

State of Confusion: Assault on the American Mind¹ **Bryant Welch, JD, Ph.D.²**

I don't want to just end the war; I want to end the mindset that got us into war.
Barack Obama

America is rapidly becoming a nation psychologically unable to confront its problems. From the White House, from the media, and from the pulpit, Americans have been deceived by predatory political forces into fighting a disastrous war, squandering our national wealth, destroying our standing with other nations, and neglecting badly needed initiatives at home. It is a series of failures that will haunt America for generations to come. And it will not end simply because George Bush leaves office.

America has been gaslighted. Gaslighting is an insidious set of psychological manipulations that undermine the mental stability of its victims. These techniques have invaded our media, infiltrated our churches, and attacked our most basic free institutions. Yes, it has even infected the American Psychological Association as APA's recent tragic response to the Bush Administration's detention centers has shown. (See "Why DID APa Do It") For millions of Americans the techniques have altered the way they think, feel, and act. It has been nothing less than an assault on the American mind.

I am a clinical psychologist and attorney. I have spent half of my thirty-year career treating patients in intensive psychotherapy. The other half I spent in Washington, D.C., much of it in a political position with the American Psychological Association. There I had the opportunity to study politics, politicians, and political manipulation firsthand as few clinical psychologists have.

My recent book *State of Confusion: Political Manipulation and the Assault on the American Mind* (Thomas Dunne Books, St. Martin's Press, June, 2008) explains from a psychological perspective how and why these manipulative and destructive techniques are now deeply imbedded in our political system and why they are having a progressively debilitating effect on the American mind. If Americans do not recognize them and confront them, the country will be less and less able to respond rationally to the very real

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crises facing America. And if we psychologist–psychoanalysts do not help America do that, who will?

Why have Americans become so vulnerable to divisive political tactics? *Why* did America get dragged into such an unwise war in Iraq? *Why* do fundamentalist religious groups, Fox News, and right wing hate radio now play such influential roles in America’s political landscape? *Why* are long-accepted scientific ideas like evolution under siege? These questions and others puzzle people from all points on the American political spectrum and from all points around the world. *What has happened to the American mind?*

The term “gaslighting” comes from the 1944 movie *Gaslight*, starring Charles Boyer and Ingrid Bergman, in which a psychopathic husband, coveting his wife’s property, tries to drive his dependent young bride insane by covertly manipulating her environment, leaving her increasingly perplexed and uncertain. Among other things, he raises and lowers the gaslights in the house while denying to the wife that there has been any change in the lighting. He feigns genuine concern for her, but cleverly isolates her from any outside contact with the rest of the world where she might become independent of his propaganda–like assault on her sense of reality. He fires the trusted elderly maid and replaces her with a younger one whom he can seductively control and who is naturally competitive with his young wife.

With a combination of seduction, deception, isolation, and bullying, he so warps his wife’s reality sense that she gradually begins to accept his “reluctant” suggestion that she is losing her mind. She becomes almost totally dependent upon the husband to tell her what is real and what is not real in spite of periodic clues that he is lying and really quite hostile and hateful towards her. Just as she is on the brink of a complete nervous breakdown, she is rescued by a perceptive Scotland Yard detective who has become suspicious of the husband and uncovers his machinations. When he exposes the husband’s deceptions to the wife, she regains her stability and is able to forcefully confront her husband as he is taken off to jail.

For many of us in the mental health profession, the term “gaslighting” refers to a series of mind games that prey on our limited ability to tolerate much ambiguity or uncertainty about what is truly happening in important areas of our lives. It is a highly destructive form of psychological manipulation that undercuts trust in one’s own sense of reality and results in confusion and perplexity. In the search for a resolution to their perplexity people often become extremely vulnerable and dependent on someone else whom they regard as omniscient and to whom they look to “clarify” confusing events. This makes them vulnerable to manipulators and false prophets. This is what has been inflicted on large segments of America.

Throughout my seventeen years in Washington, D.C., I lobbied and managed myriad psychologically related issues in the public arena. I am proud that during those years, my organization was in the forefront in addressing important issues such as recognition of the rights of sexual minorities, need to address psychological trauma as a consequence of war and disaster, and (despite the failure of the original Clinton plan) the need for a truly

national health care plan. As an attorney, I also fought against large HMO insurance companies in courtrooms around the country on behalf of mental health patients who had suffered the all-too-often fatal effects of our current system of managed health care.

When I moved to Washington to enter the political world I was initially struck by the contrasts between our clinical work and political work. In the treatment setting two people are working as hard as they can to achieve greater self-understanding. This requires tremendous candor and honesty. In the political world, in contrast, smoke and mirrors predominate and are often weapons of choice. In therapy people are searching for their true motivations; in politics they are often trying to obscure them.

