The GREAT DERANGEMENT

A TERRIFYING TRUE STORY OF
WAR, POLITICS, AND RELIGION
AT THE TWILIGHT OF THE
AMERICAN EMPIRE

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Early on the morning of October 4, 2006, a friend of mine called, waking me up. When I hit the answer button on my cell, I could already hear him laughing.

“Dude,” he stammered out, “you’re being picketed!”

“What?”

“I just sent you the link,” he said. “It’s hilarious. The 9/11 protesters are picketing your office.”

I crawled out of bed and slid into my desk chair, opened the link. It was an entry from the Official Loose Change Blog, and it read as follows:

Edit: Just got this in from Luke . . . apparently this article by Rolling Stone might be the catalyst for some blowback . . .

Peaceful Picket @ Rolling Stone!
Protest Magazine’s 9/11 Cover-Up!
Wednesday, October 4th, 4–6pm
1290 Avenue of the Americas (52nd St.)
Recently, Rolling Stone Magazine featured yet another of those uninformed,
ington. Each time I ran into talk about the towers being mined or felled by remote-controlled planes, I dismissed it as an anomaly. In fact, I had a mild ethical crisis over it when I covered the Cindy Sheehan story; because I was against the war and generally sympathetic to Sheehan's cause, I didn't want to have to mention in print that her supporters were abuzz with nut-job conspiracy theories accusing Bush of masterminding 9/11.

But the sheer numbers were so overwhelming—in one group of twenty Sheehan protesters I polled, there were fourteen who subscribed to some version of the Bush-did-it conspiracy theory—that I had no choice but to mention it in the piece.

It was the first time in my life that I felt forced to paint a negative portrait of a peace movement. It genuinely freaked me out when I eventually started to see my article linked up on a host of right-wing Web sites, used as ammunition against the antiwar crowd.

I ran into the same phenomenon several times after that. In Dearborn, where I went to interview Arab Americans who had organized to protest the Israel-Lebanon war, I was shocked to listen to well-educated, pious Lebanese Americans regurgitating 9/11 conspiracy theories like they were hard news. In particular there was a pair of college-educated sisters, Renee and Rannya Abdul-habi—both seriously religious young women who dressed in the hijab—who seemed fairly well informed about America's Middle East policy but in outer space when it came to domestic politics. Renee, the older and more politically active sister, could not be budged from her conviction that Bush had bombed the Twin Towers and that no plane had hit the Pentagon.

What was interesting about the Dearborn trip was that when I arrived, virtually the entire community was abuzz about the arrests of a pair of young Arab American men, one of whom was unfortunately named Osama, who had been caught buying a large number of cell phones. The two boys, both of whom had been football stars at Dearborn High, had been immediately dubbed “terror suspects” in the big dailies and on television and tabbed the “Dearbornistan boy terrorists” by Detroit's Ann Coulter wannabe, Debbie Schlussel. The charges were dropped a few days after
the arrests, and no terror connection was ever uncovered, but the damage, as far as the community was concerned, had been done. To them, this was another example of mainstream media racism and deception, of the media carelessly seizing an opportunity to railroad an Arab without cause. It was pretty obvious to me that, because of incidents like this, the Arab American community in the Detroit area had long ago stopped paying attention to the “mainstream” news and understood most of what they saw on television to be an unbroken string of deceptions and manipulations.

But I only thought about that later on. At the time, I still thought the 9/11 conspiracy stuff was a weird aberration, your basic Clinton-era black-helicopter paranoia reconfigured to fit disaffected lefties of the terrorism age, so when I mentioned it in that 9/11 anniversary column, it was just to score a quick punchline.

But almost instantly after the column went up online, my mailbox started filling up with hate mail. And what hate mail! If there is a consistent characteristic of the 9/11 Truth Movement, it’s a kind of burning, defensive hypersensitivity, a powerful inclination to be instantly offended, which expresses itself in a tendency for its adherents to seem literally to leap out of their seats in anger even in e-mail form.

“Fuck you, you prick!” said one letter. “Left-gatekeeper cocksucker!” said another. “You’re the one who’s clinically insane,” said a third. “I can’t believe you call yourself a journalist.” Numerous complainants promised to kick my ass. Even a column I’d written celebrating the death of the pope hadn’t come close to inspiring this much invective.

