogs that mention "9/11" and "conspiracy" each day has climbed from a handful to over a hundred.

Why now?

Oddly enough, the answer lies with a soft-spoken physicist from Brigham Young University named Steven E. Jones, a devout Mormon and, until recently, a faithful supporter of George W. Bush.

Last November Mr. Jones posted a paper online advancing the hypothesis that the airplanes Americans saw crashing into the twin towers were not sufficient to cause their collapse, and that the towers had to have been brought down in a controlled demolition. Now he is the best hope of a movement that seeks to convince the rest of America that elements of the government are guilty of mass murder on their own soil.

His paper — written by an actual professor who works at an actual research university — has made him a celebrity in the conspiracy universe. He is now co-chairman of a group called the Scholars for 9/11 Truth, which includes about 50 professors — more in the humanities than in the sciences — from institutions like Clemson University, the University of Minnesota, and the University of Wisconsin.

But even as Mr. Jones's title and academic credentials give hope to the conspiracy theorists, his role in the movement may undermine those same credentials. What happens when science tries to function in a fringe crusade?

It was a gorgeous early June day in Chicago. Jetliners taking off from O'Hare were throwing clean, quick shadows on the ground. And a tall, biblically hairy man was weaving his way through the

crowded first floor of the airport Embassy Suites hotel wearing a black T-shirt with Steven Jones's picture on it.

On this Friday afternoon, 500 conspiracy theorists descended on the Embassy Suites for a conference called "9/11: Revealing the Truth — Reclaiming Our Future." It was the most substantial gathering of the "9/11 truth movement," as the conspiracy theorists call themselves, to date. And for Mr. Jones, it was a coming out of sorts.

The 57-year-old professor, who has a long history of research in the controversial field of cold fusion, had not ventured outside Utah since he first posted his paper about the collapses seven months before. He was by now a huge figure in the movement — he was slated to deliver a keynote address that night — but he had not actually met many people involved, not even his co-chairman of Scholars for 9/11 Truth. On the airport shuttle ride to the hotel, he was almost sheepish. "This is one of the more unusual conferences I've been to," he said. "I don't know quite what to expect."

He probably did not know to expect that two journalists from Finnish TV would accost him at the hotel before he made it to the front desk. Or that the conference would draw so heavily on references to *The Matrix*.

That night, the first keynote address was delivered by Alex Jones (no relation to Steven), a radio personality from Austin, Tex., who has developed a cult following by railing against the New World Order. He is a bellicose, boyish-looking man with a voice that makes him sound like a cross between a preacher and an announcer at a cage wrestling match.

"It energizes my soul at its very core to be here with so many like-minded people," he began, "defending the very soul of humanity against the parasitic controllers of this world government, who are orchestrating terror attacks as a *pretext* to sell us into even greater slavery."

"If they think they're gonna get away with declaring *war* on humanity," he thundered, "they've got another think coming!"

The audience was a mix of rangy, long-haired men with pale complexions, suntanned guys with broad arms and mustaches, women with teased bangs, serious-looking youngsters wearing backpacks and didactic T-shirts, and elderly people with dreadlocks. But everyone seemed to get behind what Alex Jones had just said. In fact, they went absolutely wild with cheers.

Alex Jones then plunged into a history of what he called "government-sponsored terror." In this category, he included the Reichstag fire of 1933, the sinking of the *USS Maine*, the Gulf of Tonkin incident, and a shadowy, never-executed 1962 plan called Operation Northwoods, in which the Joint Chiefs of Staff approved false terror attacks on American soil to provoke war with Cuba.

Then he got to matters closer at hand. He mentioned the Project for the New American Century, the think tank of prominent neoconservatives that wrote a report in 2000 called "Rebuilding America's Defenses," which includes a line that many 9/11 Truthers, as they call themselves, know by heart: "The process of transformation, even if it brings revolutionary change, is likely to be a long one, absent some catastrophic and catalyzing event — like a new Pearl Harbor."

