Political Science

Over the Cliff: How Obama's Election Drove the American Right Insane
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Over the Cliff is old wine in a new bottle. In a 1964 article in *Harper's Magazine*, Richard Hofstadter described "the paranoid style in American politics." Amato and Neiwert offer a detailed and contemporary accounting of that approach.

Hofstadter's analysis detailed three basic beliefs of the paranoid style: one, a sustained conspiracy afflicts our politics; two, top levels of government have been infiltrated by communists or other foreign agents; and three, the country has been infused with a vast network of communist or other threatening agents. Sound recently familiar? Masons, Jesuits, and communists are groups who, at various times, have been branded Enemies of the State by the paranoids. These same themes are also prevalent in the vitriol of Glenn Beck and others of the audible political right during the early months of the Obama administration.

Over the Cliff chronicles the permeation of US mainstream political discussion by extreme conservative thought, in response to the election of the first African-American president. The authors' focal point is Glenn Beck and his television show on the Fox News cable channel.

Beck and others, such as Rush Limbaugh and Bill O'Reilly, give voice to the thought process of the extreme right—what historically has been the viewpoint of only the radical fringe. These extreme conservatives see conspiracy and danger in all aspects of the Obama presidency and seek not only to oppose the newly elected President but to destroy and demonize him. A primary method is to circulate stories that are all or mostly false. They have attempted, for example, to portray Barack Obama as illegitimately elected by falsely accusing him of having been born not in Hawaii but in Africa or Indonesia. They claim the President is surrounded by radicals, socialists, and other enemies of the State. They have succeeded in driving from office Van Jones, an Obama appointee working in environmental policy development.

In their most serious charge, Amato and Neiwert accuse right-wing talkers of irresponsible use of speech that can, under certain circumstances, incite others to violence. One example is Bill O'Reilly's verbal targeting of Dr. Tiller, the Kansas doctor who operated an abortion clinic until he was murdered by an anti-abortionist.

Over the Cliff will be of interest to those who relentlessly follow current events and American politics on the cable news shows. Although the thesis is well-researched and documented, it is up to the reader to make his or her own conclusion as to how well the authors make their case. This wine may not be a new variety, but it remains an appealing drink.

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