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Leo Ribuffo and “the “Paranoid Style” in American (Intellectual) Politics”

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Leo Ribuffo should be writing this reflection on the four years since Donald Trump’s election. Diane Labrosse kindly asked me to contribute after reading my 2017 remarks celebrating Ribuffo’s pathbreaking 1983 *The Old Christian Right: The Protestant Far Right from the Great Depression to the Cold War*. Andrew Hartman put together the roundtable that took place just weeks before Ribuffo unexpectedly passed away and made sure the papers, including Ribuffo’s, were published. But Labrosse’s kind invitation to contribute to H-Diplo gave me a chance to revisit the *Old Christian Right*, Ribuffo’s 2017 essay on Donald Trump and the uses and abuses of Richard Hofstadter’s “paranoid style,” and what I wrote less than a year into the Trump Administration.¹

Rereading Ribuffo’s work offered a reminder that wit, style, and rigor have been and remain missing from scholarly and journalistic understandings of American politics. Weeks after the 2020 election, when voters once again defied pollsters, understandings of the Far Right’s complexity and its relationship to more mainstream, respectable conservatives seems painfully, if not dangerously, simplistic. Yet the work done continues to raise concerns about Ribuffo’s warnings of an overblown Brown Scare, a phrase that he carefully chose in the early 1980s to link 1930s fears of Far-Right intellectuals to New Left scholars’ reconsiderations of McCarthyism and other anti-Communist crusades. Words can lead to violence, which has broken and continues to break bones, not just with sticks and stones but the bullets that killed peaceful protesters in Kenosha, WI. Brutality was endemic to U.S. politics before the president terrified reporters and scholars by asking the Proud Boys, a Far-Right white supremacist men’s group, to “stand back and stand by” in the first 2020 presidential debate. It is a relief to see mainstream media sources finally cover the savagery that intellectuals’ and politicians’ ideas can inspire even though they continue, as Ribuffo noted in 1983 and 2017, to oversimplify the Far Right and the breadth of U.S. politics.²

Ribuffo rightly put a lot of blame of Hofstadter’s famous argument of American politics’ paranoid style, a “famous catch phrase” that, Ribuffo insisted, “should be buried with a stake in its heart.” Truer words have never been written, at least in the fields of U.S. intellectual and political history. Ribuffo’s 2017 essay is as much a tour de force as his famous article, “Why is There So Much Conservatism in the United States and Why Do So Few Historians Know Anything About It,” a comprehensive, stunning, and hilarious rebuke to Alan Brinkley’s “The Problem of American Conservatism” in the same 1994 *American Historical Review* special issue. Ribuffo’s response unfortunately inspired many historians studying the Right, particularly after the so-called 1994 Republican Revolution, to cite Ribuffo’s *Old Christian Right* in footnotes listing work on conservatism. Yet, as both he and I reminded everyone at the 2017 panel honoring him,

¹ Leo P. Ribuffo, *The Old Christian Right: The Protestant Far-Right from the Great Depression to the Cold War* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1983); Leo P. Ribuffo, “Donald Trump and the ‘Paranoid Style’ in American (Intellectual) Politics,” H-Diplo/ISSF, Policy Series: America and the World—2017 and Beyond, 13 June 2017, <https://issforum.org/ISSF/PDF/Policy-Roundtable-1-5AN.pdf>; Leo P. Ribuffo, “Retrospective Roundtable on Leo Ribuffo’s *Old Christian Right*: Final Entry from Ribuffo,” *U.S. Intellectual History Blog*, 9 December 2018, <https://s-usih.org/2018/12/retrospective-roundtable-on-leo-ribuffos-old-christian-right-final-entry-from-ribuffo/>; Elizabeth Tandy Shermer, “Retrospective Roundtable on Leo Ribuffo’s *Old Christian Right*: Entry 4 from Shermer,” *U.S. Intellectual History Blog*, 8 December 2018, <https://s-usih.org/2018/12/retrospective-roundtable-on-leo-ribuffos-old-christian-right-entry-4-from-shermer/>.

