Richard

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THE PARANOID STYLE IN AMERICAN POLITICS

and Other Essays

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Introduction

THE most difficult and delicate task that faces the author of a book of essays is that of writing an introduction that makes his various pieces seem considerably more unified, in theme and argument, than they were in fact when they were written. The best case for gathering essays in a book is simply that it makes them more accessible and more permanent. The best case that can be made for the unity of any such collection is a personal and informal one, and perhaps for that reason is rarely resorted to: it is that the several parts, as the product of a single mind, have a certain stamp upon them; they must be, at least in their style of thought and their concerns, unified by some underlying intellectual intent.

The pieces in this book were written over a span of fourteen years, and during that time I have not always been of the same mind about historical and political matters in general or about some of the particulars dealt with here. Some unresolved tensions undoubtedly remain. It is not, then, a single consistent argument but a set of related concerns and methods that unites these essays. They fall into two groups: one deals with conditions that have given rise to the extreme right of the 1950's and the 1960's, the other with the origins of certain characteristic problems of the earlier modern era when the American mind was beginning to respond to the facts of industrialism

and world power. All deal with public responses to a critical situation or an enduring dilemma, whether it is the sudden threat posed by giant business to competition, the panic of the 1890's and the long-standing monetary disputes and sectional animosities it brought to a head, the moral shock of our nascent imperialism, the effects of resurgent fundamentalism on secular politics, the impact of the cold war on the public consciousness.

Since these studies have to do with the style of our political culture as a whole, and with certain special styles of thought and rhetoric that have prevailed within it, they tell more about the milieu of our politics than about its structure. They are more centrally concerned with the symbolic aspect of politics than with the formation of institutions and the distribution of power. They focus on the way large segments of the public respond to civic issues, make them their own, put them to work on national problems, and express their response to these problems in distinctive rhetorical styles. Because my concern is in this sense a bit one-sided, it is necessary to be clear—it is here that the intent of these essays is most likely to be misunderstood—that my reasons for emphasizing milieu rather than structure do not stem from the belief that, of the two, milieu is more important. My case is a more moderate one: it rests—quite aside from the pleasure I take in analyzing styles of thought—on two convictions: first, that our political and historical writing, until recently, has tended to emphasize structure at the cost of substantially neglecting milieu; and second, that an understanding of political styles and of the symbolic aspect of politics is a valuable way of locating ourselves and others in relation to public issues.

The older conception of politics was that it deals with the question: Who gets what, when, how? Politics was taken as an arena in which people define their interests as rationally as possible and behave in a way calculated to realize them as fully as possible. But Harold Lasswell, who made this mono-

syllabic question the title of a well-known book on the substance of politics, was one of the first in this country to be dissatisfied with the rationalistic assumptions which it implied and to turn to the study of the emotional and symbolic side of political life. It became important to add a new conception to the older one: Who perceives what public issues, in what way, and why? To the present generation of historical and political writers it has become increasingly clear that people not only seek their interests but also express and even in a measure define themselves in politics; that political life acts as a sounding board for identities, values, fears, and aspirations. In a study of the political milieu these things are brought to the surface.

No doubt it is, more than anything else, the events of our time, and among these some of the most ominous and appalling, that have launched students of society upon a restless search for new methods of understanding. But the work of other intellectual disciplines has also made the present generation of historians more conscious of important aspects of behavior which our predecessors left largely in the background. An increasing interest of philosophers, anthropologists, and literary critics in the symbolic and myth-making aspects of the human mind has found its way into historical writing, and with it has come a growing sensitivity to the possibilities of textual analysis. The application of depth psychology to politics, chancy though it is, has at least made us acutely aware that politics can be a projective arena for feelings and impulses that are only marginally related to the manifest issues. The findings of public-opinion polls have made us far less confident than we used to be that the public responds to the issues as they are debated, and more aware that it reacts to them chiefly when they become the object of striking symbolic acts or memorable statements, or are taken up by public figures who themselves have a symbolic appeal. Our enhanced feeling for the non-rational side of politics has thrown into

question a whole series of once confidently asserted propositions about the behavior of voters in the past.

People respond, in short, to the great drama of the public scene. But this drama, as it is set before them and as they perceive it, is not identical with questions involving material interests and the possession of power. Even those who exercise power are not immune to the content of the drama. In any case, they are forced to deal, as an element in their calculations, with the emotional life of the masses, which is not something that they can altogether create or manipulate, but something that they must cope with. The political contest itself is deeply affected by the way in which it is perceived and felt.

This does not mean that the material interests of politics can be psychologized away or reduced to episodes in intellectual history. It means only that historians and political scientists have always worked, implicitly or explicitly, with psychological assumptions; that these ought to be made as conscious as possible; and that they should be sophisticated enough to take ample account of the complexity of political action. I have no interest in denying the reality, or even the primacy, of the problems of money and power, but only in helping to define their reality by turning attention to the human context in which they arise and in which they have to be settled.

