



Publius's Guile and the Paranoid Style

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Abstract

When foreign dangers become domestic threats, how should governments respond? This article turns to the past to better understand the present. Three rebellions in early American history—Shays's Rebellion, the Whiskey Rebellion, and Fries's Rebellion—illustrate how similar domestic events elicited different governmental responses, depending on changes in the international environment. The ethical implications are mixed, but the policy recommendations suggest that quick executive action and slow judicial action are appropriate responses. A necessary cause of these events, both in government officials and those opposing them, is traced back to imbalances of power. The argument builds on Richard Hofstadter's *Paranoid Style in American Politics*, and elaborates the strategic logic of political paranoia.

Countries have long feared foreign attacks on their domestic tranquility. But with the increased salience of terrorism, citizens fear that such threats may come from more sources in more forms than ever before. Consequently a number of federal bureaucracies, state and local law-enforcement agencies, and other government offices have been working to counter these threats without compromising civil liberties. The balancing act is, to put it modestly, difficult.

While no panacea, the past is a helpful guide in troubled times. Early American history is studded with domestic incidents linked to international politics that forced the founding generation to wrestle repeatedly with the same issues that confront contemporary Americans. Three of the most prominent incidents—Shays's Rebellion, the Whiskey Rebellion, and Fries's Rebellion—reveal promising policy responses to domestic conflict that may be tied to international enemies. The relevance of these cases is broad; the United States is but one of many states on the frontlines of global terrorism.

Although the substance of these events was similar, and responses to them shared a strong bias toward misperception and overreaction, the policy outcomes differed significantly. It is argued that changing international threats showcased particular imbalances of power, which in turn caused a uniform, overheated tenor of policy reactions—or what Richard Hofstadter (1964) called the paranoid style in American politics. It is further argued that the paranoid style is an especially intense form of threat perception, adopted to surmount inadequacies of capability. The paranoid style has mixed effects, enabling people to act quickly but disabling their ability

to think clearly. To retain the benefits of the paranoid style while diminishing its costs, the implications are therefore nuanced. The conclusion recommends dispatch to disrupt budding threats, but devil's advocacy and delay to deliberate judicious punishments.

The discussion in the first section offers background history of the three events. The second section compares the cases. The third section searches the causes of actors' behavior, and the fourth section probes the ethical implications of the analysis and offers conclusions and recommendations.

Case Profiles

America's founders were absorbed by national security questions. In *The Federalist Papers*, the first substantive issue picked up by "Publius," the joint pseudonym of Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, and John Jay, is "Concerning Dangers from Foreign Force and Influence." Publius, in this paper, represents a personification of founding elites because their worries were widely shared. The essays on this topic, numbers II–V, constituted half of the most reprinted *Federalist Papers* during the Constitution's ratification period (Amar 2005, 43–44).

After the American Revolution, elites were anxious about domestic unrest, Native Americans, and foreign meddling—various combinations of which were thought to be working in cahoots. Through outside manipulation and influence, dissension could erupt and mortally wound the American way of life. During this precarious period, three rebellions form a fascinating natural experiment. The Shays Rebellion of 1786–1787 was a conflict in western Massachusetts originating in burdensome tax collection; the Whiskey Rebellion of 1794 was a protest against federal excise taxes in western Pennsylvania; and the Fries Rebellion of 1799 was a disturbance related to window taxes in eastern Pennsylvania.

The cases were chosen because they fall in close temporal succession, share many characteristics in their origins and course, yet produced different policies because the international political context changed. In technical jargon, this is the most-similar case study method, where the cases selected are highly similar except for a key variable (Gerring 2007, 131–139). The critical causal variable is foreign powers' grand strategic ambitions, and it is measured by military deployments. The main effects, or dependent variables, are the degree of perceived threat (how proportional is the policy response to the stimulus?) and the direction of the response (who is perceived as the primary threat?).

Shays's Rebellion

Because it is the most famous and studied case yet is still misunderstood, Shays's Rebellion garners the most attention here. In his biography of George Washington, Supreme Court Chief Justice John Marshall tells with relief how the authorities put down "this formidable and wicked rebellion" (2000, 322) and Jonathan Smith encapsulates much of the common understanding of Shays's Rebellion:

Probably no other one incident contributed so powerfully to the acceptance of the proposition . . . for a constitutional convention by all the states, or the adoption of the constitution when it was finally formed and submitted to the people as did Shays'

rebellion. The federal government, once organized, under the wise statesmanship of Washington and Hamilton, public confidence was speedily restored and the grievances which lay at the root of Shays' movement quickly disappeared. (1948, 94)

To sum up, the prevalent belief is that Shays controlled a frightening rebellion over debt that made manifest the need for a stronger government, and the Constitution quickly solved these problems ("Documents: Shays's Rebellion" 1931; Hartz 1964, 77; Minot 1970; Nevins 1927, 217–218; Onuf 1983, 175, 183–184). The prevailing belief errs, however, on nearly every score.

In 1780, Massachusetts was finishing the state constitution and it was the worst winter in forty years, curtailing the opportunity for political participation. Forty-seven towns, out of more than four hundred, ratified the document, and almost all were in the immediate vicinity of Boston. Naturally, this skewed participation affected the outcome; no state's constitution was written with friendlier laws for commercial and creditor interests. The war ended with state governments owing the army massive sums of money. To address the problem, Massachusetts issued notes whose value rapidly deflated, and speculators scooped them up at fire-sale prices.

