

Shrink Rap Radio #111, September 16, 2007. Psychoanalyzing George W. Bush

Dr. David Van Nuys, aka “Dr. Dave” interviews Dr. Justin A. Frank
(transcribed from www.ShrinkRapRadio.com by Jo Kelly)

Excerpt: *“In this case it is like George Bush felt that if he talked about his feelings he would be seen as weak; he would not be a big boy he would be a weak crybaby. So what he did was he projected weakness and crybabyness onto people around him and became a bully; and attacked anybody at school who was weak, because it was a way of attacking a disowned part of himself. And he still does that, he likes to attack weak people: criticise, poke fun; and it’s a way of getting rid of this devalued and frightened part of himself”*

Introduction: Justin A. Frank, M.D. is a Washington, D.C. based psychoanalyst and author of the book, *Bush On The Couch: Inside The Mind Of The President*, which has a 2007 update. Harvard trained, he is a member of the Washington Psychoanalytic Institute and is the recipient of numerous teaching awards from George Washington University. He lectures widely on a variety of topics including Psychoanalysis and cinema, especially political movies and the films of Woody Allen; Shakespeare and the unconscious; the Psychoanalytic theory of marriage; psycho-political life in the nuclear age; the psyche of George W. Bush; psychopathology of post-modern life. In addition to his recently updated book on the president, his many publications include articles in popular magazines, articles on film theory, and book chapters on psychoanalytic topics. He also writes a blog for HuffingtonPost.com.

Dr. Dave: Dr. Justin Frank, welcome to Shrink Rap Radio.

Frank: Thank you; it’s good to be here.

Dr. Dave: I wanted to speak with you about your book, *Bush On The Couch: Inside The Mind Of The President*, which originally you wrote in 2004 and then you’ve updated it a couple of times and I think even most recently you’ve updated it for this year, 2007. And when I first heard about your book I thought it might be tongue-in-cheek, but once I picked it up I quickly discovered that it’s quite earnest.

Frank: Yes, it’s very earnest. I was worried that the title sounded too tongue-in-cheek but I wasn’t sure what else to call it; and it’s a very serious book.

Dr. Dave: Yes, so I think I'd like to start out by reading a little bit from the book because at the very beginning of the book you set out a number of key paradoxes or questions about George Bush that kind of guided your study.

So let me read from that to get us started. You write, "How can someone so friendly and playful be the same person who cuts funds from government programs aiding the poor and hungry? How is it that our deeply religious President feels free to bomb Iraq and then celebrate the results with open expressions of joy? How can a President send American soldiers into combat under false pretences and then proceed to joke about the deception, finding humour in the absence of weapons of mass destruction under his Oval Office desk? How can someone promise to protect the environment on the one hand, and allow increased arsenic in the public water supply on the other? And why does he feel he can call his plan to lift logging restrictions in national forests the "healthy forests initiative"? If the President's interpersonal skills are strong enough to earn him the reputation of being a "free person", why was he so unwilling and even unable to talk to world leaders such as Jacques Chirac or Gerhard Schroeder who disagreed with him? How can the President sound so confused and yet act so decisively; and given the regularity with which he confuses fact with fantasy, how can he justify decisions based largely on his own personal suspicions with such unwavering certainty?"

So those are certainly good questions to start out with. And I'm wondering: what's your reply to people who will inevitably say that you are politically motivated, and out to get him?

Frank: Well I certainly feel that everybody who is in the world hopefully has some political point of view, and so in that sense I am a political person. I think that it's important though for people who are interested in psychology and psychoanalysis to be able to make a link between those two things. I am a long time liberal, anti war person; I've definitely not liked George Bush's policies, there are other people whose policies I haven't liked including some Democrats in particular Lyndon Johnson during the war in Vietnam. But I'm not out to get him.

One of the things that happens when you are a psychoanalyst is that as you begin to get to know someone you find out all kinds of things and you find their humanity. So it's very interesting that the people who are criticizing the book do not criticize me that I am out to get him. In fact people who are conservative politically who have read the book don't have much to disagree with about him, the man. It's really quite interesting.

I found things that he shares that we are all more human than not, and I found things about him that reminded me of aspects of myself and people I know and all kinds of things. So I don't feel that I was out to get him. I do feel that he is seriously flawed psychologically; and because of those flaws, not because of his politics, but because of those flaws I have questions about whether he should be President.

