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The Presidential Psychology at the End of Days**By John P Briggs, M.D. and JP Briggs II, Ph.D.
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The true rule in determining to embrace, or reject anything, is not whether it has any evil in it, but whether it have more of evil, than of good. There are few things wholly evil, or wholly good. Almost ever thing, especially of governmental policy, is an inseparable compound of the two; so that our best judgment of the preponderance between them is continually demanded. - [Abraham Lincoln, June 20, 1848](#)

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issues

In defiance of his circumstances as an unpopular, lame duck president with a minority party in Congress, George W. Bush pursues a [sharply autocratic tone](#). [He has intimidated](#) both parties in Congress and violated the Constitution. Through dissimulation and delay, he has forced the nations of the world to conclude they must wait until his term ends to negotiate any serious treaty on the imminent perils of climate change.

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environment

A sort of thousand-mile stare has descended on the country. Frank Rich writes, "we are a people in clinical depression" as a result of [Bush's leadership](#). Perhaps, a more apt diagnosis would be "dissociation." Like a child or spousal victim of a psychological abuser, Bush's "victims" try to mentally compartmentalize him; they attempt to get on with their lives - even as he keeps on being abusive. You can hear the dissociation when Congressional leaders talk about their inability to make Washington work as it should.

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multimedia

Some, including Daniel Ellsberg, who challenged the autocratic aspirations of Richard Nixon by releasing the Pentagon Papers, suggest Bush has already created a ["presidential coup"](#). Ellsberg has said, "If there's another 9/11 under this regime, it means that they switch on full extent all the apparatus of a police state that has been [patiently constructed](#)."

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We would like to answer several questions here. Is the president psychologically capable of such treasonous behavior? Why and how does his psychology make it so difficult for Democrats and others to stand up against his negativity and destructiveness (what he thinks of as his optimism)? How might they neutralize his psychology, which seems geared to inflict harm?

Behind the Torture, All That Stuff He Can't Admit?
about us

The president's reflex to justify his [right to use torture](#), even as he insists "[we don't torture](#)," illuminates how his psychology works and provides a glimpse into its dark potential.

The man who campaigned in 1999 as a "uniter not a divider" constructs and maintains a polarized world. In his book, "A Tragic Legacy," Glen Greenwald, observes polarizing reality "explains the president's personal approach to all matters - his foreign policy decisions; his relations with other countries; his domestic programs; the terms he adopts when discussing, debating, and analyzing political matters; his attitude toward domestic political opponents ... and his treatment of the national media. For the president, there always exists a clear and identifiable enemy who is to be defeated by any means, means justified not only by the pureness of the enemy's Evil but also by the core Goodness that he believes motivates him and his movement." (48)

Those who question the president's policies are either part of the evil or dangerously unaware of its threat. His dictum, "you're either with us or against us." sums up his closed psychological system. As Greenwald says, because Bush believes he is on the side of Good and Right in a struggle with Evil, he construes even his unpopularity as not "an impediment, but a challenge, even a calling, to demonstrate his resolve and commitment by persisting even more tenaciously in the face of almost universal opposition." (37)

So, torture by his administration is justified - in fact is not even torture - because it is used by Good Americans in a war against Satanic forces.

Bush's torture rationale echoes that of an extreme form of Christianity found among his personal "spiritual" advisers and the prominent televangelists he regularly consults. The religious justification for his worldview has prompted him to bestow billions of dollars on radical "faith-based" activities and to sanction an extremist Christian transformation of the military - actions that foster the idea of the US as a theocratic state called on "to rid the world of evil," as the president has asserted.

As reported by Truthout last June, many of the religious figures associated with Bush believe the final battles of the apocalypse are near, with fires that will spread from the Middle East. Where James Dobson, Pat Robertson, Tim LaHaye and John Hagee once pressed Bush hard for war with Iraq, they now clamor for one with Iran. The president cloaks himself in the innocuous terms "Christian," "evangelical" and "born again," and carefully avoids stating his beliefs specifically. But the type of Christianity most influential on his thinking is clearly radical or extremist rather than evangelical; it has an authoritarian, punishing, us-versus-them flavor; it views Christ less as a figure of tolerance and forgiveness than as a five-star general coming to wreck vengeance on anyone who has failed to join His army.

