

Lauren Langman

Bush on the Couch

by
Lauren Langman

Critics suggest that G. W. Bush's presidency may well be the most important fact misshaping the 21st century; the long-term consequences may endure for generations. His less than compassionate conservatism has seen massive retrenchments from already niggardly social programs, and his disregard of the environment accelerated global warming. His economic policies created the largest budget deficit ever. His unilateral invasion of Iran has not only been a disaster for the people of that already hobbled country, but eroded alliances with Europe and earned the enmity of Muslims throughout the world. He is the perfect poster boy for recruiting terrorists. And his response to criticism has been his swagger, cocky smirk, and the (supposedly) affable disarming of critics. A spate of behind-the-scenes books has come out, showing Dubya determined to pursue a bellicose course yet blind to contravening evidence. According to Paul O'Neill and Richard Clarke, Dubya brushes aside critiques. He claims he is doing what God ordained. Does it sound a bit scary when folks hear voices that bid them do battle? I always thought Joan of Arc was a bit schizy, but she at least seemed willing personally to fight for what she believed.

Some hail the good Christian warrior fighting God's battles against those who "are not with us," meaning (1) the evil external enemies such as Osama Bin Laden and his terrorists who "hate our values", (2) and those East Coast liberals who drink lattes, sip Chablis, drive Volvos, and support the murder of unborn babies. These "high falutin elites", a.k.a. liberal Democrats, would keep prayers out of the schools, support gay marriages, and worst of all, they look down their noses at "real Americans". The "real Americans" are down home working folks who take care of their families, take the boys hunting and the girls to skating lessons, go to Church in pickups with gun racks, and don't much care for fancy intellectual stuff. The other bunch of "real Americans" are those who mostly inherited a

privileged position, took advantages of government supported schools and technological development, and worked hard to augment those advantages; they are now the rich and super rich that W calls his base.

Many people, as Thomas Franks (2004) has shown, vote for conservative social issues, but suffer small farm and business failures, job losses, privatization of public services, deteriorating schools and environmental damage. They lose health benefits and pensions but never their faith. They don't make the connection between their plight and the real policies of those they support. There seems to be a powerful psychological confluence between their hidebound values and Dubya's persona. Others, myself included, despise W for both his policies and his personality in which his arrogant anti-intellectualism joins with a basic sadism. Behind the swagger and the smirk, behind the fundamentalism and malapropisms, who really is George W. Bush the person, and how did he get to be that way? While there are many biographies, and revelations from members of his administration, sooner or later we expected a more psychological analysis. And indeed this is the goal of Franks' *Bush on the Couch*. But Dubya was never on his couch, or perhaps anyone else's, so what instead we have is a collection of informed observations and clinical hypotheses rooted in psychoanalytic theory.

Although I am a sociologist, I also attended the Chicago Institute for Psychoanalysis. Thus I am leery about using public statements to make inferences about a person's psychodynamics. For psychoanalysis, the basic data are usually found in transference and countertransference, the often unconscious feelings expressed to the analyst and his or her feelings toward the patient within the analytic situation. Here, however, we behold "psychoanalysis at distance." But Freud and his followers ventured into such territory when analyzing Moses, Leonardo and others.

Psychoanalytical jargon often denigrates while appearing scientific and neutral. It is not a great leap from noting W's anal-sadistic tendencies, to saying he is really a shit. Thus, it is easy to move from reasoned analysis to psychobabble. While I have serious reservations about this kind of work, Frank does present provocative interpretations. I regard this book as a very serious effort to make "informed guesses" about W's character. When Franks makes inferences about W having ADHD, dyslexia, and perhaps some neurological consequences of heavy drinking. I would want

better evidence. That said, even if Franks' appraisal of W, like Freud's tale of the "primal horde" it is a "just so story," it remains informative. And to those who already detest W, his family and his Nazi sympathizer grandfather Preston, it is entertaining.