To accept all this is not to abandon whatever was of value in the old conception of political history; it suggests that this conception ought to be supplemented by another which amplifies our sense of political life and does justice to the variety of political activity. The intellectual currents stirred by such minds as Freud and Weber, Cassirer and Mannheim, have begun to move American historical writing in exploratory directions. The work of analyzing the significance of intellectual and rhetorical styles, of symbolic gestures, and of the specialized ethos of various subgroups within the population has already produced some remarkable studies. Henry Nash

Smith has applied such techniques to the role of the frontier as myth and symbol, Oscar Handlin to the clashing ethos of native and immigrant groups, David Potter to the cultural effects of American wealth, Lee Benson, Marvin Meyers, and John William Ward to the issues of Jacksonian democracy, David B. Davis to the social politics of the middle period, David Donald and Stanley Elkins to the slavery question, Eric McKitrick to Reconstruction, C. Vann Woodward and W. J. Cash to the problems of Southern identity, and Irwin Unger to the contrasting mentalities of money reformers and their opponents.

This volume embodies comparable preoccupations of my own. For many years I have been interested in the conspiratorial mind portrayed in the essay on the paranoid style. Today this mentality is of particular interest as it is manifest on the extreme right wing, among those I have called pseudo-conservatives, who believe that we have lived for a generation in the grip of a vast conspiracy. But this is not a style of mind confined to the right wing. With modulations and differences, it exists today, as it has in the past, on the left, and it has recurred at times in democratic movements from anti-Masonry to populism. "Coin" Harvey's interpretation of American history, for example, sets forth a conspiratorial view of events which has much in common with that of the founder of the John Birch Society, though the first of these men spoke in the interests of the oppressed and downtrodden, while the other is enthralled by rugged individualism.

The mind of "Coin" Harvey illustrates another tendency of our politics which runs through these pieces—the tendency to secularize a religiously derived view of the world, to deal with political issues in Christian imagery, and to color them with the dark symbology of a certain side of Christian tradition. "Coin" Harvey's expectations of this profane world were based on a faith, stated quite explicitly in his later years, that social issues could be reduced rather simply to a battle between

a Good and an Evil influence. His almost superstitious Manicheanism, his belief that the Evil influence, if not soon curbed, would bring about a terrible social apocalypse, were not unlike the conceptions prevalent on the extreme right today. (Unfortunately, in our time the views of the extreme right have greater capacity for becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy.) Of course, the power of world communism, which has taken the place of the international bankers' syndicate as the central embodiment of evil, is a far more imposing reality. But my point is that the model on which the world is interpreted contains the same exaggerations, the same crusading mentality, the same sense that all our ills can be traced to a single center and hence can be eliminated by some kind of final act of victory over the evil source. If the warnings of those who diagnose the central treachery are not heeded soon enough, it is argued, we are finished: the world confronts an apocalypse of a sort prefigured in the Book of Revelation.

It is not only in its Manichean and apocalyptic carryovers that the evangelical spirit has entered our thinking about politics. Modern "conservatism" is still pervaded by the spirit of ascetic Protestantism—by the old conviction that economic life, quite as much as religious life, ought to provide a machinery for the disciplining of character. As I have tried to show in my studies of the antitrust movement and of pseudo-conservatism and the Goldwater movement, much of our national anxiety can be traced to the fear that the decline of entrepreneurial competition will destroy our national character, or that the same effect will be brought about by our hedonistic mass culture and by the moral laxity that has grown up with and is charged to our liberal and relativistic intellectual climate.

A further concern which underlies several of the essays is the history of our ethnic animosities, which in America have been at times almost a substitute for the class struggle and in any case have always affected its character. Today we are

acutely aware once again of the pressing issue of racial justice. But the especially poignant problem of the American Negro is only the largest and most difficult of a number of ethnic problems arising out of our polyglot population. Our ethnic mixture has imposed upon our class structure a peculiar, complex status system, and has made the achievement of a full American identity a recurrent difficulty which has had profound political effects. The curse of what we call "second-class citizenship" is perennial in American politics.

Finally, one of these essays deals with the way in which public preoccupations with feelings of outraged humanity and with aggressive desires have influenced a foreign-policy decision. The public debates over our policy toward Cuba and the Philippines in the 1890's showed in rapid sequence how the American sense of mission had its aggressive as well as its benign content. Again, in discussing the Goldwater campaign, I have tried to show how the contemporary craving for finality in our foreign policy is related to our national experience, especially to our singular transition from a continental power with more or less complete hegemony in the Western Hemisphere to a world power whose aspirations now outrun its reach.

