"On Nixon and The Culture of Narcissism"

By: David James Fisher, Ph.D.

Volkan, Itzowitz, and Dod's book, Richard Nixon: A Psychobiography (1977) is intended to be developmental, psychoanalytic, and nonjudgmental. Neither partisan nor debunking, it comes at a particularly opportune moment, given America's current political situation, in which another personally flawed president, having weathered impeachment hearings, faces paralysis of his administration and the erosion of his moral authority.

The authors have written an interpretive essay rather than a full-fledged biographical or psychohistorical study; they bring neither new factual information, nor have they combed the archives. Departing from previous attempts at a psychoanalytic understanding of Nixon, they instead investigate his mind by introducing a diagnostic and dynamic conception of his "narcissistic personality organization." Borrowing from the clinical contributions of Kohut and Kernberg, and building on the methodological model of Volkan and Itzowitz's 1984 work on Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, the authors attempt to resolve the ambiguities of Nixon's career from an exploration of his "excessive narcissism," a perspective designed to clarify his strengths and weaknesses as a leader.

It is methodologically difficult, often impossible, to document the first of an individual's life – even when that person is alive and reclining on one's couch. The authors put together a "construction" of Nixon's early childhood, in addition to a number of plausible "guesses," to arrive at the psychological truth of his inner world. They base their conjecturs on contemporary psychoanalytic concepts drawn from infant development studies. Winnicottian notions of the

mother-child dyad, and clinical perspectives elaborated to treat narcissistic grandiosity and rage. For evidence, the authors draw primarily on the secondary literature on Nixon; occasionally they cite testimony from a playmate. There is no direct documentation from Hannah Nixon, his mother, and nothing from Nixon himself – hardly surprising, given infantile amnesia and Nixon's relative lack of psychological-mindedness. One potentially rich source of information – the White House tapes – appears not to be used or interpreted. This is a pity, given the random quality of the tapes, Nixon's candor and vulgarity in them, and the opportunity they offer to trace Nixon's free associations and fantasies.

The essay is built around one key explanatory concept – namely, that Nixon suffered from an exaggerated but nonmalignant narcissistic personality organization. The authors claim that Nixon was traumatized by a separation from his mother at nine months of age because of her hospitalization for a mastoid operation; they do not provide data on the exact duration of that separation. Hannah Nixon, they argue, lacked the qualities of a good-enough mother; she was depressed, overwhelmed, emotionally cold, and uncaring. Baby Richard and his mother were out of tune, unable to be attached in a nurturing manner. Having such a mother left Nixon psychologically hungry and competitive. He developed a narcissistic personality to protect himself from his extreme dependency and emotional hunger, displacing and projecting the rage he felt toward his mother, whom he tended to sanctify. Nixon's exaggerated self-regard and independence went hand-in-hand with a personality that required hatreds and that constructed and provoked enemies. Lacking empathy toward others, he often sought revenge. Cruel toward his enemies, unprincipled and ruthless toward his opponents, he was often self-sabotaging; his narcissism contained a strong component of masochism. A reported "crier" as an infant and

crybaby as a boy, Nixon shows a profile suggesting considerable pain, grief, and rage, as well as an intense craving for attention and recognition and a persistent sense of himself as a victim.

As a politician, Nixon displaced onto the public the same desires and fantasies (and defenses against those desires) that he felt toward his mother. The grandiose Nixon coexisted with the hungry, vulnerable Nixon; throughout his life he struggled to regulate his fragile self, his vast ambition serving to overcome this deep deficiency. The hurt child, the weak Nixon, tended to project or deny the devalued parts of himself. This made him permanently suspicious, capable of making intractable enemies, and feeling always threatened or internally empty. Reaching the oedipal phase did not provide meaningful compensation: Nixon's father, Frank, is described as "bad," a failure in life, and a sadist as well. Nixon never successfully identified with a good-enough father; he quite possibly internalized a number of Frank's violent and brutalizing tendencies.

Nixon the adult politician was motivated to protect his grandiose self: he tended to isolate affect, to obsessively control his feelings, to intellectualize, to avoid conflicts, and to be compulsively driven to attain power. His motive, the authors assert, was to be perceived as special, as someone who made history, who accumulated historical firsts. A loner throughout his life, he had no true friends, not even his wife Pat, whom he mistreated and humiliated. Devoid of empathy, he had no authentic interest in the welfare of others. People were selfobjects, mere extensions of himself, necessary for him to function, but not regarded as worthy of respect as separate and distinct individuals. Because of his envy, his narcissistic rage, his paranoid fears, and his constricted ability to feel, he frequently exhibited self-defeating behavior. A bad sport

and an awful loser, he was unable to admit defeat or take responsibility for his irrational and self-destructive decisions.

