

**POLITICAL POWER:**  
**AN ALLURING STIMULANT FOR REGRESSION AND OMNIPOTENCE**

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“Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.” Most of us know this first sentence, but few are familiar with the sentence that follows. “Great men are almost always bad men,” said Lord Acton in 1887, in a letter to Bishop Mandell Creighton (1904). Political power often appears to be a stimulus for regression to primitive dynamics, characterized by grandiosity and omnipotence. Under its intoxicating influence, you can easily slip into feeling like, “His majesty, the baby,” as Freud (1914) put it, entitled to have anything your heart, stomach or loins desire. Greed prevails!

Just think of the politicians who have acted as if the laws of civilization did not apply to them, such as Nixon wiretapping the citizens on his “enemies list” and breaking into the Democratic Party’s national headquarters at the Watergate Hotel to acquire political information, JFK frolicking with prostitutes in the White House pool (Hersch, 1997), Bill Clinton pardoning fugitive Mark Rich putatively in exchange for contributions to the Clinton library, George W torturing detainees at Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo in violation of the Geneva Conventions (Wolson, 2004), Senator Ted Stevens taking bribes and calling them gifts, and Mayor Sarah Palin trying to convince her Wasilla librarian to censor books which offended her religious beliefs. And this does not include Governors Eliot Spitzer and Rod Blagojevich. Often these politicians

transgressed without shame or guilt in the full light of day. And I thought only Tequila made you feel invisible!

It's like the fable of the emperor exhibiting himself in his new clothes, projecting his grandiose self-deception into his subjects who were blinded or too intimidated by their fear-induced idolatry to acknowledge his transgression. Only a child, insulated from this pathological idealization could see his nakedness and point it out.

The danger of regression to omnipotence in heads of state has been intuitively recognized for centuries. A prime example is the crucial role of the king's court jester. Only the "royal fool" had the right, to poke fun at the king, bursting his grandiose bubble by telling him the truth, without risking his life. The devalued status of "the fool" permitted the king not to take the blows to his omnipotence seriously, which minimized his humiliation and narcissistic rage. The jester kept him grounded in reality. Similarly, many of America's founding fathers were extremely relieved when George Washington refused to become the king of America, and participated in designing a constitution with checks and balances on the potential abuse of the chief executive's power. America has struggled with the president's inclination to abuse power ever since.

Psychologically, how does political power induce regression to omnipotence? Freud (1914) theorized that all of us begin life totally self-absorbed, in a state of primary narcissism. As infants, we lack the cognitive and perceptual capacities to distinguish ourselves from the outside world. Nothing exists apart from ourselves. Thus, we begin life feeling omnipotent, like God. We are motivated by our immediate impulses and exploitatively use our parents to fulfill our needs. Greed predominates and we feel

entitled to have whatever we want. When frustrated, we become enraged and want to destroy the source of frustration.

Through parental discipline, socialization and psychological maturation, we gradually learn that we are not omnipotent, that we need to depend on others for vital care-taking. Our parents help us respect others, modulate our aggression and differentiate right from wrong, especially through a healthy resolution of the Oedipus complex. But, according to Freud, we all pay a heavy psychological toll for repressing our infantile narcissistic longings. We lose our pre-Oedipal paradise in which we felt that the world was our oyster, in which we could demand the satisfaction of our immediate impulses and wreak the most horrific vengeance, in fantasy, against those who defy us. Throughout life we are burdened by constantly having to suppress these unconscious, primitive impulses.

The experience of political power is ominously similar to our infantile experience of “His majesty the baby,” when our mothers carried us down the street and total strangers stopped to lavish praise upon us and tell us how cute we were. After this time, it was downhill, for as we grew older, we had to work harder and harder for less and less attention and reward. And nothing could quite equal the euphoric experience of fetal enwombment or early infancy when all of our needs were taken care of and we were under the sway of our delusions of magical power. No wonder psychoanalysts have emphasized the pervasive human urge to regress, to return to early childhood where we can once again be the center of our own universe with our intoxicating feelings of omnipotence. The power, celebrity and attention that comes with high political office often trigger these repressed longings and the propensity to regress to infantile dynamics.

