



ine-eleven conspiracy theories have been circulating for years, producing millions of Web links, scores of books, and a nationwide collection of doubters known as the "9/11 Truth" movement.

In 2005 the State Department responded by posting some "clues" to "identifying misinformation" on their Web site. "Does the story claim that vast, powerful, evil forces are secretly manipulating events?" it asks. "If so, this fits the profile of a conspiracy theory. Conspiracy theories are rarely true, even though they have great appeal and are often widely believed. In reality, events usually have much less exciting explanations."

One of the first American officials to publicly acknowledge conspiracy theories in connection with 9/11 was President George Bush, who on November 10, 2001, in a speech to the General Assembly of the United Nations, said, "Let us never tolerate outrageous conspiracy theories concerning the attacks of September 11."

Yet according to a May 2006 Zogby poll, 42 percent of Ameri-

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With \$6,000 and a laptop computer, three kids from upstate New York made a documentary about 9/11 that spread across the Internet and threw millions for a loop

BY NANCY JO SALES

cans now believe that the U.S. government and the 9/11 commission “concealed or refused to investigate critical evidence that contradicts their official explanation of the September 11th attacks,” and that “there has been a cover-up.”

For those who can't find information about the alleged cover-up on the nightly news, there is *Loose Change*, a documentary about 9/11 conspiracy theories which just might be the first Internet blockbuster. Since it appeared on the Web in April 2005, the 80-minute film has been climbing up and down Google Video's “Top 100,” rising to No. 1 this May, with at least 10 million viewings.

“We beat the woman getting punched in the face,” says its director, 22-year-old Dylan Avery, from Oneonta, New York (population 13,000), referring to an oft watched video.

“We beat the guy who beats his computer with his keyboard,” says his producer, 23-year-old Korey Rowe, also from Oneonta and an army specialist who served in Afghanistan and Iraq.

“We beat the [Stephen] Colbert speech,” says Jason Bermas, 26, their researcher. “The viral videos, we dominate them.”

Told in MTV-style jump cuts, illustrated by high-end graphics, and scored with hip music written by a few of their friends, *Loose Change* is an investigation into the official story of 9/11 as told by *The 9/11 Commission Report*, asking a number of highly controversial questions:

What, for example, were the explosions some witnesses heard after the towers were hit by planes? Why was the site of the collapse not treated as a crime scene, and why was the debris shipped off as waste to several foreign countries?

Why were the black boxes from American Airlines Flight 11 and United Airlines Flight 175 never found, when the passport of one of Flight 11's alleged hijackers, Satam Al Suqami, turned up unscathed a few blocks from the World Trade Center?

How did American Airlines Flight 77, which crashed into the Pentagon, disappear into a 20-foot hole, leaving no trace of its 124-foot wingspan on the building? And what's with all the forewarnings that the government ignored?

For the past three months, 20,000 people a day have been clicking on to the official *Loose Change* Web site, loosechange911.com; more than 50,000 have placed orders

for the DVD since its release. (“But we're not really making any money,” says Rowe, “because we gave away like 100,000 copies for free.”) Millions more have been downloading the film from a growing number of unaffiliated sites.

It's safe to say that, if it were a theatrical release, *Loose Change* would be one of the most popular—and incendiary—movies in the country right now. Avery and Rowe say

Most of what we see on-screen during *Loose Change* are actually news reports from mainstream-media outlets like CBS News, *Newsweek*, CNN, the Associated Press, even Fox News—the “loose change” which Avery adds up into a conspiracy theory. “Some people accuse me of like, Oh, you're taking quotes out of context,” he says. “I'm giving you the article and the date. Go look it up yourself.”

Loose Change runs clips from almost every major TV news organization on that horrible day, wherein we see footage of people escaping the towers, firemen, and reporters who talk of hearing explosions after the planes hit; for some this raises questions of whether there were pre-set

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they are talking to several major movie studios about releasing a third and “final cut” of the film on September 11, 2006. They wonder if the government may be watching, too. “I hope so,” says Avery.

In the opening credits of *Loose Change*, we hear Mick O'Regan, a host on Australian radio, asking the late Hunter S. Thompson, in a 2002 interview, “How would you rate the American media in their coverage of the events of the attack last September?”

