

## Our Worst Elements

Take a good look at the various governments around the world and what do you see? Look at the nut case in North Korea. Look at the barbaric government in Saudi Arabia. Look at the corruption and violence throughout Africa. Look at the current mess in Turkey. Look at the right wing dictatorships in Latin America which our government helped foster. Observe the violent rise of the Islamic State. Then consider the horrors of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century: the Third Reich, Stalin's Russia, and Mao Ts-dung's China. (The list goes on indefinitely, it seems.) These examples illustrate the fact that we have failed to solve the problem of governance, and raise a fundamental question we urgently need to address: Why is it that the vast majority of human societies regurgitate their worst elements into leadership positions?

We now have an opportunity to perform a detailed study of this phenomenon in the United States, since it is quite possible that we are about to elect a psychopath to our highest office. While I can make no claim of expertise in analyzing what may happen here, a couple of observations are in order. The first is that any attempt to use rational argument against a candidate whose statements are either total nonsense, contradictory, or self-refuting by their mere statement is bound not only to fail, but will give that candidate a false appearance of credibility. Thus, it is very difficult to campaign against such a candidate, because the normal means of political discourse will result in nothing but unintended consequences.

When it comes to politics, our behavior is emotion based and essentially irrational. Invoking violence has a tendency to attract a large following. The European historian Tony Judt points out that Stalin was most popular with many western intellectuals when his atrocities were at their peak and widely publicized. The same was true for Mao's Cultural Revolution. (Tony Judt, *Postwar*, Penguin Press, 2005, p.216) Judt's observation is corroborated by the current attraction of the Islamic State's violence to westerners and the expressions of violence in this election cycle. Hopefully inquiries into the nature of the human brain will shed some light on the neurological processes involved in political behavior. This knowledge is urgently needed given our destructive political tendencies.

A second, but much more serious problem is the fact that psychopaths do not obtain leadership positions on their own; institutional support is absolutely necessary to put them there. In some cases, this support comes from the outside, and our government has been guilty of providing such support to right wing dictatorships. In our case, however, this institutional support comes from within, and unfortunately most of it is hidden. To paraphrase the historian Henry Steele Commager: the most atrocious crimes are committed behind closed doors in oak paneled board rooms. (Commager made his remarks in reference to Vietnam, but the archetypical example of such boardroom atrocities is the Wannsee Conference depicted in the BBC movie *Conspiracy*. That conference was the beginning of Hitler's final solution.) It is relatively easy to psychoanalyze psychopathic candidates, and considerable commentary along these lines has already appeared in the media. Much more difficult is understanding the social, economic, political, and psychological forces that make it possible for them to achieve leadership positions. Our habit of focusing on the personality of the candidates makes it all too easy to ignore these institutional forces. We now have the opportunity to do an in depth study of this problem, and I hope some of our brilliant minds will apply themselves to such an effort. We owe it to future

generations to make real progress in gaining knowledge to help us solve the problem of governance, and to develop genuine democratic systems that will reduce the probability of psychopathic leadership.