It is therefore not surprising that many politicians have narcissistic trends in their characters, especially adaptive grandiosity, which I will discuss in the next paragraphs.

In 1995, a very esteemed colleague of mine, Dr. Peter Wolson, defined adaptive grandiosity in relation to creativity, as “the individual’s exhilarating conviction of his potential for greatness, the extremely high value he places on the uniqueness of his feelings, perceptions, sensations, memories, thoughts and experiences” (Wolson, 1995a). “It is an ego-state which can be conscious or unconscious. This clearly differs from normal healthy self-confidence in which an individual believes in the value of his perceptions and in his capacity for successful achievement, but lacks the pervasive grandiose qualities described above” (Wolson, 1995).

Adaptive grandiosity is inextricably intertwined with reality testing, with secondary process thinking and with the separation of the self from others. As a result, behavior emanating from this ego-state is reality oriented and adaptive. For the artist, adaptive grandiosity was deemed necessary to help overcome separation anxiety when confronting the blank canvas. Similarly, adaptive grandiosity in politics provides the motivational fuel to step into the unknown, to take creative risks as a political leader and to exert one’s energy, intelligence and fortitude often against insuperable odds. This was evident in J.F.K’s proposal of a space flight to the moon, and the intense application of his ego-strength to achieve this goal. It is evident in Barack Obama’s willingness to venture into the ambiguous, overwhelming terrain of our economic and Iraq/Afghanistan crises with a grandiose conviction of his wisdom and ability to find a solution. Many pundits were awed by Obama’s unusual aplomb and audacity in facing these challenges

that would bring most self-confident people to their knees.

The concept of adaptive grandiosity is primarily an extreme manifestation of healthy narcissism, and is most similar to Kohut's concept (1971) of the archaic grandiose and idealizing selves as necessary building blocks for ambition, goals, and achievement. However, it is also a manic defense against the politician's depressive reaction to separation from the maternal introject when having to step into the void as a leader and confront the unknown.

Because of its fragile nature as a manic defense, adaptive grandiosity can easily regress to maladaptive grandiosity, in other words, omnipotence: a belief in magical control of both external and internal objects, an inclination toward fusion states, an inability to distinguish between self and other and the euphoric feeling that you can do or have whatever you want, regardless of human limitations. During the political process with its intoxicating fame, adulation and power, the politician's adaptive grandiosity often yields to the temptation of regressing to infantile dynamics and omnipotence, unleashing Pandora's box of greed in all of its manifestations.

Psychoanalytically, Gordon Gecko from the movie, "Wall Street," was, to some degree, right. He said, "Greed is good....It is the essence of the evolutionary spirit. Greed in all of its forms for life, for money, for love and for knowledge mark the upward surge of mankind" (1987). The Kleinians, for example, would argue that greed is the basis of love and dependency, epitomized by the baby's urge to consume the breast. If one regards greed as the baby's primordial lust for life and the oral foundation of our psychosexual longings for control, money, sex and knowledge, it is a powerful source of

motivation for achievement and fulfillment in all aspects of human endeavor. However, for this to be so, it needs to be contained and regulated by one's ego-strength, which is inherent in the dynamics of adaptive grandiosity. In contrast, the uncontained greed that is triggered by omnipotence is often destructive and self-destructive. We saw this in Illinois Governor Rod Blagojevich's impeachment following his fantastical demand to head a foundation supported by Bill Gates and Warren Buffet as one among many other avaricious requirements in exchange for his nomination of an Illinois Senator to replace Barack Obama. With maladaptive grandiosity, the emperor believes that he should be appreciated in his new clothes, or as Nixon said in the movie, "Frost/Nixon." "When the President does it, it's not illegal;" or, President Bill Clinton's grandiose entitlement to have oral sex with Monica while on the phone conducting war in the Balkans, not considering how this might impede his judgment or impair his legacy. And, of course, he was impeached for perjury, obstruction of justice and abuse of power related to the Lewinsky scandal and the Paula Jones lawsuit.

