

# The Psychology Behind the Worst Possible President

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The Psychology Behind the Worst Possible President

By Jane Smiley, HuffingtonPost.com

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Back in the year 2000, when George W. Bush lost the popular vote and was shoe-horned into office by the Supreme Court in spite of clear conflicts of interest on the part of Scalia and Thomas, the psychology of Little George was known to only a few.

To most of us he seemed like a doofus — a more or less well-meaning guy who enjoyed running things like baseball teams and the State of Texas if not too much work was involved. Had been an alcoholic and a drug user, but had apparently come clean in some hazy, quasi-religious way — that was his personal history to many Americans (if not to all those who met with Karl Rove behind closed doors and heard the truth).

At any rate, I remember thinking that Bill Clinton had done such a good job over the years getting the budget into a surplus and winning good feelings around the world that it really didn't matter who of the four who were running (Gore, Bradley, McCain, Bush) might win. They all seemed about the same in lots of ways.

What we really needed was some respite from Clinton's own penchant for mischief. I liked Clinton. I remember that *The New Yorker* magazine asked me for my take on the Lewinsky scandal, and I said that on balance, in spite of the brouhaha, I still preferred a president who would make love, not war. Clinton was a flawed human being, that was evident, but he knew it. He never didn't know it. And he was always trying to make amends.

But he was exhausting — or the media made him exhausting. I thought we were due for a rest.

Little did we know, of course, that the neocons thought we were due for a war. Thinktank gun-jockeys looking for a fight. Do they personally have some human qualities? Who cares. May they rot.

At any rate, what I think happened is that when the Bush/Scowcroft/Baker faction decided to use Little George as their presidential poster boy to expand their Middle-East-based wealth and power, they didn't reckon with Cheney and Rumsfeld. They thought their boy would be personable and easy to

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control.

The key moment was when Cheney went looking for a vice-presidential candidate and found himself. Once they had given him the opening and he had publicly used it to aggrandize himself and his agenda, B/S/B realized that for the sake of party solidarity, they had to live with it. When Baker engineered the coup that was Florida (and I do think one of the "perks" Bush offered as a candidate was that Florida was guaranteed ahead of time by Jeb and K. Harris), I think that B/S/B and C/R found themselves in an uneasy alliance -- goals were the same, but temperaments were different. Right there at the pivot was Little George.

It's pretty clear that Little George requires a constant stream of flattery and cajolery to keep him going, and this was to be supplied by Harriet Miers, Karen Hughes, and Condi Rice. At the same time, his words (and ideas) were going to be supplied by Michael Gerson, who was his favorite speech writer for five or six years, a man who hides his unscrupulous neocon soul beneath a holier-than-thou, falsely modest self presentation. Christian soldier in every sense of the word, and someone who has largely escaped the contempt he deserves for the mess we are in.

At the same time, Little George has a hard time with bad news, so he was never going to be told the truth -- he can't take the truth, as Jack Nicholson might say -- this is evident in the famous 9/11 film of Bush reading about his pet goat when he gets news of the WTC. Talk about dumbstruck and unprepared and feckless and doltish! No, I don't think Little George planned the Trade Center attacks. If he had, he would have practiced a smarmy fake reaction, and he didn't.

But he did get a feel, just a little feel, right after the attacks, of what it might be like to lead the nation. He got a feel and he liked it, and for the purposes of the neocons, it was a good feel and it gave them something to build on in their plan to overcome the cautious side of his nature, represented by B/S/B. The neocons, as we know to our sorrow, never pay back anything they owe, except perhaps with betrayal, so even though B/S/B got them into office, they were never going to listen to B/S/B unless they absolutely had to.

How do you build yourself a madman? Well, first you flatter him, and then you try never to make him angry, and then you feed him ideas that flatter him even more by making him seem to himself sentimentally visionary and powerful and righteous. You appeal to his already evident mean streak and his hot temper by reminding him all the time that he has enemies, and you cultivate his religious side so that the sense of righteous victimization inherent in extreme religion comes out.

If he were not already an ignorant, dependent, fragile, and rigid person, he would not be susceptible to this sort of conditioning, but by temperament and practice, he has nothing of his own to counter your efforts. Then you hire a few shyster-sycophants like John Yoo to tell him (ignorant as he is, with no actual understanding of the Constitution), that as president he can do whatever he wants.

