

The role of paranoia in U.S.-Soviet relations

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This is a condensed version of a talk presented at the seminar "Canada's Foreign Policy in the 80's" at the International Education Centre, St. Mary's University, Oct. 24, 25, 1980, organized by Nova Scotia Project Ploughshares.

by James Eayrs

The ills of nations are often compared to those of human beings: the fever of war, the cancer of subversion, the virus of separatism. Sometimes mental disorder is diagnosed, too.

The symptoms of what physicians call "paranoid schizophrenia of the chronic type" include hallucination, prey to fear of imaginary enemies, and the concoction of elaborate rationales to justify the reality of the delusions to which its victims are prey. The behaviour of the governments and peoples of the United States and the Soviet Union over much of their respective histories are such that, were it to be observed in individuals, the presence of paranoia would be apparent.

Among Americans, paranoid behavior has been triggered by mass anxiety resulting from unforeseen discomfiting events. Varied indeed are the supposedly conspiratorial forces on which victims of the malady have sought to project their fears and anger—witches and Jews, Freemasons and Jesuits, bankers and brokers, "merchants of death", merchants of grain, merchants of oil (to name but a few of the scapegoats for United States misfortunes over the past 300 years). But the force giving paranoids their longest innings and freest scope for fantasy is that which after the Great War they called "the Red Menace", after the Second World War "the international communist conspiracy", today "the Soviet threat".

The paranoid state has never been more in evidence than during the Great Fear which descended on the American people just before the outbreak of the Korean War. "It was a desperate time", writes an historian of the phenomenon called McCarthyism after the Wisconsin senator who so masterfully played upon the anxieties of his countrymen for the benefit of his inglorious career. "The wealthiest, most secure nation in the world was sweat-drenched in fear". In the ensuing witchhunt, no one escaped suspicion. General of the Army George C. Marshall, then U.S. secretary of defense, was denounced on the floor of the Senate as an agent of international communism. "His decisions", Joseph McCarthy declared, "maintained with great stubbornness and skill, always and invariably serve the world policy of the Kremlin".

It is no accident (as paranoids are prone to mutter darkly), that the three key politicians of the period—McCarthy, President Truman, President Eisenhower—came from the American heartland, the mid-western states of Wisconsin, Missouri, Kansas. For in these states, and others like them (including President Reagan's home state of Illinois), the paranoid style of politics had always had its following: religious fundamentalists, native populists, radicals from fringes left and right. Among such groups flourished the conspiratorial view of history. Its exponents go far beyond discerning occasional con-

spiracies (who does not now believe in the existence of a conspiracy to kill the president of the United States in 1963?), they regard, as the American historian Richard Hofstadter rightly affirms, "a 'vast' or 'gigantic' conspiracy as the motive force in historical events. History is a conspiracy, set in motion by demonic forces of almost transcendental power."

The event making this conspiratorial view of history respectable was the Soviet Union's detonation in August 1949 of an atomic weapon. When Americans learned that they could no longer rely for their safety during years to come on being sole possessors of atomic weapons, they all but panicked. When they learned, some months later, that the Soviet Union had broken their nuclear monopoly with the help of communist spies, they did panic—all the way to the top. "The atomic bomb was a bridge," writes the sociologist Edward S. Shils, "over which the phantasies ordinarily confined to restricted sections of the population entered the larger society." The White House itself now saw history as conspiracy.

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So, with better reason, did the Kremlin. The Soviet Union, like the philosopher Thomas Hobbes, had been born "the twin to fear". At the trauma of its birth, malevolent midwives attended—armies from five countries (including Canada) intent upon infanticide. Fear of capitalist encirclement was soon compounded by the fear of counter-revolution. To ensure the survival of the Soviet state despite such perils, Stalin soon decreed, an apparatus of intimidation was required.

To intimidate the outside world, the Soviet leaders created an awesome military machine. The *apogée* of awesomeness was reached in September 1961. "It was colossal, just incredible!", Nikita Khrushchev boasts in his memoirs of the most powerful hydrogen bomb ever so far tested. "The world had never seen such an explosion before."

Megatons for intimidation: gulags for repression. To intimidate its own people Stalin's regime instituted a terror state run not by parliament or supreme court or constitution but by secret police, jail and labour camp.

Whence arise the third cause of the paranoid style of Soviet behaviour: the fear of being found out. Might not the monstrous terror by which Soviet leaders retain their grip be exposed for all the world to see? Fear that the seamy side of Soviet power could be open to inspection explains their adamant refusal to accept schemes for the international control of atomic energy. As late as 1962, for all his 57-megaton intimidation machine, Khrushchev's response takes on the tone of an hysteric: "Now the Western powers want to set up espionage posts in our country. You now want to implant nests of espionage in our country in the guise of international control. And for what purpose, one may ask. To choose the moment to attack the Soviet Union. There is no other explanation."

