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Ignorance, Fear, and Democracy in America

Anti-intellectualism in America is, sadly, older than the nation itself. A new collection of Richard Hofstadter's work from Library of America traces the history of ideas and cultural currents in American society and politics.

By
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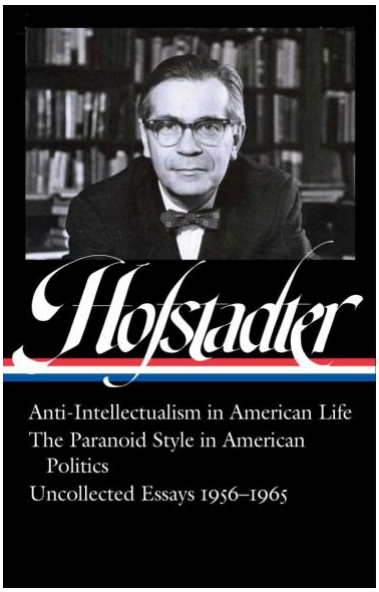
As he prepared to march across the Edmund Pettus Bridge in March 1965 on what was to become known as 'Bloody Sunday', the late civil rights leader and one-day congressman John Lewis prepared for what he anticipated would be his arrest by packing an apple, an orange, toothpaste, and a toothbrush into a knapsack, along with two books. One of those was Thomas Merton's *The Seven Storey Mountain* (1948), the Trappist monk's autobiography in which he relates his quest as a young man to find spiritual fulfillment; the other was *The American Political Tradition and the Men Who Made It* (1948) by historian Richard Hofstadter, where he argues that, sectionalist conflicts aside, American politics has been characterized by a 'shared belief in the rights of property, the philosophy of economic individualism, [and] the value of competition' that runs across the political spectrum.

The then 25-year-old Lewis famously lost that knapsack and its contents while being beaten nearly to death by police on that fateful day, but the Library of America is now ensuring that Hofstadter's legacy at least will be preserved by collecting his work from the mid-1940s to 1970 in a three-volume series edited by Princeton historian Sean Wilentz. The first of these surveys



Anti-Intellectualism in American Life, The Paranoid Style in American Politics, Uncollected Essays 1956-1965
Richard Hofstadter
Library of America

Hofstader's middle period, from 1956 to 1965, during which he published some of his most famous work and was at the height of his reputation as a public intellectual along with the likes of Lionel Trilling, Alfred Kazin, and Daniel Bell. The book presents two complete works, the Pulitzer Prize-winning *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life* (1963) and *The Paranoid Style in American Politics* (1964), along with a decade's worth of previously uncollected essays, including several appearing in print for the first time. It is a volume that is timely in tracing the history of ideas and cultural currents that continue to be alive and well in American society today.

Published in 1963, *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life* seeks to trace the hostility toward the intellect and intellectuals in American culture dating back to its roots. It is conceived as what Michel Foucault would term 'a history of the present', a genealogy of the ideas that explains current circumstances, in this case as revealed in the wake of McCarthyism and the defeat of the 'egghead' Adlai Stevenson in the US Presidential elections of 1952 and 1956.

Anti-intellectualism in America is older than the nation itself, going back to the Puritans who traveled across the ocean from the Continent in order to escape from the strictures of organized religion and all of its trappings and inhabit what they took to be a 'pristine' wilderness where pure and direct faith could reign, in which they could be free to accept Jesus as their personal savior. And according to Hofstadter it is to evangelism that we must look to discover the origins of American anti-intellectualism.

To be sure, most of the first generation of Puritan clergy were educated men with Oxbridge pedigrees. It was not long after John Winthrop arrived to lead the Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1630 that what is now Harvard University was founded. Hofstadter identifies a class aspect to this, however, with the learned scholar-ministers comprising an upper stratum living a somewhat more rarified existence over a generally uneducated laity. Puritanism's intellectual foundation also needed to be balanced with deep emotion, which was required of the faithful in order to maintain their piety.

This delicate balance overseen by the professional ministerial class was to be challenged by 'inspired' preachers of the First Great Awakening of the mid-1700s, setting the stage for the anti-intellectualist strain in American culture to emerge. It is also the moment where the democratic impulse awakens in the leveling aspect of every individual, regardless of station, having the right to choose the religion that best suited them.