To Alex Jones and to those in the audience, this was as good as finding the plans for September 11 in the neoconservatives' desk drawers.

"These people are psychopathic predators," Alex Jones rumbled. "They've got to be met *head on*!" The audience cheered like it was ready to tar and feather someone.

When Alex Jones finished, it was Steven Jones's turn to speak. The audience gave the professor a standing ovation before he had even said a word.

He stepped up to the podium in a tweed jacket. He had a kind face, a round nose, and hair somewhere between corn-silk blond and pale gray. He began to speak. His voice was reedy and slightly nasal. Someone yelled:

"Louder!"

One of the most common intuitive problems people have with conspiracy theories is that they require positing such complicated webs of secret actions. If the twin towers fell in a carefully orchestrated demolition shortly after being hit by planes, who set the charges? Who did the planning? And how could hundreds, if not thousands of people complicit in the murder of their own countrymen keep quiet? Usually, Occam's razor intervenes.

Another common problem with conspiracy theories is that they tend to impute cartoonish motives to "them" — the elites who operate in the shadows. The end result often feels like a heavily plotted movie whose characters do not ring true

Then there are other cognitive Do Not Enter signs: When history ceases to resemble a train of conflicts and ambiguities and becomes instead a series of disinformation campaigns, you sense that a basic self-correcting mechanism of thought has been disabled. A bridge is out, and paranoia yawns below.

Steven Jones's contribution to the September 11 conspiracy movement is that he avoids these problems — or at least holds them at bay — by just talking about physics.

Like many others in the movement, Mr. Jones sees a number of "red flags" in the way the buildings fell. Why did the towers collapse at speeds close to the rate of free fall? Why did they fall straight down, instead of toppling over? Why did World Trade Center 7, a 47-story high-rise that was never hit by a plane, suddenly collapse in the same fashion — fast and straight down — on the evening of September 11?

A rather hefty report by the National Institute of Standards and Technology explains how high-temperature fires started by jet fuel caused the buildings' outer columns to bow in, leading to the buildings' collapse. But the conspiracy theorists complain that the report stops short of showing computer models of the collapses.

Mr. Jones's hypothesis is that the buildings were taken down with preplanted thermite — a mixture of iron oxide and aluminum powder that burns hot enough to vaporize steel when it is ignited. Mr. Jones says that this hypothesis offers the most elegant explanation for the manner in which the buildings collapsed. He says it best explains various anecdotal accounts that molten metal remained pooled in the debris piles of the buildings for weeks. And he says it offers the only satisfying explanation for a weird sight captured in video footage of the south tower just before its collapse.

Near a corner of the south tower, at around 9:50 a.m., a cascade of a yellow-hot substance started spewing out of the building. The National Institute of Standards and Technology says in its report that the substance was most likely molten aluminum from the airplane fuselage. But Mr. Jones points out that aluminum near its melting point is a pale-silver color, not yellow. By his reckoning, then, that spew is a thermite reaction in plain sight.

Mr. Jones is petitioning Congress to release the raw data that went into the National Institute of Standards and Technology report. "If they just give us the data," he says, "we'll take it from there."

Soon after Mr. Jones posted his paper online, the physics department at Brigham Young moved to distance itself from his work. The department released a statement saying that it was "not convinced that his analyses and hypotheses have been submitted to relevant scientific venues that would ensure rigorous technical peer review." (Mr. Jones's paper has been peer-reviewed by two physicists and two other scholars for publication in a book called *9/11 and American Empire: Intellectuals Speak Out*, from Olive Branch Press.)

The Brigham Young college of engineering issued an even stronger statement on its Web site. "The structural engineering faculty," it read, "do not support the hypotheses of Professor Jones." However, his supporters complain, none of Mr. Jones's critics at Brigham Young have dealt with his points directly.

