

Conspiracy Theory



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Unless you have been in a coma or hiding under a rock you should have noticed the alarming prevalence of irrational conspiracy theories of every stripe; left and right, fiscal and social. Even if you have been seduced by one group of these theories or another, you have probably noticed that the *other* guy's conspiracy theories are *clearly* irrational. In 2009, 41% of Americans and 64% of Republicans didn't believe or weren't sure President Obama was born in the US. And 22% of all voters and 37% of Democrats either believed or questioned whether President Bush purposely allowed or arranged the 9/11 attacks in order to provide a pretext for war.¹ Both of these

preposterous theories continue to thrive along with many others. A hallmark of this phenomenon is that when confronted with evidence that such theories are wrong, their proponents often become even more committed to them. In this light, of course, it is impossible to discuss the real issues, much less resolve them.

The theory that explains this is *Cognitive Dissonance*, which is a fundamental concept in social psychology. Cognitive dissonance is a theory of human motivation which asserts that it is uncomfortable to hold contradictory cognitions in mind. When contradictions arise something has to give, and sometimes it is the facts that are discarded in favor of the fear. The value of the conspiracy theory is that it provides something apparently tangible to defend against in a complex environment that *feels* threatening. Better the devil you think you see than waiting for disaster in the dark.

I see this all the time in personal counseling, especially with couples. People who are afraid that their partner is unfaithful or dishonest will sometimes cling to those suspicions for dear life, often in the face of evidence to the contrary, and these suspicions are impossible to disprove. This is as poisonous for relationships as it is for democracy, and the only antidote is the light of reason in a safe environment. It doesn't always work but it is the only way out of the dark. Trust me. Call me.

1. Email DrJoe@Fergi.com for authoritative references to support this assertion or anything else I write.

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