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PSYCHOANALYZING PRESIDENTS WITHOUT A COUCH

LESSONS FROM THE WILLIAM J. CLINTON AND GEORGE W. BUSH PRESIDENCIES

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In this paper I address the usefulness of the psychoanalytic framework in studying U.S. presidents and by implication political leaders more generally.¹ I ask why such a framework is important for studying political leaders before I proceed to how it might be done—or at least how I have found it useful to do it.² This paper is not meant to provide a finished analysis of either William J. Clinton or George W. Bush. Rather, its purpose is to provide a sense of how psychologically framed analyses unfold and, more specifically, the kinds of questions that such an analysis asks. That task is central since in scholarship, as in psychoanalytic work, the most important and useful tool to have at your disposal is the question.

The analysis that follows is divided into four parts. The first examines the nature of psychoanalytic theory, focusing on what all such theories have in common and why they are necessary parts of any full analysis of a president's behavior. The second section focuses on alternatives to psychoanalytic frameworks and why they are helpful, but not fully so. The third section takes up the issue of how such analyses unfold, using illustrations from two contemporary presidents, William J. Clinton and George W. Bush. The fourth and final section considers a very basic issue in undertaking such analyses: the analyst's stance toward his subject.

THE PSYCHOANALYTIC PERSPECTIVE

The psychoanalytic perspective is a minority perspective within political psychology. In part, this reflects a carryover from its early and somewhat overly bold use. In part, it reflects a lack of familiarity—it is known to most only by reputation. And in part it reflects the current primacy of cognitive theories, which also lend themselves to numerical counting. The psychoanalytic perspective offers some real advantages in analyzing aspects of presidential performance.³ It does so, however, at a cost: intensive investments of time, of resources, and of the working through of complexity.

Psychoanalytic Theories or a Psychoanalytic Framework?

Alert readers may have noticed that I began by making reference to the usefulness of the psychoanalytic framework, and more particularly that I did not use the phrase psychoanalytic theory. The reason is simple, but important. There are many psychoanalytic theories—those of early and latter Freud, Heinz Kohut and self-psychology, Harry Stack Sullivan and interpersonal theory, and so on. Which theory to use, therefore, is an issue that arises at the outset.

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Yet there is no necessity to choose only one. Indeed, that may not be a good analytical idea. Why? A single theoretical perspective may obscure as much as it reveals. A theory like self-psychology that focuses on narcissism may be very useful for leaders like Bill Clinton or Lyndon Johnson. Yet it does less well explaining the psychology of George W. Bush, his father, or Gerald Ford. Of course every president, and every person, has elements of narcissism in his psychology, but the question here is how much of a role it plays. For some leaders, narcissism is a core theme. For others, it is merely a part of their psychology that must be taken into account.

The other reason why there is no necessity to choose one theory is that there is a psychoanalytic framework. The framework consists of four core elements: (1) the existence and operation of unconscious motivation, (2) the idea that a person’s internal and interpersonal psychology develops and becomes consolidated over time, (3) the idea that the process of consolidation results in patterns of choice that reflect interior psychology, and that these choices are discernable if you pay close attention to a leader over time and circumstance, and (4) that these patterns of internal and interpersonal psychology develop in relation to each other, and together form a package that is best understood as a person’s character psychology.

What a psychoanalytic framework does *not* require is (1) a view that all behavior is primarily shaped by unconscious conflicts and motivation, (2) that character psychology requires smart, flexible people to behave as if they are robots—incapable of discerning and reacting to different circumstances differently and (3) that every leadership behavior is best, and must, be explained wholly or in large part by reference to character psychology.

Unconscious motivation represents a dilemma for a psychologically minded analyst. It is very evident that unconscious motivation exists—that people do things for reasons they have long ago forgotten, for emotionally powerful reasons—or are only dimly aware of, if at all. Yet in clinical settings, unconscious motivation emerges only over time, sometimes long periods of time. And it emerges most clearly in response to the analyst’s knowledge of a range of intimate details and becomes clarified through repeated questions, interpretations, and the patient’s response to them.

Obviously, none of these circumstances are present when analyzing a president at a distance. Yet one can still find unsupportable and unnecessary speculations on the unconscious motivation of leaders in the literature. If inclined, you can find what one psychiatrist (Lifton & Mitchell, 1996) considers Harry Truman's unconscious motivation in dropping the atomic bomb on Japan (hint: it had nothing to do with avoiding the loss of allied life in an invasion). Or you can learn what another thinks he knows of Hanna Nixon's unconscious views of her son Richard (Volkan, Itzkowiz & Dodd, 1997). Often, given the almost wholly absent evidence that would support these speculations, their ultimate substantiation appears to rest on the assertion that "I'm a psychiatrist and you're not."

Such speculations are unfortunate not only because the data that would support them isn't available, but also because they are unnecessary. Character psychology is remarkably evident in the public behavior—and I do not mean primarily policy choices—that a leader makes. This is fortunate, since such analyses are a critical part of analyzing any president or administration.

The Psychological Analysis of Presidents: Why? How?

