

*Real Enemies:*

*Conspiracy Theories and American Democracy, World War 1 to  
9/11*

Kathryn S. Olmsted

Oxford University Press, 2009, £12.99, p/b <sup>11</sup>

**I**f I was going to be generous I would say 'Close but no cigar' to professor Olmsted's account. She has at any rate identified one of the central issues, expressed in her final paragraph:

'Since the first World War officials of the U.S. government have encouraged conspiracy theories, sometimes inadvertently, sometimes intentionally. They have engaged in conspiracies and used the cloak of national security to hide their actions from the American people. With cool calculation, they have promoted official conspiracy theories, sometimes demonstrably false ones, their own purposes.....If antigovernment conspiracy theories get the details wrong – and they often do – they get the basic issue right: it is the secret actions of the government that are the real enemies of democracy.'

But why should I be generous? She has the time, the academic tenure (at the University of California) and the access to the material, and still hasn't done a half decent job.

For the first third of the book she guides us through the conspiracy theories generated by the US entry into WW1 (led by a president who promised not to join the war and who did so against the population's wishes), WW2 (ditto); and into the Cold War and through the McCarthy period. So far so

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<sup>11</sup> A version of this originally appeared in the *Fortean Times*.

unexceptional.

But when we start moving through the sixties towards the present day, it all goes off the rails. Once again Oswald, Sirhan and Ray are presented as the assassins of the Kennedys and King. None of the more substantial research which suggests they were innocent is even suggested. Olmsted says (p. 8) that her 'goal is not to prove or disprove the conspiracy theories discussed in this book.' But by her choice of which version of them to present she judges the theories. Had she presented the minutely documented and cautious views on JFK's death of – say – Professor Peter Dale Scott or former CIA officer John Newman, she could not have so blithely dismissed the JFK researchers as 'amateurs'.

Iran-Contra is sketched in and she flunks the central issue of the CIA's role in facilitating the wholesale importation of cocaine. She notes that CIA officers (she calls them 'agents', often a sign of someone not familiar with the territory) 'turned a blind eye' to the import of cocaine if the dealers contributed to the (illegal) war against Nicaragua. But it's worse (or better) than that. In 1982 the Agency actually went to the Attorney General of the United States to get his permission to ignore drug dealing. In effect the CIA, with government permission, gave cocaine dealers in Central and South America a 'get out of jail free' card: for a few thousand dollars of support for the contras they could fly their product in unhindered. And so the guns out and drugs back pattern began. Iran-Contra is frequently short-handed as weapons-for-hostages. More significantly it was guns-for-coke.

The MJ-12 theories about alien-government contact are presented but she forbears to tell her readers that the whole thing was cooked-up by the US Air Force. Rather than the more considered views of the better end of the 9-11 sceptics – the academics or professionals (pilots, engineers, architects) – she devotes most of her attention to the Internet documentary, Loose Change, and the activities of the group of 9-11 widows, the so-called 'Jersey girls'. She quotes Hilary

Clinton's 1998 reference to a 'vast right-wing conspiracy' against her husband without mentioning that the conspiracy has been documented in great detail and one of its leading members has written a memoir about his role in it. And so on.

Simply because she hasn't read the material, she gets some of the post 1963 stuff wrong; and her presentation of the other material is designed to reduce its impact. Her central thesis, that state conspiracies have produced conspiracy theories, is true; but how much more oomph it would have carried had she been able to look the covert nature of American politics since the Cold War in the face.

*RR*