
BOOK REVIEWS

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State of Confusion: Political Manipulation and the Assault on the American Mind, Bryant Welch, St. Martin's Press, New York, 2008, 287 pages.

I TEND TO BE WARY of those who report having switched from psychotherapy to another career because they found it more interesting or rewarding in some way. I usually imagine they simply were unsuccessful as psychotherapists. The blurb on the jacket of *State of Confusion* reports that psychologist/attorney Bryant Welch spent many years as a psychotherapist prior to his years as a political insider in Washington, D.C. After reading the book, I am inclined to believe he was a competent therapist in his first career. His credibility as a therapist comes in part from his occasional references to vignettes from his clinical years, and in part from the way he shares his personal subjective experiences.

Welch makes a credible claim that he can provide unique insights about the current psycho-political situation in America as a result of the combination of his clinical background and political insider perspective, as well as his degrees in both psychology and law. I was fascinated by what he offers and, by the end of the book, frustrated by what he does not.

The thesis of the book is that very sophisticated psychological manipulation of Americans' minds has become the standard, and very successful, strategy of the neoconservative political movement. This strategy has been implemented through the subtle presentation of the themes of envy, paranoia, and what Welch calls "sexual perplexity" in all kinds of political propaganda. Our anxiety is deliberately provoked by the introduction of these themes, often in a manner that is subtle enough that we don't realize we have been manipulated. Then the prospect of the relief of this anxiety is offered through the presentation of a very black-and-white neoconservative point of view. Welch finds this procedure comparable to the way the husband in the 1944 movie *Gaslight* drives his wife crazy by manipulating her sense of reality, and the procedure itself is therefore labeled "gaslighting."

Welch examines in detail the way gaslighting exploits unconscious conflicts in the areas of envy, paranoia, and sexual perplexity. What it all boils down to, as I understand Welch, is intolerance for the anxiety associated with uncertainty or ambiguity. As people find the complexity of the external world and their own internal experience to be rather challenging, they are vulnerable to a combination of gaslighting followed by a message offering a reassuringly simplistic solution to their confusion and anxiety. Portraying Saddam Hussein as possessing WMD and being responsible for the 9-11 attacks was gaslighting. Invading Iraq was the simplistic solution. Welch also gives a detailed insider's account of the gaslighting behind the evolution of managed care, thereby confirming my worst suspicions.

Gaslighting, as described in the book, reminds me a great deal of the nineteen-seventies cult that profiled potential converts in airports. The first screening iden-

tified those who were of a certain age, very young adults. These were usually college students. Next, those who had an air of uncertainty or anxiety were selected from those who were of the right age. The young men and women thus selected were approached and offered a flower as well as a form of relief from their anxiety and the complexity of their lives through the adoption of the cult's beliefs and practices. As psychotherapists, we know that those who are going to have psychotic episodes usually have the first one at about this same age, suggesting that the cult group was exploiting something about psychological vulnerability during a particularly difficult and confusing period of human development. At the same time in history that this cult was recruiting in airports, colleges and universities—hosts to the same age group—were becoming increasingly concerned about student suicide risks on campus, Perhaps the recent episodes of mass homicides in schools are a function of these same factors.

One of the most disturbing conclusions Welch draws is that the failure of many Americans to tolerate ambiguity and uncertainty, or to think independently in the face of complexity, may feed upon itself and thus grow worse over time. As one is overwhelmed by complexity and succumbs to the simplified dogma presented, the relief experienced makes one less likely to try to use one's critical faculties in the future just as failure to engage in physical exercise leads to being out of shape, and being out of shape makes exercise all the less appealing. It can then be very seductive for someone to suggest that exercise isn't really necessary at all if you simply follow a certain way of viewing the world—it can lead to a nation of psychological couch potatoes.

This use-it-or-lose-it dilemma seems to be parallel to the emerging picture on Prozac's therapeutic action. It appears that the manipulation of serotonin levels is less important than Prozac's ability to stimulate the growth of neurons, and that the symptoms of depression may have more to do with neuronal atrophy than with serotonin levels and strikingly, optimal neuronal growth or regeneration requires active input in the form of physical exercise in addition to the Prozac. *State of Confusion* addresses a slightly different state of mind from that of depression, but the antidote for both involves some kind of personal effort.

The capacity for moral reasoning may be another use-it-or-lose-it function. The ability to wrestle with moral dilemmas, and to search effortfully and responsibly within oneself for solutions to them, is critical if civilization as we know it (or hope to know it) is to survive. Just as a gaslighting political spin doctor might invite one to ignore internal struggles with questions of what is real, so might a law-and-order candidate invite one to ignore the internal moral discernment process.

I was disappointed that I saw no reference in *State of Confusion* to Justin Frank's amazing book, *Bush on the Couch*, published in 2005. Frank, a psychiatrist in Washington, DC, gave a diagnostic context for understanding Bush's astonishing and brazen disregard for the constitution and the laws he had sworn to uphold. He diagnosed Bush as suffering from megalomania and paranoia. I confess that I expected this clarification of what was going on would quickly lead

to Bush's being removed from office on medical (psychiatric) grounds. Instead, in a manner reminiscent of *The Caine Mutiny*, Frank's idea seemed to pass right through the American psyche, unmetabolized. This is perhaps a case study in the very psychological processes that Welch describes so well.

Of course, my assumption that the removal of George W. Bush and company would solve the problem may also be a case study in oversimplification. Welch argues that the tendency toward diminished psychological capacity in Americans, whether moral reasoning or just plain reality testing, has been exploited and exacerbated by Bush and his neoconservatives. However, Welch suggests that Americans have been drifting toward such impairment for some time, and the fact that we elected Bush in the first place is a consequence of this dangerous tendency toward diminished capacity.

More disappointing than Welch's failure to mention *Bush on the Couch* was his failure to suggest any sort of treatment plan for the American psyche. That we need to improve our ability to tolerate complexity and anxiety and to think clearly and independently at the same time is obvious. If such abilities continue to decline, we will almost certainly find the great American experiment in democracy a failure, replaced, perhaps, by some kind of dictatorship. How to avoid such a disaster is the question that looms. Does it require more genuine education rather than merely teaching to the test? Does it mean that the role of the psychotherapist must be viewed in some context larger than that of the consulting room? Should we in some way be citizen-psychotherapists, seeking to address the psyche of the nation? What would be the mass political analog of the processes in psychotherapy that foster the tolerance of introspection, anxiety, and ambiguity? These are very complex questions that provoke my anxiety. I can feel my impulse to press Bryant Welch to write a sequel to *State of Confusion* in which he spells out some simple solution for me. On the other hand, even if a sequel were to address my anxiety as Prozac might address my depression, it would be up to me to put in the effort to really benefit from it.

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