So, here he is, Little George, caught between the devil (Cheney) and the deep blue sea (fifty-some years of being infantilized by B/S/B). Cheney and Rumsfeld, aided by Rice and Miers and Hughes, convince him that his masculinity will only be enhanced by doing all the masculine things he missed out on over the years, especially making war. And Gerson gives his

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war a virtuous, godly gloss.

And Gerson's words come out of his mouth so often that he believes them and thinks they are his. In the meantime, Karl Rove continues to think that he is the maestro, playing Little George (and his base and the rest of the nation) like his own personal piano. Playing the president, for Rove, means enhancing Little George's actual dependency while encouraging him to think that he's the boss (allowing him to call you "Turdblossom," for example, and isn't it telling that "turd" seems to be Bush's favorite imprecation, rather than, say, "fuck"?).

Bush is the worst possible president because he is simultaneously unusually ignorant for a president and unusually shallow, as well as desperate for a success he can call his own. I can see how in a certain sort of era — say an era of prosperity and world peace (can you think of one? I can't) an unusually ignorant and shallow man could bump along in the presidency for a few years without creating havoc and destruction, but these years didn't happen to be peaceful and prosperous, they happened to be delicate and dangerous.

Clinton knew that, and he approached his compromising and self-contradictory foreign policy tasks with care. But Bush and his fellow boors were so blind that they adopted as their motto "anything but Clinton", sheer contrarianism and resentment. It wasn't enough to them for the US to be powerful, as it was in the Clinton years, or to be generally respected and appreciated — they wanted something more sensational — power they could feel, power that was erotic and fetishistic, power that was uncomfortable for others, power that would make them feel big by making others feel small, power that would show Clinton up.

That's the tit Little George has been sucking for the last six years — the deluded propaganda of the neocons, addressed first to him and through him to the rest of us. What we saw the other night, when he proposed more war against more "foes" was the madman the last six years have created. This time, in his war against Iran, he doesn't even feel the need for minimal PR, as he did before attacking Iraq. All he is bothering with are signals — ships moving here, admirals moving there, consulates being raided in this other place. He no longer cares about the opinions of the voters, the Congress, the generals, the press, and he especially disdains the opinions of B/S/and B. Thanks to Gerson, he identifies his own little ideas with God (a blasphemy, of course, but hey, there's lots of precedent on this), so there's no telling what he will do.

We can tell by the evidence of the last two months that whatever it is, it will be exactly the thing that the majority of the voters do not want him to do, exactly the thing that James Baker himself doesn't want him to do. The propaganda that Bush's sponsors and handlers have poured forth has ceased to persuade the voters but succeeded beyond all measure in convincing the man himself.

He will tell himself that God is talking to him, or that he is possessed of an extra measure of courage, or he that he is simply compelled to do whatever it is. The soldiers will pay the price in blood. We will pay the price in money. The Iraqis will pay the price in horror. The Iranians will pay the price, possibly, in the almost unimaginable terror of nuclear attack. Probably, the Israelis will pay the price, too.

Little George isn't the same guy he was in 2000, the guy described by Gail

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Sheehy in her Vanity Fair profile — hyper-competitive and dyslexic, prone to cheat at games, always swinging between screwing up and making up, hating criticism and disagreement, careless of others but often charming. He is no longer the guy who the Republicans thought they could control (unlike, say, McCain).

The small pathologies of Bush the candidate have, thanks to the purposes of the neocons and the religious right, been enhanced and upgraded. We have a bona fide madman now, who thinks of himself in a grandiose way as single-handedly turning the tide of history. Some of his Frankensteins have bailed, some haven't dared to, and others still seem to believe. His actions and his orders, especially about Iran, seem to be telling us that he will stop at nothing to prove his dominance. The elder Bush(es), Scrowcroft, Baker, and their friends, Cheney, Rumsfeld, Gerson, and the neocons have made the monster and in the process endangered the country, the Constitution, and the world, not to mention the sanity of wretches like Jose Padilla (for an analysis of the real reason Gitmo continues to exist, see Dahlia Lithwick's article in Slate, [here](#)).

Maybe the bums planned this mess for their own profit, or maybe they planned to profit without mess; maybe some of them regret what they have wrought. However, they all share the blame for whatever he does next.

Jane Smiley is a novelist and essayist. Her novel *A Thousand Acres* won the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Critics Circle Award in 1992.

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