

US: Patriotic pride and fear

By Ritt Goldstein

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While some critics of US President George W Bush have charged that his administration is pursuing policies of madness, such a charge is clinically incorrect, but it may convey an extraordinarily disturbing reality. Both an eminent psychologist and a noted political scientist perceive a particularly virulent social pathogen as the basis for much of the present global strife, with Washington at the center of the epidemic.

“It certainly seems that the world is going mad,” Canadian psychologist Dr Daniel Burston told Asia Times Online, quickly noting that an increasing retreat into “social phantasy systems” would be more accurate. Burston – whose work has been acclaimed in the mainstream media – noted that famed social psychologist Erich Fromm had written on “socially patterned defects” that enabled large groups of people to adjust themselves comfortably to a system that, humanly speaking, is “fundamentally at odds with our basic existential and human needs”. Burston observed that this resulted in “deficiencies, or traits, or attitudes which don’t generate internal conflict when, in fact, they should”.

He saw the Abu Ghraib prison torture scandal as raising a number of questions, noting that “there seems very little doubt that it was sanctioned from above”. Burston labeled the guards’ behavior as “sadistic”.

Fromm, in his 1941 classic *Escape from Freedom*, wrote: “A person can be entirely dominated by his sadistic strivings and consciously believe that he is motivated only by his sense of duty.” And on June 23, the Associated Press (AP) reported that an August 2002 US Justice Department memo “argues that torture – and even the deliberate killing – of prisoners in the terror war could be justified”, with torture being redefined as “only actions that cause severe pain akin to organ failure”.

AP also reported that the Justice Department had now “backed away” from the memo.

Burston named Nazi exterminator Adolf Eichmann as representing the “prototypical example” of what the phenomenon of “socially patterned defects” can engender. He cited

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philosopher Hannah Arendt's famous work on Nazism.

In her book *Eichmann in Jerusalem: The Banality of Evil*, Arendt highlighted the unexceptional nature of the Nazi bureaucrat responsible for killing untold numbers in extermination camps. Burston noted that "with one very questionable exception, Eichmann tested normal on all psychological tests that were administered to him by mental health experts before his trial".

Clinically speaking, Eichmann – an individual who worked daily at mass murder for a period of years – was quite sane.

In instances where a group's behavior becomes deviant, even destructive to themselves or others, "it [the pathological action] becomes a source of solace and security for a person who adapts that way", said Burston. Eichmann had "adapted". And Fromm noted that, in most cases, destructive impulses are rationalized, ensuring "at least a few other people or a whole social group share in the rationalization and thus make it appear to be 'realistic' to the members of such a group."

In effect, an emotional-support network is formed, providing its individual members with a mistaken sense of legitimacy. The Iraq war's critics have long charged that numerous and severe shortcomings in the Bush administration's actions were simply met with the unending rationalization of what many see as blatant and tragic errors. Two often-cited examples of this are the administration's claims regarding Iraq's non-existent weapons of mass destruction, and Iraq's alleged link to the attacks of September 11, 2001.

"The best way to tie these things together might be through what Fromm calls 'irrational authority'", said Burston, adding that "people have a need to believe". He continued, observing that a majority of Americans mistakenly believing Saddam Hussein was involved in September 11 can be seen as "an example of people succumbing to the blandishments, or the temptations of belief", believing in the kind of authority "which routinely resorts to violence, deception and secrecy to achieve its ends", termed irrational authority. And he noted how such misconceptions are aided.

"Crowds can be persuaded through specific formulas that involve frequent repetitions, in an authoritative tone, by someone who is considered authoritative. And for many people, this works – it just works," Burston revealed. Paralleling that, in an autumn 2003 interview with this journalist, Ray McGovern – a former 27-year Central Intelligence Agency analyst who had regularly briefed the White House – had similarly said that Nazi propaganda minister Josef Goebbels "was good, and his dictum about say it five times and people will believe it, turns out, unfortunately, to be true".

On June 24, Reuters reported that former US vice president Al Gore charged that "very soon after [September 11], President Bush made a decision to start mentioning Osama bin

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Laden and Saddam Hussein in the same breath in a cynical mantra designed to fuse them together as one in the public's mind." Gore was also reported as charging that the administration worked "with a network of 'rapid response' digital brownshirts" (brownshirts were German political thugs of the Adolf Hitler era) to pressure "reporters and their editors" into refraining from critical news coverage.

Though Burston judges that many members of the Bush administration are sincere in their pursuit of "a global climate that's more conducive to democracy ... to diminish terrorism", he notes that the means the administration has employed brought "consequences that are very often the reverse of what they intended". But he discussed how noted psychologist R D Laing's theory of "social phantasy systems" could explain this.

