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Psychobiography and Politics

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Although the results of the recent U.S. presidential elections may not be surprising, what is surprising to some observers is the extent to which some voters base their preferences and actual voting behaviors on the meaning given to a single event in the lives of the candidates. For Senator Dole, this event might be his combat injury, his physical rehabilitation, his divorce of a woman integral to his rehabilitation, even his advocacy of a specific political issue. For President Clinton, such events might include smoking but not inhaling, avoiding the military draft, his admission of marital difficulties, or a promise to "fix" some legislation which he signed into law.

Some political psychologists might posit that voters ascribe political meaning to the single event based on its meaning for their own lives. Other political psychologists might posit that some voters at least make an attempt to discern the meaning of the single event for the candidate, independent of its meaning for others. In this context, psychobiographer Alan Elms has theorized that an act or event may serve three different functions for any person. It may be expressive of some need, instinct, desire, motivational pattern, conflict, sense of satisfaction or other trait or characteristic. It may be defensive, meaning it at least partially satisfies or elicits in some distorted fashion any of the above traits or characteristics with which the person is in conflict, and, in fact, is unconscious of. (This may be what Harold Lasswell had in mind when he wrote his classic *Psychopathology and Politics*. And following Lasswell, some wags might suggest that the very writing of this classic text served a defensive function for the author.) Thirdly, it may be restitutive and actually help people become more aware of conflict, its complexity and ramifications, and may resolve conflict in a manner which strengthens overall personality functioning and even character.

The implications of the above are that a positive event (from a political marketability perspective) such as a combat injury and subsequent rehabilitation may have positive, negative, or even no implications for the psychological competence, coherence, or capacity which a candidate might manifest upon successful attainment of political office. The same applies for a negative event such as a marital problem or use of an illicit drug. And the very ascription of an event as positive or negative is dependent on the expressive, defensive, or restitutive function the ascription has for the ascriber.

On what basis does the voter, including the psychobiographer, determine which of the three functions applies for a particular event and candidate? As psychobiographer William McKinley Runyan points out in his review of Elms' latest textbook, Sigmund Freud is commonly credited with writing the first psychobiography and proposed four guidelines to be employed in developing and advocating any conclusion about the meaning of an event. (1) Avoid opinions based on a single fact. (2) Avoid developing an overall viewpoint which in general pathologizes the person or situation. (3) Avoid idealizing the person or situation. (4) Avoid developing strong conclusions based on inadequate data.

These guidelines have their own problems. Postmodernists certainly would view terms such as fact, pathologize, idealize, and inadequate as problematic because they connote assumptions about the nature of reality which can be challenged by philosophers of science who do not adhere to variants of

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logical positivism. Moreover, upon what criteria can one be sure to have met the guidelines? Are still other guidelines needed in some infinitely iterative and reiterative process?

The very endeavor of psychobiography is viewed with suspicion, even derision, in the eyes of many objective personality assessment experts and psychologists who question the validity of the construct of personality or who espouse a belief that personality, if it indeed might be valid, is comprised of external situations, not internal traits. Regardless of what approach to developing knowledge one explicitly or implicitly, knowingly or unknowingly espouses, all of us-- including psychobiographers and voters-- are prisoners of our own theories. Whether we are premodernists, modernists, or postmodernists, these theories comprise how the world works as well as how it has and could work. Does this, in turn, suggest that people are becoming more and more cohesive but deluded ideologues, or compendia of fragmented selves and perceptual and moral relativists? Or that, pace, the human psyche is not changing but only reveals different facets depending on pomp and circumstance? A future issue of IBPP will focus on these questions as it explores the effects of science, technology, and globalization on individual, group, and organizational psychological functioning. (See Elms, A. C. (1994.) *Uncovering lives: The uneasy alliance of biography and psychology*. NY: Oxford University Press; Freud, S. (1910.) *Leonardo da Vinci and a memory of his childhood*. Standard Edition of the Complete Works of Sigmund Freud, II, 59-63; Lasswell, H. (1930.) *Psychopathology and politics*. The University of Chicago Press. Runyan, W. M. (Ed.) (1982.) *Life histories and psychobiography: Explorations in theory and method*. NY: Oxford University Press.) (Keywords: Psychobiography, Personality, Voting.)