

Essay: Psychological Perspectives on Government Leaders and Terrorists.

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Psychologist Dr. John Gartner, a former faculty member at Johns Hopkins Medical School, has posted a petition on the web that attracted 41,000 signatures as of 4/23/17 to urge impeachment of President Trump on grounds of mental illness, and Dr. Bandy Lee, a Yale psychiatrist, recently also formed a coalition of 800 mental-health professionals who are “sufficiently alarmed that they feel the need to speak up about the mental-health status of the President.”

(<http://mymag.com/daily/intelligencer/2017/04/yale-psychiatrists-cited...>). Trump is a leader, they believe, “who is dangerous to the health and security of our patients.” Another psychologist, Dan McAdams, at Northwestern University in Chicago, wrote an article in the Atlantic magazine last summer, diagnosing Trump with narcissistic personality disorder (<http://theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016...>).

Debate has circulated on the ethics of diagnosing political leaders “from afar”, citing the lawsuit Presidential candidate Barry Goldwater won against

psychologists who diagnosed him from afar when they were concerned with his warmongering tendencies decades ago.

So, we psychologists are in a quandary: we're not supposed to diagnose people without examining them in our office but we also have an ethical duty to warn, as in warning authorities of dangers to citizens from possible harm by a person we know well, as through a diagnostic evaluation or treatment relationship.

And, consider that U. S. Air Force officers in ICBM sites are in charge of firing atomic missiles on order from the President. They undergo careful psychiatric evaluations to protect against wayward behavior for the safety of the world. But they get their orders from the President. So, shouldn't the President also be evaluated for psychiatric stability?

What if psychologists developed valid and reliable measures of traits of political leaders, measures such as rating scales that could permit measurements from afar that identify leaders who are potentially dangerous? If psychologists had developed such a measure that showed Adolf Hitler was prone to warmongering, for example, would they have been within a reasonable professional code of ethics to make that measure available to citizens?

Imagine that German psychologists had developed a 20-item rating of warmongering-proneness that had good reliability and validity. Imagine further

that a group of 50 European journalists used it to rate Hitler and found that his average score across different groups of raters was consistently as high as prior political and military leaders such as Genghis Khan, Attila the Hun and Alexander the Great. We can expect that Hitler would have been outraged and would have tried to snuff out the information.

But citizens in Germany, knowing this information about Hitler, might have been very hesitant to support him in gaining political power. They might have vigorously disseminated the information to the general public, via the underground if necessary, risking retribution for the sake of peace and security.

If you find this an interesting issue, you may go to my web site, Politicalpsychologyresearch.com. On the Publications page, items 1 and 43, you'll find the manual and related studies on a rating scale that measures warmongering-proneness. On the Help Do Research page, study #6, you can rate Trump to get a score on this trait. The average score of half a dozen careful raters will yield a reliable estimate of his level. He has expressed admiration for WW II General George Patton. Does Trump have a warmongering-proneness score similar to Patton's?

On a related theme, a recent issue of the American Psychologist journal focused on terrorism (2017, Vol 72, No. 3). This is a complex concept, the authors

point out. One issue is definition. There are literally dozens of definitions of terrorism, and examples range from politically organized movements such as those in the Middle East that pose threats to Israel and Syria to the relatively apolitical “lone wolf” actions of Osama Bin Laden, the two Chechen-American brothers who did the Boston Marathon bombing, Timothy McVeigh, an ex-U.S. Army soldier who bombed the Oklahoma Federal Building, and school shooters of many sorts, including high school student Kip Kinkel in Springfield, OR. The authors bemoan the lack of psychological research on terrorism.

One way to study the psychological and other motives underlying terrorism would be to interview incarcerated terrorists. I wonder if any of the Guantanamo prisoners have been interviewed by psychologists in this effort. Interviewing terrorists could explore possible childhood, cultural, political, psychological and religious components of terrorism.

Another way to study terrorism is to define “terrorism endorsement” as psychological attitudes or beliefs underlying terrorist activity. For example, I have studied the trait of terrorism endorsement with a simple 12-item scale of these statements:

1. 1 2 3 4 5 If people refused to help you with your problems, you might be justified in killing them.

2. 1 2 3 4 5 If you are mad at the whole world, then it makes sense to destroy the whole world.
3. 1 2 3 4 5 The United States deserved the September 11, 2001 destruction of the World Trade Center buildings in New York City.
4. 1 2 3 4 5 I have the courage to die in committing an act of terrorism.
5. 1 2 3 4 5 I would be willing to join a terrorist organization.
6. 1 2 3 4 5 A good way to bring down a corrupt government is to kill its civilians in terrorist acts.
7. 1 2 3 4 5 People who feel very mistreated by a country have the right to commit terrorist acts against that country.
8. 1 2 3 4 5 I would enjoy steering a big plane into the Pentagon building, or another military headquarters, to destroy it.
9. 1 2 3 4 5 If I were wealthy, I would be willing to donate money to a terrorist organization.
10. 1 2 3 4 5 I would feel honored if I were invited to join a terrorist group.
11. 1 2 3 4 5 I want to learn more about how to become a terrorist.
12. 1 2 3 4 5 I admire terrorists who die for their cause.