About six days into this I called Jan Frel, my editor at AlterNet, and he mentioned, casually, that my 9/11 column was setting some kind of site record for comments. When I looked on the site I noticed that some of the comments touched on the actual subject I was writing about, but the vast majority were focused on that one “clinically insane” line. A sample:

Matt Taibbi, in denial or not, is misleading readers into believing the government’s fairy-tales concerning 9-11 and everything that has followed. He doesn’t ask “Cui bono?” He tries to make us believe that it was simply those
other terrible people with box cutters who perpetrated 9–11 on us—that despite increasing overwhelming evidence to the contrary—that we are since 9–11 the poor victims of people who hate us for our freedoms—yeah, right! What we collectively are—are suckers for the “big lie” Taibbi is pitching.

AlterNet consistently plays the role of left-wing gatekeeper by publishing articles such as this one. I wonder if AlterNet could do some real journalism by giving a fair shake to the 9/11 Truth Movement. I think AlterNet is becoming part of the problem, not the solution.

read “the new-pearl harbor” by david ray griffin and rent the film “network.” there’s no united states no middle east no germany no japan no russia no china no iran no vietnam etc etc there’s just one big global goverment a shadow government the international finanical government which executed a coup d etat on november 21, 1963 and orchestrated the attack on 9/11. its not a matter of winning any war its a matter of perpetual war.

The most insane conspiracy theory of all is to blame 9/11 on 19 Arab Muslims with box cutters led by a guy in a cave, outsmarting the the entire US Military, all of the US Spy Agencies and the US Government. As to the explosives that were most likely planted in buildings 1, 2 and 3 . . .

After scrolling through a couple hundred of these messages and looking through another hundred more or so in my mailbox, I lost my temper and tossed off a column thrashing the 9/11 “Truth” Movement. At the time I was, mistakenly, under the impression that the movement was an easy target. It seemed to me at the time that the only reason the 9/11 conspiracy theories were surviving on the Internet was that the movement’s leaders had carefully avoided articulating their theories in full. I really thought that all anyone had to do was put all of the movement claims together and the resulting summary would be so unbelievably ridiculous that people would actually be ashamed to defend them publicly. The 9/11 conspiracy theories seemed absurd on their face, the kind of thing that no person fa-
amiliar with the mundane everyday corruption of Washington would ever take seriously, and I thought, mistakenly, that they would go away as soon as someone bothered to point out in public how retarded they are.

So I wrote something along those lines. But the response was twice, three times as vociferous as before. My in-box was deluged with hate mail of the white-hot-rage/die-cock sucker genus, and then, eventually, word of the protest hit me.

At the appointed time I walked across town and grabbed a hot dog across the street from our offices on Sixth Avenue, a block up from Rockefeller Center. It was a strange scene. Among other things, it was a bad time for a protest; the sun was just starting to recede, and it was late on a workday smack dab in the middle of a workweek. The crowd of about ten scraggly-looking protesters carrying placards and wearing black "INVESTIGATE 9/11" T-shirts could easily have been cameramen or techies lugging equipment from the giant NBC complex next door, and the suit-and-tie crowd was waltzing past them. After Falun Gong, you need a pretty good act to stop traffic in downtown New York.

I finished my hot dog, walked across the street, and picked out a pair of middle-aged men handing out fliers. One was slightly pudgy with an untucked shirt and curlyish hair, and the other had a big bulbous nose and glasses and the body of Woody Allen. Introducing myself as the guy they were protesting, I told them that I understood they needed a couple of hours to give their protest maximum exposure, but that I would be very pleased to sit down and hear their concerns in a nearby diner when they were finished.

Weirdly, the two men seemed very happy to meet me, enthusiastically shaking my hand even after I identified myself. I repeated the address of the diner and started to walk away. Curly Hair asked me my name again.

"I'm Matt Taibbi," I said. "You know, the guy you're picketing."

"Oh," he said. "Okay. Well, thank you," he said, shaking my hand again. He seemed very pleased to make my acquaintance.

