Washington Policy Makers Need to Consult with Beisel

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Humans are inclined to act surprised at events that should not really be a surprise and shock to us when they involve traumatic elements, such as an attack on our country or the discovery of a cheating husband. At a Congressional hearing a decade before 9/11, there were warnings that terrorists might fly planes into buildings, while a wife whose husband leers at and flirts with other women when they are strolling together should not be shocked when he is discovered having an extramarital affair. Perhaps we should add to the Bard's reference to fear making cowards of us, that denial reflects conflict, cowardice, or delusion. In his brilliant book, *The Suicidal Embrace: Hitler, the Allies, and the Origins of the Second World War*, Professor Beisel has done a superb job of spelling out the role not simply of denial but also of its roots in the victim/victimizer dyad. The time when individuals and nations wake up to the dangers they face is so often based upon issues of denial, grandiosity, narcissism, preoccupation, and a seeming inability to focus on issues unless it fits an emotional need of the moment. David Beisel has written about these issues with incredible clarity and historical data to back up his points.

Regrettably, the limits of space this journal could offer him has meant that in this "Blind Spots" paper he could mostly only give examples of blind spots and traumatic reenactments, rather than a full-fledged discussion of their origins. Perhaps it would have been better had he limited his examples to only two or three rather than the seven listed. However, he could not resist beginning with the marvelous story of the fighter ace Adolph Galland being berated by Göring for having told the Führer of American penetration into German airspace. Though a good story, it is not an example of an unconscious blind spot. Of course, in fairness to Beisel, blind spots need not be totally unconscious; humans have all sorts of ways of knowing and not knowing. Information can be "known" but its importance and implications are not seen or at least not acted on.

Beisel is on firm ground when he comes to the Austro-Hungarian Empire and the reaction of Russia to their planned attack on the Russian ally Serbia. The explanation of some traditional historians, who attribute the failure of the Hapsburg military planners to mention the Tsarist-Serbian alliance to the self-interest of officers, is inadequate. Yes, the planners knew that it would hurt their chances of promotion to mention the obvious, but they were also loyal defenders of the realm whose lives could be on the line in a major conflict. His example of Stalin discrediting one of the numerous reports of the coming German invasion in 1941 by declaring that the reporter "should be sent to his fucking mother" is psychologically quite evocative since it raises the possibility of unconscious incestuous feeling related to Hitler.

The heart of the "Blind Spots" paper is the seven examples of Americans' blindness in the face of external threats. As a presidential psychobiographer, I am well aware that our commander-in-chief wakes up every morning being briefed about foreign threats to American safety. His political survival is focused on defending against verbal and political missiles being launched at him by the opposing party, disillusioned supporters, and members of his own party who desire his position. These domestic opponents and supporters do their best to keep him preoccupied with their concerns; typically, they don't care about the rest of the world except in the face of a direct threat or a recent world war. Presidents get elected and reelected by appearing to be strong and decisive while giving in to political pressure, which is why what are labeled as mistakes could more readily be listed as inevitable consequences of a system that punishes being farsighted and rewards presidents with an incredible increase in power when the country is attacked and they can switch from being persuader-in-chief in domestic policy to commander-in-chief with a blank check in foreign policy. American narcissism, as reflected in the belief that the U.S. is an exceptional nation and therefore can do only good in the world, is also a part of this picture.

David Beisel has had a most distinguished career as an internationally recognized, innovative scholar who may have taught psychohistory to more students (7,800) than all other teachers of psychohistory in higher education have taught together. With the

death of Rudolph Binion, Professor Beisel has become our leading psychological historian probing the unconscious tendency to traumatically reenact earlier trauma. Our country would be safer if our policy makers in Washington, D.C. would read and take to heart his work on denial leading to blind spots and traumatic reenactment, applying it to their contemporary decision-making.

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Models in Psychoanalytic Historical Research

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Professor Beisel has proposed a historigraphical framework, in which the repetition of a national trauma accounts for a series of apparent misjudgments or blind spots in U.S. military preparedness. He attributes these miscalculations to an unconscious repetition of an ordinary trauma, the attack on Pearl Harbor. His thesis is important as it invites historians and lay people alike to consider underlying common threads that tie together otherwise seemingly separate events. The cost of not doing so is catastrophic.

One would have to be a psychologically informed 20th century military or social historian of the United States to comment on the application of Professor Beisel's argument to the specific case of Pearl Harbor. I cannot, therefore, comment on it. Instead, I would like to propose that we make explicit and debate the models we use to interpret case studies. The more explicit the model, the more a new model can suggest new questions and new areas of research. Beisel's model has a popular antecedent in the idea that if we do not learn our history, we are condemned to repeat it. More technically, it follows a line that goes back to Freud's theory of hysteria: that hysterics suffer from reminiscences—from memories that they don't remember, but are repeating in their symptoms. It comes up again in "Remembering, Repeating and Working-Through" (1914) and most famously in the concept of repetition