

The Bush Presidency: An Article of Faith

by Dr. Justin Frank

Dr. Justin Frank, M.D. authored Bush on the Couch: Inside the Mind of the President, published by HarperCollins. On Oct. 25, he responded to a New York Times Magazine feature on President Bush, by Ronald Suskind, with the article we reprint in full below.

Suskind's Oct. 17 article, "Without a Doubt," was an exposé of the President's fanatical fundamentalism. Even before 9/11, Suskind says, Bush's inner circle was tightening; he displayed a "bullying impatience with doubters and even friendly questioners." By the Summer of 2001, Bush was telling his followers: "Have faith in me and my decisions, and you'll be rewarded." After 9/11, it got worse.

Suskind cites the following incident:

"In the summer of 2002, after I had written an article in Esquire that the White House didn't like about Bush's former communications director, Karen Hughes, I had a meeting with a senior adviser to Bush. He expressed the White House's displeasure, and then he told me something that at the time I didn't fully comprehend—but which I now believe gets to the very heart of the Bush presidency.

"The aide said that guys like me were 'in what we call the reality-based community,' which he defined as people who 'believe that solutions emerge from your judicious study of discernible reality.' I nodded and murmured something about enlightenment principles and empiricism. He cut me off. 'That's not the way the world really works anymore,' he continued. 'We're an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality. And while you're studying that reality—judiciously, as you will—we'll act again, creating other new realities, which you can study too, and that's how things will sort out. We're history's actors . . . and you, all of you, will be left to just study what we do.' "

As the nation's effort to comprehend its often-contradictory President reaches a fever pitch in the closing days of the campaign, members of the press have come up with one theory after another to understand Bush's strength as everything from his common touch, to his Oedipal need to succeed where his father failed, the appeal of his apparent decisiveness, and on and on. Yet, he remains opaque.

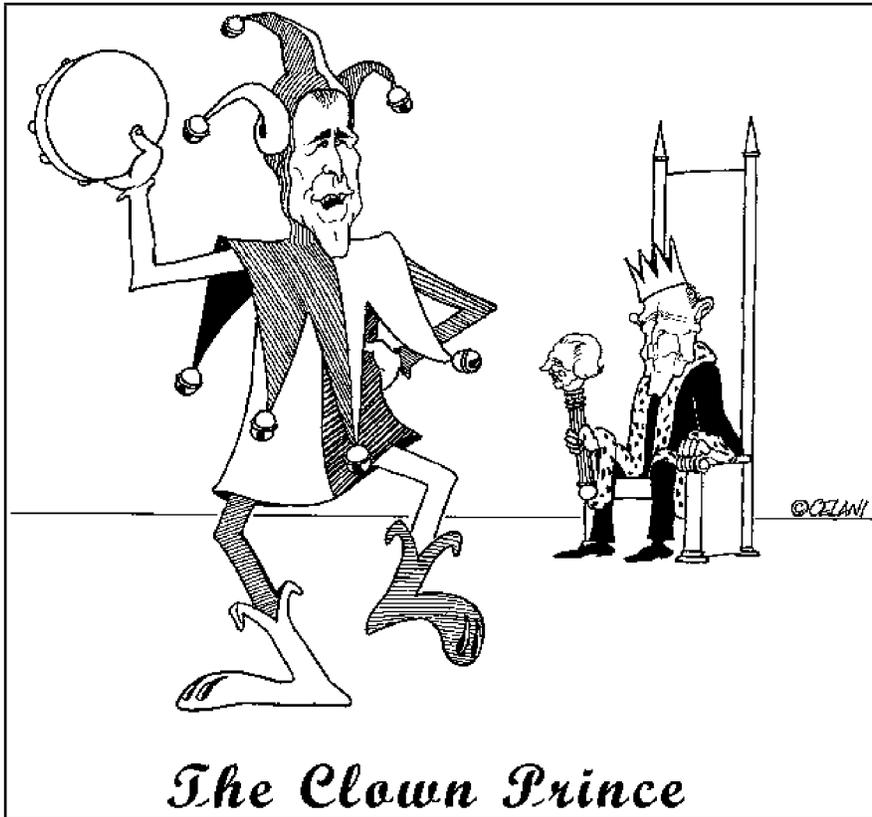
The most recent theory about Bush comes from Ron Suskind, put forth in a *New York Times Magazine* essay about Bush's faith-based Presidency that portrays the President as a man who makes decisions according to his closeness to God.

Suskind says that Bush is supremely confident, and that he demands that his staff have complete faith in him as well, meaning that his staff must remain loyal to whatever Bush wants or decides to do.

As a psychoanalyst, I explore the fantasy lives of my patients, examining with them their internal tendencies to distort reality, based on their own personal life-history and their relationships to important people from their past. We look at how they superimpose past experiences on current ones. I have also studied, using the lens of applied psychoanalysis, how President Bush makes decisions based on his own past as well as his own feelings and anxieties about those events. In my book-length study of the president, *Bush on the Couch*, I came to the conclusion that Bush's major goal, both as a human being and as President, is to win the war against the terror provoked by his own inner fears. And as the events of recent weeks have forced the President to confront the possibility that the central tenet of his deeply-engrained world-view—that he will be elected to a second, divinely-ordained term—may be in jeopardy, the inner chaos that Bush seeks to regulate through certainty has been more clearly on display than ever before in his brief public life.

