

8-6-1999

Superpower Status and Paranoia: Costs and Benefits

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Recommended Citation

Editor (1999) "Superpower Status and Paranoia: Costs and Benefits," *International Bulletin of Political Psychology*: Vol. 7 : Iss. 5 , Article 4.

Available at: <https://commons.erau.edu/ibpp/vol7/iss5/4>

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International Bulletin of Political Psychology

Title: Superpower Status and Paranoia: Costs and Benefits

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Volume: 7

Issue: 5

Date: 1999-08-06

Keywords: Paranoia, Superpower

Abstract. This article describes the inevitable paranoia and varied consequences that accrue towards a political superpower.

A close reading of the term paranoia as described in the American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Manual Disorders suggests two basic components. First, there's a tendency to ascribe abilities, skills, and powers to some entity far beyond what that entity possesses. Secondly, there's a tendency to attribute hurtful motives, intent, and consequences to the entity bearing such formidable capabilities. Both components seem to inexorably and ineluctably arise among many political actors towards a superpower. And in today's political world with the United States (US) as the consensual superpower, both components of paranoia can be observed.

There are attributed accoutrements--possessing untold wealth, marvelous and uncountable weapons, and an unstoppable cultural and value system--that could not accurately characterize any human enterprise and would even make a sacred entity blush. These attributed accoutrements nurture and reinforce superpower status up to a point. How is this? The attributors are often likely to act as if the entity with superpower status truly is a superpower regardless of the entity's characteristics--a boon when the superpower (like the emperor) is wearing no clothes.

However, there also are the malign attributions based on the above accoutrements. For example, the US must have intentionally bombed the People's Republic of China's embassy in Belgrade--its superior technology would not allow such a mistake to occur. Similarly, the US must have intentionally bombed civilian Serbs and Kosovar Albanians alike. The deaths could not be the result of accidents or incompetence. And the US is secretly behind the international illicit drug trade and responsible for the acquired immune deficiency syndrome pandemic and statistically deviant weather phenomena.

(A less paranoid but contributing psychological phenomenon to malign attributions is the fundamental attribution error. When the US has actually caused noxious consequences to or for others, these consequences are more likely to be attributed to characteristics of the US not to situational variables, luck, fate, and the like.)

There are, then, costs and benefits to the inevitable paranoid attributions ascribed to a superpower. One can only imagine--and then analyze through historical research--how these interact with a truly paranoid superpower entity. (See Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders. 4th Ed. (1994). Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Association; Harper, D.J. (1996). Deconstructing "paranoia": Towards a discursive understanding of apparently unwarranted suspicion. *Theory and Psychology*, 6, 423-448; Hendershot, C. (1997). Paranoia and the delusion of the total system. *American Imago*, 54, 15-37; Pang, A.H.T., Ungvari, G.S., et al. (1996). Querulous paranoia in Chinese patients: A cultural paradox. *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry*, 30, 463-466; Whaley, A. L. (1998). Cross-cultural perspective on paranoia: A focus on the Black American. *Psychiatric Quarterly*, 69, 325-343.) (Keywords: Paranoia, Superpower.)