

The paranoid style in American politics revisited

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F continuity and change.

It happens I wrote the opening article in the first issue of *The Public Interest*, and there I am to be found, then as ever since, quoting Nathan Glazer. Congress, Glazer reported, had in 1965 “been painfully and hesitantly trying to deal with two great measures—tax reform and a civil rights bill—and its deliberations on both have been closely covered by the mass media. . . .” Twenty years later Congress is working from much the same agenda, though this time around it is the “Civil Rights *Restoration Act*” being debated, while tax reform, of course, is back with us for what I believe is the ninth time in the intervening two decades. For my part, twenty years ago I was welcoming developments in the social sciences and the professions which raised the prospect that “the more primitive social issues of American politics are at last to be resolved” so that “we may now turn to issues more demanding of human ingenuity than that of how to put an end to poverty in the richest nation in the world.” Twenty years later I have just delivered the Godkin Lectures at Harvard wherein it is proposed that, having all but eliminated poverty among the aged, we surely could do something about its extraordinary relative rise among children. The fact that

certain difficulties persist, some indeed worsening, makes a claim on our sensibilities.

Of change? We know more and expect less. The social optimism of the 1960s has quite vanished, as have the political majorities which reflected it and in turn structured and enlivened it. I can write today with greater knowledge of the problems of, say, family structure than twenty years ago. But where once I could confidently foresee something like a large national response by the end of that decade, today I can't imagine any serious legislation occurring by the end of the century.

Now to be sure one of the central arguments of successive issues of *The Public Interest*, which began appearing in that probably over-optimistic period twenty years ago, was that there were things government can't do, or can't do well, or indeed shouldn't attempt at all. Still, I don't know that we ever foresaw, or would have approved, a time such as the present when almost any discussion of social issues in Washington is likely to be confronted with the (somewhat involute) theorem that problems arise from efforts to deal with them. I hold with Daniel Yankelovich that the electorate is on a "mental holiday, which will end abruptly and brutally." Let that be. The United States is enjoying a moment of social peace; we deserve it and ought indeed to enjoy it.

What troubles me is a contrary disposition I sense growing in Washington which is anything but relaxed and trusting. It is rather hugely distrustful and just as greatly distressed. It is a movement of the Right very much like those Richard Hofstadter described twenty years ago in his book, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics*.

Hofstadter examined those "uncommonly angry minds" who have been present and busy on the fringes of American politics throughout our history and have occasionally made their way to the center of attention and influence. He used the term "paranoid style," he explained, not in a clinical way, but in a descriptive sense, as an art historian might speak of "the baroque or the mannerist style."¹ The distinguishing feature of the paranoid style is the sense of persecution, which expresses itself in elaborate theories of conspiracy. While the clinical paranoid lives in a world he is convinced is out to

¹ Blackiston's *Gould Medical Dictionary* (4th edition, 1979) defines paranoia as "A rare form of paranoid psychosis characterized by the slow development of a complex internally logical system of persecutory or grandiose delusions, which is often based on the misinterpretation of an actual event. The delusional thinking is isolated from much of the normal stream of consciousness, the remaining personality being intact despite a chronic course. The patient generally considers himself superior, possessing unique or even divine gifts."

get him, the paranoid in politics, wrote Hofstadter, sees the conspiracy

directed against a nation, a culture, a way of life whose fate affects not himself alone but millions of others. . . . His sense that his political passions are unselfish and patriotic, in fact, goes far to intensify his feeling of righteousness and his moral indignation.

These people “tend to be overheated, oversuspicious, over-aggressive, grandiose, and apocalyptic in expression” and yet socialized, functioning individuals.

[T]he idea of the paranoid style would have little . . . 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. . . . What interests me here is the possibility of using political rhetoric to get at political pathology. One of the most impressive facts about the paranoid style, in this connection, is that it represents an old and recurring mode of expression in our public life which has frequently been linked with movements of suspicious discontent and whose content remains much the same even when it is adopted by men of distinctly different purposes. Our experience suggests too that, while it comes in waves of different intensity it appears to be all but ineradicable.

The paranoid style in politics is not confined to the United States. Hofstadter explained that he chose to confine his analysis to this country simply because, as an Americanist, it was for him a choice of convenience. (“Notions about an all-embracing conspiracy on the part of Jesuits or Freemasons, international capitalists, international Jews, or Communists are familiar phenomena in many countries throughout history.”)

Now clearly Hofstadter’s purpose in writing was beyond that simply of the historian. He hadn’t liked the conspiracy theories of the 1950s—thought they had damaged institutions—and needed analysis against the day they would come again. Of which more later.

Beginnings of the new class struggle

May I go back for a moment to that inaugural issue of *The Public Interest*? Among the contributions was a pair of essays, the first in a series, on the subject: “Why Are the Poor Still with Us?” Glazer contributed an essay called “Paradoxes of American Poverty.” It began:

Presidents, socialists, reformers and academicians have set the prevailing contemporary tone in discussing poverty in America—shock and outrage that it should exist, followed by a direct and earnest passion that we should do everything necessary to wipe it out. And for the most part the mass media and the people have followed these guides.