One "likely parental model for" adaptive grandiosity "consists of excessive" maternal "adulation that undermines the complete separation of self from object and reinforces archaic grandiosity" (Wolson, 1995). "Moreover, there is probably only a partial resolution of the Oedipus complex, with some crucial identifications with the paternal object to form the final ego-ideal, Such identifications facilitate the connection between grandiosity and secondary process functioning. Chasseguet Smirgel (1984) said that achieving an identification with the paternal object helps the child separate from the primary fusion with mother and is a major developmental step toward separation-individuation. This step represents a change from the pleasure principle to the reality

principle, and from primary process thinking to secondary process thinking” (Wolson, 1995).

“To the extent that excessive primary narcissism continues to prevail and that a positive Oedipal resolution is not fully achieved, with the ego-ideal partially merged with the ego, the person becomes the embodiment of his or her own ideals. This results in a grandiose confidence in one’s capacity, and an extremely high sense of personal self-worth. Moreover, the person has achieved sufficient individuation and object relatedness to be able to achieve with the full use of secondary process functioning. This provides an extraordinary motivation to achieve success, with the full use of one’s talents, skills and intelligence” (Wolson, 1995). The regression of adaptive grandiosity to omnipotence depends on the strength of secondary process functioning. The stronger the person’s ego-strength, the less likely the regression.

A good illustration of adaptive grandiosity versus maladaptive grandiosity is a comparison of Barack Obama with John McCain in the recent presidential election campaign. Obama appeared to be extremely determined, well-measured, energetic, and exceptionally self-confident as he put together what some have called the best campaign organization in presidential history. And of course, he was an eloquent, charismatic speaker. His success seemed to be fueled by adaptive grandiosity. The prominence of his grandiosity was evident in the Al Smith Roast in which he poked fun at his own arrogance and sense of “specialness,” and was confirmed by David Brooks, New York Times columnist, who noted on the Chris Mathews Show (12/27/08), that Obama had the chutzpah to tell an aide, (according to a piece in The New Yorker), “I know more about

speech writing than my speechwriters, I know more about policy than my policy directors and I think I know more about politics than my political directors.” Thus, there was some psychological basis for McCain’s campaign mocking him as “the chosen one,” and criticizing him as “too ambitious,” like Cassius’s devaluation of Caesar.

McCain displayed adaptive grandiosity in his remarkable perseverance especially in the face of defeat. However, in contrast to Obama’s calm and thoughtful determination, he was erratic and impulsive, desperately flinging political mud at Obama and making grandiose but empty gestures. For example, during the congressional bailout talks, he temporarily suspended his campaign and rushed to Washington, as if riding in on a white horse to save the day. But he was marginalized, even by fellow Republicans, and rendered impotent. The main theme of his campaign was self-aggrandizement. “Elect me because I am great, I am experienced, I am a war hero.” And yet what we saw was an impatient, immature politician grandstanding and losing emotional control.

His friends and political colleagues were shocked. They said, this wasn’t the John McCain they knew, possibly the most skilled senator at crossing the aisle and remarkably effective promoting and passing difficult legislation. We witnessed this latter John McCain immediately after his defeat in the graceful, admirable concession speech he delivered.

Apparently his maladaptive grandiosity was triggered when he finally won the Republican nomination for the presidency. Everyone observed McCain regress before their eyes into “his majesty the baby,” the antiauthoritarian maverick. The adaptive grandiosity that helped him get elected to the senate and contributed to his stellar career

had devolved into infantile narcissistic dynamics characterized by impulsivity and lapses in judgment and integrity.

In effect, he regressed to his former impetuous self when he was an antiauthoritarian “hot-head,” a player, carousing with the ladies and an impulsive daredevil, crashing planes during his naval training, which cost millions of dollars.

According to Timberg (1995), his biographer, John McCain had been the apple of his mother’s eye. She raised him single-handedly while his four-star Admiral father was largely absent and emotionally distant. At puberty, McCain changed from a quiet, obedient, courteous boy into a mischievous, rebel. In high school he was nicknamed “Punk” and “McNasty” by his peers.