Any time you want to explain either discretionary choice or the ways in which nondiscretionary choices are carried out, you enter into the arena of interior psychology. That is, you must address a leader's motivations—his ambitions, for example, or his ideals and values, or the skills and capacities he can bring to bear on his circumstances. Most high-level leadership positions require us to examine questions of why and how as well as what leaders do. Those questions, of necessity, involve us in a person's interior psychology.

The question is which psychology. Many prefer trait theories. They have their uses, but also their limitations:⁴

- 1 There are many traits, so the question arises: which ones do you choose for analysis and why?
- 2 Even if a trait might obviously be relevant to leadership analysis—say a need for power—it does not exist in isolation from other traits that may either facilitate it (narcissism) or inhibit it (anxiety).
- 3 Sometimes what seems like an obvious trait behavior is not necessarily explained by the trait. Consider the accumulation of political capital. You could say of someone who tries to accumulate it that he or she is motivated by power, but they might also be motivated by their ideals to do good, or to leave a mark, or to prove to themselves that they can or are worthwhile, and so on. Naming a trait doesn't necessarily provide any necessary conclusions about motivation.
- 4 Traits provide limited slices of an individual's psychology—which other slices are relevant or how narrow a particular trait slice are questions that trait theorists don't address.
- 5 Trait analysis rarely provides any developmental analysis. Traits are simply presented "as is," and therefore we know little about how and why a trait developed and therefore whether, how, and why a trait will continue.
- 6 There are enormous measurement issues with most trait research that are often bypassed because scales produce numbers and not interpretations—or so its adherents claim.

However, a major difficulty is that trait theories provide no overall framework for the analysis of any person's psychology. It provides no theoretical perspective that allows us to understand a leader as a real, integrated person rather than a limited, segmented, discrete series of characteristics that can't add up to one.

What is a person interested in the psychology of leaders to do—go back to school and get a Ph.D. in clinical psychology or become a psychoanalyst? Increasingly, some do. Yet this training really isn't wholly necessary in order to make helpful use of the framework. What is needed is a theory that draws on psychoanalytic theory, but doesn't require a psychologically minded political analyst to be a psychoanalyst in order to use it.

Getting Beyond Appearances: A Need to Be Liked?

The capacity to get behind appearances is an important asset of psychoanalytic analysis. This is an especially useful benefit in dealing with presidents. It is not only that people in general have complex amalgams of motivations. It is also the case that they often prefer to be viewed as they would like to be seen rather than as they are.

Presidents and especially their advisers are particularly susceptible to these wishes. Their political and policy success may, after all, be dependent on it. This is not an argument that leaders are, as a group, manipulative—although individual leaders may certainly be so. Rather, the point is that in motivation, as in life more generally, things are not always what they appear.

Consider the conventional wisdom regarding Bill Clinton on his ascension to the presidency. Much was written about Mr. Clinton's difficulty in saying no and his eagerness to please. Both characteristics were often attributed to Clinton's compulsive need to be liked. Indeed, the brief biography of Governor Clinton that appeared on the front page of the *New York Times* (Kelly, 1992) on the day of his election was entitled "A Man Who Wants to Be Liked, and Is."

However, the view of Mr. Clinton as needing to be liked soon ran into at least two theoretical and factual difficulties. First, there was Mr. Clinton's very high level of self-confidence. Ordinarily the need to be liked would not be associated with such high personal confidence. Second, the idea of a "need to be liked" seemed to be inconsistent with Mr. Clinton's increasingly evident tendency toward public and private displays of anger. During the nomination campaign, when Clinton was told (erroneously) that Jesse Jackson had come out in support of a party rival, Clinton, who was not aware that he was speaking near an open microphone, angrily denounced Jackson as a "back-stabber" (Berke, 1992). When news reporters followed the president-elect onto a golf course, he lost his temper, cursed them, and complained to the manager of the club (Kelly, 1992a). When out of the public's eye, Clinton's anger often turned to rage (Drew, 2000).

The "need to be liked" theory also failed to address another psychological aspect of Clinton's political leadership style—his tendency to lash out against those who oppose his policies. His public anger at the press provides one example,⁵ but there are others, including his loud condemnation of "lobbyists," "special interests," "profiteering" drug companies, "greedy doctors," "muscle-bound" labor unions, and so on. Presidents, like others, can benefit from having certain kinds of enemies. However, for a man who is said to have such a strong need to be liked, Mr. Clinton's list, as it unfolded, proved rather long and his characterizations of those on it often harsh.

Mr. Clinton is not particularly unusual in being more complicated than a surface appraisal of his psychology would suggest. But that is precisely the point. An emphasis on a possible trait—a need to be liked, for example—needs to be examined in relationship to a range of evidence of a president’s behavior, not just a narrow or conventionally understood slice of it.

Evidence in Psychoanalytically Framed Presidential Analyses

The issue of evidence is central to any scholarly effort, and psychoanalytically framed studies of leadership are not excluded from this requirement. How then is such information obtained? Those closest to the information that is important to psychologically-minded analysts are neither trained nor interested in providing insights that might present their leader as other than as he and they prefer he been seen.⁶ Yet it is possible to gain substantive traction on a president—to some degree as much as it is possible to do with any person—by observing them carefully over time in as broad a range of circumstances as is possible.