The Massachusetts government was already viewed as dubiously legitimate when James Bowdoin, a noted speculator, became governor and started enforcing tax-collection policies more onerous than the British ever had, to some material benefit for himself. The postwar recession strained the economy; hard currency was in short supply, and that was all the government would accept. Western Massachusetts towns had petitioned the Boston government for redress of grievances for some time, but received no response. When courts started foreclosing on bankrupt farmers, it was too much to tolerate. It was taxation without representation, and citizens renewed traditional forms of protest (Pencak et al. 2002, 4–14).

The rebellion began on August 29, 1786, and consisted of protesters preventing courts from meeting until they postponed their sessions. The protesters spilled no blood and damaged no property. Some minor unrest broke out in New Hampshire on September 23, but the state government dispersed it in two days (Brynnner 1993, 82–83; Richards 2002, 13). Massachusetts tried to call up its militia as had New Hampshire, but failed. Unlike New Hampshire, the Massachusetts government was viewed as illegitimate, and militia units refused to answer its call, frequently siding with the protesters.

Daniel Shays had been a highly decorated captain in the Revolutionary War. He joined the rebellion that bears his name at a late stage and led only the largest contingent of protesters. Shaysites protested twice in Springfield, Massachusetts, leaving the then-unguarded arsenal there unmolested and puzzling government officials (Brynnner 1993, 83–91; Szatmary 1980, 100). Remarkable records exist on who participated in the rebellion, and scholars have found no correlation between participation and debt (Richards 2002, 60–88). The records also show that those who sided with Shays had far more distinguished military records than those who opposed them, though most veterans sat on the sidelines.

As soon as the rebellion began, Washington and Madison began blaming the British. This was characteristic, for both had long feared foreign intrigue. Washington commented, "Newspaper paragraphs unsupported by other testimony, are often contradictory & bewildering . . . there surely are men of consequence and abilities behind the Curtain, who move the puppets [*sic*]. . . . They may be instigated by Brit-

ish Councils” (Washington 1997, 631–632). And Madison felt sure that Shays had “opened communication with the Viceroy of Canada” (Marks 1973, 102).

Boston elites and newspapers also blamed the insurrection on loyalists and British emissaries. There was some foundation for this. Secretary of War Henry Knox received a letter, dated August 20, 1786, warning him that a British counterrevolution might be afoot in New England. On September 12, 1786, Artemas Ward informed Governor Bowdoin that men, maybe British emissaries, were traveling town to town calling men to arms. That same fall, ex-General Samuel Holden Parsons heard that thousands of men were doing military drills. He believed that they were being paid three shillings a day by individuals with Tory sympathies (McDonald 1979, 244, 246, 251).

Governor Bowdoin furiously tried to establish his authority, passing a riot act on October 18 that punished militia disobedience with death, and suspending the writ of habeas corpus on November 11. In an act that protesters saw as cruel and unusual

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punishment and denial of trial by a jury of one’s peers, on November 30 Bowdoin seized a prominent rebel and jailed him without bail far from his hometown (see Richards 2002, 19–24). Bowdoin appealed to Congress, which agreed that something should be done, although what it should be was left an open question. Money was not forthcoming, overall other states did not lift a finger to help, and

anyway Massachusetts obstructed congressional forces from interfering with its handling of the rebellion (Carp 1987, 32; Dougherty 2001, 103–105, 128). On January 4, 1787, the Massachusetts Assembly was not in session, so the governor took it upon himself to privately raise an army of 4,400 men, with subscriptions from his associates. The governor himself pledged £250, but raising the rest of the £6,000 was arduous, and donors dallied. Due to miserable weather and a lackluster cause, only 3,000 soldiers gathered under General Benjamin Lincoln to quell the uprising.

In the middle of January 1787, Shays and his men were in trouble. At most, half of them were armed, the arms they had were very poor, and a large mercenary army was coming from Boston. By then the arsenal at Springfield was guarded by General William Shepard and 1,200 men (Brown 1983, 600, 604; Brynner 1993, 97; Richards 2002, 25–31; Warren 1905, 46). On January 25, in deep snow and temperatures exceeding twenty below, Shays’s contingent marched toward the arsenal (McDonald 1979, 254). After two warning shots (several Shaysites were so surprised they fell off their horses), Shepard fired grapeshot into Shays’s men.

It was a rout. In his after-action report on January 26, Shepard stated, “Had I been disposed to destroy them, I . . . could have killed the greater part of his whole army within twenty-five minutes.”¹ Lincoln’s forces caught up with the stragglers days later, but they continued their flight. That was the end of Shays’s Rebellion.

Regardless, Bowdoin received awesome martial powers on February 4, further confirming his alienation from the state. Small bands raised the occasional ruckus, two men were caught stealing and hanged, yet organization and their sole demand—postpone court proceedings—had ceased. Bowdoin eventually got the state assembly to reimburse those who had been public-spirited enough to invest in his army; he himself claimed and collected more than seven times what he had contributed (Richards 2002, 32).

