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Stage Zero -The Moral Development Of George W. Bush

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"...people progress in their moral reasoning (i.e., in their bases for ethical behavior) through a series of levels... The first is "the Preconventional Level," where one usually finds oneself in elementary school. The first stage of this level is where George, I believe, makes his home. It's called: Stage Zero."

If George wasn't driving the world down the road to extinction with his wars, his environmentally disastrous choices and world alienating policies--"Look at me, ma, no hands" he says while sitting behind the wheel of our children's future--I'd think he was almost fascinating.

Fascinating the way one who is steeped in myriad psychological issues is.

I'm a psychotherapist. And, having never seen George in therapy, despite my open invitation, it would be unethical for me to make an official diagnosis of him. So, I won't. But, I can kick some thoughts around.

Remember Tom Hanks' movie, "Big," when the kid, by an accident of fate, finds himself turned into an adult, playing grown-up roles he is not developmentally ready for? This is George. I don't mean this maliciously or satirically; I really mean it. I think developmentally speaking George is a big kid. Lots of people are. The difference is they don't have the means to bomb human beings into "pink mist,"

obliterate the infrastructures of countries, and poison the world with coal and pesticides and carbon dioxide and depleted uranium and napalm, as they play grown up.

Nowhere was George playing grown-up more conspicuous than his staged re-election photo op on the USS Lincoln. When I saw him all dressed up pretending to be a naval aviator, I kept waiting for him to pull out his GI Joe doll with karate action, sit down and start playing: "Bring 'em on. We can take 'em. Huh, Joe? Take that--heeyah," while making Joe do a big karate chop as the real soldiers look on, saluting their Commander in Chief.

And now KB Toys has come out with an Elite Force Naval Aviator Action Figure to immortalize George's "historic" day of pretend play. And with that, in a moment of unintentional, yet brilliant psychological mindedness, they have placed George, the pretend combat-ready naval aviator, exactly where he belongs--in the make believe world of the 10 and under set.

In short, George is stuck.

Without getting into too much psychobabble, in human development terms this means he had some significant issue or trauma at one stage in his development that precluded him from advancing to higher stages. Again, theorists would argue that we all have developmental issues to one degree or another. And we do. But, again, most of us are playing out our intrapsychic havoc in the battlefields of our minds, not the battlefields of the world. Our casualties, disastrously enough, are often our relationships, not the lives of U.S. soldiers and civilian mothers and children bombed out of their homes in far away neighborhoods.

There are many ways to think about human development. One could explore cognitive, psychosexual or psychosocial development. I suspect George is developmentally stuck in many ways, so we could look at any of these.

But perhaps more than any other president I can think of, George evokes pure morality as a rationale for his policy decisions. This, as opposed to choices based on reason and facts and evidence informed by morality. [Example: George's rationale for going to war were WMD's that were an imminent threat to the U.S. Oops. No WMD's. Now George says in essence, "Yeah, well, so? Saddam is bad. Really bad. And we're good. So, us being good and Saddam being bad justifies all the lying and

misleading about this illegal war."]

So, while I don't psychologically assess people from a moral perspective, it makes sense for George. You have to meet people where they are.

A preeminent theorist on moral development is Lawrence Kohlberg, a famous Harvard professor, who demonstrated through his scientific studies that people progress in their moral reasoning (i.e., in their bases for ethical behavior) through a series of levels. He delineated three levels, further broken down into six stages.

The first is "the Preconventional Level," where one usually finds oneself in elementary school. The first stage of this level is where George, I believe, makes his home. It's called: Stage Zero.

Kohlberg writes: "Stage Zero: Egocentric judgment. The child makes judgments of good on the basis of what he likes and wants or what helps him, and bad on the basis of what he does not like or what hurts him. He has no concept of rules or of obligations to obey or conform to independent of his wish."

I know! It's uncanny.

We saw George's egocentric judgment during his college years as he publicly argued for the right of his fraternity, DKE, to use cruel hazing rituals, such as branding, on its pledges. After all, George said, "the resulting wound is 'only a cigarette burn.'" (New York Times, November 8, 1967).

We saw it in AWOL George, who didn't see the need to fulfill his obligations, his promised duties in the National Guard because it didn't align with his wishes.

And we have seen unprecedented self-serving judgment time and time and time again during Bush's tenure as president.

One example among thousands: The current administration is seeking to create legislation that will make some 18 year old kid who wrongly downloads a song off the Internet without permission a felon. A felon. Such a label will dog her and impede her for the rest of her life. This, as Kenneth Lay, who robbed countless families of their life savings is not held accountable, but is running free, living not off his wife as he pretends, but off the fruits of his manipulation. So, what's the moral here? Rob a corporate buddy of George's of a buck fifty and, because it's

technically illegal, you're forever bad. Run a corporation, be a buddy of George's, rob your employees of thousands upon thousands of dollars and, although it's illegal, you're still good.

