Leaders and Psychobiographical Studies Make a Difference

Paul H. Elovitz
Presidential Psychobiographer

David Lotto is wrong. Rather than simply being Tweedledums and Tweedledees, leaders make a difference. As a presidential psychobiographer who wrote a comparative study of Bush and Gore during the 2000 election, it is my considered belief that had Al Gore assumed the presidency in 2001 there are certain things we would *not* be likely to have at the present. These include massive tax cuts for the rich, a secretive presidency focused on its own prerogatives, an intensive assault on civil liberties in the name of fighting terrorism, two more Supreme Court judges who are so conservative that some Republicans appointed decades ago now are considered liberals, added governmental restrictions on abortion and stem cell research, governmental funding of religion, an enormously expensive missile defense system, and a blatant disregard for the environment. It is most unlikely we would have had five years of ignoring the world's most pressing nuclear threat because George W. Bush does not like Kim Jong Il, while going to war in 2003 on the grounds of the nonexistent weapons of mass destruction of Saddam Hussein. Gore almost certainly would *not* have gotten us into the costly, mismanaged, and terror-producing war with Iraq.

Though David Lotto finds the Democrats and Republicans running for president in 2008 to be interchangeable, in my thirty-second year of studying and writing on the candidates, I know there are major differences in their personalities, styles of leadership, values, politics, and their subsequent policies. All of the leading Democrats favor health care reform, abortion rights, government funding of stem cell research, getting out of Iraq sooner rather than later, increasing the minimum wage, and more services for children. The leading Republican candidates stress free market capitalism, the war on terrorism, building more walls to keep out illegal immigrants, gun rights, and—with the exception of Giuliani—"family values." They appeal more to white, male, Sunbelt Americans than do the Democrats. Defeating Hillary Clinton is a unifying issue—they are less ready for a woman president than are the Democrats. In the case of both parties some, but far from all, of their campaign promises and values, will be translated into policies—programs that can make a difference.

Another refutation of the alleged lack of differences among presidents, and contenders for this position, relates to the personalities and styles of governance. It is hard to conceive of more divergent personalities and styles of leadership than those of President Bush and Bill Clinton. One cannot imagine the president from Texas, who only likes to give speeches to friendly Republican and military audiences, setting up his post-presidential offices in Harlem, or the president from Hope, who loves meeting a wide variety of people, dividing the world between the good people (us) and the "axis of evil" which got extended by Bush to include Iraq, North Korea, Iran, Cuba, Libya, and Syria. Unlike Clinton, Bush's personality would not allow his wife to run for president, let alone strategize and campaign for her victory.

In his critique of the American political reality, Dr. Lotto is trying to have it both ways. In one breath he declares that the leaders are interchangeable and in the next that elections are simply "less important than many people believe." He calls America an "oligarchy," leading me to wonder how he explains that middle-class Richard Nixon became president rather than the enormously rich Nelson Rockefeller, and why in 1994 Michael Huffington's multimillions could not buy him the California U.S. Senate seat of Dianne Feinstein. But no, though he focuses most of his essay on the advantages—and corruption—of money, he declares "the candidate who spends the most does not always win," but the one who spends less "is unlikely to win." This hedging makes it more difficult to deal with his critique. Probably this equivocation is a reflection of Lotto having thought through his position more carefully, while remaining reluctant to give up his basic point.

The question becomes, why does he hold onto a thesis that he consistently modifies? The language he chooses can point to some of the roots of his belief. Politics is described and demeaned as "a game," an "insidious distraction," a mere type of "bread and circuses" entertaining and distracting the voters while "money will continue to rule" through "manufactured consent" and lobbying by paid special interest groups.

The frustration and anger reflected in this critic's choice of words is related to his dim view of

the current political system, apparently because he wants a more radical form of government than the candidates favor. After all, he sees the candidates as Tweedledums and Tweedledees because they all believe "in the principle that free market corporate capitalism, with at most a limited and circumscribed role for government regulation, is the only feasible economic system." To him this means "that no matter which of the contenders gets to be our next president, large corporations will wield enormous power and influence on the political process." I can accept this assertion about money having considerable influence, but he then takes it to mean that "money will continue to rule," which goes way beyond the evidence as I read it.

Money has great importance in our current electoral system, but whose money is it? There are so many competing interests and so much competing money, domestic and foreign. His complaint that the leading candidates "are all firm believers in the principle that free market corporate capitalism, with at most a limited and circumscribed role for government regulation, is the only viable economic system" is misleading. The free markets of corporate capitalism are not terribly free (and I do not mean the high cost of elections) because government regulations are used by competing capitalists to advantage themselves and disadvantage their competitors—or potential competitors—by keeping them out of the marketplace. As a professor who has taught economic history, I have endlessly heard the rhetoric of free enterprise from capitalists and corporations, and then watched them use government as an instrument to achieve their ends. They, like most interest groups, want to have their cake and eat it too.

To return to the author's anger with the existing system, it strikes me that he is a frustrated idealist of the type who sees the good as the enemy of the perfect—unlike this writer who is willing to settle for a less than perfect system. If American government can not live up to its superego ideal, then he in frustration rejects so much of it. On the other hand, I identify with the ego more than the ego ideal, and am willing to accept a system with major flaws because I see myself and the other people in it as having enormous flaws as well. Our varying approaches are also related to what we see as most important. Dr. Lotto the psychologist/psychoanalyst is a skilled clinician who can work with unconscious forces, but in this essay Lotto the political man is focused on the political economy of society without apparent reference to unconscious forces, except to the extent they are used to undermine democracy, as he argues they do through advertising. In his essay, but fortunately not in all of his writings, economics trumps psychology.