When studying presidents in office this can be accomplished to a useful degree by reading. Yes, reading—not interviews by the analyst,⁷ not psychoanalyzing the leader at a distance on the basis of one or two items—but ongoing, extensive, day-in, day-out reading.

Working on someone who has been, and someone who might be or already is, president are two different enterprises. The work on Bill Clinton and George W. Bush—the two with whom I am most familiar—began with their presidential campaigns in 1991 and 1999 respectively.

That work required about three hours a day, often more, of reading the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Wall Street Journal*, and other materials,⁸ cataloging the articles in computer files, and making notes on what had been learned or questions the materials raised. Added to this catalog were many hundreds of speeches, interviews with the president⁹ or his advisers, others’ analyses, court opinions, and policy documents.

Since leadership involves the public’s views of a president’s psychology, style, and policies, public opinion polls are also relevant and widely available—at last count more than 1,000 are available—most with full lists of questions and breakdowns of responses.

As noted, all of these materials must be sorted and catalogued. Some categories, such as Social Security policy, the Iraq debate, or public opinion on Iraq are straightforward enough policy areas. They provide information on the development, ins and outs of various policy debates, the actors, tactics, and strategies. Yet they are more than that. Some items also contain information relevant to the theory that frames a psychologically minded analysis.

For example, there are many subreferenced cross-files under the categories of leadership and decision making. If a particular item reports something of interest both about a policy issue and the president’s leadership or decision making—as for example do a number of items in connection with Bush’s decision to ask the United Nations for support in disarming Iraq—they are filed in both places.

Cataloguing information is more than a filing exercise. It is a chance to discover new relationships and odd elements that can become the basis of a useful formulation. A single, unconventional occurrence—

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Mr. Bush's decision to spend his last campaign hours in Al Gore's home state of Tennessee (Balz, 2000)—became the starting point of a pattern that I label *right back at you*. It is a pattern that begins with the expectation that the person will do the conventional thing and avoid exacerbating what is already a tense situation in the hope of quietly getting by.

So, when George W. went to the United Nations to ask support for disarming Iraq, the expectation surrounding this difficult task is that he would make his case and make a plea for action. He did. Yet he also chose to directly challenge the relevance and courage of that organization—asking it “to show backbone” (Associated Press, 2002; De Young, 2002). That galvanized the UN for at least a day, before the organization's standard operating procedure reasserted itself.

The same *right back at you* psychology was evident in Bush's introduction of both his tax-cut packages (Barnes, 2003)¹⁰, his renomination of Judge Pickering to an appellate court position (Hook, 2003), his decision to put control of the Senate front and center in the 2004 midterm elections (Milbank, 2002) at a time that he was preparing the public for a possible war with Iraq, and others. The dynamics of this psychological element in Bush's leadership style has to do with his stance toward interpersonal relations (see below) and his willingness to go after what he wants—a necessary ingredient of political courage in the pursuit of his political convictions. And recall, all this started out with a single act—the campaign visits to Tennessee—that ran counter to traditional nominee behavior.

In addition to his own work of course, the analyst depends on the work of others. Every presidency generates behind-the-scenes books—like Bob Woodward's (2003) or Elizabeth Drew's (2000)—that provide enormously valuable observations for a psychologically minded analyst. On matters large and small, the analyst accumulates knowledge and, one hopes, understanding.

The point of spelling this out is to underscore how deeply immersed in a range of materials it is necessary to become. Otherwise, one cannot gain traction on the psychological and political questions that are critical to constructing a psychologically framed analysis of a president and his administration. Drive-by, casual analysis simply will not do.

This may sound tedious, but it is necessary. In doing so, an analyst gains a fuller perspective on a particular administration as well as some understanding of how a president approaches his choices and what that reflects in turn about his psychology.

CHARACTER PSYCHOLOGY: A FRAMEWORK

Once a major effort is made to collect information about a presidential administration, the question arises: how does one begin to frame the psychology of the president and his leadership? The first requirement is an understanding of character and a useful way of conceptualizing it. In my book *Psychological Assessment* (Renshon, 1998a), I developed a theoretical framework whose foundations are three domains that are central to everyone's internal psychology: ambition, character integrity (fidelity to ideals and values), and relatedness.

Ambition simply points to the leader's (or president's) level of desire to achieve his purposes, and the skills that he brings to bear on accomplishing them. While ambition has acquired a decidedly mixed reputation, it is absolutely necessary for consolidating an adequately functioning character structure.

Without ambition there is little accomplishment, and without accomplishment, consolidated feelings of self-worth can't develop.

Character integrity refers to the ideals and values by which a leader tries to live, and his fidelity to them. Both are critical. Cataloguing presidents' public expression of the virtues to which they say they subscribe is not enough. None would expect any to say otherwise. Rather, character integrity is to be found in those areas where sticking to conviction entails the possibility of real loss, political and otherwise.

Finally, relatedness refers to the basic nature of the leader's interpersonal relations—his stance toward others. Some time ago, the psychoanalyst Karen Horney (1937) suggested that people could be characterized as moving toward, away, or against others. I have found it useful (Renshon, 1998a) to add a fourth stance: those who stand apart from people, neither needing to move toward or against them, but still maintaining a real connection to them.