Dr. Dave: OK. Now you have never seen him to actually psychoanalyze him.

Frank: Right.

Dr. Dave: He's not come to visit you; he's not laid down on the couch or anything. And the idea of remotely analyzing or psychoanalyzing a public figure isn't new, and in fact you refer to it as applied psychoanalysis. Tell us a little bit what you mean by applied psychoanalysis and give us some other historical examples.

Frank: Yes, applied psychoanalysis is a discipline in and of itself, and there have been different periods in our history, in the history of psychoanalysis when psychoanalysts did write biographies of famous people. But applied psychoanalysis is the application of psychoanalytic principles to the study of a historical figure or a famous person who will never come into your consulting room or use your couch. But you use psychoanalytic principles in investigating that person. For instance you read and learn everything possibly that you can. You look for patterns, you look for patterns of behaviour; you try to make links between past and present.

This has been a long tradition that actually started in the early days of psychoanalysis: Freud did a couple of cases like that. He did a psychoanalysis of Moses, also one of Michelangelo, and in his later years after World War I he did one with another man about Woodrow Wilson interestingly. Then in the 40s President Roosevelt hired two psychoanalysts in Boston, Fritz Redlich and Jack Murray, to write psychoanalytic studies of Hitler; with the aim for him to understand Hitler and how he worked, so that after the war he would have a stronger possibility of negotiating with him and understanding where he was coming from. Both men of course died before the war was over, but the original analysis of Hitler, which I have not read, is still there in Hyde Park at the Roosevelt estate. Then in the 60s the CIA started doing this; they would hire psychiatrists and psychoanalysts and psychologists to analyze foreign leaders; again at arm's length, with the idea

of understanding their behaviour and having a better way both to negotiate with them and deal with them. So there is a long pattern of this.

Dr. Dave: Maybe you have to kill me to answer this question, but were you ever hired by the CIA to do that?

Frank: I won't have to kill you; and no, I wasn't; but several of my students were hired by the CIA. One of them worked for the CIA for 8 or 10 years, and I have a good friend who works for the CIA, Gerald Post. I don't think he does now, but he was very active and has written a lot about the process of how they do their work - without revealing any deep and dark secrets.

Dr. Dave: Well that's really fascinating. I get the impression that when it comes to applied psychoanalysis your book might be unique inasmuch as it's the first analysis of a sitting President. Do I have that right?

Frank: Yes you have that right, it's unique, it's the first analysis of a sitting President. There have been people who have analyzed the former Presidents and done psychobiographies of a variety of people in the past; but nobody has ever analyzed the sitting President.

It's a difficult situation because in 1964 when Barry Goldwater was running for the Republican party against Lyndon Johnson, there were a lot of people who were afraid because of Goldwater's tough talk that he would actually end up nuclear weapons, that he was not a safe person because of his deep seated hatred of Russia and communism. And so there was a questionnaire circulated among psychiatrists, I think it was not psychologists but psychiatrists at the American Psychiatric Association: did they think that Goldwater was stable enough to have his finger on the nuclear trigger. And a huge number of them said: no, they didn't think so. And that was used in the campaign by Johnson.

And since then there was a rule passed by the American Psychiatric Association that made it unethical to do that kind of thing, and to analyse the sitting President. Those people in the questionnaire were not doing analysis; I mean I really studied George Bush for 2 years before I wrote my book so it's not like I was just filling out a questionnaire. But it did set psychoanalytic analysis of sitting Presidents and public figures back quite a bit; and I felt that I was taking a big risk ethically, in terms of the canons of my profession.

And I in fact called a very good friend of mine who was the president and still is I think the president of the American Psychiatric Association, and I warned him about my book before it was coming out. I told him that I didn't want to undermine our profession or anything like that; I am very proud of being a psychiatrist, and he and I trained together in Boston and we were very close friends. He appreciated my warning, because I said I was worried there would be bad publicity, but there really wasn't much.

Dr. Dave: Well that's interesting, I'm glad to hear that.

Now your work is theoretically rooted in the work of Melanie Klein, a very influential psychoanalyst from the past, and some of her ideas about birth trauma. Maybe you can give us a thumbnail sketch of that, since all of my listeners may not be up to date in terms of psychoanalytic theory. And then you can tell us whether or not Bush suffered an unusual, traumatic birth.