A summation of George's egocentric philosophy might very well be his words to Bob Woodward: "I am the commander, see. I do not need to explain why I say things. That's the interesting thing about being the president. Maybe somebody needs to explain to me why they need to say something, but I don't feel like I owe anybody an explanation."

What a profoundly childlike thing to say (not to be confused with childish). It sounds to me like a kid trying desperately, yet transparently, to convince people he is fit for a role he secretly is unsure he can fulfill and discuss.

An appropriate response by Woodward to George's subtext might've been, "Such a big boy, Georgie! Yes you are!!"

I'm not a big Clinton fan, believe me, but can you imagine those words coming out of his mouth during the absurd Lewinsky debacle?

An interviewer asks: "But didn't you say you did not have sexual relations with that woman?"

"I am the commander, see. I do not need to explain why I say things. That's the interesting thing about being the president...I don't feel I owe anybody any explanation."

Now, we all know many a president has lied and distorted the truth in office. But, the difference is they kept in mind the concept of rules and obligations that they had to at least pretend to obey and conform to. Not just George, but this entire administration has completely flouted what every other administration previously has not--the need to pretend to play by the rules. The rules are forever changed, they tell us. Remember 911!

Speak brashly and carry a big photo of Ground Zero is their new philosophy. And Remember 911! is the battle cry that drowns out any dissenting skirmish this administration finds itself in. Remember 911! Is the catch-all response that replaces any obligation to account for their actions. It is the cozy, protective cloak that has

made the Bush administration all but impervious to questioning and doubt.

And not can they be heard crying, Remember 911!, but Beware The Terrorist Hiding in Your Underwear Drawer! Code Orange. Code Orange. Duct tape at the ready! Of course, a terrorist attack could absolutely happen again. We'd be foolish to think otherwise. But, this in no way negates the fact that the Bush administration has brilliantly and unabashedly exploited our post-911 apprehension. There is no greater fuel for righteous indignation and the resulting lack of critical thinking than fear. And the Bush administration is fanning the flames of fear every chance it gets.

So, through our post-9.11 eyes, many of us have very understandably come to see the radical (yes, the Bush administration is not conservative, it is radical) egocentric judgment of the Bush administration as truth. And in many cases, it has become law. The Patriot Act is the radical, egocentric judgment of a few, turned law.

And it is from the same Stage Zero mindset that a plethora of alarming legislation is being passed as hard fought civil liberties are being overturned. It is from Stage Zero that John Ashcroft and the proposed "Patriot Act II" will be enforced.

Ashcroft's egocentric judgment--the same judgment that spent \$8,000 of tax payers' money to cover a stone breast apparently too titillating for John's libido--is going to determine who is a terrorist and who isn't, who can be expatriated and who can't. It will be Ashcroft, the same man who reportedly thinks Calico cats are signs of the devil, who is the final arbiter of right and wrong, good and bad. And let's not forget that Rumsfeld was reportedly all too recently considered so way out there his colleagues didn't take him seriously.

While the causes of all this egocentric morality are beyond the scope of this article, it is worth saying that, in George's case, it is surely informed by his particularly privileged background that has left him without a realistic sense of how the vast majority of us live and struggle. As he said in a moment of uncharacteristic truth telling to Reverend Jim Wallis, "I don't understand how poor people think."

In addition, his morality and subsequent choices are surely informed and perhaps superceded by his addiction issues and by his deep-seated shame and desperate need for validation.

George's egocentric judgment is also given credibility under the auspices of his religious conviction. I do believe George is a religious man. But, he has in many

ways prostituted his religion to serve his true dogma--the advancement of the corporation.

So, for all his touting of religious and moral imperatives, George's policy decisions constitute nothing less than a moral failure. They have nothing to do with God, despite George's fantasy of divine rule, they have nothing to do with compassion, and they have nothing to do with helping you and me in any real way. Intrapsychically, they have everything to do with George's wish to finally be more than what he fears he is--a moral/business/personal failure. And interpersonally, they have to do with paybacks and power jockeying.

I believe George's handlers exploit his insecurities, posing him as an Air Force Naval Aviator here and a Friend of the Poor there, feeding into his need to play those rolls. At the same time, it fills their need to have an affable, malleable front man, willing to please and needy enough to believe the rolls in which he is cast. Karl and Dick and Co., I believe, are to a certain extent manipulating George just as they are trying to manipulate us.

So, why don't we all see through this and call them on it? Because George's handlers and speechwriters and the rest of the gang are very adept at pretending to be at a stage where they aren't: Stage 5.