Shays and the towns of western Massachusetts had made plain time and again that they were protesting, not rebelling, and contrary to rumor, British support had never entered the picture (Brown 1983, 598; Brynner 1993, 82; Smith 1948, 90). For this, four of Shays's men died at Springfield, and one artilleryman lost his arms through what his commanding officer described as "inattention." If one counts the later skirmishes, an additional two rebels and one government soldier lost their lives. The electoral repercussions of the rebellion were unambiguous: Despite their disenfranchising a large portion of western Massachusetts in the next election as punishment for the rebellion, Bowdoin and the reigning order were thumped out of office. The previous election Bowdoin had won by a 7:1 margin, but in 1787 he lost by a 3:1 margin; 77 of 203 House members were reelected (Pencak 1989, 73; Smith 1948, 89; Szatmary 1980, 114).

The new governor, John Hancock, dealt leniently with the western discontents. Almost all the insurgents got off with light penalties, and taxes fell 90 percent (Richards 2002, 119). Daniel Shays fled to Vermont, then moved to New York, where he died in 1825, still drawing his U.S. military pension. As for the Springfield arsenal, on March 8, 1787, Congress proposed to move its location, but the motion was dropped when Secretary of War Knox advised that the move was unnecessary. Massachusetts, he said, "had proved her ability to put down the rebellion and to defend the arsenal" (Warren 1905, 64).

The Whiskey Rebellion

The issues that had inspired Shays's Rebellion did not quickly disappear under the Constitution; after ratification, the same issues arose and differed only in that they interacted with another layer of government. With the Constitution operative, Congress started passing tax acts, some of which were not well received in the back country. Excise taxes, for instance, were regressive and resented. A cycle of confrontations between tax officials and taxpayers began in 1791 and continued until 1794, when it was given the name Whiskey Rebellion. Tax collectors in Allegheny County, Pennsylvania, were serving summonses to court in Philadelphia, stoking local fears of central government run amok, unjust trials, and improper taxation. This led to a verbal altercation between two officials, David Lenox and John Neville, and some farmers on July 15, 1794 (Brackenridge 1859; Gould 1996; Kohn 1972).

A militia had assembled to answer President Washington's call for more fighters against Native Americans. They heard the farmers' story and sought to protect their rights from being trodden underfoot. On July 16, they confronted Neville at his garrisoned home, the biggest in the region, at which point Neville shot and mortally wounded a man (Boyd 1985, xi; Martin 1985, 6). The next day a militia of 500–700 men, led by Captain James McFarlane, another captain in the Revolutionary War, surrounded Neville's house. Shots were exchanged, then McFarlane thought he heard a request for a cease-fire. He stepped out from behind a tree, was shot in the groin, and immediately expired. Two more militiamen died, and Neville's house was burned to the ground. Approximately 6,000 disorganized protesters marched through Pittsburgh in August to protest unfair tax collection. By September the discontents went home. The full extent of the damage inflicted by the protesters was one burned house and one seized mailbag (Elkins and McKittrick 1993, 461–474; Slaughter 1985, 19).

Meanwhile, Hamilton and Washington responded to what they thought was more than a tax grievance. After the restive parade through Pittsburgh, Washington ambivalently and Hamilton wholeheartedly set the wheels in motion to suppress the rebellion. Washington was already wary of Native American unrest inland, something, he said, that “results from the conduct of the Agents of Great Britain in the Country.” Added to this was the peril of insurrection, issuing forth from democratic societies propagated by French agents “for the express purpose of dissension” (Washington 1997, 880, 885). Hamilton sought to make an example of the rebels and exaggerated the degree of disobedience while minimizing the geographic scope of discontent (Bonsteel Tachau 1985, 98–111).

The U.S. government’s view of the rebellion had a decidedly global cast. John Quincy Adams fretted that France was forming a fifth column inside the United States, through French Revolution–inspired democratic societies and bribed American officials, such as Edmund Randolph, against whom there was evidence of bribery (Bemis 1950, 59; Elkins and McKittrick 1993, 425–426). Nor were the French the sole suspects. Canadian Governor John Graves Simcoe fueled American fears; his leaked correspondence suggested that he was ready for war with the United States—implying that British troops could return en masse (Slaughter 1986, 190). In reality, Simcoe’s words were empty boast. Canadians were in poor shape to fight, and the Whiskey Rebellion made no impression on the British government, which never considered aiding the rebels (Bemis 1965, 251–252, 363n).

At the end of August, Washington called up a 15,000-man army for the job, about the same size as the Continental Army during the Revolution. A government report the following month tied riots in Maryland, Ohio, Virginia, and Pennsylvania to contagion effects from the Whiskey Rebellion. In truth, the riots were a direct result of opposition to military drafts, yet Washington and Hamilton saw sinister plots in more prosaic resistance (Baldwin 1939, 207–208; Slaughter 1986, 188). By late October, the first army units were marching through Pittsburgh behind Governor Henry Lee of Virginia. There was no resistance; Lee found the excursion “a comedy” (Royster 1981, 130–131). Federal troops killed two innocents and one insurgent. Only two people received heavy sentences, and both were pardoned by Washington when he realized that one was a “simpleton” and the other “insane” (Ifft 1985, 176). Tax resistance continued until President Jefferson repealed the excise tax (Bonsteel Tachau 1985, 111).

