

Staying Alive

Power, personality and presidents

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Sixty years ago the political scientist Harold Lasswell published "Power and Personality." Lasswell wanted to understand what type of people sought power and what could be done to promote responsible governing in a democracy. He felt power was most desired by those trying to "overcome low estimates of self," and that many historical important leaders grew up in "extremes between deprivation and indulgence."

It is striking that President Bush was son of another president, the present Republican presidential candidate is the son and grandson of four-star admirals, and that both raised hell in their youth and war in their maturity.

Consider the contrast with President Clinton and Sen. Barack Obama, both of whom had absent fathers and experienced relative poverty in their youth, both with "strong" mothers anxious for their success. Yet much has changed in America in the last 60 years, including the types of personalities selected for its leaders, in arenas ranging from politics to corporations to religion.

These changes were heralded as early as 1949, when David Riesman noted a "change in American character" from a guilt- to a shame-based culture. In a guilt-based culture, you do the right thing because it's right and refuse the immoral choice simply because it's wrong. A shame-based culture looks not at internal moral standards, but social ones — what will people think of me if I do this? Will they support me or vilify me?

Since Riesman's time, the shift from guilt to a shame culture has gathered so much steam that shame is not the issue, but whether one is found out and goes to jail. The leaders of Enron and Tyco were caught red-handed

in massive fraud and continued to endlessly declare their innocence. The head of the NY Stock Exchange thought \$140 million a perfectly reasonable retirement payment for his non-risky, non-entrepreneurial job, expressing pride as he won in court.

Alberto Gonzales accepted and condoned torturing men in Guantanamo, men the Army knew had done nothing; continued and then hid wireless wiretapping of the general public; illegally selected Justice Department officials meant to uphold the laws through socio-political litmus tests; and violated national security laws by recklessly taking home documents considered more than "top secret" at least 18 times. Yet there are no declarations of guilt or shame by Gonzales. As he's not indicted, why would the media care?



Cue the 'Gamesman'

A better take on what has happened to American leadership can be gleaned from a 1970s era study, "The Gamesman," by Michael Maccoby and Rosabeth Moss Kanter. Kanter and Maccoby wanted to know what traits were being selected in future American leaders. They discovered several types, including brilliant engineers and talented managerial bureaucrats, all more or less dedicated to their corporations.

Yet what excited Maccoby and Kanter was the new type they found, "the gamesman," who seemed to view marching up the corporate ladder as an elaborate game with few rules. In a time with virtually no high level female executives, gamesmen were found to be charismatic, narcissistic, amoral, concerned with "get-

ting ahead themselves," rather than broad social or economic goals or even the best interests of the people they worked for. Yet other employees "loved them," and gamesmen were remarkably popular. Both authors felt the rise of the gamesman a net positive result for American business.

Then the rise of electronic media changed the rules of who would take national power. The nature of the shift became clear during the eight-year presidency of Ronald Reagan. Clearly an effective leader and communicator, a "faking," movie star actor as president would not have been tolerated under the earlier guilt-based culture. Reagan's years as a liberal democrat and as a Screen Actor's Guild president who sold out his own constituents were glossed over through his remarkable telegenic abilities. The "Teflon man" could declare "killer trees" were destroying the environment, answer impeachable scandals like Iran-Contra with hand gestures and simple joshing, and get away with it.

Yet Reagan was a far more principled national figure than what has appeared since. When asked who appears to be an amoral leader, charismatic, endlessly ambitious and working almost entirely for their own benefit, any reader can nominate their own candidates, whether they are school superintendents, religious leaders, corporation presidents or political aspirants for national office. In a money saturated media age, the process of selecting leaders places a major premium on appearance rather than substance, perception rather than reality.

Can this transformation be reversed? Watch the national political debates, and draw your conclusions.

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