Like father like son, Dubya got "legacied" into Andover, Yale and Harvard Business School. Along the way he was a cheerleader (how appropriate), member of Skull and Crossbones and racked up a less than stellar his academic record. He lived fast and loose, admittedly doing a lot of drinking, and evidence suggests a joint here and there, and a line of blow or two, or more. On occasion, he was behind the wheel while over the limit and was arrested. Then he found God, changed his "evil" ways, and proceeded to run for the president since God "had a special mission for him."

He proudly shuns 'book learning' but while he may not have the test scores to get in Texas, Law School, Dubya seems shrewd and charming. In the 2000 campaign, Bush appeared to a lot of people to be likeable; Yet Dubya seems lacking in "emotional intelligence" and incapable of introspection. Nor we do not get the impression of real warmth. He has a mean streak, often disguised by a thin smile. This is seen in his quick temper that he struggles to control in public. Empathy is not exactly a strong point. Perhaps the quality most irritating to his critics is his sheer obliviousness to the consequences of his decisions, whether his cruel fiscal policies or his sending people to be killed or kill. He appears decisive and determined, yet is easily flustered. His speech style tends to be succinct, without nuance and often without meaning. He resorts to clichés or bumper sticker logic. Further, there is the outpouring of malapropisms and neologisms that have come to be called "Bushisms."

Even, and perhaps especially, where the subject is repugnant, we have to look at a character in light of the totality of circumstances and it is only within this larger gestalt that individual qualities can be understood. With such understanding, Frank, as if presenting the case of W in grand rounds, describes Dubya's character, spells out the symptoms, suggests an etiology, and a treatment program. He begins by noting the contradiction between W's "compassion" and his cutting programs for the poor and needy. How does a religious man kill with such alacrity and find joy in the deaths of others he obviously considers beneath him? How can he send

men to die to stop mythical WMD, and then joke about looking for them in the Oval office? How can he sound confused and act so decisively, mixing fact and fantasy?

I was saddened to learn about a little boy who was repeatedly struck by a cold authoritarian mother nicknamed “The Enforcer”. His father was rarely home. Never having an empathic “good mother” nor compensatory parenting, he could never have empathize or imagine the consequences of his actions on others. Franks suggests that one salient moment was the death of a younger sister when he was seven. The family had not told him of her illness (leukemia). The parents went golfing the next day. He never learned to mourn nor feel remorse. Franks surmises that Barbara Bush did get depressed, a difficult situation for a young child. Thus he tried to cheer her up, acting like a clown. And so to deal with his own loneliness, his coping strategy was to be the joker.

Affability can be genuine human warmth, typically a reflection of how the person was lovingly treated as a young child. Yet it can also be a manipulative strategy. be it a seduction, a sale, or a swindle. In such cases “affability” is a way to gloss over and deny a fundamental deficit in oneself. Frank further suggests that maternal coldness fosters a splitting of the world into good and evil. In normal development, with nurturance and love, the person learns to integrate these primitive notions. Dubya never did learn to see shades of gray or anything untoward within himself. So his destructive impulses become projected to convenient enemies such as those who hate our freedom. But perhaps it is Dubya who really hates our freedom. This lack of empathy, coupled with his assertive style, becomes the ground from which bullies spring, and we have been able to observe the havoc wrought.

Franks suggests Dubya may have been hyperactive, complicated by dyslexia, which, in the context of a cold family, impairs complex thought and stirs up anxiety when confronted with same. Mark Crispin Miller (2002) discussed W’s difficulty with using language. But W’s deep anxiety that not only leads to disdain for intellectual complexity but fosters decisions on the basis of “gut feelings”—snap judgments that cannot be modified on the basis of further experience. Given his simplistic view of Others, combined with impulsive decisions, Bush has indulged in drastic social policies.