Go over that just once more: "Presidents, socialists, reformers and academicians" had set a "prevailing contemporary tone" of discussion on a major domestic issue which the "mass media" had adopted. This was just fifteen years after Senator Joseph R. McCarthy's accusation, at Wheeling, West Virginia, that the United States government was infested with "Communist agents" launched him on his rise to prominence. The 1950s were a decade in which intellectuals were rather on the defensive, and not least those who had been caught up as anti-Communists in the *Kulturkampf* of the 1930s and 1940s. Distinctions of the largest consequence seemed hazy indeed from the distance of Appleton, Wisconsin. From the perspective of New York, to be on the Left was a kind of fate, and not always a friendly one. A favorite parable of the time was that of the Irish cop clubbing away at some demonstrator in Union Square. "But officer," pleads the hapless acolyte of Norman Thomas or Max Schachtman, "I'm an anti-Communist." Whack, wump, thump comes the response: "I don't care what kind of Communist you are."

Actual experience was not all that awful. Seymour Martin Lipset would observe that among academics those who supported McCarthy had perhaps a harder time during the period in their own communities than those who were harassed. Even so the larger social threat was real and was felt.

What a release then when the decade passed. The great accuser was in turn accused and destroyed, and a new president came to office celebrating the higher callings of the mind—summoning, or so it was said, philosophers to his court. Herewith Irving Kristol on "The Troublesome Intellectuals," an introductory comment to our second issue:

The contentiousness and/or "pushiness" so evident among American intellectuals today is the price we are paying for so belatedly incorporating the intellectual into American public life. It is a price we ought to pay gladly, because it represents a singular and enviable opportunity.

. . . [T]he involvement of intellectuals in American politics—this coming in from the cold after a century and a half's exclusion—will itself be a most useful educational experience. . . . American politics has an ingrained philistinism and anti-intellectualism that has been the cause of infinite mischief.

The Public Interest, itself an expression of the intellectual now involved in public life, would also seek to moderate some of that contentiousness. Reason, prudence, competence were to be our themes. In an early discussion about a title for the journal I had suggested Lyndon B. Johnson's then-favorite term "consensus." Kristol actually paused a moment: *Consensus: A Journal of The Public Interest*.

Hmmm. That seemed, well, reasonable, prudent, descriptive of the age. In that second issue Kristol observed “there does seem to be something in the American air which makes all radicalism, whether of the right or left, an exercise in nostalgia.” Such hopes were not to last the year. Even as Kristol wrote, the Vietnam war had begun in earnest: “liberalism’s war” as William Pfaff would write. Johnson began backing away from social policy; urban riots were becoming endemic. By issue Number 4, which appeared in the fall of 1966, Kristol would address the rise of both the “New Left” and, now, the “New Right.” A friend from California, an active Democrat, had visited him, troubled that

the “New Left,” using Berkeley as a base, was . . . trying to move into the Democratic party in a significant way. Then there was the victory of Ronald Reagan in the Republican primary, and the discovery of the pollsters that he seemed to have an excellent chance against Governor Brown in November. This was a particular shock since the Democrats had always felt . . . that Reagan, as an “extremist” would have the least chance of election. . . . My friend didn’t understand what precisely was bugging the militants of this New Left or why the citizens of California should show so keen an interest in Ronald Reagan. Neither this New Left nor this New Right seemed to have anything like a coherent program.

Kristol espied instantly, however, that a new class struggle was emerging—over values rather than programs. The New Left had the familiar complaints of alienation; they felt dispossessed of a rightful inheritance. “The New Right, oddly enough, makes its complaint in not dissimilar terms: the self-reliant individual is losing control over his own destiny, and over the destiny of his children too.” Neither could get a “friendly grip” on American life. It was easy “to poke gentle or cruel fun” at either, but there was something more.

As we were to learn, there was a crisis of authority brewing. This is a danger to any political system, but perhaps especially that of democracy for the very reason that *political* remedies seem in order, and possible. Kristol saw this and warned that “*the one worst way to cope with this crisis in values is through organized political-ideological action*” (his italics).

For the *Public Interest* writers of this period Kristol’s rule never to politicize an issue of culture was not an abstraction; it was an experience. Without exception that I know, the founders of *The Public Interest*, and the writers of the early issues, were Democrats. (Kristol: “I approve, on the whole, the various programs for a Great Society . . .”) But for most this attachment had come late to their intellectual lives. (Most? Many? How to be precise? I cannot, but

hope even so to be understood.) For them the real struggle, worldwide, had been with the totalitarian left, and the culture broadly defined was characteristically the setting, a struggle that seemed finally to have come to an end with the Stalinists discredited and defeated in Western culture, after which political defeat would inevitably follow.

When the New Left went ahead anyway—they had been warned!—and commenced as they could to politicize the universities and invade the Democratic Party, the response of this cadre of American intellectuals was simply to move on. Their attachment to any of the bourgeois parties, as you might say, was tactical at most. To the extent there was anything visceral in this deeply civil and civilized circle it was contempt that could rise to quiet rage at the lying and conniving and manipulating of the old totalitarian left—which now reappeared in the mouths of babes. No first-time-tragedy/second-time-farce for this group of battle-hardened dialecticians. The totalitarian tactic was outrageous in whatever form. And so the group began to make distinctions between its general view and that of the left-liberalism that was becoming ascendant in previously friendly if slightly distant circles, especially those of the more politically and ideologically active. In turn the group came to be seen as distinctive. The *Public Interest* circle, readers and writers, came to be something distinct in American political and intellectual terms.

