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Critical Thinking ~~and~~ Essay

The first article to be examined is "When 9/11 Conspiracy Theories Go Bad," by David Corn. What is Corn trying to do in his first paragraph? "Please stop sending me those emails." Here Corn might be trying to hook the attention of the reader right away. Maybe the rest of his argument is dry, so he must intrigue you in the beginning. Obviously he refers to "those emails" before we know what he is talking about, instead of doing it the other way around, which would be more logical. However, this tactic does serve a purpose, which is to get us to ask the question "What emails?" It forces us to want to read on, whereas if he had written it in logical order, describing a type of email he receives regularly and then asking that those who send them need to stop, the reader could have lost interest in the description of the emails and not read on to see where the article was going. "You know who you are." He directly speaks to the audience, and implies that his target audience is only those who have indeed written him these emails, the subject of which he still has not revealed to us. It's apparent, though, that he must be writing the article for more than just those people. Perhaps he wants to reach anyone who has been thinking about the issue, or people who have been having even slight doubts as to the cause of 9/11. "And you know what emails I mean." Again he implies that the reader should already know what is going on. Perhaps we should, based on the title, the only part of the paper so far to have any substance. It says "When 9/11 Conspiracy Theories Go Bad." So we know the subject of the emails is probably 9/11 conspiracy theories, and for this reason Corn finds it unnecessary to restate the obvious. He is assuming a baseline intelligence level in his audience then, to be able to extrapolate from the title what the emails are about. At least this is the case at first, because he then goes on to "spell it out" for us. So, on the other hand, maybe he is at the beginning truly talking directly to those who *have* written those emails, and then he "let's the rest of the audience

in on it" by spelling out the content of the emails. It's a rather creative way to get things started.

Corn then goes on to give anecdotal examples of some emails he has received. This is an argument from anecdote, although so far the anecdote doesn't clearly point to the thesis of the argument. In fact, the series of anecdotal arguments in the second paragraph can easily have been put in to support the conspiracy theories. However by the title it is likely that this is not the case. Corn must have put these in the paper as a sarcastic gesture, or to show their ridiculousness later on. The arguments from anecdote do serve to give Corn more credibility, because now there are cement examples of these emails he's been referring to, showing that he is not just making these things up in an attempt to antagonize the conspiracy theorists.

In the next paragraph, he clearly states the thesis of the conspiracy theorists argument. He still has not clearly stated his thesis, though. There must be a reason for putting the opposing idea first. Perhaps because in order to dissect and argue against his opponents, we need to know the opponents view first in order to avoid becoming confused. Corn next accommodates the audience by admitting that the government "engage[s] in brutal, murderous skullduggery from time to time." Now that the audience trusts Corn a bit more, he finally hits us with his overt thesis: that "the notion that the U.S. government either detected the attacks but allowed them to occur, or, worse, conspired to kill thousands of Americans to launch a war-for-oil in Afghanistan is absurd." For the rest of the article Corn completely removes any sense of accommodation and courageously goes head to head with the audience, trying to change our opinion quite forcefully. It is likely that the remainder of the argument will therefore be based on logical arguments, because that is the only way to argue to someone and be their "enemy" at the same time. Most people realize that you can't argue with concrete, logical derivations from a collection of data, even if they do hate you. He now calls the emails tripe and crap, and says that it is not even

worthy of a response, but because it has made him so mad he will give one anyway. These are assertions, because they don't come from any type of evidence, but only from the opinion of Corn. Ethos is not being used, nor is pathos. He will present an argument from facts.

Corn attacks the theory that Osama Bin Laden had treatment in an American hospital in Dubai by stating that there is no way to verify or disprove it. He basically discards that story as *not important enough to deal with*. He attempts to disprove the idea that a man jailed in Canada claimed to be a former U.S. intelligence officer and to have passed a warning of the attack to the jail guards by discrediting the man, revealing that he was in jail for credit card fraud. If he wasn't trustworthy with finances, his word must not be worth anything either. This is an argument from association. Also, he says that the story was not corroborated by the guards, only by the man himself. He then gives an argument from authority, saying that the judge deemed that there is no evidence to support his claim. When he says "would U.S. officials be capable of such a foul deed," he is using the loaded word "foul," which is meant to give the statement more power, as far as impacting the impression of the reader goes. Then he uses an argument from definition by defining the word he used in the question, "capable." He defines "capable" as "able to pull it off and willing to do so." This qualifies his argument by constraining it to being true only if this definition of capable is assumed to be true. He is taking away the ability of the audience to define capable in their own way, and increases the probability that the audience will end up agreeing with him. It is easier to argue a point successfully when less is left open to interpretation.

