

Classroom Silence About September 11: A Failure of Education?

**Four Arrows (aka Don Trent Jacobs)
&
Rafiq (Robert Lewis)**

The consequences of uncritical belief in the official story about what happened on September 11, 2001, in light of the many substantiated contradictions to it, makes education's silence about 9/11 one of its greatest failings for future generations. Educators are responsible to help students do independent research and dialogue about the validity of the official account across many academic disciplines. Instead, most have become complicit in entrenching assumptions that allow for oppressive domestic and international policies to continue. This silence does not stem from direct attacks on academic freedom but relates more to a perceived need for self-censorship. This paper is perhaps the first published appeal for more courageous engagement with this important topic in schools, especially in higher education. This purpose reflects a concern for the state-of-the-world and for future generations, and should not be interpreted as being "political" beyond the fact that any study of this topic would naturally include an analysis of governments and their affairs and motives.

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Introduction

Nothing strengthens authority as much as silence.

Leonardo da Vinci

I know of no other safe depository of the ultimate power of society but the people themselves, and if we think them not enlightened enough to exercise that control with a wholesome discretion, the remedy is not to take it from them but to inform their discretion by education.

Thomas Jefferson

Many educators see learning as an opportunity to understand what is true and teaching as a means to share this truth. Parker Palmer writes that “to teach is to create a space in which obedience to truth is practiced” (1983, p. 69). If educators are to fulfil this role, they must be prepared to acknowledge the existence of evidence contradicting the truths they are safeguarding. They must be obedient to the facts that arise even when they prefer the facts were not true. To do otherwise is to continue to allow lies into the history books. Unfortunately, education, especially in the United States, often is influenced more by hegemony than reality. Numerous scholars have made this case in the past decade with texts such as, *Education as Enforcement: The Corporatization and Militarization of Education*. (Saltman and Gabbard, 2010). A prime and tragic example of this tendency is the unquestioning acceptance of the official 9/11 story in most classrooms across the United States. Despite overwhelming evidence and peer-reviewed scholarship contradicting *The 9/11 Commission Report*, educators have not been encouraged to pursue, nor have they initiated, independent research and critical thinking on this topic. Because the official account of 9/11 is responsible for policies with far-reaching and tragic repercussions, including two wars, huge economic costs, loss of civil rights, and rampant deception, 9/11 has relevance for educators in a range of disciplines. Its future impact on everything from airport security policies to nuclear treaties will make academic research into the truth about 9/11 a vital educational enterprise for decades to come. Yet scholarship has not been rigorous in sourcing what educators disseminate about the events of 9/11.

Critical quest(ioning) in education

What explains this failure of critical education respecting 9/11 studies? The current situation is suggestive of the kind of hegemony described by Antonio Gramsci in Italy a generation before Orwell’s publication. In education, the desire for prestige can be understood in terms of confidence and security as they relate to compliance, tenure, promotion, peer respect and acceptance, publication, and even the peace of mind that comes from not “rocking the boat” or challenging convention. When it comes to questioning *The 9/11 Commission Report* and being labelled “a conspiracy theorist,” it seems all of these threats to prestige increase the pulse rate of even the noblest of scholars.

But Gramsci’s version of state hegemony doesn’t tell the whole story of why education has been complicit in entrenching the findings of *The 9/11 Commission Report*. In fact, most educators whose work has

helped to propagate these findings have not been knowingly complicit. For example, Benjamin DeMott wrote in *Harper's Magazine*:

The plain, sad reality — I report this following four full days studying the work — is that *The 9/11 Commission Report*, despite the vast quantity of labor behind it, is a cheat and a fraud. It stands as a series of evasive manoeuvres that infantilize the audience, transform candor into inequity, and conceal realities that demand immediate inspection and confrontation (2004).

