

Washington Post
December 21, 1991
OP-Ed page
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The Paranoid Style

It happens I was in the White House at the hour of John F. Kennedy's death. There were a dozen or so of us; (I was an assistant labor secretary at the time) seated in a circle in presidential assistant Ralph Dungan's large southwest corner room on the first floor. We were a few doors down from the Oval Office, where the rug, or something, was being changed and the furniture emptied out. The president's famous rocking chair was resting on top of a pile of cabinets and such in the little anteroom just outside. (Come to think of it, this may be the only "proof" of a conspiracy that Oliver Stone's movie "JFK" somehow overlooks.)

There was no formal announcement that the president had died—just a time when everyone knew. Nor did we do anything; there wasn't anything to do. Or not much, anyway. McGeorge Bundy got up and went over to a telephone, asking in a quiet voice that he be put through to the secretary of defense, Robert McNamara. The door opened, and in burst Hubert Humphrey, eyes streaming. He grasped Dungan, who had risen. "What have they done to us?" he gasped.

"They," of course, were those people down in Dallas. No one in particular, just the bunch that never did like Kennedy, one of them—or whatever—crazed enough to do some cowboy shoot-out thing. A little later I was interviewed on television, and from some unfathomed recess there rose the opening words of Prospero's soliloquy in "The Tempest": "Our revels now are ended." That is what had happened.

But there was another matter. What would the American people *think* had happened? Late in the afternoon I learned on the radio of the arrest of a man who had been involved with Fair Play for Cuba, or something like that. Oh, my God! I thought, the Texans will kill him. Keep in mind that this was a nation only just coming out of a period of near hysteria on the part of some about the menace and influence of communism.

At midnight I went out to Andrews Air Force Base to meet the plane bringing back the Cabinet and subcabinet members, who had been halfway across the Pacific, heading for Japan, when the assassination occurred. I pleaded with any who knew me: "We must get hold of Oswald." No one had the foggiest idea what I was talking about. I went away with the sense that not enough of these people had ever been in a police station.

Oswald was killed presently, whereupon a complicated thing happened. I did not think there had been a conspiracy to kill the president, but I was convinced that the American people would sooner or later come to believe that there had been one *unless we investigated the event with exactly that presumption in mind.* John Macy, who was then Civil Service commissioner, is now dead, and so I must be careful in what I say he thought. But I believe he agreed, and I know he began to join me in meeting with people who might make a difference, and making the same argument I did. At one point I was carrying with me the 19th century "memoir" of Pastor Charles Chiniquy, "Fifty Years in the Church of Rome." I used it as evidence of our utter credulity. Chiniquy tells of an "interview" warning Lincoln of a Catholic plot against his life. Lincoln agrees (according to Chiniquy's fantastical account, responding as follows):

"I will be for ever grateful for the warning words you have addressed to me about the dangers ahead to my life, from Rome. I know that they are not imaginary dangers. If I were fighting against a Protestant South, as a nation, there would be no danger of assassination. The nations who read the Bible, fight bravely on the battle-fields, but they do not assassinate their enemies. The Pope and the

Jesuits, with their infernal Inquisition, are the only organized powers in the world which have recourse to the dagger of the assassin to murder those whom they cannot convince with their arguments or conquer with the sword."

The president particularly regretted "the Roman Catholic traitors" that so infested the Union army. Let it be noted that Lincoln's secretary of war, Edwin M. Stanton, believed that the assassination had indeed been a Catholic plot. Note also that the copy of "Fifty Years" that I was carrying around had been specially reprinted for the 1960 presidential election, which is the only reason I knew about it.

We got nowhere, Macy and I. In truth, I probably got into trouble. I was heard as saying not that people were likely to think there had been a conspiracy unless we investigated properly, but that there *had* been a conspiracy. The Warren Commission did not see its work in anything like the perspective I had hoped for. It was Lyndon Johnson at his worst: manipulative, cynical. Setting a chief justice of no great intellect to do a job that a corrupt FBI was well content should not

be done well. Edward Jay Epstein laid it all out in a master's thesis written at Cornell a few years later.

More relevant to the present moment, however, is Richard Hofstadter's incomparable essay "The Paranoid Style in American Politics," which, as it happens, he delivered as the Herbert Spencer Lecture at Oxford within days of the Kennedy assassination. (It was published in Harper's Magazine a year later.) He begins: "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."

Hofstadter begins with the panic in New England in the 1790s over the dangers to religion of the Bavarian Illuminati. On to the anti-Masonic era: them that is what drank wine from human skulls. Next "Catholics and Mormons—later Negroes and Jews lent themselves to a preoccupation with illicit sex." (Probably the most widely read contemporary book in the United States before "Uncle Tom's Cabin" was "Awful Disclosures" [1836], one Maria Monk's "account" of her escape from a convent/brothel in Montreal.) On to the John Birch Society.

Hofstadter (as also Daniel Bell) was at this time primarily concerned with the conspiratorial

fantasies of the right—Ike as a tool of the Red etc.—and certain of their characteristics, such as the redemptive role of ex-communists in exposing the conspiracies (similar to that of the ex-Catholic priests of yore). But he knew well enough the paranoid style of the left also, as illustrated in this passage:

"... 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 person conspiracy, 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."

It is in that sense a rationalizing mode. Facts are everything—and facts are *never* accidental. "For every error or act of incompetence one can substitute an act of treason." And always, of course, this is proof of "the existence of a vast insidious, preternaturally effective international conspiratorial network designed to perpetrate acts of the most fiendish character."

And so to "JFK." It *could* be viewed as parody. The homosexual orgies in the New Orleans town house of the villain Clay Shaw are straight out of Maria Monk's nunnery in Montreal. The general boozing it up as they plan the murder of their commander-in-chief are straight out of Ramparts in a slow week in the '60s. The black waiter who hears nothing is, well, MGM in the '30s. A John Birch look-alike is the fake erudition. Garrison is forever going on about those who practice to deceive, about riddles wrapped in mysteries inside enigmas. One particular note: "Let justice be done, though the heavens fall." At one point I all but yelled out: "Jim! Use the code! *Fiat Justitia Ruat Coelum.*"

But it is not parody, and it is not funny. It could spoil a generation of American politics just when sanity is returning.

All of us in politics ought to see it: This is what citizens under 30 or 40 are going to be thinking soon. But don't despair. We have got through worse. As a matter of fact, an inadvertent illustration is there in the movie itself.

In one of the longer scenes, Jim Garrison meets with a renegade Pentagon officer who explains the whole plot. They sit on a park bench, with the Washington Monument at some distance in the background. Now if you just look closely at the monument, you will see that about a quarter of the way up, the color of the stone changes, gets lighter. That is because in the 1850s the pope donated a block of marble to the private association that was building the memorial. It was widely believed that there was a secret purpose in this act—that when the block was actually set in place it would be the signal for the Masonic-Papist seizure of the White House. A band of alert citizens saw to it that the marble ended up on the Potomac instead. Work stopped, only to be resumed by the Corps of Engineers 30 years later in time for the 1888 centennial, and that is the reason for the difference in color.

Don't despair, but maybe do read a little. The members of the Warren Commission could have done that for us. They could have known our past better.

Hofstadter closes with this pearl from the British historian L. B. Namier: "the crowning attainment of historical study" is to achieve "an intuitive sense of how things do not happen."

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