

Weekend Edition
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The Politics of Narcissism

America's Grandiose Persona Under Bush

By PETER WOLSON, Ph.D

As the death toll of American soldiers rises daily in Iraq, Democratic presidential contenders are attacking President Bush's policy of unilateral preemption and urging him to share post-war responsibilities with the international community. But the Bush administration appears reluctant to relinquish control. Instead, while aggrandizing American superiority and pursuing a policy of global intimidation, it has been displaying contempt for international collaboration and trumpeting its isolationism. Under the Bush presidency, could it be that the face of America has begun to look like a narcissistic personality disorder?

What are the traits of this syndrome? How have they been reflected in the Bush administration, and what are their implications for the 2004 presidential election?

A display of grandiosity and superiority

A narcissistic display of grandiosity usually compensates for a sense of vulnerability and helplessness. Clearly, 9/11 made Americans feel extremely vulnerable and, consequently, perhaps, willing to accept President Bush's grandiose policy of unilateral preemption without much protest. As outlined by neocons Richard Perl and Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz years before 9/11, this strategy expresses the superior attitude that the United States, as the most powerful country on earth, has the right to forcibly remove the leaders of other nations who are judged to pose a threat to American security, and impose its democratic form of government upon them. As President Bush recently told Tim Russert on Meet the Press, he reserves the right to wage war to achieve these goals without having to consult with the international community.

Arrogantly, President Bush railed against the slow pace at which the United Nations conducted its search for Saddam's weapons of mass

destruction (WMD), ignored protests from the international community and proceeded to attack Iraq. Since the war, he has been accused by domestic and international critics alike of engaging in American imperialism, and the rationale for the war is now under intense scrutiny.

Grandiosity was also reflected in the Bush administration's mistaken belief that the Iraqis, after thousands of years of living under authoritarian governance, would heartily welcome the American liberators and the chance to establish a democracy. Instead, American soldiers were generally greeted with resentment and daily, homicidal terrorist attacks. The anticipation of a joyous welcome was a narcissistic projection of the Bush administration's idealized, egocentric belief system and reflected a lack of empathy for a different culture.

A profound distrust and avoidance of dependency often accompanied by contempt for others

A narcissistic personality fears that dependency poses the threat of feeling weak, humiliated and dominated by the other. In an increasingly interdependent socioeconomic world, the Bush administration seems to fear that involvement with other countries places the United States in a position to be controlled and exploited by them. Its contempt for participation in the United Nations and even NATO is used to defend America against this vulnerable, dependent position.

A conviction that it is "a dog eat dog world," one can only trust one's self, and a predilection for "splendid isolation".

Since dependency is psychologically dangerous, the only one the narcissist can trust is himself. The Bush administration seems to believe that the United States can only rely upon itself. The guiding principle of unilateral preemption is: "Do unto others before they can do unto you." Thus, the rationale for President Bush's preemptive attack against an "imminently threatening" Saddam Hussein.

Ironically, after 9/11 there was an outpouring of empathy for the United States from France, Germany and the world community at large. But instead of capitalizing on this international support, the Bush Administration's distrust of others has led to a detachment from other nations.

The grandiose idealization of "going it alone," certainly appeals to the masculine Western tradition of America's rugged individualism. But when taken to the extreme of a lone gunslinger, fighting the "evildoers" who are "wanted dead or alive," it smacks of defensive grandiosity. As a result of its isolationism, the Bush administration now has to face the responsibility of American soldiers dying daily from terrorist attacks with few international troops to relieve this tragic burden.

A dominating, exploitative use of others, and an inclination to use or ignore the law as it suits one's own purposes

It appears that the Bush administration will engage with other nations only when it is dominant and able to use them for self-serving needs. Thus, it is willing to ask other countries for soldiers and equipment, as long as it can retain control of Iraq rather than share decision-making power in Iraq's rebuilding. This is in contrast to a more mature form of international collaboration in which giving and taking among nations is on an egalitarian, mutually respectful basis. Recently asking the United Nations for help with Iraq's elections is far too little, too late.

As for observing the law, the Bush administration ignored the UN's mandate to continue looking for weapons of mass destruction before using force, by preemptively attacking Iraq. Yet it was critical of leaders, like Saddam Hussein, who defied UN mandates.

Moreover, it justified the war as necessary to safeguard the United States against Saddam's alleged WMDs, although these have not been found. Increasingly, it appears that the President deceptively used this rationale to attack Iraq for other reasons, as suggested by former Bush Treasury Secretary Paul O'Neill who also accused the Administration of lying. In addition, awarding lucrative contracts to firms, like Halliburton, with which both the Bush family and Vice-President Cheney have been intimately involved, raises questions of self-serving exploitation.

A reliance upon revenge in retaliation for injuries to self-esteem.

Various pundits have speculated that that the Administration's leak of the CIA identity of Ambassador Joseph Wilson's wife, Valerie Plame, as well as the Treasury Department's investigation of Paul O'Neill immediately following his "60 Minutes" interview, were acts of revenge for their embarrassing disclosures against the Bush administration.

Others have conjectured that the war against Iraq was mainly an act of revenge for Saddam's assassination attempt against the first President Bush.

Thus, President Bush's administration, with its America *uber alles* superiority, has increasingly insulted and alienated America's allies. This has fostered a hostile international climate that has made these countries reluctant to help us and may eventually breed more terrorism. With so many issues at stake in the 2004 Presidential election, the one that influences all the rest is whether we want the face of America to look like a bully masking vulnerability through exploitative domination. In light of the United States' sense of vulnerability since 9/11 and President Bush's popularity, could this intimidating, grandiose persona be America's new ideal?

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