Even a cursory study of the familiar elements of Bush's biography confirms that his is not a life-long journey searching for truth or even for God. Rather, it is a lifelong pursuit of relief. In his childhood and early youth, that relief was comic: he was the jester, trying to comfort his grieving mother (who golfed on the day after his young sister's death) and distract others from recognizing the disabilities that his preoccupied parents never recognized or treated. In other efforts to reduce his anxiety, Bush as a child blew up frogs with firecrackers and ten years later branded Yale fraternity pledges on the buttocks. He developed a sarcastic and mocking style as yet another method to hide his personal shame through shaming others. The anxieties these behaviors masked were soon narcotized by alcohol, and as, as we all know, Bush reached a turning point around his 40th birthday when he exchanged one form of relief for another, replacing alcohol (which was starting to create as much need for further relief as it was offering) for a born-again Christian, fundamentalist faith. Mr. Suskind accurately notes that faith has become central to the President's conduct of his office.

What Mr. Suskind and others overlook, however, is the psychological function of Bush's faith. As he openly stated in the third presidential debate, Bush's faith is driven by a need for calm. I think, however, that he can only reach that calm state if he leaves behind all curiosity and inquiry, and then uses faith to justify his incuriosity—which he then uses to make himself think and act certain about his courses of action. His faith is based on an almost desperate need, as is the certainty that he affects in its name. Certainty is not an expression of faith, but a defense against anxiety. People who have non-defensive faith are open to new ideas, not closed. But Bush uses faith and certainty as a way to block thought,



as a way to protect a mental apparatus compromised by years of massive anxiety, inability to pay attention, heavy substance abuse, disregard for rules, and a lifetime of having been rescued from potential disasters by family or family surrogates.

That Bush is brimming with anxiety was obvious to anyone watching his debates against Kerry. While in each debate Kerry was relatively consistent, slightly detached, and thoughtfully presenting his arguments against Bush, the President was remarkably inconsistent in his response; trapped behind a podium, unable to physically discharge his anxieties, he was hesitant and testy in the first debate; the following week, he could scarcely stand still, impatiently jumping from his stool to interrupt; and finally last week pasting an unconvincing smile on his face when he wasn't slipping into a mocking yet nervous cackle.

In that last debate, the massive amount of effort that went into Bush's attempt to look confident was as obvious as the bit of spittle on the corner of his mouth (which has engendered the new term spittlegate, but which some professional colleagues told me they thought might indicate use of amphetamines to help control his impulsive behavior of the previous debate).

In all three debates he fell back on his childhood's preferred approach to anxiety management, either by playing the role of the class-clown interrupting serious discussion of important issues by attempting to tell jokes (which usually

fell on deaf ears), or by attempting to mock Senator Kerry any chance he got.

In the White House, Bush's preferred mode of anxiety management could be described as "message management," the almost mantric repetition of familiar phrases that are clearly used to control communication rather than instill it with meaning, and in all three debates he retreated to fixed mantras, from "hard work" in Debate I to "no child left behind" in Debate III. And in all three debates he displayed his uncanny ability to avoid answering direct questions, stock in trade for most politicians, perhaps, but evidence of the desperate anxiety inspired by having to face questions he needed to evade. Suskind creates a vivid portrait, chilling to some, inspiring to others, of a faith-driven President who looks to prayer for solutions, who feels certain about the world because of his link to what he calls a "higher authority."

But there is a difference between having faith and using faith. Bush uses

faith as a weapon against doubt, against anxiety, against having to do the work of thinking about reality. When he mocks others, whether it be Kerry or the entire state of Massachusetts, Bush openly turns his back on faith, revealing to all that his faith is not only a shield but also a weapon. His arrogance is defensive: certainty is not a sign of strength, or even of resolve. By accusing Kerry of being willing to say anything, Bush expresses his own fears, his own need to cling to disproved ideas and even to lies to protect himself from his own anxious impulsivity, seen to best advantage in Debate II. To take Bush's faith at face value, as so much of the media is apparently willing to do, fails to recognize it as a defense; to leave so much of Bush's psyche and motivation unexplored beyond the descriptive level engages in analysis as based in faith as Bush's own.

To have faith in Bush's faith, if you will, is to ignore that Bush's peculiar affect of certainty does not imply strength, despite heavy-handed appearances to the contrary when Bush swaggers around his faithful minions. This kind of certainty reveals fragility. Bush is too fragile to entertain different perspectives. By mis-defining it as strength, one misses the central element in Bush's struggle to superimpose belief onto reality. It is an attempt to fend off and eradicate his fears of reality, fears which ultimately reveal immense fragility. For those of us who live in reality, as Suskind makes clear, the threat could unfortunately not be more dire.