

American Politics in the Age of Trump

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I believe that the two main psychodynamic trends that are fueling American politics today are: 1) The psychological danger of the 'the other' as it threatens the 'self', and 2) The defensive hatred and devaluation of 'the other' to protect the integrity and cohesiveness of the 'self'. Such defenses are arguably a manifestation of pathological narcissism. This would include, for example, the hatred between Democrats and Republicans, the hatred of women, the hatred of immigrants and minorities, like blacks, Mexicans, other Latinos, Jews, Muslims, Asians, LGBTQ individuals and native Americans. Over the last two decades, America has experienced a narcissistic regression to tribal and identity politics, culminating in the election of a president with an arguably narcissistic personality disorder who advocates the self-centered policy of America First, or 'me first'. So many of President Trump's policies reflect the classic narcissistic distrust of dependency, such as his withdrawal from international alliances for protection, trade and climate change, etc. and his inclination to act 'above the law', which has led to his impeachment.

How can we explain the tribal warfare between Democrats and Republicans that has resulted in radical congressional polarization and paralysis? This polarization can be traced back to President Bill Clinton and the gridlock that followed George W. Bush's victory over Al Gore. I suspect that President Clinton's successful political compromise with Republicans might have been the trigger for this gridlock because it involved a loss of each party's primordial political identity. By entering the gray zone of compromise, the parties had to surrender a piece of their black and white, ideological self. This psychodynamic was strikingly expressed in an op-ed piece published in the *Los Angeles Times* on January, 1999, entitled 'Hating The Politician In The Mirror'. In this piece, I was puzzled about why, Bill Clinton, the most conservative of all Democratic presidents, was so virulently hated by Republicans even more than previous liberal Democratic presidents. Wouldn't Republicans prefer a Democrat with similar values to theirs?

Clinton was a right-of-center 'Republicrat', if you will. He tried to privatize social security, supported the globalism of NAFTA – which until Trump's presidency, was a Republican plank, required recipients of social security to work for their welfare payments and even advocated cost saving policies that deprived poor school children of lunch money. Many Democrats hated him for these policies.

In the piece, I explained the surprising intensity of the Republicans' hatred of Clinton through Freud's concept of 'the narcissism of minor differences'. By implementing the Republicans agenda, Clinton was, in effect, coopting their political identity. Because this posed an existential threat, I argued that Republicans were unconsciously motivated to politically destroy Clinton in order to survive as a party. However, after they impeached him, they were still willing to compromise their conservative agenda to pass significant bipartisan legislation and balance the budget. Clinton left the presidency with an ample surplus of money in the treasury, not a 21 trillion dollar national debt that continues to escalate today.

Following George W. Bush's victory over Al Gore, there was a 50-50 split in Congress between Republicans and Democrats. The most pressing question was whether the parties would continue to compromise for the good of the country, or lock horns in tribal gridlock. To explore this, I wrote an *LA Times* piece entitled, 'America's State of Mind: Healthy and Divided' (November 26, 2000) in which I

speculated about the internal object representations of the Democratic psyche compared with the Republican mind.

I hypothesized that the Democratic Party's vision of government was roughly equivalent to a powerful, nurturing mother figure protecting and caring for the needy and downtrodden. In contrast, the Republican ideal embodied a strong father figure who rewarded people for taking responsibility for their own lives and supported independent initiative. The Democratic 'breast-mother' government satisfied the basic human need to be taken care of by a loving, tolerant parent while the Republican father figure fulfilled the need to break away from parental domination, to have control over one's own life and pursue one's fortune.

Quoting from the article:

Psychologically, the basic human need of maternal nurturance often conflicts with the need for autonomy.

In the political arena, Americans try to resolve this personal conflict by voting for the party that represents their strongest internal need.

Americans who have traditionally been more in need of help or care- women, the working class, the aged, the disabled, immigrants, certain racial and religious minorities, gays, etc- and Americans who support them, are more likely to vote Democratic. For these voters, liberal means the generosity of a nurturing governing structure. In contrast, they view Republicans as uncaring, hardhearted and greedy, a party of the rich and powerful, demanding that government support their aggressive, self-serving (often entrepreneurial) needs.

For liberal Democrats, conservative is often equated with depriving the hungry and poor of government support through tax dodges, paying employees the lowest wages and benefits they can get away with, exploiting 'mother earth' for profit and risking gun violence for the macho preference to hunt. They view the Republican stance against abortion as a willingness to ruin a woman's life in favor of the right of a fetus to live, again supporting the vital interests of a 'child' against a 'murderous' maternal authority.

In contrast, Americans who live according to an ethic of self-reliance and subscribe to the right of an individual to control his own life, money and property with minimal interference, are more likely to vote for a paternal Republican government. For these voters, government represents a powerful, controlling parental figure, a necessary evil that potentially threatens individual autonomy by 'stealing' earned money through excessive taxes. The ideal Republican governance does not spoil or infantilize the people with nurturing protective handouts but requires them to be responsible for themselves and supports individual initiative through tax breaks. (Wolson, 2000)

Unfortunately, political deadlock is what transpired historically and is what paralyzes American government today. As suggested earlier, the moderate, centrist gray zone of compromise, a mature state of ambivalence, potentially threatens a party's distinctive political identity and explains why there are so few moderate Republicans today. Like the middle sibling, they tend to get lost in the shuffle compared with the distinctive allure of polarized extremes, like the Republican Tea Party and Democratic radicals, like AOC and Bernie Sanders.