Citing his book on Laing's work, *The Crucible of Experience*, Burston highlighted that Laing believed most people develop a form of "pseudo-sanity", doing so as a function of the emotional imperative of adapting to "pseudo-realities". The upshot is that they live within a "social phantasy system" of varying degrees.

The described result for the individual is a proportionate loss of the ability to think critically, as well as limited ability to consider anyone or anything outside one's particular group, especially in a positive light.

"People who are deeply embedded within social-phantasy systems like these function effectively within the framework of those groups. But their sense of reality regarding the world outside of their reference group is profoundly impoverished as a consequence," Burston outlined. "That makes them act in ways which – from an outsiders perspective – look insane."

Notably, the unpleasant reality of a substantive social-phantasy system would provide explanation for the growing disparity between the way the US views itself and the way others view it. This might also explain the number of failed policies increasingly impacting the United States.

Beyond this, "the concepts of socially patterned defects" (Fromm) and of "social-phantasy systems" (Laing) make abundantly good sense of "normal" political behavior – both in the US and abroad – "where people routinely support leaders, parties or other political entities whose policies run directly contrary to their individual and collective self-interest", said Burston, who saw certain similarities between the present period and the 1930s.

While the historical context of the two periods differs greatly, "there are some social psychological parallels", he observed, seeing the reality of the 1930s Italian "Corporative State" as a "closer analogy" to present US circumstance. But while Burston spoke of a "conscious dissimulation and trickery" on the part of today's leaders, he emphasized that what's occurring is "a kind of dance, a kind of a tango between the leaders and the led".

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As with the 1930s, there's a "certain willingness on the part of people to absorb disinformation and take it in for fact ... no matter how implausible it appears to be", Burston said. He attributed this to the diminishing of what Fromm termed "rational authority", authority marked by transparency and openness, and authority that breeds what has been called a "truth-loving disposition".

"What we see now, increasingly, is the erosion of that [truth-loving disposition] – people are becoming more and more suggestible, more and more willing to be seduced," Burston related. Far earlier, Fromm had noted: "With the rise of fascism, the lust for power and the conviction of its right has reached new heights. Millions are impressed by the victories of power."

Burston sees the contemporary result as growing "opportunities for people who have a hidden agenda to take advantage of the public trust. And that seems to be increasing dramatically."

He believes that "we are seeing a growing threat to the viability of democratic decision-making systems across the board, around the world". Burston warned of the potential for a "corporate fascist regime" in the US, saying the country could be "poised on the verge" of such an event. Sixty-three years ago, Fromm had said: "There is no greater mistake and no graver danger than not to see that in our own society [the US] we are faced with the same phenomenon that is fertile soil for the rise of fascism anywhere."

And noted political scientist Dr Michael Parenti told Asia Times Online that he agrees. Parenti – who received his PhD in political science from Yale and is the award-winning author of 18 books – noted that "there's a concern that we're tending towards fascism, or we're replicating fascism today". The way in which fascism is defined is key.

Parenti sees fascism as a tool employed by ruthless power elites to achieve their ends. "And what they've learned in the more than 80 years since its [fascism's] origin is that they can achieve many of these things – more securely perhaps – while retaining a democratic veneer."

"The essence of fascism, I believe, is in its output. And its output is a system which systematically redistributes wealth from the many to the few, and ensures the domination of giant cartels over the whole political economy," Parenti said. By eliminating the traditional fascist symbolism and mannerisms, by putting white gloves on it, if you will, Parenti sees the use of "plain old Americanism" as the "cloak around which people will rally and give the president these extraordinary powers, and surrender their own liberty and the like".

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Reflecting on the high military expenditures, the nature of America's tax structure, and the evolving nature of its economic structure, Parenti warned that an agenda not dissimilar to that of fascism appeared to be ongoing, but "without having to go all the way and destroy every little shred of democracy". His forthcoming book, *Super-Patriotism*, explores how patriotic pride and fear is exploited.

"In spite of a veneer of optimism and initiative, modern man is overcome by a profound feeling of powerlessness which makes him gaze towards approaching catastrophes as though he were paralyzed," Fromm had far earlier warned. He also observed that "truth is one of the strongest weapons of those who have no power".

Ritt Goldstein is an American investigative political journalist based in Stockholm. His work has appeared in broadsheets such as Australia's Sydney Morning Herald, Spain's El Mundo and Denmark's Politiken, as well as with the Inter Press Service (IPS), a global news agency.