

The Paranoid Style in History
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Paranoia is a psychological ailment in which a person believes that everyone is out to get him. Many paranoids believe that there are hidden enemies buried deeply in society (deep state) who are responsible for their own miseries. They believe that the elites (the educated and/or the wealthy) deliberately keep the poor and miserable from thriving.

The latter category are not psychologically afflicted, but are rather victims of manipulators who play upon the "unfairness" of those in power. The manipulators evoke in the lesser educated masses righteous anger and the desire to destroy those who are keeping them from their brave new world. This is populism at its worst.

A great scholar, Richard Hofstadter, in 1962, published an essay in Harper's Magazine that was a summary of his just published book: The Paranoid Style in American Politics. He identified periodic surges of populist anger in American history with such claims as "the deep state" (a hidden government inside the government), "bankers" (codeword for Jews with money), "fake press" (code words for educated elites), and immigrants (cheap labor taking their jobs).

His identification of America's paranoid style has received much praise from scholars and enjoys new life today as we live through another episode of this paranoid style. The elements of paranoid style are demagogues whose public rants can stir up an audience and a string of conspiracy theories that magnify and lie about the people in charge and the values that sustain them.

Hofstadter has plenty to work with when he explores America's history, but I am even more interested in how deadly this paranoid style has been throughout world history. Since the Middle Ages in Europe, when the first conspiracy theories emerged that Jews were behind all evil and that the cure would be their extermination, there have been many other victims of conspiracy theories: witches, Quakers, Masonic Order, and during revolutions, the nobility and priests.

Hitler was a particularly adept manipulator of public discontent. He stirred up the masses and identified Jews, the handicapped, Gypsies, Slavs, and the Deep State (intellectuals, the press, the judges, and enemies in the armed forces).

Scholars familiar with Hofstadter's book, were shocked to see a perfect exemplar of this paranoia get elected to the American presidency. While the majority of voters did not vote for him (three million of them), the electoral college system was cleverly exploited to get votes from people rife with conspiracy theories and deep suspicion of the governing elites. The Internet was used to spread conspiracy theories, targeted at the same sort of people who once got it through the rumor mill, word of mouth.

Cynical and more educated people, who were not paranoid, supported a demagogue because they expected to personally benefit from his promises. Hitler was initially supported by Germany's aristocrats who expected law and order to replace potential anarchy. They got order, and they got law, but at a terrible cost: a world war that left their country in shambles and their demagogue and his enablers dead.

Fortunately, and with thanks to our Founding Fathers, it is much more difficult for a paranoid-employing demagogue to overwhelm us as was done in Germany. We have a majority population vested in the idea of rule of law, in separation of powers that protects us against a dictator, and with independent courts and independent (not state owned) press.

Our founders worried about an untrammelled leader, one who might become a tyrant with no opposition. They gave the publicly elected Congress power to use a legal mechanism called an impeachment investigation to hear evidence against a president abusing his power to benefit himself or who has been seduced (or blackmailed) by a foreign power to favor their wishes rather than his country's. Congress can impeach with a majority vote. Then the impeachment case goes to the Senate (the more elite branch) for a trial that must have a two-thirds majority vote to remove the president from power.

Once out of power, the courts can then pursue the president for crimes. This system promises to reawaken our respect for what the founders gave us.

684 words

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