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In America, Crazy Is a Preexisting Condition

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Birthers, Town Hall Hecklers and the Return of Right-Wing Rage

By Rick Perlstein
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In Pennsylvania last week, a citizen, burly, crew-cut and trembling with rage, [went nose to nose](#) with his baffled senator: "One day God's going to stand before you, and he's going to judge you and the rest of your damned cronies up on the Hill. And then you will get your just deserts." He was accusing Arlen Specter of being too kind to President Obama's proposals to make it easier for people to get health insurance.

In Michigan, meanwhile, the indelible image was of the father who wheeled his handicapped adult son up to Rep. John Dingell and [bellowed](#) that "under the Obama health-care plan, which you support, this man would be given no care whatsoever." He [pressed his case further](#) on Fox News.

In New Hampshire, outside a building where Obama spoke, cameras trained on the pistol strapped to the leg of libertarian [William Kostric](#). He then explained on CNN why the "tree of liberty must be refreshed from time to time by the blood of tyrants and patriots."

It was interesting to hear a BBC reporter on the radio trying to make sense of it all. He quoted a spokesman for the conservative Americans for Tax Reform: "Either this is a genuine grass-roots response, or there's some secret evil conspirator living in a mountain somewhere orchestrating all this that I've never met." The spokesman was arguing, of course, that it was spontaneous, yet he also proudly owned up to how his group has helped the orchestration, through sample letters to the editor and "a little bit of an ability to put one-pagers together."

The BBC also quoted liberal Illinois Sen. Dick Durbin's explanation: "They want to get a little clip on YouTube of an effort to disrupt a town meeting and to send the congressman running for his car. This is an organized effort . . . you can trace it back to the health insurance industry."

So the birthers, the anti-tax tea-partiers, the town hall hecklers -- these are "either" the genuine grass roots or evil conspirators staging scenes for YouTube? The quiver on the lips of the man pushing the wheelchair, the crazed risk of carrying a pistol around a president -- too heartfelt to be an act. The lockstep strangeness of the mad lies on the protesters' signs -- too uniform to be spontaneous. They are both. If you don't understand that any moment of genuine political change always produces both, you can't understand

America, where the crazy tree blooms in every moment of liberal ascendancy, and where elites exploit the crazy for their own narrow interests.

In the early 1950s, Republicans referred to the presidencies of Franklin Roosevelt and Harry Truman as "20 years of treason" and accused the men who led the fight against fascism of deliberately surrendering the free world to communism. Mainline Protestants published a new translation of the Bible in the 1950s that properly rendered the Greek as connoting a more ambiguous theological status for the Virgin Mary; right-wingers attributed that to, yes, the hand of Soviet agents. And Vice President Richard Nixon claimed that the new Republicans arriving in the White House "found in the files a blueprint for socializing America."

When John F. Kennedy entered the White House, his proposals to anchor America's nuclear defense in intercontinental ballistic missiles -- instead of long-range bombers -- and form closer ties with Eastern Bloc outliers such as Yugoslavia were taken as evidence that the young president was secretly disarming the United States. Thousands of delegates from 90 cities packed a National Indignation Convention in Dallas, a 1961 version of today's tea parties; a keynote speaker turned to the master of ceremonies after his introduction and remarked as the audience roared: "Tom Anderson here has turned moderate! All he wants to do is impeach [Supreme Court Chief Justice Earl] Warren. I'm for hanging him!"

Before the "black helicopters" of the 1990s, there were right-wingers claiming access to secret documents from the 1920s proving that the entire concept of a "civil rights movement" had been hatched in the Soviet Union; when the landmark 1964 Civil Rights Act was introduced, one frequently read in the South that it would "enslave" whites. And back before there were Bolsheviks to blame, paranoids didn't lack for subversives -- anti-Catholic conspiracy theorists even had their own powerful political party in the 1840s and '50s.

The instigation is always the familiar litany: expansion of the commonweal to empower new communities, accommodation to internationalism, the heightened influence of cosmopolitans and the persecution complex of conservatives who can't stand losing an argument. My personal favorite? The federal government expanded mental health services in the Kennedy era, and one bill provided for a new facility in Alaska. One of the most widely listened-to right-wing radio programs in the country, hosted by a former FBI agent, had millions of Americans believing it was being built to intern political dissidents, just like in the Soviet Union.

So, crazier then, or crazier now? Actually, the similarities across decades are uncanny. When Adlai Stevenson spoke at a 1963 United Nations Day observance in Dallas, the Indignation forces thronged the hall, sweating and furious, shrieking down the speaker for the television cameras. Then, when Stevenson was walked to his limousine, a grimacing and wild-eyed lady thwacked him with a picket sign. Stevenson was baffled.

"What's the matter, madam?" he asked. "What can I do for you?" The woman responded with self-righteous fury: "Well, if you don't know I can't help you."

The various elements -- the liberal earnestly confused when rational dialogue won't hold sway; the anti-liberal rage at a world self-evidently out of joint; and, most of all, their mutual incomprehension -- sound as fresh as yesterday's news. (Internment camps for conservatives? That's the latest theory of tea party favorite Michael Savage.)

The orchestration of incivility happens, too, and it is evil. Liberal power of all sorts induces an organic and crazy-making panic in a considerable number of Americans, while people with no particular susceptibility to existential terror -- powerful elites -- find reason to stoke and exploit that fear. And even the most ideologically fair-minded national media will always be agents of cosmopolitanism: something provincials fear as an outside elite intent on forcing different values down their throats.

That provides an opening for vultures such as Richard Nixon, who, the Watergate investigation discovered, had his aides make sure that seed blossomed for his own purposes. "To the Editor . . . Who in the hell elected these people to stand up and read off their insults to the President of the United States?" read one proposed "grass-roots" letter manufactured by the White House. "When will you people realize that he was elected President and he is entitled to the respect of that office no matter what you people think of him?" went another.

Liberals are right to be vigilant about manufactured outrage, and particularly about how the mainstream media can too easily become that outrage's entry into the political debate. For the tactic represented by those fake Nixon letters was a long-term success. Conservatives have become adept at playing the media for suckers, getting inside the heads of editors and reporters, haunting them with the thought that maybe they are out-of-touch cosmopolitans and that their duty as tribunes of the people's voices means they should treat Obama's creation of "death panels" as just another justiciable political claim. If 1963 were 2009, the woman who assaulted Adlai Stevenson would be getting time on cable news to explain herself. That, not the paranoia itself, makes our present moment uniquely disturbing.

It used to be different. You never heard the late Walter Cronkite taking time on the evening news to "debunk" claims that a proposed mental health clinic in Alaska is actually a dumping ground for right-wing critics of the president's program, or giving the people who made those claims time to explain themselves on the air. The media didn't adjudicate the ever-present underbrush of American paranoia as a set of "conservative claims" to weigh, horse-race-style, against liberal claims. Back then, a more confident media unequivocally labeled the civic outrage represented by such discourse as "extremist" -- out of bounds.

The tree of crazy is an ever-present aspect of America's flora. Only now, it's being

watered by misguided he-said-she-said reporting and taking over the forest. Latest word is that the enlightened and mild provision in the draft legislation to help elderly people who want living wills -- the one hysterics turned into the "death panel" canard -- is losing favor, [according](#) to the Wall Street Journal, because of "complaints over the provision."

Good thing our leaders weren't so cowardly in 1964, or we would never have passed a civil rights bill -- because of complaints over the provisions in it that would enslave whites.

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