



[Article]

The Paranoid Style in American Politics

By [Richard Hofstadter](#)

Adjust  

Share   

It had been around a long time before the Radical Right discovered it—and its targets have ranged from “the international bankers” to Masons, Jesuits, and munitions makers.

American politics has often been an arena for angry minds. In recent years we have seen angry minds at work mainly among extreme right-wingers, who have now demonstrated in the Goldwater movement how much political leverage can be got out of the animosities and passions of a small minority. But behind this I believe there is a style of mind that is far from new and that is not necessarily right-wing. I call it the paranoid style simply because no other word adequately evokes the sense of heated exaggeration, suspiciousness, and conspiratorial fantasy that I have in mind. In using the expression “paranoid style” I am not speaking in a clinical sense, but borrowing a clinical term for other purposes. I have neither the competence nor the desire to classify any figures of the past or present as certifiable lunatics. In fact, the idea of the paranoid style as a force in politics would have little contemporary relevance or historical value if it were applied only to men with profoundly disturbed minds. It is the use of paranoid modes of expression by more or less normal people that makes the phenomenon significant.

Of course this term is pejorative, and it is meant to be; the paranoid style has a greater affinity for bad causes than good. But nothing really prevents a sound program or demand from being advocated in the paranoid style. Style has more to do with the way in which ideas are believed than with the truth or falsity of their content. I am interested here in getting at our

political psychology through our political rhetoric. The paranoid style is an old and recurrent phenomenon in our public life which has been frequently linked with movements of suspicious discontent.

Here is Senator McCarthy, speaking in June 1951 about the parlous situation of the United States:

How can we account for our present situation unless we believe that men high in this government are concerting to deliver us to disaster? This must be the product of a great conspiracy on a scale so immense as to dwarf any previous such venture in the history of man. A conspiracy of infamy so black that, which it is finally exposed, its principals shall be forever deserving of the maledictions of all honest men. . . . What can be made of this unbroken series of decisions and acts contributing to the strategy of defeat? They cannot be attributed to incompetence. . . . The laws of probability would dictate that part of . . . [the] decisions would serve the country's interest.

Now turn back fifty years to a manifesto signed in 1895 by a number of leaders of the Populist party:

As early as 1865-66 a conspiracy was entered into between the gold gamblers of Europe and America. . . . For nearly thirty years these conspirators have kept the people quarreling over less important matters while they have pursued with unrelenting zeal their one central purpose. . . . Every device of treachery, every resource of statecraft, and every artifice known to the secret cabals of the international gold ring are being used to deal a blow to the prosperity of the people and the financial and commercial independence of the country.

Next, a Texas newspaper article of 1855:

. . . It is a notorious fact that the Monarchs of Europe and the Pope of Rome are at this very moment plotting our destruction and threatening the extinction of our political, civil, and religious institutions. We have the best reasons for believing that corruption has found its way into our Executive Chamber, and that our Executive head is tainted with the infectious venom of Catholicism. . . . The Pope has recently sent his ambassador of state to this country on a secret commission, the effect of which is an extraordinary boldness of the Catholic church throughout the United States. . . . These minions of the Pope are boldly insulting our Senators; reprimanding our Statesmen; propagating the adulterous union of Church and State; abusing with foul calumny all governments but Catholic, and spewing out the bitterest execrations on all Protestantism. The Catholics in the United States receive from abroad more than \$200,000 annually for the propagation of their creed. Add to this the vast revenues collected here. . . .

These quotations give the keynote of the style. In the history of the United States one find it, for example, in the anti-Masonic movement, the nativist and anti-Catholic movement, in certain spokesmen of abolitionism who regarded the United States as being in the grip of a slaveholders' conspiracy, in many alarmists about the Mormons, in some Greenback and Populist writers who constructed a great conspiracy of international bankers, in the exposure of a munitions makers' conspiracy of World War I, in the popular left-wing press, in the contemporary American right wing, and on both sides of the race controversy today, among White Citizens' Councils and Black Muslims. I do not propose to try to trace the variations of the paranoid style that can be found in all these movements, but will confine myself to a few leading episodes in our past history in which the style emerged in full and archetypal splendor.