² Nate Cohn, “What Went Wrong with Polling? Some Early Theories,” *New York Times*, 10 November 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/11/10/upshot/polls-what-went-wrong.html>; Neil MacFarquhar, “Suspect in Kenosha Killings Lionized the Police,” *New York Times*, 27 August 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/27/us/kyle-rittenhouse-kenosha.html>; Craig Timberg and Elizabeth Dwoskin, “Trump’s Debate Comments Give an Online Boost to a Group Social Media Companies have long Struggled Against,” *New York Times*, 30 September 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2020/09/30/trump-debate-rightwing-celebration/>; Kathleen Belew, “Why ‘Stand Back and Stand By’ Should Set Off Alarm Bells,” *New York Times*, 2 October 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/02/opinion/trump-proud-boys.html>.

his book focused on the Far Right, both deeply intertwined with and attacked by the young men (like William Buckley) who endeavored to make conservatism respectable after World War II.³

Ribuffo's 2017 essay went a step further to show the consequences of liberal, pluralist intellectuals, like Hofstadter and the other contributors to Daniel Bell's 1963 *Radical Right*, which is as frequently cited and rarely read as Hofstadter's 1967 *Paranoid Style in American Politics and Other Essays*. But Ribuffo read them both carefully and understood the larger context in which they dabbled in psychology and laid out an understanding of American politics based on a clear left, right, and center. He also pointed out the criticisms that their work received at the time and in subsequent decades as scholars reconsidered American populism and nineteenth-century Populists. That research did little to stop "a term of art with some theoretical and empirical basis" from deteriorating "into an unexamined catch phrase" by 1980, when Hofstadter had been dead for a decade and Daniel Bell had joined Ronald Reagan's winning coalition.⁴

"Allusions to a mere paranoid *style* to describe Trump," Ribuffo emphasized in 2017, "seem almost mild." Sales of Sinclair Lewis's *It Can't Happen Here* had skyrocketed, academics and public intellectuals openly conflated Trumpism with fascism; and psychologists publicly proclaimed him mentally unfit for office, breaking the famous "Goldwater rule" that exemplified the use and abuse of psychology in the *Radical Right*. Ribuffo did not expect better "from the self-congratulatory mainstream media" or "politicians and activists [who] pick up any available rhetorical stick to clobber an opponent."⁵

But Ribuffo rightly wanted more from scholars, especially those who had become public intellectuals. They, after all, should have recognized in 2016 and 2017 that many of the conspiracies that energize the president and his supporters do "not fit Hofstadter's core criterion, a conviction that history itself is a conspiracy." Such analysis would require a real effort at the hard work of understanding the president and his die-hard fans, or "stans" in the lexicon of social media. That kind of effort, "no easy task" as Ribuffo admitted, would also have highlighted that "the latest 'extremists' on the right are not hermetically sealed off from temporarily less volatile conservatives—including most congressional Republicans."⁶

That point highlighted how salient Ribuffo's work has been and remains. "Rescuing the 1930s" was central to *The Old Christian Right*, whose rich portrayals of William Pelley, Gerald Winrod, and Gerald L.K. Smith excavated their lives, writings, and evolving anti-Semitic and anti-Catholic convictions. Their ideas represented an important, misunderstood part of American intellectual and political traditions that defy postwar pluralist proclamations of a left, right, and, what Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. considered, a vital center. Fascism, as Ribuffo emphasized, was but one facet of Far-Right politics in both Western Europe and the United States. Moreover, Pelley, Winrod, and Smith had important connections to mainstream politicians and businessmen, such as Henry Ford, and enough followers to have a real chance of winning elections, much to the alarm of the FBI, Congress, and the Roosevelt Administration. Ribuffo correctly wanted historians to "try to do better" than fall back on Hofstadter's misunderstood catchphrase in 2017, after the GOP had earned the Party of No nickname and Republicans had already dutifully lined up behind newly-elected President Trump.⁷

Ribuffo's warnings seemed almost prophetic weeks before the 2020 election. Senate Republicans have refused to pass additional COVID-19 relief and rushed Amy Coney Barrett's Supreme Court confirmation. Journalists covered Senator Mitch McConnell's obstinacy and

³ Ribuffo, "Donald Trump and the 'Paranoid Style,'" quoted 1; Leo P. Ribuffo, Why Is There So Much Conservatism in the United States and Why Do So Few Historians Know Anything about It?, *The American Historical Review* 99:2 (April 1994): 438–449, <https://doi.org/10.1086/ahr/99.2.438>.

⁴ Ribuffo, "Donald Trump and the 'Paranoid Style,'" quoted 12.

⁵ Ribuffo, "Donald Trump and the 'Paranoid Style,'" quoted 13.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*; Ribuffo, *The Old Christian Right*; Michael Grunwald, "The Victory of 'No,'" *Politico*, 4 December 2016, <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2016/12/republican-party-obstructionism-victory-trump-214498>.

opportunism whilst simultaneously fretting over the president's remarks about the Proud Boys and linking politicians to QAnon conspiracy theories.⁸

