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Political Psychology in the Contemporary Political World

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Abstract. This edition of IBPP explores several recent political events from the vantage point of political psychological perspectives and constructs.

-----The United States and the International Criminal Court

With over 60 countries having ratified the relevant treaty, the International Criminal Court will soon be a reality. Yet the constructs of reality, perception, and deception--within the context of an objectivist stance on constituting reality--may subvert the Court's role as an adjudicative entity for individual complicity in human rights atrocities such as genocide, war crimes, and crimes against humanity.

The stance of the present United States Government (USG) is to not only not ratify the treaty but also to remove the USG signature furnished near the end of the second Clinton administration. The rationale for this stance is that the Court would render USG military and civilian personnel much more vulnerable to politically motivated, unjust, and frivolous suits than currently.

The counter to this rationale is that the Court will only prosecute an individual when that individual's national government is unable or unwilling to prosecute. As quoted in *The New York Times*, the United Nations Secretary General has stated that "Countries with good judicial systems who apply the rule of law and prosecute criminals and do it promptly and fairly need not fear. I do not think this is a court that is going to run amok." Yet it may be this counter to the USG rationale that is running amok.

First, the implied notion that there is some objective standard of good, rule of law, promptly, and fairly is a very tenuous one. One might posit that much of the past, present, and future of political violence is motivated through a lack of consensus as to an objective standard. One might also posit that the very phenomenon of competing perspectives of political philosophers and members of various polities weaken the notion of an objective standard. One might still have absolute faith in an objective standard, but that absolute faith must still be parsed as to objectivism itself and to the particular form that the objective standard would take.

Second, the process towards some consensual notion of the various constructs such as good and fair is inherently political. Moreover, the process is and would inevitably be subject to change as social, economic, cultural, and other factors change. A temporally situated judgment of alleged misbehavior seems quite susceptible to problematic legal decision-making wherein identification of transgressions and the countering of such an identification may be so dependent on ever-changing, contextual factors. Even if one were somehow to extricate adjudication from politics, differential perceptions could roil the international stage even among well-meaning adjudicative actors.

And, of course, not all adjudicative actors are well-meaning. Deception via such routes as material corruption, sacred rage, and other varieties of instrumental advantage suggests that the Secretary General's statement should be rethought and recast.

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The Bush administration is often attacked for isolationism, a veritable phobia of multilateral treaties, a sense of entitlement that borders on noblesse oblige, and isomorphic political behavior to that of entities that constitute the Axis of Evil--viz., North Korea, Iraq, and Iran. Perhaps the administration merits some or even much of this attack. However, on matters concerning the International Criminal Court, it is the administration's stance that deserves merit. (See Crossette, B. (April 12, 2002). War crimes tribunal becomes reality, without U.S. role. *The New York Times*, p., A3; Eagle, M. N. (2000). A critical evaluation of current conceptions of transference and countertransference. *Psychoanalytic Psychology*, 17, 24-37; Overbeck, J. R., & Park, B. (2001). When power does not corrupt: Superior individuation processes among powerful perceivers. *Journal of Personality & Social Psychology*, 81, 549-565; Tsang, J.-A. (2002). Moral rationalization and the integration of situational factors and psychological processes in immoral behavior. *Review of General Psychology*, 6, 25-50; Weine, S.M. (1999). Against evil. *Peace & Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology*, 5, 357-364.)

-----Venezuela and the Mass Media

Near the temporary ending of his presidency and reactive to mass political demonstrations, Hugo Chavez of Venezuela ordered five private television stations shut down. He charged that the stations were inciting violence and were trying to oust him by broadcasting scenes of opposition political protests and of political violence against the opposition.

Most opponents of Chavez attacked his charges and intended actions (his orders were not totally obeyed) as based on doing whatever he thought was necessary to stay in power and as exemplars of violations of free speech. And they may have had a strong case--at least based on what might have been assumed to be going on in his stream of consciousness and on some conceptions of civil liberties, civil rights, and human rights.

