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Trends. Trust and Diplomacy: Observations of the New American President

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Politicians and political pundits--allies and adversaries alike--have made much of United States (US) President George W. Bush's comments that he found Russia's president, Vladimir V. Putin, to be trustworthy. Were the comments but boilerplate with no intended significance? Were they intended to show that Mr. Bush could get along with another president--thus burnishing the former's image of competence? Were they intended to reassure US allies that the Russians would eventually go along with Mr. Bush's plans for a ballistic missile defense, the abrogation of the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, and an expansion of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization from the Baltic to the Bosphorus and beyond? Or did Mr. Bush mean that he really did find Mr. Putin to be trustworthy? Recognizing that the above inferences are not necessarily independent, one might still wonder what Mr. Bush meant if he, indeed, meant what he said.

First, Mr. Bush would seem to believe that there is something labeled "trustworthiness" as a trait carried around by people--or at least the Russian president. More generally, people would be assumed to bring a certain psychology to the table, and this psychology would seem relatively impervious to situational variance. This trans-situational consistency and predictability--if an accurate read on people--would certainly seem a boon to diplomacy. If inaccurate, it would be a huge bane.

Second, Mr. Bush's take on a consistent and predictable world would seem to be reinforced by a fuller description of his comments: "I looked the man in the eye. I found him to be...trustworthy...I was able to get a sense of his soul." Here, Mr. Bush apparently would not have considered that looking one in the eye as a route to assessing trustworthiness--even if a reliable and valid pathway for assessing trustworthy people--might be a bogus pathway for assessing the untrustworthy, who might even simulate various eye presentations when looking back. Perhaps there would be very low false negatives but high false positives. Moreover, the notion that there is something that is ultimately intrinsic, integral, and comfortably essential to a person's psychology--if not accurate--would lead to heuristics of social cognition in the context of political decision making that might be unfortunately off the mark. One might assume one is dealing with a total person when there is no person.

Third, at least one opponent of Mr. Bush has objected that the statement on trustworthiness was unfortunate given its foundation on only a "first two-hour meeting." The notion that time--at least up a point--is positively correlated with accurate personality assessment is shared by the opponent, many mental health professionals, and many lawyers who revel in critiquing mental health professionals who purportedly have captured the sense (if not soul) of legal contestants based on small amounts of contact with said contestants. First impressions may be last impressions to Mr. Bush--a state of affairs that might not be lost on Mr. Bush's staff personnel and agents of influence targeting Mr. Bush.

Suggestions on what to trust about Mr. Bush's comments on Mr. Putin's trustworthiness may well prove untrustworthy. This may be a trustworthy conclusion in a diplomatic arena wherein leaders cannot only agree to disagree but disagree while asserting agreement. (See Kosugi, M., & Yamagishi, T. (1998). General trust and judgments of trustworthiness. *Japanese Journal of Psychology*, 69, 349-357; Pearce, J. L., Branyiczki, I., & Bigley, G. A. (2000). Insufficient bureaucracy: Trust and commitment in particularistic

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organizations. *Organization Science*, 11, 148-162; Perlez, J. (June 18, 2001). Bush's warmth toward Russian leader stirs skeptics. *The New York Times*, <http://www.nytimes.com>; Singh, J., & Sirdeshmukh, D. (2000). Agency and trust mechanisms in consumer satisfaction and loyalty judgments. *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, 28, 150-167; Slovic, P. (1999). Trust, emotion, sex, politics, and science: Surveying the risk-assessment battlefield. *Risk Analysis*, 19, 689-701.) (Keywords: Bush, Diplomacy, Putin, Trust.)