Illuminism and Masonry

I begin with a particularly revealing episode—the panic that broke out in some quarters at the end of the eighteenth century over the allegedly subversive activities of the Bavarian Illuminati. This panic was a part of the general reaction to the French Revolution. In the United States it was heightened by the response of certain men, mostly in New England and among the established clergy, to the rise of Jeffersonian democracy. Illuminism had been started in 1776 by Adam Weishaupt, a professor of law at the University of Ingolstadt. Its teachings today seem to be no more than another version of Enlightenment rationalism, spiced with the anticlerical atmosphere of eighteenth-century Bavaria. It was a somewhat naïve and utopian movement which aspired ultimately to bring the human race under the rules of reason. Its humanitarian rationalism appears to have acquired a fairly wide influence in Masonic lodges.

Americans first learned of Illuminism in 1797, from a volume published in Edinburgh (later reprinted in New York) under the title, *Proofs of a Conspiracy Against All the Religions and Governments of Europe, Carried on in the Secret Meetings of Free Masons, Illuminati, and Reading Societies*. Its author was a well-known Scottish scientist, John Robison, who had himself been a somewhat casual adherent of Masonry in Britain, but whose imagination

had been inflamed by what he considered to be the far less innocent Masonic movement on the Continent. Robison seems to have made his work as factual as he could, but when he came to estimating the moral character and the political influence of Illuminism, he made the characteristic paranoid leap into fantasy. The association, he thought, was formed "for the express purpose of rooting out all religious establishments, and overturning all the existing governments of Europe." It had become "one great and wicked project fermenting and working all over Europe." And to it he attributed a central role in bringing about the French Revolution. He saw it as a libertine, anti-Christian movement, given to the corruption of women, the cultivation of sensual pleasures, and the violation of property rights. Its members had plans for making a tea that caused abortion—a secret substance that "blinds or kills when spurted in the face," and a device that sounds like a stench bomb—a "method for filling a bedchamber with pestilential vapours."

These notions were quick to make themselves felt in America. In May 1798, a minister of the Massachusetts Congregational establishment in Boston, Jedidiah Morse, delivered a timely sermon to the young country, which was then sharply divided between Jeffersonians and Federalists, Francophiles and Anglomen. Having read Robison, Morse was convinced of a Jacobinical plot touched off by Illuminism, and that the country should be rallied to defend itself. His warnings were heeded throughout New England wherever Federalists brooded about the rising tide of religious infidelity or Jeffersonian democracy. Timothy Dwight, the president of Yale, followed Morse's sermon with a Fourth-of-July discourse on *The Duty of Americans in the Present Crisis*, in which he held forth against the Antichrist in his own glowing rhetoric. Soon the pulpits of New England were ringing with denunciations of the Illuminati, as though the country were swarming with them.

The anti-Masonic movement of the late 1820s and the 1830s took up and extended the obsession with conspiracy. At first, this movement may seem to be no more than an extension or repetition of the anti-Masonic theme sounded in the outcry against the Bavarian Illuminati. But whereas the

panic of the 1790s was confined mainly to New England and linked to an ultraconservative point of view, the later anti-Masonic movement affected many parts of the northern United States, and was intimately linked with popular democracy and rural egalitarianism. Although anti-Masonry happened to be anti-Jacksonian (Jackson was a Mason), it manifested the same animus against the closure of opportunity for the common man and against aristocratic institutions that one finds in the Jacksonian crusade against the Bank of the United States.

The anti-Masonic movement was a product not merely of natural enthusiasm but also of the vicissitudes of party politics. It was joined and used by a great many men who did not fully share its original anti-Masonic feelings. It attracted the support of several reputable statesmen who had only mild sympathy with its fundamental bias, but who as politicians could not afford to ignore it. Still, it was a folk movement of considerable power, and the rural enthusiasts who provided its real impetus believed in it wholeheartedly.

As a secret society, Masonry was considered to be a standing conspiracy against republican government. It was held to be particularly liable to treason—for example, Aaron Burr's famous conspiracy was alleged to have been conducted by Masons. Masonry was accused of constituting a separate system of loyalty, a separate imperium within the framework of federal and state governments, which was inconsistent with loyalty to them. Quite plausibly it was argued that the Masons had set up a jurisdiction of their own, with their own obligations and punishments, liable to enforcement even by the penalty of death. So basic was the conflict felt to be between secrecy and democracy that other, more innocent societies such as Phi Beta Kappa came under attack.

