



## **On Re-reading Richard Hofstadter’s “The Paranoid Style in American Politics”**

Judith M. Hughes

Scarcely a week goes by without an appeal — whether in print or on video — to Richard Hofstadter’s *The Paranoid Style in American Politics*. This has been true for the last decade. When the Tea Party emerged roughly ten years ago, *Newsweek* placed the Hofstadter essay on its “What You Need to Read Now” list. From tea parties to birther frenzy, allusions to Hofstadter’s piece were widespread. Then, with Trump’s candidacy and electoral success, Hofstadter became the go-to historian for light on how a reality TV star ended up the 45<sup>th</sup> president of the United States.

Hofstadter’s choice of the term paranoid — though he insisted that he was not “speaking in a clinical sense”<sup>1</sup> — suggests his familiarity with psychology and/or psychoanalysis. He was not alone. Indeed, this ease was characteristic of his generation, a generation for whom, as W.H. Auden put it, Freud was “no more a person . . . but a climate of opinion.” For better or worse, they were all Freudians. Freud had molded their intellectual manners and fundamentally altered how they thought. But by the 1970s, the weather had changed: borrowing from psychoanalysis had ceased to inspire commentators of one sort or another. And now the weather has shifted once more. The current crop of pundits is again comfortable with a psychoanalytic frame of reference. Two items stand out.

The first is projection. It directs attention to the way specific impulses, wishes, aspects of the self are imagined to be located in some object — object being psychoanalytic parlance for person — external to oneself. It goes hand in hand with denial, that is, one denies that one feels such and such emotion, has such and such a wish, but asserts that someone else does. The enemy, Hofstadter wrote, “seems to be on many counts a projection of the self: both the ideal and the unacceptable aspects of the self are attributed to him.”<sup>2</sup>

The second is introjection (often used synonymously with internalization). The critical agency known as the superego is familiar enough; the notion of internal objects is an elaboration or expansion, which underlines how injunctions and prohibitions deriving from multiple figures are introjected at multiple periods, beginning in early childhood. Taken together, introjection and projection draw attention to the dynamic interaction between a person’s internal world and the external world; they signal, in addition, another feature of mental life: that reality thinking and fantasy thinking coexist and that a person’s grasp on reality can be quite shaky.

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics and Other Essays* (New York: Knopf, 1965), p. 3.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* p. 32.

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Hofstadter provided examples—a few leading episodes taken from American history in which the paranoid style “emerged in full and archetypal splendor.”<sup>3</sup>

Reaching back to the 1790s, he pointed to the panic “over the allegedly subversive activities of the Bavarian Illuminati.” Though it is unclear whether any member of the society ever made his way to America, New England Federalists warned of a Jacobin plot—hatched by Illuminati—that was part of an international conspiracy. Then four decades later, the anti-Masonic movement took hold not just in New England but in the northern United States more broadly. “Anti-Masons were fascinated by the horrid oaths that Masons were said to take, invoking terrible reprisals upon themselves if they should fail in their Masonic obligations.” And as a secret society, Masons were considered to be a danger to republican government—indeed particularly liable to treason. “Fear of a Masonic plot had hardly been quieted when rumors arose of a Catholic plot against American values.” As one Protestant militant wrote: “Jesuits are prowling about all parts of the United States in every possible disguise, expressly to ascertain the advantageous situations and modes to disseminate Popery.”<sup>4</sup> In all cases, the same frame of mind, just with a different villain.

“The central image,” Hofstadter noted, “is that of a vast and sinister conspiracy, a gigantic and yet subtle machinery of influence set in motion to undermine and destroy a way of life.” What stands out “about the paranoid style is not that its exponents see conspiracies or plots here and there in history, but that they regard a ‘vast’ or ‘gigantic’ conspiracy as *the motive force* in historical events.” History, in this telling, “*is* a conspiracy set in motion by demonic forces” that can only be defeated by an “all-out crusade.” Nothing short of utter triumph will do. This insistence on “unqualified victories leads to the formulation of hopelessly demanding and unrealistic goals, and since these goals are not even remotely attainable, failure constantly heightens the paranoid’s frustration. Even partial success leaves him with the sense of powerlessness with which he began, and this in turn only strengthens his awareness of the vast and terrifying quality of the enemy he opposes.”<sup>5</sup>