While there are a handful of Web sites that seek to debunk the claims of Mr. Jones and others in the movement, most mainstream scientists, in fact, have not seen fit to engage them.

"There's nothing to debunk," says Zdenek P. Bazant, a professor of civil and environmental engineering at Northwestern University and the author of the first peer-reviewed paper on the World Trade Center collapses.

"It's a non-issue," says Sivaraj Shyam-Sunder, a lead investigator for the National Institute of Standards and Technology's study of the collapses.

Ross B. Corotis, a professor of civil engineering at the University of Colorado at Boulder and a member of the editorial board at the journal *Structural Safety*, says that most engineers are pretty settled on what happened at the World Trade Center. "There's not really disagreement as to what happened for 99 percent of the details," he says.

Thomas W. Eagar is one scientist who has paid some attention to the demolition hypothesis — albeit grudgingly. A materials engineer at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Mr. Eagar wrote one of the early papers on the buildings' collapses, which later became the basis for a documentary on PBS. That marked him for scrutiny and attack from conspiracy theorists. For a time, he says, he was receiving one or two angry e-mail messages each week, many accusing him of being a government shill. When Mr. Jones's paper came out, the nasty messages increased to one or two per day.

So Mr. Eagar has become reluctantly familiar with Mr. Jones's hypothesis, and he is not impressed. For example, he says, the cascade of yellow-hot particles coming out of the south tower could be any number of things: a butane can igniting, sparks from an electrical arc, molten aluminum and water forming a hydrogen reaction — or, perhaps most likely, a spontaneous, completely accidental thermite reaction.

Occasionally, he says, given enough mingled surface area, molten aluminum and rust can react violently, à la thermite. Given that there probably was plenty of molten aluminum from the plane wreckage in that building, Mr. Eagar says, it is entirely possible that this is what happened.

Others have brought up this notion as well, so Mr. Jones has carried out experiments in his lab trying to get small quantities of molten aluminum to react with rust. He has not witnessed the reaction and so rules it out. But Mr. Eagar says this is just a red herring: Accidental thermite reactions are a well-known phenomenon, he says. It just takes a lot of exposed surface area for the reaction to start.

Still, Mr. Eagar does not care to respond formally to Mr. Jones or the conspiracy movement. "I don't see any point in engaging them," he says.

Hence, in the world of mainstream science, Mr. Jones's hypothesis is more or less dead on the vine. But

in the world of 9/11 Truth, it has seeded a whole garden of theories.

"Steven Jones! Who'd like Steven Jones!" hollered a man outside the main convention room as people exited Mr. Jones's speech. "Dripping metal! Steven Jones!"

He was selling DVD's of a speech Mr. Jones gave a few months earlier in Utah.

Another man walked by on the conference floor and pointed to a picture of the yellow-hot spew from the south tower. "There's your smoking gun," he said, to another conferencegoer.

The evening ended just after midnight, with the 9/11 Truthers chanting en masse in the conference hall, "We're mad as hell, and we're not gonna take it anymore."

"We have all kinds of weird conferences," said the concierge the next morning. "I mean, not to say this is weird. Last year we had one that was all tall people."

"For a while there, people who wanted to dismiss us could say, 'Well, it's just a bunch of crazies on the Internet,'" says David Ray Griffin, a well-known theologian and philosopher and a prominent member of Scholars for 9/11 Truth. "The very existence of the organization has added credibility," he said.

By many accounts, scholarly contributions to the movement began with Mr. Griffin, who retired from the Claremont School of Theology in 2004. About a year and a half after September 11, Mr. Griffin began reading books and Web sites arguing that the U.S. government was complicit in the attacks. Eventually, they won him over.

That left him feeling a peculiar sense of obligation, he says. The official story had all the voices of authority on its side, and the case for government complicity in the attacks had no real standing. "It was not reaching a really wide audience," he says.

