

Book Notes:

Reading in the Time of Coronavirus

By Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence
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'The Paranoid Style in American Politics'

Several years ago, I found myself in the breakfast nook of the Hampton Inn in Rock Springs, Wyoming. With a Fox News anchor bloviating on one TV and CNN talking heads pontificating on the other, as I noshed my powdered eggs, turkey sausage, and ersatz home fries – I am a sucker for breakfast buffets, good, bad, or indifferent – I couldn't help but overhear the folks at a nearby table discussing the coming military takeover of the Mountain West.

By their account, working off plans by the U.S. Army to conduct maneuvers in the region later in the summer, black helicopters would soon descend to disarm the locals while those who resisted would be interned in the local Walmart, which would have been confiscated by the government, emptied of its wares and converted into a detention center. They conversed with such nonchalance one would have thought they were discussing the weather, the Green River's current depth (or lack thereof) or the prospects for the University of Wyoming Cowboys upcoming football season.

But they were earnest. They thought the "war" for their America was about to erupt.

Today, reading about Marjorie Taylor Greene, the Q-Anon enthusiast who is also the U.S. Representative in Congress from a district in northern Georgia, I thought about these people, Tara Westover's family in her memoir *Educated*, the Weavers of Ruby Ridge, Idaho, Timothy McVeigh, the deadliest native-born domestic terrorist in American history, and assorted others of the lunatic right-wing fringe.

I asked myself, "Who are these people?"

And when that "war" they thought was about to begin does not erupt, I asked myself, "What will they do?"

Well, the answer to my naive second question – naïve because why was I so

sure the “war” would not erupt? – is simple. Like all doom prophets, conspiracy theorists, and predictors of the “*End Times*” on date “X,” when the end, doom, or conspiracy does not occur, they simply pivot, pick a new date, and wait. Or some take preemptive action hoping to spark the end’s onslaught and storm the Capitol of the United States, leaving five dead in their wake.

The answer to the first question is more difficult and more troubling. For “who they are” turns out to be our neighbors, like the fellow on an Erie County road who has a “Trump (but *not* the apostate Pence) – Make America Great Again” flag affixed to the side of his barn. Or the car in front of me on West 26th Street festooned with stickers extolling MAGA, the NRA, Q-Anon, and telling whoever chanced to read it “to love America or leave it.” To be sure, it is not all of our neighbors, but enough of them to make one pause.

And, pausing, I must ask again, who are these people? Why are they almost always white and almost always some variant of Christian?

And why are they so angry?

A number of commentators have attempted to answer these questions. Jill Lepore in *The Whites of Their Eyes: The Tea Party’s Revolution and the Battle over American History* went out in Boston to meet them. Who she met might surprise you. She met computer programmers, teachers, retirees, bankers, accountants, truck drivers, and others. All of them, to varying degrees, agreed with economist David Tuerck, who said the problem wasn’t only in Washington but, “Right here in Massachusetts, we have a Supreme Judicial Court that thinks it can redefine marriage without a thought to the will of the people. ... It’s time to rally around a new cause which is to return America to the principles for which our forefathers fought and died. It’s time to start a new American Revolution.” [1]

That they are almost always white and Christian results from two dynamics driving social change in America since the late 1960s. America has always been a multiracial country, but for much of its history that reality was either denied or ignored. Following the 1954 Supreme Court decision of *Brown v. Board of Education* striking down racial segregation in the nation’s public schools, the Civil Rights Movement of the middle and late 20th century and the influx of non-European immigrants after the passage of the Immigration Act of 1965, it could neither be denied nor ignored.

For some people, the combination of the 2008 election of Barack Obama, America’s first African-American president, and the growing awareness that by the middle of the 21st century America would be a majority-minority society did not signal a post-racial America but a time for reckoning. Coupling that with the decline in Christian church attendance, the growth of those who identified as not affiliated with any organized religion, an advancing secularism and the growing presence of Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, and other ancient religious traditions new to America led to a sense of bewildering change for large numbers of people. [2]

Although commentators have been contorting themselves these past five years trying to identify and understand those who voted for former President Trump, the answer is transparent. Although they are a more heterogeneous group than some want to admit, ranging from the affluent seeking tax breaks and business deregulation to the disaffected from “Any-Blighted-Rural-American-Town,” from anti-abortion advocates to misogynists and avowed racists, they also

include average Americans bewildered by a rapidly changing nation.

