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The Politics of Geropsychology: Kohl and Weizman

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Abstract. This article comments on geropsychological inferences that may be related to two recent scandals involving aging political leaders.

Two long-term national leaders with public lives of superlative accomplishment are now under attack for seeming lapses of judgment. In Germany, former Chancellor Helmut Kohl is refusing to reveal the names of donors who made political contributions of more than \$1 million--a contravention of a law that requires reporting of contributions over \$10.5 thousand. He also is resisting efforts to clear up allegations that he might be singularly responsible for the amassing of more than \$13 million in unreported funds in the long-term attempt to strengthen his Christian Democratic Party. He is insisting that his "honor" would be compromised by divulging donors even in the face of violations of the law. Meanwhile, the cherished Party that has been the focus of his political life is under attack and losing significant political viability.

In Israel, President Ezer Weizman is being accused of failing to declare over \$450 thousand that he received from a French businessman and political supporter. He is being accused of possible tax fraud and bribery. There appears to be a wide consensus in Israel that he is seriously weakened as President and should either resign or temporarily step down at least until the investigative process runs its course. Yet he is insisting that "if I erred, I made a human error in innocence" and only has agreed not to Issue pardons or swear in judges while he is under criminal investigation.

One common link between the two leaders is that they are both well passed what commonly is called middle age. One might further infer that they may share geropsychological factors affecting what seems to be gross political misjudgment. More specifically, one might surmise that age-specific consequences such as personality rigidity, memory deficiencies, deterioration in social judgment, and becoming mired in the past--all related to cerebral degenerative disease--may constitute such factors.

Yet, empirical findings render many generalizations about "age-specific consequences" as suspect. One problem is that the physical and psychological status of an aging leader is difficult to discern. Outright deception and lack of candor occur in the service of protecting, maintaining, and even increasing political power. Moreover, the dynamics of the leader and inner cadre of trusted aides can actually affect the quality of diagnosis and medical care in a manner that too often exacerbates existing health problems and consequences. The same can be the case for the nature of the political system populated by the leader and inner cadre (especially in a closed political system) that can lead to a downward, fatal spiral in decision-making quality. Thus, linking aspects of a leader's health to political judgment and behavior is fraught with complexity.

Instead, one might turn to empirical findings on the psychological epiphenomena, consequences, and sequelae of aging for other population samples. Here one finds a host of data that may go against lay generalizations as well as defy generalization. For example, Parker (1999) found that a sample averaging 19.5 years reminisced more than another sample averaging 74.7 years, while the older sample experienced greater postreminiscence positive affect than the younger sample. Borozdina and

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Molchanova (1997) found that although older samples (75-93 years) exhibited less stable and adequate self-concepts, there were wide individual variations and sex differences in the findings. Coleman et al (1999) did not find strong support for a dichotomy between younger and older age as to variables such as depression related to absence of accommodation and assimilative processes of coping. Luszcz et al ((1997) found that there were negligible differences in the residual age-related variance in some measures of memory. Frieske and Park (1999) found that 86% of the age-related variance in televised news was actually mediated by measures of sensory acuity information and processing speed. And Molinari et al (1999) found that with aging there is a general mellowing of the personality--at least for those diagnosed with personality disorders. They also found that there are no age differences in patients diagnosed with personality disorders except that older adults were significantly less likely to be diagnosed with more than one disorder. (This last set of findings may be quite interesting in light of present day vignettes of political leaders as--to put it mildly--psychologically challenged.)

One might conclude that the problems of Kohl and Weizman are not in the least age-related--that leaders of any age might be enmeshed in similar straits. In fact, the perception of old age being implicated in political difficulty might be one that is negatively correlated with age. (See Borozdina, L.V., & Molchanova, O.N. (1997). Die qualitaet des selbstkonzepts im alter (the quality of self-concept in old age). Zeitschrift fuer Gerontologie und Geriatrie, 30, 298-305; Cohen, R. (January 25, 2000). Audit traces illegal funds in Kohl party. The New York Times, p. A4; Coleman, P.G., Ivani-Chalian, C., & Robinson, M. (1999). Self and identity in advanced old age: Validation of theory through longitudinal case analysis. Journal of Personality, 67, 819-849; Luszcz, M.A., Bryan, J., & Kent, P. (1997). Predicting episodic memory performance of very old men and women: Contributions from age, depression, activity, cognitive ability, and speed. Psychology & Aging, 12, 340-351; Molinari, V., et al. (1999). Age-related personality differences in inpatients with personality disorder: A cross-sectional study. Journal of Clinical Geropsychology, 5, 191-202; Orme, W.A., Jr. (January 24, 2000). President of Israel faces accusations with defiance. The New York Times, p. A6; Parker, R.G. (1999). Reminiscence as continuity: Comparison of young and older adults. Journal of Clinical Geropsychology, 5, 147-157; Post, J.M. (1980). The season of a leader's life: Influences of the life cycle on political behavior. Political Psychology, 2, 35-49; Post, J.M., & Robins, R.S. (1990). The captive king and his captive court: The psychopolitical dynamics of the disabled leader and his inner circle. Political Psychology, 11, 331-351.) (Keywords: Geropsychology, Leadership, Scandal.)