Frank: Well I don't know about the birth. She was not so much interested - although I did write in my book about birth trauma a little bit; but Melanie Klein, although trained in Europe moved to England in the 20s and was known essentially as a British psychoanalyst. And she was quite revolutionary because she really was interested in the importance of certain factors in the person's development.

One of them is the importance of the ability to mourn and face loss, and that that is central to growth.

Another thing she wrote about was the importance of recognising destructiveness in yourself, and recognising sadism and cruelty; which unless you recognise it, it makes it very imperceptible - because we all have little bits of that or maybe lots of bits of that. It makes it much harder to love if you don't recognise your own potential to hurt other people.

And she was very interested in the issues of weaning and loving and hating the same person and looking at ambivalence. I think a lot of her theories really have informed my work really since the beginning of my training which is now over 30 years ago.

And in the case of George Bush, one of the things that happened early in his life was that he was the first born: and when he was three and a half he had a sister born, and that happens to everybody who is first born, lots of people. But when he was seven years old his sister died of leukaemia, and at the same time as she died, maybe two months before she died his brother Jeb was born. So his mother's attention was really elsewhere and he was left to

his own devices. And in the family, because of the nature of that family there was really no mourning for the dead sister - who was really his only playmate it looked like - and there was no funeral, they never talked about her; her name was Robin.

So there was this pattern set early on that things that are painful are not talked about, they are not looked at, they are not discussed. And that was something that he carried with him all of his life and to this day doesn't really like to talk about any kind of painful thing. In fact one of the ways of managing it was - one of the things that Melanie Klein wrote about that was so important was - although Freud had written about it too, about the concept of projection: which is attributing a quality in yourself that you don't like, attributing that quality to somebody else. In the slang it's like: the pot calling the kettle black.

But in this case it is like George Bush felt that if he talked about his feelings he would be seen as weak; he would not be a big boy he would be a weak crybaby. So what he did was he projected weakness and crybabyness onto people around him and became a bully; and attacked anybody at school who was weak, because it was a way of attacking a disowned part of himself. And he still does that, he likes to attack weak people: criticise, poke fun; and it's a way of getting rid of this devalued and frightened part of himself.

Dr. Dave: Yes. Now the psychoanalytic approach of course emphasises the formative importance of the early years of life as you're pointing out. So not surprisingly you do spend some time dwelling on that in the book. What are some other points that are salient in terms of Bush's family and the early years?

Frank: Well one of the things that's interesting in psychoanalysis also is patterns that are passed on from generation to generation. Melanie Klein didn't write so much about that but other psychoanalysts do. One of the things that was very interesting was that George Bush's mother Barbara, her mother died and Barbara Bush did not go to her own mother's funeral. And Barbara Bush's mother was not very mothering and never cooked for Barbara. And George Bush kids his mother Barbara about the same thing: that she never cooked for him; that every time she wanted to cook something she would get freezer burn.

There are patterns that were passed on through generations of a disconnected mother. One thing that's important in early life is that it's really important for a baby, and a young child to see itself or himself reflected in the mother's eyes. In other words when you smile it's

important for the mother to smile back. When you are a little baby and have a certain feeling or a certain experience it's important for that to be reflected back.

But if the mother is depressed or if the mother is emotionally disconnected the child doesn't get that kind of feedback, and then desperately searches for it elsewhere. And he became a person who searched for that feedback elsewhere; at school when he became a class clown, and a kind of a teasing bully. Because his mother was really either depressed or disconnected, and if you read her memoirs there is hardly any mention of her first born son George, and a great deal of time is about Jeb and the kids who came after.

Dr. Dave: Wow - and why would that be?

Frank: I think that some of it is about the idea that I think unconsciously, and this is just speculation obviously, that she must have linked George and the dead daughter Robin as the first part of her life; and then having Jeb was the part of the new beginning, so the next kids were the ones she writes about most, and was most connected to.

Dr. Dave: That's very interesting. Now people could get the impression that you're a Bush hater, but in fact you acknowledged at the beginning of this discussion and also in the book, you note a number of his positive qualities. What are some of those?