Psychological appeals in American politics came before Freud's nephew Edmund Bernays took a leading role in developing advertising, which David Lotto calls the "bastard nephew of psychoanalysis." A colleague tells me that Walter Lippmann's first book, *A Preface to Politics* (1913), is an early attempt to apply Freud to politics. Psychoanalysis helps us to understand not simply the psychobiography of the individuals involved in politics, but also politics' role in organizing and expressing aggression. For example, it is not hard to see unconscious group psychological needs for domestic enemies in the debates over issues of family values and war and peace. A mechanism which I sometimes identify at work is what Freud called "the narcissism of minor differences," where comparatively minor viewpoints become matters of life and death in the minds of the participants.

David Lotto reminds me of the American populists who criticized capitalism as if it were a static system. In fact the "creative destruction" of capitalism makes it a most dynamic, innovative, productive, and unsettling system. Thirty years ago the power and range of the computer I am typing on and the World Wide Web (the Internet) on which I am checking points in an instant were almost unimaginable for an individual to possess at a modest price. They have placed enormous power in my hands. (These innovations also mean that typewriting companies have gone out of business and that lots of American jobs are being outsourced to lower-priced Asian labor.) Lotto misses the democraticizing influence of the rapid communications made possible by modern technological innovation—through television, the computer, the Internet with its blogs and instant messaging, cell phones (with built-in cameras and text messaging), and the 24-hour news cycle. This technological transformation putting power in the hands of the people sometimes brings unexpected candidates and issues to the fore.

Who is to be trusted with the lives and prosperity of the nation is a crucial question for both psychohistorians and the public generally. Money,

whatever its importance, does not tell the nation if the leader is self-defeating as was Nixon or has poor judgment as is the case with George W. Bush. We will be electing a new president in 2008, who will have enormous power to do good or evil. I, for one, care who is elected, even if I am choosing a lesser evil rather than my ideal candidate. Beyond the issue of emotional stability my foremost criterion has to do with whether this individual will get us out of and keep us out of war. This means I will not vote for John McCain, should he win the Republican nomination, because he is a hawk who considers it quite important "to stay the course" in Iraq. Nor do I expect I would vote for Rudolph Giuliani who is not only hawkish, but is *not* inclined to accept constitutional limits, as reflected in his trying to extend his mayoral three months after the 9/11 attacks. Reading Barack Obama's *Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance* (1995) has convinced me that, in addition to his inexperience, he is too much of an observer, a journeyer through life, to readily get my vote.

To understand our electoral choices, I have lost much sleep over more than three decades studying the childhoods and personalities of the candidates and often publishing my results prior to the elections. It can be enormously hard to get accurate childhood materials because the candidates and their campaigns are mostly bound and determined to mythologize their pasts. But psychoanalysts and psychobiographers have a better chance than most to get past the mythology. We can more readily see behind the public persona while having our eyes peeled for narcissistic, self-defeating, and self-destructive tendencies. We have a greater awareness and understanding of the relationship between the national mood—the commonly held feelings and fantasies—and the candidates. Sometimes we even can judge their ability to stand up against or to ride the winds of war.

An important function of recent presidential elections has been the integration of different categories of people and groups into the presidency and body politic generally. JFK overcame the prejudice against people of his Roman Catholic faith reaching the pinnacles of power, inspiring numerous minority members and groups to aspire to the presidency. In 1976 in opposition to the then political wisdom that no Southerner could be president after the Civil War, the Georgian Jimmy Carter ran his campaign from Atlanta to be elected as a Southern Washington-outsider. Ronald Reagan broke the taboo on divorced politicians (and men in their seventies) occupying the Oval Office. In the current election the barriers being challenged involve the following categories of Americans serving as our top leader: African Americans (Barack Obama), Hispanics (Bill Richardson), Italian-Americans (Rudolph Giuliani), Mormons (Mitt Romney), and women (Hillary Clinton).

In 2000 Ralph Nader, seeing the Republicans and Democrats as Tweedledum and Tweedledee, ran for president as a Green Party candidate, helping to make George W. Bush rather than Albert A. Gore president. This has made an enormous difference in the last seven years. Politicians are not the same. As a citizen, professor, psychoanalyst, and psychohistorian I work for the possible, not perfection. Thus, despite my frustration with the candidates and political system, I continue to study the childhoods, leadership styles, personalities, and values of presidential candidates. I hope David will as well.

Paul H. Elovitz, PhD, *is co-diredtor of the Psychohistory Forum's research seminar on the childhood, personality, and psychology of presidents, and may be contacted at pelovitz@aol.com.*

◇◇◇CP◇◇◇

Rejoinder to Elovitz

David Lotto

Actually, Paul Elovitz is wrong. He appears to be suffering from an all too common case of optimistic naiveté: too much seeing the glass half-full when it is really just about empty. Bill Clinton, the man from Hope, who opened an office in Harlem after the ignominious end of his administration, was the president of the Democratic Leadership Council (DLC) in 1990 and 1991. He was consistently loyal to one of the cornerstones of the DLC credo: the belief in and reliance on "market-based solutions" in all things. Clinton (and his vice president, Al Gore) were always supporters of free-trade agreements and globalization, charter schools, a privatized healthcare system, and even the partial privatization of Social Security. Free-market capitalism and its corollary that money must be given its say in the political proc-