A few hours later, I slipped into the Morning Star Café just down the block from my apartment. There were about five or six protesters there, including Curly Hair, whose real name was Les Jamieson. He was from
the local chapter of 911Truth.org. They already had big plates of food in front of them and were munching happily. I sat at the end and ordered coffee.

It was awkward. I'm not sure exactly what was said at first, but I recall that after a stammering attempt on my part to start a discussion, all five or so protesters started speaking at once; I heard something about “heat levels” on my left and “video” on my right. Finally we settled down and Les started talking about some compelling 9/11 footage that some friend of his had, something about explosions, that the New York TV stations were “sitting on” and keeping from the public.

“Les,” I said, “how do you think that works? Do you think a news director for Channel 2 says to the people in the archive room, 'Make sure this is locked away and no one sees it?’”

“Well, clearly, they’re hiding it,” he said.

“Okay,” I said. “Do you think the guys from the TV stations are in communication with people in government, discussing what should and should not be aired?”

“All I’m saying is, they’ve got the footage, and they’re not showing it,” he said. “So there must be something going on.”

Murmurs of assent all around the table. I changed the subject, asking them if they could just forget about the explosions and all the rest of it for now and name one piece of concrete evidence linking the government to the crimes of 9/11. From there a longish conversation started that seemed fruitful and pleasant—the tone of the discussion was respectful from both sides, and Les and his friends were making their case, even though neither side was convincing the other of much. I suppose on some level I was regretting the description of these nice people as clinically insane, but I also remembered that that’s the thing about the Internet—there’s an awful lot of white-hot insanity out there that is written by people who seem quite normal once they look up from their computer screens. Eventually Les concluded that the best evidence he could think of was the Project for the New American Century report that claimed that a “new Pearl Harbor” would be needed to get the public behind our expansionist policies in the Middle East.
"But that's not evidence of anything," I said. "It's a self-evident statement. Anyone could have said that before 9/11. I could have said it."

"But it's right there out in the open," said Les. "They said it. How come people in the press can't take a lead like that and—"

"A lead?" I said. "How is that a lead? Where does it lead to?"

There was a skittish, late-thirtyish woman sitting next to me with a long dark ponytail, I'll call her Mary, who had kept trying to bring the JFK assassination into the discussion. Mary had also said that the military was controlling the media, that "all this Brad and Jennifer stuff" was part of a plan to hide the truth. She interjected now.

"I think what he's asking, Les," she said, "is what the actual evidence is linking the government to the attack. What you're talking about is circumstantial evidence."

"And not good circumstantial evidence," I said.

"Yes it is," she said. "It's good circumstantial evidence. I would say it's very strong."

Les frowned. "Well," he said, "if you're asking for concrete . . ."

Just then a lean, bearded figure, dressed in an army jacket, stormed through the front door of the diner and made a beeline straight for my side of the table. It was as if he'd studied my probable seating position beforehand; his entrance was executed with military precision. He pulled up a chair, spun it around to sit with the chair back facing forward, plopped down, and started barking at me in the frenzied, heavily accented English of a German film student sent to the emergency room for a meth overdose.

"Who zent you!" he screamed. "You left-gatekeeping scum! Who paid you off? Who made you do zis? You are working for zomebody! You . . ."

He kept screaming. I looked around the table in shock. The others looked down at their food.

"Hah! Who vas it! Answer me! Answer me now!"

"Jesus," I said. "Calm the fuck down!"

"I am not CALMING DOWN!" he screamed. "You will give me ANSWERS!"

I reared back in my chair. I didn't know it yet, but this was my in-
Introduction to Nico Haupt, the so-called mad genius of the 9/11 Truth Movement, a feverish blogger who is credited with inventing the famed movement acronyms LIHOP (let it happen on purpose) and MIHOP (made it happen on purpose) and seems to be a ubiquitous presence at any 9/11 Truth function on the East Coast. Haupt is the movement mascot, the future propaganda minister of the Truth Republic. I would later look up his blog entries and find them to be masterpieces of conspiratorial paranoia and unintentional comedy. Among other things, they contain the usual salutations to the surveillance teams who of course are watching him at all times:

Secretly on the payroll of some other weird intelligence? Not true, because I'm also constantly hungry. I still regret any kind of recruitments :)

A personal note to the NSA, who's a regular log-in guest on my sites:
I guess, you have to take the less comfortable way again and sniff my e-mails. You're still bastards for me, who betrayed this nation and the constitution. Shame on you and go to hell!