Hofstadter was a historian of the United States; yet the most powerful examples of the paranoid style were European. Saul Friedländer, in his magisterial *Nazi Germany and the Jews*, drew on Hofstadter and extended his argument. Where Hofstadter left the impression that the paranoid style turned up from time to time, more or less unchanged, Friedländer saw it as far more pervasive—and focused on Jews. “And for the anti-Jewish

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 10.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., pp. 10, 16, 19, 20.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., pp. 29 -31 (emphasis in the original).

true believer, the ultimate struggle for salvation demanded the unconditional fanaticism” of someone to show the way.<sup>6</sup>

Hitler’s zealotry proved up to the mark. His worldview, presented in clusters of fixed ideas, “had the internal coherence of obsessions. . . . For the future Führer, the Jew’s ominous endeavors were an all-encompassing conspiratorial activity extending throughout the span of Western history. . . . [T]he Jew, in Hitler’s description, was dehistoricized and transformed into a principle of evil that confronted a no less metahistorical counterpart as immutable in its nature and role throughout time—the Aryan race.”<sup>7</sup> Even after Stalingrad, “the hysterical adoration and blind faith” of so many was so vital “that countless Germans continued to believe in . . . [Adolf Hitler’s] promises of victory.”<sup>8</sup> And that bond to the Führer, the bond that prompted millions of Germans to follow Hitler without question, held until the very last phase of the war, when defeat loomed and the all-conquering thousand year Aryan Reich Hitler foretold crumbled.

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This glance at German history brings me back to projection and introjection. When, for example, a person projects aggressive feelings onto an object, the object will seem unduly aggressive. Then when the person introjects that aggressive object, the introjected object will act in an aggressive way toward the person—an uncomfortable internal situation, commonly conceptualized as being at the mercy of a harsh superego. The next step amounts to the tightening of the screw, with the aggressive object re-projected and so on; with each turn of the screw, the world appears more and more Manichean, that is, more and more divided between absolute good and absolute evil. The analyst’s task, as James Strachey formulated it in a classic paper, is to interrupt this cycling and splitting. How was it to be accomplished?

A remark by Freud—a footnote in *The Ego and the Id*—had pointed to the analyst being tempted “to play the part of prophet, savior and redeemer to the patient.” But this was not advisable: “the rules of analysis,” Freud emphasized, were “diametrically opposed to the physician’s making use of his personality in any such manner.”<sup>9</sup> Strachey took the warning to heart:

[T]he patient is all the time on the brink of turning the real external object (the analyst) into the archaic one; that is to say, he is on the brink of projecting his primitive introjected imagoes onto him. In so far as the patient actually does this, the analyst becomes like anyone else that he meets in real life—a phantasy object. . . . The analyst must [therefore] avoid any real behavior that is likely to confirm the

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<sup>6</sup> Saul Friedländer, *Nazi Germany and the Jews*, 2 vols. (New York: HarperCollins, 1997-2007), 1: 95.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 98-100.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 2: 658.

<sup>9</sup> Sigmund Freud, *The Ego and the Id* (1923), in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, 24 vols., translated under the general editorship of James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1953-1974), 19: 50n1.

patient's view of him as a "bad" or a "good" phantasy object. This is perhaps obvious as regards the "bad" object. . . . But it may be equally unwise for the analyst to act really in such a way as to encourage the patient to project his "good" introjected object onto him. For the patient will then tend to regard him as a good object in an archaic sense and will incorporate him . . . as protection against his "bad" ones

At a critical moment, Strachey argued, the patient proves able to distinguish between analyst and fantasy object. The patient's sense of reality thus serves as "an essential but . . . very feeble ally"—an ally that could not be relied upon and should not be overtaxed.<sup>10</sup>

What Strachey did not mention—he simply assumed it—was the analyst's appreciation of reality. He took for granted the analyst's ability and willingness to help the patient distinguish between fantasy and reality. Without that, the cycling of projection and introjection would continue uninterrupted. Here, then, are two contrasting types: the truth-telling analyst and the one who appropriates the mantle of prophet.

### I. A Prophet Unarmed

As the 2008 Democratic primaries got underway, the sheer energy at the rallies filled Obama with wonder.

Once my speech was over and I walked off the stage to shake hands along the rope line, I often found people screaming, pushing, and grabbing. Some would cry and touch my face, and . . . young parents would pass howling babies across rows of strangers for me to hold. . . . At some basic level people were no longer seeing *me*. . . . Instead they had taken possession of my likeness and made it a vessel for a million different dreams.<sup>11</sup>

Obama himself was convinced that the country was desperate for a new voice—for his voice. Even before he won a Senate seat, he had positioned himself as the apostle of racial harmony. Invited to give the keynote address to the Democratic National Convention in 2004, he produced a stunning performance.