Former President Jimmy Carter's faith, like that of many evangelicals, involves a powerful commitment to love and tolerance. We do not detect a similar commitment in Bush. Spiritual issues and political motives appear secondary to Bush's subconscious use of his faith as a psychological defense. That defense "resolves" and protects him from the pain of a core inner conflict. The drinking and alleged drug taking of his younger years once resolved that same conflict. The supposed spiritual awakening Bush underwent in the mid-1980s allowed him to trade one defense for another. (Author Craig Unger has shown Bush's famous "mustard seed" moment with the Rev. Billy Graham - widely celebrated by the president - never happened; at the same time, Bush carefully avoids mentioning the faith awakening moment he probably really did have with radical evangelical preacher Arthur Blessitt.) In one sense, a half-hidden Manichean Christianity was more effective than alcohol in masking Bush's inner conflict. It made it possible for him to be president.

The Core Conflict

The central, secret conflict that consumes George W. Bush and motivates much of his action can be summed up in a few words: the desperate need to avoid, contain and disguise disabling fears about his competence and adequacy in a context where he expects to feel superior. Out of this core conflict have arisen his good and evil worldview, his lack of empathy, even cruelty, his competitiveness, his bullying, his inability to make a rational decision (despite styling himself "the decider"), his tendency for deception and self-deception, his proclivity for unconsciously sabotaging the success of his own projects.

Bush's biography is well known by now: growing up in family circumstances with a mother who was a "bully," and a father who, though passive, seemed effortlessly successful and talented as an athlete, war hero, businessman and politician. The younger Bush, expecting to demonstrate these same gifts, discovered quickly he couldn't measure up. The discovery probably began early, for example, when he wanted to be the catcher on his little league baseball team but couldn't do well because he reflexively blinked every time a batter swung (Unger, "The Fall of the House of Bush" 81), or his slowness in school, perhaps due to undiagnosed dyslexia or anxiety.

Biographer Bill Minutaglio described a moment at Yale when young Bush apparently tried to take another direction from his father, but couldn't pull away. (Minutaglio, "First Son" 104) Instead, he imitated (to the point of parody) his father's career, compiling failure everywhere his father found success: a C-student at Yale, a desultory pilot, a money-losing businessman. The fact his father or his father's friends needed repeatedly to rescue him from his failures (with Defense Secretary Robert Gates the latest rescuer) would have only increased the conflict between his sense of entitlement and expectation on the one hand, and his sense of insufficiency and incompetence on the other. Bush's sensitivity to his father's approval and disapproval is well established. Younger brother Marvin said the elder Bush could, intentionally or not, make his older son feel he alone had "committed the worst crime in history." (Minutaglio 148). And younger brother Jeb once speculated the attempt by George junior to live up to his

disapproving father was the kind of thing that "creates all sorts of pathologies." (Minutaglio 101)

So, Bush indulged in pure wishful thinking when he recently told journalist Robert Draper, "I've never had a fear of losing. I don't like to lose. But having parents who give you unconditional love, I think it means I had the peace of mind to know that even with failure there was love. So I never feared failure." (Draper, "Dead Certain: The Presidency of George W. Bush" 36)

In fact, failure has been George W. Bush's single greatest fear.

Substance abuse would have numbed the feelings of inadequacy and given license to his hidden anger about his circumstances. He probably understood in a family as hermetically sealed from self-reflection as his, he could never openly admit feelings that he was a child "left behind" emotionally.

Then, George W. Bush accepted Jesus as his personal savior and the drinking - and presumably those painful feelings the drinking needed to numb - disappeared. The failure-shriveled Bush of the past was replaced by a new God-filled Bush of the future, armed against his inadequacies with the defense of "faith." But his sense of his inadequacy continued beneath the surface.