However, the balance seems to be shifting for the Democratic Party some of whose main presidential aspirants are solidly centrist, like Joe Biden, Pete Buttigieg and Mike Bloomberg. And many centrist democrats won the 2018 election. This swing back toward the center might be a reaction to the

polarized politics of the Trump administration. It would seem that a political party's identity must be strong enough to risk ideological compromise without being perceived as weak or fragmenting.

The existential threat of 'the other' became a frightening reality in the terrorist attacks of 9/11. With America's national integrity at stake and a narcissistically vulnerable president at the helm, George W. Bush and his administration reacted with defensive grandiosity, characterized by an ideology of America '*uber alles*', and a war policy of unilateral preemption. If America felt threatened, it had the right to go to war against any country, without international approval. It was thought to be a matter of kill or be killed. Bush's administration distrusted the United Nations, NATO and international relations, fearful that if you depend on other countries, they will exploit you, etc. The same narcissistic mentality has been enacted today in the Trump administration with the pre-emptive assassination of Iranian General Qasem Soleimani without any appreciation of Iran's national vulnerability militarily and economically in relation to America.

This is an amplification of Trump's narcissistic apprehension of immigrants, the foreign 'other' threatening America's borders, i.e., its ego-boundaries, and fueling a longing for an impenetrable barrier that would fortress the United States against alien exploitation by retreating into 'splendid isolation.'

Freud had a brilliant implicit explanation of why the hatred of 'the other' is endemic in the human psyche. In a piece for the *Huffington Post* (2008), I wrote,

We begin life in the womb, physically and psychologically merged with our mother, sharing common nutrition and oxygen through her blood supply [...] There is no difference between our internal mental world and the external physical world. When the umbilical cord is cut, we are physically separated from mother but we are still psychologically merged with her. We experience everything, including the external world, as our self. Sigmund Freud called this primary narcissism.

However, at birth, our enwombed paradise is shattered as we are bombarded by light, noise, hunger and pain – for the first time. We experience aversive stimulation, the first representation of 'the other', as a frustrating threat to our existence and omnipotence and become enraged. Our hatred of 'the other' continues unconsciously throughout development. At the youngest ages, we idealize our parents as the best parents in the world and react to strangers with trepidation and anger [...] Hating 'the other' is a way of protecting our original, archaic merged state within mother's womb that still unconsciously exists in our mental life.

The antidote for our hatred of 'the other' is empathy [...] Through empathic familiarity, the fear and hatred of 'the other' and toxic projections of 'badness' often dissolve into seeing and loving the other like ourselves and as part of the human family. (Wolson, 2008)

Congressional gridlock continued in President Obama's administration with Senate Majority leader, Mitch McConnell vowing to block Obama's legislative initiatives. I believe that the presidential election through the electoral college of Donald Trump, a bigoted, narcissistic white nationalistic authoritarian, and the regression to tribal and identity politics were a 'white-lash', a narcissistic defense against the threat to white male hegemony, motivated mainly by the escalating multicultural character of America (Wolson, 2017).

Arguably Trump's victory was precipitated by the presidency of Barack Obama and the campaign of Hillary Clinton. In Hillary's case, the threat of a cool, assertive, ambitious woman as America's next president evoked a reaction of revulsion not only in Republicans, but also in Democrats, women as

well as men. National misogyny prevailed. The 'otherness' of Obama, Hillary and the increasing multicultural threat to American white male hegemony resulted in a narcissistic regression to emotional tribal identifications and the degradation of American ethics, morality and reason.

Even after Trump's impeachment, Republicans will vote for Trump's full support of their conservative economic and social agenda. Christian Evangelicals and Catholics will support Trump for appointing socially conservative justices even though they are voting against their religious values for an unethical, immoral, corrupt individual. As long as Christian, heterosexual, white male culture was the American majority, the 'otherness' of minorities could be varyingly tolerated. But when Blacks, Mexicans, Asians, Muslims, etc., began living in more and more previously all-white American communities combined with the traumatic effects of the 9/11 Arab terrorist attacks against our country, a self-protective 'white-lash' festered and surged. President Barack Hussein Obama and Hillary Clinton's nomination were the last straws, auguring the death knell for white male hegemony. Electing President Donald Trump became the concrete embodiment of this narcissistic regression.

Thus, it appears that political compromise for Republicans and Democrats threatens a loss of each party's core ideological identity, which then triggers a regression to primitive splitting in order to restore and strengthen party identity. My hope is that as America becomes increasingly multicultural and as white hegemony fades into obscurity, both political parties will acquire sufficient self-cohesiveness and integrity to enter the gray zone of collaboration without needing to regress to tribal gridlock.

References

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