Now even as we speak, there are those who are preparing to divide us, the spin masters, the negative ad peddlers who embrace the politics of anything goes. Well, I say to them tonight, there is not a liberal America and a conservative America—there is a United States of America. There is not a Black America and a White America and a Latino America and an Asian America—there's a United States of America.

His, then, was a politics of hope — "the audacity of hope" — a "belief that there were better days ahead."

As Obama campaigned in 2008, he "needed to embrace white people as allies rather than impediments to change." He "needed to use a language that spoke to all Americans,"

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<sup>10</sup> James Strachey, "The Nature of the Therapeutic Action of Psycho-Analysis," *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis* 15 (1934): 146-147.

<sup>11</sup> Barack Obama, *A Promised Land* (New York: Crown, 2020) p. 136 (emphasis in the original).

and so he framed “the African American struggle in terms of a broader struggle for a fair, just, and generous society.” He understood then, or maybe only later, “how appealing to common interests discounted the continuing effects of discrimination and allowed whites to avoid taking the full measure of the legacy of slavery, Jim Crow, and their own racial attitudes.”<sup>12</sup>

The forbearance, this indulgence of white sensibilities, was amply apparent in Obama’s “More Perfect Union” speech of March 2008. The circumstances were these: after a journalist uncovered a fiery speech by Reverend Jeremiah Wright, pastor of the church the Obamas sporadically attended in Chicago, Obama delivered a masterful speech on race in America. He deftly wove together his life story with the American story.

I am the son of a black man from Kenya and a white woman from Kansas. I was raised with the help of a white grandfather who survived a Depression to serve in Patton’s Army during World War II and a white grandmother who worked on a bomber assembly line at Fort Leavenworth while he was overseas. . . . I am married to a black American who carries within her the blood of slaves and slave owners. . . . I have brothers, sisters, nieces, nephews, uncles and cousins of every race and hue, scattered across three continents, and for as long as I live, I will never forget that in no other country on Earth is my story even possible.

From there he laid out the historical basis for Black grievances; at the same time suggesting that white fears and resentments also had legitimate roots.

For all those [African-Americans] who scratched and clawed their way to get a piece of the American Dream, there were many who didn’t make it—those who were ultimately defeated, in one way or another, by discrimination. . . . That legacy of defeat was passed on to future generations. . . . For the men and women of Reverend Wright’s generation, the memories of humiliation and doubt and fear have not gone away; nor has the anger and bitterness of those years. . . .

In fact, a similar anger exists within segments of the white community. Most working- and middle-class white Americans don’t feel that they have been particularly privileged by their race. . . . And in an era of stagnant wages and global competition, opportunity comes to be seen as a zero sum game, in which your dreams come at my expense. So when they are told to bus their children to a school across town; when they hear an African-American is getting an advantage in landing a good job or a spot in a good college because of an injustice that they themselves never committed; when they’re told that their fears about crimes in urban neighborhood are somehow prejudiced, resentment builds over time.

As history, the equivalence Obama sketched out between Black responses to centuries of inequality and white resentment over charges of pervasive racism was woefully inadequate; as politics, it achieved its purpose: to usher race—and its divisiveness—off the stage.

Obama thus pledged not to demonize his opponents. The Republicans did not follow suit. The assault began with McCain picking Sarah Palin as his running mate. She

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 118.

turned out to be irritable, ignorant, and likely to draw a blank when faced with an even mildly hostile question. But she sure knew how to rouse the Republican base. And Obama sensed that something had shifted that would have long-term consequences.

[Palin] spent the first week of October drawing big crowds and enthusiastically gassing them up with nativist bile. From the stage she accused me [Obama] of “palling around with terrorists who would target their own country.” She suggested that I was “not a man who sees America the way you and I see America.” People turned up at her rallies wearing T-shirts bearing slogans like PALIN’S PITBULLS and NO COMMUNISTS. The media reported shouts of “Terrorist!” and “Kill him!” and “Off with his head!” coming from her audiences.<sup>13</sup>

Only after the fact did Obama fully appreciate how consumed with conspiracy thinking Republicans had become. “At the time that it’s happening,” he said in an interview for *The Atlantic*, “you get a sense that this is a strain within the Republican Party or the conservative movement that has always been there. It dates back to the Birchers and elements in the Goldwater campaign”—the two movements that prompted Hofstadter to write about the paranoid style in the first place—“but you sort of feel that all of this is behind us.” As he was writing his memoir, “the clarity of those patterns became more obvious.”