For example, the president tries to control his environment (speaking only to friendly audiences), and consistently seeks to avoid or deflect definitive "tests" of his competency (though he is eager to test the competency of school children). His plain speaking style, rigidly on message, or laced with platitudes and moralistic bromides, compensates to cover his fear that he is unable to cogently think through an argument. He often looks as if he is trying to remember what he's supposed to say because he's fears he'll say the wrong thing.

His biography strongly suggests it was difficult for him to engage in activities involving the ambiguity uncertainty and mistakes that normally lead to learning and growth. Instead, he put his energies into defenses and avoidance. He undermined his own ability to think about complex issues. He currently likes to imagine he's living a presidential life similar to Abraham Lincoln's, with a war and religious fervor he imagines is like the Second Great Awakening of Lincoln's time. He thinks of himself making decision in a similar fashion to Lincoln. (Greenwald 64-65) The problem is Bush lacks precisely the characteristic that made Lincoln a profound decision-maker: an ability to tolerate the ambivalence of situations long enough to perceive the shades of positive and negative, and emerge with what Lincoln called "our best judgment of the preponderance between them" (see epigraph).

In place of a Lincolnesque decision process, Bush's Christian defense supplies divine inspiration in the form of what he calls "gut" feelings that tell him, without much thought, what's right and wrong, good or evil. He feels this form of magical thinking absolves him of the fear that his incompetence or confusion might lead to a wrong or "stupid" choice. In his glaring reluctance to admit mistakes, he's like a child confronted by his parents. But for him, admitting a mistake may be even more threatening than the child's fear of losing his parents' love. By admitting a mistake, he would acknowledge the deep inadequacy he secretly believes defines him. So, he assures himself his spiritual gut feelings can never be mistakes or failure because they come from his attunement with God. But what Bush hears in his gut is not the divine; it is the workings of his own psychology organized to deny and transcend the family image of him as a failure that circulates in his head and has become his image of the world.

As part of his Christian defense, the president has developed strategies that substitute for rational evaluation. To decide whether someone is competent, for example, the president believes he needs only to approve (from his gut) that an individual is a "good person" - Harriet Miers, Alberto Gonzales, Nouri al-Maliki are some examples. Their actual abilities and performance don't matter. If the president gives his stamp of "good person" approval, then it is "unfair" to quibble about performance or qualifications.

Bush's "Christian defense" also allows him to cope with failures by reassuring him that his divinely inspired decision will prove right in the long run. Seeing himself as Good and those who oppose him as Evil or dangerously naive, Bush can justify using any means at his command to defeat them. In this way, he can also give reign to his underlying anger and his desire to inflict harm on a world that had considered (and, he knows, still considers) him inadequate. He can vent his rage at being shackled to a father he has to endlessly compete with. Because he feels weak himself, the weaker are often his targets: children needing medical insurance, endangered species. Meanwhile, he gives uncritical affirmation to authoritarian ("good father") figures who he thinks approve of him: former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, Russian President Vladimir Putin.

Despite his best efforts, his feelings of anxiety about his own inadequacy constantly spill over. Spillage through his body language is notorious among reporters. In a Washington Post article following his failures to respond to Katrina, Dana Milbank closely observed movements as Bush underwent

pointed questioning by NBC's Matt Lauer. "The president was a blur of blinks, taps, jiggles, pivots and shifts ... He had the body language of a man wishing urgently to be elsewhere," [he wrote](#). When Lauer asked Laura Bush about the strain on her husband, he jumped in with a mocking third-person statement about himself: "He can barely stand! He's about to drop on the spot." In this abrupt defensive reflex, Bush denied his inner feelings by aggressively ridiculing thoughts he was afraid the viewer might just have had. Explaining his need to have Cheney with him at the 9/11 Commission interview, he said he wanted commission members to "[see our body language ... how we work together](#)." Another unconscious leak. What exactly did he think the commission would see except his own exposed inadequacy? His attempt to hide it, revealed it.

From the beginning of his December 4, 2007, press conference, the president offered a display of goofy facial grimaces, scowls, shifting stances, nervous and inappropriate chuckles accompanying serious statements, winking while reporters asked questions as if to indicate that the questions were foolish and that he was in cahoots with other reporters who appreciated the joke. The president had come to explain the fact he had recently trumpeted Iran ready to start "[World War III](#)," or a "[nuclear holocaust](#)," though the National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) had recently concluded that Iran had, in fact abandoned its nuclear weapons program in 2003.