It was arguably farcical, however, when the treason trials began. The *Public Interest* tendency was formally denounced as, oh well, a deviationist tendency objectively allied with the class enemy. This occurred in the wrathful pages of *Dissent*, “a journal devoted to radical ideas and the values of socialism and democracy.” In the autumn of 1973, Michael Harrington, the very socialist Glazer had placed in such agreeable company in issue Number 1, declared that Kristol and Bell and he and I and suchlike were not liberals at all, but—“neoconservatives”!

Many in the group were rather taken with the term, and have gone where it pointed. So began one of the great migrations in twentieth-century American politics. The Republican Party and the conservative cause acquired an intellectual class. In fairness, it should be said *another* such class, for there were genuinely able conservative intellectuals already at work, and indeed it was these who first recognized and welcomed the newcomers. By 1980, Republicans “had become, or were becoming, the party of ideas.”² Democrats

² Daniel Patrick Moynihan, introduction to *No Margin for Error* by Howard Baker (New York: Times Books, 1980), p. vii.

were left seemingly the party of government and, as Tocqueville might have forecast, destined for a good spell out of office (“ . . . [I]t was by promising to weaken it that one won the right to control it.”)

Although much of the foregoing will seem anecdotal, and even self-absorbed, I think it defensible as a sketch of certain events of that time and as a prelude to some events now appearing. *The Public Interest* first appeared in a brief “era” of good will. Republican moderates had put down a “paranoid” insurgency on their right. Then came an insurgency of the Democratic left. And now the New Left is past and it appears that it is now the turn of the New Right, recall that this was Kristol’s term nineteen years ago, to show its destructive and perhaps self-destructive tendencies. It would seem once again it is the turn of conservatives to deal with an insurgency in the peculiarly paranoid style of the Right.

Hofstadter’s paradigm

Hofstadter began his essay with an account of imagined conspiracies that preoccupied eighteenth-century divines. He then turned to the anti-Masonic movement that began in New York in the 1820s and in time “affected many parts of the Northern United States and . . . showed the same fear that opportunities for the common man would be closed, the same passionate dislike of aristocratic institutions, that one finds in the Jacksonian crusade against the Bank of the United States.”

(Let me interrupt here to note one difficulty. The paranoid style shares a distrust of elites with popular movements that are perfectly normal in a democracy such as ours where elites can be hugely out of touch with other parts of the political community. It is a huge mistake to confuse the two.)

“As a secret society,” Hofstadter continues, “Masonry was considered to be a standard conspiracy against republican government,” peculiarly liable to treason, as in Aaron Burr’s adventures. Freemasons were thought to maintain a vast network of relations constituting a secret government which controlled the real government. (In my own youth, in New York City, I was assured of this: These things persist.) They drank wine from human skulls in their infamous lodges. They took terrible violent oaths of secrecy. As the establishment was infested with Masons—sheriffs, judges, juries would all be in cahoots with Masonic criminals—Masonic malfeasance would go unpunished, even unreported. The press, too, was infiltrated by Masons, the proof of which was that there was precious little reporting of the Masons’ efforts to seize control of the

country and impoverish “the hardy common citizens of the type the anti-Masonic movement liked to claim for its own.”

An anti-Catholic movement followed, obsessed with Jesuit conspiracies, and stimulated by two books which appeared in 1835. *Awful Disclosures*, by Maria Monk, was the most widely read popular book in America until the appearance of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. It would be rated soft porn today: mostly an account of compliant nuns succumbing to the lust of libertine priests. Resulting children were baptized, then strangled.

A more systematic treatment of the Catholic conspiracy can be found in *Foreign Conspiracy against the Liberties of the United States* by Samuel F. B. Morse, then a professor at New York University, and inventor of the telegraph and the Morse Code. “A conspiracy exists,” Morse proclaimed, and “its plans are already in operation . . . we are attacked in a vulnerable quarter which cannot be defenced by our ships, our forts, or our armies.” The war was between Roman Catholicism on the one hand, and political and religious liberty on the other. Jesuits were prowling everywhere, cassocks stuffed with cash, carrying out the conspiracy. “Can we not perceive all about us the evidence of his presence? . . . We must awake or we are lost.” The instrument of the enemy in this case, interestingly, was Prince von Metternich’s government: “*Austria is now acting in this country.*”

In Hofstadter’s view this cry of impending doom is typical of the paranoid’s style: “He is always manning the barricades of civilization. He constantly lives at a turning point: it is now or never in organizing resistance to the conspiracy. Time is forever just running out.” Again, the messianic mission: “As a member of the avant-garde who is capable of perceiving the conspiracy before it is fully obvious to an as yet unaroused public, the paranoid is a militant leader.”

Commencing with the New Deal and its aftermath, Hofstadter has difficulty keeping count, such did the paranoid style flourish. The founder of the John Birch Society discovered that “Communist influences are now in almost complete control of our Federal Government.” Russian troops were massing on the Mexican border. John Foster Dulles was a Communist agent. The venerable Arthur F. Burns was in on it all (and presumably still is). Milton S. Eisenhower was the real boss, President Eisenhower a mere “dedicated, conscious agent of the Communist conspiracy . . .” Hofstadter then abstracts the basic elements in the paranoid style.

The central image is that of a vast and sinister conspiracy, a gigantic and yet subtle machinery of influence set in motion to undermine and destroy

a way of life. . . . The distinguishing thing . . . is not that its exponents see conspiracies or plots here and there, but that they regard a "vast" or "gigantic" conspiracy as *the motive force* in historical events. History is a conspiracy.

He writes that the basic elements of the contemporary post-World War II approach can be reduced to three.