Fear of encirclement, fear of being overthrown, fear of being found out: such are the triple sources of anxiety assailing two generations of Soviet leaders. Will they assail the third?

Lava from Mount St. Helens will cool with time, and so will ideology. But how long does the cooling process take?

Leaders in the Soviet Union are inordinately tardy about shedding the blinkers of their ideology. A recent assessment notes that for all the research done by Soviet-style think tanks such as the Institute for the United States and Canada, "even the most sophisticated Soviet analysts of Western society continue to speak of 'bourgeois' countries, ruled by the 'class enemy'." Behind the Iron Curtain, the iron fist still rules. Elena Bonner, wife of Nobel Laureate Andrei Sakharov (whose immense prestige has so far spared him punishment more condign than exile in Gorky), reports "intensified repression in the form of peremptory firings, interrogations, surveillance, forcible confinements in psychiatric hospitals, and long sentences of imprisonment and internal exile."

Soviet society is still in thrall to fear. So is American society, but for different reasons. Russians fear their rulers and those rulers fear their subjects. Americans are fearful of one another.

A survey (the methodology of which is said to be impeccable) finds that "four out of every 10 Americans are 'highly fearful' they will be murdered, raped, robbed or assaulted." Another survey finds that members of the U.S. foreign service—an elite band, recruited for qualities including fortitude and calm—feel safer when posted overseas, diplomatic kidnaps notwithstanding, than in Washington, D.C.

To the New Fearfulness in American life is joined the New Anxiety. A sense of foreboding not unlike that generated by the loss of the atomic monopoly has been generated by palpable losses of the United States' capacity to determine the outcome of events, whether in Vietnam or in Iran.

Add to the New Fearfulness and the New Anxiety the New Fundamentalism. Fundamentalism, as the American political scientist Harold Lasswell noted in a lecture on "World Politics and Personal Insecurity" delivered almost fifty years ago, is linked with deprivation. People deprived of jobs, of purchasing power, of status, of the all-important sense of personal worth, readily succumb, Lasswell noted, to the revivalist's appeal. "In depression, fundamentalist movements have serious meaning for political developments. With the declining economic power of the cities, and the search for soul satisfying security in hard times, a substantial number of the population may become incited to action around symbols of "the Old Time Religion", and the ancient code of familiar and personal morals. Accumulated hostility may discharge in the fanatical revitalizing of these forces."

Prefigured in this passage is the emergence of the "moral majority", "the New Evangelicals" of American society, half a century later. The New Fundamentalism is into politics, and with a vengeance. Abortion, taxes, welfare, have already felt their formidable influence. Foreign policy has yet to, but it will.

The foreign policy of fundamentalism is likely to be risky. As Lasswell put it in 1932: "The flight into action is preferable to the torments of insecurity; the flight into danger becomes an insecurity to end insecurity." As a Toronto columnist, Norman Snider, wrote recently: "The first thought of the fundamentalist is to strike back, to get even, to punish, to smite the unbeliever, more to relieve that intolerable knot of frustration that's gathered in the base of the brain than anything else, no matter what the cost."

Is the Soviet leadership capable of recognizing the emergence, for these reasons, of the paranoid style of American politics? And of making due allowance for it, in the interest of mutual survival? It is a lot to ask of Chairman Brezhnev and his aging colleagues, who are paranoid themselves. What seems to lie ahead is not a balance of power but a pit and a pendulum.

But when it is dark enough, you can see the stars. As did a Canadian diplomat, Escott Reid, who, stricken by news of the fate of Hiroshima, wrote to his wife on August 7, 1945: "I am in despair today about the kind of world our children are going to live in . . . I just haven't enough faith in man or God to believe that we have enough time or intelligence or goodwill to reach the goal of a world government before we obliterate civilization in another war. But there's nothing to do except to live as if it were possible, and to try one's best to make it possible." As does an American lawyer, Samuel Pizar, whose home town in Poland was occupied by Soviet troops and family murdered by the Nazis: "I cannot say that Russians . . . could one day be our friends. But is their hostility genetic or is it conceivable that a young Russian engineer, technician or manager today, cynical about the moribund bureaucracy that surrounds him, bored with ideological rhetoric, aware of the discontent of his country's consumers, intellectuals and ethnic groups, but intensely interested in accomplishing something constructive, just might be willing to look beyond the ideological divisions of the present day? At the very least, we should take care not to feed a paranoia that might be dying out."