At first, the president claimed (an obvious lie) that he hadn't known about the NIE conclusions when he issued his dire warnings about Iran. (Later the White House had to clarify [he had indeed known](#).) Then, he said the NIE didn't make any difference to his opinion. Bush is famously adverse to attempts to probe his psychology, and so, after about 40 minutes, when a reporter questioned him about his body language and thought it indicated he was depressed, the president lashed back, "And so, kind of Psychology 101 ain't working. It's just not working. I understand the issues, I clearly see the problems ..." - and in a gesture of angry denial, [ended the news conference](#).

A year prior, however, in a more relaxed and expansive context with friendly journalist, Robert Draper Bush did indicate curiosity about his own inner workings. "I really do not feel comfortable in the role of analyzing myself," Bush told Draper, but then he emphasized. "I'll try." He didn't get far, though. Immediately after saying that he would "try," he launched into how the primaries are a test of will, then insisted ("eyes clenched, like little blue fists," Draper writes) that he felt constantly watched: "I fully understand that the enemy watches me, the Iraqis are watching me, the troops watch me, and the people watch me. The other thing is that you can't fake it. You have to believe it. And I believe it," he told Draper, leaving ambiguous whether the "it" referred to Iraq or something more deeply personal. "I believe we'll succeed." ("Dead Certain" x)

Of course, his feeling watched and "faking it" (faking certainty, faking competence) is exactly what George Bush is doing.

When the Defenses Become the Reality

We have noted in previous articles other prominent defenses Bush employs to cover his feelings of inadequacy: He is a classic emotional bully. Bullies disguise sensations of their own weakness by splitting the weakness off and casting it out of their own conscious awareness - projecting it - onto the consciousness of others. They generate a stream of signals and behaviors that keep others on guard and seek to enfeeble them. Bush's signing statements where he reserves the right not to abide by the law he's just adopted, his foreign policy asserting his right to preemptive strikes, his denial of Habeas Corpus, his fixation on retaining the torture option, his rejection of subpoenas from Congress, his diminishment of people by giving them nicknames - at different scales, these are emotional bullying tactics. Friends from his younger days remember that in basketball and tennis games Bush would force opponents who had beaten him to continue playing until he had worn down their will so [he could beat them](#). Bush emotionally bullies his White House staff, making them afraid to tell him any news that doesn't fit his "optimistic" expectations. Draper reports senior staffer Josh Bolton greeting Bush each morning with the line, "Thank you for the privilege of serving." (397)

In January 2000 - and more decisively after September 11, 2001 - Bush came into possession of what we have called his "presidential defense." He became "the decider," the "commander guy," leader of the most powerful nation on earth overseeing a war he imagines is without end. Bush feels that his powerful office means - magically - that reality is his to define. Many have noted that the president is convinced that just because he says a thing will be so, [it will be so](#).

As "the decider," Bush regularly asserts that he alone is the one who has to make the "tough" decisions, his primary job as president. At the same time, he has often declared that he loses no sleep and suffers no anxiety over his decisions. What does he mean by "tough," then? The statements are actually the paradox of how he avoids his inadequacy: he can be supremely competent on the grounds

that he's the decider who decides what is competent; but since his competent decisions come magically, he doesn't lose sleep over them. In talking about why he never gets advice from his former president father, he says they both understand that as president he knows what his father doesn't know. That statement also doesn't make much logical sense; but it makes great psychological sense: a form of "I'm the daddy now, and daddy's not; daddies don't need advice."

Bush clings to a bad decision and can't change it because he had no rational basis for making it, or any decision, in the first place. Sticking with his decisions stubbornly - what he calls "leadership" - is all he really feels he has to offer as the nation's chief executive.