First . . . the . . . conspiracy . . . to undermine free capitalism, to bring the economy under the control of the federal government and pave the way for socialism or communism.

The second contention is that top government officialdom has been so infiltrated by Communists that American policy . . . has been dominated by sinister men who were shrewdly and consistently selling out American national interests.

The final contention is that the country is infused with a network of Communist agents, just as in the old days it was infiltrated by Jesuit agents, so that the whole apparatus of education, religion, the press, and the mass media are engaged in a common effort to paralyze the resistance of loyal Americans.

There *are* patterns in cultures, including political cultures, and when historians detect them we are better able to recognize and deal with them when they recur.

If I am not mistaken, such a recurrence has been taking place in Washington in recent years, and is taking root in the nation at large. It has links to the old Bircher-McCarthyite notion of betrayal to the Communists by an elite, the Masonic strain if you like, and also exhibits a belated awareness of the struggle with Stalinists, many of them "undercover," in the New York cultural milieu of the 1930s through the 1950s, the Jesuit strain, you might say. What is new is the locus of the conspiracy: the television networks.

The conspiracy revealed

Hofstadter did not attempt to account for the rise of the various delusions he described: They came when they did. Not being a historian, I am not bound by professional canons, and will risk a tentative explanation. This new conspiracy theory began to take hold midway through Reagan's first term. To all appearances an assertive and convinced group of conservatives had attained to great influence in the capital. They had won federal elections, been appointed to high office. Yet they did not seem to feel that their ideas and ideals were prevailing. To the contrary, they began to suggest that something was thwarting their revolution. Somehow the President himself was being misled; acting at the behest of unknown others. He was not being allowed to be himself. The cry "Let Reagan be Reagan" was heard in the Cabinet itself.

I have served in the Subcabinet or Cabinet of four successive American presidents, including the Cabinet of the two previous Republican presidents. I am aware that presidents play many roles and that some do dissemble sometimes. But never have I seen a president more himself in his public appearances, more at ease with himself and comfortable with his views than Ronald Reagan. *Who* then was not letting him be himself?

On the fringe of the Reagan movement, in itself an entirely normal political movement that first triumphed within an established party, and then won national office, a conspiracy theory developed. I *think* it came about because the Reagan revolution didn't change all that much; or didn't do so in expected ways. Such is life, and those around the President made their peace with the fact thereof, but again, on the fringes there was a denial of reality and a conspiracy theory sprang up.

The unified theory, if I may use the term, is spelled out in a four-page, single-spaced letter dated April 22, 1985, which a constituent of mine received from Mr. John T. Dolan of the National Conservative Foundation of Alexandria, Virginia. In the early 1980s Dolan was briefly a man to be reckoned with in Washington. As head of the National Conservative Political Action Committee he took credit for the defeat of five liberal Democrats in the 1980 senatorial elections in which Republicans won their first majority there in a quarter century. Dolan affected the highbinder style of someone who cared not the least about respectability, even legality. In the spring of 1980 he told the *New York Times*:

There's no question about it—we are a negative organization that wants to get rid of five bad votes in the Senate. . . .

We're interested in ideology. We're going to beat these five and send a shiver down the spine of every other liberal Senator and Congressman.

He could not repeat his performance in 1982 or 1984 and thereafter gave up on electoral politics, seemingly convinced that something had thwarted him. I offer him as an example.

Dolan's letter proceeds as might the product of a creative writing course. This week's assignment: Compose a political manifesto in the paranoid style describing a vast conspiracy against republican government in the United States. Start with a central image. Proceed to describe the three basic elements of the conspiracy, as outlined by Hofstadter. The locus of the conspiracy must be of sufficient proximity and influence to pose a credible, imminent threat to society. Credit will be given for novel suggestions.

Mr. Dolan reported to my constituent friend (who had never

before heard from him or of him), that a private meeting had been arranged

between you and two Members of the President's Cabinet on May 21, 1985; *Secretary of the Interior Donald P. Hodel* at 11:00 A.M. and *Secretary of Education William J. Bennett* at 2:00 P.M., in their respective offices in Washington, D.C. These special briefings have been arranged for members of the CONSERVATIVE FORUM . . .

He begins with the conspiracy.

The American people have twice now elected Ronald Reagan to the White House by landslide proportions based upon his conservative platform. Yet at every turn, his—our—agenda is stymied by people who simply disregard the will of the American public and continue to proceed with their own liberal programs.

Next, the three basic elements.

Machinery.

The liberal machine in Washington, D.C. is powerful and entrenched. The federal bureaucracy consists of increasingly powerful career "civil servants" who are totally out of touch with grassroots America. They have consistently wasted untold billions of dollars of taxpayers' money every year on irresponsible federal programs that have accomplished absolutely nothing. Worse still, theirs is a socialist agenda predicated on their "right" to spend our money at will on totally unproductive programs.

Treason at the Top.

The bureaucrats in Washington, D.C. are strongly supported by the liberals in Congress who share the same philosophy. These legislators are clearly out of step with their constituencies, and continue to fund the welfare state that the American public has so soundly rejected.

The Hidden Network.

The third, and possibly most irresponsible liberal group fighting the conservative movement is the liberal media. You will never hear the media report on the untold billions of dollars that liberals waste every year. Instead, the liberal media repeatedly blasts the Reagan Administration for "massive" budget cuts while maintaining that conservatives are anti-poor, racist, etc. You and I know this is simply untrue and is the height of hypocrisy.

