ings about secure yet confining social roles. Participants' greater interest in resolving doubts about the motives of perpetrators likely reflect doubts about the fairness of conventional moral and social expectations as well as the ever-widening distance at which the victims of 9/11 and other acts of terror are remembered. Their responses suggest that it is important to understand witnesses' reactions to the absurdity of terror as something distinct from victims' reactions to traumatic events, for while very few interview participants appeared to be traumatized by the terror they had seen or read about, many seemed deeply conflicted about how to integrate the possibility of committing absurd violence into their moral outlooks.

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Consequences

Playing the Trauma Card after 9/11?

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The sight of a large aircraft flying low over Manhattan's skyline drove thousands of New Yorkers out onto the streets, their faces registering terror and panic. But no, this morning in the spring of 2009 was not a replay of 9/11; only a bureaucratic snafu out of Washington. But if nothing else, it demonstrated the lasting power of mass trauma and the underlying fear of repetition.

Key elements in this process are the fear of the original traumatic event recurring as well as the individual's tendency to repeat or reenact the original circumstances for relief or mastery. Unlike physical trauma's blunt force causing loss of consciousness, in psychic trauma the individual is overwhelmed by an experience he/she cannot assimilate: in psychoanalytic terms the usual defenses are breached and the ego's mediating capacities are shut down, resulting in a state of helplessness (See Burness Moore and Bernard Fine, *Psychoanalytic Terms and Concepts*, 1990, p. 199; and Jerry Piven, editor, *Terror and Apocalypse*, 2002). In psychic trauma, the precipitant may be external, internal, or a combination; but unlike physical trauma, where the external assault produces uniform effects, psychic trauma spans a wider, less predictable range. Identical events do not necessarily affect everyone similarly. Soldiers can be traumatized in combat, take it in stride, or thrive on it—depending on the individual. This may be in part, one surmises, because traumatic events in adult life are more internally disruptive the more profoundly they resonate with earlier, usually childhood, trauma.

To whatever extent mass trauma occurs it further complicates efforts at understanding, although the above incident suggests its tenacity. One's relative physical as well as emotional proximity to Ground Zero would likely gauge the degree of intensity. I have friends in the Midwest who watched the horrible spectacle on TV and calmly boarded an eastbound flight that weekend, while a New Yorker friend canceled a vacation to Italy scheduled for the next summer.

Against this backdrop, we can consider whether key figures in the government were sufficiently traumatized in the aftermath of 9/11 to have their decision-making capacities affected. Across the Potomac a third jet smashed into the Pentagon, and a fourth, intended for the White House, was prevented due to the heroism of three passengers.

Vice President Cheney, Condoleezza Rice, and other

top officials watched the original crashes at 8:46 and 9:03 on television from their White House offices before being hustled off through a tunnel to an underground bunker and conference center. Unsuccessful in reaching Bush, Cheney took charge of operations. "By many accounts," writes Barton Gellman in *Angler: The Cheney Vice Presidency*, 2008, p. 118, "he was the coolest head in the room. 'He was holding the fort,' recalls a White House observer, 'the man in charge.'" In fact, he was pretty much running the country. Next to him, although they weren't conferring (and didn't get along), was Condoleeza Rice who "saw herself as organizing and coordinating the rest of the NSC" (Gellman, p. 118). An hour had passed before Cheney reached Bush on Air Force One—the two may have spoken briefly around 9:30 (Bob Woodward, *Bush at War*, 2002], p. 18). In Woodward's account, Secretary of State Colin Powell was in Peru having breakfast with the president. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld (a former Navy pilot) was in the Pentagon holding an intelligence briefing when the third plane struck. "He felt the building shudder and darted to the window" but could see little. "He went outside and followed the rising cloud of smoke to the crash site, helping with the rescue effort before a security agent urged him to get out of the area." Instead, he returned to the war room and then to his office where he began preparing for Bush's return. (Woodward, 2002, pp. 24-5)

Bush himself on that fateful morning, as is well-known from Michael Moore's film *Fahrenheit 9/11*, was reading to second graders at a public school in Sarasota, Florida. At about 9:15, Chief of Staff Andrew Card stepped in and whispered in his ear, "A second plane hit the second tower. America is under attack." In Woodward's account, Bush had a "distant sober look, almost frozen, edging on bewilderment" (Woodward, 2002, p. 15). In a later rendering by Robert Draper (*Dead Certain*, 2007, p. 135), Bush was informed of the first plane crash as the motorcade pulled up

to the school—apparently some kind of freak accident. According to Draper (p. 136), at the report of a second attack, "Bush's head keened slightly, as if in reaction to an electrical surge. His eyes narrowed and lost focus." He finished the reading lesson, lingering in the classroom and posing for photos before conferring with aides, jotting on note cards, and then at 9:30 entering the school auditorium where he was expected to speak on No Child Left Behind. Instead, he curtly announced, "This is a difficult moment for America. Today we've had a national tragedy." After citing the attack, he warned, "Terrorism against our nation will not stand," called for a moment of silence, and then left to be escorted onto Air Force One (Draper, 137).

