

Groupthink and the slide into fascism

By Ritt Goldstein

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On July 8, Asia Times Online broke the story (Patriotic pride and fear) of how noted Canadian psychologist Daniel Burston (two PhDs from Canada's York University and a widely acclaimed author) perceived a broad retreat into "social fantasy systems" and "socially patterned defects" as explaining much of the Bush administration's decision-making. He observed for ATol that such flaws bring those involved to "act in ways which - from an outsiders perspective - look insane". On the following day, July 9, the US Senate Intelligence Committee released its report on the United States' justification for the Iraq war, claiming an erroneous "groupthink" was to blame, and coincidentally highlighting the validity of Burston's observations.

Groupthink is defined as "a mode of thinking that people engage in when they are deeply involved in a cohesive group, when the members' strivings for unanimity override their motivation to realistically appraise alternative courses of action". In other words, retreat into a "social fantasy system" allowed "socially patterned defects" to flourish within the group's members.

The Senate Intelligence Committee chairman, Republican Senator Pat Roberts of Kansas, stated that "it is clear this groupthink also extended to our allies and to the United Nations and several other nations as well". The July 8 ATol piece provides parallel commentary on this, noting 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."

In an October 2003 article titled "Cheney's hawks hijacking policy", this journalist revealed that former senior Pentagon staffer Lieutenant-Colonel Karen Kwiatkowski (retired) described "a subversion of constitutional limits on executive power and a co-optation through deceit of a large segment of the Congress", adding that "in order to take that first step - Iraq - lies had to be told to Congress to bring them on board". Planned and

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deliberate lies were told in order to manipulate Congress and the American people purposefully, effectively, and criminally, undercutting the very foundations of US democracy.

Not to be misunderstood, the “groupthink” in question is far from innocent error, and administration critics charge that the Senate Intelligence Committee reports’ attempts to couch blame as mere “fuzzy thinking” highlight the propaganda efforts ongoing, the groupthink still dominating policy. But this psychological phenomenon perhaps best translates to a broad failure to appreciate the reality of circumstance, the nature or implications of actions, the very difference between right and wrong. And while a hard core of believers/leaders is typically central to such a phenomenon’s workings, their influence radiates broadly outward through their immediate group(s) and those they interface with.

Coincident with the Intelligence Committee’s report, Senator Roberts defended the Iraq war as justified for humanitarian reasons, though numerous human-rights organizations have condemned the US record in Iraq, the war crimes that US forces are alleged to have committed there.

Notably, before the Iraq war began, numerous figures had publicly challenged the Bush administration’s prewar assertions. On September 9, 2002, CNN had headlined “Former weapons inspector: Iraq not a threat”, noting, “Former UN weapons inspector Scott Ritter says US military action against Iraq would be a mistake.” And oil-war questions were abundant.

But highlighting the dynamics of what was ongoing, Kwiatkowski had charged that “there was an extra-governmental network operating outside normal structures and practices, ‘a network of political appointees in key positions who felt they needed to take some action, to make things happen in a foreign affairs, national security way’. She said Pentagon personnel and the DIA [Defense Intelligence Agency] were pressured to favorably alter assessments and reports”, a hard core of misguided individuals within the administration of US President George W Bush enjoying “a mistaken sense of legitimacy” in their efforts, spreading this false and wrongful mindset to many of those they encountered.

While groupthink is undoubtedly to blame for the Iraq war’s false premises, the full implications of the “groupthink” that occurred, as well as that which is ongoing, appear to have yet to emerge. Highlighting a disturbing reality, Burston had noted parallels between the social psychology of the present and that of the 1930s.

In a further parallel to the 1930s, on July 9 the conservative Chicago Sun-Times (one of the United States’ top 50 papers) ran a commentary on US fascism, stating that “fascism’ is not an exaggeration”, and adding that anyone who doubted this “doesn’t know what fascism is”. It went on to note: “Some liberals suggest that the administration is capable of canceling

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the November election on the grounds of national security if it looks like Bush would lose. I doubt this.” But on July 11 and 12, news of the administration seeking legal authority for just such an election postponement - a delay in the November election for national-security reasons - widely broke.