Sometimes a president's interpersonal style is relatively straightforward. George H.W. Bush was a president who genuinely moved toward others. Richard Nixon was a man who moved away or against them. This is not to say that such interpersonal stances are wholly uncomplicated, only that in some leaders they seem to be fairly much what they present themselves to be.

Others are not quite what they seem, and there is a need to explain the anomalies. Ronald Reagan seemed to be and was a friendly, genial man. Yet he never bothered to learn the names of many who worked with him, and had very distant relationships with his children. Clearly, there was more to his interpersonal relations than the friendly demeanor that was evident—an opaque side to his psychology that eluded even his official biographer.

President Clinton is a man who appeared to move toward others. Yet his interpersonal style was trumped by his personal ambition, lending an exploitative subtext to a façade of engaged friendliness. President George W. Bush is a man who can move toward others or keep his distance, and as I will suggest shortly, is not about to let his personal feelings of attachment interfere with what he wants to get done.

What seems potentially useful about such a formulation of character is that it provides specific content to a concept more often discussed in terms of its dynamic operation—that is, patterns of behavior across time and circumstance. Moreover, the theory appears to reflect elements that every person must address. Everyone must figure out what they want to do in life and refine the skills that will help realize these ambitions if they are to be successful. Every person must develop principles for navigating life's inevitable, but often unclear or difficult choices.

Some will aspire to the high ideals, but fail to put them into practice. Others will be guided primarily by self-interest, but present their choices as if they weren't. A smaller number will struggle to maintain fidelity to their ideals even when it is difficult to do so.

And finally, every person exists and lives in an ocean of others. Others are our friends and our enemies, our allies and our competitors, and our most trusted and intimate relations. They thus become a profound source of fulfillment or regret. We may move toward, away, against, or stand apart from others, but we cannot avoid them. Whether internalized within our psychologies because of experience or, as a consequence of ongoing relationships, they are as central to our emotional lives as oxygen is to our physical lives.

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LEADERSHIP PERFORMANCE

Obviously, character elements alone will tell us very little about presidential performance in the absence of a theory of the latter. It is important to have a theory of performance that is not dependent on specific debates over policies and their effects, but would still allow the appraisal of a president's approach to policy. It would also be useful to have a theory that focuses on the most important things that presidents actually *do*. In short, a useful conceptual framework for analyzing presidential performance would include a concern with both a leader's policy thinking and political action.

“I proposed three tasks of presidential leadership: mobilization, orchestration, and consolidation.”

The two essential core elements of presidential performance, in my view, are leadership and judgment. In *Psychological Assessment* (Renshon, 1998a), I proposed three tasks of presidential leadership: mobilization, orchestration, and consolidation. The first, *mobilization*, refers to the president's ability to arouse the public. The second, *orchestration*, refers to the demonstrated capacity to channel mobilization to the achievement of goals. *Consolidation* involves setting up and into motion policy structures or procedures that will solidify the results of a president's judgments.

It seems clear that each of the three character elements already noted (ambition, character integrity, and relatedness) is related to the twin pillars of presidential performance. A president's basic stance towards others, for example—his allies, his advisers, and those who are neither—is a basic element of at least two dimensions of presidential leadership: mobilization and orchestration. It has an impact on the ways his judgments are shaped as well. A president is surrounded as much by people and his relationships to them as he is by policy.

The quality and effectiveness of presidential leadership, especially in divided societies such as the United States, has as much to do with a president's candor and trustworthiness with others, above all the public (but also his allies and advisers), as it does with actual policies. So too, a president's ambitions and the methods he chooses to attain them will help define both his leadership and frame his judgments.

Character in Leadership: Two Illustrations

President Bush put enormous effort into the 2002 midterm elections. The results gave the president a majority in the Senate, and thus numerical control of both houses of Congress. Partisans smiled or despaired and pundits kept track of his scorecard. Yet in addition to all these relevant matters was the level of commitment reflected in this political blitz, from a man who doesn't like to be away from home and has been characterized as following a relaxed (some say lazy) schedule.

Yet Mr. Bush was clearly determined to help himself advance his own causes. Obviously this reflects on his policy ambitions, which are clearly robust. It also reflects his very active stance toward his own presidential fate, and is inconsistent with a view of him as a passive lightweight who leaves all or much to those who are more interested and involved.

It might as well reflect a strong competitive element in his psychology. The president appears to be a man who likes to win. That may make him like many others, but with the added observation that he also is willing to put in the work necessary to improve his chances.

What we have here are possible elements of an explanation of the president's psychology, and further questions, but no definitive answers. What do you do with such elements? The analyst sees whether they are consistent with other elements. Consider the domain of ambition.

Pundits erroneously predicted that Mr. Bush would act as president as he had as governor—picking a few issues, many of which had already been brought to political readiness by others. That view suggested that as president, Mr. Bush would have limited policy ambitions, work for consensus, and take few big policy risks. Even a cursory look at the president's record suggests that all three pieces of conventional wisdom are dead wrong.

Ambition: The President's Small Agenda?

Mr. Bush came to Washington with an enormous policy agenda, not a small one. Small wonder that David Broder of the *Washington Post* was questioning whether Mr. Bush wasn't trying to do too much with too little political capital. Mr. Broder noted that Mr. Bush had actually added to his "to do" list:

- A comprehensive energy plan, itself made up of a number of far-reaching and controversial parts;
- An HMO reform bill and a trade bill to give the president "fast-track" authority (Cooper, 2001).

