

Beyond Boston: Conspiracy Theories and International Relations

Written by Luke M. Herrington

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LUKE M. HERRINGTON, APR 16 2013

Though the smoke from the Boston Marathon attacks has cleared, a cloud of confusion remains as investigators race to determine who detonated two bombs near the finish line of the race yesterday. As such, J. Dana Stuster over at *Foreign Policy* observes that conspiracy theories about the attacks are already proliferating. Writers at *Salon*, the *Huffington Post*, and the *Atlantic* followed suit.

With so little new information emerging about the attacks (keep in mind that it's not even been 24 hours since the attack took place), and with media outlets like CNN simply looping their reports, it should really come as no surprise that people might attempt to answer all the questions—who?, why?— with their own rather imaginative ideas and theories.

Even the media is engaged in wild speculation. Authorities may have classified the bombings as a terrorist attack, a move *e-IR's* own Dan Cox might disagree with without having more information about the attacks, but questions remain: was it domestic or foreign terrorism? Was it really terrorism? Was it Al Qaeda? We don't know; and we can't until someone steps forward to claim responsibility.

From here, however, substantive discussion lapses into conspiratorial paranoia: who was the mysterious man on the roof? Who is the injured Saudi national under guard (but not in police custody) at an undisclosed hospital?

Both left- and right-leaning groups are already speculating that the bombings, which wounded more than 140 people and left three dead, were so-called "false-flag attacks." The notorious hacktivist network, Anonymous, has been posting Facebook comments suggesting the possibility of a false flag attack, while Dan Bidondi, a reporter for the right-wing conspiracy theory website, *Info Wars*, somehow managed to gain access to a press conference with Massachusetts Governor Deval Patrick, where he spouted off the governor's first question: "Is this another false flag attack staged to take our civil liberties?"

Stuster notes that, as of 4 PM yesterday, *Info Wars* had already posted an article insinuating that the FBI or the Boston Police Department's bomb squad could somehow be involved in these bombings. Indeed, Alex Jones, the conspiracy theorist behind *Info Wars*, and other sites like *Prison Planet*, wasted no time tweeting that the attack "stinks to high heaven #falseflag."

Of course, such bizarre theories have more in common with ideas, like the one that said the 9/11 terrorist attacks were an inside job, used as an excuse to declare war on Iraq than with reality itself. But that hasn't stopped the tinfoil hat brigade yet, and it probably won't. As Stuster observes, Twitter lit up within minutes of the attack about the possibilities of an "inside job."

Given North Korea's recent saber-rattling, for instance, and more level-headed analyses of the subject (see here and here) notwithstanding, one Twitter user has already suggested that Monday's bombings were part of an elaborate scheme meant to justify war with the Hermit Kingdom. Others say Syria. Still others, Iran. Even Israel's national intelligence agency, Mossad, has been the target of such blame.

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If Mossad, the U.S. government, and even the Illuminati—a real favorite of the conspiracy theorist—are already being blamed, then surely it's only a matter of time before some would-be polemicists start trying to pin the marathon attacks on the Vatican, Jewish bankers, the Council on Foreign Relations, or spinning it as fulfillment of Biblical End-Times prophecies.

The media will likely not have many new *real* details to report prior to the FBI's next press briefing at 9:30 AM. And it will probably take days (and a great deal of time beyond that) for real answers to emerge about this attack.

In the meantime, however, it seems to be an appropriate time for IR scholars and other political scientists to start studying conspiracy theories, conspiracy theorists, and similar issues. Given that one of our own field's most prestigious professional membership organizations is regularly indicted for its role in such esoteric conspiracies, the inherently political nature of these theories, and their transnational/international scope, it only seems natural that IR scholars start asking questions about conspiracy theories.

Psychology and Neurology already have a lot to say about conspiracy theories. Especially in times of panic, where little information exists, the human needs to find meaning in events, to rationalize and contextualize tragedies of great magnitude like the bombings in Boston or the 9/11 attacks, are met by entertaining such conspiracies. As reporter Claire Porter suggests, “[i]t gives people a false sense of control.”

Historians too, have considered the role conspiracy theories have played in shaping our understandings of modern history.

And specific conspiracy theories beg for special attention from IR scholars and political scientists. Christian nationalists in the U.S. argue that the United Nations and other such organizations are part of a conspiracy to establish a one-world government—a sign of Biblical prophecy fulfillment. What effect do such theories have at polls? Can they be interpreted as a response to—and part of a wider backlash against—the destructive forces of globalization? Are such conspiracy theories meant to be modern day myths designed to strengthen a nation's sense of self? Questions abound, but like yesterday's tragedy, finding answers will take time.

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Dr. Luke M. Herrington is an Assistant Professor of Social Science at the School of Advanced Military Studies (SAMS) at Ft. Leavenworth. A political scientist and international relations scholar by training, he received his PhD from the University of Kansas. His research and teaching interests focus on political violence and extremism, religion in comparative and international politics, theories of great power conflict, and the role of various beliefs and attitudes (e.g., tolerance) in political life and development. His most recent work explores the negative impact of conspiracy theory on American national security.

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