

AMERICAN PANIC

FROM THE *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *HOW THE STATES GOT THEIR SHAPES*



A HISTORY *of*
WHO SCARES US AND WHY

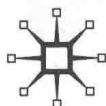
MARK STEIN

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AMERICAN PANIC

To Harry and David

Acknowledgments

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Introduction

“It is better TO LIGHT A CANDLE
than curse the darkness.”

—Chinese proverb

Political panic, the irrational fear that one's government is in danger, is by no means unique to any country. In America, it dates back to the 1692 Salem witch hunt, though conceivably earlier panics may have occurred among Native American tribes. The panic that began in Salem commenced after seizures suddenly afflicted three girls, ages nine through twelve. When the colony's physicians could not explain it, fear arose that sorcery was taking place in Salem and endangering its Puritan rule. After the first suspect was arrested and charged with witchcraft, a capital crime, more accusations quickly followed, many of them leveled by individuals who stood to gain from the conviction of the people they accused. In little over a year, nineteen colonists were executed, eight others awaited execution, fifty awaited sentencing, and 150 still awaited trial when the colony's governor ended the proceedings by fiat.

What happened in Salem over 300 years ago continues to reverberate in the United States. “Witch hunt” remains a phrase in the American vernacular, ensconced in our dictionaries as an investigation of disloyalty based on unverified assertions and public fear. In other ways, too, the Salem witch

hunt entailed elements of political panic that have continued to contribute to a pattern in American political panic. That there is a pattern in political panic can be seen when William Gribbin, concisely describing today's Tea Party movement, wrote, "Growing out of neighborhood protest rallies, burgeoning in a climate of hostility toward established politicians . . . [it] soon became an organized political force. It fostered a raw democracy, attacked every hint of special privilege, and so drove even its foes to emulation."¹ The pattern emerges from the fact that Gribbin was not writing about the Tea Party. He was writing about the Anti-Masonic Party, an early nineteenth-century movement barely remembered today.

An element regarding the present-day Tea Party that echoes an element from the Salem witch hunt surfaced when *Washington Post* commentator Susan Jacoby wrote in the paper's October 20, 2010, online edition, "All of the Tea Party/Republican candidates this year are ignorant." The statement did that which statements by Tea Party adherents frequently do: stereotype a group of people. In so doing, the statement entered the realm of panic by *doing that which it fears*. Similarly, during the Salem witch hunt, one of the townspeople urged a slave in the community to prepare a "witch's cake," a confection made with urine from a person whom the devil has possessed. The cake is then fed to a dog. The dog's ingesting of the cake was believed to cause the devil to spit out, from the possessed person's mouth, the identity of his agent. Here, too, panic resided in doing that which one feared; in this instance, fearing that sorcery was endangering the community, the townspeople engaged, via the slave-made "witch's cake," in sorcery.

This book seeks to illuminate such elements that form this recurring pattern in American political panic. It seeks to light a candle rather than curse those who curse the darkness since, as the pattern to be unearthed will show, none of us is immune from political panic. Most of us, upon becoming aware of other groups, have entered the portals that can lead to panic. "On one level or another, we're all drawn to conspiracy theories," the legendary FBI profiler John Douglas observed with Mark Olshaker in *The Anatomy of Motive* (1999). "They make the world seem comprehensible." The danger one feels when sensing conspiracy is the same sense of danger that is present

in the panics explored in this book. Among these panics have been fears of conspiracies by witches, Catholics, communists, capitalists, Muslims, and the Japanese after Pearl Harbor. Others sensed danger to the republic emanating less from conspiracy than what they perceived to be the nature of Native Americans, Africans and their African American descendants, Jews, Chinese, Latinos, homosexuals, and women. As with fears of conspiracy, fears based on stereotypes help make the world comprehensible. What makes none of us immune is that *the perception of a pattern*, which makes the world comprehensible to those who fear conspiracies, is what enables all of us to understand concepts and events.²