They are people who think they're losing their culture. They are people who feel dislocated, disoriented, and disconnected from this evolving and bewildering new American culture and, from their point of view, ersatz, non-white "Americans" with whom they cannot relate.

Regarding the disconnected, as Thomas Pynchon said in *Gravity's Rainbow*, when "nothing is connected to anything," it results in "a condition not many of us can bear for long." [3] Feeling not like strangers in a strange land, but like strangers at home, unable to bear their bewilderment at society's cascading changes and frustrated at not finding any acceptable theory or explanation for their plight, people become angry and look for scapegoats.

And, hey presto, here we are in 2021 awash in conspiracy theories and paranoid hallucinations masquerading as policy in which a member or members of the U.S. Congress believe that Donald Trump, sent by God to defeat a cabal of Satan-worshiping, child-abusing, deep-state villains, has been thwarted by an electoral conspiracy so vast and so subtle as to escape detection.

Where do conspiracy theories "so vast and so subtle as to escape detection" originate? They are an outgrowth of humans' innate need for their experience to make sense. Humans tell themselves stories to make sense of their experience. When confronted with a fact or series of facts threatening their understanding of their experience, what do humans do? Do they amend and enlarge their stories to fit the new facts?

Usually, but not always. Sometimes, they reject the new facts. Instead, they weave together an alternative story fitting their "alternative facts" into their old story. Armed with these more palatable "facts," they tell their old story in a new way, reaffirming their previous sense of what their experience means.

We tell ourselves stories to make sense of our experience. It does not follow that the story must be true.

A mid-20th century example with ramifications still resonating in American society asks "Who killed JFK?" Was it a lone gunman, a misfit seeking some sort of psychic transcendence by killing the prince? Or was it a vast conspiracy involving the Mafia, Castro-ites, Cuban communists, and, perhaps, even the Soviet Union? The conspiracy theory was/is so strong it has outlasted both the facts and the Soviet Union, which collapsed in 1991.

Why?

Because for some people the notion that a lone misfit could kill the President of the United States so threatened their sense of how reality is organized, so threatened their need for social stability, so knocked their world out – of balance that they rejected the facts and accepted a "story," a conspiracy theory based on a blend of "real facts" and "alternative facts" sufficiently vast to fit the scale of the crime. With their grand theory in hand, for some people, although no one ever proved the conspiracy theory correct, the world was back in balance.

The facts, those persistent things, as detailed by Vincent Bugliosi in *Reclaiming History: The Assassination of President John F. Kennedy*, however, point to a lone gunman. [5] Did Bugliosi's 1,612-page book with a CD-ROM

containing an additional 958 pages of endnotes and 170 pages of source notes change public opinion?

Yes, for a few, but for many the conspiracy theory, no matter how often debunked, no matter how often refuted by the facts, persisted and persists. As of October 26, 2017, according to the website *FiveThirtyEight*, 61 percent of Americans believe JFK was not killed by Lee Harvey Oswald alone and that others were involved. [6]

Why? There are at least two reasons. First, facts are boring things frequently involving numbers. As a rule, people do not like numbers. Taught math poorly in school, most people grow wary when numbers are bounced about. As a small experiment, see what happens when trying to solve a small problem about how much a box of cereal costs per ounce or about the precise value of your grocery store fuel perks when you say to your audience “Let “x” equal ...” When numbers are deployed, many people get that queasy feeling they get when talking to insurance agents, bankers, tax preparers, and car salespeople about the intricacies of compound interest.

More to the point, facts are the weakest persuasive tool. In the rhetoric of argumentation attempting to persuade anyone of anything there are only three broad categories of persuasive tools available. They are facts, trust, and emotions. Facts, as we have seen, are the weakest. In fact, the pun intentional, when you use facts to argue with someone, you almost never convince them. Instead, you only succeed in motivating them to double-down on their “facts,” for no one likes to be proven wrong.