Just the same, educators remain largely ignorant of such reporting (or pretend to be). In part, the ignorance of educators about the provable facts of 9/11 or the reluctance to seriously consider them has been encouraged by curriculum guidelines. Two examples are the liberal National Education Association's guidelines for teaching about 9/11, which envision using the event to teach tolerance and empathy, and the conservative Thomas Fordham Foundation's curriculum, which favours using 9/11 to promote American solidarity around American values and a superiority that makes one's enemies hate America. Although such polarized responses of education to the events of 9/11 have been cause for debate, this debate remains uncritical about the details of what actually happened on 9/11. Other curriculum offerings for high schools and colleges similarly assume that *The 9/11 Commission Report* is true. The most expansive of these is the September 11 Digital Archive. (See <http://9/11digitalarchives.com>) Despite offering numerous 9/11 links, this archive includes none of the so-called "9/11 truth movement" links, conspicuously overlooking Architects and Engineers for 9/11 Truth, whose work in the hard sciences has garnered the support of almost 1,400 architectural and engineering professionals. Also absent is Firefighters for 9/11 Truth, whose members have hands-on experience with the hard science of 9/11 and include eyewitnesses to the events. Nor does it mention the work being done by Scholars for 9/11 Truth, whose website houses two separate associations, one of which publishes a peer-reviewed journal entitled *The Journal of 9/11 Studies*. It appears to the authors of this essay that, although we have great respect for these scholars' activism and courage, most of them largely contain their investigations and dialogue to this forum rather than questioning 9/11 in their educational settings at large.

One university web resource from MIT is "Reconstructions: Reflections on Humanity and Media after Tragedyⁱ." A creation of MIT's Comparative Media Program, it is described as "an on-line resource and

study guide” created to “explore, challenge, examine, analyze, debate, share, and host dialoguesⁱⁱ” in response to the real grief of 9/11 and to the new contexts that it created for the social sciences around ethnicity, religious studies, geopolitics, and so on. The creators of “Re:constructions” assert that they do not offer answers but are encouraging people to ask questions before they rush to judgment and action. Yet this resource too offers nothing that facilitates scholarly questioning of the facts of the official 9/11 story itself. It is as if the official version were sacrosanct.

Over the post-9/11 decade, education’s silence on 9/11 studies has become pronounced in the face of mounting scholarship that lays bare the falsehoods of *The 9/11 Commission Report*. This paper does not intend to attempt anything close to a literature review of the vast and ever-growing scholarship that challenges the official 9/11 story, but citing a few to rationalize its appeal for critical study may be important.

Reviewing literature

An important example of such scholarship is David Ray Griffin’s *Debunking 9/11 Debunking: An Answer to Popular Mechanics and Other Defenders of the Official Conspiracy Theory* (2007). The importance of this book derives from its origins as a critical scholarly response to two publications by the magazine *Popular Mechanics*. One was an article entitled “Debunking the 9/11 Myths: Special Report (2005). The other is a conservative-based publication entitled *Debunking 9/11 Myths: Why Conspiracy Theories Can’t Stand Up to the Facts* (Dunbar and Reagan, 2006). Both of these texts were published to lend credibility to the state’s story about fire causing the collapses of the World Trade Centre towers. These publications have done much to ensure that educators and scholars ignore their doubts about the facts of the material events of 9/11. But neither publication is obedient to truth. And the falsehoods of both are exposed cogently by Griffin, whose reputation as an impeccable researcher preceded his wading into 9/11 waters. *Publishers Weekly* describes Griffin’s rebuttal of *Popular Mechanics* as “thorough,” “highly detailed,” characterized by “solid reasoning,” and “deeply unnerving” (Interlink, n.d.). In this piece, Princeton law professor Richard Falk is cited as calling Griffin “America’s number one bearer of unpleasant, yet necessary, public truths.” Griffin’s work on 9/11 meets the standards of scholarship and warrants acknowledgment by educators in their discussions of 9/11, yet it is largely dismissed in classrooms throughout North America.

Griffin also appears as a contributing author in the book *The Hidden History of 9/11* (to which Author #1 also contributed). Republished

by Seven Stories Press in 2008, it was originally published by Elsevier in 2006. Edited by Paul Zarembka, a professor of economics at the State University of New York at Buffalo, this was the first scholarly academic textbook published by a highly respected academic publisher to challenge the official 9/11 story. Yet it was never reviewed by a mainstream media organization or a significant academic journal.

