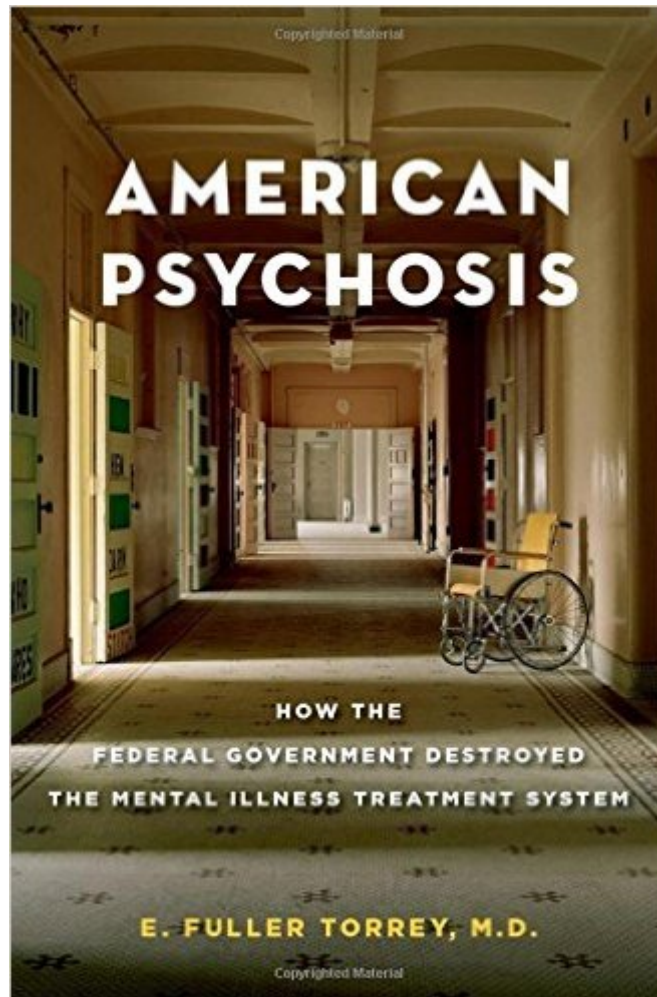


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American Psychosis: How The Federal Government Destroyed The Mental Illness Treatment System



Synopsis

In 1963, President John F. Kennedy delivered an historic speech on mental illness and retardation. He described sweeping new programs to replace "the shabby treatment of the many millions of the mentally disabled in custodial institutions" with treatment in community mental health centers. This movement, later referred to as "deinstitutionalization," continues to impact mental health care. Though he never publicly acknowledged it, the program was a tribute to Kennedy's sister Rosemary, who was born mildly retarded and developed a schizophrenia-like illness. Terrified she'd become pregnant, Joseph Kennedy arranged for his daughter to receive a lobotomy, which was a disaster and left her severely retarded. Fifty years after Kennedy's speech, E. Fuller Torrey's book provides an inside perspective on the birth of the federal mental health program. On staff at the National Institute of Mental Health when the program was being developed and implemented, Torrey draws on his own first-hand account of the creation and launch of the program, extensive research, one-on-one interviews with people involved, and recently unearthed audiotapes of interviews with major figures involved in the legislation. As such, this book provides historical material previously unavailable to the public. Torrey examines the Kennedys' involvement in the policy, the role of major players, the responsibility of the state versus the federal government in caring for the mentally ill, the political maneuverings required to pass the legislation, and how closing institutions resulted not in better care - as was the aim - but in underfunded programs, neglect, and higher rates of community violence. Many now wonder why public mental illness services are so ineffective. At least one-third of the homeless are seriously mentally ill, jails and prisons are grossly overcrowded, largely because the seriously mentally ill constitute 20 percent of prisoners, and public facilities are overrun by untreated individuals. As Torrey argues, it is imperative to understand how we got here in order to move forward towards providing better care for the most vulnerable.