I also enjoyed his theories that someone "got to" Ed Asner, often listed as a 9/11 Truth supporter:

I always was and always will be a big fan of Ed Asner's movies and TV series, especially "rich man, poor man". Last week, I was a bit disappointed that Asner "caved in" and basically made a u-turn, by writing that 9/11 was based on negligence. I heard a different view a long while ago, even personally from him on the phone. Someone else might speculate, why this has happened now. Maybe someone threatened Asner with some infos of his past?

Haupt's blogs are a great running account of the life of a would-be revolutionary in the Internet age—sort of like a MySpace version of Che's Congo diary. His writings are full of little offhand personal tidbits left behind for his future biographers. "Or what about a romantic reason?"
he writes one day in 2004, apropos of nothing. "My girlfriend denied to marry me... Maybe it's frustration, depression or that I'm constantly broke." Later on, he confesses to bravery in the face of impending capture: "Maybe I'm scared that the Homeland Security will arrest me as a 'terrorist'? Not at all."

In any case, Haupt had better hope he's a speed addict, because if he isn't, there are very few reasonable excuses for his Raskolnikovian appearance. He spits wildly when he talks, and he can't allow anyone to respond to anything he says. In fact, my little meeting with the protesters basically broke up very shortly after his entrance, because Haupt wouldn't let me or anyone else shut him up for even ten seconds. After I said something about needing evidence to accuse the Bush administration of planning the attacks, Haupt flipped and began demanding evidence for absolutely everything that came out of everybody's mouth. When someone asked me how I could explain Bush's failure to prevent the attacks, I began by saying, "Well, this batch of Republicans are the most incompetent, corrupt..."

"Where's your evidence for zat?" Haupt screamed. "Show me evidence Bush eez corrupt!"

I sighed. "You think they knocked down the towers and you want me to prove to you that Bush and his crew are corrupt?"

"Ver eez your evidence, you bastard!" he shouted.

"Well, there was the Jack Abramoff thing—"

"Bullshit!" Haupt screamed. "No proof!"

This was really getting weird. "He was convicted," I said. "Is that good enough for you?"

"Lies!" he screamed.

"Nico," Les whispered. "He was convicted."

"The evidence! Give me the evidence!"

At another point, when I tried to tell him that the issue of my being "paid off" was moot, since I write my online column for free, he just kept screaming, not letting me get a word in edgewise.

"Now it eez my turn to talk! You will listen! Vat about zee war games?" he screamed.
I looked around the table with a pleading expression. “Hey, can you get this guy to shut up?” I asked.

“Nico, please . . . ,” said Les consolingly.
Nico ignored him and just kept screaming.
“You are a traitor to zee Constitution!” he bellowed, sticking a finger less than an inch from my nose. “An enemy of zee state!”

Hearing this German accuse me of being a traitor to the United States moved me immediately from stunned bemusement to genuine anger. “Stop spitting on me,” I said.

Haupt kept screaming. Bits of food matter—from some previous meal, apparently, since he had not eaten here—were showering my sport coat.

“Hey, stop spitting,” I said. “I’m not kidding.”

“I vill spit on you all I like!” he shouted. “Go ahead, stop me! You vant to hit me? Hit me! Go ahead, hit me! Zen I vil have a story! Go ahead, hit me!”

Haupt was about two inches from my face. The whole restaurant was now staring. The manager of the diner, who had threatened to call the police early on in the confrontation, was now reduced to watching out of mere curiosity; there was nothing left for him to do but let this scene play itself out. The shower of spittle continued to rain on me as a torrent of incomprehensible accusations flowed from somewhere in the middle of Haupt’s beard: “Controlled demolitions . . . war games . . . commission . . . traitors!” I couldn’t even make out the individual words. Every cell in my body ached to twist his head off and roll it down Columbus Avenue, but I knew this was a bad solution.

“Okay,” I said finally. “Let’s go outside. You’re not going to play nice, we’ll just have to do this.”