Both Draper and Woodward heard the son's echoing of his father's words over Hussein's invasion of Kuwait: "This aggression will not stand." Asked about the familiar wording, Bush replied, "What you saw was my gut reaction coming out" (Woodward, 2002, p. 16). Unlike the responses of Cheney, Rice, and Rumsfeld, Bush's deer-in-the-headlights expression and delay in assuming control raise the prospect of traumatizing effects. The adaptations of his own personality seeming to falter, he summoned a fallback position contingent on his vexed identification with his father.

Revisiting those critical moments, Bush recalled he was thinking, "They had declared war on us, and I made up my mind at that moment that we were going to war" (Woodward, 2002, p. 15). Some may view this as self-serving revisionism, and Bush is prone to spinning his past, as evident when he put a gloss on his troubled childhood by boasting of his father's "unconditional love" (*Washington Post*, 2/11/08). He has also been unflatteringly portrayed as being upstaged by Cheney's and Rumsfeld's determination in the run-up to the Iraq war. In any case, the next day, he stepped outside the White House to declare, "This will be a monumental struggle of good versus evil. But Good will pre-

vail." Two days later, at a memorial service, he promised "to answer these attacks and rid the world of evil." In a press conference at the end of the week, he used "'evil' nine times in thirteen minutes" (Jacob Weisburg, *The Bush Tragedy*, 2008, pp. 102-3). After his initial call for a crusade was hushed by his aides, he maintained the theological polarity and religious certitude of his righteous cause—the central theme and title to Draper's *Dead Certain*. Weisberg similarly found cognates of "resolute" to be "key terms" of his post-9/11 presidency.

Was this stark polarizing of the world into opposites along with the rigidity of purpose and the hunkering-down refusal to own up to errors a symptomatic reaction to trauma? At the most it resembles a state of quasi-paralysis, and at the least it suggests a regressive level of self-organizing in the fallout of a destabilizing crisis, and most likely re-enforced latent or not so latent personality trends. After a spell of post-election euphoria in 2004, he grew increasingly isolated in his second term and more disconnected from the larger world, his lofty fixity of purpose being perceived as blinkered obstinacy. His poll numbers sank, but there were never massive protests as in the Vietnam War period. For those who have suffered mass trauma, the leader who can best voice their dire condition sounds most normal; the leader who can also embody their trauma assumes great power. But this is a loan not a gift, for it is predicated ultimately on revenge, and payback can only be delayed for so long. Bush promised vindication, but Osama bin Laden proved elusive; flushed out of his wormhole, Saddam Hussein offered a woeful Satan; and convenient composites like "Axis of Evil" and "Islamofascists" dissolved in the fog of war.

From all reports, Bush out of office is at peace with himself; but such is not the case with some of his key players who appear to be flailing out at the restless ghosts of wars spawned by 9/11. Richard Clarke, national coordinator for

security and counter-terrorism under Clinton and Bush, wonders if Rice and Cheney are experiencing a form of PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder) and he is having none of it as the title of article, "The Trauma of 9/11 Is No Excuse" (*Washinton Post*, 5/31/09, pp. B1-2) makes clear. He quotes Rice defensively responding to a student's question about torture as claiming, "Unless you were there, in a position of responsibility after September 11, you cannot possibly imagine the dilemmas that you faced in trying to protect Americans." After watching "Americans drop out of eighty-story buildings," Rice was determined to do everything she "could that was legal to prevent that from happening again." Cheney, likewise feeling the heat on torture issues, has gone on the offense via the talk-show circuit. For him that day was a "defining" experience that "caused everyone to take a serious second look" at threats to America. Interestingly, Clarke doesn't deny the possible impact of "trauma" on Rice or Cheney, having himself glimpsed the "day's horror on his face." His point is that if Cheney and Rice were surprised, they should not have been. There had been numerous briefings through the spring and summer by Clarke and CIA's George Tenet warning of imminent attacks from al Qaeda. Their warnings went unheeded because the White House and the NSC (National Security Council) were in denial. For those in power, this externally-induced trauma had internal preconditions which affected, perhaps intensified, their responses and precipitated what many see today as a headlong rush into preemptive war against the wrong enemy.

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