Dolan concludes by soliciting money to carry out a grassroots campaign to expose the conspiracy, a small enough sum for so large a mission. (And, in the American style, this would be a "corporate tax-deductible contribution.")

The "private meetings" with the Secretaries of Education and Interior would be only the start:

Our next scheduled meeting is with *Health and Human Services Secretary Margaret Heckler* on June 11, 1985.

Treasury Secretary James Baker, Commerce Secretary Malcolm Baldrige and Energy Secretary John Herrington have also agreed to hold meetings this fall. I am also arranging a series of private meetings with top White House officials and conservative Congressional leaders who will update you on the President's legislative agenda. Attendance at these meetings *will be limited to 25 people each* in order to allow for the maximum exchange of personal views.

Finally, the Mission.

The . . . goal of the CONSERVATIVE FORUM is to fight the distortions of the liberal media in their efforts to discredit the conservative movement. Through the National Conservative Foundation, we are already assembling the most sophisticated research on the liberal press available in America today. Armed with this research, we are producing, and will be airing nationally, a battery of commercials demonstrating the incredible bias of our national media. We will be specifically targeting the Washington Post, The New York Times, ABC, NBC, and CBS to demonstrate conclusively their efforts to discredit President Reagan and our conservative issue agenda.

I have lingered with this text not because of its great consequence but because of the clarity and completeness of the explication. Here is the paranoid style in American politics fully on display, with the new locus of conspiracy: television news.

Attack on the networks

Turn now to the pronouncements of the organization Accuracy In Media (AIM), Inc., a Washington-based corporation which publishes AIM REPORT, edited by Reed Irvine. Doubtless Mr. Irvine has many and diverse thoughts on his subject, but a reader of AIM REPORT could easily conclude that they come down to one charge: The television networks based in New York are witting or unwitting dupes of Communism and potent instruments for the diffusion of Soviet propaganda.

Let us sample three REPORTS: March, April, and May of 1984. The March 1984 REPORT had as its headline: "NBC Airs Soviet Propaganda." The broadcast in question was a two-part series, "The Church of the Russians" (which is to say the Russian Orthodox Church) "which shocked and outraged those familiar with the true state of religion in the Soviet Union today." NBC had failed to report that "the Orthodox seminaries in the Soviet Union are controlled by the KGB." Young people in the Soviet Union "are sophisticated enough to know that the Orthodox priests are fakes."

Hofstadter noted that there is commonly, perhaps uniformly, a touch of truth on which the paranoid style builds its fantasies. (The Masons *were* a secret society, and their members were of the elite,

and frequently influential. The Jesuits surely *hoped* for the conversion of the United States to Catholicism.) I don't in the least doubt that there are KGB agents within the Orthodox Church in the Soviet Union; it previously had its share of Czarist agents. The essence of the paranoid style is to extrapolate grotesquely from that grain of the truth.

Erving Goffman used to argue that the world of the paranoid (I believe he meant clinical paranoid, but his case will serve for our political analogue) was never really "upside down" from that in which the rest of us toil, but merely ever so slightly tilted. Inasmuch as conspiracies have the greatest chance of success when nothing unusual seems to be going on, to the paranoid mind the outward appearance of normality is the key clue to the fact that a conspiracy is indeed afoot. What more commonplace nineteenth-century scene than smoke issuing from chimney pots? How better, then, for enemies to send signals unsuspected by the uninitiated? Only those aware of, or in on, the conspiracy would know. What seems normal can in fact be most sinister to the paranoid.

Thus, the ABC network ran a movie in 1983 about the aftermath of a nuclear attack on the United States; something that could happen, and which a lot of people think about a great deal. Accuracy In Media got the real message, and took action. The April 1984 AIM REPORT headline is: "We Win!" It reports that ABC shareholders would get a chance to vote on an Accuracy In Media resolution, which read as follows:

Whereas, the Soviet Union spends billions of dollars each year on its worldwide propaganda and disinformation campaign with the goal of manipulating the mass media of the United States and other countries of the free world, and,

Whereas, ABC on November 20, 1983, televised a movie, "The Day After," which had been produced and promoted by ABC at an estimated cost of around \$8 million and which in the view of some experts in propaganda analysis meshed with the Soviet anti-nuclear campaign whose primary goal was to bar the deployment of Pershing II and cruise missiles in NATO countries,

We ask the board of directors to take note of the danger that ABC's facilities may be used to disseminate Soviet propaganda and to undertake an investigation to determine whether or not this has been done in the past and to devise measures to insure that it is not done in the future.

And so to May, 1984. The AIM headline: "CBS: 'Arrogant and Irresponsible.'" AIM is a shareholder in CBS and at the corporation's annual meeting of that year asked that CBS consider "what measures might be taken to guard against the facilities of CBS being used to disseminate Soviet-bloc propaganda." In a statement on the

occasion Mr. Irvine addressed the subject of “the vulnerability of our media to penetration by Soviet propaganda,” commending a book on the subject by Professors Roy Dodson and Richard Schultz, *Dezinformatsia*. (Again, the paranoid touches base, briefly, with reality. Dodson and Shultz had written a serious and interesting analysis of Soviet propaganda techniques. However, their book does not even remotely suggest that American television has been used to disseminate Soviet propaganda.) Undeterred, AIM reported:

We saw a . . . serious case in 1981, when CBS aired its five-part series, “The Defense of the United States.” Walter Cronkite was shown interviewing a General Milshtein in Moscow, who was provided with an opportunity to voice false statements about the missile build-up, statements which certainly were Soviet disinformation, but which were never disputed on the program. A Soviet defector, Igor Glagolev, said he knew General Milshtein well and that Milshtein didn’t believe anything that he had said in his interview with Mr. Cronkite.