While young boys need their father's for a number of reasons, not the least of which is to work through their aggression to the father and internalize him as a role model, Bush 41's absence made it difficult for Dubya to separate from his depressed mother and find another source of nurturance. Given these dynamics, he sought to "impress, emulate and outperform" his father. Yet as a real combat pilot, good student, successful businessman, ambassador to the UN, CIA director and even president, George Herbert Walker Bush, was a tough act to follow, though Dubya surely tried. To impress his father, and indeed do him one better, he would get Saddam, who tried to hurt his Dad. Dad, however, understood the problem of occupying Iraq and how it would be doomed. That he would eventually reject his father's Northeast culture and embrace the shit kicker style of rural Texas says much about his ambivalent attitude to his father.

While not as dumb as some would charge, he seemed to have impaired capacities for learning and was happy enough to just get by. Nor was he much of an athlete, so in turn, to cover his anxieties and the shame of limited abilities, he focused on frivolity, glad handing, and attempting - sometimes subtly, sometimes not—to dominate others. Dubya denied being an alcoholic but denial is characteristic of people with alcohol problems. Those who abstain without treatment are prone to "grandiosity, judgmentalism, intolerance, detachment, denial of responsibility, overreaction and an aversion to introspection". This seems applicable to a man who denies having made any mistakes or ever being ashamed. Moreover, a history of drinking has adverse long-term consequences on memory, processing speed, attention, executive functions and balance. He endlessly repeats mantras of "freedom," "justice," "progress," strung together in ways that make little sense except perhaps to Fox News and the "true believers." They, of course, do not all have the excuse of being former alcoholics.

For a "dry drunk" religion is a way of blocking out his wild past and providing a structure of impulse control. Indeed it may provide an inner peace, recall Marx called it an opiate. But this kind of conversion leaves one prone to what Freud called illusions and magical thinking, such as swallowing Creationism as science whilst global warming or the snowball's chance in hell of an anti-missile system working are dismissed as liberal hokum. These illusions shade into grandiosity, perhaps as when

his “mission” was “accomplished,” replete with his appearance in a tailored flight suit. The phallic aggressive narcissism would transform him into the Top Gun action figure who kicked Saddam’s ass. *But we know the mission was not accomplished.* As to phallic grandiosity, I guess only Laura knows

Despite embracing a hyper-moralistic religion Dubya never seemed averse to violating laws, whether DWI, looting Iraq, or tolerating criminal acts in his administration from illegal contracts to outing Virginia Plame. Given such duplicity, there is an obsession with secrets and any questioning is seen as hostile. W has said, I don’t owe anyone explanations. He takes liberties with the truth and seemingly is unaware of his dissimilitude. Being surrounded by enablers called the press corps helps sustain the emperor’s new armor. Dubya’s anal sadism makes him indifferent to human suffering as when he made fun of Karla Faye Tucker, pleading for her life. From branding pledges at Skull and Bones (“only cigarette burns”) to his denigrating nicknames for everyone, his sadism flourished. Psychologically, there is subconscious communication from the psyche of the leader to the follower, and I suggest W was the enabler of the sadistic practices at Abu Ghraib. And I would suggest that his sadism is most evident in the tightly drawn smile, the glee of seeing others in pain from the time he blew up frogs as a young child.

He distorts events to conform to his view of reality and that of his inner circle in ways that disavow and project his sadistic tendencies. He seems incapable of accepting information that might interfere with his sadism, for example, despite information from weapons inspectors reporting no WMD, he ignored doubts. The aggressive intent of Hussein, seemed far more a projection of W’s own aggression, to justify his attacks on Iraq. No matter what, he remains resolute. Frank recalls Miller’s observation that W never falters when he struts, thumps his chest and speaks about violence and punishment, but when speaking of compassion, altruism or idealism, he makes hilarious mistakes. He has little of the charisma of a Clinton or Reagan. Yet W has the ability of a used car salesman to size people up and evoke powerful loyalties. Indeed, his speech problems and superficial self-effacement make him seem almost endearing.

Still, rather than look at psychodynamics alone, I suggest we take a more sociological tack. Dubya embodies qualities that have long been part of American culture, beginning with its Puritanical moralism. Frank himself suggested, “George W Bush behaves like a modern version of the preachers during the witch-hunting days of Cotton Mather. As many noted from the times of Crèvecoeur and De Toqueville, to recent studies of American character several themes stand out: religiosity, affability, individualism and violence and toughness, that in turn dispose anti-intellectualism and a paranoid style.

