

Special Report

Physician sees 'presenile dementia' in Bush's faltering speech

By Jerry Mazza

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September 18, 2004—In a letter to the editor of *Atlantic Monthly*, October 2004, Joseph M. Price, M.D. of Carsonville, Michigan, comments that James Fallows' July/August *Atlantic* article on John Kerry's debating skills ("When George Meets John"), "was interesting, but most remarkable was Fallows's documentation of President [sic] Bush's mostly overlooked changes over the past decade—specifically 'the striking decline in his sentence-by-sentence speaking skills.'" Dr. Price understands Fallows' initial "speculations that there must be some organic basis for the President's peculiar mode of speech, a learning disability, a reading problem, dyslexia or some other disorder."

Quoting Fallows, Dr. Carson also agrees with him that "The main problem with these theories is that through his forties Bush was perfectly articulate." Yet, Dr. Carson stated he felt "that something organic was wrong with President [sic] Bush, most probably dyslexia, but . . . was unaware of what Fallows pointed out so clearly: that Bush's problems have been developing slowly, and that just a decade ago he was an articulate debater." He was as Fallows said, "artful indeed in steering questions and challenges to his desired subjects . . . [one] who did not pause before forcing out big words, as he so often does now, or invent mangled new ones." As Dr. Carson suggests, "Consider, in contrast, the present: 'the informal Q&A he has tried to avoid,' 'Bush's recent faltering performances,' 'his stalling, defensive pose when put on the spot,' 'speaking more slowly and less gracefully.'"

Dr. Price suggests that "not being a professional medical researcher and clinician, Fallows cannot be faulted for not putting two and two together. But he was 100 percent correct in suggesting that Bush's problem cannot be 'a learning disability, a reading problem, [or] dyslexia,' because patients with those problems have always had them." The doctor goes on to say, "Slowly developing cognitive deficits, as demonstrated so clearly by the President [sic], can represent only one diagnosis, and that is 'presenile dementia'! Presenile dementia is best described to nonmedical persons as a fairly typical Alzheimer's situation that develops significantly earlier in life, well before what is usually considered old age."

Dr. Carson adds, "It [presenile dementia] runs about the same course as typical senile dementias, such as classical Alzheimer's—to incapacitation and, eventually, death, as with President Ronald Reagan, but at a relatively earlier age." Dr. Carson adds, "President [sic] Bush's 'mangled' words are a demonstration of what physicians call 'confabulation,' and are almost specific to diagnosis of a true dementia." His advice: "Bush should immediately be given the advantage of a considered professional diagnosis, and started on drugs that offer the possibility of retarding the slow but inexorable course of the disease."

As the son of an Alzheimer's victim who passed at 80, I might add that my father exhibited some of Bush's recently reported explosive behaviors, starting at least 15 years earlier. This along with an inflexibility of opinion and attitude, a kind of relentless insistence that he was on the right side (not just the Republican right) of every issue we discussed. It was a set of behaviors that eventually made it almost impossible to speak with him, and led to his wife [my stepmother] leaving him, leaving myself as his sole caregiver. Ironically, it was only in this state of aloneness and incapacitation that he had some recognition of a very deep problem and that his survival depended on accepting medical care, accepting the medication that ameliorated some of his behaviors, and accepting me as a friend not the enemy.

As a layman and admittedly a liberal, I see in Bush, and in the Republican will to dominance, i.e. "new world order", an eerie echo of my own father's behavior. As a writer, not a psychologist or psychiatrist, I see in each case the need to control, generated by some deeper fear, anxiety or insecurity. In my father's case that need was generated largely by my father's father, who was an alcoholic, and kept the family in a state of agitated imbalance for decades. Even years after my grandfather was deposed by his sons as the head of the family, he remained an alcoholic and a disturbing presence for all. It's not surprising that my grandmother, a gentle, accepting woman, passed some 13 years before my grandfather did, at the age of 65, of her first and only heart attack, simply worn out.

I offer this information, painful as it is to remember, for whatever light the personal life can shed on political life. And I might add, in the anger, the sheer hate and viciousness of the Grand Old Party's behavior, I see hardly anything grand, but rather obsessively self-aggrandizing to the point of pathology. I am fully aware there are those who would say this is what it takes to survive in politics and in the world. I see it as a giant step back in our development, both as a nation and a species. It would be wonderful to move forward in a somewhat more humane atmosphere, one that would mitigate the contagion of anger and hate that has spread to the world. With all our differences, we are still one human family, sharing a physiology, consciousness, a need for love and safety, the need to procreate and protect our young, and to relish the joys of the immediate as well as the extended family, our brothers and sisters of the world.

If this seems like a foolish optimism, a soft-toothed liberal pipedream, consider the alternatives, which we are living every day. The proliferation of war, of weapons of mass destruction, of divisive fundamentalism (east and west), of aggressive unilateralism as opposed to a binding multilateralism. The end game on this *Grand Chessboard* is not a *Pax Americana* (an American Empire) as envisioned first by Zbigniew Brzezinski and now by PNAC (the Project for the New American Century), but a world in shambles, pocked by pocket wars, decimated by regional and national poverty and disease, a world of haves and have-nots, walled in or walled out by mutual fear and disrespect. Rather than crossing the human divides, we are widening them, like so many tribes stranded on ice floes in a roiling ocean. If we are to survive as a species we need to reach a common higher ground. The right choice, like voting or not, like which candidate is the sane one to vote for, is ours, and at this point not just a privilege, but an existential necessity.

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