

Unabomber: The Power of Paranoia

Terror begets terror, fear begets fear—until the hysteria exhausts itself. Have we reached the end of this cycle?

Lance Morrow

Apr. 15, 1996

STALIN'S DINNERS IN THE KREMLIN went on all night. He would sit at a long table and force his ministers and cronies to drink, hour after hour, while he plotted and probed and flattered and terrified them. At dawn, when their brains were numb with fear and vodka and confusion, the NKVD might lead one or two of the men away, without explanation, to be shot. That was the physics of paranoia under laboratory conditions: for every action, an opposite (if, in the Kremlin, somewhat unequal) reaction. Paranoia induces paranoia. Stalin refracted violent fear through alcohol, then presided over a reciprocal mind game that ended in death.

Intellectuals sometimes take a certain ain't-we-awful pride in America's tradition of political paranoia (Know-Nothingism, anti-Catholic ravings, McCarthyism, for example). But on the whole, Americans' freedom has made them comparative innocents; dinner parties aside, Stalin may have murdered upwards of 10 million of his fellow citizens, though estimates vary greatly.

Still, American paranoias come in waves, and the past year or have seen a surge in the dark dynamic: Waco and Ruby Ridge, then Oklahoma City, a commemoration of April 19, which has become a savage Guy Fawkes Day. Five days after Oklahoma City, the Unabomber struck in Sacramento, California, as if envious and eager to reclaim the attention. The paranoid screams self-importance; insignificance transforms itself into destructive power.

The air filled with rhetoric about "angry white males," with middle-aged militiamen in weekend camouflage promising armed struggle against Washington. The National Rifle Association complained about the government's "jackbooted thugs." The assault-rifle fringe could hear black helicopters descending, as if to deliver Boutros Boutros-Ghali, dark men in blue helmets and World Government.

A hundred paranoias bloomed. Or anyway, moods hardened into intransigence: Here I stand. The Gingrich freshmen vowed no compromise; liberals wrote them down as fascists. The Million Man March, otherwise admirable, provided the platform for minister Louis Farrakhan's elaborate numerological fantasies, the very arithmetic of the universe clicking in conspiracy. Whitewater and Vincent Foster's death continued to emit a low-intensity radioactive glow (a marvelously double-jointed paranoid bumper sticker said IF VINCE FOSTER HAD OWNED A GUN, HE WOULD BE ALIVE TODAY). And, of course, an elaborate police conspiracy framed O.J. Simpson for a double murder.

By last week it was clear the American psychology has changed, much for the better. Certain menacing uncertainties have resolved themselves.

The man who seems to be the Unabomber was arrested—another example of the way in which a demon, hitherto concealed, may shrivel when brought into sunlight. The suspect's family turned him in because they recognized his writings—a killer betrayed by his own prose style.

The Alfred P. Murrah Building in Oklahoma City was leveled last April. The victims and their families have come at least some way toward healing. President Clinton

visited in his role as national grief counselor. As the first anniversary of the explosion approached, the hard but orderly business of the McVeigh trial followed its course.

It was a strange week for the state of Montana, which may fear acquiring a reputation as the last refuge of scoundrels. In Jordan the authorities, wary of another Waco or Ruby Ridge, were gingerly handling the anarchist bunco artists who call themselves the Freemen.

Americans have drawn back toward the emotional and political center. The primaries came in a burst of excitement—and vanished in bathos. The anger drained from the process, despite the exertions of Pat Buchanan. With no passion, Americans faced an election contested by two relative moderates, neither of whose victories would provoke extremes of emotion. The absolutes receded.

TIME
SPECIAL REPORT

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