“Well let's see, uh, ‘shamefully’ is a word that comes to mind,” says the father of gonzo journalism. “I've spent enough time, well, on the inside of the White House and political campaigns, and I've known enough of the people who do these things, to know that the public version of the news or whatever event is never really what happened.”

bombs going off in the buildings. Here's Bryant Gumbel on CBS: “We understand there has been a secondary explosion on Tower One...”

Freeze-frame images of the towers going down show what some say ap-

pear to be demolition “squibs,” or horizontal plumes of smoke and debris being ejected during the collapse, also suggesting explosions.

Loose Change also delves into the question of why the United States' elaborate air-defense system failed to thwart the September 11 attacks. *The 9/11 Commission Report* says “there was no one to blame.” The film points to a 20-page instruction from June 1, 2001, issued by the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff which reassigned the authority for aircraft interceptions and shoot-downs to Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld.

Titled “Aircraft Piracy (Hijacking) and Destruction of Derelict Airborne Objects,” the instruction states that henceforth “the NMCC [National Military Command Center] will... forward requests for DOD assistance to the Secretary of Defense for approval.” Neither the president nor the

vice president is mentioned in the new directive as being part of the chain of command. By military protocol, the authority belonged to Rumsfeld, who later claimed he was "out of the loop."

Are you sort of suggesting that [9/11] worked in the favor of the Bush administration?" Mick O'Regan asks Hunter S. Thompson in *Loose Change*.

"Oh, absolutely. Absolutely," Thompson says. "You sort of wonder when something happens like this, well, who stands to benefit? Who had the opportunity and the motive?"

The film's answer to this is the September 2000 report from the Project for the New American Century, a neo-conservative think tank whose members include Donald Rumsfeld, Dick Cheney, Jeb Bush, and Paul Wolfowitz. Titled "Rebuilding America's Defenses," it envisions a future of burgeoning defense spending and the overthrow of Saddam Hussein. "The process of transformation, even if it brings revolutionary change, is likely to be a long one, absent some catastrophic and catalyzing event—like a new Pearl Harbor," Avery reads from the report in voice-over.

It's a long leap from all this, however, to claiming, "The government did it." There is no conclusive evidence in *Loose Change* of U.S. government involvement in 9/11. The film relies too heavily on already published reports, some of which have been discredited. For example, the segment on United Flight 93 cites an early story from a Cincinnati ABC News affiliate, WCPO, on the plane's safe landing at a Cleveland airport on the morning of September 11. WCPO later retracted the story.

For the final cut of *Loose Change*, Avery says, "We're tracking down potential eyewitnesses to the landing of Flight 93 in Cleveland." He also says the third edition of the film will include more on-screen interviews; the first version had only one, with Marcel Bernard, the chief flight instructor at Free-way Airport, in Bowie, Maryland. Bernard recalls that, in early August 2001, Hani Hanjour, one of the alleged hijackers of American Airlines Flight 77, had trouble controlling and landing a single-engine Cessna 172 when he did test runs. "Average or below-average piloting skills," Bernard says.

And yet, according to the official version of events, if Hani Hanjour had been the pilot he would have had to execute a perfect 330-degree turn at 530 miles per hour, descending 7,000 feet in two and a half minutes, in order to crash Flight 77, a Boeing 757, into the Pentagon.

"[Flight 77] could not possibly have flown at those speeds which they said it did without going into a high-speed stall," Russ Wittenburg, a former commercial and air-force pilot, is quoted saying in *Loose Change*. The film also makes much of the visual similarities between the hole left in

chain-saw operators ... and a long-haired fellow named Hummox ... who, on and off, lived in a cave for 15 years.")

In 2002, Italy awarded its highest literary prize, the Naples Prize, to *The War on Freedom: How and Why America Was Attacked, September 11, 2001*, a book by British writer Nafeez Mosaddeq Ahmed that claims the U.S. government was complicit in the attacks. *The New Pearl Harbor: Disturbing Questions About the Bush Administration and 9/11*, by David Ray Griffin, a professor at the Claremont School of Theology, in California, has become the leading book on 9/11 conspiracy theories in this country, selling more than 100,000 copies and popularizing among 9/11 Truth activists the expressions "MIHOP" and "LIHOP"—for the government "made it happen on purpose" or "let it happen on purpose."