Psychologically, he seemed to be struggling with a conflict between a demanding superego that required duty, service and conscientiousness influenced by his father’s and grandfather’s military tradition and his rage against being controlled by paternal authority. Until his POW experience he felt that he had failed to fulfill his father’s expectations (Timberg, 1995). This history appears to reflect a partial Oedipal victory and paternal abandonment resulting in adaptive grandiosity and a predilection for defiance.

John McCain said that his Vietnamese POW experience motivated him to dedicate his life to his country rather than personal gratification. His many productive years in the Senate reflected this dedication. Unfortunately, under the alluring influence of the political power he acquired by winning the RNC nomination for President, he

regressed.

In contrast, Barack Obama committed only a few narcissistically devaluing faux pas during the campaign. These included his devaluing depiction of blue collar workers in Western Pennsylvania as bitterly clinging to guns and religion due to job losses, and, shortly after winning the election, his contemptuous remark about Nancy Reagan conducting séances. However, on the whole he was exceptionally careful and calm in the face of all the political mud that was hurled at him, reflecting excellent secondary process functioning. His ego-strength limited his potential for regressing to maladaptive grandiosity.

Similar to McCain, Obama was largely raised by mother figures, his grandmother and, to a lesser degree, his mother. The latter effectively abandoned him for philanthropic pursuits. His father divorced his mother and returned to Kenya when Obama was one. One might infer that he also had a partial Oedipal victory with some positive male influences through his Indonesian stepfather, who taught him to fight, and through his grandfather. However, at age 12, Obama finally met his real father for a few months and was extremely impressed with his charismatic eloquence and mesmerizing storytelling, as were his mother and grandparents. As a young adult, Obama learned that his father had returned to Kenya as the fair-haired boy of Jomo Kenyatta, President of Kenya, and had aspirations of becoming Kenyatta's successor. But he was outspoken against government corruption and offended Kenyatta. He was subsequently demoted, lost his influence and turned to alcohol (Obama, 1995).

In this story, we see the psychogenic basis of Obama's adaptive grandiosity, his

partial oedipal victory, the male influences of his step-father, grandfather and his idealized real father who was eloquent, inspirational and had his own presidential ambitions. The title of Obama's (1995) autobiography, "Dreams From My Father," reflected this ego-ideal. Obama had a confusing, detached, lonely childhood, moving from Hawaii, to Indonesia, to Kansas. During late adolescence he drifted toward drugs, alcohol and depression, but his grandmother confronted him about the importance of respecting himself and applying his intelligence and talents to create a good life. He took her admonitions to heart and credits her for his success.

In addition, he was confused about his identity, raised by whites while being half black and looking black. And it wasn't until he was in college and began to immerse himself in black culture that he finally consolidated his identity and felt at home. He seems to have projected his longing to repair his fragmented self-structure onto the political landscape with his sublimated aspiration of unifying the disparate, compartmentalized, multicultural, multiracial, multi-political aspects of American society. His newfound political power has not yet triggered a regression to infantile dynamics.

In contrast, the regression to maladaptive grandiosity was paramount in the "imperial presidency" of George W. Bush, as the Los Angeles Times recently termed it. As Republican Governor of Texas, George W. was known as a conciliator with the Democratic power blocs in the State Senate and House of Representatives. Based on his track record, he justifiably ran for President as a "compassionate conservative," which

appealed to many voters who knew of his ability to make compromises with his political opponents.

Shortly after becoming President and sustaining considerable media criticism for his mispronunciation of words and lack of intellectual gravitas, George W was saved by 9/11. Strutting with a macho swagger, he became one of the most grandiose, omnipotent presidents in American history, the “war president,” as he put it. This display of maladaptive grandiosity seemed, in part, to be a way of compensating for his profound sense of inadequacy.

In an Op-Ed piece written for Counterpunch, I (Wolson, 2004) pointed out how the Bush regime displayed all the symptoms of a narcissistic personality disorder.

