

# Ordinary Paranoia: The Frightening Similarity of John Cheever's Wapshot Novels

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*In this essay, I argue that traditional readings of John Cheever's two Wapshot novels as radically different misses their underlying similarity. Seeing underlying similarity between the two novels provides new ways of thinking not only about Cheever's novels but also about the paranoia that suffused the early postmodernist period of the 1960s and Cheever's moral resistance to its attractions.*

I first started thinking about John Cheever's two Wapshot novels – *The Wapshot Chronicle* and *The Wapshot Scandal* – at the end of George W. Bush's presidency, back when Osama bin Laden was still alive, Barack Obama was just an oddly named Senator, before anyone had an iPhone, no one was streaming Netflix or Hulu, and all too few had any idea that a Great Recession was about to transform the economy. At the time of my first reading the two novels, I was, along with (as I discovered) most scholars of the two texts, taken by how radically different they were – how, that is, they could have been written so close together (just seven years separate the 1957 *Chronicle* from the 1964 *Scandal*) yet be so divergent in tone, style, theme, and, bluntly, their overall perspective on American life.

Reading these novels back-to-back, one is indeed struck by the way that the two novels, despite being about the same family and sharing many characters, present almost contradictory views of what the world is like. Gone, for instance, in *Scandal* is *Chronicle's* playfulness, its strong sense of

communal ties and rootedness, as well as, most profoundly, its overarching sense of what Robert Collins calls the "nostalgia of cheerily eccentric old New England" (1).<sup>1</sup> *Scandal* feels darker and presents a pessimistic vision of life in which, Collins further argues, "individual people are homeless, helpless, anxious, and anguished in a world where all other people are remote" (8). These differences suffuse the novels in many of their details: for instance, the unique Wapshot house, a wild and woolly setting that is often a character in itself in the first novel, is replaced in the second novel by the prefabricated and uniform houses of the planned suburban community of Talifer in *Scandal*. The tight connection of the St. Botolphs' community itself withers: in *Chronicle*, the death of a stranger is handled via a communal binding; in *Scandal*, the death of a stranger is passively observed through the window by Coverly's wife Betsey because "she had not wanted to do anything that would call attention to herself, that would involve giving testimony or answering questions. Presumably her concern for security had led her to overlook the death of a neighbor" (32-33). The warm world of connectedness and community in *Chronicle* has become the cold and impersonal isolation of *Scandal* – indeed, the 1957 world of *Chronicle* seems, from the vantage of the 1964 world of *Scandal*, already a lost world and a lost time, accessible only by a nostalgia that relies, like all nostalgia, on the sense of an irretrievably lost otherness. Readers and scholars have long been befuddled by this difference: how could this dramatic change happen in such a short period of time?

The most common way to explain this radical change is to look to Cheever the man. Scott Donaldson noted some time ago that, around the time of the composition of *Scandal*, Cheever seemed to enter (Twain-like) a "dark period," in which he "regarded the ills of modernity with something verging on despair" (654), quoting Cheever himself as saying that "life in the United States in 1960 is Hell" (658). Others locate the cause of the change even more explicitly in biographical terms; Meanor, for instance, ignores his own advice that "using biographical information in literary analysis is a dubious undertaking" and claims that Cheever's "crisis with alcohol, however, provides the clearest and most obvious reason for the radical change in tone between" the two novels (68-69). In short, this explanation works by claiming that Cheever, beset by what are now well-known crises in his personal life, grew bitter, depressed, and pessimistic, and *Scandal* manifested these changes.

And yet when I reflect now where I, and my community and even my country were when I first started thinking about Cheever's novels, I no longer find this change – the difference between the two novels – as surprising or even as notable as I did initially. By certain measures – of an era, a literary canon, or a century – seven years is indeed a notably short span; by other measures, however – such as that of a lived life – it can seem notably protracted. A lot can happen in seven years.

Maybe Cheever in 1964 really did see a different world from the one he had seen in 1957. Is that really so surprising? A very short catalog of events that took place between the novels is illustrative: Sputnik is launched, and then human beings are sent into orbit; there's a communist revolution in Cuba just ninety miles off the US border; nuclear weapon technology spreads to China and some European powers; a 46-year-old president (who had replaced a president born in the 19<sup>th</sup> century) is assassinated in notably mysterious circumstances. There's more: a U2 spy jet is shot down from an unimaginable 70,000 feet (simultaneously revealing that such jets are both possible and real), which leads in part to the Cuban Missile Crisis, which in turn only just barely averts total nuclear war. Even this: men stop wearing hats, the Beatles transform popular music, television becomes the centerpiece of most living rooms. The list goes on and on. Tallying up such events is striking: who *would* see the world as the same in 1957 and 1964? Perhaps the world of *Scandal* is so different world from that of *Chronicle* because, simply, it really is a different world.