To this he might have added:

- An unexpected and controversial initiative to "regularize the status of millions of illegal immigrants in this country" (Schmitt, 2001)
- A major plan for a "new federalism" (Allen & Balz, 2001)
- A new initiative to provide housing for the disabled (Allen, 2001)
- A new plan to enforce and refine gun control (Lichtblau, 2001)
- A "New Freedom Initiative" to help the disabled (Hunt, 2001)
- Reforming Social Security
- A prescription drug rider for Medicare
- A review of a host of regulatory rules in areas including ergonomics (Dewar & Skrzycki, 2001), medical records privacy (Pear, 2001), and environmental issues including air pollution (Pianin & Mintz, 2001), land usage and control (Jehl, 2001), and the Endangered Species Act (Seelye, 2001).

This is only a partial list of the president's domestic ambitions. It does not include his equally robust foreign policy, which of course expanded after 9/11 to include a worldwide war on terrorism and disarming Iraq.

Mr. Bush's very robust policy ambitions speak to the first domain of character: ambition. It is now increasingly clear, indeed obvious, that he is not a man of modest policy ambitions. Yet a key question is whether he has equally robust personal ambitions. If he does, what is their nature and how did they develop?

Mr. Bush is well known as a man who muddled through a good part of his early life, with none of the signs of self-conscious ambition that were so evident in Bill Clinton, Al Gore, or Woodrow Wilson. The conventional wisdom is that at age 40 a frequently well lubricated Mr. Bush found religion and baseball—and politics soon after. Yet this chronology neglects the fact that Mr. Bush ran for Congress in 1978 when he was 32, eight years before he found religion, sobriety, and presumably purpose. He ran a good race, but was out-old boy'd by a savvy local who successfully cast George W. as an out-of-touch, effete Easterner—one of the numerous parallels to his and his father's political careers. Recall that his father was criticized as “out of touch” because he referred to a “splash” of coffee and marveled at checkout counter scanners.

George W. Bush himself alludes to the importance of this midlife turn and there is no doubt that it played a key role. Yet the origin of the president's personal ambition seems more likely to be found in a combination of very high accomplishment on the part of his father and grandfather and the failure of George W. to see an obvious way to equal or surpass it. He was not, as his father had been in so many areas, a star, except in the one area in which neither his father or grandfather wanted to compete: campus cut-up. His father was both his ideal and his curse.

Yet his congressional race in 1978, when he was 32, suggests that George W. was drawn to politics. He had, of course, grown up with it, and had worked hard on his father's own (successful) congressional race in 1966 as a 20-year-old—another father-son parallel.

George W. Bush: Relatedness and Its Political Consensus

A president's stance toward others is one core of both his character and his leadership. It has certainly shaped George W. Bush's approach to the central question of governance in his administration: How does one govern in a divided society permeated by a ferocious partisan split?

One answer would be to moderate your ambitions. This Mr. Bush has not done. Indeed, one could argue that he has substantially enlarged their scope in response to circumstances.

One could seek a bipartisan policy stance; that would entail substantial concessions to policy opponents. On most issues, Mr. Bush has not done this.

The question is why, and the answer comes in two parts—one political and both personal. The political and personal side of the first is to be found in Mr. Bush's insistence to be true to his own views and principles. This results in a strategy of mobilizing his core and orchestrating their focus by depending on discipline and determination to gain his policy objectives.

This is a strategy with a high political cost—and a personal one as well. Sticking to principles is guaranteed to fuel opposition, even if it doesn't unite it. It is likely to worry those who might eventually support the president, but are not yet quite sure whether his policies are acceptable.¹¹ It is also guaranteed to stimulate rage among some opponents that he would dare to take that course, and anxiety that he might succeed. In an already divided and partisan society this is not a tack that can be taken by a man with a need to be liked.

Consider in this respect the president's stance toward consensus. He likes it, yet is comfortable without it. Moreover, and this is a key element, he is willing to endure the costs, both personal and political, to forge a new one. He is not a man who easily goes along.

He is quite willing to work with the barest minimum of congressional membership to get his policies enacted. This seems clear in his continuing commitment to controversial policies: tax cuts as an article

of economic faith; the war with Iraq; market-oriented environmental policies; his continuing appointment of right-of-center judges in the face of demands that he reverse course; his stance toward the many treaties that he feels are either damaging to U.S. interests or basically deter the treaty abiders and not the cheaters—or both. The list is a long one.

This practice makes Mr. Bush a controversial president, since it runs so strongly against accepted practice and conventional wisdom. It is, politically, a lonely place, and not every leader could tolerate being there. It is also politically risky.

Yet Mr. Bush persists in following his basic clearly spoken views. In this respect the accumulating evidence is that he is the psychological reverse of Bill Clinton. The latter took enormous personal risks but avoided policy and political risk. Mr. Bush seems quite willing to take large policy risks—personal accounts for Social Security, a military confrontation with Iraq, the decision to withdraw from the ABM treaty, a new and controversial National Security Policy document, and so on.

