Revisioning forensic mental health assessments: a turn to eastern contemplative wisdom traditions for helping with difficult cases

Commentary

Sometimes an auspicious event in American history can raise a critical number of issues in forensic psychopathology assessment all at once. I am talking about the huge impeachment trial of President Donald Trump, a psychodrama currently being played out in Washington, D.C. at the time I am writing this opinion piece. Because this is not a full research paper or clinical case study but just an opinion/commentary article, what I endeavor to do is simply lay out three themes or issues at play that I have noticed during the impeachment trial. The first theme I will mention is Collapsing the Distinction Between Legal and Illegal Activities. As we saw in Michael Douglas’s brilliant portrayal of Wall Street Raider Gordon Gekko, in the first Wall Street movie, even the CEO of a huge money-making organization with massive real estate holdings can actually be diagnosed with Anti-Social Personality Disorder as laid out by the DSM 5. To summarize briefly, Gordon didn’t care about anybody except himself nor empathize with the other as they were just objects to be manipulated for his own purposes even his own hand-picked protege, and life was lived in the law of the jungle. He told Charlie Sheen’s character, his protegé, that one just needs to accept that, the law is kill or be killed, destroy or be destroyed, it is as simple as that. Maybe this is a somewhat appropriate self-philosophy for a corporate raider, but not so fitting for an American President who recently has done much to renounce America’s global role of being a steward of freedom. Trump pulled the military and abandoned the Kurds, labelled as one of most heroic group of fighters in the world, to be slaughtered, dismantled nuclear pacts, tried to unilaterally invoke a peace settlement in the middle east by totally supporting Israel, has a history of sexual violence against women which he openly brags about, and even paid off a porn star who he had an extra marital relationship with to keep quiet. Now, he is being impeached for illegally trying to force the Ukraine prime minister to investigate Democratic presidential candidate front runner Joe Biden and his son, Hunter Biden who is on the board of directors of a Ukraine company, by withholding already announced aid to the Ukraine country. Somewhere around 400 million US of actual announced foreign aid was held back on Trump’s orders. If that is not manipulating foreign interests for personal gain while in the office of the President what is? There seems to be a certain blinding effect of the office of the President, maybe left over from the Kennedy mystique years. People do not plainly look with their own eyes and observe actual behaviors.

A second theme is integrating the Wisdom Contemplative Traditions and Shamanic Practices in Forensic Assessments. One of the first issues that the wisdom traditions deal with in thousands of years of ongoing practice is noticing and going beyond the ego and everyday narcissism.1 Zen, in particular, although Taoism, Tibetan Buddhist, Hassidic, Advaita, Tantra, Sufi, and Christian mystical traditions all have direct pointing to moving beyond the separate self-egoic preoccupation which has stood at the apex of Western conventional psychology through the success ideal for over a century. It is openly acknowledged that Donald Trump takes his flair of narcissism beyond this everyday narcissism to a level that Almaas describes to of pathological narcissism, qualifying him for a diagnosis of narcissistic personality disorder in the DSM 5.

However, we can go further than that in describing Donald Trump’s history of behavior as we delve into anti-social personality land. Anthropologist Carlos Castaneda underwent extensive sorcerer and shamanic training in Mexico for three decades which he described in a series of best-selling books which more than 30 million copies were sold beginning in the 1970’s. In, one of his books, called The Fire From Within he described the phenomena of the “Petty Tyrant.” He described levels of petty tyrants, ranging upwards from little petty tyrants, to small fry petty tyrants, to actual petty tyrants, “buffoons” he described them. But, he also described one level beyond petty tyrants, simply called the tyrant, in which the mistake is made by the average person to not have a well thought out strategy to deal with them. The first important realization is dealing with the situation of the tyrant is noticing the tyrant takes him or herself with far too much self-importance, deadly seriousness and self-preoccupation, a weakness. The warrior must do an assessment of the tyrant’s strengths and weaknesses and formulate a well thought out disciplined strategy involving the elements of control, discipline, forbearance and timing.

A review of the four elements follow before describing the mysterious fifth element will. A warrior stays in control despite even the most ludicrous demands of the tyrant. Discipline is required so the warrior does not get caught up in feelings of feeling sorry for him or herself, but instead immediately goes to work in mapping strengths, weaknesses and quirks of behavior of the tyrant. Forbearance is required to wait patiently, with no rush, a joyful restraining back of what is due.2 Timing is the gate in the dam built by control, discipline and forbearance in which everything is pooled behind the dam. It means holding back even though the warrior knows it is rightfully
due. A fifth quality arises, when the timing is right, and that is will. But this is not just personal will, but the absolute will of existence that overrides the situation in the search for justice and gives infinite power to the warrior or warriors just at the critical time of suddenly reaching out for immediate action, striking out against the tyrant who is caught by total surprize, annihilated and defeated. This whole strategy must be used to perfection to match and ultimately confront the tyrant. In this case, it would be the tyrant that Donald Trump has become.

The third theme is Deconstructing Fear Based Alliances and Organizations. In confronting the anti-social personality person, the tyrant, a simple formula can be used. Alliances and organizations run by fear and will to survive will fall apart as apparent loyalty dissolves as soon as a greater fear comes along. Donald Trump has for example some senators apparently very loyal to him as they fear jeopardizing their political future aspirations of holding continuing offices in the senate or even joining the inner circle of the President Come re-election. So, they are fearful of losing their political careers if seen as being disloyal. They claim 100% loyalty. However, everything unravels when even a greater fear is put in front of them. This fear arises about pending criminal charges and possible jail time. All of a sudden, apparent loyalty to the President unwinds quickly as the circles of influencers madly make deals to avoid jail if at all possible. Kevin Kruse notes in the 2019-2020 holiday issue of Vanity Fair magazine that although former President Richard Nixon avoided jail time for the Watergate crisis, four dozen of his closest advisors were convicted, and half of them did jail time including his chief of staff, White House counsel, top advisors, and the attorney general. Kruse reminds us some of Trump’s people are already locked up including one of his lawyers and a former campaign manager. The stampede of insiders suddenly seeing the light when faced with jail should be beginning soon as the psychodrama in Washington heats up, and the ominous time for the will of the absolute showing up in striking mode looms near.

It is humbling that sometimes affairs seem to have to be on the brink of total disaster before people have the courage to face apparent evil and confront it head on. We can only hope that the moment of the movement of infinite will soon be upon us for America and the world’s sake.

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The author declares there are no conflicts of interest.

References