So what becomes striking, in light of these dramatic changes, is not that the two novels are so different, but rather that the two novels are similar at all. Looking out at the new world of the mid-1960s, how could Cheever see any substantial continuity between that world and the one of the mid-1950s? While scholars are right that the novels are certainly different, what scholars tend to miss is that they are just as much similar. Indeed, I will argue that this is on purpose, that there really is something at work here in terms of how Cheever uses these novels to contemplate the ways that we grapple with radical change in the world around us *even as* we recognize how we ourselves – the steady, selfsame actors on a rapidly changing stage – stay the same.

In what follows, my main point will be this: *The Wapshot Scandal* presents a vision in which the world has radically, dramatically, and deeply altered from the world of *The Wapshot Chronicle* less than a decade before it – but, at the same time, *Scandal* presents an anxious, even terrified, vision of that world as being governed by men (and to a lesser extent) women who themselves have *not* changed. In other words, while the novels together show a dramatically changed world, they also show a frighteningly similar world: even though dramatically new and different technology exists, it can only be controlled by terrifyingly common and static human beings. In this way, too, Cheever resists the lures and attractions of early postmodernism's obsession with the paranoid fantasy of almost supernaturally malevolent forces conspiring to control us and otherwise perpetrate evil plots upon us. Cheever's vision, I will argue, is more courageous because more honest: these potential catastrophes that lurk just off screen arise from the fact that we are terrifyingly and mundanely the same while the world itself is almost incomprehensibly different.

### **Goldwater, Cheever, and the "Same but Different" 1960s**

*The Wapshot Scandal* was published in January 1964; six months later, Barry Goldwater was nominated as the Republican candidate for President. Goldwater, who in many ways exemplified the cresting spirit of paranoia of the period, argued in his 1962 book *Why Not Victory?* that any changes in contemporary life were merely at the level of technological superficiality. "I do not subscribe," wrote Goldwater, "to the theory that nuclear weapons have changed everything. [...] We have in the nuclear bomb an advance in weaponry, and terrible though that advance is, it still is merely a more efficient means of destruction" (119). Here, Goldwater argues that nuclear technology has not changed anything at all beyond the efficiency and technique of destruction. The bomb, in other words, is merely a new technical fact about the same old world: "In a historical and relative sense, it can be compared with the advance made in military operations by the invention and adaptation of gunpowder to war-making and the development of aerial warfare and strategic bombing missions" (120).<sup>ii</sup> What is perhaps most frightening about Goldwater's view is the sense that the new problems of the world were not really new at all and so did not require a new way of thinking or a new apparatus of analysis. Because nukes are, in a manner of speaking, just a different way of waging conventional warfare, we

don't need to puzzle or worry about new responsibilities and new moral dilemmas: it's merely a matter of the more or less technocratic administration of war.

*The Wapshot Scandal* is well aware of this type of thinking, as is most clearly seen in the novel's episodic centerpiece (and to my mind, most comic scene). Coverly Wapshot, the son of *Chronicle's* patriarch Leander and employee of the apocalyptically-minded "Missile Research and Development Site" in faraway (and decidedly non-New England villagey) Talifer, finds himself on a flight home when suddenly, "[w]ithout any warning, the plane dropped about two thousand feet" (185) and a strange voice comes on the intercom. "This is not your captain," the voice says, "Your captain is tied up in the head. Please do not move, please do not move from your seats, or I will cut off your oxygen supply. We are traveling at five hundred miles an hour, at an altitude of forty-two thousand feet, and any disturbance you create will only add to your danger" (186). The voice goes on to explain that "I have logged nearly a million air miles and am disqualified as a pilot only because of my political opinions" (186). This language evokes fear of a hijacking—a crime which was becoming commonplace in the 1960s—but, as it turns out, the plane is not actually being hijacked: it's just being robbed. "This is a robbery," says the new pilot. "In a few minutes my accomplice will enter the cabin by the forward bulkhead, and you will give him your wallets, purses, jewelry and any other valuables that you have" (186). When the thief emerges from the bulkhead, Coverly and the other passengers see that he "wore a felt hat and a black handkerchief tied over his face with holes cut for eyes" (187). The Old West imagery here is unmistakable – these are outlaws robbing a 1960s version of a train full of scared passengers who deposit their valuables in a "plastic wastebasket" (187) – in lieu, one supposes, of the more traditional canvas sack.