The argument from trust says, “Believe me, for I am trustworthy.” How to be seen as trustworthy? Aristotle says to be perceived as a person worthy of trust you must be a person of integrity. How to be seen as a person of integrity? Live a life of integrity. That is difficult and, of course, takes a lifetime.

That leaves appealing to emotions. An argument based on emotion has many facets, but two are most important. One is love, which at its core says I identify with you, I agree with you, I see the world as you see the world. We are one and the same. My love for you validates you – you are worthy of my attention and all I ask is that you believe me. When I add the second element, an argument from fear, my appeal is almost irresistible, for I tell you I see what you see, I fear what you fear, and only the two of us in combination can defeat the thing we fear securing for us the world as we both agree it should be.

I might be lying – see the argument from trust – but that is beside the point.

So, an appeal based on emotion is by far a more powerful, a more persuasive argument than one based on mere facts. That is why stories are more persuasive than simple facts, for stories at their heart are emotional explorations of the things we love and the things we fear.

In short, the conspiracy is a better story and humans love stories. Humans are storytellers. And the most popular of all stories are mysteries.

Who doesn't love a mystery? And what is a conspiracy theory but a story that purports to solve a mystery. Like mysteries, conspiracies have villains and heroes, elaborate plots seasoned with money, power, sex, and an indeterminate ending that keeps one perpetually engaged.

It's exciting. It makes one feel alive vibrating with the thrill of the hunt.

Why? What are we hunting? The meaning of it all, or if not the meaning of it all, conspiracists are hunting the why inside the story of white, Christian America's apparent unraveling. This bewildering new America is not the result of demographic shifts and natural cultural realignments, but the work of some vast conspiracy seeking to displace them from their rightful place. There are villains at work and the conspiracy enthusiasts, like the cosplaying invaders of the Capitol, must become the heroes saving American culture from its enemies' evil designs.

The conspiracy theory story answers one of the deepest human needs – to understand. For better or worse, we humans can't – as philosophers and seers from the Buddha to the Beatles advise – humans can't just "let it be." We need to know not only what happened, but why. We need to know what something means and where we fit within that meaning.

We know or think we know *what* happened, although even getting that down is not as simple as it sounds. Ask any judge about the value of eyewitness testimony.

Try this thought experiment. Try to write a simple account describing what you did in July 2015. Only five years ago – you should remember that – right?

I know I was in Ireland trying to remember how to drive a stick shift while simultaneously trying to master driving on what I will always consider the wrong side of the road.

OK, that's trivial.

You can use documents like planners and notes, if you have them. You don't even need complete sentences – just sketch what happened that July.

Now, if during that month an emotionally important event, a life-changing event, happened, analyze the *why* behind that event.

Why did you do what you did?

You'll discover how elusive recreating what happened, recreating the past can be.

The *elusive* why? The *illusive* why? *Elusive* with an "e" meaning hard to capture, hard to pin down, hard to recall. *Illusive* with an "i" meaning vague, intangible, difficult to grasp in both the literal sense of getting and holding and in the figurative sense of understanding and knowing.

Because *whys* – the reasons we do things – reveal our values. Values are the things we believe to be true. They guide our actions. They are who we are and why we do what we do.

So, if stories are about the whys behind our actions, then our stories reveal the things we value. The things that make us – us. Our stories reveal who we are.

We seek meaning. We want the *whats* – the what happened, the stuff of our experience – to make sense. More importantly, we want to **understand** the *why* – the values – behind our *whats*. We do that by telling ourselves stories. Stories about *why* and how people – how and *why* we –

do *what* we do. But then something strange happens. We become so invested in our stories that we cling to them. If they don't seem to make sense of our experience, do we change our stories?

Sometimes.

But not always.

Sometimes we reimagine, we reinvent our experience to fit our stories.

How?

By discarding the facts that do not tell our story the way we want it told – by imagining alternative facts telling our story the way we want it told – the truth be damned! If “Who shot JFK?,” for example, is too old a story, try this one. What if our candidate lost an election we thought she'd win? Do we accept the narrative, the story of her defeat or do we invent another narrative, invent another story in which there is voter fraud, tampered voting machines, phantom mail-in ballots that were counted or not counted or counted twice?