But go down the wormhole of 9/11 conspiracies and you will find *Loose Change* detractors even among 9/11 Truthers, one of whom recently called the film a "very fine piece of CIA disinformation."

"That's ridiculous," Avery says. "The idea that three kids from a hick town in upstate New York are part of a C.I.A. disinformation campaign would just show how desperate our government is."

There's a blog dedi-

cated to debunking his film (screwloosechange.blogspot.com), and detractors will point you to a widely read *Popular Mechanics* cover piece from 2005 entitled "9/11, Debunking the Myth," which tackles many of the questions raised in the film. (Conspiracy buffs claim that the article's lead researcher, Benjamin Chertoff, is a cousin of Department of Homeland Security secretary Michael Chertoff. Benjamin Chertoff could not be reached for comment.)

Avery and Rowe have also received a letter threatening a lawsuit by Gedeon and Jules Naudet, whose footage from the morning of the attack on the Twin Towers was used without permission in *Loose Change*. Avery's lawyer is arguing that it's permissible under "fair use." (Full disclosure: The editor of this magazine was an executive producer on the Naudet brothers' CBS special, *9/11*.)

Certainly, few can accept the claim on the *Loose Change* DVD box that says, "What you will see inside will prove without a shadow of a doubt that everything you know about 9/11 is a complete fabrication." One thing seems sure: *Loose Change*

FOR MANY YOUNG PEOPLE, 9/11 IS THE DEFINING NEWS EVENT OF THEIR LIVES. "THIS IS OUR KENNEDY ASSASSINATION," SAYS PRODUCER KOREY ROWE.

the west wing of the Pentagon and damage to buildings done by cruise missiles.

On May 16, the Department of Justice released two Pentagon videotapes of the crash of Flight 77 after a Freedom of Information Act request by Judicial Watch, a conservative government watchdog. "Finally, we hope that this video will put to rest the conspiracy theories involving American Airlines Flight 77," said Judicial Watch president Tom Fitton. The video "shows the nose cone of the plane clearly entering the picture," said Fox News.

You can decide for yourself by watching the video at defenseink.mil/pubs/foi/index.html.

The Pentagon crash, the collapse of the World Trade Center, the crash of Flight 93—almost every aspect of what happened on 9/11 but the sheer horror of it—have become the subject of debate the world over. Yet in America, questioners of the government's official story are often depicted as harmless loonies. (In a piece in *The New York Times* in June, the 9/11 Truthers were said to include "professors,

has struck a nerve. "Love us or hate us, we've done the movement a favor," Avery says. "We've gotten 9/11 truth out there."

Undoubtedly what has put *Loose Change* ahead of the pack of 9/11 conspiracy fare is that it's a pretty watchable movie—especially considering it cost \$2,000 and was made on Avery's Compaq Presario laptop. "I saved money serving ice cream at Friendly's," Avery says. He never attended college himself and was rejected from Purchase Film College twice.

Loose Change: 2nd Edition (which has additional footage Avery bought on eBay) cost about \$6,000 to make, money he saved while working at a Red Lobster and a Starbucks in Silver Springs, Maryland, where he moved in 2004 to "get out of Oneonta." In 2005 he moved back to his hometown.

And now Avery, a *South Park*-watching, video-game-writing, self-described "nerd," has become an Internet folk hero—at least for many young people, for whom 9/11 is the defining news event of their lives. "This is our generation's Kennedy assassination," says Rowe.

Consider another Zogby poll from August 2004, which found that 63 percent of New Yorkers under 30 believe some U.S. leaders "knew in advance that attacks were planned on or around September 11, 2001, and that they consciously failed to act." For young people like these, coming of age at a time when 9/11 is being used to justify war, the slashing of civil liberties, domestic spying, and torture, Avery is a new sort of yuppie, doing something outrageous in the face of power, making him the subject of boy worship and girl crushes.