The characters, their intentions, and their interactions are all meant to evoke the spirit of an old Western in front of a new backdrop: an airplane instead of a train. As Goldwater would say, the underlying world is just the same, only the details of technology have changed. (Though these different details are not exactly minor: Coverly imagines these new cowboys' crashing the plane and leaving all the passengers "truncated, beheaded, mutilated and scattered over three miles of farmland" (186).) On this view, then, what we get is a comic manifestation of Goldwater's vision: everyone's

still the same, just the technology has changed. The same sorts of people we've always had rob planes now instead of trains. We don't need a new way of thinking in the age of the jet. We can use the same old ways of thinking slightly tweaked – we only need to get used to planes (not trains) being robbed and wars conducted by nuclear (not conventional) weapons.<sup>iii</sup>

As attractive as this reading might be, there is, however, something deeper at work in this scene – something deeper that, to my mind, undermines the comic feel of the plane robbery and underscores just how “dark” Cheever gets in this, his dark period. Coverly is on this particular flight because he has to deliver a briefcase to his boss, Lemuel Cameron, the mad genius director of the Talifer Missile Research and Development Site. I'll have more to say about Cameron later, but for now what we need to know is this: Cameron, as head of Talifer, serves as a shorthand for the revered, celebrity physicists of the period, whose “ruthlessness and [...] brilliance were legendary” (127) and whose minds controlled and safeguarded the nuclear future of the world. Prior to the flight, Coverly had attended a conference of scientists with Cameron, where Cameron presented on “a detonative force that was a million times the force of terrestrial lightning and that could be produced inexpensively” (173). After the conference, Cameron left on a separate flight and Coverly noticed a briefcase Cameron had left behind. “The responsibilities attached to this simple object were frightening,” Coverly thinks. “It must contain the gist of what [Cameron] had said that afternoon and from the faces of his audience Coverly guessed that what he had said concerned the end of the world” (178). Thus, when one of the plane robbers comes to take Cameron's briefcase away from Coverly, which through the whole plane robbery ordeal Coverly had kept tightly clasped to his chest, he faces the choice of resisting the robber and potentially crashing the plane, or surrendering the briefcase and potentially sacrificing the earth itself by letting this unimaginable technology fall into outlaw hands. Coverly decides to surrender the briefcase – but not without emitting “a groan of dismay” (188).

The idea that a simple, single briefcase can contain the information that would lead to the cataclysmic destruction of the entire earth and that the briefcase could be lost to Old West style masked and fedora'ed plane robbers illustrates what I see as Cheever's anxiety (contra Goldwater) that the extraordinary ability of our technology to destroy us has far outdistanced our ordinary capacity, as

humans, to save ourselves. We never learn what was actually in the briefcase, and the (for now) persistence of the world suggests that it may have actually been empty as Coverly had desperately hoped. But the awesomeness of his choice to surrender the briefcase rather than crash the plane continues to terrify Coverly and he doesn't know how to think about what he has done: "He tried to judge himself along traditional lines. Had he refused to yield up the briefcase he might have wrecked the plane and killed them all; but mightn't this have been for the best?" (194).

This incapacity to decide such questions is a recurrent theme in the novel, for Coverly elsewhere wonders, in the midst of the new technological apparatuses surrounding him, if ordinary people like him are any longer sufficient to the task of living: "It seemed, in this stage of the Nuclear Revolution, that the world around him was changing with incomprehensible velocity but if these changes were truly incomprehensible what attitude could he take, what counsel could he give his son? Had his basic apparatus for judging true and false become obsolete?" (174-75). Though he is himself the same, the world in its manifest newness, has made that very sameness obsolete. Plane robbers are the same as train robbers, but what they can steal now is not only "watches" and "wallets" (193) but also a briefcase potentially containing on its few papers the technological instructions for ending the earth.