In the course of the following twelve months there occurred numerous military anniversaries, principally associated with the Nazi surrender in Europe, but also marking the North Vietnamese triumph in southeast Asia in 1975. Television covered both. Where the first subject lent itself to archival reporting of an American success and nostalgic returns to old battlefields by long-reconciled combatants, the tenth anniversary of the fall of Saigon, a messier story all around, could be reported, wisely or not, in live interviews with many more of the actual participants—many, predictably, still active in fighting political battles related to the war’s conduct. The networks did a lot of this. And so to the May 1985 AIM REPORT: “Homage to Hanoi.” They begin with a 1975 passage by James Reston speculating that “*Maybe the historians will agree that the reporters and the cameras were decisive in the end. They brought the issue of the war to the people . . . and forced the withdrawal of American power from Vietnam* [italics in the original].” Henry Kissinger is cited in a less speculative mood. Of a Ted Koppel interview with Le Duc Tho, he observes: “I think what we saw is a defeat which we inflicted on ourselves. And it is quite significant that Le Duc Tho thanked his American supporters at the end of his remarks . . .” None of the networks escaped, but NBC captured AIM’s “despicable coverage award” for all ’round performance.

In June, 1985 the Public Broadcasting Service announced that it would present (which is to say make available to PBS stations) a fifty-seven-minute rebuttal to a thirteen-part series that PBS had commissioned on the Vietnam war and presented in 1983. The rebuttal film produced by AIM was entitled “Television’s Vietnam: The

Real Story” and was partly financed by a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities. Fox Butterfield of the *New York Times* describes the feature as contending that “America’s purpose in Vietnam was ‘noble’ but that it was misled by ‘disinformation’ from the press and television, which helped lose the war.”

As Tom Shales of the *Washington Post* noted the week of the broadcast:

Footage of Jane Fonda prancing and grinning merrily through North Vietnam is justifiably inserted to embarrass the white-wine liberals who made protesting against the war into sanctimonious exhibitionism at the time.

But none of this strikes at any of the original documentary’s integrity or good intentions. It couldn’t have been perfect, and wasn’t, but AIM fails to support its charges that it was “flawed by serious errors and distortions,” and that it turned the sorrowful story of the war into a “melodrama of heroes and villains.”

The single most specious charge is made against the press in general, not the PBS show. AIM blames the media for the fact the war was lost. After giving examples of allegedly excessive media focus on war protest, [narrator Charlton] Heston says, “This kind of distorted coverage had a cumulative effect on Congress. The results on the battlefield were disastrous.” Even crackpots must wince a bit at this kind of assertion.

From conspiracy to intimidation

What does it matter what the crackpots believe? It matters to the extent that others come to believe *them*. This particular viewpoint, just now, is close to power in Washington. Unless Mr. Dolan completely misrepresents himself, he is able to summon at least six members of the President’s Cabinet to meetings with his Conservative Forum to chat about the liberal conspiracy. Who can say how widely Dolan and his kind are believed? But they are not rejected. To the contrary, they are encouraged. Without overstating either the fragility of such large corporate enterprises as network news programs or the credibility of Mr. Dolan, we begin to approach officially sanctioned political pressure on those who report the news. This is not, in my view, something we should wish for our country.

First, as to the facts: They are wrong. I have been more or less continuously involved with intelligence matters for the past dozen years, and have been especially interested in this question of Soviet disinformation. Heaven knows the Soviets try. (One caveat: Not everything that comes out of Moscow is propaganda. Much of what they say they believe. How much is an absolutely key question for the intelligence analyst. Do they *believe* that? Or do they know it is not true but simply want others to believe it?) In this time I have

never encountered a successful Soviet penetration of the American television networks. Which is to say I have never seen reported as true an untruth which originated with the Soviet propaganda machinery.³ There may have been such, but all I can attest is that none has ever come to my attention. (If any came to the attention of senior American intelligence officers during the period 1977-1984, when I served as a member of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, it would have been their duty to report it. I cannot recall any such.)

Certainly the Soviets do succeed in spreading lies. When terrorists seized the Grand Mosque at Mecca in November 1979, someone circulated word in Islamabad that the U.S. was responsible for this assault on Islam's holiest shrine—which inspired a Pakistani mob to go burn down an American embassy building. (So it is explained.) But no American media reported that the U.S. was responsible for the incident at Mecca, nor has any credible media outlet anywhere else. Most efforts by the Soviets at disinformation are pretty clumsy and, even in countries where spreading rumors of American conspiracy is a popular pastime, the Soviets don't enjoy much success. Newsmen don't fall for it. In October 1984, aboard the Secretary of State's plane heading to India for the funeral of Indira Gandhi, we learned that the Soviets had put it out that somehow the United States was involved in the assassination. The next morning the *Patriot*, the Indian Communist daily, reported the charge in blazing headlines. But the rest of the Indian press ignored it. That evening, in response to a blunt inquiry from the Secretary of State, the Prime Minister of the U.S.S.R stated that this was not his government's view. End of that media manipulation campaign.

