

**PL1-- "THE NEED TO DE-MYSTIFY THE PRESIDENCY," TIKKUN,
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"The major impact of September 11 has been to make people frightened of death, scared that something is going to happen to them. The objective horror of the fact that we could basically could die ourselves is the real issue."

-- Dr. Robert Firestone

September 11's most important consequence has been the re-mystification of the Presidency, as Americans have yielded to unconscious child-like needs to be protected by the most unlikely father figure in our nation's history. The President's undeserved surge in popularity has blinded us to his failure to promote democracy so as to counter rising Muslim hostility, which poses the greatest long-term threat to American security. And it has contributed to his flawed military, economic, environmental and civil liberty policies that threaten our long-term security far more than Osama Bin-Laden. These trends can be reversed, if more Americans take a greater interest in foreign and anti-terrorist policy rather than leaving it their leaders. But if Bush's popularity remains high, and two or three more domestic September 11s occur, the cause of preserving American democracy could face its greatest challenge since the Civil War.

As Ernest Becker so brilliantly described in Denial of Death and Escape From Evil, the origins of authoritarianism lie in a Faustian Bargain that people make with their rulers. Unconsciously terrified of death, they agree to cede power to leaders to be protected against it. This is why leaders combined sacred and secular power for most of recorded history.

Although modern democracies have thankfully separated church and state, our unconscious fear of death remains - as does our willingness to give up our freedom in return for an illusory protection against death. The Presidency remains the repository of these unconscious desires for protection, the last remaining public office which possesses more than secular power. This is what is meant by the idea that the Presidency is the "symbol" of the nation, or that it represents more than the man occupying the position.

Nothing illustrates the truth of Becker's insights more than the astonishing rise in post-September 11 popularity enjoyed by President George W. Bush, a mediocre, incompetent and inconsequential man who has become the beneficiary of people's unconscious desires to be protected from death. The absurdity of magazine covers comparing him to Theodore Roosevelt, or polls ranking him as a better President than any but FDR and Lincoln, reveal just how deep our unconscious desire to be protected by a father figure can go.

September 11 had enormous psychological implications for Americans. The largest domestic attack on U.S. civilians in our history, it shattered forever the sense of security and invulnerability conferred on us by our geographic separation from the rest of the world. What was important was not only that foreigners murdered thousands of Americans on a typical day at work, but that they were average, ordinary citizens no different than ourselves. Each of us was made to feel our vulnerability toward death in a way we never had before.

It is clearly this unconscious need to be protected that accounts for the post-September 11 rise in President Bush's popularity. It began before he had taken any military action, and was clearly not due to his subsequent unexpected luck in Afghanistan. (Defense Secretary Rumsfeld was predicting a long, hard winter just prior to the unexpected collapse of the Taliban.) And it has remained high despite his failed promise to capture Bin-laden, the growing evidence that his Administration bungled its pre-September 11 anti-terrorism efforts, the failure of its Middle East policy, its empty threats against Saddam Hussein, its inability to forge an international coalition to fight terror, and its failure even at home to force domestic agencies to cooperate in creating an effective "Homeland Security" policy.

This increase in President Bush's popularity has serious consequences for both our short and long-term security. It has neutralized critics of his wasting billions of dollars on high-tech weapons we do not need rather than spending the same money on measures that would effectively increase our long-term security, e.g. by pursuing effective democratic nation-building in Afghanistan so as to show the Muslim world that we stand for more than corrupt Saudi-style dictatorships. It has allowed him to ignore the threat to the environment which his own Environmental Protection Agency has noted will harm future generations far more than

any terrorist threat. It has greatly weakened efforts to reduce the corporate greed and fraud which so weakens our economy. And it has enabled him to take measures that, if continued and implemented, pose the greatest threat to civil liberties in our nation's history.

Perhaps Bill Clinton's major contribution to the Presidency, however inadvertent and unintended, was to demystify the office. For the first time millions of Americans realized the ugly truth: that the need to fundraise, compromise and distort the truth necessary to win the White House ensures that our President will be an average, normal citizen distinguished neither by moral commitment, vision, wisdom nor compassion.

Only as the American people apply this lesson to George W. Bush, rather than continuing to be ruled by unconscious desires to imbue "the Presidency" with mystical powers it cannot deliver on, will our democracy be saved and will we develop effective policies that can protect not only our generation but future ones from the scourge of terrorism and environmental devastation.

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