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Hating the Politician in the Mirror

By Peter Wolson

Why are Republicans so hateful toward Bill Clinton when he is more like them than virtually any other Democrat? He has pushed through many of their favorite policies, such as cutting welfare, promoting the North American Free Trade Agreement and proposing that portions of Social Security reserves be privatized. You would think Republicans would regard him among their favorite Democratic presidents. Instead, the opposite is true. They seem determined to kill him politically through character assassination fueled by a hatred that is hard to understand. Sigmund Freud had a brilliant explanation for this type of animosity: "the narcissism of minor differences." The psychoanalyst contended that human beings express their most virulent hatred toward those who are just slightly different from themselves. This is because slight differences pose a greater psychological threat to one's core sense of self (ergo: "narcissism") than those who are extremely different from ourselves. Freud used this concept as an explanation for the most heinous forms of aggression.

Thus, German Jews were supposed to have identified more with being German than non-Jewish Germans. The genocidal displacement of aggression toward German Jews in the Holocaust may have been partly attributable to the narcissism of minor differences, since the slight difference, the "Jewishness" of the German Jews, threatened the core identity of the German people. The same can be said of the genocide in Bosnia, the fratricidal conflict between Irish Catholics and Protestants, the hostilities between ' Arabs and Israelis, and the genocide between the Hutus and Tutsis in Rwanda.

Of course, the impeachment and trial of Clinton pale by comparison with genocide and religious wars, but the same psychological principle seems to be operating. Clinton, as a "Republicrat," may threaten the fundamental identity of Republicans significantly more than a flagrantly liberal Democrat.

By co-opting the Republicans' political agenda while clothed in Democratic attire, Clinton has committed the psychological crime of shattering the Republican self-structure, usurping the principles that provide them with a sense of meaning and purpose. It is not surprising that the Republican political agenda is reportedly in shambles. From the beginning of Clinton's presidency, the Republicans' unrelenting determination to kill him politically seems to have been motivated by the need to keep the party uncontaminated by any Democratic pestilence that may resemble them in this instance Clinton.

What better way to preserve one's distinctive identity than to show that Clinton is a sleazy, conniving, lying, cheating criminal who in no way resembles the high moral authority of the 13 Republican congressmen who are prosecuting him. In this way, the Republicans can call attention to the superiority of their party and differentiate themselves from the morally inferior threat to their political existence.

By persecuting Clinton in the name of morality, law and order, the Republicans are discharging the hatred triggered by the narcissism of minor differences. This illustrates another Freudian principle: using the superego (i.e., principles of morality, conscience, law and order) in the service of the id (i.e., sexual and aggressive impulses).

Despite a relentless "inquisition," independent counsel Kenneth W. Starr failed to expose any criminal wrongdoing on Clinton's part in Whitewater, Travelgate and Filegate. He then wired Linda R. Tripp to entrap Monica S. Lewinsky into revealing her sexual liaison with Clinton. Like a deer caught in the headlights, Clinton tried to squirm out of harm's way by denying that he had sex with "that woman." He evaded being pinned down.

The public understood this. If Clinton lied, he was lying about sex under the pressure of an aggressive Republican assault in the name of morality to weaken his presidency. Calling Clinton's efforts to avoid being caught "perjury" and "obstruction of justice" is a prime example of using the superego in the service of aggression. First, you shoot at the deer, and when the deer tries to elude its hunters, you crucify it on moral grounds for an illegitimate evasion.

The American people have intuitively understood that the Republicans are out to destroy Clinton, giving him consistently high approval ratings while the Republicans' approval ratings sank to a new low.

Many pundits are puzzled about why the Republicans would so zealously continue to shoot themselves in the feet. The answer appears to be that their hatred toward Clinton continues to be fueled by the narcissism of minor differences and expressed through the superego in the service of the id. The fact that Republicans are not heeding the warnings of the polls and are pursuing a full impeachment trial with witnesses suggests that their political judgment has become impaired by the intensity of their unconscious aggressive impulses.

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