When each of these are refuted and rejected – when the facts do not support the story – do we change our story? Perhaps not. Perhaps we double-down because our story can't be wrong because if our story is wrong then how we understand the world no longer makes sense and we can't live in a world that doesn't make sense. That is why people take their stories very, very seriously. In fact, they take their stories so seriously they'll go to war to preserve them, for after all what are religious wars, what are culture wars but arguments – fights – about whose story is the one true story?

In our time, almost all of Americans' disagreements with one another are disagreements about whose story is the American story. Why is that so crucially important? Stories and storytelling are the glue that unifies cultures. In our fractious times, the stories unifying American culture are fraying, are unraveling.

Sadly, this is not a new phenomenon in American political history. As Richard Hofstadter pointed out in his classic 1964 essay *“The Paranoid Style in American Politics,”* it might be said to be in the American grain. Twenty-first century alt-right conspiracy-mongers share with their earlier American antecedents a sense “that they were/are fending off threats to a still established way of life ... the modern right wing ... feels dispossessed: America has largely been taken away from them and their kind, though they are determined to try to repossess it and to prevent the final destructive act of subversion.” [6] As a result, in order to “Make America Great Again,” they must save it from foreign enemies, invading aliens *nee* immigrants and home-grown traitors undermining American values.

A renowned historian, Hofstadter traced out the paranoid style and its implications for modern American politics in a series of essays, including *“The Paranoid Style ...,” “The Pseudo-Conservative Revolt,” “The Pseudo-Conservative Revolt Revisited,”* and *“Goldwater and Pseudo-Conservative Politics.”* The latter merits special attention, for our current discontents find their roots in Goldwater's late 1950s Senatorial campaigns and his 1964 Presidential campaign. We'll revisit that in a future *Book Notes*.

Although Hofstadter died in 1970 and did not see the light of his own prescience, he has three critical insights into understanding our current

conspiratorial fetishists. First, he connects them to earlier manifestations of paranoid thinking in American politics; second, he describes the foundational elements of American paranoid political thinking; and, third, he explains how this paranoid thinking gives rise to “cultural” and “symbolic” politics.

Fear of the other, fear of some vast conspiracy undermining American values, Hofstadter illustrates, is, to borrow a cliché, as ‘American as apple pie.’ It goes back to the 18th century fear of the Illuminati, a new world order emanating from the French Revolution that would overthrow the established social order. In America, it found expression in the writings of a Boston Congregational minister, Jedidiah Morse, father of Samuel, who warned of a plot against America’s Christian values fueled by religious infidelity and Jeffersonian democracy.

[7] That was followed in the 1820s and 1830s by an anti-Masonic movement obsessed with conspiracies against democracy and “the closure of opportunities for the common man.” [8] In the later 1830s, these morphed into anti-Catholic and anti-Jesuit conspiracy theories threatening American values. Samuel Morse, inventor of the telegraph, wrote an anti-Catholic treatise warning about *Foreign Conspiracies Against the Liberties of the United States*. It was followed by Lyman Beecher’s (father of Harriet Beecher Stowe) *Plea for the West*, in which he argued that Protestantism was engaged in a life-or-death struggle with Catholicism.” [9]

And so it went through the 19th century and into the 20th as conspiracy after conspiracy theory saw threats to the American social order from foreigners (read Catholics and other immigrants), from the newly emancipated freedmen of the South giving rise to the Ku Klux Klan, from socialists threatening capitalism in the Red Scare after both World War I and World War II and culminating in the McCarthyism of the 1950s. Hofstadter did not live to see the post-1960s pushback against civil rights, Pat Buchanan’s declaration of a religious war for the soul of America, or the modern Tea Party enthusiasts who formed after President Barack Obama’s election.

But Hofstadter would have understood them, for they all shared the same three key elements of the archetypal American paranoid political conspiracy story. First, there is a sustained conspiracy consistent in its aims and persistent over time. Second, it has infiltrated the government at its highest levels. And, lastly, it is pervasive, having infiltrated all aspects of American culture from schools and colleges to the media and its many outlets to churches and civic associations to government at all levels. [10]

All current alt-right and other right-wing conspiracy theories find their origin stories in the 1960s political and cultural convulsions. The political convulsions of the 1960s include Keynesian economics, the growth of the regulatory state supported even by Richard Nixon and Gerald Ford, the civil rights movement, the anti-war movement (read as, in a twist of double irony, the anti-anti-government need to rescue the government from its betrayers). Cultural convulsions include the rise of second wave feminism, New Wave religiosity, the environmental movement, and the counterculture’s “do your own thing,” “sex, drugs, and rock ‘n’ roll” celebrations of self and sensation seeking.