Kohlberg writes: "Stage 5: The social-contract legalistic orientation. Right action tends to be defined in terms of general individual rights and standards that have been critically examined and agreed upon by the whole society... The result is an emphasis upon the "legal point of view," but with an additional emphasis upon the possibility of changing the law in terms of rational considerations of social utility... The "official" morality of the American government and Constitution is at this stage."

This is where most of us Americans believe we are, or at least we used to. Because this is much of what our country was founded on. And the Bush administration knows this and they exploit it. They talk the talk of Stage 5 as they walk the walk of Stage Zero.

But such incongruity is crazy making. It's like a mother who beats her child as she tells him she loves him and would never hurt him.

Like the abused kid, many of us want to believe George is telling the truth and is looking after our best interest. He seems like a nice enough guy. We try to contort our sense of morality and reality to fit his, questioning our own. But, while we hear George tell us the economy is recovering, we see thousands upon thousands in our communities laid off with no future job prospects. And we can only contort and deny so long until finally something gives. So now, the facade is cracking and many people are starting to see the real, ugly, self-serving picture behind George's wall of pretty words. And it is through this crack that activists, progressive politicians and those of us concerned about the once unimaginable state of our country must thoughtfully, respectfully and gently enter and begin to mobilize and organize.

The final of Kohlberg's stages is Stage 6. Again, Kohlberg writes: "Stage 6. The universal ethical-principle orientation. Right is defined by the decision of conscience in accord with self-chosen ethical principles that appeal to logical comprehensiveness, universality, and consistency... At heart, these are universal principles of justice, of the reciprocity and equality of the human rights, and of respect for the dignity of human beings as individual persons."

Kohlberg believed many people never truly reach Stage 6. But, I think it is not unreasonable to hope that the man who is running our country and our world should aspire to this stage. Having a Stage Zeroling behind the wheel is a sure sign our world will be driven into an enormous ditch before you can say Robust Nuclear Earth Penetrator.

To help clients move through the stages, Kohlberg believed a therapist should present him or her with moral dilemmas to discuss. Never have I considered, nor do I plan on doing therapy with clients this way. But, I think it is my patriotic duty to help our morality-touting Commander in Chief rise out of Stage Zerohood and step into a stage more fitting of his position.

So, again, I invite you, George, to come see me in therapy and work out some of your moral development issues, just as I invited you to work out some of your shame issues a while back.

In the meantime, here is a moral dilemma for you to chew on to help you work your way up the moral ladder. Hope it helps.

Moral Dilemma: You are an exceptionally privileged man who has a long history of

personal and business failures. Despite yourself, you find you are appointed to the most powerful position in the land through the help of friends and family in high places.

You say you are compassionate (burning the flesh of others aside). Yet in your short tenure in office, you have instituted public policies and norms that have irretrievably pockmarked the face of the world such as walking away from international treaties, years in the making: The Kyoto Treaty, the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty, the International Criminal Court Treaty, and the Land Mines Ban Treaty, making our world infinitely more dangerous.

You have created the largest federal budget deficit in American history, as you blithely accept the highest unemployment rate in decades, (the upturn of the last economic quarter was mostly due to payments to the coffers of a few defense contractors. So only a few of your friends have seen the benefits of the slight upturn. And the small unemployment decrease was due to people so frustrated they just dropped out of the job market).

And as the US now boasts the highest proportion of children born into poverty in the "developed" world (22%) and 43 million Americans have no health insurance, your administration is slowly but surely gutting all our country's safety nets, which will ultimately add fuel to your privatization frenzy and create a truly vicious cycle.

Through this same privatization, you are pilfering the jobs and futures of millions of federal employees in the name of national security, effectively gutting the Civil Service Act of 1883, dragging federal employment practices back to the good old days of nepotism and cronyism while you do your best to pass a law to cut the overtime pay of hard working citizens.

Your administration reportedly instructed the EPA to lie to the people of New York City about the toxic air they have been breathing since 9.11, which has caused very serious respiratory illnesses. You ask soldiers to continue to die, to expose themselves to higher and higher levels of toxic depleted uranium that promise years of subsequent health problems, as you show a uniquely George-esque brand of "supporting our troops"--ignoring the demands of the family members of active troops who are clamoring for some answers and accountability for this war; trying to block the pay raises of those on active duty; and pledging to veto a bill that would overturn an old law that, in effect, makes veterans pay for their own benefits.

Do you have Laura look up what the word compassionate means in the dictionary and pick a new, more appropriate word like, say, self-interested? Do you have a moral reckoning and become the man you pretend to be? Or, do you forever remain "...a white Republican guy who doesn't get it..." as you said to Reverend Jim Wallis and, true to your pervasive pattern, continue to pull an Orwell and tell us War is Peace, Occupation is Liberation, and Self-Interest is Compassion? Discuss.

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