Categories: World

Bin Laden: Dead or alive?

Rumours about bin Laden are only the latest in a toxic new wave of conspiracy theories

by Nicholas Kohler with Erica Alini on Tuesday, May 17, 2011 10:05am - 5 Comments

AFP/Getty Images

On Good Friday in 1865, Abraham Lincoln and his wife, Mary, appeared at Ford's Theatre in Washington to watch *Our American Cousin*, a contemporary farce. During the play, John Wilkes Booth, a popular Shakespearian actor and Confederate sympathizer, made his way to the president's box with a .44-calibre derringer and fired a single

shot into the back of his head. Booth then leapt down onto the stage and is said to have cried: "*Sic semper tyrannis*"—"Thus always to tyrants!" Somehow, amid the subsequent commotion, Booth escaped, leading authorities on a 12-day chase that ended with his being locked in a burning barn in Virginia.

The men carrying Lincoln from the theatre hadn't yet laid him down in the boarding house across the street, where he died the next day, before the conspiracy theories surrounding his shooting, Booth's part in it, and the shadowy forces that might really lie behind the plot began proliferating. These narratives began with the conspiracy led by Booth to kill Lincoln in the days following the Confederate side's surrender to the Union and the end of the Civil War, but quickly became more baroque.

By 1937, when amateur historian Otto Eisenschiml published his tract on the assassination—*Why Was Lincoln Murdered?*—Booth had become just a patsy to Edwin Stanton, Lincoln's steely secretary of war. In the one figure of the scheming Stanton, Eisenschiml sewed together all the accidents and curiosities of Lincoln's shooting into one, cohesive plan. The book marshalled arguments that cast Stanton as an individual of such capacity and ambition that he could first manufacture a situation in which Lincoln was left unguarded, engineered Booth's improbable getaway, then orchestrated a means of spiriting his fellow conspirators away, their heads hooded, to isolated prisons where they could never report on Stanton's role in the plot. The book was a bestseller.

The U.S. has long been prone to accepting such tales, beginning at least as early as the witch hunters of 17th-century Salem. Scores of similar fantasies followed, most now long forgotten. In the 19th century, Samuel Morse, the inventor of Morse code, set about proving that the Hapsburgs were poised to install an Austrian prince as emperor in Washington, part of a dastardly Catholic plot. The Cold War later fomented hysteria around an insidious Red menace that catapulted senator Joseph McCarthy to a position of enormous influence at the same time as it created a new wave of concern that UFOs heralded a coming alien invasion.

All the stories, as conspiracy theories are wont to do, saw society's evils stemming from one overarching plot so bad and so amorphous that it could encompass all of misery and each of its causes—a force so perfect that it can never make mistakes and so fear-inducing that it silences all its participants forever.

Fun stuff. Yet there is evidence that, taken as a genre, American conspiracy theories have changed—that they are on the rise and increasingly bubbling up into the U.S. mainstream, where they are interrupting the fragile workings of the country's body politic. No longer benign distractions or pleasant parlour games—Elvis is alive, Paul McCartney dead, Kurt Cobain the victim of murder; the government arranged to shoot a fake moon landing on a Hollywood sound stage, Lady Di faked her own demise and is now living happily in South Carolina—conspiracy theories are now promoting a corrosive new distrust of authority and warping the national debate.

A whole cocktail of catalysts has triggered this transformation, chief among them the trauma of the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, the rise of the Internet and near-collapse of traditional news media, and concern among Americans over the U.S.'s waning influence in the world and Chinese ascendancy. Leaving aside the Muslim world, where conspiracist accounts of current events are often written as fact in newspapers, polls over the last decade have tracked a stubborn willingness in the U.S., as well as elsewhere in the West, to believe the strangest propositions.

In 2006, a Scripps Howard-Ohio University survey showed that a third of Americans suspected federal U.S. officials either helped in the 9/11 attacks or did nothing to stop them—part of a plan developed by elements within the U.S. government to send troops into the Middle East. And even in this country, according to an Angus Reid poll conducted around the 2008 anniversary of 9/11, as many as 39 per cent of Canadians either disagreed that al-Qaeda carried out the Sept. 11 attacks, or weren't sure. About a third believed the U.S. government allowed the attacks, and 16 per cent were convinced that it planned and executed the 9/11 catastrophe.