Frank: Well his positive qualities are I think - he has a great sense of humour. He is amazingly resilient, he has been attacked and criticised and he just is able to stand up. He is able to be unwaveringly certain at times, which is definitely a form of strength. He was able to stop drinking when he was about 40; he had been a very heavy drinker in terms of trying to manage his anxiety and all of the agitation he was feeling; and he was really a ne're-do-well, he never made it in the world of business and never was successful and he ran unsuccessfully for Congress in '78 I think. And he didn't stop drinking til 1986 when he was 40; but the capacity to do that is a great strength of character.

So he does have certain kinds of strengths: he is extremely loyal to his friends; he is affectionate. People who know him, in fact the week after the book came out I was having breakfast in Washington and at the next table was Steve Hadley, who is now the head of the NSA, the National Security Agency. And Steve and I are old friends; and he came up to me and he congratulated me on the book, and then he asked me if I had really met President Bush, and I said no I hadn't. And we talked a little bit about him -

and he said that I would really like him, that he is really a good guy. So I discovered those things about him.

Dr. Dave: That's really interesting. And at the same time, with these positive qualities there are contradictions in his personality, right?

Frank: Yes. He has this cruel streak, that if he were just a used car salesman - I don't mean anything against that - or just somebody you would meet in a bar, you could deal with his cruelty; but when you are President of the United States it becomes very unsettling. He teases people, he puts people down, he has a delinquent side of himself that he's always had. He's always been delinquent in one form or another whether it's from fake IDs for early age drinking, to signing statements as an adult. Where they pass laws and then he says: well I don't have to obey these laws. He just writes the signing statement and dismisses them; and he has written more signing statements by far than any President previously.

So there are these sides to him: and then there is the alcoholism, and then there is this kind of real cruel streak he has always had. He used to torture animals when he was little; when he was in college he would use hot coat hangers as part of pledging at Yale he would brand the buttocks of freshmen recruits. These are things that are pretty cruel I think. Then he would deny them, and minimise them.

One of the things that I wrote about in the book was at one point he was - it became public what he was doing when he was in the fraternity because his family name was so famous; so he was interviewed by a New York Times reporter after Yale because of his name - Bush. When asked about branding pledges, he said: look, it's nothing worse than a cigarette burn, it's not a big deal. When you read that, you know you do a double take: you say, well wait a minute - who goes around burning people with cigarettes?

Dr. Dave: (laughs) Right.

Frank: The fact that he could just dismiss it like this. It's the same way I think when he was a child, when his parents dismissed the death of his sister, they would dismiss people's troubles. You see this now with his mother, how she was about the people in Katrina when they were at the superdome, the astrodome and she said: well this is probably a better place for them anyway; or something like that. She was very dismissive; they dismiss other people's troubles; which for me, in the unconscious thinking about it is really a sign of cruelty, and of sadism.

Dr. Dave: In your psychoanalytic narrative the management of anxiety is a key thread. Maybe you can talk something about that, about his defensive style of where his anxiety comes from and then how he manages that.

Frank: I'm really glad you brought that up; because anxiety - it's funny, here I am the Kleinian, one of the main concerns of Kleinian theory and foci of Kleinian theory is anxiety; and the importance, the centrality of anxiety and psychic development that people are very anxious. And there's two kinds of anxiety: there is what she calls paranoid anxiety, which means a fear that somebody is going to hurt you. That you are afraid of somebody in the world, like when people talk about Oedipus, they talk about a castrating father: a fear that the father is going to attack you. That is called paranoid anxiety. And she felt that that kind of fear is based on projection: in other words that the child wants to attack the father, but that wish is so painful and scary that he projects his attacking wish and then feels that he is going to be attacked. So that's one kind of anxiety, paranoid anxiety.

The other kind of anxiety is what she calls anxiety when you love and hate the same person, and you are afraid that your anger at that person will destroy the loved person; that's called ambivalence. And she was very focussed on how people go out of their way to manage their anxiety, and I think George Bush had a tremendous amount of anxiety. When the mother is disconnected - if a baby cries, a mother or father will pick up the baby and calm them, and cuddle them and hold them. But if the baby is really left to his own devices he has no outside agent to help manage his anxiety and is left having to manage it himself. And one of the ways people manage anxiety when they are children is by becoming very hyperactive; they run around and discharge their anxiety in notoric ways.