Another important publication that refutes the hard-science claims of the official 9/11 story is Steven Jones's "Fourteen Points of Agreement with Official Government Reports on the World Trade Center Destruction." Although the title of this article suggests conformity with "official government reports," the intention of Jones and his co-authors is critical analysis. Their title was intentionally crafted to by-pass the automatic dismissal of counterarguments that usually occurs, although the paper essentially demolishes the official report. The effectiveness of their paper lies in its engagement with *The 9/11 Commission Report* on its own terms, free of popular perceptions that the report is thorough. This approach reveals, contrary to claims made by *Popular Mechanics* and others, that the report does *not* explain the total collapse of the World Trade Centre towers. Jones notes that the National Institute of Standards and Technology admitted this fact in 2007 when it stated, "We are unable to provide a full explanation of the total collapse." And he writes in response:

We agree that NIST so far has not provided a full explanation for the total collapse. Indeed they take care to explain that their report stops short of the collapse, only taking the investigation up to the point where each Tower "was poised for collapse."

Jones hypothesizes that the total collapse is explainable if explosives were used. He notes NIST's further admission that it "did not test for the residue of these compounds [explosives] in the steel," and he writes:

We agree; there is no evidence that NIST tested for residues of thermite or explosives. This is another remarkable admission. Probing for residues from pyrotechnic materials including thermite in particular, is specified in fire and explosion investigations by the NFPA 921 code.

Near the end of their peer-reviewed paper, Jones and his co-authors state that they have "looked for such residues in the WTC remains using state-of-the-art analytical methods," and they announce that "the evidence for thermite use is mounting" (p. 39). Jones's contributions to 9/11 studies in

this article have considerable implications for educators interested in obedience to the truth of 9/11.

Yet the work of scholars like Griffin and Jones has largely met with silence in academic circles, with the exception of a few invitations to speak to university student groups. Instead, the falsifiable claims made by *Popular Mechanics* have become dogma. This can be seen in instances of hard-science publications that seek to address new material realities created by the physical events of 9/11. Although prior to 9/11 no steel-framed building had ever collapsed due to fire, and certainly not free-fall into its own foundation, the popular perception of 9/11 has made such melting and disintegration of steel appear to be a real possibility. Rather than react to this anomaly, some scholars have chosen to take advantage of the situation by offering creative articles speculating about the vulnerabilities of skyscrapers. For instance, consider the article “‘A new era’: The Limits of Engineering Expertise in a Post-9/11 World,” whose abstract states:

One lesson reinforced by the fall of the towers is that engineers cannot control the entirety of any engineering project. This reality raises questions about professional responsibility as it relates to risk, vulnerability, and uncertainty. (Pfatteicher, 2007, pp. 1-4)

It is important to note that the official story has been clearly challenged by the overwhelming population of engineers and architects willing to speak out, but such smokescreen articles have helped to maintain it. Another example is the article “Progressive Collapse of Structures: Annotated Bibliography and Comparison of Codes and Standards,” whose author notes:

The collapse of the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001, led to demands by the public to amend current building codes and provide protection against collapse caused by extreme events. Following September 11, the literature on progressive collapse mitigation has expanded significantly. Important issues examined by investigators include events leading to progressive collapse, assessment of loads, analysis methods, and design philosophy. (Mohamed, 2006, pp. 418-425)

Even though NIST has not implicated either engineering expertise or progressive collapse in the implosion and disintegration of the twin towers, for practical purposes, as these two articles demonstrate, the

state's lies about 9/11 have managed to become facts. When scholars engage the world through the lens of such hegemonic "facts," the state's (*i.e., the corporate-military-government-academic complex's*) lies are strengthened anew and the silence that makes the lies possible continues to grow.