Václav Havel, the former Czech president who had led the grassroots effort that brought Soviet rule to an end, on meeting Obama told him: “‘You’ve been cursed with people’s high expectations. . . . Because it means that they are also easily disappointed. . . . I fear that it can be a trap.’” Obama claimed that he had known this all along, that “a time would come” when he “would disappoint” those who had projected “a million different dreams” onto his likeness. He knew he would fall “short of the image” that he and his presidential campaign “had helped to construct.” As the mid-terms approached, he recognized that he was in trouble:

[E]ven without looking at the polls, I could sense a change in the atmosphere on the campaign trail: an air of doubt hovering over each rally, a forced almost desperate quality to the cheers and laughter, as if the crowds and I were a couple at the end of a whirlwind romance, trying to muster up feelings that had started to fade. How could I blame them? They had expected my election to transform our country, to make government work for ordinary people, to restore some sense of civility in Washington. Instead many of their lives had grown harder, and Washington seemed as broken, distant, and bitterly partisan as ever.<sup>14</sup>

In the event, the Democrats were routed: they lost sixty-three House seats, thirteen governorships, and 816 state legislative seats.

Obama entered political life, he entered upon his presidential campaign, fashioning himself as the one candidate who could bridge America’s divides. What about the need to get beyond reliance on one person to bring about change? After four years of Trump—and

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 195.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., pp. 350-351, 136, 591.

the down ballot successes of many Republicans even as their presidential candidate lost—the political system is as hard to overhaul as ever. This is not Obama’s fault. But it does point to a flaw in his conception of how to achieve lasting political reform.

## II. A Prophet Unhinged

At the Democratic National Convention in 2020, Obama offered this assessment of the man who had followed him in office:

I never expected that my successor would embrace my vision or continue my policies. I did hope, for the sake of the country, that Donald Trump might show some interest in taking the job seriously, that he might come to feel the weight of the office and discover some reverence for the democracy that had been placed in his care.

But he never did. For close to four years now, he’s shown no interest in putting in the work; no interest in finding common ground; . . . , no interest in treating the presidency as anything but one more reality show that he can use to get the attention he craves.

The truth was, as Obama made clear, that Trump knew nothing of governing and was loath to learn. Despite all his talk—and the disruption and the furor—his legislative accomplishments amounted to very little: tax cuts for the rich and conservative judges for the right. Issues such as balanced budgets and healthcare, issues that had animated the Tea Party, evaporated midway through Trump’s presidency without any loss of enthusiasm among his supporters. As for “draining the swamp,” Trump made a mockery of it by his flagrant corruption and self-dealing.

Why, then, did Trump’s followers care so little about his failures? Fintan O’Toole, writing in *The New York Review of Books*, claimed that it was no accident that the path to Trump’s 2016 success lay through the idea of birthright: “his racist campaign to suggest that Obama was not entitled to be president because he was born in the wrong place. Birtherism unlocked the central concept of . . . Trumpism: real Americans.”

Once he [Trump] understood that his market was in that idea, Trump brought together two versions. . . . One is national: America First. The United States has a God-given right to global preeminence, The other is trickier. In effect, it puts “white” before America First. This is not something Trump especially wanted to say. Like most racists, he likes to think of himself as “the least racist person that anybody is going to meet.” But he fully understood that very many of his consumers wanted that qualifier to be there, some explicitly, most implicitly.<sup>15</sup>

More than a year before launching his presidential run, Trump made political waves with fear mongering--that US troops and aid workers would bring the Ebola virus back with them from Africa. In September 2014, he tweeted: “Why are we sending thousands of ill-trained soldiers into Ebola infested areas of Africa! Bring the plague back to the US? Obama is so stupid.” Then on September 30: “The United States must immediately institute

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<sup>15</sup> Fintan O’Toole, “The Trump Inheritance,” *The New York Review of Books*, February 25, 2021.

strong travel restrictions or Ebola will be all over the United States—a plague like no other!” And on November 10: “A single Ebola carrier infects 2 others at a minimum. STOP THE FLIGHTS! NO VISAS FROM EBOLA STRICKEN COUNTRIES!”<sup>16</sup> Substitute “Muslim” for “Ebola Stricken” and you have the ban Trump imposed once in office.