Then there is the celebrated campaign following the death of Leonid Brezhnev in 1982, to portray Yuri Vladimirovich Andropov as a closet swinger. The *Wall Street Journal* reported that he "likes Glenn Miller records, good scotch whiskey, Oriental rugs, and American books." Other papers picked up miscellaneous tidbits about the Americana in Andropov's life and this led a handful of commentators to make hopeful noises about Soviet-American relations during the Andropov reign. But if any harm was done it is difficult to spot. Reviewing the episode in *The New Republic*, Edward Jay Epstein concluded it was less disinformation than the familiar desire of the press to add some "color" to a new face in the absence of any reliable sources of information.

³ Accuracy In Media has recently spun off Accuracy In Academia, which has learned that 10,000 Marxist professors are "brainwashing" America's youth through "misinformation and disinformation" in classrooms (*Washington Post*, August 4, 1985).

There are of course biases in journalism: Reporters are burdened with the same sorts of preconceptions any of us bring to most any subject. Sometimes they will get the story wrong, or miss the point. Even so, the advent and development of television news in the space of, what? twenty years, say 1950 to 1970, was an event not different in its impact from the invention of printing. What was so very special in the United States were the people involved. Anyone who has known that first generation of television journalists will gladly concede one point and fiercely defend another. They were political liberals; their successors, in the main, still are. They had begun life as newspapermen when, typically, reporters were Democrats and publishers were Republicans—a class distinction if you like. But their avocation was *straight news*, and part of the crescendo of creativity that broke forth in the 1950s was nothing more or less than the energies released by the realization that they were free to put out their own newspaper. Think: no editorials! In this regard the federal government was on their side. The Fairness Doctrine of the Federal Communications Commission required that a reasonable amount of broadcast time be devoted to controversial issues, *and* that a reasonable opportunity be afforded opposing viewpoints. A general rule held that time be devoted to public interest topics, of which news reporting was clearly the mainstay.

Yet they were never quite so free as they felt. First, the networks themselves were in no way free of the federal government. Witness the Fairness Doctrine itself. An agreeable law? Well, yes. But no such law could be passed regarding the press. I believe it is settled that television news is protected by the First Amendment. It is a somewhat diminished protection, perhaps, in that stations are licensed and subject to public interest requirements. Thus the Federal Communications Commission can ordain something called a “family hour” during which only wholesome subjects may be broadcast while the children are still up. The plain fact is that the public owns the airways; owners own the press.

What the public owns, the government controls. In July 1985, the newly appointed attorney general of the Reagan administration, fresh from the White House staff, was speculating as to whether “rules” needed to be established for television coverage of events such as the hijacking of TWA Flight 847 the previous month. By any measure, save the murder of one naval person before any television was involved, the hostages had been returned and the administration was entitled to considerable credit. Yet it rather encouraged a general judgment that the networks had somehow behaved badly.

Nothing new. Last year the CIA got mad at ABC for what it described as “deliberate news distortion” and tried unsuccessfully to get the FCC to strip the network of its broadcast licenses. Fred W. Friendly has recounted the efforts of the Kennedy administration to harass fundamentalist religious broadcasts that were politically hostile. What might be new is a generally censorious tone, even when the news has been “good.” Reminding the nominal owners who the real owners are.

Television stations are commercial enterprises which earn money by selling programs to advertisers priced according to the size of audiences. Newspapers do the same, but newspapers mostly sell their audiences news. Television mostly sells entertainment: If you like, it puts on plays, interspersed with what the Greeks would call games, interrupted at intervals with news. The managements of the three New York networks have been generous with new budgets and meticulous about not interfering. I first appeared on the *Today Show* in 1963 and have been somewhat evident on all three networks for more than two decades now. I have never heard so much as a whisper of interference by management. (In the interest, as they say, of full disclosure, I should say I was briefly a consultant to NBC in the late 1960s. Working with Fred Freed, one of the early masters of television documentary, I got a close look at one network. There was some grumbling about budgets: but of political interference, not a word.)

There are some 1,250 television broadcast stations. Of these, the three major networks own a couple dozen. The rest are either independent, or are affiliates of one or another network. In rough terms about half the stations are affiliated, and these in about equal proportions among NBC, CBS, and ABC. If the networks are primarily in the entertainment business, so are the affiliates. But they are much closer to their audience, and understandably and properly sensitive to public opinion about the material they present. Should a general mood develop that holds that network news is somehow tainted, manipulative, not to be trusted—well, the easiest thing is simply not to buy it. If it ceases to be bought either it will cease to be offered for sale, or it will be recast. That is the law of midtown Manhattan.

I would be at pains to make clear that in speaking of the paranoid style I do not refer to the merely more excitable sectors of the conservative right or the liberal left (as these designations are commonly employed). Thus my colleague Senator Jesse Helms of North Carolina is involved with an enterprise, “Fairness in Media,” which

professes great alarm at the nightly appearances of Dan Rather on CBS television and urges citizens to “buy and hold CBS stock” so that they can “later vote that stock to end CBS liberal bias.” For every such alert that comes in the mail telling a senator that the liberals have seized Radio City (NBC), “Black Rock” (CBS), or the former Sheffield milk bottling plant on West 57th Street (which serves as the somewhat down-scale studios of CBS), there is an opposite from People for the American Way, or what have you, warning that it is Jesse Helms or the Reverend Falwell who is about to seize power. This is called direct mail. It raises money. The tone is frequently apocalyptic, but the causes on both left and right are just as frequently serious and sober-minded and certifiably sane.