This has happened not only among scholars in the hard sciences but also among writers in the social sciences and the humanities who have taken the post-9/11 world as their backdrop without problematizing the truth of this new world. Just as the hard sciences have propped up the state's claims about the material events of 9/11, the social sciences and the humanities have repeated the state's claims about the particulars of the 9/11 "terrorist" plot. In often subtle ways, scholars have threaded unproven "facts" about the circumstances of 9/11 into their discourse. This situation has brought the idea of "critical education" to a new low.

Inviting critical discussion

There are many examples of how disputable facts have been unquestioningly accepted as a starting point when teachers and students happen to engage uncritical 9/11 dialogue. One is the continuing belief that Osama bin Laden led the plot and that nineteen known hijackers carried it out. In light of the official reasons for the invasion of Afghanistan, it would seem this allegation would be more subject to scrutiny. It is reasonable to wonder why the US government under George W. Bush did not provide the Taliban with evidence of bin Laden's guilt when asked to do so, instead of risking the perception that it was bent on launching an illegal war. Speculation, of course, is not research. One can understand the reluctance of educators to raise these questions openly. However, in pursuit of "obedience to truth," would critical educators not want to discuss why the US Department of Justice has not formally indicted bin Laden and charged him with the 9/11 attacks? As far back as July 2006, the FBI's director of investigative publicity stated that "the FBI has no hard evidence connecting bin Laden to 9/11":

The FBI gathers evidence. Once evidence is gathered, it is turned over to the Department of Justice. The Department of Justice then decides whether it has enough evidence to present to a federal grand jury. In the case of the 1998 United States Embassies being bombed, bin Laden has been formally indicted and charged by a grand jury. He has not been formally indicted and charged in connection with 9/11

because the FBI has no hard evidence connecting bin Laden to 9/11. (Global Research, n.d.)

It would also be reasonable for educators to acknowledge media reports that several of the so-called 9/11 hijackers are alive. One of these reports came from the British Broadcasting Corporation on 23 September 2001:

Another of the men named by the FBI as a hijacker in the suicide attacks on Washington and New York has turned up alive and well. The identities of four of the 19 suspects accused of having carried out the attacks are now in doubt (BBC, n.d.).

In short, considering the past, present, and future implications of the official story, it would seem reasonable for educators to distinguish between what the state has said about 9/11 and what the state has proved, particularly in light of the rhetoric surrounding the importance of critical thinking and critical pedagogy. Doing so might lead people to believe that the Taliban was correct to question the lack of evidence of bin Laden's alleged role in 9/11 and to acknowledge that there also exists high-school level, primary-source research that puts in question the official conspiracy theory about the hijackers. Rather than repeating the mantra about bin Laden and the hijackers, educators could at least concede that there is little we can say with certainty about the circumstances of the 9/11 "terrorist" plot and therefore be more guarded about political and military decisions based upon absolute claims.

The failure of education to admit such important points is complicated by the fact that in the social sciences and the humanities "things *perceived* as real are real in their consequences" (Bowker and Star, 1999, p. 53). Whereas in the hard sciences the laws of physics remain intact even if some people say that on 9/11 a fire fed by jet fuel and office furniture was able to melt steel within hours, in the social sciences and the humanities lies about history create beliefs that seem never to be challenged effectively (the legend of Christopher Columbus comes to mind). The result of this is the creation of 9/11 literature that repeats the 9/11 illusion when discussing the new socio-political realities of the post-9/11 world. One example especially relevant to education is Anthony Glees's, "My Eureka Moment: The Enemies Within," which discusses "the risks posed today by Islamic terrorists on campus" in the United Kingdom (2010). Glees suggests that examining the student backgrounds of the 9/11 hijackers will help universities to prevent "Islamic terrorists" from radicalizing other students. And he argues that universities should counter