Over the past three years, I have hence become more convinced that Ribuffo rightly warned about reporters' and historians' mischaracterizations of the Far Right but wrongly considered the Brown Scare trumped up. *The Old Christian Right* highlighted forgotten FBI investigations, hearings, lawsuits, and jail sentences, all affronts to the civil liberties that Americans hold dear, including those in his generation of historians who reexamined Communist witch-hunts. Yet those historians have shown that anti-Communist crusades ruined, and sometimes ended, the lives of actors, teachers, union organizers, and ordinary Americans so often aspiring for the equality now guaranteed by law but painfully rare in practice. Some radicals highlighted the violence perpetrated by the Far Right, which has been poorly covered in histories of the many struggles for political, economic, and social justice. Journalist, lawyer, and anti-fascist crusader Carey McWilliams, for example, offered a searing portrait of the radicals who were lynched while trying to organize the many white, Black, Latinx, and Asian laborers struggling to survive the Golden State's *Factories in the Field* (1939). California farmlands were soaked with blood decades before the Oklahoma City bombing started to draw attention to increasingly common acts of domestic terrorism. Homegrown white supremacist groups, as the Department of Homeland Security only recently noted, have been more likely to plan and carry them out.⁹

Leo and I actually talked at length after the roundtable, somewhat about why our perspectives differed on the threat that the Far Right posed then and in the past. He and I had only occasionally emailed before this roundtable even though he had been close to my graduate advisor and spent his career in the DC area, where I was born shortly before the *Old Christian Right's* publication. But I grew up a veritable world away from the high-minded scholarly circles in which Leo thrived. I had up-close, personal exposure to the Far Right and its violent fantasies and conspiracies before the Oklahoma City bombing and the 1999 Columbine massacre that convinced a friend to stop wearing a black trench coat to our Northern Virginia high school. Leo marveled that he never would have guessed from reading my work on Barry Goldwater, American conservatism, or the Sunbelt where the small Far Right defied pollsters' predictions and played a pivotal role in upending state, local, and party politics decades before Ross Perot's ill-fated run reportedly inspired Trump.¹⁰

I like to think that high praise reflects how Ribuffo and I both recognized before voting in the 2020 election began: "Trumpism is not going away—especially if he looks like a martyr driven from office by cosmopolitan elites." Even the predicted, much hoped for "blue wave" could not have been able to wash something away that more Americans voted for in 2020 than in 2016. The Far Right has been and remains too complex to be reduced to one man, simply labeled fascist, or assumed to be separate from mainstream conservatism or the Republican Party. As such, the challenge of excavating the Far Right's past, understanding its present-day varieties, and considering its future implications should be an interdisciplinary undertaking beyond "reductionist and bizarre psychoanalytic undertakings" or economic "rational expectations" models since, as Ribuffo reiterated, "human beings are more complicated than they think they are."¹¹

I'm just relieved that he admitted that sometimes "blowing off steam" can be helpful to the most serious of scholars. Leo even ended his witty, thoughtful remarks by reminding us all in his New Jersey vernacular, that "President Trump is a stuck-up bigot, bully, blowhard,

⁸ Emma Green, "The Amy Coney Barrett Hail-Mary Touchdown," *The Atlantic*, 26 October 2020, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2020/10/amy-coney-barrett-supreme-court/616865/>; Jacob Jarvis, "QAnon Linked to at Least 44 Election Candidates in 2020—and Some Could Win," *Newsweek*, 21 September 2020, <https://www.newsweek.com/qanon-candidates-2020-election-win-1532853>; Susan Davis, "Senate GOP COVID-19 Relief Bill Fails," *NPR*, 10 September 2020, <https://www.npr.org/2020/09/10/911414284/senate-gop-covid-relief-bill-fails-prospects-of-bipartisan-deal-before-election->

⁹ Shermer, "Retrospective Roundtable on Leo Ribuffo's *Old Christian Right*;" Jenny Gross, "Far-Right Groups Are Behind Most U.S. Terrorist Attacks," *New York Times*, 24 October 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/24/us/domestic-terrorist-groups.html>.

¹⁰ Elizabeth Tandy Shermer, *Sunbelt Capitalism: Phoenix and the Transformation of American Politics* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013); Jonathan Martin, "Ross Perot and Donald Trump," 9 July 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/07/09/us/politics/ross-perot-presidential-candidate.html>.

¹¹ J.T. Young, "So Much for the 'Blue Wave,'" *The Hill*, November 6, 2020, <https://thehill.com/opinion/campaign/524796-so-much-for-the-blue-wave>; Ribuffo, "Donald Trump and the 'Paranoid Style,'" quoted 14.

and con man.” I can think of many academics who would agree. I just wish they’d stop themselves from tweeting it. There’s enough covfefe out there already.¹²

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¹² Ribuffo, “Donald Trump and the ‘Paranoid Style,’ ” quoted 14; Matt Flegenheimer, “What’s a ‘Covfefe?’” *New York Times*, May 31, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/31/us/politics/covfefe-trump-twitter.html>.