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The United States of Paranoia: Reading Response 3

The author started off with the failed assassination story of Andrew Jackson by Richard Lawrence (aka King Richard III) in 1835. Of course the assassination miserably failed, but the explanation behind how it unfolds, with or without the intention to kill, somehow drives people mad. It is not surprising to have such an unexpected coincidence creates such ripples of conspiracy theories in its wake. After all, the assassinator had a second chance after his initial misfire, and as the picture depicted the scene (p. 6), Lawrence was only a few feet away from president Jackson. Not surprising at all that Jacson was accused of staging the incident to gain public support as he claimed “[Lawrence has] been hired by that damned rascal Poindexter to assassinate me.” (p. 4).

The succeeding presidents who were purportedly opposed to the *Slave Power* shortly died of some food poisoning, but “There is little evidence for Dye’s explosive charges. You can make a case that Harrison’s doctors did more to hurt than to help the ailing president, but no more than conjecture supports the idea that anyone deliberately killed him.” (p. 5). These stories, however truthful they are, gives me the impression of how paranoid people were back in the days. It is in human’s nature to act accordingly to such cases, especially intensified by conspiracy theories and the media, but there is no doubt that these theories made America vigilant and evolved to such a degree, but the same can be said about conspiracies that are helpful and misleading.

I believe after reading the first few pages of the book, conspiracy theories do more good than not. It is sort of an adaptive response of people back then to unexplained phenomenon, to forcefully attribute the cause and the blame to something, or someone, as a defense mechanism against similar future occurrences or as countermeasures. I specifically like this line from the author, "Different people adopt and adapt these myths for their own needs, keeping the scaffolding of a story line in place while changing the content." (p. 17). The same reason why sometimes, especially through word of mouth, conspiracies evolve too far off from the tree and produce damaging misconceptions.

We can’t blame the people back in as early as the 16th century for having such off explanations about something in comparison to today’s standard, as we have much more evolved perception of the world. But however evolved, conspiracies of today are of the same narratives as in the past but with different characters. For one, the on-going COVID-19 pandemic surely has conspiracies lurking around the corners. Some may have attributed the cause to China deliberately spreading the virus, but there was really no hard evidence supporting it. Much like how Europeans accused Indians as the “Devil’s pawns” (p. 24). They could be innocent or there are *Enemies Within* or *Outside* or *Above* or *Below* or Underneath or Elsewhere that orchestrated this whole pandemic. Who knows they are all theories after all.

Works Cited

Walker, Jesse. *The United States of Paranoia*. Harper. Kindle Edition.