Fries’s Rebellion

The Quasi-War was a series of naval engagements fought between the United States and France from 1798 to 1800. In part because of this undeclared war, the U.S. government sought increased revenue streams to fund its navy. One result was the Direct Tax Act of 1798, which a group of German immigrants, the *Kirchenleute* (church folks), petitioned against. They did so because the act taxed citizens based on the size of their windows, which reminded the *Kirchenleute* of the oppressive hearth taxes that had forced them to flee Germany. In addition, they objected that the assessors were not drawn from or accountable to local politics. Their resistance escalated over several months (it is sometimes called the “Hot Water Insurrection” because *Hausfrauen* were said to have dumped hot water on assessors who tried to

take window measurements), and local elites led the resistance (Davis 1899; Dimmig 2001; Henderson 1970; McDougall 2004, 363).

John Fries was hardly an archetypal rebel. A father of ten and a captain in the American Revolution, he had answered the call to suppress the Whiskey Rebellion. On March 6, 1799, he led about 140 men on a nonviolent jailbreak, releasing twenty men thought wrongfully imprisoned for resisting the window tax. Philadelphia newspapers magnified the incident, and a high-profile publication, the *Gazette of the United States*, reported that “a band of French mercenaries dispersed over the Commonwealth, are preparing an Insurrection of the whole state” with the intention of “dismembering the Union and deliver[ing] us over, bound hand and foot, to the dominion of the Directory” (Elkins and McKittrick 1993, 698). Because it happened at a time of tension with France, talk of the French menace resonated. Federal officials feared the worst and received the news with consternation (DeConde 1966, 198; Newman 2004, 142–143, 152).

President Adams branded the disobedience treason on March 12, approved a military response on March 20, and sent a 920-man army with 2,000 reserves to crush an insurrection that did not exist and had never been in touch with foreign agents. The soldiers, on arriving, were perplexed to find nothing. The only fatality was an ill-starred bull, which a jumpy private had mistaken for a rebel army in the night. Fries was arrested, prosecuted twice without a lawyer, and sentenced to death. Realizing that it had only been a small disturbance, President Adams later pardoned him—against the unanimous advice of his counselors. With the passing of the Quasi-War shortly afterward, taxes decreased.

The Cases Compared

To be sure, no two rebellions are identical. Fries’s Rebellion was a smaller ordeal than the others; the force deployments to quell the rebellions were of different sizes; the Massachusetts government was less respected than the Pennsylvania and federal governments. Yet the scale of the rebellion, the scale of the response, and governmental legitimacy do not explain the degree of overreaction or the anxieties felt by policymakers. Overall, it is striking how much the main traits of the rebellions converge.

First, on the ground, the facts of the rebellions align: They were peaceful hinterland political protests triggered by economic grievances, led by stymied local elites who appealed to traditional rights, and the resolution was tax relief. The rebellions were, at base, protests by the political periphery against the center, objections to stark power asymmetries (Katznelson 2002, 95). Their nonviolence deserves underscoring. While it is conventional to refer to the three incidents as rebellions, it should be clear that convention does violence to meaning. One may as well speak of the Civil Rights Rebellion. Modern riots do far more damage and kill many more people. Even by antebellum standards, these movements were tame.² Although Shays, McFarlane, and Fries bear a passing resemblance to George Washington circa 1770 in miniature, the three rebellions were protests that did next to no harm to people or property.

As an aside, it is stunning how limited the effects of the rebellions were. Despite the hoopla in history books, there is no evidence that Shays’s Rebellion added any urgency to nominate delegates from Massachusetts for the Philadelphia Convention, and no evidence that it helped Massachusetts ratify the Constitution (Brynnner 1993;

Feer 1969). One can imagine counterfactuals of how Shays's Rebellion could have caused more chaos, but such flights of fancy are pipe dreams. Even with Bowdoin's perpetually clumsy reactions to the rebellion, there was little danger. Almost no one was threatened by Shays: not the neighboring states that did not mobilize to meet the threat, not the man Shays actually marched on, General Shepard, who estimated he could have slaughtered most of Shays's men in under a half-hour, not Secretary of War Knox, who declined to relocate the Springfield arsenal, not the people nearest the rebellion, not the voters of Massachusetts, and only grudgingly some financial lights of Boston.

What is jarring about these cases is how wide the disconnect is between evidence and belief, how little decision-makers updated their beliefs as information became available, and how systematically they erred.

The same point can also be made with respect to the Whiskey and Fries rebellions. In spite of the nervous governmental reaction, neither event was anywhere close to spiraling out of control or gaining support from foreign governments. There was no clear victory on either side; citizens refused to pay the disputed taxes, and resistance abated with the tax levels. The major impact of the Whiskey Rebellion was to displace many distillers beyond the

government's reach in Kentucky and Tennessee, to the lasting benefit of American spirits. The Fries Rebellion had little impact and is largely forgotten today.

Second, in the halls of power, elite reactions had much in common, too. All of the governmental responses featured misperception, overreaction, lack of doubt that anyone was misperceiving or overreacting, and lack of awareness that governmental responses could be a main stimulant of undesired behavior. Perceptual imperfections are, to some extent, inevitable. Information is always fragmentary, reacting to fluid situations is demanding, erring on the safe side of unstable situations is prudent, and emotional health requires some defense mechanisms. But what is jarring about these cases is how wide the disconnect is between evidence and belief, how little decision-makers updated their beliefs as information became available, and how systematically they erred.