Since Masons were pledged to come to each other's aid under circumstances of distress, and to extend fraternal indulgence at all times, it was held that the order nullified

The Paranoid Style in Action

The John Birch Society is attempting to suppress a television series about the United Nations by means of a mass letter-writing campaign to the sponsor, . . .

the enforcement of regular law. Masonic constables, sheriffs, juries, and judges must all be in league with Masonic criminals and fugitives. The press was believed to have been so "muzzled" by Masonic editors and proprietors that news of Masonic malfeasance could be suppressed. At a moment when almost every alleged citadel of privilege in America was under democratic assault, Masonry was attacked as a fraternity of the privileged, closing business opportunities and nearly monopolizing political offices.

Certain elements of truth and reality there may have been in these views of Masonry. What must be emphasized here, however, is the apocalyptic and absolutistic framework in which this hostility was commonly expressed. Anti-Masons were not content simply to say that secret societies were rather a bad idea. The author of the standard exposition of anti-Masonry declared that Freemasonry was "not only the most abominable but also the most dangerous institution that ever was imposed on man. . . . It may truly be said to be Hell's master piece."

The Jesuit Threat

Fear of a Masonic plot had hardly been quieted when the rumors arose of a Catholic plot against American values. One meets here again the same frame of mind, but a different villain. The anti-Catholic movement converged with a growing nativism, and while they were not identical, together they cut such a wide swath in American life that they were bound to embrace many moderates to whom the paranoid style, in its full glory, did not appeal. Moreover, we need not dismiss out of hand as totally parochial or mean-spirited the desire of Yankee Americans to maintain an ethnically and religiously homogeneous society nor the particular Protestant commitments to

The Xerox Corporation. The corporation, however, intends to go ahead with the programs. . . .

The July issue of the John Birch Society Bulletin . . .

said an "avalanche of mail ought to convince them of the unwisdom of their

proposed action—just as United Air Lines was persuaded to back down and take the U.N. insignia off their planes." (A United Air Lines spokesman

individualism and freedom that were brought into play. But the movement had a large paranoid infusion, and the most influential anti-Catholic militants certainly had a strong affinity for the paranoid style.

Two books which appeared in 1835 described the new danger to the American way of life and may be taken as expressions of the anti-Catholic mentality. One, *Foreign Conspiracies against the Liberties of the United States*, was from the hand of the celebrated painter and inventor of the telegraph, S.F.B. Morse. "A conspiracy exists," Morse proclaimed, and "its plans are already in operation . . . we are attacked in a vulnerable quarter which cannot be defended by our ships, our forts, or our armies." The main source of the conspiracy Morse found in Metternich's government: "*Austria is now acting in this country. She has devised a grand scheme. She has organized a great plan for doing something here. . . . She has her Jesuit missionaries traveling through the land; she has supplied them with money, and has furnished a fountain for a regular supply.*" Were the plot successful, Morse said, some scion of the House of Hapsburg would soon be installed as Emperor of the United States.

"It is an ascertained fact," wrote another Protestant militant,

that Jesuits are prowling about all parts of the United States in every possible disguise, expressly to ascertain the advantageous situations and modes to disseminate Popery. A minister of the Gospel from Ohio has informed us that he discovered one carrying on his devices in his congregation; and he says that the western country swarms with them under the name of puppet show men, dancing masters, music teachers, peddlers of images and ornaments, barrel organ players, and similar practitioners.

confirmed that the U.N. emblem was removed from its planes, following "considerable public reaction against it.")

Birch official John Rousselot said, "We hate to see a corporation of this country promote the U.N. when we know that it is an instrument of the Soviet Communist conspiracy."

