

The 2016 election is seeing the return of the ‘Paranoid Style’ in American politics

*The 2016 primary season has seen Donald Trump gain traction with Republican voters through nativist rhetoric. While many see Trump’s extremist campaigning as a new low in American political discourse, **Ron Pruessen**, using the work of Richard Hofstadter, reminds us that such apocalyptic visions from politicians are really nothing new. He argues that crises over the decades such as World War II and 9/11 and the War in Iraq feed into the ‘theatre’ of paranoia, producing anxiety among voters which opportunist politicians are then able to feed on.*



What are we to make of the spectacle that has unfolded along the Republican Party’s road to choosing a presidential nominee? Should we put more emphasis on its frightening “Walking Dead”-like scenes or on the moments when a Tim Burton-ish spirit seems to pull comedy out of the nightmare?

The aspirants are certainly not smiling. Their extremist statements and policy positions pour forth like manna from hell. Though Ted Cruz and Marco Rubio are giving him a run for his money, Donald Trump is surely the current winner of the “Miss Over-the-Top” award. It will take a long time to forget his pledge to “build a great, great wall on our Southern border” to keep out the Mexican drug dealers and rapists he sees as the illegal immigrant demographic – or his call for a “complete shutdown of Muslims entering the United States.” (He did add the word “temporarily” to this a month later). Add in his rants about women and GOP rivals—and, oh yes, Barack Obama – and Trump seems to have set a new, very low standard for doing battle in the American political arena.

But has he? For a historian surveying today’s Republican gladiators, it’s hard not to recall the work of Richard Hofstadter. Although “The Paranoid Style in American Politics” was [published](#) in 1964, the passage of more than half a century has not diluted its value for illuminating dark nooks and crannies. Other scholars have debated the applicability of Hofstadter’s analysis to specific moments and movements, but the general thrust of his insights retains credibility – and relevance.

Tracking examples from the 1790s onward, Hofstadter describes the fevered words and actions of Americans who were anti-radical (the French Revolution variety), anti-Catholic, anti-Mason, anti-immigrant, anti-Black, anti-Asian, anti-Semitic, and anti-communist (the Red Scare/Cold War variety). Apocalyptic visions prompted a readiness to do battle with evil – as personified by “minions of the Pope” (1855), “the secret cabals of the international gold ring” (1895), or a Red/pinko “conspiracy of infamy” (1951), among others. As with 2016’s Republicans, the fulminations sometimes turned comic: e.g., John Foster Dulles as a communist agent according to the John Birch Society. But laughter would have been rare in the face of repression and prosecution – as well as violence (think Ku Klux Klan).



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Hofstadter utilizes a dictionary definition of paranoia: “a chronic mental disorder characterized by systematized delusions of persecution and of one’s own greatness.” The “and” is important. Historically, it shows how periodic American preoccupation with enemies links up with core convictions about manifest destiny and exceptionalism. It also tells us something about 2016 – where chest-thumping (and occasional “pussy”-labeling) counterpoint patriotic calls to blast encircling dragons.

If the paranoids of the political arena could breathe fire (while also burning crosses, firing firearms, etc.), Hofstadter himself tried to avoid extremism in his analysis. He explicitly warned against oversimplification, for instance. This meant taking care to point out that paranoia was not remotely a unique US phenomenon. Other countries, other eras, even other millennia, had seen apocalyptic fears spawn fury (rounds of millenarianism in the Middle Ages, for example). And in the Hofstadter spirit, it is also fair to recognize that Republicans are not alone in evidencing a sense of persecution and macho intention in 2016. Listen to Bernie Sanders’ constantly repeated castigations of “Wall Street.” Sanders can’t hold a candle to the GOP’s bonfire, to be sure, but there is more than a whiff of persecution smoke in his rallying cries.

Hofstadter also urged sensitivity concerning the wellsprings of paranoia. In considering the McCarthyite/John Birch Society firebrands of the 1950s, he pointed to the way decades of crises had created “a vast theater” for their imagination. How could the Great Depression, World War II, and the Cold War not have produced serious anxiety – especially since the global scale of the traumas meant that “The theater of action is now the entire world”? It’s not difficult to extend this insight into the 21st century. A list that includes only 9/11, the war in Iraq, and the economic crisis of 2007-2009 (among many other choices) would alone have had the potential to produce shock and dismay.

In the end, though, Hofstadter probably bent a little too far backwards. “We are all sufferers from history,” he wrote, “but the paranoid is a double sufferer, since he is afflicted not only by the real world, with the rest of us, but by his fantasies as well.” As strident Republican pledges portend for the aftermath of the 2016 election, however, remembering the fates of racial, ethnic, and religious minorities who were among “anti” targets in other times makes it clear that paranoid fantasists have also inflicted multiplied suffering on others too.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of USAPP – American Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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