Since so many of these pages deal with the contemporary right wing and its backgrounds, a word of clarification may be necessary. The prominence of the right wing reflects a certain recurrent interest on my part in writing about the historical background of contemporary events. It does not result from any disposition to exaggerate the numbers or the representativeness of our right-wing enthusiasts. As I hope I have made clear in more than one of these studies, the American right wing represents only a small portion of the American public. Anyone whose own observations of our political life still leave him in doubt about this judgment can put it to the test by drawing up a list of typical right-wing attitudes and policies on public questions and comparing them with the responses

of the general public to relevant questions in opinion polls. The polls, of course, are not infallible, but their findings here, as in many other situations, can be verified in other ways—for example, by examining the lengthening list of right-wing senators and other politicians of similar persuasion whose recent careers have been cut short by the electorate. Nonetheless, the right wing, from McCarthyism to Goldwaterism, has made itself acutely felt in our time. Its effectiveness rests in part, no doubt, on plenty of enthusiasm, money, and zealous activity and on increasingly adequate organization. But it rests as well, I believe, on certain points of contact with real problems of domestic life and foreign policy and with widespread and deeply rooted American ideas and impulses. It is against this larger background that I have tried to illuminate some of its themes.

R.H.

June 1965

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Part I

Studies in the American Right

THE PARANOID STYLE IN AMERICAN POLITICS

This essay is a revised and expanded version of the Herbert Spencer Lecture, delivered at Oxford in November 1963. An abridged text appeared in *Harper's Magazine*, November 1964.

I

ALTHOUGH American political life has rarely been touched by the most acute varieties of class conflict, it has served again and again as an arena for uncommonly angry minds. Today this fact is most evident on the extreme right wing, which has shown, particularly in the Goldwater movement, how much political leverage can be got out of the animosities and passions of a small minority. Behind such movements there is a style of mind, not always right-wing in its affiliations, that has a long and varied history. I call it the paranoid style simply because no other word adequately evokes the qualities 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 would have little contemporary relevance or historical value if it were applied only to people with profoundly disturbed minds. It is the use of paranoid modes of expression by more or less normal people that makes the phenomenon significant.

When I speak of the paranoid style, I use the term much as a historian of art might speak of the baroque or the mannerist style. It is, above all, a way of seeing the world and of expressing oneself. Webster defines paranoia, the clinical entity, as a chronic mental disorder characterized by systematized delusions of persecution and of one's own greatness. In the paranoid style, as I conceive it, the feeling of persecution is central, and it is indeed systematized in grandiose theories of conspiracy. But there is a vital difference between the paranoid spokesman in politics and the clinical paranoiac: although they both tend to be overheated, oversuspicious, overaggressive, grandiose, and apocalyptic in expression, the clinical paranoid sees the hostile and conspiratorial world in which he feels himself to be living as directed specifically *against him;* whereas the spokesman of the paranoid style finds it directed against a nation, a culture, a way of life whose fate affects not himself alone but millions of others. Insofar as he does not usually see himself singled out as the individual victim of a personal conspiracy,[1] he is somewhat more rational and much more disinterested. His sense that his political passions are unselfish and patriotic, in fact, goes far to intensify his feeling of righteousness and his moral indignation.

[1] There are, of course, exceptions to this rule, particularly among the most outré right-wing agitators—see especially Leo Lowenthal and Norbert Guterman: *Prophets of Deceit: A Study of the Techniques of the American Agitator* (New York, 1949), ch. 9—but their significance is arguable. See, however, the interesting suggestions on the relation between styles of thought and patterns of psychosis in N. McConaghy: "Modes of Abstract Thinking and Psychosis," *American Journal of Psychiatry*, CXVII (August 1960), 106–10.

Of course, the term "paranoid style" is pejorative, and it is meant to be; the paranoid style has a greater affinity for bad causes than good. But nothing entirely prevents a sound program or a sound issue from being advocated in the paranoid style, and it is admittedly impossible to settle the merits of an argument because we think we hear in its presentation the characteristic paranoid accents. Style has to do with the way in which ideas are believed and advocated rather than with the truth or falsity of their content.[2]

A few simple and relatively non-controversial examples may make this distinction wholly clear. Shortly after the assassination of President Kennedy, a great deal of publicity was given to a bill, sponsored chiefly by Senator Thomas E. Dodd of Connecticut, to tighten federal controls over the sale of firearms through the mail. When hearings were being held on the measure, three men drove 2,500 miles to Washington from Bagdad, Arizona, to testify against it. Now there are arguments against the Dodd bill which, however unpersuasive one may find them, have the color of conventional political reasoning. But one of the Arizonans opposed it with what might be considered representative paranoid arguments, insisting that it was "a further attempt by a subversive power to make us part of one world socialistic government" and that it threatened to "create chaos" that would help "our enemies" to seize power.[3]

Again, it is common knowledge that the movement against the fluoridation of municipal water supplies has been catnip for cranks of all kinds, especially for those who have obsessive

[2] Milton Rokeach, in *The Open and Closed Mind* (New York, 1960), has attempted to distinguish systematically between the content of ideas and the way in which they are espoused. It is important to bear in mind, however, that while any system of beliefs can be espoused in the paranoid style, there are certain beliefs which seem to be espoused almost entirely in this way.

[3] *Interstate Shipment of Firearms,* Hearings before the Committee on Commerce, U.S. Senate, 85th Cong., 1st and 2nd sess. (1964), p. 241; *cf. pp. 240–54, passim (January 30, 1964).*