There was a wealth of disconfirming evidence that elites ignored. Reliable sources delivered opposing views. For example, in Shays's Rebellion, the chief justice of the Berkshire County Court, William Whiting, said that the Boston aristocrats were "overgrown Plunderers" and that the people had an obligation to "disturb the government," an "indispensable duty to watch and guard their liberties, and to crush the very first appearances of incroachments upon it." Baron von Steuben, Washington's former drillmaster, remarked that if it had been Delaware that needed outside aid, it would have been understandable. But Massachusetts—which had "on her rolls ninety-two thousand militiamen" who would not heed the governor because they coincided "in sentiment with the malcontents"—had a government that served only a small number of gentlemen. Why "would Congress dare to support such an abominable oligarchy?" And loyal Federalist Noah Webster, "To pay the debt to the men who now hold the evidences of it appears to me the most iniquitous measure that a legislature can adopt—a violation of their own engagements as well as of the compact by which society exists" (Richards 2002, 14, 15–16, 80).

Secretary of War Knox deserves to be singled out as a prominent, incompetent contributor to public discussion. On paltry evidence, he cried to Congress that a full-

tilt rebellion was under way, in addition to an Indian uprising—in an area that had not seen a Native American in a generation (McDonald 1979, 250). He wrote Washington, evoking Cromwell and the Levelers, that the rebellion had 12,000–15,000 men, that Continental Army veterans were not participating, that it was made up of debtors and rabble who wanted to level property, annihilate debts, issue paper money and force creditors to accept it, and declare agrarian law. He may have had ulterior motives for saying such things, but that does not explain why so many people went along with him. His actions in Congress the following March contradict his initial position, but Knox never offered a retraction or expressed any doubts that he was consistent and right.

Lack of doubt is salient throughout; authorities were certain that the insurgents were major dangers despite exiguous evidence. With rare exceptions, no one considered that they might be overreacting or might have overreacted. Madison was aghast when he learned that Massachusetts had electorally punished Shays's opponents and could not conceive of anything but wickedness at the bottom of such conduct (Madison 1999, 67–68). General Lee found the Whiskey rebels risible, but he held a firm conviction that without his troops, violence would have exploded and despotism and anarchy could have reigned, and the Pennsylvania governor concurred (Hamilton 2001, 964; Royster 1981, 130).

In Fries's Rebellion, General MacPherson conjured support for his perceptions out of thin air, imagining nefarious schemes that had no basis in reality: the "Terror which they [the insurgents] have inspired among the peaceable part of the Inhabitants has rendered even the well affected averse from giving intelligence, and they appear to conceal their plans with great ease" (Newman 2004, 163). And in pardoning Fries and interpreting the rebellion as a minor riot, President Adams was crossing the unanimous counsel of his advisers. The public was "thunderstruck" by his pardon, and Hamilton found it a "dereliction—it was impossible to commit a greater error" (Hamilton 2001, 965).

Moreover, few conceived that their actions were actually promoting unwanted behavior. Bowdoin remained unaware that his responses were exacerbating the situation. Washington and Hamilton missed the nexus between their draft order and subsequent draft riots. During the Fries Rebellion, elite observers swiftly shifted blame away from domestic policy decisions and onto fictitious foreign mercenaries.

Yet in spite of all these similarities, the rebellions generated different preeminent enemies and preferred policies. Elites were very chary of various enemies: Britain in the 1770s, Britain and Spain in the 1780s and 1790s, and decreasingly Spain and increasingly France in the late 1790s. Despite the fact that a stronger national government was not necessary to put any of these rebellions down, policymakers moved increasingly toward strengthening the national government after each one. But there was nothing inevitable about this, and similar events did not repetitively spur, say, a constitutional convention. For Shays's Rebellion, the impetus was to create a federal state. In the Whiskey Rebellion, the moral of the story was to empower the newly created state. And with Fries's Rebellion, the lesson was an attenuated version of the lesson from the Whiskey Rebellion. Similar events elicited dissimilar suspicions and solutions.

Etiology: The Provenance of Paranoia

Explaining these differences surely involves some of the unique circumstances and personalities engaged, but beneath these factors lie more general phenomena. This

section investigates two main questions: (1) Why were elites so quick to connect disparate events into a grand plot from alternating epicenters of evil? And (2) why the strong tendency to misperception and overreaction? Both of these questions relate to Richard Hofstadter's celebrated book on the paranoid style in American politics, which captures the "heated exaggeration, suspiciousness, and conspiratorial fantasy" surrounding these rebellions (1964, 3). Each question is discussed in turn.

First, some background: Hofstadter claimed that a paranoid streak runs through American politics and well beyond. For Hofstadter, the paranoid style emanates largely from psychological forces: from a need to make sense of the randomness in the world, to provide a worthy role to play in life's titanic drama, to project forbidden yearnings and express terrifying fears, and from a fear of catastrophe. Most of his seminal work is devoted to sketching the worldview and cognitive leaps of this collective paranoia, but little space is spent probing its causes.

The argument developed here advances Hofstadter's arguments by outlining the political method to the paranoid style's madness. This argument dovetails with other scholarship that connects what appear to be cognitive quirks or pathologies to underlying strategic logic (Jervis 1976, 301, pt. III; Mercer 1996, chap. 2; Pape 2003). The main contention is that the paranoid style is an adaptive behavior to power asymmetries—although some of its manifestations can be deleterious, it is not, on balance, reprehensible. The paranoid style represents an extreme form of a normal human activity: compensating for inferiority of power. As asymmetries in power and vulnerability widen, the paranoid style grows more pronounced.