The authors repeatedly assert their need to tame, control, and discipline their countertransference toward their subject. If this occasions a gain in objectivity and clinical empathy, it diminishes the reader's sense of the author's subjective connection to Nixon and to the problematics of assessing him. Indeed, there is something old-fashioned, conservative, and anxious in the authors' wariness of their countertransference. They take a fascinating person who lived through tumultuous times, and turn his life into a rather dull, entirely predictable affair. Despite their recurrent use of the language of pathology, they insist that the reader remain aware of Nixon's human qualities: "We felt kinship for him, we admired his 'courage' to find solutions to his inner problems, we 'scorned' some of the ways in which he reacted to events, we had 'sympathy' for his having a self-destructive side that in turn injured the nation (p. 148). But because they do not reveal their working through of this countertransference, they deprive the reader of the knowledge it might have produced. We are left instead with an absence. The result curiously deadens the essay's impact on the reader. Rather than share the process they have undergone, the authors attempt to unravel the enigmas of Nixon's character by building a schema of his inner world. All the events and "crises" of Nixon's life are then fit into this preconceived psychodynamic frame.

Over his long political career, Nixon had a history of sleazy transactions. Lying and deception mark every period of his political life, not just Watergate. The authors do not explore the deeper meanings or the legacy of these lies, implying that an empathic understanding of Nixon the

"patient" excuses and forgives all. The authors never hold him accountable for his misdeeds and crimes. In writing of Nixon's narcissism, they fail to indicate where mirroring and empathic understanding end and where accountability begins. At times their paradigm rationalizes the deceit: "Nixon's reliance on truth distortion was absorbed in his narcissistic personality structure, becoming an armament in maintaining his grandiose self, and in his skillful dealings with the political process" (p. 95).

The authors do not psychologically explore Nixon's relationship to significant group processes and to sectors of the American constituency with which he resonated; he tapped into xenophobic American fears of communism and subversion during the Cold War; he pandered to anxieties about race, the economy, and crime; he articulated the aspirations and ideals of the American lower middle classes (for example, the morality of hard work, meritocracy, and the wish for America never to lose a war). Nixon is often hailed (and hailed himself) as a brilliant strategist in foreign policy – the opening to China being the most often cited as a master stroke. Yet he frequently made public statements about foreign policy goals while secretly pursuing precisely opposite ends. The man who made law and order a slogan on his campaigns flagrantly broke laws, considering himself unencumbered by the rule of law.

As a politician in the age of mass media, Nixon understood that political power rests on the capacity of the politician to gather and manipulate information. Politics, then, becomes akin to theater (Nixon had training as an actor). Presidential power evolved into an exercise in swaying public opinion and the attempt to mobilize the masses through the construction of simple, powerful images. For Nixon and his associates Watergate became a problem of public relations.

Politics becomes severely distorted within such a conception, truth becoming a matter of indifference to the men exercising power. Once truth loses its meaning, the political process loses its moral legitimacy. Politics then degenerates into utter banality, leaving a public resigned to thinking that all politicians are liars and crooks and consequently that the political process does not matter.

Psychobiographical approaches must carefully avoid contributing to the further trivialization of our political culture. Psychoanalytic forms of understanding ought not to contribute to people feeling even more inadequate and victimized than they already do, especially since the massive disillusionments of the Vietnam War and Watergate. Presenting political leaders as narcissistic may intensify the widespread political cynicism in our society, without appreciably deepening our understanding of political elites. Because the authors tend to view the mature Nixon as a "patient" – and a rather primitive one at that – they unwittingly contribute to the banalization of the political process, making it every less possible to hold our leaders responsible, particularly for their unconscious dynamics and their ignorance thereof.

Nixon's disrespect constitutional norms and the separation of branches of government, his disdain for democratic values, do not disappear because we grasp his narcissistic deficits. He was a man who abused his formidable power, who perverted the rule of law, who deployed his towering resentments against the press and the Eastern establishment, and who consistently demonstrated his zeal to stifle liberal opposition and dissent on the left. Psychoanalysts ought to be particularly mindful of this history and to be conscious of our vulnerability in this area. The book's misleading reference to the break-in at "Ellsberg's psychiatrist's office" was in point of

fact a break-in at the office of Dr. Lewis Fielding, a distinguished Los Angeles psychoanalyst. Nixon's burglars were manifesting his contempt for privacy and confidentiality – seminal issues for psychoanalytic ethics. Combine these traits with Nixon's antiintellectualism and fear of genuine dialogue, and the totality constitutes a durable threat to those of us concerned about human rights and civil liberties.

The authors do not adequately address this dimension of Nixon's leadership style, a style that amalgamated vast ambition, enormous envy, and paranoid projections, with no countervailing commitment to principles oriented toward authentic human concerns. Nixon's social and economic programs were devoid of compassion because he never really cared about people. Leaders like Nixon reflect and require a stupefied, mystified, depoliticized population who lack a sense of history; they exacerbate the narcissistic cultural tendencies embedded in America. By reducing all of Nixon's deeds and misdeeds to narcissistic dynamics, Volkan and his colleagues inadvertently contribute to a cynical, counterpolitical mentality. What would better serve our country, and what would advance psychoanalytic biography as methodology and critical theory, is a study explicating how "the culture of narcissism" of Nixon's America helped to produce, sustain, and ultimately banish such a political leader. If we could understand the group processes, and collective fantasies, shared anxieties and resentments that politicians mirror and exploit, Americans might be inoculated – or could better struggle politically – against the next wave of political leaders who promise us everything while subverting our democratic ideals.