

Lloyd Gardner on Richard Hofstadter, “The Paranoid Style in American Politics” (*Harper's Magazine*, November 1964, pp. 77-86).

When I was a graduate student Richard Hofstadter's recently published “Age of Reform” (1955), a Pulitzer Prize book, was already being hotly debated. Discussion centered – as it would in later books by Norman Pollock and Lawrence Goodwyn – over his interpretations of Populism, particularly as they related to the movement as a precursor of McCarthyism. It seemed that the Populists were guilty of many sins, including anti-Semitism and nativist anti-foreign attitudes in general. Pollock and Goodwyn saw the Populists in a much more favorable light, as forward looking members of a movement dedicated to genuine democratization in the face of a rapidly industrializing society. William Appleman Williams also participated in the debate, in a round-about fashion much later, with the publication of his “Roots of the American Empire.” Williams saw American expansionist moves as driven by the need to accommodate agrarian discontent about persistent surpluses that kept the domestic market depressed. The process he described was a rational response to dislocations in the marketplace as revealed in archival records of Senate and House committees, while Hofstadter attempted to analyze Populism by extracting inflammatory statements from manifestos and orations. It is well to remember that Hofstadter – who became justly famous as a political historian – began as an intellectual historian with his “Social Darwinism in American Thought, 1860-1915” (1944). Hofstadter's frustration with the evolution of American politics is the key to understanding his article under discussion, as well as much of his writing. “I am interested here in getting at our political psychology through our political rhetoric.” Read today, this caveat seems more of a warning about the results of such a study than it did when the article was published.

The opening sections of “The Paranoid Style in American Politics” offer a connection between Populism and McCarthyism even more explicitly made than in “Age of Reform.” He begins with the senator describing a “conspiracy of infamy” that had produced a “strategy of defeat.” In the midst of the stalemated Korean War, McCarthy's accusations struck a vein of discontent, spawned, it must be said, at least in part by exaggerated notions of American predominance as first proclaimed by President Truman in his descriptions of the atomic bomb, and the boast that only in America could the bomb have been developed – a remark that came home to haunt the Democratic Administration when the Soviets exploded an atomic device only four years after Hiroshima. If it could only have been done in America, then the case for treason seems unanswerable – at least on the surface. An analysis of presidential rhetoric is missing in the article. McCarthy might have been the Midwestern nativist fully deserving of Hofstadter's loathing, but it was a New York Judge, Irving R. Kaufman, who sentenced the Rosenbergs to death on the grounds that the Russians would not have gotten the bomb for years, and would never dared to start the Korean War otherwise. True, Kaufman did not describe a vast conspiracy that included such figures as General Marshall as

McCarthy did, but his insistence that the thousands of deaths in the Korean War could be blamed on conspirators giving the Russians the secret of the bomb was not, after all, so dissimilar as to be completely outside the paranoid style.

From McCarthy, Hofstadter turns back first to the Populists and provides readers with a quotation from a manifesto denouncing the “conspiracy . . . entered into between the gold gamblers of Europe and America,” who had used every device of treachery known to man to deal a blow to the prosperity of the people and “the financial and commercial independence of the country.” About two decades ago I had students in my classes who stayed up all night to hear the earliest BBC reports on gold prices in the London markets as willing reporters for Lyndon LaRouche, whose American Labor Party’s target at the time was Queen Elizabeth (later it was to be Jane Fonda). Fear of foreign manipulation of gold prices, common to the Populists and LaRouche, is a quite different matter than McCarthyite charges of espionage carried out for ideological reasons. Hofstadter’s article too easily slides over such differences, as he races on back to still earlier examples of the paranoid style: anti-Catholicism, the anti-Masonic Party, and the 1790s fear of the Illuminati. These “conspirators” brought forth nothing much more impressive than a resounding Fourth-of-July oration from Yale President Timothy Dwight on the dangers of Jeffersonian democracy. “Soon the pulpits of New England were ringing with denunciations of the Illuminati, as though the country were swarming with them.” Why the Illuminati, a splinter group of intellectuals whose anti-clericalism was hardly unknown at the time, rated such attention (and indeed until Hofstadter they were largely forgotten) is not explained except that they seem to provide another example of the paranoid style in the earliest era of American politics. He promotes the Illuminati question above the insults Federalists and Republicans daily exchanged – many of them harsher than what goes on today in negative TV ads – and which became the object of the Alien & Sedition Acts.