The colonial frontier was especially ripe for revival grounded in emotion. As people moved away from the more settled areas, they left the institutions of 'civilized' society behind, including those of religion. Communities, such as they were, often had no schools or churches not to mention books. And as Hofstadter writes:

> ‘[M]en and women living under conditions of poverty and exacting toil, facing the hazards of Indian raids, fevers, and agues, and raised on whiskey and brawling, could not afford education and culture; and they found it easier to reject what they could not have than to admit the lack of it as a deficiency in themselves.’

This resentment helped to foster the embrace of a more ‘primitive’ and thus ostensibly purer form of Christianity for which the Good Book alone would be the final arbiter and which traveling, often self-appointed evangelists with no formal education would propagate. This emphasis on faith over reason continues to inspire evangelism and has often influenced politics over the course of the nation’s history.

Similarly to the early Puritan clerics, the generation that founded the American republic were learned men who formed a patrician elite. And as Hofstadter wryly notes: ‘It is ironic that the United States should have been founded by intellectuals; for throughout most of our political history, the intellectual has been for the most part either an outsider, a servant, or a scapegoat.’ But the patrician elite soon fell out among one another, opening the door for factionalism, often with little regard for propriety.

The first victim of attempted political assassination was Thomas Jefferson at the hands of the Federalists. He was attacked for being a ‘philosopher’ given to ‘abstract theories’ who lacked the character to lead; worse, he was a Francophile. And as a Deist, he was a threat to Christianity. One allegation was true, that he ‘kept a slave wench and sired mulattoes’, though that was commonplace among the enslavers of Black people, so it’s uncertain why that would have been perceived at the time to have any negative consequences.

Anti-intellectualism became firmly embedded in American politics with the rise of Andrew Jackson in the 1820s, which twice pitted the ‘natural genius’ of ‘Old Hickory’ against the patrician intellectualism of John Quincy Adams. Jackson won a plurality of votes in 1824, but not enough electoral votes to secure the Presidency. The House of Representatives in a contingent election selected Adams who almost immediately proceeded to disregard the democratic impulses to which Jackson had appealed by proposing a series of national initiatives for educational and scientific improvement that even his own Cabinet at times would not support. Four years later, the unlettered Jackson, ‘nursling of the wilds’ according to one contemporary encomium, beat Adams in a landslide with his supporters founding the modern Democratic Party in the process.

Another purveyor of anti-intellectualism has been the business class, whose proprietary interests in property and profit have facilitated consensus in American politics going back to the Founding Fathers, as Hofstadter argued in *The American Political Tradition*. Through what Hofstadter terms ‘the practical culture’, the business class, particularly since the onset of the industrial age, has bent the intellect toward strictly technological, materialistic, and above all utilitarian ends. Its view of education is essentially vocational, a matter of career preparation to be measured in terms of return on investment.

The need for technical training becomes more pronounced toward the end of the 19th century with the rise of large-scale bureaucracies, which resulted in the creation of business schools to

instruct in the principles of management, finance, and other aspects of the commercial enterprise. Alongside it, interestingly, grew the whole field of self-help to promulgate development of personal characteristics necessary for success, a secularization of the evangelical spirit epitomized in the exhortations of Norman Vincent Peale.

Rather than serve as a bulwark against this trend, American higher education has participated in the leveling down of the intellectual. Part of the dilemma has been the need to balance unencumbered intellectual inquiry with access to the knowledge necessary to sustain a functioning democracy. The democratization of higher education has been well-suited to the anti-intellectual and utilitarian impulses within American culture. However, here Hofstadter is not arguing against the democratization of education so much as attempting to open it up to the embrace of more 'playfulness', as he terms it in the book's introduction, in the sense of being amenable to 'the quest for new uncertainties' and equipped with the ability and the desire to turn 'answers into questions'. This disposition is not one that can be easily grasped through standardized testing or inculcated through strictly technical training.

The anti-intellectualism of American culture provides the fertile ground in which the subject of Hofstadter's follow-up book has taken root and flourished. *The Paranoid Style in American Politics* is a collection of essays, written over a 14-year period, once again in the shadow of McCarthyism but this time imbued with a new sense of urgency in response to the rise of the far right in American politics as embodied by the ascension of Arizona Senator Barry Goldwater to the Presidential candidacy of the Republican Party in 1964. The collection is divided into two parts, the first dealing with the American right and the second with other considerations of the modern era. Part I still reads as a Foucauldian history of the present.