—San Francisco Chronicle, July 31, 1964

Lyman Beecher, the elder of a famous family and the father of Harriet Beecher Stowe, wrote in the same year his *Plea for the West*, in which he considered the possibility that the Christian millennium might come in the American states. Everything depended, in his judgment, upon what influences dominated the great West, where the future of the country lay. There Protestantism was engaged in a life-or-death struggle with Catholicism. "Whatever we do, it must be done quickly. . . ." A great tide of immigration, hostile to free institutions, was sweeping in upon the country, subsidized and sent by "the potentates of Europe," multiplying tumult and violence, filling jails, crowding poorhouses, quadrupling taxation, and sending increasing thousands of voters to "lay their inexperienced hand upon the helm of our power."

Anti-Catholicism has always been the pornography of the Puritan. Whereas the anti-Masons had envisaged drinking bouts and had entertained themselves with sado-masochistic fantasies about the actual enforcement of grisly Masonic oaths,¹ the anti-Catholics invented an immense lore about libertine priests, the confessional as an opportunity for seduction, licentious convents and monasteries. Probably the most widely read contemporary book in the United States before *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was a work supposedly written by one Maria Monk, entitled *Awful Disclosures*, which appeared in 1836. The author, who purported to have escaped from the Hotel Dieu nunnery in Montreal after five years there as novice and nun, reported her convent life in elaborate and circumstantial detail. She reported having been told by the Mother Superior that she must "obey the priests in all things"; to her "utter astonishment and horror," she soon found what the nature of such obedience was. Infants born of convent liaisons were baptized and then killed, she said, so that they might ascend at once to heaven. Her book, hotly attacked and defended, continued to be read and believed even after her mother gave testimony that Maria had been somewhat addled ever since childhood after she had rammed a pencil into her head. Maria died in prison in 1849, after having been arrested in a brothel as a pickpocket.

Anti-Catholicism, like anti-Masonry, mixed its fortunes with American party politics, and it became an enduring factor in American politics. The American Protective Association of the 1890s revived it with ideological variations more suitable to the times—the depression of 1893, for example, was alleged to be an international creation of the Catholics who began it by starting a run on the banks. Some spokesmen of the movement circulated a bogus encyclical attributed to Leo XIII instructing American Catholics on a certain date in 1893 to exterminate all heretics, and a great many anti-Catholics daily expected a nationwide uprising. The myth of an impending Catholic war of mutilation and extermination of heretics persisted into the twentieth century.

Why They Feel Dispossessed

If, after our historically discontinuous examples of the paranoid style, we now take the long jump to the contemporary right wing, we find some rather important differences from the nineteenth-century movements. The spokesmen of those earlier movements felt that they stood for causes and personal types that were still in possession of their country—that they were fending off threats to a still established way of life. But the modern right wing, as Daniel Bell has put it, feels dispossessed: America has been largely taken away from them and their kind, though they are determined to try to repossess it and to prevent the final destructive act of subversion. The old American virtues have already been eaten away by cosmopolitans and intellectuals; the old competitive capitalism has been gradually undermined by socialistic and communistic schemers; the old national security and independence have been destroyed by treasonous plots, having as their most powerful agents not merely outsiders and foreigners as of old but major statesmen who are at the very centers of American power. Their predecessors had discovered conspiracies; the modern radical right finds conspiracy to be betrayal from on high.

Important changes may also be traced to the effects of the mass media. The villains of the modern right are much more vivid than those of their paranoid predecessors, much better known to the public; the literature of the paranoid style is by the same token richer and more circumstantial in

personal description and personal invective. For the vaguely delineated villains of the anti-Masons, for the obscure and disguised Jesuit agents, the little-known papal delegates of the anti-Catholics, for the shadowy international bankers of the monetary conspiracies, we may now substitute eminent public figures like Presidents Roosevelt, Truman, and Eisenhower, secretaries of State like Marshall, Acheson, and Dulles, Justices of the Supreme Court like Frankfurter and Warren, and the whole battery of lesser but still famous and vivid alleged conspirators headed by Alger Hiss.

Events since 1939 have given the contemporary right-wing paranoid a vast theatre for his imagination, full of rich and proliferating detail, replete with realistic cues and undeniable proofs of the validity of his suspicions. The theatre of action is now the entire world, and he can draw not only on the events of World War II, but also on those of the Korean War and the Cold War. Any historian of warfare knows it is in good part a comedy of errors and a museum of incompetence; but if for every error and every act of incompetence one can substitute an act of treason, many points of fascinating interpretation are open to the paranoid imagination. In the end, the real mystery, for one who reads the primary works of paranoid scholarship, is not how the United States has been brought to its present dangerous position but how it has managed to survive at all.

