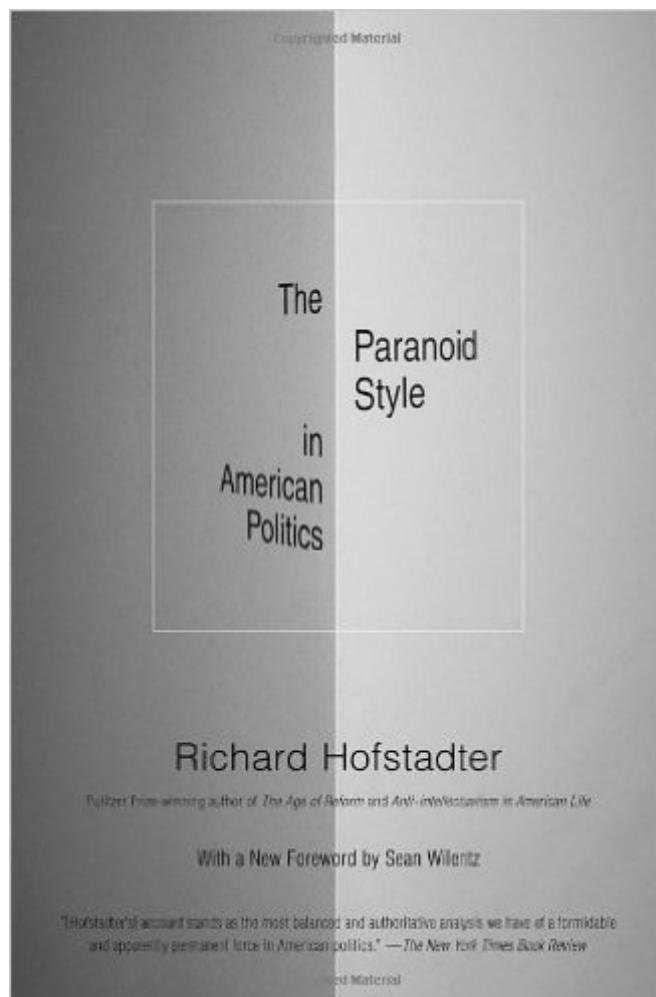


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The Paranoid Style In American Politics



Synopsis

This timely reissue of Richard Hofstadter's classic work on the fringe groups that influence American electoral politics offers an invaluable perspective on contemporary domestic affairs. In *The Paranoid Style in American Politics*, acclaimed historian Richard Hofstadter examines the competing forces in American political discourse and how fringe groups can influence " and derail " the larger agendas of a political party. He investigates the politics of the irrational, shedding light on how the behavior of individuals can seem out of proportion with actual political issues, and how such behavior impacts larger groups. With such other classic essays as "Free Silver and the Mind of 'Coin' Harvey" and "What Happened to the Antitrust Movement?", "The Paranoid Style in American Politics" remains both a seminal text of political history and a vital analysis of the ways in which political groups function in the United States.

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Customer Reviews

Don't be put off by the lame cover design. The late Mr. Hofstadter's book deserves your attention, particularly in light of recent American history. 'The Paranoid Style' is in fact a collection of essays, the first four of which are thematically-related studies of American hyper-conservatism. (I won't discuss the other essays in this review.) In the first, Hofstadter brings to light earlier historical avatars of conservative paranoia, reaching back to 18th century fears of 'Illuminati' and Freemasons, and 19th century anti-Catholic sentiment. Hofstadter then contextualizes the

then-current anti-communist movement and McCarthyism as the latest examples of a 'style' of American political rhetoric that cannot brook coincidence, and that, in contrast, prefers to see historical events, which are largely beyond our control, as the evidence of a vast and perfect conspiracy to destroy America and its values. In the next essays, Hofstadter engages with what he calls 'pseudo-conservatism,' a philosophy embodied in those ultra-right wing movements that do not seek to conserve or guide our social institutions at all, but instead wish to tear them out root and branch, on the grounds of their complete and utter corruption. At the time, Hofstadter's targets were right-wing organizations like the John Birch Society, but above all Barry Goldwater and his supporters. These 'pseudo-conservatives' rejected completely the moderate Republican leadership of the time, and sometimes went so far as to accuse them of treason.

I read this book several decades ago, but (1) after painfully witnessing the bizarre notions entertained in the Republican primary debates this season (e.g. the Federal Reserve is some kind of criminal enterprise, public health vaccinations reflect coercive gov't power run amok), (2) reading of a recent survey where 26% of those who identified themselves as Republicans also identified Barack Obama as the "Antichrist" (26%!), and (3) seeing on TV a recently-elected Congressman of the Tea party persuasion reject out-of-hand political compromise saying he was sent to Washington to "go to war" (with a electoral margin of about 150 votes!), I thought "Paranoid Style" might bear re-reading. I'm glad I did; this is an excellent and probing analysis, and also beautifully written, of the development of the radical right in American politics around the middle part of the last century. Professor Hofstadter analyzes the underlying premises of McCarthyism in the 1950s and Goldwaterism in the 1960s, and discusses the social and psychological dimensions of these right-wing movements. It was interesting, to me at least, how much in his analysis Hofstadter relies on prevailing sociological notions of the time (e.g., the primacy of status politics over interest politics in times of prosperity) when sociology today appears far less intellectually influential. Thus, this book is worthwhile just as a historical treatment of political and social forces shaping American right-wing movements at particular points in time. My re-reading was prompted by what the McCarthy and Goldwater movements discussed in "Paranoid Style" could tell us about the motives and forces underlying the current right-wing resurgence in the Republican party.

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