Then, just last week, with the announcement by U.S. President Barack Obama that Navy SEAL commandos had assassinated Osama bin Laden, the world witnessed the birth of yet another set of conspiracist fantasies—variations of which said that bin Laden is either still alive, has been dead for a decade, or never existed at all. The speculation prompted Seth Meyers, news anchor on *Saturday Night Live*'s "Weekend Update" segment, to quip that Obama "will go down in history as the first black person ever to have to prove that he killed someone." Still, the lack of transparency around the assassination has opened the door to bizarre accounts and real doubt, even in Canada, where, according to an exclusive survey conducted for *Maclean's*, nearly one in five question the official U.S. government narrative detailing bin Laden's death. For many, Obama does have to prove that his

administration killed a man—just the latest indication that conspiracy theories are now hurting the U.S.

Many of today's conspiracy theories remain animated by suspicions dating back to pre-modern Europe, from the Knights Templar, a military order that emerged in the Crusades, to Enlightenment-era secret societies like the Illuminati and Freemasons, all of which still hold an allure that's proven lucrative to *Da Vinci Code* novelist Dan Brown. Meanwhile, real conspiracies like the Bolshevik revolution that led to the Soviet Union have helped shape history. In the U.S., Republican zealots working in association with the Committee for the Re-Election of the President and caught breaking into the Democratic National Committee's offices in the Watergate Hotel eventually led to the resignation of president Richard Nixon.

More rarely—and to uncommonly tragic effect—conspiracy theories themselves have altered history. The Protocols of the Elders of Zion, an anti-Semitic forgery manufactured at the turn of the last century that purports to outline Jewish plans for world domination, helped set the conditions for Adolf Hitler's rise to power in pre-Second World War Germany, and therefore laid the ground for the Holocaust.

Yet there is a peculiarly American species of conspiracist thought that turns the lens away from the *other*—from the anti-Semitic caricature, Catholic plots or the aerial trajectories of UFOs—and toward the institutions of the U.S. itself. "Our distrust of concentrations of power, both public power in the government and private power from concentrations of wealth, is in some ways a sort of American birthright," says Mark Fenster, author of *Conspiracy Theories: Secrecy and Power in American Culture.*

Since the 1963 assassination of John F. Kennedy, followed five years later by the slayings of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Robert Kennedy, American conspiracy theorists have scrutinized their own country and uncovered a hidden hierarchy of puppeteers whom they charge with controlling world events—"a mystery wrapped in a riddle inside an enigma," says David Ferrie, a key Kennedy conspiracy figure played by the excitable Joe Pesci in Oliver Stone's 1991 conspiracist epic, *JFK*.

That impulse has, since Sept. 11, 2001, only accelerated, reaching its apotheosis in theories from both the left and right laying the blame for the terrorist attacks on shadowy elements within the U.S. government. Truthers, as proponents of these theories are commonly called, argue 9/11 was a so-called "false flag" operation, a self-inflicted "inside job" engineered by former George W. Bush vice-president Dick Cheney along with factions inside the CIA who sought a mandate to rejig the Middle East and Central Asia.

Supporters of these theories like to refer to Operation Northwoods, a 1962 memo prepared for president Kennedy that offered a series of Potemkin "false flag" scenarios that would give the U.S. an excuse to invade Cuba—a new Pearl Harbor, in other words. "We could sink a boatload of Cubans en route to Florida (real or simulated)," reads one of the chilling scenarios that document proposes.

Over the past decade, the truther movement has laid the ground for other made-in-America conspiracy theories, in particular the birthers, who believe Obama was born either in his father's native Kenya or in Indonesia and is therefore ineligible to hold the office of president. So unshakable did this movement become that, late last month, Obama released a long-form birth certificate indicating he was, in fact, born in Hawaii.