One aspect of American “exceptionalism” has been the persistence of religion. As De Toqueville noted, in a vast land without a pre-existing social structure, where people were ever on the move, religion was the primary basis of community life and social solidarity. In no other modern nation might the religious convictions of a leader be subject to scrutiny. Today it is not possible to run as Republican without gaining the trust of conservative Christians. Even if they lose businesses, jobs, benefits, pensions and even sons and daughters, they still support republicans. In the US fundamentalist religion is not so much the opiate of the people, its is more like a hallucinogenic form of hegemony that enables to ruling economic classes to amass vast profits.

According to earliest observations, in America, unlike aristocratic Europe, there was a free and easy casual intercourse between people. While such relationships may have been a bit superficial, it would again seem W is the master of superficial relationships. De Toqueville also noted that the American democracy, with its more fragile social bonds, people were reluctant to stand out on the basis of intellectual ability; as a result, as Hofstadter (1962) argued, a strong anti-intellectualism arose. Whether or not his radical anti-intellectualism is a manifestation of W’s inner deficiencies, his interpersonal style resonates with a large number of Americans, especially in the more rural, culturally isolated places we call the red states, firm in their religious convictions, and firm in their isolation from the life of the mind, nuance and complexity. But one consequence was the tendency to reduce complex social issues so that the adversities of the world were seen as the consequences of individuals—and deviant individuals would do us harm. There is a paranoid style in American life stretching from witchcraft in Salem to viewing Saddam Hussein as an imminent threat. For W this may well be the product of projection of his

Lauren Langman

own aggression, but there is a frightfully strong synergy between W's cognitive style and long standing American patterns.

The same historical conditions composed a culture of coarseness and toughness, guns and violence (Wilkinson, 1984), and enshrined in our popular culture (Slotkin, 1992). From the Deerslayer to Davy Crockett, to Sam Spade, Shane, Rambo or Dirty Harry, the tough loner skilled in the tools of violence, and willing to use that violence to insure good, has long been an element of American character, and has been clearly evident in the buck-skin Dubya persona who was gonna smoke Usama out. And while this makes for good film, even great films like Shane or the Wild One, it makes for imbecilic international policy.

The extent to which Frank flits among sound clinical judgments, informed inferences, and outright speculation is not always clear. Just as Freud's theory of the origin of civilization beginning with the son's slaying of the father has little factual basis, it nevertheless is a powerful story of how the demands of civilization require the suppression of desires to insure social harmony, and their sublimations into work, order, beauty and cleanliness. So *Bush on the Couch* is an interesting story of the relationships of capitalism to character, and how the legacy of early Puritan morality, mediated through the Barbara and George Herbert Bush, gave rise to W. Franks does present supporting information and reasonably convincing explanations. But what is more important is not what Frank tells us about W, but what W reveals about our nation. At the time of this writing, four more years of "primary process" thinking portends endless crises, and if my analysis of American character has any value, such crises would enable completing the moves to fascism that W has started. I strongly support Frank's suggested treatment program. Dubya should leave office, period. If you don't like W, you'll love this book. And if you do like W, then perhaps a few years of analysis might do you some good. But then again, if you like W, psychotherapy may not help, lobotomies are still an option.

Bibliography

Frank, Thomas, *What's the Matter with Kansas*, New York: Metropolitan Books, 2004

Lauren Langman

Hofstadter, Richard, *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life*, New York: Random House, 1962

----- *The Paranoid Style in American Life*. New York: Knopf, 1965

Miller, Mark Crispin. *The Bush Dyslexicon*, New York: Norton, 2002

Slotkin, Richard. *Gunfighter Nation: the Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America*. New York: Atheneum, 1992

Wilkinson , Rupert, *American Tough: The Tough-Guy Tradition and American Character*, Greenwood Press. Westport, Conn. 1984.