A matter of duty

To illustrate the difference between political rhetoric and political paranoia, pause a moment with Lyndon H. LaRouche, Jr. and his “National Democratic Policy Committee” (formerly the “U.S. Labor Party”). Theirs has been a larger and more active presence on the *left* in recent American politics than is perhaps generally known. Liberal and moderate Democrats, with an exception I will come to, have been pretty much on their own in fighting off and blocking this influence.

Although LaRouche did not begin organizing his network until four years after Hofstadter’s book appeared, there could hardly be a more exact model of the paranoid style. LaRouche seems to have begun as a member of the Socialist Workers Party, a Trotskyite group. He set out on his own in 1969, when he established a left-wing National Caucus of Labor Committees at Columbia University. Since then he has established a consortium of like-minded believers in what must surely be one of the most all-encompassing, apocalyptic conspiracy theories yet devised. The conspiracy includes as co-conspirators the KGB, the CIA, the British royal family, the Rockefellers, the media, the Mafia, the Ku Klux Klan, the Council on Foreign Relations, the Trilateral Commission, “the Zionist lobby,” and all manner of powerful institutions working in league to bring poverty and nuclear holocaust to America, mainly by promoting the illicit narcotics traffic. All of this is somehow traced to the Guelph tendency of the Italian Middle Ages. It abounds in codewords—for “British” read “Jewish.” (In 1980 the New York State Supreme Court dismissed a libel suit LaRouche had filed against the Anti-Defamation League of B’nai B’rith for its characterization of a LaRouche group as anti-Semitic, noting that the assertion was “fair comment” based

on the facts.) It is a moving target, however. True to Hofstadter's model, danger is ever-nigh if only the signals are perceived. The *New York Times* reported, in a two-part series on the LaRouche network in 1979:

. . . life moves from crisis to crisis as Mr. LaRouche announces new plots of assassination or looming thermonuclear war. "Every few weeks there's a new reality, different from the one before but just as absolute," said one former member.

The Democratic Party has taken the brunt of the LaRouchite assault. (In 1982, shortly after I had been renominated by the New York State Democratic Convention, LaRouchites representing themselves as Democrats filed enough signatures to force a primary contest against one of their number. This was fought out all summer, sometimes literally, on the streets of New York. It was the nastiest campaign I have been involved with in more than thirty years of electoral politics.) In the main I think they are a spent force. But if this is so it is because there have been those in the Democratic Party and the labor movement willing to resist them.

Our allies have been in the media; first the press, then television. Mark this: No charge of conspiratorial subversion by Accuracy In Media would exceed the routine charges levelled by LaRouche and his followers against the networks. Television did not exactly rush to cover the story; an incident was needed, which came in the form of a fracas involving Dr. and Mrs. Henry A. Kissinger at Newark airport on February 7, 1982. But thereafter the movement was reported, as it should have been, and NBC did a full-scale documentary.⁴

Will an effort be made by conservatives to address the paranoid style on the Right? So far there have been few voices heard from the political ranks. Frankly, I smell fear. Does it not then fall to the conservative intellectuals, not least the new conservatives, to address the issue? True, they risk seeming "troublesome," as Kristol noted back in issue Number 2. But it ought to be recalled that they turned in conservative directions in no small measure out of disgust with the debasement of the standards of political discourse on the Left at about the time this journal first appeared.

Granted a problem exists with "elites." McCarthy had his success

⁴ In this documentary, I was interviewed about the 1982 campaign. LaRouchites attempted to prevent the interview from taking place by various shenanigans. LaRouche sued NBC for libel, asking \$150 million in damages. NBC filed a countersuit claiming that LaRouche had tried to prevent NBC's interview with me. A federal jury in Virginia found LaRouche had not been libeled, and in the countersuit awarded NBC \$3 million in damages. (The judge in the case reduced it to \$200,000.)

not least because elements within our then much more readily identified foreign-policy elites and their constituents were getting a bit too comfortable with the fact of Communism abroad in the world. The American electorate was not in the least bit so disposed. Today there are similar divisions over moral perceptions. (Note, however, that Communism presented itself to the public generally, or at least to the people I grew up with, as a moral, not a political or economic issue. Its complete name was “*Godless Communism.*”) The New York-based media (it is always the “*New York media*”) will almost always incline to the more “cosmopolitan” view. They are more cosmopolitan. It will commonly be the case that their views will diverge from those of the public generally. This is something for television to be sensitive to: but not something it can help.

A final plea then. Something precious and irreplaceable is at stake: the freedom of the press in the form of television journalism. Issues come and go. It is institutions that must be preserved. It is the singular American good fortune that our radio and television are not state-owned, as they are almost everywhere, with allowance here and there for some privately owned competition. The curious aspect of an openly state-controlled media is that, in a democratic society, they can usually be held to impartial standards. (But then the British government recently cancelled a BBC documentary on Northern Ireland.) The risk we take with privately owned media is that they will submit to various forms of political control which, being so less visible and formal, are capable of imposing considerably greater bias. It is the turn of conservatives, in what is in so many ways a triumphantly conservative polity, to protect the institutions they inherited pretty much intact from the despised or disparaged liberals. It would do no harm for the networks to show a little impatience; a certain willingness to brawl a bit if it comes to that. What did Elmer Davis say way back then, when some not dissimilar issues were abroad? “The republic was not established by cowards, and cowards will not preserve it.”