One well-worn definition of power is relative skill plus will plus capability. Early Americans were skilled at strategy and could fight tenaciously, but they lacked material capability. They could make up for weakness in one category by strengths in others. Edmund Burke thought that where other countries complained under an "actual grievance," Americans anticipated their grievances and complained before they actually suffered (Wood 1998, 5). John Dickinson exhibited this sentiment when he wrote that the critical question was "not, what evil *has actually attended* particular measures—but, what evil, in the nature of things, *is likely to attend* them [emphasis in original]" (ibid., 5). Because they were not yet stronger, Americans needed to be tougher and smarter.

This argument is outside-in; that is, international competitive pressures drove American domestic policy responses. European great-power politics forced American elites to be concerned about their vulnerabilities because they were in a prone position. When stimuli occurred, they touched raw nerves, and necessity pressed Americans to husband their scarce resources. This is not to say that actors were necessarily conscious of such a calculus. Much like breathing, strategic thinking is amenable to control but largely reflexive.

Elites shot events through the prism of international politics because survival depended on it. Which enemies received top billing depended on changes in force deployments, but decision-makers primarily viewed domestic dangers as dangerous to the extent that they related to world politics. This was pragmatic; the capability of domestic actors pales in comparison to that of international threats, and young revolutionary states are remarkably susceptible to the unpredictable perils of war (Amar 2005, 120; Snyder 2000; Walt 1996). As enemy forces shifted, American attention shifted with them. This is why similar events spurred dissimilar policy outcomes.

American threat perception primarily tracked British military strength around

North America, which had ramped up in the Revolution, but stayed uncomfortably high thereafter. When peace came in 1783, there remained a number of unresolved issues, and the British were dilatory in leaving forts on American territory. While the British had more soldiers and a more formidable navy, it was not only the British that threatened American elites. After the war the Spanish cooled toward the American states, and threatened to cut free navigation of the Mississippi River, lack of access to which was sparking secession. Secessionist groups dotted the periphery of the states; perhaps the most formal entity among them was the short-lived state of Franklin, formed in 1786. Initially, the former colonies were only loosely tied together, opening opportunities for foreign powers to divide and rule North America.

The Constitution alleviated this problem but did not eliminate it. Jay's Treaty would eventually resolve many American concerns over trade, debt, British bases, and boundaries. But at the time of the Whiskey Rebellion, the treaty's issues were subject to acrimonious debate, which simultaneously highlighted dangerous domestic divisions and transatlantic disputes. For a young state this was a worrisome combination, and a show of strength to a domestic disturbance was understandable under such conditions.

With the Napoleonic Wars, Spanish aims waned and French aims waxed. Occupied by conflict on the Continent, the Spanish government settled many of its thorniest disputes with the United States in 1796 in Pinckney's Treaty, which allayed boundary issues and freed navigation on the Mississippi. Conversely, Napoleon had burgeoning ambitions for the New World and wished to extend his empire there. Naturally, this led to American apprehension. But with the Haitian Revolution and France's disastrous expedition to subdue it, the French threat abated. The Quasi-War flickered, but the French navy was not as strong as the British navy. The result of this dynamic was a low but increasing perception of threat from France. In sum, elites were swift to connect disparate events to a unified danger of migrating origin because the country was in jeopardy from different capitals at different times.

Advancing to the second question, if these rebellions were so similar in form and so lacking in intensity, why was the government so anxious and uninformed about them? Surely some of the answer lies in the poor communication networks of the day. However, not all of the outcome can be ascribed to that cause; quality information was available from reliable sources. So, too, some of the answer lies in reasonable mistakes. The fog of war and politics enshrouds much; mistakes are inevitable. And some suspicions were correct. While the British were doing little in the way of devious plotting or cultivating Native American proxy forces in the 1790s (though they would do so around the War of 1812), the Spanish were promoting Native American proxy forces and encouraging secessionist groups—through what we would now call covert action links.

Unavoidably, elites erred, but revealingly they erred heavily and systematically in one direction. Mistakes can be divided into two groups: false positives (type I errors) and false negatives (type II errors). American elites unquestionably committed type II errors during this period. For instance, one of the highest-ranking military officials in the United States, General James Wilkinson, was posthumously discovered to have regularly received bribes and a pension from King Don Carlos IV of Spain (Adams 1986, 838–839). Yet the bulk of mistakes in these cases fall under the heading of type I errors. Actors responded to the latent emergency they feared rather than the actual situation they faced.

Repeatedly, elites thought the rebellions they faced were much stronger, better organized, and more foreign influenced than they were. When information came in to the contrary, updated beliefs and milder responses were more the exception than the rule. Washington's lenity with the Whiskey rebels stands in sharp contrast to the hanging of Shaysites for petty theft. Adams's sensible pardon of Fries stands out in bold relief to his advisers' inflexible severity and especially Hamilton's asperity.

Another striking facet of these rebellions is their fractal nature, or how one side was a microcosm of the other (Abbott 2001, 22–27). Government officials were not the only ones mistaking conspiracies for something more pedestrian. The rebels,

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too, saw fiendish plots, gross usurpations of power, would-be tyrants, and worse in what were often the mundane exercises of a weak but growing state. The rebels, too, saw their opponents as more monolithic and coordinated than they were in reality. And the rebels, too, vastly overstated the amount

of influence foreigners held over the opposition, seeing their enemies as pawns of whatever remote forces ostensibly oppressed them.