Burston had said he believed the US could be poised “on the verge” of a corporate fascism, and eminent political scientist Dr Michael Parenti (Yale PhD in political science and author of 18 books) spoke similarly. And indeed, the slippery slope of “groupthink” in effect provided the basis for the psycho-dynamics dominating the rise of 1930s fascism, its proponents of a “new order” perceiving endless lies, propaganda, repression, mass violence, and even mass murder as legitimate means to what they perceived as their “noble” ends, versus tragic and criminal delusions. Students of history will note the “groupthink” evidenced in Germany’s 1930s mass rallies at Nuremberg, though the realization of what was then occurring didn’t fully emerge until the Nuremberg War Crimes Tribunals of the 1940s.

As discussed in ATol’s July 8 article, the process of groupthink then in effect spawns “‘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 then noted that this resulted in “deficiencies, or traits, or attitudes which don’t generate internal conflict when, in fact, they should”. He then cited “Nazi mass-murderer Adolf Eichmann as representing the ‘prototypical example’ of what the phenomenon of ‘socially patterned defects’ can engender”, emphasizing 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”.

In discussing questions of contemporary fascism with Asia Times Online, Dr Parenti said, “When fascism came to power [in the 1930s], what it did was cut back on the public sector, privatize a lot of state-owned industries, abolish inheritance taxes and other taxes on the rich, abolish corporate taxes, cut wages, destroy labor unions, and destroy or undermine opposition parties.” He described fascism as simply a tool employed by ruthless power-elites in achieving their ambitions. He added: “There’s a concern that we’re [the US] heading towards fascism, or that we’re replicating fascism today.”

Parenti saw citizenry being mobilized by “waving the flag in their face, and wrapping the flag around the leader, and telling them that they’re being threatened by one menace or another, from abroad or within.” In a parallel, Bush critics have long charged his administration with precisely this. Parenti cited Nazi Field Marshal Hermann Goering’s similar explanation of popular motivation, which emerged from the period of the Nuremberg Tribunal.

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In a purely American vein, Parenti recalled that former US secretary of state John Foster Dulles had said: "To get the people to support large military budgets and intervention, you've got to conjure up a threat, and you've got to make this scenario of 'one nation is a hero, another nation is a villain'. It's got to be hero versus villain." And the Senate Intelligence report does aid parallels between Dulles' vision and the Iraq war. "You fool the people into thinking that you're protecting them, you're watching out for their interests, and you get them to vote against their own interests," Parenti charged.

Comparing today's United States to the 1930s, Parenti addressed the recent US Supreme Court decision allowing Vice President Dick Cheney and the Bush administration to refuse public access to the documents of Cheney's so-called Energy Task Force. Indications exist that oil-war questions were discussed within this group, a September 2003 Inter Press Service article, "Oil war questions surround Cheney energy group", addressing such concerns. Parenti strongly emphasized the implications of the court decision.

"The Supreme Court decision does, in effect, lift the executive power to an unaccountable and undemocratic status. So you really have no way for Congress or the public to hold these people accountable for what they're doing. You're, in effect, setting up a cloak of impunity on their actions under the guise of 'executive privilege' ... so what we're getting here is many of the same things that the fascists accomplish, while maintaining a democratic veneer," Parenti claimed, adding: "You're getting enormous tax cuts for the rich - there are now corporations that are making billions of dollars in profits that are paying no taxes - you're getting the rollback of trade unions through outsourcing, closing down unionized factories ... you're getting depressed wages, wages aren't keeping up with inflation; increasing spending in the military sector - this is just exactly what the fascists did. So you're accomplishing a lot of these same things without having to 'go all the way' and destroy every little shred of democracy." Parenti then proceeded to draw a firm parallel with the Italian 1930s "corporative state".

"In practice, the big decisions regarding the political economy were made by the industrialists," Parenti noted, but prefacing that by saying all groups within the Italian corporative state were "supposed to" share the decision power. He likened the large Italian industrialists' group to America's National Association of Manufacturers, saying, "in effect, those were the guys who were really thoroughly incorporated, and most of the ordinary people were left out in the cold, as subjects of the state".

After a moment, Parenti quickly observed that "the people always get a share of this action, though. The American people get a share of it, the Italians did ... their share is the

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taxes and the blood. They pay the taxes, and they send their sons off.”

Notably, with the Nuremberg Tribunals, society long ago determined that those who may commit criminal acts while influenced by groupthink are nevertheless criminals, and should be judged accordingly.