Along with the fact that none of us is immune from political panic is the fact that *not all political alarm is panic*. Panic is a type of alarm, the elements of which will be unearthed and assembled in the pages that follow. As the elements that compose this pattern assemble, they will in turn illuminate why some people panic and others don't. Here, too, events at Salem set the stage. Some accusers, as previously suggested, may have participated in the panic for personal gain. Others, quite likely, simply went along to get along. Of those who did not succumb to panic, many probably, even if privately, did not believe in sorcery. One highly influential Massachusetts colonist who did believe in sorcery but remained skeptical of the panic in Salem was Cotton Mather. Mather, a prominent Boston minister and physician, was the author of a 1689 book, *Memorable Providences Relating to Witchcrafts and Possessions*. Still, he criticized the Salem trials. Three elements that recurred in subsequent panics surface via Cotton Mather. The first is a *misbegotten assertion*—in this case, that witches exist—misbegotten because it was based on a second recurring element in political panic, an *unverified claim*. Such a claim in Mather's book is exemplified in his statement, "The blessed God hath made some to come from the Damned, for the Conviction—may it also be for the Conversion—of us that are yet alive." Though Mather undoubtedly believed this statement, no basis existed to verify his claim other than faith. Ironically, Mather's criticism of the trials in Salem resulted from the court's acceptance of unverified claims. He vigorously objected to the admission of "spectral evidence,"

testimony that a defendant appeared to a witness in a vision. That Mather fell victim to an unverified claim and yet criticized the use of the same element reveals a third element that recurs in political panic: *alarmists cannot be stereotyped*.

Confessions, which can serve as verified claims, are another element that we will see recur in many political panics, including the panic over witchcraft. During the trials, the slave who prepared the "witch's cake," Tituba, confessed to seeing particular accused women "ride upon sticks" and "hurt the children."³ In an account written shortly after the episode by Robert Calef, he records Tituba later claiming "that her master [Samuel Parris, the father of one of the accused girls] did beat her [Tituba] and otherways abuse her to make her confess."⁴ At the time of the trial, Tituba's confession saved her life, but also bestowed credence on the claims of the accusers—much as confessions continued to do in panics to come.

The panic over witchcraft reached the point where two dogs were put to death after coming to be suspected of possession by the devil.⁵ While the execution of dogs for witchcraft may appear to be the high-water mark of the panic, these acts occurred when widespread panic was receding. As will be seen in many of the episodes examined in this book, panic intensifies in some individuals as they perceive it to be diminishing among others.

One important difference between the panic at Salem and those that commenced later is that the Salem witch hunt predated the Constitution. For that reason, the witch hunt helps illuminate the extent to which the Constitution of the United States has affected political panic. One immediately recognizable difference is how suddenly the panic at Salem ended. "I have also put a stop to the printing of any discourse one way or the other," Governor William Phips wrote to the king, ". . . because I saw a likelihood of kindling an inextinguishable flame if I should admit any publique and open Contests. . . . They are now stopt till their Majesties pleasure be known."⁶ Lacking a constitutionally mandated freedom of speech, right to assemble, and system of checks and balances among the colony's executive, judicial, and legislative functions, the king's appointed governor had the authority to end trials, vacate verdicts, and prohibit speech or gatherings. After

the American Revolution and the adoption of the Constitution, political panic in America would not be so easy to halt.

Though the colonists in Salem did not have the Constitution, they did have something Americans associate with the Constitution: founding fathers. Political panics in the United States—both those emanating from the political right and left—have been and remain replete with references to the nation's founders. For American Puritans in 1692, their foremost founding father was John Winthrop, who articulated the vision for this new community while en route with his fellow Puritans in 1630. Winthrop declared, "Wee must be knitt together in this worke as one man . . . [and] abridge ourselves of our superfluities." He then invoked the biblical image of a New Jerusalem when he added, "Wee shall be as a Citty upon a Hill."⁷ Seven decades later, Cotton Mather lamented how far they had strayed from the vision of their founders. "They will not find New England a New Jerusalem," he wrote, adding that "many of the rising generation . . . grow weary of their Church-State."⁸