And it's worth noting that Cheever's plane robbery episode isn't a far flung flight of fancy. In his collection of anecdotes *Surely You're Joking, Mr. Feynman!*, the physicist Richard Feynman recounts how, in the days immediately after World War II, he briefly returned to the famous Los Alamos site where he had helped build the world's first (and at this time only) atomic bombs. One lonely evening, after everyone else had knocked off for the day, he found he needed some specific documents out of a colleague's safe. Rather than wait until morning for the colleague to return, Feynman decides instead to pursue his passion for amateur safecracking. Experimenting with obvious "psychological" combinations, Feynman quickly discovers that the colleague had used the first six numbers of the mathematical constant  $e$  as the combination for a series of safes that housed "the terrible burden of the atomic secrets" (174). Just like that, Feynman was able to "steal" these secrets; in his typical style he reflects on the ramifications of this:

*Now I could write a safecracker book that would beat every one, because at the beginning I would tell how I opened safes whose contents were bigger and more valuable than what any safecracker anywhere had opened [...]: I opened safes which contained all the secrets to the atomic bomb: the schedules for the production of the plutonium, the purification procedures, how much material is needed, how the bomb works, how the neutrons are generated, what the design is, the dimensions – the entire information that was known at Los Alamos: the whole schmeer! (171-72)*

The secrets of planetary destruction were “stolen” through a few minutes of puzzling about what numbers a physicist might obviously and mundanely choose for a safe combination. (Indeed, Feynman tells in the same anecdote that a frighteningly large number of other Los Alamos safes could be “cracked” by simply dialing in the combination pre-set by the factory!) For Coverly and anyone living in the new nuclear age, these are paralyzing questions: what do we do now? How can we do anything? If the survival of the planet can be compromised by a lost briefcase or an easily cracked safe, how can we go on?

### **Cheever's Style of Paranoia**

Americans – particularly American literary writers – of the early 1960s had no good answer to these questions. Indeed, one wonders how, after the near miss of global annihilation in the Cuban Missile Crisis and the assassination of a president, the period could possibly find any satisfying answers at all. But if American writers had no good answers, they did at least have an easy and appealing answer: paranoia. Like Coverly's inability to judge or think straight in the terrifying new world, the literature of the period reflected this paralysis by retreating into the paranoia that came to characterize early postmodernism.

One of the most important and influential of these statements about the resurgence of paranoia was Richard Hofstadter's "The Paranoid Style in American Politics," originally published in November 1964, just ten months after the publication of *The Wapshot Scandal*. As several examples spanning two centuries demonstrate, the paranoid style is, according to Hofstadter's argument, hardwired into the American worldview – rather than a new response to a new world, paranoia is a mainstay of American politics and culture.<sup>iv</sup> What constitutes the paranoid style? To students of the literature of the high-postmodernist paranoids of the 1960s through 1980s, Hofstadter's catalog will



seem eminently familiar: Hofstadter's paranoid style is one that evokes "qualities of heated exaggeration, suspiciousness, and conspiratorial fantasy" (3), and whose exponents don't just "see conspiracies or plots here and there in history" but instead "regard a 'vast' and 'gigantic' conspiracy as *the motive force* in historical events" (29). Further, this conspiratorial force is always organized around some nefarious purpose – an "international conspiratorial network designed to perpetrate acts of the most fiendish character" (14), a "gigantic yet subtle machinery of influence set in motion to undermine and destroy a way of life" (29). The enemy is "a perfect model of malice, a kind of amoral superman: sinister, ubiquitous, powerful, cruel, sensual, luxury-loving" (31-32). Thus, "[t]he paranoid's interpretation of history is in this sense distinctly personal: decisive events are not taken as part of the stream of history, but as the consequences of someone's will" (32).<sup>v</sup>

Such descriptions of the paranoid style aptly capture the spirit of, for example, DeLillo's conspiracies of "[m]en in small rooms" (*Libra* 41), or of Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*, in which Oedipa feels throughout that she is somehow involved in a kind of "hierophany" (20), in which each individual moment gets its meaning only through being part of a larger, deeply mysterious structure. One of Oedipa's common refrains is that everything that happens around her seems to be "all part of a plot, an elaborate, seduction, *plot*" (20). So when one of the novel's minor characters tells Oedipa, who is becoming overwhelmed by these inaccessible networks of meaning around her, that "[t]he higher levels have their reasons" (98), he is vindicating her paranoid sense of the world. The world and its history are driven by a small group of people with malevolent goals; the rest of us are, simply, at their mercy.