Yet Chavez's actions could be supported based on a large amount of social and behavioral science data suggesting that some people in some situations are significantly influenced to emulate televised events through constructs such as vicarious conditioning, social comparison processes, other ongoing self-construction processes, and so on. Televised events also were serving the purpose of transmitting anti-Chavez information based on the political power needs of the transmitters that might only weaken his presidency.

In fact, "hot images" via television seem to be ever more crucial--subject to eventual habituation processes--in setting local, national, and international agendas and priming political violence in today's era of globalization. Unfortunately for Chavez and all other political leaders, multi-modal advances in telecommunications seem to be encroaching on tightly planned and implemented information management strategies. Avatars of Good and Evil await instruction in navigating this Brave New World. (See Forero, J. (April 12, 2002). Protests against Venezuelan leader end in violence. *The New York Times*, p. A3; Jacobson, D. (2001). Presence revisited: Imagination, competence, and activity in text-based virtual worlds. *CyberPsychology & Behavior*, 4, 653-673; Smith, B. J., Ferguson, C., McKenzie, J. Bauman, A., & Vita, P. (2002). Impacts from repeated mass media campaigns to promote sun protection in Australia. *Health Promotion International*, 17, 51-60; Sotirovic, M. (2001). Media use and perceptions of welfare. *Journal of Communication*, 51, 750-774.)

-----The Blame Game in the Mideast

Most world observers would agree that there continues to be too much violence characterizing the political conflict between Israel and the Palestinian National Authority. The agreement dissipates when observers seek to blame one side or the other; attribute violence as more deserved by one side or the other; and attribute short-term, mid-term, or long-term causality for the violence. As to causality, there are two salient hypotheses making the global rounds. And, interestingly, neither directly implicates Israel nor the Authority.

The first hypothesis is that the Clinton administration is causally responsible for the recent violence. One sub-hypothesis is that too much attention, enmeshment, and emotional involvement by the president directly induced the violence. Another is that the failure of so much "fire power" led to the violence. Putative psychological phenomena of relevance might include the reactance stimulated through the diplomacy of the administration, the positive reinforcement of violent behavior through sequences of such behavior and high-level attention of the administration, the administration's pressure on Israel for significant compromise that only whetted the appetite of the Authority for more, and even a "halo effect" through some inevitable imparting of evil from the evil Clinton administration (in the eyes of conservative Republicans and their global acolytes and isomorphs) to the main parties to the Mideast conflict.

The second hypothesis is that the Bush administration is causally responsible for the recent violence through its initial policy of relative benign neglect of Mideast events. Putative psychological phenomena of relevance might include generating violence as a means to obtain the seemingly lost attention of the White House, social entropy wherein violence spreads without some strong political force as a structure and container, a similar Hobbesian scenario wherein the bloody tooth and claw of Nature rules without political structure and intervention, or beliefs that the relative benign neglect suggested the administration's incompetence and inadequacy concerning Mideast affairs and presented opportunities ripe for exploitation on the part of one or both sides--as well as all relevant allies, adversaries, and neutrals.

The obvious but less well-attended point is that an infinite number of events preceded and are concurrent with the recent violence. Epistemological approaches based on faith, authority, reason and logic, and empiricism/experimentalism afford many pathways to arrive at causal attributions or to support attributions already arrived at unknowingly.

It would, then, seem that political dialogue concerning causality--beyond that for therapeutic and propagandistic designs--is a moot endeavor. The war of words over the violence may be many things, but a discourse over what is True and Good it is not. (See Anderson, I., Beattie, G., & Spencer, C. (2001). Can blaming victims of rape be logical? Attribution theory and discourse analytic perspectives. *Human Relations*, 54, 445-467; Fraser, C.O. (2001). Was it my fault? Effects of counterfactual mutation focus and self-presentation strategy. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 31, 1076-1095; Kanekar, S., & Miranda, J. P. (1998). Attribution as a function of agential distance in a causal chain. *Genetic, Social, & General Psychology Monographs*, 124, 271-282; Sanger, D.E. (April 13, 2002). Fading optimism: The Mideast morass. *The New York Times*, pp. A1, A8.) (Keywords: Chavez, International Criminal Court, Israel, Palestinian National Authority, Venezuela.)