The title essay started out as a lecture given at Oxford University in November 1963, the day before President John F. Kennedy was assassinated in Dallas, and it was published in abridged form in that month's issue of *Harper's Magazine*. For Hofstadter, the paranoid style is not the product of a disturbed mind, but 'a mode of expression', the articulation of a way of seeing the world, deployed by 'more or less normal people' for political purposes.

Feelings of persecution are central to the paranoid style and conspiracy theories abound within it. As if he were writing of the present moment, Hofstadter begins by observing that:

> '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. Today this fact is most evident on the extreme right wing, which has shown, particularly in the Goldwater movement, how much political leverage can be got out of the animosities and passions of a small minority.'

It must be noted that the paranoid style is not necessarily a function of the right or the left—as Hofstadter notes, the Moscow Trials of the Great Purge of 1938-1939 under Joseph Stalin were steeped in the paranoid style—but an ideological construct that can cut both ways.

While many examples of the paranoid style can be cited, Hofstadter, as an historian of American thought, was primarily concerned with the American case and in particular its expression on the

right. Again in providing a history of the present, Hofstadter traces the paranoid style back through the Goldwater movement to McCarthyism, anti-Catholicism, the anti-Masonic movement, and back to the earliest days of the nation. Among the early purveyors of the paranoid style was Samuel F. B. Morse, inventor of the telegraph, whose 1835 screed *Foreign Conspiracy Against the Liberties of the United States* railed against 'the popes and despots' operating at the behest of Austria through the Jesuit order among the unsuspecting citizens of the Republic.

Contemporary right-wing thought, in Hofstadter's estimation, can be characterized by three primary claims, which with some elision can still be discerned today: 1. the conspiracy to undermine free-market capitalism as epitomized by the New Deal, or in its present-day manifestation, 'the nanny state'; 2. the infiltration of top government by socialists, in the age of Brietbart and QAnon, the subversives of 'the deep state'; and 3. the network of leftists in education and the media conspiring to undermine the 'real' America.

Hofstadter began mapping out the paranoid style in the mid-1950s, represented in the collection by the 1954 essay 'The Pseudo-Conservative Revolt'. Hofstadter picks up the term 'pseudo-conservative' from the 1950 book *The Authoritarian Personality* (1950) by Frankfurt School critical theorist Theodor W. Adorno and his associates written while he was living in exile in California during and shortly after the Second World War. Hofstader's argument is that pseudo-conservatism is a product of the rootlessness and heterogeneity of modern life and the striving for status and identity that it engenders. Like the members of the Tea Party surveyed in sociologist Arlie Russell Hocschild's 2016 book, *Strangers in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right,* 'The pseudo-conservative always imagines himself to be dominated and imposed upon because he feels that he is not dominant, and knows of no other way of interpreting his position.'

Pseudo-conservatism gets updated in the 1965 essay 'Pseudo-Conservatism Revisted', the writing of which was prompted in large part by the Goldwater Presidential campaign. In the ten years since introducing the concept, Hofstadter notes that the far right has grown in organization and influence, a statement that resonates today. He walks back the emphasis on status anxiety a bit, as well makes a few other corrections, including admitting to have understated the importance of nativism and fundamentalism to the right, which also seems increasingly relevant to today. Again, Hofstadter relates some history of the present by looking back to the likes of anti-Semite Father Charles Coughlin in the 1930s (who continued to serve as a parish pastor into the mid-'60s and for whom my best man was an altar boy) and of course, Wisconsin Senator Joseph McCarthy in the 1950s, as well as the John Birch Society.

Hofstadter directly engages Goldwater and pseudo-conservative politics in the essay that rounds out Part I of *The Paranoid Style in American Politics*. The first statement Hofstadter makes is that the success of Goldwater and the pseudo-conservatism he represents is not an accidental effect of moderate Republican ineptitude, but the result of an organized effort within the party. And like the Republican party of today, moderates were at pains to distinguish between 'the conservatism represented by Senator Goldwater and his followers and the conservatism that conserves'. And as if speaking of President Donald Trump, Hofstadter observes of Goldwater:

> ‘[H]ow are we to explain the character of a ‘conservative’ whose whole political life has been spent urging a sharp break with the past, whose great moment as a party leader was marked by a repudiation of our traditional political ways, whose followers were so notable for their destructive and divisive energies, and whose public reputation was marked not by standpattism or excessive caution but with wayward impulse and recklessness?’