Another central point that Hofstadter makes about this more general paranoid style is that, unlike the clinical paranoiac who sees everything as directed toward his or her own *personal* destruction, the cultural paranoiac sees the stakes in much larger terms: "The paranoid spokesman," writes Hofstadter, "sees the fate of this conspiracy in apocalyptic terms—he traffics in the birth and death of whole worlds, whole political orders, whole systems of human values. He is always manning the barricades of civilization" (29-30). The cultural paranoiac finds the conspiratorial world "directed against a nation, a culture, a way of life whose fate affects not himself alone but millions of others. [...]"

His sense that his political passions are unselfish and patriotic, in fact, goes far to intensify his feelings of righteousness and moral indignation" (4).

To my mind, we have a very clear representation of exactly this kind of cultural paranoiac in *Scandal*. In a scene that takes place shortly after Coverly has lost the briefcase, Cameron is brought before a Senate Committee to account for his program and its progress (a routine matter, this being the "seventeenth time he's been grilled this year" (201)). One of the senators on the committee, identified only as "an old man, slim and with the extraordinary pallor of an uncommonly long life span" (209), has all the characteristics of Hofstadter's paranoid style. While questioning Cameron, the Senator says,

*"We possess Promethean powers but don't we lack the awe, the humility, that primitive man brought to the sacred fire? Isn't this a time for uncommon awe, supreme humility? If I should have to make some final statement, and I shall very soon for I am nearing the end of my journey, it would be in the nature of a thanksgiving for stout-hearted friends, lovely women, blue skies, the bread and wine of life. Please don't destroy the earth, Dr. Cameron," he sobbed. "Oh, please, please don't destroy the earth." (210)*

Clearly, this overwrought speech has all the markings of Hofstadter's paranoid: a vague nostalgia for a past, better way of life, a profound fear of a supreme danger emanating from the malevolent designs of particular individuals, an hysteric anticipation of a cataclysmic event that fundamentally endangers an entire way of life and, with it, the entire world – and the senator, like all cultural paranoiacs trying to save the world from annihilation, sees himself as the last barricade between us and doom.

Cheever scholars often read this scene as Cheever's own *cri de coeur*, his own desperate plea for peace and sanity in a turbulent, scary period, as for instance when Kenneth Mason argues in "Tradition and Desecration: The Wapshot Novels of John Cheever," that this scene, "[m]ore than any other scene in the novel, [...] evidences Cheever's deep concern about a society ruled by men whose values reflect an unrestrained and inhumane scientism" (247). I think, however, that such readings miss a vital aspect of the scene. The senator's paranoia is ultimately different from that described by Hofstadter because he does not fear that Cameron is threateningly extraordinary, but instead, terrifyingly ordinary.

The Senator begins his questioning by (in a sense) positioning himself as the direct opposite of Goldwater; rather than confirming Goldwater's view that the world is on the whole continuous (with minor changes in the details), the Senator sees a radical break from the past having taking place: "I think," he says, "the difference between this noisy and public world in which we now live and the world I remember is quite real, quite real" (209). The Senator's argument calls for strenuous efforts to match ourselves to the moral and ethical demands of the new world; he calls for an "uncommon awe" and a "supreme humility" because he finds Cameron's true horror to be not that he is some new breed of man, but that he is the same old man as always, unable to meet the responsibilities of his terrifyingly unprecedented powers. Rather than these same old men with the same old failings, we need a new breed of man with a deeper sense of humility and awe. The senator's plea is for Cameron to become larger, to become better, to become equal to the new powers he holds.

As the rest of the scene plays out, however, we see Cameron depicted as frighteningly ordinary: a reader of pulp novels, a mediocre musician, and, above all, the same flawed father that we see throughout Cheever's work. The hearing concludes by suspending Cameron's security clearance: he is too ordinary to be allowed to work with the extraordinary; he is not fit to handle what he himself has helped to create. What's truly frightening to Cheever, and where his paranoia (if it can be so called) comes from, is that *Scandal* is the same story of *Chronicle* after all.