Few people today think of John Winthrop as one of America's founding fathers, but the quest he expressed has remained deeply rooted in the nation's political landscape. In *Puritan Origins of the American Self* (1975), historian Sacvan Bercovitch detailed how Americans altered the Puritan quest to create a New Jerusalem in the New World by turning it into a secular mission in which the United States would change the world as a beacon of freedom and democracy. President John F. Kennedy echoed John Winthrop when he declared in his 1961 inaugural address, "The eyes of all people are truly upon us, and our governments, in every branch . . . must be as a city upon a hill—constructed and inhabited by men aware of their great trust and their great responsibilities." President Ronald Reagan, in his 1989 farewell address, reprised, "I've spoken of the shining city all my political life . . . a tall proud city built on rocks stronger than oceans. . . . And if there had to be city walls, the walls had doors and the doors were open to anyone with the will and the heart to get here."

In exploring the political panics that have erupted in America, this book will progress as chronologically as possible, given the varying lengths and

overlaps of the panics. It will also progress from identifying recurring elements to analyzing them. This exploration will not present full histories of the resistance of those groups over whom there was panic, or of those Americans who spoke out against panic, except when such responses significantly impacted on the panic. Ultimately, this book will seek to determine whether such episodes can be avoided, or at least minimized. Can this nation's political landscape be drained of the muck of hysteria? To find out, we must put on political rubber gloves and dig into three centuries of battered and often blood-soaked earth.

One

“Hyenas in human form—no good
INDIANS except those that are dead.”

—CHICAGO TRIBUNE headline, January 3, 1891

Of all the political panics in American history, none has been more deadly than that which fueled the ethnic cleansing of the people who populated what is now the United States prior to the arrival of Europeans. Far more unarmed Native American women, children, and elderly were killed in the United States than all the people killed in the nation's other political panics combined. The treatment of Native Americans provides insight into a fundamental question regarding political panic: When is violence against a group of people an act of panic as opposed to an act of war?

From the colonial era through the nineteenth century, whites often viewed Native Americans as a threat to the expansion of settlements believed necessary for economic and political security. One of the first such conflicts was the Pequot War (1637–38). In that war, panic clearly surfaced when the colonists surrounded a fortified Pequot encampment and, recognizing the danger of charging into it, opted to burn it and kill anyone who tried to escape the flames—including women, children, and the elderly. *Any* Pequot was thus regarded as a threat. Commanding officer John Mason justified this killing of women and children when he wrote in his report, “But God

was above them who laughed his enemies and the enemies of his people to scorn, making them as a fiery oven. . . . Thus did the Lord judge among the heathen, filling the place with dead bodies!"¹ It is conceivable that God favored the colonists over the Pequots, but it is not verifiable. As in the actions taken against accused witches, people were killed on the basis of an unverified claim.

Actions based on unverified claims are not, in and of themselves, acts of panic since we often act on the basis of assumptions. What is beginning to surface from the witchcraft panic and the massacre of the Pequots, however, is that an individual is susceptible to panic to the extent that he or she acts on the basis of unverified claims.

Panic in the Newly Born United States

In both the American Revolution and the War of 1812, Native Americans fought on both sides, based on what each tribe perceived to be its political best interest. In August 1813, Creek Indians from the Red Sticks tribe attacked American forces at Fort Mims in Alabama, where many noncombatants had sought safety. In this instance, it was the Native Americans who set fire to the premises, resulting in the deaths of scores of unarmed elderly, women, and children—and demonstrating that Native Americans, too, are susceptible to panic.²

The massacre of whites at Fort Mims also illustrates other elements that recur in political panic. The first of these is, not surprisingly, *panic breeds panic*. This element can be seen in the *Universal Gazette* of Washington, D.C.; its October 29, 1813, report on the massacre described the Red Sticks as "savages" who lack "feelings of common humanity." This stereotype is, in turn, predicated on two elements that recur in political panics right up to the present day. One of these elements is the use of an *absolute*—in this instance, the assertion that *all* Red Sticks lack empathetic feelings. The assertion is akin to the absolute implicit in John Mason's claim regarding God's condemnation of all the Pequots. Surfacing as well in the *Gazette* statement is the use of a *filtered fact*. The absolute the newspaper applied to the Red