What is the strategic rationale that ties together the symptoms of the paranoid style? This heightened sensitivity, this tendency toward false positives, this sedulous screening out of dissonant information—these behaviors are consonant with a power-asymmetry argument. On this view, it is not a coincidence that actors were more knowledgeable and curious about the more powerful and were rather ignorant and incurious about the less powerful. Attention to those above and inattention to those below are causally linked; it is economizing behavior, which is frequently—though not always—functional. To overcome deficiencies of capability, people were intensely alert to infractions by their greatest foe. If the risk of an omission, oversight, or careless error is a devastating blow, then elevated vigilance and additional false positives become acceptable costs.

To avoid diffusing focus and energies, actors concentrated on singular or nearly singular targets, endowing enemies with inflated unity and abilities. As Walter Lippmann put it in a classical formulation: “For these blind spots keep away distracting images, which with their attendant emotions, might cause hesitation and infirmity of purpose. Consequently the stereotype not only saves time in a busy life and is a defense of our position in society, but tends to preserve us from the bewildering effect of trying to see the world steadily and see it whole” (1922/1997, 75; cf. James 1918/1950, 455–458).

The above arguments may explain why puppetry tropes are a long-running theme through American foreign policy. We have already seen Washington liken Shays to a British puppet, but a dozen years earlier John Adams had the same fear: “foreign powers would find means to corrupt our people, to influence our councils, and, in fine, we should be little better than puppets, danced on the wires of the cabinets of Europe” (Merrill and Paterson 2005, 32). Much later, George Kennan wondered at “this tendency of ours to insist on seeing as blind puppets of some other great power weaker or smaller factions or regimes whose relations with that great power are actually much more complicated and much less sinister than that” (1954, 164).

Of course, as Hofstadter noted, there is nothing distinctly American about any of this; the present cases happen to be American, and so the discussion revolves around

Americans. Felix Gilbert chronicled a parallel example in Renaissance Florence, another state that sought to offset material weakness and foreign influence by craft. Gilbert states that the “Florentines used a weapon with which they believed they could compensate for the lack of military strength. This weapon was reason (*ragione*) and the Florentines considered themselves as experts in its use” (1984, 34). It is probably no accident that the best-known theorist of conspiracies was Florence’s favorite diplomat (Machiavelli 1996, III, 6; 1998, chap. 19). Nor is there anything necessarily old-fashioned about this. Attempts at overcoming material inferiority through spiritual superiority are just as familiar in historical events (e.g., the Taiping and Boxer rebellions) as in current events (e.g., Hezbollah and al-Qaeda).

The Ethics of Domestic Tranquility: Conclusions and Recommendations

To sum up the central arguments, asymmetries in capability drove early American elites to see their great-power antagonists as more unified, more malign, and more organized than they were, and this caused them to misperceive and overreact to minor unrest like Shays’s Rebellion, the Whiskey Rebellion, and Fries’s Rebellion. This paranoid style also led elites to blame their principle foreign foe du jour for home-grown problems. In some ways this is a rational response to uncertain and unsafe environments. It concentrates thought on pressing dangers; it enhances defensive dexterity; it countervails shortages in one form of power with surpluses in other forms. In other ways, the paranoid style can go too far and lead to pathologies like oversensitivity, oversimplification, and mercilessness. While it may have helped strengthen the country, it also killed innocents and compromised American ideals.

The ethics of the paranoid style are complex. From a Kantian (deontological) standpoint, where the right is defined independently of the good, American elites acted inappropriately. It was decision-makers’ responsibility to treat human beings as ends, not means, and to exercise authority according to the dispassionate dictates of reason and duty. Not only did elites often behave with a cavalier disregard of truth; they acted on maxims of behavior that could not be universalized—were roles reversed they would have expected, as a rule, fairer treatment. Yet Kantians would not issue a blanket condemnation, given that individual responses varied. Brave souls like George Washington and John Adams, to their enduring credit, stood up to the tide and refused to punish individuals instrumentally.

From a Millian (utilitarian or teleological) standpoint, whereby the good is defined independently of the right, and the right is defined as the maximization of the good, American elites acted rightly. What injustice was meted out to some individuals may reasonably be thought to have been spectacular punishment that secured offsetting benefits like a strong state and increased domestic cooperation. The country’s future peace and prosperity called for the paranoid style in a time of insecurity.

Although there are marked disagreements between the two perspectives, their disputes are not total. Overlap can be found, and—since good policy is based on good ethics—that will form the basis for recommendations. Both views would agree that it is imperative for state officials to dutifully protect the populace and act with celerity to counter threats. In doing so, people will commit errors (Kantians seek no systematic bias in the kinds of errors committed, while Millians would reach different conclusions based on their version of cost-benefit analysis). But when it comes to adjudicating culpability, all sides would tend to the view that it

is the better part of valor to allow cooler heads to prevail and exonerating evidence to be weighed impartially. It speaks well of American democracy that even in its infancy there was as little interference with electoral accountability and the rule of law as there was.

To distill the foregoing recommendations, the paranoid style helps tactical agility but hurts strategic acuity; it sidesteps paralysis but impedes analysis; it is healthy in a sentinel but unhealthy in a judge. America's founders inoculated the country to the worst excesses of the paranoid style by separating the branches of government, expressly to guard against collective passions hijacking the brain of the body politic. By design, the presidency and Supreme Court are especially insulated from particularist pressures. Recommendations, therefore, are modest. The paranoid style has its uses in times of uncertainty, but in the face of danger it would do no harm if government officials were more aware of their cognitive biases and the risks of overreaction. This implies a need, where feasible, for institutionalizing decisional delays to allow for deliberation and for devil's advocates to expose dogma (Jervis 1976, 415–424).

