



UNCONSCIOUS FORCES SHAPING INTERNATIONAL CONFLICTS: ARCHETYPAL DEFENSES OF THE GROUP SPIRIT FROM REVOLUTIONARY AMERICA TO CONFRONTATION IN THE MIDDLE EAST

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INTRODUCTION

An aspect of the emerging theory of “cultural complexes” that continues to grip me is what I termed in an earlier essay the *archetypal defenses of the group spirit*.¹ This phrase is a mouthful, but its purpose is to offer a precise psychological description of a level of collective emotional life that is deeply responsive to threat — whether the threat is real or simply “perceived” as real. When this part of the collective psyche is activated, the most primitive psychological forces come alive for the purpose of defending the group and its collective spirit or Self. I capitalize “Self” because I want to make it clear that it is not just the *persona* or ego identity of the group that is under attack but something at an even deeper level of the collective psyche which one might think of as the spiritual home or “god” of the group. The tendency to fall into the grips of an identification with an *archetypal defense of the group spirit* is universal, and almost every one of us has experienced such a “possession” at some time in our lives — at least in one if not many of the primary groups to which we belong simultaneously.

The tribal spirit of the clan or of the nation often lies dormant or in the background, but when it is threatened, the defenses mobilized to protect it are ferocious and impersonal. The mobilization of such potent, archaic defenses is fueled by raw collective emotion and rather simplistic, formulaic ideas and/or beliefs. One can think of the more virulent cultural complexes as being fed by a vast underground pool of the collective emotional life. *Archetypal defenses of the group spirit* are animated by the release of these heightened emotions of groups in distress.

Just as Jung first investigated personal complexes through their activation by trigger words such as “mother” or “father” in his word

association tests,² cultural complexes are also frequently triggered by a collective, word association process that takes on a life of its own in the psyche of the group and which can be manipulated by skillful political operatives who use specific trigger words to activate the primitive emotions that fuel cultural complexes. In our current international vocabulary of cultural complexes, “holy jihad” or “axis of evil” or “crusade” or “terror” come to mind as trigger words/phrases for the seemingly endless pool of global distress in the emotional life of groups which seems to be cheaper and much more easily tapped than any other natural resource that fuels collective life. Once a certain level of emotional intensity is achieved in the psyche of the group, *archetypal defenses of the group spirit* come to the forefront and begin to determine and even dictate how the group will think, feel, react, and behave.

These activated *archetypal defenses of the group spirit* find concrete expression in forms as varied as the unrest of divided populations over the legal status of foreign immigrants in countries around the world, the threatened development of nuclear weapons by nation states such as Iran or Korea, the deployment of suicide bombers by terrorist groups, or the launching of massive military expeditions by world powers. And, these same kinds of archetypal defenses come alive in all sorts of skirmishes between diverse groups of people, who are not necessarily armed with explosive devices but perceive themselves in a threatened or disadvantaged position in which their most sacred values are in jeopardy — Gays, Blacks, Women, the Christian Right in the United States, the Muslim Brotherhood throughout the Middle East. The list of groups threatened at the core of their being or at the level of the group Self seems endless.

In this paper, I want to gradually build on several examples of how the psychology of archetypal defenses of the group spirit expresses itself. The building blocks of this paper’s thesis include the creation of the American Revolutionary flag, the contemporary language of a Presidential speech, two historical examples of such archetypal defenses in action, a modern opera, and finally a film, Stephen Spielberg’s *Munich*, in which the various building blocks of the paper’s argument are most fully teased out. Flag, speech, political action, opera, and film are several of the natural forms in which the collective psyche finds symbolic expression. First, however, I want to review some of the basic terms that are used to frame this inquiry: collective psyche, archetypal defenses, and group spirit.

COLLECTIVE PSYCHE

Observations of group life in the Jungian tradition have led to the notion that there is a collective psyche that is far more than the sum of the individual psyches of those who belong to the group.³ The more positive side of this notion is familiar to anybody who has participated in a team sport, who will know that the quality of play has as much to do with the collective psyche of the team as it does with the skills and flaws of the team's individual members. And, on the more negative side, anybody who has been in a crowd or an organization that begins to lose control of its emotional life knows how frightening, unruly, and destructive the collective psyche can become.

Even when not in the grips of cultural complexes, the collective psyche tends to “think” and “feel” in simplistic ways. When aroused, the “collective psyche” behaves much more like a beast than a rational being. The beast of the collective psyche is prone to simplistic thinking, abrupt emotional swings, and crude behavior. Rarely does the beast of the collective psyche engage in what we tend to value most in psychology and social life — differentiated dialogue and exchange. Of course, the collective psyche can be mobilized to effective action when rallied around a core belief or deep fear. More often than not, however, the collective psyche is primitive, nonrational, simplistic, easily manipulated, and stirred into an emotional frenzy with trigger words and images. Images of single-celled organisms such as an amoeba under the microscope come to mind when I think of the simple stimulus/response of a group's reaction to threat or injury— recoiling and secreting toxins to defend against alien stimulation. Other metaphors to describe the collective psyche that come to mind are the simple reflexes elicited in a neurological exam or the inflammation and fever caused by viral or bacterial infections. It may well turn out that using the language of biology to describe the collective psyche in its primitive reflexes, inflamed eruptions, and delirious fevers may be far more than metaphoric. In time, the relatively new science of neuroimaging could uncover a biological substrate or “wiring” for the psychology of the collective psyche in the human brain. Indeed, there could even be a biological basis for the psychology of the particular type of group behavior I am describing in this paper — the archetypal defenses of the group spirit.