Corn then uses an argument from authority when he says that the U.S. spies and special agents are not skilled enough to successfully pull off such an intricate, large scale plan. He says he knows this because of the many years he spent covering national security matters. He does not

give detail about what he means by covering national security matters, probably because he is not actually as experienced or qualified to speak as he implies. He does mention his book, however, which might go into more detail about his past experiences. The book is only based on interviews with 100 CIA officials, though, and that does not seem very trustworthy, seeing as there is no guarantee that the CIA officials and employees won't lie. Still, the mention does increase his authority to the reader, and is an effective tactic. He gives another argument from definition, defining and qualifying his phrase "not good enough." He elaborates on the phrase and says that the plot of destroying two towers, a piece of the Pentagon, and four airplanes and making it appear as if it all was done by another party is beyond the ability of U.S. intelligence.

Corn then uses an ad hominem argument by attacking the character of the reader who does not agree with the next idea Corn presents, which is that bureaucracies do not work well together, and therefore could not have successfully orchestrated an attack with such precision and secrecy. He makes an argument from speculation, explaining how the process of trying to keep such a big secret would work and what would systematically go wrong. It is important to realize that none of this speculation is a reality. It is merely a construct of the author meant to implant his assertions into your subconscious under the guise of fact. He deduces that too many people would have to remain quiet to allow this plan to work. His next tactic is to elaborate on the next point he made in his thesis, which is that the U.S. government is not evil enough to pull off such an attack. This argument will be based on numerous assertions, as no concrete evidence can be used to discuss morality or the character of people. It will surely be full of loaded words, mainly in the form of adjectives, to describe events and people. "This is as foul as it gets." "Foul" is a loaded word. "(The sacrificial lambs could have included White House staff or members of Congress, had the fourth plane not crashed in Pennsylvania.)" "Sacrificial lambs" is

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a loaded set of words, giving a very dramatic meaning to the idea of the people of the White House sustaining an attack in order to further their political agenda. He uses the word "dastardliness" which has a very exaggerated connotation to it. He uses an argument from humor by comparing the idea of government involvement to a James Bond movie: "This is a Hollywood level of dastardliness, James Bond (or Dr. Evil) material."

Corn returns for a moment to using an accommodating persona in the next paragraph. He says "CIA officers and American officials have been evildoers." Here he admits that officials have committed what he asserts as "evil" acts. This may help the author to relate more to the audience, so that they will trust his opinion more in the end. "They have supported death squads and made use of drug dealers overseas." He again asserts U.S. government involvement in what the audience will see as heinous acts. He still does not provide any pieces of evidence to support these claims, because he sees the audience as people who are itching to hate the government, and therefore he knows that he will not need any evidence to persuade them of this. "They have assisted torturers, disseminated assassination manuals, sold weapons to terrorist-friendly governments, undermined democratically-elected governments, and aided dictators who murder and maim." Same thing here. He uses loaded words here such as "dictator," "murder," and "maim." These words all create evil or immoral connotations to the statement. These will act as buzzwords to the intended audience. After having given in a little to the audience as to what the government is capable of doing, he then uses this as leverage in explaining that the 9/11 attack is beyond the things he has described, and therefore they most likely were incapable of being involved. This logical fallacy will most likely still be effective against the majority of the readers who don't think about these kinds of things.

Corn then uses another argument from anecdote, describing the interview he had with a particular CIA official. He asserts that this CIA official "helped manage a division that ran the sort of actions listed above." There is no way to verify this assertion, but it will still be a powerful tool in persuading his audience. His witness goes on to say, "kill an American citizen? No, no, he added, we could never do that." This argument from anecdote is also in a way an argument from authority, because the witness is himself in the CIA and therefore has the authority to talk about the CIA. Corn uses this argument to lead into his next point from his thesis, which is that the U.S. government and the CIA are "not gutsy enough" to attack their own citizens. To support this point, he uses a series of arguments of pathos; he appeals to the reader's emotions, getting them to feel sorry for the CIA agents that would have to risk their job security to do these things they are accused of doing. Allow me to elaborate. He tells us to "think of the danger – the potential danger to the plotters. What if their plan were uncovered before or, worse, after the fact?" This pathos argument puts the reader in the CIA agent's shoes for a minute, and actually causes the reader to be sympathetic for an instant. The reader will see the agents as ordinary people trying to keep a job instead of evil drones, plotting world domination.