Absorbed in keeping up his psychic deflector shields, Bush seems shockingly unempathetic, even sadistically cruel about the pain of others. He is callous about torture; he takes pride in executions. His empathy for Katrina victims was clearly forced. He's a man who can put on a jacket of compassion or outrage when he needs to, but then takes it off and can't remember where he left it when a new need for empathy arrives. He's too busy expending that energy on his own situation.

Former Reagan speech writer Peggy Noonan has puzzled in her Wall Street Journal column at "the president's seemingly effortless high spirits" these days, at his "jarring peppiness" in circumstances that call for a sober demeanor. Bush's inappropriate affect connects with his inability to feel empathy and shows that he is disowning his depression about his failures and projecting it elsewhere. At the same time, he wants desperately to be liked. That explains the often inappropriate clowning and joking.

Bush's "presidential defense" traps him in a difficult paradox: It dramatically escalates the potency of his protection against being decisively (in his shifting terms) "found out" as inadequate. But it also dramatically escalates the psychically devastating consequences to him if he were to be found out (or find himself out).

As president, Bush is surrounded by what critics have taken to calling "enablers," a term that alludes to Bush's years of drinking and implies that the alcoholic's dynamic remains in force. Cheney is perhaps the chief enabler. As we've discussed previously, the vice president fulfills his need for personhood and power through taking on the wishes of his "patron" and serving as what Sidney Blumenthal calls "the pluperfect staff man." To do this, Cheney operates behind the scenes, where he is comfortable. His strategy translates into an obsessive secrecy for the administration as he carries out Bush's agenda of disguising weakness through bullying and authoritarianism. Doing the boss's dirty work has turned Cheney into a man who is amoral, paranoid and resentful at having framed himself as always second man. He likes the idea of being considered "the evil genius" who operates from the shadows. A deeply passive character with little sense of his own agency apart from a patron, Cheney makes himself, as he has said, "indispensable." He has worked his whole career to establish the presidency as an almost totalitarian "unitary executive," the ruler above all. His effort strikes us as a metaphor of his own internal struggle to be "the man": the paradoxical attempt to exercise his own will by exercising the will of his patron.

Other enablers include the women who surround Bush, principally Laura Bush, Karen Hughes and Condoleezza Rice. These women probably function for him as "good mothers" in contrast to his own mother. They seem to sense his distress, his inner fragility, and his extensive anxiety on a subconscious level, and try to soothe it. In his observations of Bush during the interview with Matt Lauer, reporter Milbank noted that "the first lady had a calming influence on the presidential wiggles. When Laura Bush spoke about her husband's 'broad shoulders,' the president put his arm around her - and the swaying and shifting subsided. The president, now on more comfortable terrain, delivered a brief homily about the decency of others. Through the entire passage, he blinked only 12 times" (down from 37 blinks the reporter counted during Bush's previous statement). The women may help him control his anxiety, but he would not be able to talk to them about it. They have their own issues with him. Rice revealed much about her psychology as enabler and victim of the administration's Stockholm syndrome when she told a friend, "People don't understand. It's not my exercising influence over him. I'm internalizing his world." (Draper 286) Like the alcoholic he once was, Bush has nobody to genuinely confide his anxieties to, not even Laura, who threatened to leave him if he didn't stop drinking. So, even in his most intimate friendships and relationships he is on stage, on message, exerting self-control (not always successfully), riding his bike to distract himself, keeping up his facade.

Bush's psyche throws out a fog of opposites as he attempts to control his ambivalence by disowning and splitting off parts. He can see himself only as Good, Successful, Loyal, Strong. The opposites of those must be cast outside him. He has negligible capacity to explore and draw nourishment from the fertile ground that exists in all of us between the poles of our conceptions and emotions. Insight grows from that ground. There he might discover, for example, that success and failure have many shades. In place of shades, Bush's character decompensates into stark contradictions. Claiming he is not a divide

means the opposite, a "compassionate conservative" means the opposite. When his administration hold conferences to help resolve climate change or the Palestinian issue, his internal fragmentation dictates that he really doesn't want these things resolved - he wants the opposite. When he urges the success of an enterprise, it is likely that he has implanted somewhere the seeds of its failure. In the "surge" plan of last January there were several, for example: one flaw - vigorously warned against by the surge plan's supporters - would have created independent command structures for American and Iraqi forces. The command structures idea has been quietly scuttled by the military, which explains that "there are limitations preventing the Iraqi Security Forces from operating fully independently from Coalition forces." Another flaw involved Bush's remarkable failure to press the Iraqi leadership for the political reconciliation he said last year was the whole point of the surge's improvement of security in Baghdad. Thus, the surge has failed to accomplish its central purpose.