### ***Chronicle into Scandal: The Persistence of the Mundane***

There is a common tendency to elevate innovative individuals to the stature of genius and to then give that title of genius a kind of god-like aura, as if being genius is equivalent to being something larger than or greater than merely human. Through the character of Cameron, Cheever seeks (aggressively) to undermine this common tendency. For example, even though Coverly often reacts to being in the presence of Cameron with the typical kind of "unease" (132) and "fright" (128) that comes from being in the presence of individuals of legendary powers, fame, and authority, the legitimacy of such a reaction is called into question as early as his first actual encounter with Cameron, when the two happen to be skiing the same mountain. The last two at the top, Coverly offers to let Cameron – a "legendary skier," of course – go down first; after Cameron refuses, Coverly

descends and spills at the third turn: "He was not hurt but, getting to his feet, he happened to look overhead and saw Dr. Cameron descending sedately in the chair lift" (133). Later in the lodge bar Coverly overhears Cameron "talking [to his party] about running the trail and talking about it in detail; the hairpin turns, the long stretch of washboard, the icy schusses and the drifted snow" (133). Overhearing such lies from such a man, Coverly is "fascinated": "Here was a man responsible in a sense for the security of the nation, who could not be counted upon to tell the truth about his skiing. He was notorious for his insistence upon demonstrable truths and yet in this matter was a consummate liar" (133). Coverly then attempts to think of Cameron in a different light, the kind of light we've been trained to think of geniuses: "Had he brought," wonders Coverly, "another and finer sense of truth to the face of the mountain? [...] Had his disregard for the common truth involved some larger sense of truth?" (133). Cheever's answer to Coverly's perhaps rhetorical question is, clearly and aggressively, *no*.

Indeed, one of the most important and, to my mind, compelling arguments for the quality and strength of *Scandal* as a novel (usually given second-billing to the more famous *Chronicle*) is precisely Cheever's unwillingness to surrender to the comforts of Coverly's question and to instead insist on the importance of rejecting both the attractions of paranoia and genius. It would be easy to surrender to the allure of Coverly's question about Cameron and to prevent ourselves thinking that this man who is singularly in charge of the earth's survival could be just a standard blowhard caught in a standard lie to impress. But *Scandal* refuses to let us see the world through the paranoiac's lens of nefarious plotting *even as* it refuses to let us see the world through Goldwater's lens of banal continuity.

This impressive high-wire act of bifurcated vision is seen particularly in the way that Cheever connects Cameron to another flawed and fretful character, Leander Wapshot, father of Coverly and troubled patriarch of the Wapshot family. By the time of *Scandal*, Leander has died and all that remains is a ghost that maybe does or maybe doesn't haunt the Wapshot home back in St. Botolphs. The first time we encounter Cameron in *Scandal* occurs shortly after Coverly has returned from a trip to St. Botolphs during which he had been frightened by his father's ghost; back at Talifer, Coverly

overhears Cameron shouting at one of his subordinates and Coverly thinks, "Oh, Father, Father, why have you come back?" (36). Cameron and Leander are linked directly here; throughout the novel, they are also linked in indirect ways, such as when they have similar regrets about disappointing children, similar meditations on erections, similar reactions to hiring prostitutes, and so on. The point of making these connections, I think, is to illustrate that Cameron is, after all, not radically different or radically new – it is not, as the old senator correctly points out, that he has lost his humanity, it is *that he has retained it*. It is that he is, in many ways, simply Leander with the power of the gods. Though the world needs new men for its new responsibilities, it is stuck with the same old flawed men.

Here's a final example. In *Chronicle*, when Leander sinks the *Topaze* and sees it converted to a gift shop and is at his most despondent and depressed, he fires a pistol out the window and in his despair exclaims, "I only want to be esteemed" (233). In *Scandal*, one of Cameron's assistants, a man named Brunner, explains to Coverly his reasons for getting into the nuclear missile business: "I had to make my name mean something. So when this lightning thing turned up I felt better, I began to feel better. Now my name means something, at least to some people it does" (177). Brunner, like Leander, simply wants to be esteemed – just wants to make a name for himself, make his mark. There is one crucial difference, though, of course: Brunner's way of making a name for himself functions at the scale of cataclysm. "[H]ere was a lonely man," the narrator tells us of Brunner, "whose humble motives in inventing a detonative force that could despoil the world were the same as the child actress, the eccentric inventor, the small town politician. [...] Waked by a peal of thunder he must have wondered more than most if this wasn't the end, *hastened in some way by his wish to possess a name*" (177, emphasis added). Brunner's motives are indeed no more profound or even interesting than Leander's or Coverly's or any number of individuals spanning the Wapshot novels; the crucial difference is simply that Brunner's pursuit of making a name—and the avenues of possibility for name-making—have changed in earth-threatening ways. Ultimately, the answer to what had changed for Cheever between his two Wapshot novels might be no more than his realization that we no longer express our flaws and shortcoming by shooting pistols out windows but instead by hastening the extinction of the human species.

