

POTENTIAL SPACE
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PSYCHOLOGICAL POST-MORTEM OF THE MID-TERM ELECTIONS

For many people in the Bay Area, including most therapists, the election of Barack Obama in 2008 signaled a return to sanity. Yet here we are just two years later in a national political landscape so topsy-turvy it feels almost psychotic. How did things get so crazy?

Attachment theory's emphasis on the importance of a secure base may be applied to the development of a healthy society. Just as important as actual economically secure circumstances is "felt security," a sense of trust and cohesiveness instilled by affectively attuned responsiveness that creates cohesion. Candidate Obama embodied a style that promotes felt security, but President Obama has lost his groove in reassuring an anxious nation.

Neuroscience identifies the literal split in the American psyche as stemming from different regions of the brain controlling affect and cognition. Cognitive scientists also note that, in general, liberals tolerate ambiguity and conflict better, whereas conservatives prefer moral certainty, dislike nuance, and tend to be more loyal and decisive.

Such research illuminates Melanie Klein's notion of development from the infantile paranoid-schizoid position to the depressive position. In the face of primitive anxieties, good and bad remain split, preserving both omnipotence and a fragile sense of goodness in the face of malevolence. Gradually, under adequate circumstances, we achieve the capacity for ambivalence, integration, mourning the loss of the ideal, and tolerating disillusionment and uncertainty.

But current circumstances are far from adequate. The country is in the grip of trauma following 9/11 and an economic collapse that has upended the lives of millions. Such primitive anxieties lead to splitting, which presents fertile ground for demagoguery. The Republican Party, whose stated priority is to make sure President Obama fails, has exploited these fault

lines with devastating effectiveness through uniform obstructionism, right-wing media, and the Tea Party.

It is as if President Obama, famous for his predilection for bipartisanship, is trying to govern a paranoid-schizoid nation from a depressive position. Reverting under constant threat to his characteristic defenses of withdrawal and intellectualizing, he has lost his affective attunement with middle America. Meanwhile, Republicans march in loyal lockstep, espousing an affectively charged, clear-cut message, and Democrats, if they can overcome their paralysis at all, fall into their usual formation of the circular firing squad. Such a scenario provides neither real nor felt security.

Nancy McWilliams writes of the pitfalls encountered by therapists who operate from the depressive style of personality organization with clients of a very different cast. These therapists prefer closeness, fear rejection, suffer guilt readily, and tend to be overly responsible and self-critical while avoiding their own greed, anger, and hunger. McWilliams urges the importance of gaining trust, respect, and containment of an escalating client by setting limits, which communicates that you cannot be conned, exploited, or destroyed. And, if nothing else, it helps you get back to your own internal secure base.

It is not too much of a stretch to see the parallels between President Obama and a well-meaning therapist in their attempts to work collaboratively with hostile “partners.” In a recent article published in [The Huffington Post](#), political psychologist Drew Westen urges Obama to “Make your case to the American people, make it evocatively, and draw the line in the sand. That's how you earn people's respect.” Let's hope that Obama can heed this advice, and that we can help him. If he is restored to himself, we might have another chance to restore the better angels of our nature over the more malevolent forces of these dangerous times.