Corn uses a question to argue the point that the Honorable George W. Bush would not risk his reputation by being a part of such an evil plan, by asking "would George W. Bush take the chance of being branded the most evil president of all time by countenancing such wrongdoing?" He uses another argument from humor when he basically discredits the source that Michael Ruppert used to argue for the conspiracy theory. "He has offered \$1000 to anyone who can 'disprove the authenticity of any of his source material.'" Then he gives his argument, saying, "Well, his timeline includes that Canadian prisoner's claim and cites the Toronto Star as the source. But Ruppert fails to note that the Star did not confirm the man's account, that the

paper reported some observers 'wonder if it isn't just the ravings of a lunatic,' and that the Star subsequently reported the judge said the tale had 'no air of reality.'" The humorous part of the argument comes when he says that he is still "not expecting a check." With the bulk of Corn's argument over, he moves on to talk about the "problem" of conspiracy theories and how they are gaining too much of a following. This may be to discredit the validity of conspiracies as a whole, so that he does not have to argue his case against each individual theory later on.

Corn gives examples, or arguments from history, to back up his assertion that there are real problems to worry about more than this "X-Files-like nonsense." One of these arguments from history is "General Tommy Franks, the commander of military operations in Afghanistan, declaring the commando mis-assault at Hazar Qadam, which resulted in the deaths of fifteen to twenty local Afghans loyal to the pro-U.S. government, was not an intelligence failure. He uses a loaded word when he calls the "plot in which shady, unidentified U.S. officials scheme to blow up the World Trade Towers to gain control of an oil pipeline in Central Asia" "cinematic." Cinematic is definitely a hot button for the majority of the readers, who take the conspiracy very seriously. He makes a final argument from humor in the last paragraph, accusing the CIA of purposely creating these conspiracy theories to distract the people from real problems.

The second article to be examined is "9/11 Conspiracy Myths: Truth Under Attack," by Senator John McCain. Senator John McCain uses "us" and "we" in the entire article which refers to the target audience as the American people. Including himself in the group builds a bond between the reader and the author, making them more inclined to listen to what he has to say. Since again this piece of rhetoric is meant to argue against the World Trade Center conspiracy theories; it is doubtful that he intends to include the hardcore believers in his writing. Radical viewpoints can seldom be changed, even with the most compelling arguments.

Therefore, it is likely that the McCain is trying to reach those who aren't quite sure what to believe. The Americans who are torn in their opinion about the incident are the ones who can be persuaded one way or the other, so McCain is taking the opportunity to be the man who is responsible for the change. He starts off his theme by painting a vivid picture of the disaster in the minds of the readers, using a myriad of loaded words. "...the serenity of that bright morning was destroyed by a savage atrocity, an act so hostile we could scarcely imagine any human being capable of it." The loaded words in this statement include serenity, destroyed, savage, atrocity, and hostile. Serenity is loaded in that it contains a connotation of peacefulness. It probably isn't much of a stretch to say that a usual day in the world of business and trade is anything but peaceful. Surely it was a day of stress, hustle, and bustle. McCain wants to create more of a striking contrast to the reader of before the crashes and after the crashes. The word destroyed again has loaded meaning, because it carries a negative connotation, again to create the contrast in the reader's mind. Describing the event as a "savage atrocity" holds incredibly negative connotations and gives severe judgment to the event. By this time in the rhetoric, the audience is sure to be entranced by the words and ready to hear what the author has to say. McCain took a page out of President Bush's book when he asserted that "evil literally took flight." Evil is most definitely a buzzword to the average Republican, who tends to see issues as more black and white, right and wrong. Those leaning toward the left side of the political spectrum are probably less impressed with the use of this word. I wouldn't go so far as to say it is a hot button for them, though.

In the next paragraph the McCain uses a series of words to describe the American's response to the disaster. These words are courage, heroism, compassion, generosity, unity and resolve. These are all positively loaded words as far as I can tell. I can't see any group of

Americans being offended by these words. He continues to "butter up" the audience by saying that we were all "united in a kinship of ideals, committed to the notion that the people are sovereign, and that people everywhere, no matter what their race or country or religion, possess universal and inalienable rights." He alludes to the Bill of Rights, which most Americans find a very positively loaded item. The theme so far with the author is to throw as much positively charged diction at the reader as possible, getting them proud to be Americans, so that his dissection of the conspiracy theories is more easily accepted as truth, which, for the sake of this course, does not exist. He even tries to get rid of the left-right separation, by saying that "we were not Democratic or Republican, liberal or conservative. We were not two countries." Whether or not this will be successful is hard to discern. The most radical will probably be insulted by this attempt at binding the two parties together. Existential import is used, predominately with the word "Americans." The reason for this is obvious. It creates an "us vs. them" situation, so that we as Americans will be unable to accept that our own government was working against us.