The basic elements of contemporary right-wing thought can be reduced to three: First, there has been the now-familiar sustained conspiracy, running over more than a generation, and reaching its climax in Roosevelt's New Deal, to undermine free capitalism, to bring the economy under the direction of the federal government, and to pave the way for socialism or communism. A great many right-wingers would agree with Frank Chodorov, the author of *The Income Tax: The Root of All Evil*, that this campaign began with the passage of the income-tax amendment to the Constitution in 1913.

The second contention is that top government officialdom has been so infiltrated by Communists that American policy, at least since the days leading up to Pearl Harbor, has been dominated by men who were shrewdly and consistently selling out American national interests.

Finally, the country is infused with a network of Communist agents, just as in the old days it was infiltrated by Jesuit agents, so that the whole apparatus of education, religion, the press, and the mass media is engaged in a common effort to paralyze the resistance of loyal Americans.

Perhaps the most representative document of the McCarthyist phase was a long indictment of Secretary of State George C. Marshall, delivered in 1951 in the Senate by senator McCarthy, and later published in a somewhat different form. McCarthy pictured Marshall as the focal figure in a betrayal of American interests stretching in time from the strategic plans for World War II to the formulation of the Marshall Plan. Marshall was associated with practically every American failure or defeat, McCarthy insisted, and none of this was either accident or incompetence. There was a "baffling pattern" of Marshall's interventions in the war, which always conduced to the well-being of the Kremlin. The sharp decline in America's relative strength from 1945 to 1951 did not "just happen"; it was "brought about, step by step, by will and intention," the consequence not of mistakes but of a treasonous conspiracy, "a conspiracy on a scale so immense as to dwarf any previous such venture in the history of man."

Today, the mantle of McCarthy has fallen on a retired candy manufacturer, Robert H. Welch, Jr., who is less strategically placed and has a much smaller but better organized following than the Senator. A few years ago Welch proclaimed that "Communist influences are now in almost complete control of our government"—note the care and scrupulousness of that "almost." He has offered a full scale interpretation of our recent history in which Communists figure at every turn: They started a run on American banks in 1933 that forced their closure; they contrived the recognition of the Soviet Union by the United States in the same year, just in time to save the Soviets from economic collapse; they have stirred up the fuss over segregation in the South; they have taken over the Supreme Court and made it "one of the most important agencies of Communism."

Close attention to history wins for Mr. Welch an insight into affairs that is given to few of us. "For many reasons and after a lot of study," he wrote some years ago, "I personally believe [John Foster] Dulles to be a

Communist agent." The job of Professor Arthur F. Burns as head of Eisenhower's Council of Economic Advisors was "merely a cover-up for Burns's liaison work between Eisenhower and some of his Communist bosses." Eisenhower's brother Milton was "actually [his] superior and boss within the Communist party." As for Eisenhower himself, Welch characterized him, in words that have made the candy manufacturer famous, as "a dedicated, conscious agent of the Communist conspiracy"—a conclusion, he added, "based on an accumulation of detailed evidence so extensive and so palpable that it seems to put this conviction beyond any reasonable doubt."

Emulating the Enemy

The paranoid spokesman sees the fate of conspiracy in apocalyptic terms—he traffics in the birth and death of whole worlds, whole political orders, whole systems of human values. He is always manning the barricades of civilization. He constantly lives at a turning point. Like religious millennialists he expresses the anxiety of those who are living through the last days and he is sometimes disposed to set a date for the apocalypse. ("Time is running out," said Welch in 1951. "Evidence is piling up on many sides and from many sources that October 1952 is the fatal month when Stalin will attack.")