the pull of radicalization on campus by convincing “their students that change in our country must be peaceful and democratic.” It may be true that the *perception* that bin Laden attacked the United States on 9/11 has contributed to a real radicalization of Islamic youth on campuses; perhaps bin Laden is regarded as having issued a call to arms. If this is the case, educators would do well to inform their Muslim and Arab students that bin Laden’s role in 9/11 is unconfirmed. These students should be made aware of the likelihood that they are being exploited by the 9/11 lies and duped into participating in a state-fabricated “war on terror.” Yet Glees cannot make this point because the 9/11 mantra and bin Laden’s guilt are built into his discussion. For this reason too, he suggests that we should examine the student backgrounds of the “hijackers,” but he ignores their probable backgrounds as students who were trained by the US military and the CIA (Newsweek, 2001). Lastly, in offering the “peaceful and democratic” ways of the United Kingdom as a coda for would-be “Islamic terrorists,” Glees overlooks the irony that the non-peaceful war in Afghanistan is undemocratic in light of the government’s 9/11 story. Even Noam Chomsky, one of the liberal left who also over the years has failed to support critical questioning of the official 9/11 story, recently stated, the war is “totally illegal” given the absence of evidence against bin Laden (Press TV, 2010). This uncritical article is based on allegations made against bin Laden while the Twin Towers were still standing. Thus, Glees’s educational piece has served to further diminish possible research into what really happened.

Another example of a 9/11 article in the humanities is Liz Jackson’s “The New Assimilationism: The Push for ‘Patriotic’ Education in the United States since September 11.” This article makes the same verifiably false assumptions about 9/11 to talk about tolerance for Muslims in public schools:

Historically and today these sorts of pushes for assimilationism and patriotism and against multiculturalism serve ultimately to exclude rather than to include more people, despite the proponents’ alleged commitment to equality and individual liberty as promoted in the U.S. constitution. (2010, pp. 108-136)

Here again we see that the *perception* that “Islamic terrorists” are responsible for 9/11 has had real consequences for educational policy and for Muslim students. And again we see, as with Glees’s article, that the most obvious remedy to this situation is absent from the discussion. With the 9/11 mantra operative, Jackson cannot point out that 9/11 provides no

justification for an educational policy that regards the positive recognition of Muslims and Islam as unpatriotic. She notes that assimilationist education contradicts the spirit of the US Constitution, but she does not mention the further Orwellian circumstance that this post-9/11 brand of patriotism is based on a state lie in the form of *The 9/11 Commission Report*. In contrast to Glee, who supports the state's counterterror initiatives, Jackson contests the state's assimilationist education policy, yet by virtue of her silence on 9/11 studies, she too cannot escape complicity with the state's 9/11 lies.

Suggestions are far more powerful hypnotically and more likely to be believed when conveyed indirectly, so it is no wonder the US population continues to become more and more hypnotized by the authoritative declarations of many educators. As it relates to 9/11, even imagining alternative theories for what happened is uncomfortable, to say the least, which allows for such perceptions to grow even stronger. Yet there is hope. Besides this piece, there is one other peer-reviewed article that authentically and critically discusses the key findings of 9/11 studies: Matt Everett's "9/11: The Greatest Lie Ever Told." Everett details a set of evidence in the 9/11 studies literature that exposes the 9/11 inaccuracies and deceptions:

I examine whether Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda were really behind the attacks; I describe evidence that the World Trade Center towers were brought down deliberately with explosives; I examine what could have prevented the U.S. military from intercepting the four targeted airliners; and I show how the alleged crash sites at the Pentagon and in rural Pennsylvania were inconsistent with the plane impacts said to have occurred there. (2010, p. 140)

He also discusses people's reluctance to acknowledge the 9/11 truth evidence, citing the observations of Paul Craig Roberts, former assistant secretary of the US Treasury. Roberts observes that "with 9/11, many Americans feel that they must believe their government so that they don't feel like they are being unsupportive or unpatriotic, and they are very fearful of being called 'terrorist sympathizers.'" Roberts explains the phenomenon of the silence on 9/11 studies in the following terms:

Democracy is based on the assumption that people are rational beings who factually examine arguments and are not easily manipulated. Studies are not finding this to be the case. In my own experience in scholarship, public policy, and

journalism, I have learned that everyone from professors to high school dropouts has difficulty with facts and analyses that do not fit with what they already believe. (p. 151)