Then, of course, there is the wall. Trump’s justification for it was not merely about keeping killers and rapists at bay. It was also about immigrants as carriers of disease, a common trope in nativist propaganda—and one that Trump reanimated in preparation for his presidential campaign. August 5, 2014: “Our government now imports illegal immigrants and deadly diseases. Our leaders are inept.” July 6, 2015: “Tremendous infectious disease is pouring across our border.” In terms of mileage, Trump ended up building very little—something like eighty miles of new construction. But through his rhetoric, he signaled far-right extremists that he understood their core anger and fear about America being taken over by minorities and foreigners.

So Trump’s response to Charlottesville should not have come as a surprise. The Unite the Right rally, scheduled for August 12, 2017, was explicitly organized and branded by far-right racist white supremacists as a far-right, racist, and white supremacist event. At the time, the Confederate statues and monuments across the country were under increasing scrutiny. But the attendees at the Unite the Right rally made crystal clear that they were not gathering out of some architectural-protectionist urge. The Neo-Nazi Andrew Anglic offered this description of the upcoming event:

Although the rally was initially planned in support of the [Robert E.] Lee Monument, which the Jew Mayor and his Negroid Deputy have marked for destruction, it has become something bigger than that. It is now an historic rally, which will serve as a rallying point and battle cry for the rising Alt-Right movement.<sup>17</sup>

And the night before the main event, there was a procession where more than 200 marchers held tiki torches and chanted “Jews will not replace us” and “Blood and Soil.”

At a rowdy press conference held three days after civil rights activist Heather Heyer was killed when a white nationalist drove his car into a crowd of counter-demonstrators, Trump drew a moral equivalency between left and right: “You had a group on one side that was bad and you had a group of the other side that was also very violent. And nobody wants to say that. But I’ll say that right now.” The bad group was the white nationalists; the “very violent” group were those who had come to object. In case anyone missed his point, he continued, “You had a group on the other side that came charging in—without a permit—and they were very violent.” And then his most famous, or infamous, line: “I think there’s blame on both sides. . . . But you also had people who were very fine people on both sides.” There were no “very fine people” who were part of the organizing or promotion of Unite the Right.

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<sup>16</sup> For Trump’s tweets, see Fintan O’Toole, “Vector in Chief,” *The New York Review of Books*, May 14, 2020.

<sup>17</sup> Quoted in Jane Coaston, “Trump’s new defense of his Charlottesville comments is incredibly false,” *Vox*, April 26, 2019.



At the press conference, what was striking was how put upon Trump felt when expected to condemn neo-Nazis, how he was consumed by his own resentment. And here was a bond with the much more numerous “real Americans” who showed up at his rallies. His was the voice that would articulate their grievances. “Nobody knows the system better than me,” he solemnly declared in accepting the Republican presidential nomination, “which is why I alone can fix it. I have seen firsthand how the system is rigged against our citizens.”

Decades before he ran for president, Trump had adopted as his mantra, “I have been treated very badly.” In 2016, his campaign had been convinced, in true paranoid fashion, that the Republican establishment in the primaries and then Hillary Clinton and her allies in the general election were committed to rigging the vote to prevent Trump’s rightful accession to the White House. This conviction was by no means limited to the alt-right. And political commentators reckoned that if Trump failed to eke out a victory, his already suspicious supporters were likely to double down on allegations that they had been cheated out of what was rightfully theirs.

Thus the “big lie” was nothing new. It was a lie that was already there: a Trump loss could mean only one thing—widespread and shameless cheating. After the voting was over, Trump spent weeks claiming, falsely, that the election had been stolen from him. He portrayed himself as an aggrieved victim of a vast conspiracy that involved not just Democrats but Republicans as well, not to mention judges, election officials, mass media, Cubans and Venezuelans and voting machine companies. And, at the same time, he encouraged supporters to travel to Washington on January 6 to help him find a way to cling to power.

Trump summoned rioters—for a “wild” protest to stop the certification of Biden’s Electoral College victory. At a rally outside the White House, he told them, “We will never give up. We will never concede.” He encouraged them to “fight like hell,” saying that otherwise they would lose their country. “The clamorous soundtrack of that day was antiphonal. It was call and response”—projection, introjection and re-projection. “Both Trump and his fans were finding their way . . . , signals sent out in one form and returned in another.”<sup>18</sup> Trump promised his people that he would be with them. Then he went home and watched the insurrection on TV.