"You're an amazing man," a young woman named "Kaella" recently wrote on his MySpace page, where Avery has over 2,600 "friends." "More people should see this documentary. I'm spreading the word."

In February, after watching *Loose Change*, Samantha Woodhouse, 21, quit paramedic school in Corning, New York, to be near Avery. "She tracked me down," Avery says with a shrug. Now she's his girlfriend and his secretary too.

"Awesome work, man," wrote "James," another of Avery's MySpace fans. "I've shown the 2nd edition to everyone I know and it's opening some eyes, even of my parents. Remember, the truth will set us free."

"You're my hero," wrote "Ali."

After Mike Malloy of Air America talked up the movie on-air last year, Avery, Rowe, and Bermas were off on a tour of college campuses, including Princeton, SUNY Binghamton, and the University of Arizona. "We went and screwed some people's minds up there," Rowe says.

Lefty radio stations like KPFFK, in Los Angeles, and WBAL, in New York, find they get such positive responses when they do a program on the film they're now using it during fund-raising drives. "Every time we offer [the film as a pledge gift] it generates some excitement throughout the city," said WBAL program director Bernard White during a May interview with Avery, Rowe, and Bermas.

"It's weird," Avery told me over Memorial Day weekend. "It's all been so weird." He was standing in the field behind the dilapidated house he shares with Rowe, Bermas, and Woodhouse. They were having a

article links to 10 others, and before you know it you're up until six in the morning. It's crazy, the information takes over."

He started relaying the information to his childhood friend Rowe, who was stationed in Afghanistan with the 101st Airborne Division, 187th Infantry. ("I didn't believe it at first," Rowe later told me. "I was like, things are wrong, but they're not *that* wrong.")

"It wasn't supposed to be true," Avery said. "And then I started realizing that, you know, we were lied to. And then it was: Well, do I keep making this a fictional film, or do I focus on the real thing and write about what really happened? And that's where I went with it."

He said he always knew he wanted to be a director. In 2002 he met *Sopranos* star James Gandolfini at the opening party for Vines, a restaurant in Oneonta that Gandolfini had helped finance.

"He told me if I want to be a successful director I have to say something to the entire world. I have to have a message," Avery said. "I think that's one of the reasons our movie's successful, because it's a movie about something that fucking matters. Even if you disagree with it you still walk out thinking back to that day and at least questioning something."

"You have to be a skeptic," he said. "You can't believe anything someone tells you just because they told you to. Especially your government, and especially your media—the two institutions that are put there to control you. And you're going to tell me you're going to take their word for everything? I don't think so."

I asked him what he thought was going to happen with the 9/11 issue. He paused for a moment.

"Second American revolution," he said. "I really think there's going to be anger.

There's going to be a lot of anger. I think a lot of people are really pissed off and I think that the people that aren't pissed off are going to be even more pissed off than the people that already are. Because when it becomes irrefutable public record that 9/11 was done by our government the shit is gonna hit the fan. People are going to be upset. You can't stop it. People say, Aw, we need a peaceful revolution. We need to peacefully change things. Trust me, that's a great idea—I'm all for it. But Americans are violent, especially when they've been lied to, especially over something like this. So much has been lost because of 9/11—I mean, families have been shattered. There's so much pain. So many people have just got—fucked. It's the only way to put it."

Some of the kids were lighting a bonfire. He went off to watch it. □

**"YOU'RE AN AMAZING MAN,"
"KAELLA" WROTE ON DIRECTOR
DYLAN AVERY'S MYSPACE PAGE.
"I'M SPREADING THE WORD."**

party, which they called Louderfest, for their film company, Louder than Words. There was a barbecue going; a jazz band of local young guys was playing. About 40 kids were milling around, smoking and drinking, some wearing black "Investigate 9/11" T-shirts.

"I was supposed to be making a fictional story about me and my friends discovering that 9/11 was an inside job, and doing something about it," he said, "and basically that happened in real life."

When he started writing this film, also called *Loose Change*, he was 18. "I started researching 9/11 and I found an article on the World Trade Center—someone had posted a picture of a controlled demolition and then a picture of the World Trade Center collapsing. And I was like, Wow, O.K. And then you find one article and that