But ultimately the experience that I brought from the therapeutic consulting room to the Washington political world was invaluable. I began to see that transcending that difference between the political world and the therapy world was the human mind, working the same in both the clinical setting and the political. Psychological concepts such as “resistance,” “symbols,” and “transference” were extremely helpful in learning how to develop a political legislative campaign. Understanding and being able to read the nature and depth of certain emotional states, like envy and narcissism, helped avoid pitfalls that could invite political opposition from people whose support was badly needed. In a relatively short period of time we were able to make substantial advances for mental health treatment through our legislative initiatives, legal battles, and public relations struggles. We opened psychoanalytic training to psychologists and social workers around the country, made psychologists’ services eligible for Medicare reimbursement, and won critical battles legitimizing psychologists’ rights to practice in landmark lawsuits like *Capp v. Rank*. We repudiated the myths being perpetrated by a few entrepreneurial psychologists that managed health care could provide high quality mental health services. Most importantly for the long term, we positioned psychology well for the inevitable transition our health care system will have to make to a true national health insurance system.

At first I had thought using these psychological tools was just the only way *I*, given my background, could make sense of political things. With time, I concluded it was the only way political things *do* make sense.

But there was another part of the psychological world in Washington for which I was not so prepared. There is a widely known and very old saying in Washington, “If you want a friend, get a dog.” That is an overstatement, but not by as much as one might think. And the reason for that is because Washington is a beehive of deception where one can never be sure of what is real and what is not real. Who is sincere and who is just very good at pretending to be sincere? It can get very confusing. In Washington, gaslighting reigns.

I saw many individuals painfully gaslighted in work and organizational settings. I saw whole organizations undercut by manipulative CEOs. But when gaslighting is done to an entire country as it has been to the United States, the stakes are chilling. In America the political use of gaslighting is leading to a psychologically impaired and unstable American electorate. The resulting policy decisions that are made have devastating implications for all Americans and the world.

Once Americans adopt the irrational beliefs and become dependent on the gaslighter, they are highly unlikely to reconsider their beliefs no matter what the consequences and no matter what the evidence is to the contrary. This is why it was so easy to retroactively adjust the rationale for the Iraq war so many times. With remarkable ease, America's cause went from eliminating weapons of mass destruction to evicting an evil dictator, to spreading democracy, because the idea that our leaders might have been wrong, incompetent, or worse was simply too disconcerting a proposition for many Americans to consider. An already traumatized and confused nation, bombarded by messages from people on whom they had become increasingly dependent, was simply too weak to rebel.

But why is there such dependency? As we all know, a fundamental aspect of human psychology is the mind's effort, its outright *need*, to have a reality it feels certain of. The reality it creates may or may not be accurate. That is less important. From the point of personal psychological need, it is better to *feel* certain than to *be* right. The mind simply cannot function well without this certainty and, if it feels uncertain, it will seize on almost anything for help. This is the pressure point of maximum vulnerability in the human mind, a point that right wing ideologues have long known how to press—and that progressive liberal forces are only now beginning to address (in large part due to the important work of psychologists like Drew Westen and others). American politics is now a battle to shape what Americans perceive as reality.

Making *reality* a political battleground means that in America reality is up for grabs, and the long-term risk is that voters will become the prey of anyone who seems to provide security, strength and certainty.

When the mind's reality sense is repeatedly manipulated by clever people with devious intent, the victim's mental ability to function effectively is eroded and they become disoriented. Rationality falls by the wayside. People behave erratically and because of their own ever-increasing uncertainty they become dependent upon demagogues and ideologues that speak confidently and appear to offer escape from the uncertainty. This has happened to millions of Americans who, often lured by moralist bromides, have turned to neo-conservative spokesmen, ministers, and politicians and become dependent on them, even enthralled by them.

It is remarkable how many of these prominent political and religious spokesmen to whom conservative Americans have looked for help, have themselves been exposed for serious hypocrisy, preaching morality but practicing what they themselves have labeled immorality. What is even more astonishing, however, is how dependent and willing to overlook hypocrisy and deception millions of their followers are. *This reluctance to see the gaslighters for what they are is the cornerstone of the gaslighting relationship.*

In March 2007 former House Speaker Newt Gingrich, shortly after publishing his new book, *Rediscovering God in America*, admitted that he was having an affair with a younger employee at the same time he was leading the impeachment of President Clinton for not being forthcoming about the same offense. Gingrich had thechutzpah to imply that

his willingness to risk being exposed as a hypocrite at the time of the impeachment was a profile in political courage. But this same allegation of hypocrisy could just as easily be attributed to Rush Limbaugh, William Bennett, Rev. Ted Haggard, and Bill O'Reilly all of whom were caught in the most remarkable scandals for individuals assuming their self-righteous postures of moral superiority. With the exception of Haggard, none appears to have suffered any lasting effects.