Because he unconsciously expects to be seen by the world as a failure, Bush feels a strange comfort and familiarity in failing and then in denying that he is failing. He can never learn from mistakes. Worse, his psychodynamics ensure that his efforts to avoid his failures inevitably produce more failure:

Bush's administration has become famous for the hubris of believing it would create its own reality; that fantasy inflated an expanding bubble of self-deception that left the White House increasingly out of touch with reality in every political dimension, except for intimidation. The cause of this is clear: To an unprecedented scale, a president's entire administration has been focused on the service of his psychological defense system.

Then, What Is He Capable of?

After previous articles about Bush's psychology, we received a number of emails from clinicians agreeing with our description of Bush's basic psychodynamic, and offering their diagnoses. These vary from one another, sometimes substantially, as might be expected, since no one we know of has had access to a first-hand psychiatric evaluation of Mr. Bush. What can we say about his psychopathology? We find no evidence in the public record that the president hears voices or is mentally ill in a way that would require hospitalization or medication, though some psychiatrists or psychopharmacologists might prescribe medication if he came in for treatment of his own accord. We think Bush's psychological dysfunctions are profound, but they are of the sort that would probably not arouse notice if he were, say, the owner of the Texas Rangers, a job he apparently enjoyed. (Draper 42) (Of course, being a baseball team owner replayed his central theme: his father had the baseball talent and he lacked it.) That said, we believe the effect of the presidency on Bush's psychodynamics and the effect of Bush's psychodynamics on the presidency have created a situation where his personality is as genuinely dangerous to the nation as if he were delusional.

Psychologically, Bush's one non-negotiable position is that he must never have to face his failures because once he found Jesus as his personal savior, he put all his failures (and failings) behind him. But now, after seven years as president, his failure is everywhere. Unlike presidents Jimmy Carter, Lyndon Johnson and even Richard Nixon, Bush seems incapable of coping with his defeats by taking some redeeming direction. In the next year, we believe his behavior will continue to be guided by his need for massive avoidance of his feelings of inadequacy, particularly with regard to Iraq. Success in other areas means little to him and he gives them scant concern for his "legacy". He has identified himself as "a war president." The war is linked to his vague sense of divine mission, his internal aggression, his never-ending competition with his father.

We believe the great foreseeable peril of Bush's remaining year in office is the intersection of his Christian defense with Iran. In recent months, when Bush warned that Iran sought to launch World War III, he seems to have unconsciously told us it is he who wants war. The neo-conservative agenda to capture the Middle East for its oil, only reinforces Bush's own psychological reasons for attacking Iran: 1) to certify his biblical mission, and 2) to avoid facing the colossal incompetence of the Iraq war by bequeathing a widened and inextricable conflict to his successor. We believe Bush is aware that the long-term chaos that might result from an attack on Iran could confound the historical image of his administration enough to make his own failures harder to see. In 50 or 100 years - after he is dead, anyway - historians might even see his worldview in a favorable light. After all, they're still debating George Washington. That's what he thinks. The presidency has become for Bush like the popular "global domination" board game he played with fellow undergrads at Yale. There, he was known as the player willing to take the most risks.

Despite the mainstream press's inclination to construe the president's position euphemistically as a "hard line" on Iran, anyone who followed other reports, including Seymour Hersh's in The New Yorker, could reasonably conclude that the 2007 National Intelligence Estimate was a serious blow to Bush and Cheney's long-standing effort to provoke, create or discover a pretext to attack Iran and expand the

Middle East wars. Hersh reported that in 2006 the president and vice president had pressed for use of nuclear weapons against Iranian facilities but were rebuffed by the military. We believe the president is probably already committed internally to pursue this belligerent course for his legacy. Vague fantasies of an "end-of-days" mission may be in his mind, as well.