“While Mr. Bush is a man who gravitates toward people, there is a very steely side to him.”

While Mr. Bush is a man who gravitates toward people, there is a very steely side to him.¹² His statement on 9/11—“I’m a loving guy, but I’ve got a job to do”—perfectly captured the psychology of a person who is and can be interpersonally connected, but can also stand apart.

Consider the 2003 firings of the president’s economic advisers and the selection of new ones. It’s of some interest to focus on who was picked and their policy views, but it is also relevant to ask how this was done. One place to begin is with the abrupt, fast, and unceremonious departures of Paul O’Neill and Larry Lindsey. For a leader known for his commitment to loyalty and cordial interpersonal relations,¹³ Mr. Bush wasted no time and acted in a way—especially with Mr. O’Neill—that suggested that this was much more than a change in advisers.¹⁴

When Bob Woodward (2003) interviewed the president, he raised the issue of George W.’s pressing his advisers to begin bombing Afghanistan—the president had pushed them to “name a day.” George W. told Woodward, “One of my jobs is to be provocative...serious to provoke people into—to force decisions, and to make sure in everyone’s mind where we’re heading...” Woodward then asked whether he had alerted Condoleezza Rice or anyone else that he would be so provocative, and Bush replied,

Of course not, I’m the commander in chief—see, I don’t need to explain things. That’s the interesting thing about being president. Maybe someone needs to explain to me why they say something, but I don’t feel I owe anyone an explanation...

There are a number of interesting elements in that quote, but one thing is certain: it is not the voice of a man who needs to be liked, or is led around by his advisers. Indeed, it raises a question of abundant, perhaps too abundant, self-confidence. And here, as in the case of ambition, an important question arises as to where that self-confidence comes from—what experiences, what lessons were instrumental in its development. It is certainly not a natural by-product of any string of accomplishments before Mr. Bush successfully ran the Texas Rangers baseball team.

Character Integrity and Leadership

Having briefly discussed ambition and relatedness it is important to note, briefly, the area of character integrity. In fact, I’ve already alluded to it in my discussion about George W.’s ability to stand apart politically, and his capacity to withstand the strain of fighting to forge a new consensus.

Character integrity is best seen not when it is easy to make a choice, but when it is difficult. It is much more instructive to see how often a leader is willing to disappoint his friends, rather than frustrate his enemies. This is not a matter of taking one easy shot at the most extreme members of your support group, as Bill Clinton did when he criticized song lyrics by a black rap artist Sister Soulja that glorified killing police. It is much more in evidence in Mr. Clinton’s decision to pursue a free trade agreement for North America (NAFTA) over the strong objections of his key and important allies in organized labor.

Mr. Bush is often portrayed as “pandering” to his “right-wing” base. In reality, his base consists of conservatives of all stripes—from moderates, through libertarians, the religious right, and the “movement conservatives.” Yet there is a larger, more important issue here: how often the president is willing to frustrate his friends. An editorial in the *New York Times* (2001) is worth quoting at length:

While environmentalists have sounded an anxious alarm over President Bush’s agenda, it is his allies in industry who are expressing concern that his administration is falling short of their expectations. Several surprising first moves, particularly on clean air, have put environmental organizations in the unexpected role of offering guarded praise for an administration they fought hard to defeat. The industry representatives, who see themselves as early losers, have circulated a view that Mr. Bush’s presidency might not be as much of a departure from his predecessor’s as hoped. Beginning with word of a decision not to try to overturn President Bill Clinton’s declaration of nearly two dozen national monuments, the new administration has gone on to uphold a Clinton-backed plan to rein in diesel emissions and signaled support for a plan to begin regulating carbon dioxide emissions to combat global warming, steps seen as anathema by oil and mining interests. ‘It may be just too early to tell, but we’re not seeing a difference of philosophy from the Clinton days,’ said a leading industry lobbyist who insisted that neither his name nor that of his organization be published.

This is not the only example. Donald Lambro (2002), writing in the conservative *Washington Times*, wrote,

President Bush’s about-face on trade tariffs, stricter campaign finance regulations and other deviations from Republican doctrine is beginning to anger his conservative foot soldiers but does not seem to be cutting into his overall popularity—yet. Mr. Bush has made several decisions in recent weeks that have infuriated conservative leaders here and out in the grass roots. He is pushing for amnesty for illegal immigrants in the border-security bill in an attempt to appeal to Hispanic voters. He imposed higher tariffs on imported steel sought by the industry in West Virginia and Pennsylvania. He said he would sign the campaign finance reform bill that he opposed in his campaign. And he wants a 50 percent increase in foreign aid, a program that conservatives have been fighting for decades.

There are other telling details. Immediately after 9/11, and repeatedly thereafter, George W. has continued to rankle his conservative allies by insisting that Islam is basically a peaceful religion. During the lead up to the Republican nomination, Bush was on the road followed by some national reporters, among them Nicholas Kristof (2000) of the *New York Times*. The setting was a genteel country club with almost all white wealthy Texan women, and some men. George W. gave a speech, and he repeated it in similar venues elsewhere, that spoke of the wealthy’s responsibilities to those less fortunate. He went on in this vein for some time. It was clearly not the message that his audience expected or wanted to hear, but he gave it nonetheless.