Consistent with our interest here in understanding the silence on 9/11 studies among educators, Everett notes the “need for research and analysis, to find why so many people have been resistant to evidence contradicting the official 9/11 story.” He concludes with an observation of much relevance to education:

To understand the attacks, we also need to understand the attackers. What motivated these individuals? Why were their colleagues unable to stop them? How was it possible for them to deceive us, the public, for so long? Addressing questions like these will be of great importance, because, with a fuller understanding of 9/11, we can reduce the risk of an atrocity like it ever happening again. (p. 160)

Everett’s article brings the work of 9/11 studies scholars into the academy and into the arena of educational considerations via the peer-reviewed journal. It may be the first in the humanities to do so. This is an important step. Perhaps articles providing similar synopses of the 9/11 truth evidence will need to appear in journals across the academic disciplines before the facts of 9/11 can acquire enough currency to displace the gross deceptions, partial truths, and remarkable omissions of the *9/11 Commission Report*.

Conclusion

As our cursory survey of the 9/11 studies literature attests, good scholarly work has been done to establish that *The 9/11 Commission Report* is both incomplete and deceitful, yet this fact is unknown or disregarded in most private and public school settings. We have proposed that a fear of being labeled as anti-American or as a “conspiracy theorist” is one reason. The authors know of teachers in America who have been fired or denied tenure for attempting to promote inquiry into the subject. Textbook censorship continues to play a role as well. Most books, for example, still depict Christopher Columbus only in a positive light, ignoring most of the facts about his atrocities against Indigenous populations. The pedagogical value of 9/11 studies ultimately lies in its verifiable identification of a state lie. *The thousands of protestors in the “Occupy Wall Street” movement are demonstrating an ability of young people to respectfully make this assertion in the streets of cities around the world.*

Why cannot professional educators initiate dialogue and research about these claims? Educators, as a result of what already exists in easily accessible literature, should now be confident in telling their students and colleagues that the US government's story does not stand up to scholarship. As more and more courageous educators engage this subject, a heightened awareness of state deception in the post-9/11 decade can define a new era, as education did for postmodernism.

It took many educators to finally bring about a large-scale critical language for talking about media deception and, although critical media studies are still far from reaching a point where they can effectively counter the corporate controlled media phenomenon, there has been success on many levels. We cannot wait much longer for a similar groundswell among educators willing to engage critical 9/11 studies. The global impacts of the corporate-military-government-academic complex are too far-reaching and the potential damage too severe. The violence rationalized by the remarkably unbelievable yet nonetheless believed story of 9/11 will not stop without a critical reckoning that can slow down or redirect the machinery. Even if the *who* and *what* questions about 9/11 are never answered, the question of *why* the state lied about 9/11 has implications that extend far beyond 9/11 and across the scholarly disciplines, as Christoher Bollyn conveys in *Solving 9/11: The Deception that Changed the World* (2009). Critical educators have a golden opportunity to practise their craft in this most important arena, and the authors of this piece hope this overview and our arguments will stimulate large numbers of teachers and students to engage the subject before Orwell's predictions become truer than even he might have imagined.

Critical education, especially in the absence of an independent media that reaches large numbers of people, is the only vehicle for reflecting on the academy's own vulnerability to state control and hegemony. If truth-seeking about September 11 becomes a significant part of education's agenda, an agenda we believe is more important than competing ones such as increasing test scores, then there may be a chance for the citizenry to know who is shaping the education that determines the public mind. With such an education, the public might be able to redirect the downward spiral our world seems to be experiencing. Educators, as partners in the process of truth-seeking with their students, can guide learning in ways that benefit the larger society and its affiliated ecological relationships, or they can serve as pawns for a few special-interest entities. Outcomes of such education would ultimately encourage a rethinking by the citizen population of numerous policies that amount to domestic terrorism in the name of protection from another 9/11 attack.

Endnotes

ⁱ Re:constructions: Reflections on Humanity and Media after Tragedy,
<http://web.mit.edu/cms/reconstructions/front.html>.

ⁱⁱ September 11 Digital Archive,
<http://911digitalarchive.org/guide.php?detail=456>.

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