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The Psychology of Conspiracy

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According to The New York Times, two ex-CIA analysts are claiming that there is incontrovertible evidence that tens of thousands of Americans may have been exposed to chemical weapons before, during, and/or after Operation DESERT STORM. The ex-analysts also claim that authorities within the Department of Defense (DOD) and CIA have repeatedly discounted this evidence, hindered the analysts' efforts to publicize the information and inform policy, investigated one of them for compromising classified information, and "ruined" their careers. The counterclaims from DOD and CIA authorities posit that the whole matter is merely one of honest disagreement among intelligence analysts and that the investigation for compromising classified information is a standard response when anyone with a security clearance writes an unauthorized letter to a newspaper on an area in which one works. (One of the ex-CIA analysts admits to this.)

What to believe? A political psychologist might generate a number of usual suspects, i.e., hypotheses, when a conspiracy is alleged. (1) The analysts are lying to seek fame and fortune or to get back at the US. Government for unfortunate career reversals. (2) The analysts are mentally unstable and primed to see conspiracy under every rock and behind every tree. (3) The analysts believe that they are right, are stable, are not working for fame and fortune but are wrong. (4) The analysts are right regardless of their motives. (5) The authorities are merely seeking to protect a formal process of intelligence analysis wherein there is ample room for divergent views before a formal opinion is generated, and there is a pressing need to protect intelligence sources. (6) This last hypothesis applies with the added fact that the authorities are wrong and the analysts' views on chemical warfare during the Persian Gulf War are correct. (7) The authorities are indeed engaging in a conspiracy to cover up politically damaging information. (Here the political damage may be to the US., the US. Government, or specific members of the government, namely themselves or their allies within the bureaucracy.) (8) There is no conspiracy but the disruption of business as usual fosters a number of uncoordinated impediments by various authorities towards the analysts. (9) There is no conspiracy, but there is a banality of evil phenomenon under which various authorities each for idiosyncratic reasons acts noxiously towards the analysts.

There are other hypotheses, singly and in combination. Some, such as a combination of (3) and (6), may induce maximum conflict in which neither side will voluntarily back down and in which both sides are wrong about chemical warfare during the Persian Gulf War. Some of the more sinister, such as (7), may be usefully explicated by the same psychological models of moral judgment and behavior which have been applied to terrorism.

These models comprise empirically validated, intrapsychic phenomena, including various defense mechanisms on the part of the conspirator. Rationalization of conspiracy behavior, denying the conspiracy is a conspiracy, projecting towards the victims of the conspiracy so that the latter seem to deserve it in the eyes of the conspirator, or even repressing the conspiracy's effects on the victim are only a few common mechanisms. A social-cognitive learning theorist might jettison the psychodynamic jargon and even the notion of the unconscious, a sine qua non of a defense mechanism, and posit psychological phenomena with similar intrapsychic and behavioral consequences. This would be similar

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to Dollard and Miller's attempt in the 1940s to bring psychodynamic theory into the realm of learning theory.

Meanwhile, another class of real or alleged victims encompass those who may have come into contact with either chemical or even biological agents during the Gulf War. They also are looking for some truth. Social psychological processes affecting their plight and their quest for a so-called truth-- especially ongoing discourses on the self, responsibility, liability, causality, and reality-- will be discussed in a future issue of IBPP. (See <http://www.nytimes.com/96/10/30/gulfwar-chemical.html>; Freud, A. (1966.) *The writings of Anna Freud: Vol. 2. The ego and the mechanisms of defense.* (Rev. ed.) NY: International Universities Press; Bandura, A. (1987.) *Mechanisms of moral disengagement.* Paper presented at the Psychology of Terrorism Interdisciplinary Conference. Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, Washington, D.C.; Dollard, J., & Miller, N. (1947.) *Social learning and imitation.* New Haven: Yale University Press. (Keywords: Conspiracy, Terrorism, Moral.)