This scale is quite reliable (.91) and correlates .64 with an independent 58-item questionnaire measure of violence-proneness. It also correlates with subscales of this violence-proneness measure, specifically Rigid Thinking (.40), Hostile Pleasure (.68), Homicide endorsement (.49), Being Closed to Help (.57), not being willing to Help Stop Violence (.54) and being Dishonest in

Taking Tests. This violence-proneness scale differentiates incarcerated from non-incarcerated teenagers and adults. Thus, it measures traits that are associated with criminality in general.

The Terrorism-endorsement scale also correlates significantly with measures of Social Disenfranchisement on an individual level (.37*), on a group level (.41*) and overall (.52**). Social disenfranchisement is measured with a scale of 80 items which measure five components at the individual and group levels: injustice, vulnerability, helplessness, distrust and superiority.

This terrorism endorsement scale also correlates with several measures of “Authority Paranoia”, expectations of being mistreated by: parents (.56**), police (.57**), one’s national government (.36*), other national governments (.39*), people of other races (.50**), people of other religions (.33*) and people of other groups in general (.44**).

This sort of information leads to the hypothesis that criminal behavior in general and violence and terrorism in particular may be symptoms of a failed society, beginning in one’s childhood family. For example, persons who were abused in childhood tend to see police, religions, governments, etc. as abusive of them when adults. They seem to project unresolved childhood fear and anger out onto institutions as adults.

I once read in a book about war which proposed that wars can't be won on the defensive. One can't hole up in a castle and outlast persistent attackers. From this we might speculate that wars against persistent terrorists, such as the ISIS and Taliban groups in the Middle East, can't be won with military action if it is of a defensive nature. Indeed, military action may simply prolong the conflict if viewed from the above perspective.

Instead of "defending" our way of life, perhaps we must take the offensive in a different way. Perhaps we need to "sell" to the angry men of the Middle East a new package of opportunities, opportunities to feel a sense of belonging to constructive groups.

Authors of some of the articles in the American Psychologist volume cited above opine that terrorists want to feel a sense of social belongingness. If left with no other alternatives, they are vulnerable to recruitment by terrorist organizations. If their countries offer limited meaningful opportunities for education, employment, marriage, public service, recreation and other constructive community activities, they can be seen as lacking opportunities to "belong". We can imagine then that they see the world from the perspective of one who is socially disenfranchised, as discussed above. Belonging to a terrorist organization can give them a sense of belonging, even if it is only to a

destructive organization, perhaps like juvenile delinquents with few constructive options in inner city ghettos join gangs.

Fighting such groups with guns can be expected to fail because it reinforces the self-image of the delinquent or terrorist as one who is being socially rejected, and because it makes captured guns more available to them to use in fighting back, venting their anger at a world they see as unjust, making them feel helpless, vulnerable, etc. They can feel momentary “superiority” pulling the trigger of a powerful weapon.

Other research I have been doing in political psychology strongly suggests that the liberal and conservative worldviews evolved in the human species to serve different functions in the service of clans. The conservative worldview includes endorsement of several traits oriented to protection against threats, such as fearfulness, xenophobia, authoritarianism, prejudice, religious fundamentalism, lying and conniving, social disenfranchisement and militarism.

Research shows that under stress, citizens tend to lean to the right, politically. Lately we see signs of this with England opting out of the European Union and politics leaning right in different ways in France, Turkey and the United States.

World population is growing steadily as are average temperature, melting of ice caps and storm frequencies. The U.N. reports dangerous levels of air pollution in most cities of the world. We seem feeble in our resolve to seriously address these many problems. Instead, we look for boogie men and load our guns. Pogo, the comic strip opossum, told us decades ago that the enemy is us. Opossums play dead in the face of threat.

Instead of rolling over and playing dead, may we have the courage and insight wake up in the face of threats and apply our skills wisely and persistently in the interest of a safer, more peaceful and happier future. Surely we can imagine alternatives other than guns and bombs. For fifteen years we've tried that approach in the Middle East. Let's at least discuss some, peaceful opportunities we could promote for citizens in the Middle East to help them feel a sense of belonging, instead of simply feeling like targets of our hatred.

And may we have the courage to screen candidates for high political office on traits that may put our nation at risk, at least as carefully as we screen their underlings in atomic missile silos who push the launch buttons at the Commander-in-Chief's order.