Well that's sort of what he did, and so he was always trying to manage his anxiety: he had different kinds of twitches; one way of managing his anxiety would be to be a bully - if you could bully other people you don't feel as scared or anxious; later on in life he manages anxiety by drinking and the best way to manage anxiety for many people, you know coming home from a hard day's work when you're anxious, you have a drink. Well he was a very heavy drinker. And we all find different ways to manage anxiety.

But one of the things that is so important as a psychoanalyst is that anxiety itself can be a source of information, not something that you have to run away from, but it might have some meaning, so if you are anxious before a speech that you are going to give or you are anxious about something it means you should pay attention to it, and it's a signal that you need to pay

attention to. But Bush was trying to deaden his anxiety completely, and then when he stopped drinking he really had no other way to manage his anxiety. He couldn't manage it through alcohol and so he had to find other ways, and that's when he turned to religion and to massive exercise. He also smoked a lot of cigarettes; a very heavy chain smoker, which isn't really talked about much by people, but he was a very heavy smoker and that's a way to manage anxiety.

He still has to manage anxiety now, by spending a lot of time away from the White House. He manages anxiety by constantly exercising; by having very short meetings, brief meetings; and he manages anxiety by making sure that every person he speaks to has been vetted and screened as somebody who would not challenge him or threaten him. Remember in the April 2004 press conference when somebody asked him if he had ever made a mistake, he sort of froze and became paralysed and couldn't really answer that question. And that's what happens when a person who is so used to managing their anxiety by evading it - when they are confronted directly they really don't know what to do.

Dr. Dave: You talk about him having stopped drinking but you also describe him as a dry drunk, and you list some telltale characteristics. Can you take us through that?

Frank: Well yes - the dry drunk is actually not a medical term, so even though I used the term I was trying to be careful to talk about it as a term that makes sense to me, but it's not clinically used in psychiatry and psychoanalysis. But people in AA use it, and it's a very meaningful term; which is that somebody who has stopped drinking who is an alcoholic, they have stopped drinking but they have not gotten rid of the alcoholism - the ism part of alcoholism.

That includes people who also can't manage anxiety, people who have to see the world in black and white. One of the ways of managing anxiety is to simplify things: you're with us or you're against us; you're a good guy or you're a bad guy. That's a way of managing anxiety and it's typical of dry drunks. Dry drunks are at times very impulsive and they cling to the same idea, they can't change their mind about anything; and he has clung to this idea about Iraq for instance and that is very typical of dry drunks. They get angry and very suspicious; and they become sometimes full of braggadocio, like they can say I can lick any man in the house, I can beat up anybody, and that is sort of the way he says "bring it on". It's very typical of a dry drunk.

Dr. Dave: You even raise the possibility in relation to his drinking that he may be suffering from some brain impairment as a result of his period of very heavy drinking.

Frank: Well it's really striking how he has trouble thinking things through, he makes lots of slips of the tongue. He has trouble organising his mind, and he has other cognitive deficits that I think he has. It's too bad that he has not been tested psychologically. But one of the things that can happen in people who have chronic alcoholism - and he was a heavy drinker for 24 years of his life - is about 15% of people don't ever get back to their pre morbid state, in other words to the state they were at before they started drinking. But most people do recover fully their mental processes; but there is something about him.

I have had several patients and a couple of colleagues who wondered about him being kind of early stages of an alcoholic syndrome: where you are disorganised, where you deny things that you just said. You could say something and then somebody would quote you, and you would say - well I never said that.

And he did this recently with George Stephanopoulos when he was interviewed, and Stephanopoulos asked him about "staying the course", and how can he keep insisting on staying the course? And George Bush finally said to him, "look I have never been about staying the course, I never said staying the course". And my blood ran cold when he said that, when I saw that interview; because it means that he is denying everything he has been saying for the previous two years.

People who have alcoholic brain damage do that more than other people, but there are lots of people who will deny things that they have said because they are uncomfortable about them when they hear somebody else say them. I just heard about a case today; so I don't think that is unique to him.

Dr. Dave: You talked about the notoric expression as one way of handling anxiety, and you actually did raise the possibility that he may have suffered from ADHD and dyslexia. What can you tell us about that?