Now the so-called "deathers" are skeptical of the Obama administration's description of bin Laden's assassination. That official account says that on May 1, elite Navy SEAL Team 6 commandos stole across the Pakistani border from Afghanistan and, in a daring raid, shot bin Laden twice in his compound in Abbottabad, a garrison town not far from Islamabad that is home to Pakistan's major military academy. The SEALs then transported bin Laden's body to the aircraft carrier Carl Vinson, waiting in the north Arabian Sea, where it underwent DNA testing, was washed, then given a traditional Islamic burial, at sea.

The conspiracy theorists find all this laughable. Bin Laden, many of them say, died a decade ago, either of a kidney ailment or from fatal injury. Alex Jones, a Texas radio host and influential conspiracy theorist, told his listeners last week that a White House official admitted privately to him in 2002 that bin Laden had been killed and "frozen—literally frozen—and that he would be rolled out in the future at some date" as a propaganda tool. "That means the guy they killed and threw in the ocean must have either been a ghost, or one of bin Laden's many reported doubles," wrote Jones's fellow traveller, Kevin Barrett, on his blog within hours of Obama's announcement.

Competing theorists, some of whom congregate online in places like the “Osama bin Laden NOT DEAD” Facebook group, say bin Laden was a CIA agent who has merely retired after a job well done. Others claim that he never existed at all, and that the al-Qaeda leader’s famed video statements starred an L.A. actor playing the part of arch-villain somewhere in the Hollywood hills.

Skeptics of Obama’s version of events point specifically to the number of changes anonymous administration officials have made to the story since Obama’s official announcement. Early reports, for example, said he died armed and in a fury of bullets. Later iterations had him without a weapon, and using a woman as a human shield, until finally he was unarmed, without a human shield, but nevertheless still somehow resisting the Americans.

Some also question the disposal of his body at sea so soon after the raid, and argue that the results of DNA testing said to have been conducted on the body were achieved too speedily. Others wonder at Obama’s refusal to make public photographs of the corpse, pointing out that the Bush administration quickly released photographs of Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein’s dead sons in 2003. Others still ask why the Obama administration did not spare bin Laden, an invaluable prisoner. “If captured alive, there is little doubt that bin Laden would have been forcefully coerced into revealing a treasure trove of information regarding his international network,” Canadian war and military reporter Scott Taylor wrote in a recent column. “Do I believe bin Laden is dead?” he asked. “Yes. Do I believe the White House’s version of events? Um, which one?”

Indeed, many find it convenient the assassination took place so soon after Obama released his long-form birth certificate, which quieted suspicions he was born outside the U.S., and so soon before the 2012 presidential race (indeed, polling numbers in the days after Obama’s bin Laden announcement saw his popularity soar). It didn’t help any that some news outlets were duped into publishing phony photographs of the body early last week.

Such is the advanced state of American conspiracism that Obama likely could not have done anything to head off deatherist speculation.

The pictures? Last week’s fakes suggest even genuine photographs would have been rejected as doctored, and held up as insults requiring retribution by others (reports said on Tuesday that the CIA planned to make photographs available to some U.S. senators). A shifting narrative, whether due to the “fog of war” or enthusiastic officials made rash by their participation in a moment of history, isn’t evidence of fabrication but to be expected. Had bin Laden been captured alive, the U.S. would have been inviting supporters to kidnap and hold innocents for ransom in exchange for their captain. A burial at sea sidesteps the questions of who would take bin Laden’s body and how to avoid creating a shrine to a jihadist hero.

Make these arguments to any committed conspiracist and you will confront the final truth about this sort of speculation—you cannot argue against a negative proposition.

What is worrying about the spread of these theories is how mainstream they threaten to become. Though they may represent a fringe, Americans who harbour this brand of skepticism aren’t alone. According to a survey conducted for Maclean’s by Innovative Research Group, which runs the Canada 20/20 panel, a surprising number of Canadians do not believe the U.S. government’s official version of events. Though 83 per cent of respondents agreed with the statement that bin Laden is “definitely dead,” 16 per cent said he “may be dead or alive, I am not certain,” and one per cent believe that bin Laden is “still alive.”

