
Washington: A Psychosis

Psychology could do the country a valuable service by making a thoroughgoing analysis of the political mind. It should be done. Much of the confusion that bedevils the social body stems from the assumption that its frame of thought, its way of thinking, is identical with that of the political world, whereas even superficial observation shows that the political mind runs on tracks of its own. It is *sui generis*.

Just by way of analogy, and with no intent to be insidious, psychology recognizes the distinctive makeup of the criminal mind; it has complexes all its own, and criminal behavior is explained within the context of those complexes. In the same way, if the operations of the political mentality were clearly defined, the confusing incongruities of political behavior would fall into a meaningful pattern. It would be like opening the window of a room filled with foul air to be able to say: "What else can you expect from the political mind?"

The matter is of utmost importance at this time. Political thought is fast crowding out all other patterns, so that if it is not scientifically set apart it might cause a general mental un-

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balance. A community infested with gangsterism must take on the character of its dominant group, for, like Gresham's law, decadent values tend to push out of circulation the values that call for integrity. So, as the area of private life is more and more constricted by political pressures, and we are compelled by necessity to adjust ourselves to the political mentality, it is entirely possible that its pattern may supersede what we still call common sense. Assuming that political psychology is essentially an aberration, it is not inconceivable that we may all go insane and not know it.

That the politician must have an indigenous mental arrangement follows from the fact that his way of getting on in life is different from that of any other human. The impact of one's livelihood on one's psyche cannot be discounted. The bellhop in Waterloo, Iowa, will make conversation as all other bellhops do by remarking on the miserable weather; but this one will add: "It's good for the crops." In Detroit, the impending strike is the obbligator to all thought, and even the cigar-store clerk in Wall Street is conscious of Dow-Jones averages. In Washington—but we will leave that until we have explored the basic idea, that whatever circumstance determines our livelihood determines our thinking.

In that respect, the thief (used merely for illustrative purposes) is no different from any other human. The premises of his thinking may have been distorted by a phobia, but from there on his mind works as his business demands. He lives by breaking the law; his values are shaped accordingly. He cannot conceive, for instance, of a self-contained right of property. The idea is nonsensical, because experience tells him that the only inviolable property is that which cannot be got to.

To be sure, the criminal, because he has to live with himself, covers his business with an ethical cloak. He contends (like Karl Marx) that the robbery he is condemned for is common practice in all legitimate business; making a profit is only legalized thievery. Even in the matter of apprehension and punishment he finds comparison between his and legitimate business; in the latter, risks are covered by insurance, and he covers the risk of his trade by buying "protection" from complacent officials and by hiring devious legal talent. His thinking is shaped by his livelihood.

What we call the "normal" pattern of thought is so only because it is the pattern of the majority—those who live by producing goods and services. Its "principles" are made necessary by the operation of the marketplace. The merchant, the doctor, the shoemaker all have a common objective, that of satisfying the need for their services, and all their thinking is shaped by the exigencies of trade. They fall in line with community customs because that way lies acceptance of their services. The fixation of acceptance is so strong in the marketplace psychology that when an individual breaks from it he is judged abnormal; he needs "adjustment." And the values that attain top rating in the productive world—honesty, dependability, thrift, and so on—got there only because without them this world would fall apart.

We come now to the politician. He is not a criminal, by definition. Nor is he a producer, even though the textbooks on political science go to great lengths to give him credit for aiding production; their insistence on this point is indirect admission of his incapacity to contribute a single economic "good" to the marketplace. So then, if he is neither a criminal nor a producer,

his mental processes must be different from both and we must look to the manner of his living for a clue.

The politician lives by taxes. It is not that his personal emoluments are derived from levies on production, but that the entire world in which he moves and finds spiritual comfort is so supported. That is more important than his livelihood, which he could, in a pinch, dig out of the marketplace. But, were taxes miraculously to be abolished, the whole political world would collapse, taking his thought pattern with it. He would most certainly suffer a mental unbalance.

Hence, taxation is of necessity a fixation in the political psyche. Yet, like all mental rigidities, it came by way of a rationalization. The institution of taxation rests foursquare on the axiom that somebody must rule somebody else. Were the notion to get around that people could manage without political power, it would be hard to make out a case for taxes. Therefore, uppermost in the thought pattern of the political cosmos is the doctrine of power. The idea of letting people alone is as far from political thinking as letting property alone is from criminal thinking. (Isn't taxation also a denial of private property?)

Now, political power is nothing but the capacity to impose one will on another, so as to bring about behavior that would not otherwise occur. The consequence of exercising such power is to inflate the ego of the one in whom it is vested. The more power the politician wields, the greater his self-esteem—and the more readily does he justify a widening of his area of power and the consequential increase in taxes. The environment he lives in compels him to think that way.

Much of the criticism of the politician stems from a misconception of the nature of his business. The principles that obtain in the social world, the one built on production, cannot apply

to a world that has no interest in production, except to tax it; that world must have its own rules. Politics is, in the best sense of the word, unprincipled; it is concerned only with rulership, and experience has shown that in that trade the only valid rule of thought and behavior is expediency.

That is the clue for the suggested psychological study. Of course, the scientist would hardly be satisfied with such generalities, but would dig for the taproots of political behavior in specific cases. He would then find that there are politicians and politicians. As an instance of the differentials in the political personality pattern, it might be mentioned that Senator Truman presents a case quite different from that of President Truman. For intensified investigation, our psychologist would do well to come to Washington.

There he will find a laboratory made to order: the inevitable cocktail party. This institution plays a far more important part in Washington life than mere sociability, for it is the hatchery of much that affects the business of the nation.

Let us suppose that at one party he meets, among others, the two principal types of politician, the bureaucrat and the congressman. Present will surely be several newspapermen; they attend because they expect to pick up the thread to a headline, and they are invited because of their potential for publicity. The distaff side, being the bulk of the population, will be well represented. All present will show evidences of political-thought infection.

Although the conversation will be marked with trivialities, the investigator will quickly detect a tacit understanding; namely, that Washington is the cement that holds the country together. If our psychologist should suggest that the ordinary folk might rub along without Washington, that the legitimate

functions of government could be conducted in a medium-size office building, he would freeze the assemblage into speechlessness. The mind channeled into the political pattern cannot comprehend a world without politics. The psychologist had better not advance the idea until the party is about to break up.

In the meantime, he might observe the marked difference between the demeanor of the congressman and that of the bureaucrat. The latter will display a greater sense of self-assurance; he will be soft and sanguine; he will talk with an *ex cathedra* air that only a bureaucrat can affect. And that will be so even if his job is only to take charge of the inkwells on the fourth floor of the State Department. The congressman, on the other hand, will be less sanguine but more assertive. He will display an urgency to convince and to please, characteristic of the marketplace psychology. He will show a sense of obligation and responsibility totally absent from the bureaucrat's psyche.

Perhaps the difference between the elected representative and the scion of the executive branch can be explained by the difference in tenure. The congressman is rooted in his constituency, whereas the bureaucrat has only a bureaucrat to please.

One further hint and the psychologist must go it alone. He should not overlook the barber and the taxi driver. They too will reflect the political psychology, so all-pervasive in this voteless city that one suspects it is not so much a place as a psychosis.