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Greening the Media

The Media's Choice in 2016—Two Paranoid Styles?

How the media's embrace of paranoid political rhetoric frames global warming

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We stand on the cusp of an election that has reached such levels of animus and even loathing expressed by Donald Trump and his chorines, matched by intense misogyny, that the Republican establishment itself is alarmed. On the other side, Hillary Clinton is an underwhelming choice for Democrats and remains bedeviled by scandals old and new that have both followed her for decades and emerged in the recent past.

We have seen very little environmental talk during this vituperative campaign—from the candidates or the media trailing them around the country. On the occasions when talking points veered away from the candidates' respective forms of putative misconduct, the 2016 General Election nevertheless stuck to more traditional areas suited to the paranoid rhetoric preferred by mainstream media: our jobs (in decline), our middle class (threatened), our militarism (weakening), and our foreign political and trade policies (vulnerable).

Such fear-mongering is not new to American politics and political reporting.

Fifty years ago, the lapsed leftist Richard Hofstadter published an epochal essay in *Harper's Magazine*, entitled "The Paranoid Style in American Politics." Hofstadter observed that Congress and elections had become, regrettably, sites that seemed designed for "angry minds." He used the word "paranoid" because it captured the "heated exaggeration, suspiciousness, and conspiratorial fantasy" that characterized the expression of this anger. He was not suggesting these people were clinically ill, but that they had the propensity to state unfounded and brutal ideas then seek to put them into practice.

The point Hofstadter was making was really about how politicians, and by extension Americans, talk politics—hence the word "style." He discerned a repetitive tendency in the debating content and tactic of our speechmaking that sought to expose internal and external conspiracies against the "real" America. The enemy might be Catholic, black, Jewish, secular, Russian, Marxist, or Masonic, and it might be poised to strike in the 18th, 19th, or 20th centuries. The identity of the menace might have changed over time—but it was always there, lurking, ready to destabilize our little "r" republican virtues.

Of course, the paranoid style and fear-mongering has spread beyond political talk. Today many American institutions, news media being the most pernicious and conspicuous perpetrator, absolutely celebrate the paranoid style and the profitable anxieties it cultivates. As *Rolling Stone* columnist Neil Strauss put it in a recent article:

"For mass media, insurance companies, Big Pharma, advocacy groups, lawyers, politicians and so many more, your fear is worth billions. And fortunately for them, your fear is also very easy to manipulate. We're wired to respond to it above everything else. If we miss an opportunity for abundance, life goes on; if we miss an important fear cue, it doesn't."

The persistence of ethnic and religious transformations in the population, and fear of the resulting

cosmopolitanism, has fueled existential crises across the ages, as more and more people appear on the horizon who look, sound, or genuflect differently from settled populations. The paranoid style of political talk cultivates a basic terror of cultural encounters by cherry-picking past, present, and future horrors to conjure the specter of mortal threats. In the case of today's Republican base, the proverbial wagons are circled against these illusory threats; unsurprisingly it lags behind demographic trends in terms of age, ethnicity, language, religion, and education. It is therefore ripe for exploitation by such rhetoric.

That's why we can say with relative certainty that more white men will vote Republican than Democrat and the vast majority of Latinos and African Americans will vote Clinton. Asian Americans will split more evenly but with a developing tendency towards the Democratic Party. Big cities will be reliably Democrat, as will the country's wealth creators (California and New York) and queer folk. Only a third of college graduates will vote conservatively. We can also say that Trump supporters will not be the poorest and most disenfranchised—the average income of Trump advocates during the Republican primaries was well above that of the population in general.

So what might this paranoid framework tell us about this column's bailiwick?

When it comes to the environmental issues, one candidate has decried the science of global warming as a foreign conspiracy and the other is increasingly renowned for the differences between her policy statements in public and her paid speeches in private. The denial story fits into a longstanding and disturbing trend.

We know that a fervent disdain for the scientific findings and warnings about climate change fit the paranoid model very well, and that Republicans mistrust climate scientists as careerists and ideologues.

Trump's policies speak of delivering energy rather than protecting the environment. They focus on withdrawing from much of the outside world as an unreliable source of energy and becoming almost autarkic, telling us to ignore imported ideas of alternative energy while allowing the absolute exploitation of domestic fossil fuels, albeit with vague guarantees to “protect clean air and clean water” and “conserve our natural habitats, reserves and resources.” The rhetoric is one of fear of the foreign, of the other, who cannot be relied upon to meet our needs. His so-called “American Energy Renaissance” is an unbridled form of nationalism, replete with disdain and mistrust.

By contrast, Clinton focuses on climate change. But she, too, draws on a profoundly arrogant yet fearful nationalism in promising the dispatch of unnamed enemies and a priority of “making America the world's clean energy superpower.” Clinton does refer to environmental justice and the need to diminish greenhouse-gas emissions, and has more precise targets and initiatives than Trump, but the rhetoric is again one of fear blended with arrogance—the USA is the center of the world, dammit! So make our green economy another pillar of our global dominance.

Whatever happens November 8, those who follow the science, and understand what needs to be done, will have to be vigilant in ensuring the Federal Government does the right thing. That vigilance should show an awareness of the way that the paranoid style of our politics operates, and seek not to emulate but to sidestep and discredit it in terms of the globe's real, material risks.



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