It should also be noted that it was Goldwater who pioneered ‘the Southern strategy’ in an attempt to capitalize on the white backlash against the civil rights movement not only in the former Confederacy but in the North, as well. And like the ‘dog whistle’ politics of recent election cycles, the Goldwater campaign used the coded language of urban street violence, corruption (AKA ‘the swamp’), and the ostensible threat to women (today comfortably ensconced in the suburbs) to turn out the vote.

From an electoral campaign perspective, the plan didn’t work. Goldwater lost to Lyndon Johnson, carrying only five states in the Deep South and his own state of Arizona, in the largest landslide since James Monroe defeated John Quincy Adams in 1820. But as Hofstadter notes, the Goldwater faithful and their pseudo-conservative fellow travelers were apparently satisfied in having established themselves as a force to be reckoned with in American politics and especially in their ability to attain leadership of the party from a minority position. And while the Southern strategy didn’t deliver results in 1964, the appeals to racial animus and fear have proven highly effective in subsequent Republican victories from Richard Nixon to Trump. Even when out of power the right has been successful, as Hofstadter predicted, in its obstructionism, creating ‘a political climate in which the rational pursuit of our well-being and safety would become impossible’.

The uncollected essays contain two additional reflections on Goldwater, one written before the results of the 1964 election and one written after. The first discusses Goldwater in the context of the two-party system, the historical emergence of which Hofstadter takes up in one of his last books, *The Idea of a Party System: The Rise of a Legitimate Opposition in the United States, 1780-1840,* published in 1969. The essay ends on a pessimistic note with the thought that Goldwater need not win the election in order to continue to control the Republican Party and disrupt the system to the point of mounting a second campaign for President.

The second essay muses on what Hofstadter terms ‘the Goldwater debacle’. The sound drubbing that Goldwater and the rest of the Republican Party took in 1964 was evidence to Hofstadter that the center ultimately did hold and that what Hofstadter’s friend from his younger days the sociologist C. Wright Mills terms the power elite ‘threw its preponderant weight on the side of responsibility’. Hofstadter closes the essay with a charge to the ‘moderates’ of the Republican Party to regain the political center in order to establish a position within the broader consensus of the American public and yet carve out an identity to distinguish themselves from the Democratic Party.

Hofstadter died of leukemia in 1970 at the age of 54 and did not live long enough to see that although Goldwater did not personally maintain control of the Republican Party, the pseudo-conservatism he represented continued to gain force in American politics despite its minority position. Inklings of this were apparent by the late 1960s, which Hofstadter did recognize in the

Nixon campaign, though the scale of it over time is something he may not have imagined. Rather than move toward the center, the Republican Party has doubled down on pseudo-conservatism, using racial politics, voter suppression, gerrymandering, and the unequal representation of the Electoral College to win elections, with the last two Republicans attaining the Presidency doing so while losing the popular vote.

The remainder of Part II of *The Paranoid Style in American Politics* and the uncollected essays delve into other aspects of American culture, politics, and thought, representing a broad range of Hofstadter's interests and opinions as an historian and a public intellectual, and demonstrating the breadth of his erudition. (I'm a sucker for all things Tocqueville and greatly appreciated Hofstadter's appreciation of the French aristocrat of whom it is said wrote the best book on democracy, which is also the best book about America.)

The final essay, written around 1962 and previously unpublished, is a personal note of Hofstadter's on his origins and evolution as an historian and a thinker, and makes the case for history as a literary practice and not just a recitation of facts. (And indeed, Hofstadter is a master stylist.) The entire volume from the Library of America is assiduously annotated by Wilentz, a formidable historian in his own right, with notes on persons, events, and references that may not be well known to contemporary readers. There is also a chronology of Hofstadter's life.

In the 50 years since his premature death, Hofstadter has come in for criticism from the right and the left. It can be argued that he was a liberal elitist with a rather reductive view of populism and reform, that his notions of the American body politic didn't acknowledge what we now call 'intersectionality', that some of his interpretations of the facts don't hold up to present-day scrutiny, not too mention that some of the facts themselves have been subsequently called into question. But in the main, Hofstadter's contribution to our understanding of America's past and its relevance to the present still command attention. The current volume from the Library of America is a testament. The subsequent volumes in development, one of which will include the full text of *The American Political Tradition,* promise to reaffirm that.