Writing more than fifty years ago, Hofstadter described Barry Goldwater as living “psychologically half in the world of routine politics and half in the curious underworld of the pseudo-conservatives”—an underworld that called into question the validity of the political system that kept putting men of “wholly evil intent” into office. Hofstadter continued: Goldwater demonstrated his sympathy with this way of thinking when on the night of his defeat, “he so flagrantly violated the code of decorum governing the conduct of losing presidential candidates. The code requires a message of congratulation, sent as soon as the result is beyond doubt, so worded that it emphasizes the stake of the whole

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<sup>18</sup> O’Toole, “The Trump Inheritance.”

nation in the successful administration of the victor and reasserts the loser's acceptance of the public verdict. In withholding his congratulations until the morning after the election, and then hinting at Johnson's incapacity to solve . . . acute problems . . . , Goldwater did something more than show bad manners. . . . [H]e expressed his suspicion that the whole American political system . . . was too soft and equivocal for this carnivorous world."<sup>19</sup>

How innocent this now sounds!

### III. Where Do We Go From Here?

Recall Strachey and the model of the truth-telling analyst. In his inaugural address—an address stripped of the rhetorical flourishes often found in such addresses—Biden gave his word to “always level” with his fellow Americans. And, in similar vein, he enjoined them to “reject a culture in which facts . . . are manipulated and even manufactured.” The biggest lie may have been Trump's claim that the election had been stolen. But the problem extended far beyond Trump and his cronies; it extended to conservative media and those elements—no longer on the fringe—of the Republican party that have been happy to embrace conspiracy theories.

Were reality to be squarely faced, grief would not be far behind. Grief over the failure to realize American ideals; grief over the failure to make the country more equal and more just. Grief, as Biden made clear, that “the cry of racial justice . . . 400 years in the making . . . can't be any more desperate” and that “political extremism, white supremacy, domestic terrorism” can't be any more blatant. Happy talk of the American Dream is altogether inappropriate.

In another *New York Review* piece, O'Toole dubbed Biden “The Designated Mourner.” Biden is “haunted by death, not just the private tragedies his family has endured, but by a larger and more public sense of loss.”<sup>20</sup> In his bestselling memoir, *Promise Me, Dad*, Biden wrote:

I have found over the years that, although it brought back my own vivid memories of sad times, my presence almost always brought some solace to people who had suffered sudden and unexpected loss. Not because I am possessed of any special power, but because my story precedes me: I was a newly elected thirty-year-old United States Senator, excited to be down in Washington interviewing staff, when I got the call that my wife and eighteen-month-old daughter had died in a car accident while out shopping the week before Christmas. Beau and Hunt had been in the car too. They pulled through without permanent damage, but not before spending weeks in the hospital. The pain had seemed unbearable in the beginning and took me a long time to heal, but I did survive the punishing ordeal. . . . When I talk to people in

<sup>19</sup> Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style*, pp. 100-101.

<sup>20</sup> Fintan O'Toole, “The Designated Mourner,” *The New York Review of Books*, January 16, 2020.

mourning, they know I speak from experience. They know I have a sense of the depth of their pain.<sup>21</sup>

And that was before the slow death of his beloved son Beau.

But, O’Toole asked, “Can a politics of grief be adequate to a politics of grievance? Can it deal with . . . the toxic self-pity that Trump both fostered and enabled?” Biden’s implicit answer is: by getting out of the way. Pundits have been surprised by the changes Biden has made in his public persona. Where once he was famous for his “goofy exuberance, cartoonish loquaciousness, . . . for talking and talking, often until he talked himself into trouble,” now he seems to have learned his lesson: to tamp down his ego. “The dirtiest word in his revised vocabulary is the first person singular.”<sup>22</sup>

Biden wants legislation—to deal with real grievances—not attention. He is operating on the theory that “the less flamboyant the style, the less chance there is of his becoming a cultural lightning rod.” If, he seems to reason, you dial down the conflict, you just may be able to dial up the policy.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Joe Biden, *Promise Me, Dad: A Year of Hope, Hardship, and Purpose* (New York: Flatiron Books, 2017), pp. 49-50.

<sup>22</sup> Frank Bruni, “Biden Has Disappeared,” *New York Times*, March 21, 2021.

<sup>23</sup> Ezra Klein, “Biden is the Anti-Trump, and It’s Working,” *New York Times*, March 5, 2021.