When Bill Clinton was elected president, or more accurately, when the prospect of his election became real with his nomination in 1992, Pat Buchanan declared there was a religious war for America’s soul now that government was infiltrated by cultural revolutionaries. Newt Gingrich brought it to Congress. Tenured radicals on college faculties, teachers unions in public schools, women as ministers and priests in mainline Christian denominations, and a media glorifying rock ‘n’ roll and sex on prime-time television completed the late 20th and

early 21st century's apocalyptic conspiracists' fantasies. Abortion, same-sex marriage, and Obama's election in 2008 lit the fuse.

As Hofstadter pointed out, this gave rise to a politics not of policy discussions but of emotional contests over cultural issues; in his phrase, a politics not of interests but of symbols. Interests are susceptible to rational analysis and compromise. Symbols are emotionally laden cultural indicators touching core issues of identity and values. Generally, they are not open to compromise.

And here we are with Marjorie Taylor Greene in Congress, former President Donald Trump sending a mob to the Capitol, a few brave Republican souls challenging them as others either cower in fear or position themselves to seize the opportunity.

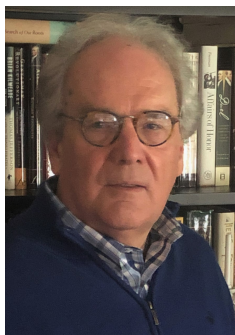
What to do?

Well, as someone once said, "the truth will out." That might be so, but someone else once said "a lie sprints around the world in a blink while the truth comes limping after." Nonetheless, tedious as facts can be, the road back to cultural sanity begins with telling the truth.

In the media, it requires somehow restoring a 21st century version of the editorial function. In education, it means seeing the history wars for what they are – a political fight for control of the past in order to control the future. And it means restoring teaching civics to our middle and high schools.

Coming at the end of a lengthy article that began with conspiracy fantasists watching the skies for black helicopters to spirit them away to Walmart detention camps, those few lines about what to do seem inadequate. In a future *Book Notes* we will explore what needs to be done to give truth at least a fighting chance against lies and distortions, not to mention paranoid fantasies.

For the paranoid, as Richard Hofstadter pointed out, will always be with us, but it does not follow that they should prevail.



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End Notes

1. Lepore, Jill. *The Whites of Their Eyes: The Tea Party's Revolution and the Battle over American History*. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010), p.5.
2. Cf. Jones, Robert P. *The End of White Christian America*. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2016) and Robert P. Jones, "Trump Can't Reverse the Decline of White Christian America," in *The Atlantic* (July 4, 2017) available at <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2017/07/robert-jones-white-christian-america/532587/> accessed February 1, 2021. For America's proliferating religious diversity, see Diana Eck, *A New Religious America: How a "Christian Country" Has Become the World's Most Religiously Diverse Nation*. (New York: Harper One, 2001).
3. Cf. Roth, Andrew, "First things first: Let's Leave Fantasyland Behind" in *Book Notes* at Jefferson Educational Society Publications available at <https://www.jeserie.org/uploads/Roth%20Book%20Notes--Fantasyland.pdf> accessed January 12, 2021.

4. See Bugliosi, Vincent. *Reclaiming History: The Assassination of President John F. Kennedy*. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2007).
5. McCarthy, Niall, "Most Americans Believe JFK Conspiracy Theories," in **Statista: Global No. 1 Business Data Platform** (October 26, 2017) available at <https://www.statista.com/chart/11622/most-americans-believe-jfk-conspiracy-theories/> accessed February 1, 2021.
6. Hofstadter, Richard. "The Paranoid Style in American Politics," in **Harper's Magazine** (November 1964) available at <https://harpers.org/archive/1964/11/the-paranoid-style-in-american-politics/> accessed February 1, 2021, p.12.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 6.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 9.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 10
10. *Ibid.*, pp. 14-15.

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