So Mr. Griffin wrote his own book, trading on his authority as an academic. He called it *The New Pearl Harbor*. It was mostly just a synthesis of all the material he had read, tidied up by a philosopher's rhetorical skills.

When it was finished, he aggressively pursued blurbs for the book jacket — and eventually scored one from Howard Zinn, the radical professor emeritus of political science at Boston University. Mr. Zinn said the book was "the most persuasive argument I have seen for further investigation on the Bush administration's relationship to that historic and troubling event."

It went on to become one of the most successful books on the purported conspiracy.

"There's a big chasm between those who are even willing to entertain the hypothesis enough to look at the evidence and those who aren't," Mr. Griffin says. "The only way to overcome that is by appeal to authority."

"You can't just appeal in terms of straight argument," he says. "You've got to do something to break through, to get people to look at the evidence."

Now that the movement has progressed, and more voices of authority have joined, Mr. Griffin is more convinced than ever.

"I think now it's just irrefutable," he says. People who don't question the official story, he says, are "just

whistling in the dark."

James H. Fetzer, the co-chairman of Scholars for 9/11 Truth, retired last month from his post as a distinguished McKnight university professor of philosophy at the University of Minnesota at Duluth. He wanted to focus more on the movement. "Whether there's another critical-thinking course being taught at the University of Minnesota is relatively trivial," he says, "compared to this."

Mr. Fetzer, a voluble, impassioned man who often speaks in long paragraphs, is no stranger to conspiracy theory. Before September 11, he had a side career investigating the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. But the issues surrounding the Scholars for 9/11 Truth are far more acute, he thinks. In Mr. Fetzer's mind, the country is in a state of dire emergency.

Hence, it does not much bother Mr. Fetzer that outside scientists have largely refrained from tackling the group's arguments. "I don't think it's a problem," he says, "because we have so much competence and expertise among ourselves."

911myths.com, a Web site run by a software developer in England, is one of the few venues that offers a running scrutiny of the various claims and arguments coming out of the 9/11 Truth movement. Mr. Fetzer has heard of 911myths .com, but he has never visited the site.

"I have been dealing with disinformation and phony stories about the death of JFK for all these years. There's a huge amount of phoniness out there," he says. "You have to be very selective in how you approach these things."

"I can assure you the things I'm telling you about 9/11 have objective scientific status," he says. 911myths.com, he says, "is going to be built on either fabricated evidence, or disregard of the real evidence, or violations of the principles of scientific reasoning."

"They cannot be right," he says.

On the second afternoon of the conference, Mr. Fetzer gave a speech in one of the hotel salons to a standing-room-only crowd. It began like an introductory lecture in moral philosophy he might have given at the University of Minnesota. He discussed different theories for the origins of right and wrong — moral egoism, utilitarianism, deontological moral rights. Then he came to the emergency.

"The threat we face," he said, is "imminent and ominous." He recommended arming the citizenry.

During the question-and-answer session, an audience member asked whether there might be a way to capture a TV station, to get the word out about September 11. Mr. Fetzer upped the ante on the idea.

"Let me tell you, for years, I've been waiting for there to be a military coup to depose these traitors," he said from the podium.

"Yeah!" shouted some men in the audience.

"There actually was one weekend," Mr. Fetzer went on, "where I said to myself, my God, it's going to happen this weekend, and I'm going to wake up and they will have taken these guys off in chains."

His voice was building. "Listen to me," he said. "The degree of perfidy involved here is so great, that in the time of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides, frenzied mobs would have dragged these men out of their beds in the middle of the night and ripped them to *shreds!*"

"Yeah!" cried a chorus of voices in the audience. "Yeah!"

Amid the cheers and applause that swept the room, there was Steven Jones, sitting quietly in a chair against the wall. He had one leg crossed over the other, and he was looking around at the cheering audience with a vaguely uncomfortable smile on his face, holding his foot in his hands.

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Section: The Faculty

Volume 52, Issue 42, Page A10

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