In the movie *Gaslight*, the gaslighting husband fired the elderly maid and carefully controlled any outside influences that threatened his own control of his wife's reality sense. Similarly, today's gaslighters have extended their reach throughout American society in multiple ways to increasingly control information Americans receive about the world. They have invented a 24-hour-a-day, 7-day-a-week cable pseudo-news channel, co-opted evangelical religious leaders, and viciously attacked their opposition with smear campaigns.

At the same time, professions that have historically played important roles in helping us define our political reality are all under attack—mainstream media, law, education, even science, have all suffered a precipitous decline in influence. Thus, the American mind is on one hand assaulted by powerful new forms of deception and, on the other, abandoned by traditionally supportive institutions. Given the complexity of our present situation, this could not have occurred at a more difficult time.

In America today, psychological gaslighting exploits people already confused and perplexed about an increasingly complex world. Their world is made more confusing by leaders deliberately misleading them and making them struggle with explosive, but only subliminally recognized, psychological states. The current assault on the American mind is taking place in three specific emotionally charged psychological states: paranoia, sexual perplexity, and envy. These are the true “battleground states” in American politics today. Whoever carries the day in addressing and harnessing these psychological states will control and shape the American political landscape for the coming decades. Any political party or movement that fails to consider them in its campaign strategy handicaps itself significantly.

The genie cannot be put back in the bottle. The methods of gaslighting are now deeply and permanently ensconced in our political system and will not go away. The forces are there, the techniques operative. Unless we learn about these techniques and how to defend against them we will continue to suffer from them. But when we do understand how the mind works—how certain states of mind affect us in our political behavior—it provides us with a powerful and consistent explanation for America's behavior in today's political world.

American politics, now and for the future, will be the politics of reality. Any party that does not try to articulate a reality that appreciates the needs and complexities of the human mind will become increasingly obsolete. For a nation armed with nuclear weapons to suffer the psychologically regressive effects of gaslighting at the same time it is grappling with the post-9/11 loss of its island fortress security is a highly combustible combination

that is terrifying in its potential consequences. *State of Confusion* is my attempt to sound an alarm to these dangers, describe the psychological dynamics behind them, and suggest potential remedies to prevent the potentially devastating consequences they could have. An understanding of the human mind is the key tool of the new political architect and psychologist—psychoanalysts more than any other professionals have the understanding to explain and make constructive use of those tools.

Why *Did* the APA Do It?

The regressive effects of gaslighting have taken their toll on our national organization as well as our country. Many Division 39 members were shocked last year when APA twice refused to take an unequivocal stance against psychologists' participation in the Bush detention centers. The fact that other health care organizations, typically more conservative than APA on humanitarian issues, were very outspoken about the issue made it all the more puzzling.

In human rights groups and liberal organizations around the world the arguments APA spokespersons advanced in support of APA's position did not pass the red face test for credibility. Instead, their seemingly transparent disingenuousness only made us sound embarrassingly like the Bush Administration.

Banning psychologists' participation in reputed torture mills was clearly unnecessary, it was argued. To do so would be an insult to military psychologists everywhere. Psychologists would never engage in torture. Further, psychologists' participation in these detention centers was really an antidote to torture since psychologists' presence could protect the potential torture victims. We were both too good and too important to join our professional colleagues in taking an absolutist moral position against one of the most shameful eras in our country's history.

There are two questions that beg for answers. How did the APA form such an obviously close connection to the military? And why did the APA governance—the Board of Directors and the Council of Representatives—go along with the military interests? How could an organization of such bright people be rendered so incompetent to protect the profession from the horrible black eye they have given us?

I have had ample opportunity to observe both the inner workings of the APA and the personalities and organizational vicissitudes that have affected it over the last two decades. With one interruption, for most of the twenty year period from 1983 through 2003, I either worked inside the APA central office as the first Executive Director of the APA Practice Directorate or served in governance positions including Chair of the APA Board of Professional Affairs and member of the APA Council of Representatives.

When the torture issue broke last year, the answer to the first question about APA's military connection seemed obvious. Since the early 1980s, APA has had a unique relationship with Hawaii Senator Daniel Inouye's office. Inouye, for much of that time, has served as Chair of the Subcommittee on Defense for the Senate Appropriations Committee. The Subcommittee has responsibility for all U.S. defense spending. One of Inouye's

administrative assistants, psychologist Patrick DeLeon, has long been active in the APA and served a term as APA president. For over twenty-five years, relationships between APA and the Department of Defense (DOD) have been strongly encouraged and closely coordinated by DeLeon. It was DeLeon acting on behalf of Inouye who initiated the DOD psychologist prescription demonstration project in the late 1980s that began psychology's efforts to secure prescriptive privileges.