"We liberated Afghanistan from the murderous rule of the Taliban." This is mainly an assertion, as the words "liberated" and "murderous" can be disputed until the end of time without definitively proving it one way or the other. The next tactic used by McCain is to demonize the Al Qaeda network as much as possible, further strengthening the "us vs. them" theme. "Osama bin Laden and his ilk have perverted a peaceful religion, devoting it not the salvation of souls, but to the destruction of bodies." The negatively loaded words in this sentence such as "perverted" and "destruction of bodies" enforce our hatred for this group. McCain is devoting much of his energy to getting the target audience riled up before he even gets to the point of the article, which has to do with the conspiracy theories. This is important because it shows that

McCain may not have a very strong argument against the conspiracies themselves, but because he still wishes to persuade us to disagree with them, he needs to use other tactics. Things like this are important to realize in the analysis of rhetoric.

McCain next uses an argument from history, describing past attacks that Al Qaeda and other terrorist groups have made on the U.S. For example, one of his arguments from history is the previous bombing of the World Trade Center in 1993. This is a valid argument to make his point that Al Qaeda is indeed responsible for the 2001 attack. After these arguments from history the author finally makes the shift to discussing the conspiracies that have been forming over the years. He uses irony when he says "surely, something more must be at work," in a way mocking the idea that many Americans have been having about the attack. Then he uses arguments from history to describe how many Americans have had similar doubts about past attacks, such as Pearl Harbor, or the way communism thrived on its own. "Many Americans resisted the notion that an island nation far from our shores could launch a surprise attack against our Navy; that communism could remain viable in the world without assistance from the U.S. government itself." The strategy behind this argument from history is to discredit the conspiracy theories by stating events that McCain presupposes the readers believe to have been legitimate occurrences. McCain uses naming when he describes the stories that conspiracy theorists have come up with as "fanciful." By saying this, McCain betrays his feelings on the matter, in the hopes that the reader will share the same sentiments. After this McCain describes some of the beliefs of the conspiracy theorists to give a backdrop for his rebuttals. "They claim that the Twin Towers were toppled by a controlled demolition, that the U.S. Air Force did not shoot down the hijacked jets because it was ordered to 'stand down' on 9/11, that the holes in the Pentagon were too small to have been made by a Boeing 757." By summarizing all of the theories into one

sentence, McCain is belittling them, or giving them little importance. Whereas it took the McCain several paragraphs to basically say "Americans were attacked by terrorists and it was terrible, and it is even more terrible that some Americans blame our government," it takes him only one sentence to say what conspiracy theorists have spent books talking about. His next argument is nothing more than an assertion, which is him saying that "the truth is more mundane." Obviously, there is no real way to prove one way or the other if truth is mundane or exciting. This part of the article has little strength in the sense of persuasive rhetoric.

Instead of taking a direct path by arguing against the theories themselves, he attacks the character of those who come up with these theories. These are known as *ad hominem* arguments. An example of one of his *ad hominem* arguments is when he says "Blaming some conspiracy within our government for 9/11 mars the memories of all those lost on that day." This could also be classified as an appeal to the emotions of the reader. It serves to make the reader feel guilty for blaming the government, because the author has linked that to being disrespectful to those who died in the disaster. This correlation the author creates is no more than an assertion, and can not hold up to a thorough analysis or debate.

McCain asserts that the "explanation for 9/11 must start and end with the facts." This statement implies that the author believes the conspiracy theories are not at all based on facts or evidence, while the official story is entirely factual. He fails in his rhetoric to back up his own claims with facts. He merely asserts that the facts are there, without actually presenting them. He goes on to make more blind assertions without giving any kind of support for them. One of these assertions is that "the CIA was not involved in 9/11." He makes this statement and leaves it at that, without giving any references or pieces of evidence to support his statement.

In his final paragraph, McCain concludes his argument by restating that facts need to be presented to the conspiracy theorists, again asserting that they are not in fact using facts in their analyses, but not providing any facts of his own to support his argument. McCain's rhetorical strategy was entirely based on appeals to the emotions and values of the reader, and strike me as much weaker than the argumentative strategy presented by David Corn's article.

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