I went outside. Haupt, I could see through the window, stayed in his chair and smiled faintly, looking at the others for approval. For several minutes he refused to come out. I sighed. I was thirty-six years old, with an expensive dentist, and the prospect of getting into a fight with a deranged German conspiracy theorist on the corner of West Fifty-seventh Street suddenly seemed a more than unusually ridiculous way to spend an
afternoon. I was actually relieved when Haupt slipped out the door and slithered uptown, away from me.

After Haupt left, Les and his friends gathered their things and came outside. I walked with them to the subway.

"I'm sorry you had to see that," Les said. "He doesn't represent us."

Les was a nice guy. So were all his friends, actually. There was something very sad about the whole thing. On the way to the subway, we talked more about 9/11 Truth. I kept trying to explain my point, which was that there was no concrete evidence that the government had committed the attacks, and that if they wanted to be taken seriously, they had to come up with something solid. Moreover, instead of entertaining dozens of theories simultaneously, what real investigators do is follow the evidence and try to actually come up with a single theory of the crime. Narrow the field of view, not expand it. And part of that process involves asking why the alleged conspirators would do what the Truthers accuse them of doing. Why fly a plane into the towers and blow them up? Why crash a plane in the middle of Pennsylvania? Why shoot a missile at the Pentagon and say it was a plane? And so on.

"You're too concentrated on the why," said Les. "You have to concentrate on the what. And the what is a controlled demolition and a plane shot down in Pennsylvania."

"But why would they shoot down that plane in Pennsylvania?" I asked. "What does that do for them?"

Another of Les's friends, a long-haired guy named Mike, explained that the Shanksville plane, which was originally intended to hit the White House, had been delayed on the ground forty minutes by air traffic control. After the delay, he said, it would have been too obvious if they had just gone on and let it hit the White House. "That would have been just too unbelievable," he said. "No one would have believed they wouldn't have scrambled their air defenses for that long. So maybe they just shot the plane down to cover their mistake."
I didn't know where to start with that one. "Wait a minute," I said. "Are you saying that they had control of the airline and the air force, but not air traffic control? They could control every step of the process, but they couldn't keep air traffic control from delaying them forty minutes?"

"Actually," said a third of Les's friends, "if you read the transcripts, the people who come out looking the cleanest are the air traffic controllers."

I sighed. "But—okay, never mind."

"You'll see," Mike said. "I know a lot of people who started out like you. But sooner or later, they come around to the truth."

I smiled and said nothing. A few minutes later we shook hands and they got on the subway, headed downtown.

**How many lies are too many?** How much bullshit is the human organism designed to tolerate before it starts to malfunction? Is there a breaking point?

Mainstream American society has never been designed to confront difficult or dangerous truths. In fact, our mass media has corrupted the idea of objective truth so badly in the past five or six decades that it is now hard to tell when anyone is being serious about anything—the news, the movies, commercials, anything.

On the night after the diner incident I was watching television when I realized that this sort of thing was probably predictable. I was watching a "Can you hear me now?" Verizon commercial that featured a phony competitor to Verizon, with its own "Can you hear me now?" guy look-alike and a fake "support team" of cardboard figurines. My reaction to the commercial was a desire to decapitate everyone on-screen with a chainsaw—the healthy reaction, I think, to an intentional effort to dump obnoxious automated bullshit into my living room. But who has the energy to keep chainsawing all those heads off? How many lies can you fight off in a lifetime? Do they eventually creep into your head and spread the infection?

We probably took our first step into the danger zone back in the eight-
ies with the notorious Joe Isuzu commercials, which were a clever attempt by Madison Avenue to capitalize on the American population's growing awareness that the claims of most television advertisements were transparent bullshit.

The Isuzu ads were a stroke of genius. Just when America was starting to figure out that there never really were four out of five real dentists who recommended anything, along comes Joe Isuzu, this parody of a mercury-tongued pitchman who comes on TV with a wildly overdone serpentine smile, claiming that an Isuzu truck could hold "every book in the Library of Congress" or had "more seats than the Astrodome." Isuzu was scoring honesty points, but the way they did it was by lying openly. The ads were a huge hit and the irony age was officially born.