Hofstadter acknowledges that while the paranoid style has a greater affinity for bad causes than good, “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 have read over those statements several times in an effort to grasp fully the distinction. It is a difficult task. If the paranoid style reflects a penchant for dangerous excess in political thinking, when does the style itself become the heart of the demand? Or as Marshall McLuhan quipped, when does the medium become the message? And Hofstadter seems to agree, for no matter what grievances are addressed, nothing will satisfy the authors of manifestos, because their heart is in changing the world, not in accommodating different views. He suggests that paranoids habitually project onto the despised conspirators almost supernatural abilities to influence events, and even that they vicariously envy the supposed sinful diversions they deny to good people like themselves. Remember the classic definition of a true Puritan as someone who suspects that somewhere in the world someone is having fun?

In these days of PNAC manifestos and General Boykin’s assurances that the American cause is just because his God is bigger than Osama Bin Laden’s God, Hofstadter’s

description of the anti-Catholic writings of celebrated Americans, Samuel F.B. Morse and Lyman Beecher, is a well-taken point that there was always a powerful strain of millenarian thought in American politics long before the thirst for oil influenced American policy. Beecher's writings about the struggles with world Catholicism and the expected final battle for superiority between Protestantism and the Vatican on the Western frontier – where America's future (and the world's) would be determined -- could easily be updated beyond the Cold War to the idea that the object of radical Islam is to re-establish the Caliphate on a world scale. The trouble with any generalization about a paranoid style is that it is a generalization. If pressed one could find "it" in practically all political rhetoric from local politics to national politics in practically all eras. There is no effort in the article to suggest how important the style is in actually determining policies at any specific time. That being the case, the effort risks becoming simply descriptive (as political scientists suggest we historians are too often) instead of analytical (as we reply we truly are).

John Foster Dulles had no doubts about what separated the United States from its European allies in meeting the Communist challenge in the Cold War:

The American people, far more than the people of either Britain or France, are a religious people who like to feel that their international policies have a moral quality. By and large throughout our history we have stood for policies which could be expressed in moral terms. Perhaps there has been an element of hypocrisy in this respect but also there is a very genuine dedication to moral principles as contributing the element of "enlightenment" to what is called "enlightened self-interest."

There is a particular antipathy in the American people to the so-called "colonial" policies of the Western Europe powers. The U.S. is the first colony to win independence and feels sympathetic to the aspirations of colonial and dependent peoples and . . . [are] strongly vexed at the leadership which communism is giving to these aspirations, while we seem inhibited from giving that leadership because of our alliance with the colonial powers.¹

As he mulled over what he had written in this July 1954 draft of a personal think-piece, it seemed not yet enough. So Dulles added in longhand, "There is also strong opposition to giving moral approval to Soviet rule over captive peoples, as seems implicit in U.K. attitudes."

There has always been an assumption, as above, that American ends are those desired by the rest of the world, if they are guided in the right direction away from the taint of "old Europe," as someone said recently. In this light, separating out the "paranoid style" in American politics is a difficult assignment. Richard Hofstadter was a very great historian. His "American Political Tradition" remains one of a very few five-star

¹ Dulles, draft, "The 'Big Three' Alliance," July 11, 1954, The Papers of John Foster Dulles, Subject File, Box 8, Mudd Library, Princeton University, Princeton, New Jersey.

treatments of the whole sweep of the tradition and the men who made it. The article under discussion here, however, seems more time bound to the era of Cold War thought, and particularly Hofstadter's efforts to come to terms with McCarthyism, and the turmoil of the early 1960s surrounding civil rights issues, and, inevitably, the assassination of John F. Kennedy. But, even so, it calls attention to the persistent fear of betrayal and conspiracy, products, one might argue in addition, of an essentially borderless nation where "threats" arise from supposed ideological dangers as much as foreign arms, from the time of the Puritans onward to today's Patriot Act.

¹ Dulles, draft, "The 'Big Three' Alliance," July 11, 1954, The Papers of John Foster Dulles, Subject File, Box 8, Mudd Library, Princeton University, Princeton, New Jersey.

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