It remains to be seen whether Secretary of Defense Robert Gates - Bush's father's designated new "minder" inside the administration - or senior military commanders can prevent Cheney from finding a way to operationalize the decision. So far they've succeeded. Meanwhile, the Democrats appear to be in denial about the risk of Bush's intentions. They know that almost everyone in authority who is rational actor believes taking on Iran at this time would be a colossal blunder, and they assume - though they must know better - that Bush will be persuaded by that rationality. We think this "misunderestimates" his psychology. The Democrats should overcome their denial and take their own preemptive action to block him from such an attack.

Some have imagined a worse scenario. In 2007, a statement to a small group of constituents by Democratic representative John Olver of Amherst, Mass., made the rounds on the Internet. Olver worried that Bush would attack Iran, declare a national emergency and suspend the 2008 elections. A clarifying email from Olver's press secretary to us said the congressman had no evidence that any of this would happen but that he had worried about a "thought crime" on the part of the president.

Is Bush psychologically capable of acting out such a "thought crime," maneuvering to remain in power? Would Bush ever actually move to suspend the Constitution? Unfortunately, he's done just that already, in significant ways. How committed is he really to the idea of democracy he talks about incessantly? Psychologically these are interesting questions. Given his tendency to polarize and split his ambivalence, we'd have to say that his constant pieties about democracy suggest the opposite is significantly at work in his consciousness. He's even joked about it: "If this were a dictatorship, it'd be heck of a lot easier, just so long as I'm the dictator." Of course, he would vehemently deny that he is dictator even if he became one.

When Draper asked Bush about what plans he had after leaving the White House, they appeared vague, shiftless: making more money than his father on speaking engagements, setting up some foundation or something for encouraging democracy. "I can just envision getting in the car, getting bored, going down to the ranch." (406) His fantasies suggest his polarized ambivalence. He may yearn to escape into his old drinking days shiftlessness to get out from under the constant anxiety he feels about being competent as president; yet, he also seems keenly aware of the narcotic feeling of being a "consequential" person with a biblical mission, surrounded by the most powerful psychological defenses in the world. (Once out of office, how will he return to the family that knows his secret?) Is Bush capable of wanting to take the nation down an authoritarian road (a different question from whether he could get away with it)? If there were a terrorist attack on US soil or the assassination of a candidate, he could claim he is defending America by postponing the election. Cheney's office could provide the Constitutional rationale. With Bush's psychohistory, it's easy to become paranoid. Purely speculating: We think that Olver's "thought crime" is not the first thing on the president's mind and that he is not so out of touch with reality that he wouldn't have serious pause at such an action. (Martial law hasn't worked well for Pakistani strong man Pervez Musharraf.) That said, we believe Bush's psychodynamics could propel him in that direction if certain conditions arose.

As Greenwald observes: "The most dangerous George Bush is the one who feels weak, impotent, an under attack. Those perceptions are intolerable for him and it is doubtful if there are many limits, if any, on what he would be willing to do in order to restore a feeling of potency and to rid himself of the sensations of his own weakness and defeat." (95)

Responding to the Bush Psychology

It's likely that members of Congress in particular have experienced the subliminal shockwaves of what Greenwald describes. When the president feels weak, you don't know what he'll do. You sense that somewhere beneath your feet lie tripwires, which are his psychological defenses. Step on one, and you feel he'll react in a way that will be time consuming, unpleasant, distracting and possibly personally humiliating. He will pretend that his assault on you will be about important matters of national concern, but it will be really about himself. It will be hard to explain all that to the public, however. The president gives off subtle, angry irrationality that takes the air out of individuals of either party who might want to challenge him. They'd rather not deal with him if he can be avoided. They try to evade his polarizations. In that way they, too, become his enablers.