“A narcissistic display of grandiosity usually compensates for a sense of vulnerability and helplessness. Clearly, 9/11 made Americans feel extremely vulnerable and, consequently, perhaps, willing to accept President Bush's grandiose policy of unilateral preemption without much protest. As outlined by neo-cons Richard Perl and Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz years before 9/11, this strategy expresses the superior attitude that the United States, as the most powerful country on earth, has the right to forcibly remove the leaders of other nations who are judged to pose a threat to American security, and impose its democratic form of government upon them. As President Bush recently told Tim Russert on Meet the Press, he reserves the right to wage war to achieve these goals without having to consult with the international community.

“The grandiose idealization of "going it alone," certainly appeals to the masculine Western tradition of America's rugged individualism. But when taken to the extreme of a

lone gunslinger, fighting the "evildoers" who are "wanted dead or alive," it smacks of defensive grandiosity. As a result of its isolationism, the Bush administration now has to face the responsibility of American soldiers dying daily from terrorist attacks with few international troops to relieve this tragic burden.

“In addition, awarding lucrative contracts to firms, like Halliburton, with which both the Bush family and Vice-President Cheney have been intimately involved, raises questions of self-serving exploitation.”

What was the genetic basis of George W’s ostensible regression to maladaptive grandiosity? The following illustrates how this regression was fueled by primitive dynamics. George W. grew up much closer to his mother than his father, who was away for considerable periods of time engaged in business and politics. But as early as eight years of age, he demonstrated a precocious ability to work the room during his father’s campaigns, hobnobbing with prospective benefactors and soliciting their support. This was an early sign of his enormous confidence in his ability to win over adults through his social charm and personality, perhaps the pre-eminent feature of his “good ole boy” rise to the presidency. Nonetheless, his younger brother, Jeb Bush, the past Florida governor, revealed that George W. felt the pressure of living up to his father’s example. As analysts, we know that when the father is extraordinary or inaccessible, or a combination of both, as was George H.W., the son’s idealization can increase monumentally, which makes it harder to believe he can ever fill his father’s shoes.

“Brothers Jeb and George W. referred to their father as the “beacon.” George W. believed his father was superior to most men at whatever he did. The son’s academic and

work history virtually replicated his father's, but, in many instances George W. fell short of his father's accomplishments. He was a cheerleader at Yale, not a star baseball player. He was in the Navy reserves ducking a Vietnam war assignment, not a war hero, and he failed at multiple business enterprises which his wealthy family financed. His underachievement could well have been a reaction to the pressure he experienced trying to live up to his father's image" (Wolson, 1999).

It seems that George W might have unconsciously coped with his critical superego through alcoholism and an anti-authoritarian mischief making and rabble-rousing. During his father's 1988 presidential campaign, according to his biographer, Bill Minutaglio (2001), George W. commented it would be better for him if his father lost the election and retired to private life because of the enormous expectations for a son in politics whose father was president.

George W's transformation from an impulsive alcoholic to a serious politician seemed to be a result of his wife's influence and his religious conversion. He came to believe that God wanted him to be president and guided his destiny. This projection of omnipotence into God served both adaptive and maladaptive functions. Adaptive grandiosity impelled by religious zealotry, motivated him to control his impulsivity and employ his social skills and cunning to win the governorship of Texas and the presidency.

However, once he became president, his regression to infantile dynamics and omnipotence became palpable. How much of George W's god-inspired "macho" grandiosity invading Iraq and toppling Saddam was fueled by an Oedipal defiance and

wish to triumph over an idealized castrating internal father? He all but declared that his father had failed to complete the job in the first Iraq war. By rejecting the counsel of his father's trusted advisor and friend, James Baker, and his father's policy of international negotiation in favor of a policy of American domination, it was as if he was trying to prove his father was the castrated male, not himself.

Clearly, political power can be a dangerous inducement to the tyranny of primordial impulses over reason. And these impulses and infantile dynamics can be displaced through projective identification into a nation's psyche, as we experienced in the administrations of George W, Richard Nixon and Joseph Stalin.