The weird thing was that the new post-Isuzu ironic ads coexisted with ads of the same-old-bullshit genre. You had Joe Isuzu talking about using his trucks to haul two-thousand-pound cheeseburgers alongside cola ads that showed ordinary people looking like they were about to have huge heaving orgasms at the sight of a cold Coke, or be magically transformed into swimwear models after a couple of Diet Pepsis. You had open lies that were celebrated as such, veiled lies meant to be taken seriously, and then the ads would end and the news would come on and you would be presented with President Ronald Reagan—as skilled and telegenic a liar as politics has ever seen, Joe Isuzu's perfect Dostoyevskian double—getting up on TV and on the one hand lying through his teeth about Iran-Contra, and then on the other hand comparing Daniel Ortega to "that fellow from Isuzu."

Somehow, ordinary people were supposed to keep track of all this, make their own sense of it. Decades after Watergate, Vietnam, and the Kennedy assassination, Americans were forced to rummage for objective reality in a sea of the most confusing and diabolical web of bullshit ever created by human minds—a false media tableau created mainly as a medium to sell products, a medium in which even the content of the "news" was affected by commercial considerations. I'll leave it to someone else to break down all the different species of lies that by the early twenty-first-century Ameri-
cans swallowed as a matter of routine—the preposterous laugh tracks in sitcoms, the parade of perfect-looking models used to sell products to the obese, the endless soap operas about the rich and the beautiful cruising the OC in Testarossas, marketed to a country in which 10 percent of the population lacks enough to eat.

It all got to be too much. Our political campaigns were reduced to an absurd joke, hollow image contests in which adult political commentators worried publicly about which candidate broke a sweat or looked at his watch during debates. In the late Clinton years government ground to a halt for almost two years in an utterly ridiculous and interminable national debate over a blowjob. The national press then stood by and did nothing while the country elected to the most powerful office on earth a man barely capable of reading—and if you ask me it was that set of circumstances, the outrageous presidential election of 2000 between a dingbat and a bore that was sold to the American people as a heroic clash of serious and qualified ideological opposites, that more than anything trained the population to dismiss as unserious anything the national media subsequently had to say about 9/11.

Thinking back now about 9/11—what were people supposed to think? It took about ten minutes after the towers fell for the lies to start. Well, actually it was about ten days. It was around then, on September 20, from the U.S. Capitol, that President Bush addressed the nation and offered this famous tidbit:

Americans are asking, why do they hate us? They hate what we see right here in this chamber—a democratically elected government. Their leaders are self-appointed. They hate our freedoms—our freedom of religion, our freedom of speech, our freedom to vote and assemble and disagree with each other.

Bush’s famous explanation for 9/11 was a new low in American politics. It was a lie, obviously, but it wasn’t even a good lie. We were watching, live, the last stage of a fifty-year decline in the performance standards of the White House’s propaganda professionals. Once upon a time, in the
days of FDR and Truman and Ike, the president was like a cross between Superman and God, the descendant of George Washington, who could not lie. Then Kennedy was shot and the Warren Commission came along (bringing with it a whole cottage industry of Kennedy mudslinging) and we learned that if the president was not a liar exactly, he was sure getting a lot of pussy that he never told us about. Then came Nixon and Watergate, and by the mid-seventies America learned to check its silverware case every time the president finished giving a televised speech. Nixon’s fall coincided with the CIA hearings and the awful revelations of all manner of crazed government behavior—exploding cigars for Castro, foot powder planted by the CIA to make the dictator’s beard fall out. Northwoods. Gulf of Tonkin. By the middle of the decade, America knew: not only was its president a crook, but its government was a criminal enterprise, a potential suspect in any heinous unsolved crime. Who killed JFK, MLK, Malcolm X? Who conspired to assassinate Salvador Allende? You knew who the first suspect was.

This was too much for people to handle. After Carter, with his dreary, not-always-convincing attempts at honesty, America decided that even if it knew its president was a fraud, it could live with him, so long as he was a skilled fraud. To the rescue came Ronald Reagan, whose virtue was that he told lies that were enjoyable, uplifting. Reagan was the first president who was rewarded at the polls for the quality of his fictions. He shared this trait with Bill Clinton, a bullshitter of Shakespearean dimensions who carried America all the way through the nineties with an оргiastic smile on his face. We knew Clinton was a liar and a pussy-killer, but we didn’t mind. Two-hundred-fifty-odd years after “I cannot tell a lie,” Clinton’s reign defined presidential truth as a statement that was legally defensible in theory and also vetted by the best and most expensive lawyers on the planet, i.e., “I did not have sex with that woman.”