Such a thought is, indeed, terrifying. Hofstadter argues that the paranoid worldview stems in large part from the inability to deal with this more frightening truth: we retreat to paranoia because paranoia is *easier*. "In our time," Hofstadter writes, "innumerable decisions of the Second World War and the cold war can be faulted, and *it is easy* for the suspicious to believe that such decisions are not simply the mistakes of well-meaning men but the plans of traitors" (36; emphasis added). It is much more difficult to try to understand the world and its history without recourse to artificial, paranoid narratives: "in fact," Hofstadter writes, "the paranoid mentality is far more coherent than the real world, since it leaves no room for mistakes, failures, or ambiguities" (36). It is easier to be a paranoid, argues Hofstadter, than it is to face the harsher reality of the world's being a concatenation of ordinary but generally well-meaning men making ordinary but potentially disastrous mistakes. It is easier, that is, to believe that someone like Cameron is sinister and evil than it is to believe that he is petty, forgetful, and jealous – that this man with "the powers of the doom-crack" is just like the rest of us.

As Emile the grocery boy expresses it at one point, it is more comforting to think that there is a vast conspiracy out there to control us than it is to think, instead, that "some drunken corporal might incinerate the planet" (254). Though the details of the Cuban Missile Crisis wouldn't come out until some years after *Scandal*'s publication, accounts of Khrushchev's allegedly drunken communications during the period lend some credibility to this fear of ordinarily-flawed men in control of extraordinarily-fraught decisions. In our own more recent experiences, it is in its own way easier for some to think of horrifying events like September 11<sup>th</sup> as the result of some nefarious conspiracy – an "inside job" – rather than as the result of a series of mistakes and misreadings of data; it is in a manner of speaking more comforting to think that the disastrous invasion of Iraq was the result of a shadowy plot for oil, power, familial revenge (or whatever) than it is to accept the military calamity instead as the result of confusion, arrogance, or lack of foresight (or any other number of potential, depressing candidates of incompetence). Like Hofstadter, Cheever suggests that in our hearts we want to be paranoids: we would rather the world be deliberately manipulated by Cameron's super-villain mind than ineptly managed by his flawed mind.

We want different men for our different world. But if the continuity between *The Wapshot Chronicle* and *The Wapshot Scandal* is any indication, Cheever saw the danger in allowing ourselves to give into the comforting visions of a nefarious new breed of men controlling the fate of the world. Read in tandem, Cheever's novels make the sustained argument, not irrelevant to our own world nearly fifty years later, that, if the world is going to end, it won't be because we have changed but because we have remained the same.

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<sup>i</sup> A nostalgia which, by the way, Cynthia Ozick derided as "fraudulent and baseless, a lie told not out of malice or self-interest, but worse, out of sentiment and wholesale self-pity" (267).

<sup>ii</sup> These quotes were originally brought to my attention in Richard Hofstadter's 1965 essay "Goldwater and Pseudo-Conservative Politics," specifically at page 30. I'll have more to say about Hofstadter's vision of mid-1960s paranoia in what follows.

<sup>iii</sup> All of this echoes the same strangely mundane treatment of a plane crash in Cheever's 1955 story "The Country Husband"; in this earlier story, a (non-fatal) plane crash is treated as just another of the frustrating, minor inconveniences commuters suffer through.

<sup>iv</sup> Indeed, it's one of the most influential discussions even today, as its popular re-issuing for the Bush/Cheney era shows; along with his recently revived *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life* for the age of Sarah Palin and Donald Trump, Hofstadter has become the haunting intellectual ghost of our era.

<sup>v</sup> As when, in the (as of this writing) ongoing presidential campaign Marco Rubio quatably argued, "Let's dispel with this fiction that Barack Obama doesn't know what he's doing. He knows exactly what he's doing." Almost by definition, on the paranoid view any event or state of affairs – almost literally – can be recast as the deliberate object of an imposing, malevolent will. All states of affairs in contemporary America can be easily (and comfortingly) framed as a result of President Obama's devious cunning, or worse.