As a member of the avant-garde who is capable of perceiving the conspiracy before it is fully obvious to an as yet unaroused public, the paranoid is a militant leader. He does not see social conflict as something to be mediated and compromised, in the manner of the working politician. Since what is at stake is always a conflict between absolute good and absolute evil, what is necessary is not compromise but the will to fight things out to a finish. Since the enemy is thought of as being totally evil and totally unappeasable, he must be totally eliminated—if not from the world, at least from the theatre of operations to which the paranoid directs his attention. This demand for total triumph leads to the formulation of hopelessly unrealistic goals, and since these goals are not even remotely attainable, failure constantly heightens the paranoid's sense of frustration. Even partial

success leaves him with the same feeling of powerlessness with which he began, and this in turn only strengthens his awareness of the vast and terrifying quality of the enemy he opposes.

The enemy is clearly delineated: he is a perfect model of malice, a kind of amoral superman—sinister, ubiquitous, powerful, cruel, sensual, luxury-loving. Unlike the rest of us, the enemy is not caught in the toils of the vast mechanism of history, himself a victim of his past, his desires, his limitations. He wills, indeed he manufactures, the mechanism of history, or tries to deflect the normal course of history in an evil way. He makes crises, starts runs on banks, causes depressions, manufactures disasters, and then enjoys and profits from the misery he has produced. The paranoid's interpretation of history is distinctly personal: decisive events are not taken as part of the stream of history, but as the consequences of someone's will. Very often the enemy is held to possess some especially effective source of power: he controls the press; he has unlimited funds; he has a new secret for influencing the mind (brainwashing); he has a special technique for seduction (the Catholic confessional).

It is hard to resist the conclusion that this enemy is on many counts the projection of the self; both the ideal and the unacceptable aspects of the self are attributed to him. The enemy may be the cosmopolitan intellectual, but the paranoid will outdo him in the apparatus of scholarship, even of pedantry. Secret organizations set up to combat secret organizations give the same flattery. The Ku Klux Klan imitated Catholicism to the point of donning priestly vestments, developing an elaborate ritual and an equally elaborate hierarchy. The John Birch Society emulates Communist cells and quasi-secret operation through "front" groups, and preaches a ruthless prosecution of the ideological war along lines very similar to those it finds in the Communist enemy.² Spokesmen of the various fundamentalist anti-Communist "crusades" openly express their admiration for the dedication and discipline the Communist cause calls forth.

On the other hand, the sexual freedom often attributed to the enemy, his lack of moral inhibition, his possession of especially effective techniques for fulfilling his desires, give exponents of the paranoid style an opportunity to

project and express unacknowledgeable aspects of their own psychological concerns. Catholics and Mormons—later, Negroes and Jews—have lent themselves to a preoccupation with illicit sex. Very often the fantasies of true believers reveal strong sadomasochistic outlets, vividly expressed, for example, in the delight of anti-Masons with the cruelty of Masonic punishments.

Renegades and Pedants

A special significance attaches to the figure of the renegade from the enemy cause. The anti-Masonic movement seemed at times to be the creation of ex-Masons; certainly the highest significance was attributed to their revelations, and every word they said was believed. Anti-Catholicism used the runaway nun and the apostate priest; the place of ex-Communists in the avant-garde anti-Communist movements of our time is well known. In some part, the special authority accorded the renegade derives from the obsession with secrecy so characteristic of such movements: the renegade is the man or woman who has been in the Arcanum, and brings forth with him or her the final verification of suspicions which might otherwise have been doubted by a skeptical world. But I think there is a deeper eschatological significance that attaches to the person of the renegade: in the spiritual wrestling match between good and evil which is the paranoid's archetypal model of the world, the renegade is living proof that all the conversions are not made by the wrong side. He brings with him the promise of redemption and victory.

A final characteristic of the paranoid style is related to the quality of its pedantry. One of the impressive things about paranoid literature is the contrast between its fantasied conclusions and the almost touching concern with factuality it invariably shows. It produces heroic strivings for evidence to prove that the unbelievable is the only thing that can be believed. Of course, there are highbrow, lowbrow, and middlebrow paranoids, as there are likely to be in any political tendency. But respectable paranoid literature not only starts from certain moral commitments that can indeed be justified but also carefully and all but obsessively accumulates "evidence." The difference between this "evidence" and that

commonly employed by others is that it seems less a means of entering into normal political controversy than a means of warding off the profane intrusion of the secular political world. The paranoid seems to have little expectation of actually convincing a hostile world, but he can accumulate evidence in order to protect his cherished convictions from it.