So America went from being a place where the president set the standard for truth and forthrightness to being a place where the president was expected to lie always, and at all times. But the one thing throughout this period that Americans could always depend on, even after Nixon and the collapse of public faith in the president’s morals, was that the lies the
American president told would always be the very best lies that science, computerized research, and Washington’s most devious spooks could produce. Our president may lie, but he will lie effectively and spectacularly, with all the epic stagecraft and lighting and special effects available to the White House publicity apparatus. He is never a hack, never a half-assed, off-the-cuff, squirming, my-dog-ate-my-homework sort of liar. Or at least he wasn’t until George W. Bush came around.

“They hate our freedoms” was possibly the dumbest, most insulting piece of bullshit ever to escape the lips of an American president. As an explanation for the appalling tragedy of 9/11, which was the culmination of decades of escalating tension between the Arab world and the West, it was insufficient even as a calculated effort to snow an uneducated public—it was too stupid even to hold up as that. And yet when he said it, Bush was not savaged by the mainstream media for blowing off the biggest security question of our time. The Washington press corps did not line up to pelt him with mushy pineapples for insulting their intelligence. Instead, he was cheered as a hero by members of both parties and virtually all the country’s commercial media, which engaged in a kind of frantic race to see who could more enthusiastically compare Bush’s speechmaking to that of Winston Churchill. Worse still, the mainstream media followed Bush’s lead by coming up with its own, more verbose, versions of Bush’s analysis.

“They hate our freedoms” was only one of a number of preposterous lies mainstream society was expected to embrace after 9/11. The Iraq invasion and the reasons for it were only the most obvious. By 2003 or 2004 any American with even half a brain could only assess the performance of his government via a careful weighing of its various lies and contradictions. An educated person understood that the weapons of mass destruction (WMD) business was a canard and that there had to be some other reason for the invasion of Iraq; indeed, even in the weeks before the war began, commentators across the country were already judging (and in some cases supporting) the war plan based entirely on what
they guessed the real reasons for the invasion were. A classic example
was Tom Friedman of the New York Times, who even as he boosted the
war never took the WMD business seriously, imagining instead that Iraq
had always been a kind of geopolitical Hail Mary, designed to transform
the region.

But President Bush was a man on a mission. He had been convinced
by a tiny group of advisers that throwing “the long bomb”—attempting
to transform the most dangerous Arab state—is a geopolitical game-
changer.

It is not a good sign when even your supporters don’t even bother to
take your cover story seriously. And yet that was the position the Bush
administration was in by 2003–4. No one except his most dug-in Repub-
lican loyalists took anything his people said or did at face value. When the
administration submitted its “Clear Skies” plan to Congress, who among
us didn’t automatically know that it was a giveaway to polluters? Or that
“Healthy Forests” was somehow going to result in more trees being cut
down? America by the early years of this century was a confusing kalei-
doscope of transparent, invidious bullshit, a place where politicians hired
consultants to teach them to “straight talk,” where debates were decided
by inadvertent coughs and smiles and elections were resolved via compet-
ing smear campaigns, and where network news programs—subsidized by
advertisements for bogus alchemist potions like Enzyte that supposedly
made your dick grow by magic—could feature as a lead story newly re-
leased photos of the Tom Cruise love child, at a time when young Ameri-
can men and women were dying every day in the deserts of the Middle
East.

The message of all of this was that Americans were now supposed to
make their own sense of the world. There was no dependable authority
left to turn to, no life raft in the increasingly perilous informational sea.
This coincided with an age when Americans now needed to understand
more of the world than ever before. A factory worker in suburban Ohio
now needed to understand the cultures of places like Bangalore and Be-
ing if he wanted to know why he’d lost his job. Which, incidentally, he
probably had. Now broke, or under severe financial pressure, with no community leaders, no community, no news he can trust, Joe American has to turn on the Internet and tell himself a story that makes sense to him.

What story is he going to tell?