

The New Criterion

Dispatch September 13, 2009 02:47 pm

Truth & consequences

by Stefan Beck

I first came across this column by Charles Krauthammer on September 11. I was, am, in perfect sympathy with its main argument, which is that Van Jones's association with the 9/11 "Truth" movement should have disqualified him from membership in "polite society," to say nothing of "a high-level job in the White House." Krauthammer can't get too exercised by the other major complaints about Jones (his use of indelicate language, his psuedo-communism, and so on), finding them more or less beside the point. "On the eighth anniversary of 9/11," he writes, ". . . a decent respect for the memory of that day requires that truthers, who derangedly desecrate it, be asked politely to leave. By everyone."

Few would argue with that, which is why it should have been made the centerpiece of the campaign against Jones. Yes, I'm relieved that this buffoon will not be working in the White House, but that really is a trivial matter next to our collective responsibility to keep the paranoid style at arm's length. Having recently had the pleasure of reviewing Arthur Goldwag's Cults, Conspiracies, and Secret Societies, I am more convinced than ever that conspiracy mania—irresponsible, contemptuous, and self-indulgent—will never go away. We can live with that, and laugh at it. But once this feverish cast of mind receives the tacit approval of those in power, we've got big problems, because what conspiracy theorists really want to do is pass the buck. Forgive me for quoting myself:

Goldwag's expertly cross-referenced assemblage of strange theories, of the cults that hold them dear, and of the tenebrous groups and secret societies that are their bread and butter, holds the

skeleton key: It's fun. It's
fascinating. Above all, it's easy.
Truth may be stranger than fiction,
but it also often calls for hard
work. If al Qaeda obliterated the
WTC, something must be done
about it—sacrifices must be made.
If some unnameable and
unknowable cabal is responsible,
there's little one can do but sip
Mountain Dew at the keyboard
and blog about it.

. . . [I]t's worth asking whether an
interest in conspiracy theories ever
derives from guilt. The average
theory uproots garden-variety
badness—incompetence in high
office, greed, cowardice, and so
on—and replaces it with truly
exotic, hothouse evil. Those who
worship Mammon become those
who literally worship Satan. A
political figure who commits
adultery becomes a practitioner of
Illuminist sex magic involving
children and animals. The
problem, psychologically, seems to
be that if those with power and

influence aren't several orders of magnitude worse than you or me, we all have just as much to answer for.

work that entails.

Conspiracy theorists like the 9/11 "Truthers" sell a fantasy of zero responsibility and zero accountability, disguised as radical patriotism. Excluding them from public discourse is a matter not only of good taste but also of reminding ourselves what planet we live on, and the hard

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