THE BIOGRAPHER'S STANCE

Anyone who undertakes a psychologically framed analysis of a president commits himself to spending lots of time with him and has to be able to answer two questions: Why do it? And what are your feelings about the person?

What Is So Interesting About George W. Bush

The psychological part of *High Hopes*, my Clinton study (Renshon, 1998b), was rooted in the puzzle of a man with such enormous talents and such large self-destructive tendencies. While many were struck by his capacity for comebacks, I was always interested in why they were so often necessary.

I also found myself expressing agreement with Clinton's centrist policies, although after following him over some period it became clear that in many important areas he was much of an "old Democrat" as a new one.

George W. presents a rather different configuration. He does not appear to be a person—like Bill Clinton—whose psychology is at war with itself. It's not that there are no questions to answer about George W.'s psychology; it's just that it seems to be more an "as is" rather than an "as if" personality. Understanding his psychology seems to be a matter of aggregating consistencies, rather than accounting for anomalies.

Certainly a major interest in the George W. Bush presidency is his policy ambitions—which I think are transformative—and the circumstances into which he has been thrust by 9/11. The study of Bill Clinton was a study in psychology and leadership with the former underlined, and for George W. Bush it is with the latter underlined.

George W.'s leadership is important because he is trying to transform a political culture from moderate left to moderate right of center, in a society that is deeply divided—all the while fighting a worldwide war against catastrophic terrorism.¹⁵ This sounds very much like a recipe for heroic leadership.

Heroic leadership in American society is the traditional. Its archetype is Franklin Roosevelt, its metaphor the hierarchy, and its motto, "Decide and command." The task of the heroic leader is to convince the public of what it is that he already thinks they *must* do. It envisions the leader as struggling against, and overcoming through determination, courage, or even artifice the circumstances he must surmount. He is known for his authoritative views and acts, not his accessibility. He makes no concessions to the illusion of public intimacy, because the heroic leader stands above and beyond his supportive publics.

Reflective leadership, on the other hand, is personal and diffuse. It draws its authority not by being beyond people, but by being of and like them. It draws its legitimacy not by gathering up all available power, but by dispersing it. Its prototype, but not its archetype, is Bill Clinton. President Bush campaigned as its exemplar. Its metaphor is the prism, and its motto is "Select and Reflect." It is not reflective in the introspective sense, but rather in the sense of radiating outward.

“George W.’s leadership is important because he is trying to transform a political culture from moderate left to moderate right of center, in a society that is deeply divided—all the while fighting a worldwide war against catastrophic terrorism.”

The task of reflective leadership is to gather the disparate elements of a frayed or fractured political and cultural consensus and mirror them so that publics can see the basis for their common purposes. The reflective leader diffuses, not sharpens, conflict. It is leadership whose purpose is not to choose and impose, but to engage and connect.

George W. seems to be a leader with elements of a heroic style—his plain, blunt speech, for example, or his strong beliefs in his views and principles—who has been thrust into heroic circumstances. Yet beneath those circumstances America is in many ways still a culturally and politically fractured society. Heroics are necessary to win the terrorist war, but they won't bring this country and its divergent elements into some semblance of a coherent, integrated society. How President Bush handles those different, divergent, and really conflicted needs will be one of the most important elements of this presidency.

The Analyst's Relationship to the Leader

At least since Freud's analysis of Woodrow Wilson¹⁶ it has been clear that the analyst's own political preferences and views can play an important and distorting role in assessing psychological suitability if care is not taken. This can happen because the analyst admires, dislikes, or has some other set of feelings about his subject. Does an analyst favor activist presidents, liberal, or conservative values? Does a particular candidate or president anger, excite, or disappoint the analyst?

In assembling a psychologically framed analysis of individual candidates or presidents, a political psychologist's own stance toward his subject is a potential source of both information and, if one is not careful, bias. Presidential elections are highly charged emotional events from which an analyst cannot fully remove him or herself. Difficulties of analysis can arise from the direct and obvious distortions that often accompany personal preferences. But they can also arise in more subtle ways when the analyst puts together the facts in a framework of analysis.

The analyst, especially one who makes use of and is trained in psychoanalytic psychology, has a particular obligation to be clear in these matters. No analyst can avoid personal responses to the materials with which he or she constructs an analysis, but one can try to be as explicit as possible. In that explicitness lies at least a partial solution to unintended or, worse, systematic bias.