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Customer Reviews

This important book, hopefully, will be read by those in relevant positions of influence to learn of the sorry state of the treatment of those with serious mental illness in the United States, and move them to action. It is written by a psychiatrist who has dedicated a substantial portion of his career addressing this issue. It begins as a detailed chronicle of how the federal government transformed flawed institutional care into an outpatient system which in the end became dysfunctional and chaotic, a system, "without eyes or a brain," that left many of those with serious mental illness relegated to a life of unbelievable squalor and neglect. Although deinstitutionalization had been slowly evolving for several years, the process began in earnest in 1963, during the Kennedy administration, with the enactment of federal mental health legislation (supported by the President motivated by a covered up of a family tragedy). This law promoted the deinstitutionalization of the mentally ill and provided, instead, for the establishment of outpatient mental health clinics throughout the country. The legislation was fatally flawed from the beginning by the notion that mental illness was caused by environmental factors, not biological ones, the failure to provide for continuity of treatment for those with serious mental illness, and providing financial incentives that had little to do with the treatment of mental illness. These unintended incentives encouraged a diaspora of the mentally ill into custodial care in unregulated for profit board and care facilities and nursing homes (many with appalling conditions), into our streets as homeless, and into our prisons. Contacts with law enforcement frequently erupt into violence with mentally ill being killed by policemen.

Walks on the Margins, a Story of Bipolar Illness I've been talking and writing about our broken mental health care system and the need for change since shortly after our son was diagnosed with mental illness in 1999 and we began battling to find good treatment in that "system." It's been well over a decade now, yet nothing has changed. That we dare to call mental health care a "system" is laughable. After all "system" implies organization of services, coordination of care, and oversight. In too many cases, there are no services at all. And instead of care, there is only chaos. I've never understood how this could have happened--how we could be failing the mentally ill among us so

completely. E Fuller Torrey, in his recently released book, *American Psychosis*, has made it painfully clear. With uncompromising and fierce analysis and insight, he has explained how things went so wrong after JFK signed the community mental health act in 1963. The motivation for legislation was laudable, the outcome, however, was a disaster. Fifty years since, the mental health care system is in shambles. Mental health hospitals had already begun closing in the 50's and continued to do for many reasons--exposure of the horrible conditions and lack of treatment in some, new medications that brought the worst symptoms under control, changes in Medicare and Medicaid that disallowed coverage for psychiatric hospital care, lawsuits and changes in commitment criteria, and the feeling that there were better ways to treat those who live with mental illness.

After every mental illness related tragedy -- think: Jared Loughner, James Holmes, Unabomber, Navy Yard -- the media and politicians call on Dr. Fuller Torrey for his effective, informed and cost-efficient ideas on how to prevent the next mental illness-related tragedy. And then everyone goes on as if nothing happened. *American Psychosis: How the Federal Government Destroyed the Mental Illness Treatment system* is Dr. Torrey's latest and perhaps best effort to explain how the mental illness system went wrong, why we have so many tragedies, and more importantly, how to stop them. *American Psychosis* starts with the oft forgotten story of Rosemary Kennedy's multiple mental and developmental disabilities and how in 1963, these led President John Kennedy to establish Community Mental Health Centers (CMHC) in honor of his sister. Dr. Torrey, who also had a mentally ill sister, argues: (T)he mental health centers legislation passed by Congress was fatally flawed. It encouraged the closing of state mental hospitals without any realistic plan regarding what would happen to the discharged patients, especially those who refused to take medication they needed to remain well... It focused resources on prevention when nobody understood enough about mental illness to know how to prevent them. And by bypassing the states, it guaranteed that future services would not be coordinated. Dr. Torrey delivers an easy-to-digest explanation of Medicaid, Medicare, and every politically correct federal white paper, task force report, court decision, civil liberty pronouncement, and consensus statement that created and maintains the mess.

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