Paranoid writing begins with certain broad defensible judgments. There was something to be said for the anti-Masons. After all, a secret society composed of influential men bound by special obligations could conceivably pose some kind of threat to the civil order in which they were suspended. There was also something to be said for the Protestant principles of individuality and freedom, as well as for the nativist desire to develop in North America a homogeneous civilization. Again, in our time an actual laxity in security allowed some Communists to find a place in governmental circles, and innumerable decisions of World War II and the Cold War could be faulted.

The higher paranoid scholarship is nothing if not coherent—in fact the paranoid mind is far more coherent than the real world. It is nothing if not scholarly in technique. McCarthy's 96-page pamphlet, *McCarthyism*, contains no less than 313 footnote references, and Mr. Welch's incredible assault on Eisenhower, *The Politician*, has one hundred pages of bibliography and notes. The entire right-wing movement of our time is a parade of experts, study groups, monographs, footnotes, and bibliographies. Sometimes the right-wing striving for scholarly depth and an inclusive world view has startling consequences: Mr. Welch, for example, has charged that the popularity of Arnold Toynbee's historical work is the consequence of a plot on the part of Fabians, "Labour party bosses in England," and various members of the Anglo-American "liberal establishment" to overshadow the much more truthful and illuminating work of Oswald Spengler.

The Double Sufferer

The paranoid style is not confined to our own country and time; it is an international phenomenon. Studying the millennial sects of Europe from the eleventh to the sixteenth century, Norman Cohn believed he found a persistent psychic complex that corresponds broadly with what I have been considering—a style made up of certain preoccupations and fantasies: “the megalomaniac view of oneself as the Elect, wholly good, abominably persecuted, yet assured of ultimate triumph; the attribution of gigantic and demonic powers to the adversary; the refusal to accept the ineluctable limitations and imperfections of human existence, such as transience, dissention, conflict, fallibility whether intellectual or moral; the obsession with inerrable prophecies . . . systematized misinterpretations, always gross and often grotesque.”

This glimpse across a long span of time emboldens me to make the conjecture—it is no more than that—that a mentality disposed to see the world in this way may be a persistent psychic phenomenon, more or less constantly affecting a modest minority of the population. But certain religious traditions, certain social structures and national inheritances, certain historical catastrophes or frustrations may be conducive to the release of such psychic energies, and to situations in which they can more readily be built into mass movements or political parties. In American experience ethnic and religious conflict have plainly been a major focus for militant and suspicious minds of this sort, but class conflicts also can mobilize such energies. Perhaps the central situation conducive to the diffusion of the paranoid tendency is a confrontation of opposed interests which are (or are felt to be) totally irreconcilable, and thus by nature not susceptible to the normal political processes of bargain and compromise. The situation becomes worse when the representatives of a particular social interest—perhaps because of the very unrealistic and unrealizable nature of its demands—are shut out of the political process. Having no access to political bargaining or the making of decisions, they find their original conception that the world of power is sinister and malicious fully confirmed. They see only the consequences of power—and this through distorting lenses—and have no chance to observe its actual machinery. A

distinguished historian has said that one of the most valuable things about history is that it teaches us how things do not happen. It is precisely this kind of awareness that the paranoid fails to develop. He has a special resistance of his own, of course, to developing such awareness, but circumstances often deprive him of exposure to events that might enlighten him—and in any case he resists enlightenment.

We are all sufferers from history, but the paranoid is a double sufferer, since he is afflicted not only by the real world, with the rest of us, but by his fantasies as well.

Richard Hofstadter was DeWitt Clinton Professor of American History at Columbia University. His book "Anti-Intellectualism in American Life" was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for General Nonfiction in 1964. This essay was adapted from the Herbert Spencer Lecture, delivered at Oxford University in November 1963.

TAOS

Conservatism, Conspiracies, History, Political psychology, Radicalism, United States

More from Richard Hofstadter

The future of American violence

From the
November 1964 issue

[Download PDF](#)

From the Archive

Timeless stories from our 171-year archive handpicked to speak to the news of the day.

Enter email

[Sign Up](#)

RELATED