Stalin is obviously an extreme example of adaptive and maladaptive grandiosity. Under the influence of his adaptive grandiosity, the Soviet Union became one of the two most powerful nations on earth, but Russian society became as paranoid as Stalin. His regression to omnipotence was so profound that he gradually expected his political cohorts to read his mind, as if they were primitively merged with him. They knew that if they didn't, they could be sent to the gulag and/or killed. Moreover, Stalin induced a culture of omnipotent gratification among his henchman. For example, Beria, head of the secret police, allegedly a good family man, felt the sadistic entitlement to pick up any woman he desired and rape her (Montefiore, 2003).

I strongly recommend Simon Sebag Montefiore's (2007), "Young Stalin," which reads like pulp fiction although it is thoroughly researched and annotated. Also his, "Stalin: Court of the Red Tsar" (2003) which takes over where "Young Stalin" ends. Stalin was an abused child, beaten daily by his drunken father. He was favored by his

adoring mother, but she was also an alcoholic and beat him. Like many successful narcissistic personalities, he had numerous talents and skills. He defensively retreated to his room and read voraciously anything he could get his hands on: philosophy, history, literature, economics, etc. As an adolescent, a number of his romantic, lyrical poems were published and became minor Georgian classics, and he sang so well in the church choir that he was considered good enough to become a professional. He was also a talented painter. However, the Russian revolution became his great passion and he raised money for it by becoming a bank robber and a murderer (Montefiore, 2007). According to Montefiore, Lenin picked Stalin as one of the leaders of the revolution because he wanted a bloody revolution and knew that Stalin was a killer.

Clearly, Stalin suffered from malignant narcissism verging on sociopathy, and paranoia. Unlike most sociopaths, however, he could control his impulses. An interesting side-note was his idealized identification with Adolph Hitler, a kind of malignant twinship of brothers in evil, if you will. Montefiore (2003) suggested that this fraternal bond was cemented in Stalin's psyche when he learned of Hitler's "Night of the Long Knives," in which Hitler had the SS murder the members of the SA, who had been his most loyal supporters and enforcers. He apparently feared they were acquiring too much power. Stalin thought this was a brilliant strategy, and seemed to emulate it with many of his closest associates, eventually having them imprisoned and/or killed.

His fraternal bond with Hitler was consecrated with the Molotov-Ribbentrop non-aggression pact during World War II. When his advisors informed him that Hitler was on the verge of invading Russia and bombing Moscow, he couldn't believe it. He

imprisoned the first messengers and protested repeatedly that this wasn't possible. When the bombs fell on Moscow, he was dazed and confused, clinging to his delusion that this was merely a provocation by Hitler. His defense ministers didn't know what to do, fearful of provoking his ire. But he quickly reconstituted and became a brilliant strategist, ultimately defeating the German army.

Toward the end of his administration, he retreated to his isolated dacha and seemed to re-enact his lonely childhood, complaining that nobody wanted to visit him. However, he commanded his chief ministers to attend monthly feasts in which he forced them to consume great quantities of the most delicious food available while the rest of Russia starved. He would compel them to eat and drink beyond their capacity until they regurgitated and were totally inebriated. He would then exhort them to consume anew, while he monopolized their attention with repetitive recitations of his youthful exploits. Bored nearly senseless, drunk and bloated, they mustered all their willpower to look attentive. They would inevitably begin to fight with one another while he listened very closely for any signs of betrayal. Stalin's greed and gluttony resulted in this five foot four, pockmarked, life-long thin man looking pregnant in old age with an extremely engorged stomach (Montefiore, 2003).

As history has shown, political power can easily trigger regression to maladaptive grandiosity and destructive greed. Our hope with the new administration is that Obama's grandiosity remains adaptively fueling his creativity in resolving the complex, daunting problems facing America today and not regress to omnipotence and greed. Like every king, he needs the equivalent of a court jester in the form of Saturday Night Live, late-

night T.V comedians, journalists and political pundits, and the confrontation of his powerful team of strong-minded individuals to poke holes in his grandiosity when it becomes too inflated and keep him grounded. As for any political leader, we need to keep in mind Lord Acton's profound, but chilling insight, that "Great men are almost always bad men" (1904).

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