However, in the end, the analyst's stance toward his subject, examined or not, must stand the scrutiny of others. Do the frames of analysis put forward appear to cover the most important aspects of what needs to be explained psychologically? Is the evidence for putting forward those categories of analysis persuasive? And finally, are the implications drawn regarding these characteristics found in the real world of the president's actual behavior? These questions, and not the emotional appropriateness or correctness of the analyst's personal views, are what must ultimately be primary.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Further consideration of the methodological issues raised in such analyses can be found in Renshon (1998a,b; 2003).
- 2 There is an unusual and uncomfortable degree of self-reference in this essay, but I thought it would be useful to share how I approach developing the questions that arise and the analysis that seeks to answer them. I have worked on several leaders—Saddam Hussein, Bob Dole, Al Gore, John McCain—but my illustrations here primarily are drawn from my longer work, including a book on Bill Clinton and one on George W. Bush to be published in 2004.
- 3 It is useful, I think, to distinguish between *empirical* and *numerical*. The former simply means systematic, while the latter refers to assigning numbers to categories. The two are often confounded. Assigning numbers to a category does not necessarily result in greater theoretical validity. On the other hand, a lack of numbers is no indicator of theoretical deficiency.
- 4 Further examination of the uses and limitations of trait theory in constructing psychologically framed analyses of political leaders can be found in Renshon (2002).
- 5 See, for example, his angry response and abrupt ending of a news conference in response to a reporter's question when he introduced his Supreme Court nominee, Ruth Bader Ginsberg.
- 6 There are exceptions. The Clinton administration failed to impose effective prohibitions on senior staff talking with reporters, and the results were two books that were very informative; one might say revealing (see Drew, 2000; Woodward, 2000).

On the other hand, the Bush administration has been fairly rigorous in imposing discipline, with the result that no authoritative “behind the scenes” book has yet emerged. There is one partial exception, and both the books and the interviews were conducted with President Bush (Woodward, 2002). A book that gives a limited, unauthorized, inside view of the Bush administration is written by a former speechwriter (Frum, 2003).

- 7 The naïve and the skeptical often ask “Have you interviewed him?” Both reflect a belief that such interviews, if they could be obtained, would be of substantial use. Such thinking reflects a lack of appreciation both of the capacities of high-level leaders to present themselves as they prefer and the failure of questions, even from an analyst, to acquire X-ray status. Probing questions are likely to border on the rude or inappropriate and, in any event, are not the kind of questions that are likely to be answered when asked by a stranger—and one with obvious self-interest (not the leader's).

The best psychologically minded question asked by an interviewer was related to me by James McGregor Burns, who interviewed then presidential candidate William J. Clinton in a car between speaking engagements. Burns first asked Clinton what he would do if he submitted a proposal to Congress and they balked. Clinton replied that he would figure out what he might change to make it more acceptable and then go back to them. What if they still rejected it? Burns asked. Clinton replied, I'd see what more I could do or who I could talk with. Burns then asked, Well, what if, in spite of everything, they still balked? Then, Clinton replied, I'd keep going back until they tired.

The interview questions, in a brief time, gave some insight into Mr. Clinton's leadership style, and the determination behind it. Yet it also must be noted that when Mr. Clinton became president, he often and quickly backed off from pursuing a number of proposals that became too controversial—gays in the military and the Cabinet appointment of Lani Guinier are two that come to mind.

- 8 The researcher is also helped in this respect by several daily Web sites that link the reader to other major news stories on specific topic and events.

On something as minor as the recent flap over John DiLulio's comments on the Bush White House, aside from the original article, one could as easily get a copy of the actual memo DiLulio sent to Ron Suskind at *Esquire* and his published response in a local paper explaining why he apologized for his indiscretion.

When President Bush changed his chief economic advisory team, those daily Web political review pages provided links to about 40 or so other stories that gave important pieces of the stories behind the scenes. It's like having 40 well-connected research assistants talking with people who are in a position to provide perspective. You must obviously sort through them, but the building blocks are there.

- 9 These are conveniently collected for the researcher in the *Weekly Compilation of Presidential Documents*.
- 10 Barnes writes, "Bush emerged as a strong commander in chief after September 11 and Republican success in the 2002 election increased his political clout. Democrats have tacitly acknowledged his strong political position by proposing their own tax package. Normally they dislike playing the tax cut game because it's one they rarely win. But they had accused Bush of devoting too much time to fighting terrorism and Iraq and too little to the economy. He called their bluff."
- 11 This is one reason why I suspect that Mr. Bush's popularity ratings have declined from the high eighties to the middle fifties.
- 12 This is also the view of David Frum (2003), a speechwriter for the president.
- 13 Mr. Bush sent out 875,000 Christmas cards in 2003—more than his father, who was known for such cordiality, and more than Bill Clinton—who was famously known for the size of his electronic Rolodex.
- 14 I think it will turn out that the president was angry with both men, primarily based on their performance—which reflected badly on his judgment in selecting them. Mr. Bush sees himself as a good judge of talent, after getting a sense of people over time. This he had with Mr. Lindsey but not with Mr. O'Neill.
- 15 The term *catastrophic terror* simply reflects the rise of terrorist groups with the will, the desire, and, if they can acquire the means, the intention to unleash chemical, biological, or nuclear weapons against their sworn enemies—primarily the United States, but more generally the Western democracies.
- 16 Freud acknowledged that his study of Wilson "did not originate without strong emotions," that he found Wilson "unsympathetic," and that "this aversion increased in the course of years the more I learned about him and the more severely we suffered from the consequences of his intrusion into our destiny" (1966: xiii, xvi). However, Freud went on to say these feelings "underwent a thorough subjugation" (1966: xvi) to a mixture of "sympathy, but sympathy of a special sort mixed with pity" (xv). This is hardly an auspicious vantage point from which to conduct such an analysis and it has led some like Elms (1976, 179) to make the sensible suggestion that analysts "choose a subject towards whom he feels considerable ambivalence rather than harsh antagonism or uncritical adulation."

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