Frank: Well he has trouble - his brother is a very well diagnosed, Neil Bush, dyslexic - who virtually cannot read. George Bush has a very difficult time reading, he doesn't like to read; he has to be briefed by his advisers; he doesn't read the documents that he gets. They come to his desk and other people read them to him; so I think he does have a serious reading problem.

But he also has a kind of attention deficit hyperactive disorder. I really think he is unable to sit still. If you watch films of him when he was governor, he was always fidgeting around, touching people, being really unable to sit still. There are several different interesting pictures of him sitting when other people are speaking at an awards event when he was governor; and he would just get up and touch people, tap people and very much hyperactive. And one of the ways of managing anxiety is to constantly be on the move and constantly try to discharge it.

Dr. Dave: Well I can't help but wonder, how can a guy who can't read, who doesn't want to read, doesn't like to read - get through Princeton, let alone become President?

Frank: Well he went to Harwood, not Princeton; I don't know if he could get to Princeton. He went to Yale actually.

Dr. Dave: Oh Yale, that's right.

Frank: He went to Yale because of his father, and in those days they had legacies, and I guess they still do. His father was a star at Yale and his whole family, and his grandfather went to Yale and so he has a long family history. And these Ivy League schools they want to take people in the family so they can get endowments and family money, and Yale is no exception; in fact it was fairly well known in those days.

And so he could get through by just getting what is called the gentleman's C. He probably couldn't read very well and he didn't do very well in school but he managed to get through. He also got into Harvard Business School, which was really interesting for me. How he did, I don't know; I don't think he reads very well.

Now there are lots of people who have dyslexia and trouble reading who do very well in life, many of them are in acting you know. They memorise scripts, they have other people read to them, they memorise scripts or read slowly and they memorise things. It's laborious, and the issue is not that he couldn't read at all, but it's hard work to read. And he is not averse to hard work in that way and so maybe he just did power his way through, I don't know. But clearly it's not anything of choice for him, reading.

Dr. Dave: Well let me cut to the chase here. Is there any danger that as an evangelical Christian who believes in the apocalypse, that this President

would be motivated to bring about the end of the world as we know it, in order to hasten Christ's return?

Frank: Well that's a tough question, because my first answer is a qualified yes, there is a danger. What makes it even more dangerous is that I think at his deepest level of his psychic organisation he really hates his parents; and in particular - well both of them. And I think that unfortunately he is confusing the American people with his parents; and I think that he is doing destructive things wilfully to the American people. He is destroying our army, and he really is; he is sending them out there without any plans, preparation or support. He is bankrupting the government, and he is doing that I think on purpose because I think he really is destructive, he broke all kinds of treaties.

He likes to break things; he is a very angry man that he has covered up with his affability and his charm; but he really is a destructive person. And I think I don't see him as evangelical as some people might see him, because I don't think he is deeply religious, I think that he takes advantage of other people's religiosity; but I don't see him as being religious. But I think that he is deeply destructive.

I hate to stop, but I am going to actually have to get off from this interview.

Dr. Dave: Yes, I'm sorry because I had another question or two.

Frank: OK what's your last question, I am just getting these calls and they may be from patients and I can't tell.

Dr. Dave: OK well have you taken any heat for writing this book from the President, his administration, the neocons, psychiatry?

Frank: I've taken some heat from psychiatry in the first few months, and anybody who criticised the book, I actually wrote them a letter and I said why don't you read the book and then you can criticise it. And I never heard back from them.

As far as politically, it was the same thing. The people who criticised it were the people who hadn't read it. And I had my office burgled a couple of times, and my friends told me it might be the FBI or somebody trying to make a big mess. But I don't buy that. And so I took much less heat than I thought I would.

But the other thing that happened is that I got ignored by the major mainstream press. The headlines in the New York Times book review was the book on swiftboating, or the attacks on Hilary; but a book written by a legitimate psychoanalyst who is a professor and well trained at Harvard, that book was not reviewed and didn't get much press. It was ignored, and I think they were anxious about it. So in that sense the only negative feedback I got was no feedback from some people. Which was frustrating.

Dr. Dave: Yes I can well imagine, and I am going to encourage my listeners to read the book.

Dr. Justin Frank, thanks so much for being my guest today on Shrink Rap Radio.

Frank: Thank you, it was a pleasure.