Unfortunately, there's no magic formula countering the psychology of the kind discussed here in the unique circumstance where the owner of that psychology is the president. But here are some things to

consider:

Bush-type personality operates in a defensive, binary mode. Greenwald observes that the president's neocon advisers have found they can manipulate him by casting the policy they're advancing in a binary, good-evil terms. Then Bush manipulates others using such polarizations. When he says some variation of, "You're either with us or against us," he makes you feel angry and weak. You want to strike back, but you can't if you wish to remain rational. So you want to say logically, "No, I'm not against you but I'm not with you, either." But that requires explaining, which is immensely difficult in our media environment. Reporters have become addicted to conflict-based storytelling as a way of getting audience attention. They prefer a polarized fight and will even try to start one if it doesn't exist. They tell stories by juxtaposing antagonistic sound bites. A politician trying to articulate a position that is non-polarized, nuanced and non-conflictual is at a disadvantage. Perhaps, serious politicians need to develop some tactics that can directly confront polarizing. "There you go again, Mr. President, creating a false division. There are third and fourth options here." Whenever possible, the mainstream press should be chastised and educated about its addiction to this kind of conflict-based reporting, which creates a free fire zone, an information free environment that destroys public discourse.

A person polarizing the world as Bush does is like a small, weak animal that puffs itself up in order to scare off attackers. In Bush's case, the presidency has frequently led him into the illusion that he actually is his puffed up size. It might help to remember that he's not.

Polarizing tactics work because they provoke and rely on fear in those at the receiving end - fear of being wrong, fear of what the other guy will do, fear of uncertainty, fear of mistakes. Fear these things less and the tactics will work less. Such fears make us feel like children again. But we're adults. Binary absolutist categories are always an inadequate description of the real world, which is, as Lincoln said, an "inseparable compound" of various polarities. As adults, we can think and speak about subtleties and complexities. If we do, fear will go down, not up. Most adults implicitly understand that the real world is, more often than not, nuanced, and an appeal to the truth of shades has its own strong power.

The Democrats have recently tried to operate in the grand American tradition that opposition and diversity must be accompanied by a willingness to negotiate. That is the message of the Constitution, a document that embodies a psychologically very deep understanding of the give-and-take of creative process. The Democrats attempted to work with the president and their Republican colleagues in this spirit after they won the Congress in 2006. Psychologically, it was the right thing to do. They tried to heal the wounds the president had inflicted and draw him into a creative collaboration. But the president's massive defensiveness over his failures has kept him truculently binary. He has obviously intimidated his fellow Republicans so that they, too, have continued in a merely oppositional mode and are supporting his vetoes. The president is dismissing Congress as incidental to his authority.

At this point, it appears that the Democrats and moderate Republicans are succumbing to their fear of direct confrontation with his psychology. They seem afraid the president might be vindicated by another terrorist attack on US soil (as though the attack would prove that polarizing the world is the true path). They want to avoid a constitutional crisis in the months until Bush leaves office. They haven't wanted their legislative time consumed with investigations of administrative corruption and usurpation of power. They haven't wanted to alienate the electorate during an election season. Their own ambivalence has been set off by his, but with a different result. They waffle: one minute resisting him, the next backing down. All this is understandable, but it misses the point that corruption and usurpation of the sort that has been unleashed by the president's psychology may have already seriously damaged our national institutions. What is the message to the future if we allow this president's psychological defenses against his failures to inflict such damage and then evade our responsibility to hold him accountable for it?

Members of Congress can stop being victims of the president's abusive psychology. You can confront a polarizer about his behavior without yourself becoming a polarizer. Instead of splitting ambivalence as Bush does, ambivalence can be used to think through a clear course of action. The Constitution helps, in this case. The Democrats might, for example, articulate their balancing duties under the Constitution and carefully and firmly distinguish them from acts of partisan opposition. They might publicly acknowledge that this president, with the past complicity of Congress, has damaged our institutions. They could insist on the investigative and deliberative process called for by our system of government. Methodically holding Bush and his administration to account for his abuses (such a thing has never before happened to him) may be the most effective way to neutralize the further acting out of his dangerous psychology. It would empower others in his administration to resist him. It would refocus Congress on its own responsibilities in the constitutional process. Of course, to accomplish this would require some adults and "profiles in courage."

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