To apply the argument to current events and recent history, a caveat is necessary. The issues involved are extraordinarily complex and cannot be treated with justice in the space remaining. Nevertheless, a few comments will be ventured. Before the September 11 attacks, the United States government was more a target than a proponent of the paranoid style. After the attacks, America's unparalleled preponderance was inadequate to guarantee homeland security. This led to many of the trappings of the paranoid style:

- Increased executive powers (e.g., the USA PATRIOT Act of 2001) and extensive executive activism (e.g., open-ended detentions at Guantánamo Bay)
- Perception of an unrealistically unified enemy (e.g., belief in an Axis of Evil or in cooperation between Saddam Hussein and al-Qaeda)
- Overreaction and misperception (e.g., the Iraq War and Vice President Richard Cheney's One Percent doctrine, whereby a 1 percent chance of a negative outcome is treated as a certainty)
- Lack of doubt that anyone overreacted or misperceived (Rove 2009)
- Lack of awareness that governmental policies could be causing untoward outcomes (Fuller 2009)

As it has in the past, the tide of the paranoid style is ebbing with threat perception. Almost a decade has passed without terrorism in the United States, and reports of thwarted plots portray them as feeble (Mueller 2006). Policy intellectuals are questioning the prowess of global terrorism and the seriousness of those who warn of it (Walt 2009). Like Bowdoin and his party, Republicans suffered at nearly every level in the last election. Like the Whiskey rebels, the Taliban has retreated across mountains and borders to avoid submitting to the U.S. government. As in the Fries trial, accused plotters are receiving more lenient treatment as time goes by (Lithwick 2009). But threats cannot stay in abeyance forever, and the paranoid style will surely swell in the future.

It is interesting to examine the argument in the present because of American primacy. The feverish conspiracy theories popular in Middle Eastern coffeehouses are consistent with the view that the paranoid style is a prophylactic against power-

ful outsiders. But how does the paranoid style abide in the United States, a country possessed of unmatched material capability? Security studies scholars have long noted that a state's interests expand with its capability; one's reach always exceeds one's grasp. Hence, capability can never be adequate to fully protect one's interests. Even the strongest states must buttress their positions with skill and will because of their commensurately expanded ambitions. As noted above, competitors tend to resemble each other, and the paranoid style tends to be mirrored in opponents; the stronger only have a weaker case of it. For instance, as Bernard Bailyn details (1990, 155–159), during the Revolutionary period and beyond, there was a rich British literature accusing Americans of conspiracy.

But fundamentally, the crux of the paranoid style lies deeper, and this has far-reaching implications for attempts to obviate it. If the present analysis is correct, remedying the paranoid style is not a matter of psychology or education or mass media (Jacoby 2008, 10, 309–315). The paranoid style is not necessarily a sign of stupidity, although sometimes it makes people act that way—it is a sign of frailty. The solution, however imperfect, lies in salving the inevitable power imbalances that underpin it. For better or worse, power asymmetries are a part of life, and so the paranoid style has always been and will always remain ineradicable. Yet it is one thing to say that a condition is incurable and another to claim that it should never be treated. Sometimes, easing the paranoid style is not only possible but also desirable.

Publius is an exemplar of this argument in a double sense. In one sense, Publius's guile *was* the paranoid style. American elites had to be alert to great-power intervention; the paranoid style allowed them to concentrate the wit and will necessary to balance superior capability. But in another sense, Publius's guile was an idealized response to the paranoid style. Madison, Hamilton, and Jay chose their pseudonym from Publius Valerius Publicola. Quite fittingly, the ancient Publius was a new man who became a Roman, overthrew a king, established a republic, and put down a rebellion against the young republic. But despite eminent public service, rumors swirled that he was becoming rich and mighty and conspired against the people's liberties.

In reply, he assembled the people and made symbolic gestures of deference toward them, lowering the *fasces* and admitting that the majesty of the state belonged to the people, not to their leaders. He bemoaned, "Once hailed as a liberator of my country, I have sunk in your eyes to the baseness of traitors. . . . Will you never find in any man merit so tried and tested as to be above suspicion?" (Livy 1971, 113 [II 8]). Publius did not stop at symbols and speeches. He passed measures to aid the rights of people to appeal decisions by the magistrates and to deprive individuals of civil rights if found guilty of plotting for a return to monarchy. For these, he was given the name Publicola, friend of the people. When he died, "by universal consent the greatest soldier and statesmen of his day . . . he was so poor that his resources were not enough to pay for his funeral" (Livy 1971, 123 [II 17]).

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NOTES

1. "Documents Relating to the Shays Rebellion," p. 694. Merrill Jensen records that during the revolution Lincoln's generalship "had been so bad that the British had captured his whole army without any particular effort on his part to save it" (1962, 56).

2. From 1964 to 1971, there were 750 riots that killed 228, injured 12,741, and did enormous economic damage that lasted for a generation. See Postrel 2004. On antebellum disturbances, see Pencak et al. 2002; Shy 1987, 77; Szatmari 1980, 124–126.

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