Greg Lyle, managing director of Innovative Research Group, says those numbers constitute “quite a vote of confidence” in the official American narrative. “It’s a lot more trust than we’re used to. You have to remember that a few years ago, we asked the question, ‘Who’s a bigger force for evil in the world, Osama bin Laden or George W. Bush, and one in five Canadians said George W. Bush,” Lyle notes. “Imagine if George Bush had said, ‘I’ve killed Osama bin Laden and I’m not going to show anyone the body and I’m not going to show any pictures’—you would not find 83 per cent of Canadians agreeing that he’s really dead.” (Interestingly, half of respondents said bin Laden’s death would have no impact on the war on terror, with 15 per cent fearful it would lead to still more attacks in the future.)

Still, the survey picks out vast pools of skepticism even in Canada about what Western democracies and their alleged watchdog news outlets tell people about the events shaping their world. For a while, one skeptic in this country appeared to be seasoned political veteran Thomas Mulcair, the NDP deputy leader, who just days after his party’s historic second-place election achievement responded to CBC television host Evan Solomon’s questions

about the bin Laden photographs by saying: “I don’t think, from what I’ve heard, those pictures exist.” (Mulcair later blamed his comments on post-election fatigue and called Solomon’s question, which came after discussions about the election, a “complete non sequitur.”)

Such were the idiosyncrasies of the official assassination story that as mainstream a journalist as *Wall Street Journal* columnist Peggy Noonan, in a piece headlined, “Show the proof, Mr. President,” last weekend argued that Obama should endeavour to convince skeptics. “His refusal to release more evidence that Osama is dead is allowing a great story to dissolve into a mystery,” Noonan wrote. “He is letting a triumph turn into a conspiracy theory.” Then there were the blog comments written by anti-war protester Cindy Sheehan, whose son died in the Iraq conflict and whose celebrity stems from her lengthy protest outside George W. Bush’s Crawford, Texas, ranch. In Sheehan’s estimation, Obama is no better than Bush. “It’s not that I don’t believe Obama about Osama because he’s Obama, I don’t believe him because he is just one in a long line of butt-naked Emperors,” she wrote.

Meanwhile, in a local television interview, New Hampshire state Rep. Lynne Blankenbeker, a Republican and veteran of the first Gulf War, voiced her doubts about the assassination, saying, “I was obviously very excited by the possibility that Osama bin Laden is no longer around,” but added, “as a military person I have received nothing from my superior officers…Which makes me take pause—it seriously makes me take pause.”

For chroniclers of U.S. conspiracism, these sorts of remarks point to a troubling crisis of trust in the U.S. “The rise of conspiracism has had a toxic affect on American society, and in particular the intellectual marketplace,” says Jonathan Kay, an editor and columnist at the *National Post* whose book, *Among the Truthers: A Journey Through America’s Growing Conspiracist Underground*, is out next week. Kay compares Obama’s handling of the bin Laden assassination to his slow-to-react approach to the birthers. “For two years Obama said, ‘This is ridiculous, I’m not going to give in to these folks,’ ” says Kay. Indeed, there is speculation Obama sought not to quash the debate too quickly because “it made the Republicans look like such idiots,” Kay adds.

Then business tycoon and reality television star Donald Trump made noises about getting into next year’s presidential race, likely on the Republican ticket, and was able to whip up quick support by exploiting those birthplace doubts. “It actually became a mainstream vote-moving phenomenon,” says Kay. “I see nothing wrong with a society where people watch *The X-Files*, read conspiracy theory books and go to conspiracy theory movies,” Kay says. “The question is, when does that interest and lurid fascination affect the functioning of a society? I would say it affects the functioning of society when it affects how elections are decided—when it affects how public debates are conducted.” In this there is no doubt: in the U.S., that is just what’s happening.

Tags: Abraham Lincoln, birthers, conspiracy theories, JFK, Obama, Osama bin Laden, truthers

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