For many APA governance members, most of whom have little Washington political experience, Dr. DeLeon is perceived as a canny politician and political force on Capitol Hill. The two most visible APA presidents on the torture issue, Drs. Levant and Koocher, based on personal discussions I have had with them in recent years, clearly hold DeLeon's political savvy in high regard.

While I personally got along well with DeLeon and never doubted his commitment to psychology, his view of psychology and his sense of priorities were quite different from mine, and I did not share the assessments of Dr. DeLeon's political prowess. I felt his priorities had more to do with the status of psychology as reflected in comparatively minor issues that were often unconnected to issues that were of true importance to practitioners. Rightly or wrongly, I often felt that an accurate sense of context was missing from his political analysis and objectives. It's the same feeling I have now when I look aghast at what APA has done on the torture issue. Except this time, it is not something relatively innocuous.

Some people attempt to explain APA's recent seemingly inexplicable behavior by assuming that large sums of money changed hands on the torture issue. I could certainly be wrong, but I think the more likely (and more remarkable) explanation is that the judgment of those making the decisions was simply that bad and that insensitive to the realities of the human suffering they were endorsing.

Regardless, there is no question that APA had formed a strong relationship with military psychologists and the DOD through its connections with Inouye's office. But it is the second question that is probably more difficult to understand from afar. How could both the APA Board of Directors and the APA Council of Representatives support the military on this issue and subject the profession to such embarrassment by supporting a policy that is anathema to the vast majority of psychologists?

Here's how. The pluralistic and multifaceted governing process that I saw when I entered the APA in the early 1980s ended in the 1990s. Differences of opinion stopped and the APA suffered a terrible regression. Increasingly inbred, under the administration of Raymond Fowler, the association agenda was primarily financial, focusing on making money both through real estate and through what many of us felt was unwarranted, financially harsh treatment of APA employees.

More peculiarly, Fowler's "agenda" for APA was encapsulated in the phrase "working together" a noble idea that to the best of my knowledge was never attached to any actual substantive agenda. Instead, it served as a means of social control, a subtle injunction

against raising any of the conflictual issues, challenges, or ideas that need to be addressed in any vital and accountable organization.

The result was that much Council intercourse turned into fawning over one another. Many members appeared to me to bathe in the good feeling that came from “working together.” For some, the bath was a narcissistic one and organizational regression became more debilitating. In other instances during this period, dissent by rank and file members was stifled with heavy handed letters from the APA attorney threatening legal action or communications from prominent members of the governance threatening ethical action if policy protests were not discontinued.

As a result of the regression, the governance of APA was ill-prepared for thoughtful deliberation on a matter as important as the torture issue. As I have written in *State of Confusion*, when people are confused, they are eager to be told what is real. The governance was simply over its head in trying to effectively deliberate on such an issue when there was organized support on the other side coming from the military interests supported by Koocher and Levant and possibly DeLeon.

When the torture issue arose, the Council, despite the efforts of Division 39 members, fell victim to some of the very silly arguments described above. Council members were told that to oppose psychologists participation in the detention actions was to cruelly suggest that our colleagues might engage in torture. In a fashion chillingly characteristic of the gaslighter (described above), it was implied that those who raised concern about torture, were themselves torturing their colleagues who were working in the military. One prominent member of the APA governance gratuitously raised the ethnicity of one of the military psychologists, seemingly opening the possibility that the opponents to torture were racist.

These arguments were then followed with the grandiose closing argument that psychologists presence at the detention centers was critical to make sure torture did not recur. We psychologists had a moral duty to prevent immoral behavior. The piano player, once aroused to the possibility of what was going on upstairs, was now needed to prevent it. Yes, these were the arguments that carried the day in APA deliberations. In the more discerning eyes of the world, they have very little credibility.

But the gaslighting is not over, even now. There is one more step in the process. History will show this to be a despicable period of American history. The people who have supported APA’s position on this issue obviously do not want their legacy at APA to include that they supported a policy that failed to indict the detention centers. The recent history must be revised. In a seeming gesture of reconciliation, the APA has offered to continue negotiating the matter with the dissident groups. In this fashion the historical revision has already begun. It may well be that the final policy APA adopts will ultimately read the way it should have last summer and much, much earlier when it actually mattered. APA will “get it right” shortly before or shortly after George Bush leaves office. In leaving a final written policy that is like our sister organizations’ original policies, APA’s shocking failure at the critical time will appear to never have happened. Such is the work of a

regressed and gaslighted organization. Despite being an organization of psychologists, APA has been subjected to very little analysis.