GROUP SPIRIT

As I formulate it, the group spirit is akin to what we Jungians might call the “Self” of the group. The “group spirit” is the ineffable

core beliefs or sense of identity that bind people together. Sports teams have a “group spirit” and their fans often magically participate in it. Nation states have a “group spirit” and their citizens often magically and unconsciously participate in it — particularly in times of crisis. Religious faiths have a “group spirit,” often symbolized by a part human/part divine being. Ethnic groups, gender groups, and racial groups all have a “group spirit” that is frequently felt and identified with in a myriad of ways.

The group spirit can be symbolized by animals, humans, inanimate objects and, in its most ineffable form, the refusal to symbolize it in imagery at all. The group spirit has many different elements that have come together in a seamless, often wordless and even imageless, non-material whole that is known to its members through a sense of belonging, shared essential beliefs, core historical experiences of loss and revelation, deepest yearnings, and ideals. One can begin to circle around the nature of a group’s spirit by asking questions such as:

- What is most sacred to the group?
- What does the group treasure most?
- What binds the group’s members together?

Donald Kalsched’s writings about the psychodynamics of the “personal spirit” can easily be extended to a description of the group spirit:

Occasionally it appears as a special animal — a favorite pet, a kitten, puppy or bird. Whatever its particular incarnation, this “innocent” remainder of the whole self seems to represent a core of the individual’s imperishable personal spirit — what the ancient Egyptians called the “Ba-soul,” or Alchemy, the winged animating spirit of the transformation process, i.e. Hermes, Mercurius. This spirit has always been a mystery — an essence of selfhood never to be fully comprehended. It is the imperishable essence of the personality — what Winnicott referred to as the “True Self” and which Jung, seeking a construct that would honor its transpersonal origins, called the *Self*.⁴

What makes the psychology of individuals in relation to the “group spirit” far more complex is that any one individual can belong to multiple groups simultaneously and feel a deep connection to “the group spirit” of more than one group at a time — even when two groups or more that an individual belongs to are in direct conflict with one another. We can all imagine that our “personal spirit” has affinities

to more than one “group spirit” at a time. Such conflicting loyalties can occur around racial, ethnic, religious, national identities.

ARCHETYPAL DEFENSES OF THE GROUP SPIRIT

Donald Kalsched postulated that, in response to severe trauma, an individual develops defenses of the personal spirit.⁵ I suggest that groups react in much the same way: when a group has been attacked at the core of its being and values — as the United States was on 9/11 — or when a group has been corroded at the core of its being and values — as Islam has been for the past 500 years — archetypal defenses are mobilized to protect the vulnerable and injured group spirit. These archetypal or daemonic defenses are ferocious and inhuman.

The daemonic defenses often direct their primitive aggression back onto the wounded spirit of the group as evidenced in the self-mockery and self-denigration entrenched in the humor and self-perception of any number of oppressed minorities. But just as often these same defenses of the group spirit can turn their savage aggression out onto whomever or whatever appears to be a threat to the spirit, basic value, or identity of the group. I see this response as automatic, reflexive, and in some ways the most natural way for the group psyche to react. Those individuals identifying with the archetypal defenses of the group spirit can torture people in prison, behead people, and blow themselves and others up — without regard for their own personal well-being or the humanity of those who happen to be in their path. As defensive agents of a wounded group spirit, they are not constrained by normal human values or concerns. They are truly impersonal representatives of the group and its wounded spirit.

Although he was writing about the appearance of archetypal defenses or “defenses of the self” in the life of the individual infant, Michael Fordham’s formulation of the nature of “archetypal defenses” can apply just as easily to the appearance of these defenses in the life, even in the infancy, of the group psyche and its individual members:

... a persistent overreaction of the defense-system may start to take place; (attacks on not-self objects) may become compounded with parts of the self by projective identification, so that a kind of auto-immune reaction sets in; this in particular would account for the **persistence of the defense after the noxious stimulation had been withdrawn.** [bold added]... little or no inner world can develop; the self-integrate becomes rigid and persists. ... all later developments based on maturational pressures result not in deintegration but disintegration and the predominance of defense systems leads to the accumulation of violence and hostility, which

is split off from any libidinal and loving communication with the object that may take place.⁶

Fordham's developmental approach to the origins of archetypal defenses of the Self raises another interesting possibility with regard to the emergence of archetypal defenses in group life. One can speculate that the time of onset, severity, and duration of trauma in the group's developmental history will contribute to the formation of its "Self" and its archetypal defenses. If severe, long-lasting trauma has been at the core of the group's earliest development, one can imagine that its defenses will tend to be most primitive and rigid. The corollary would be that the more developed and mature the group "Self" has had a chance to become without crippling trauma, the more likely it is for there to be some flexibility in its defensive structure. And, the more beaten down and wounded a group has been over time with the accumulation of multiple traumas in its history, the more likely it is that its archetypal defenses will be less responsive to rational intervention.

DON'T TREAD ON ME: 1775

I would now like to give a series of examples of how the collective psyche, group spirit, and archetypal defenses interact in a dynamic psychological process. What makes this first example so interesting is that the voice of the collective psyche found expression in a symbol in which the group spirit and its archetypal defenses are actually one and the same. In later examples, there is a more easily discerned distinction between the spirit of the group and the defenses that are mobilized to protect it when it is attacked.



(www.gadsden.info)

This symbolic expression of the collective psyche first appeared in the mid-1770's during the American revolutionary period — in the infancy of the American republic. Against a yellow background, the so-called Gadsden flag features a rattlesnake coiled for attack which sits above the defiant warning “Don't tread on me.” About the symbol of the rattlesnake, a journalist (now thought by many scholars to have been none other than Benjamin Franklin) wrote in the *Pennsylvania Journal*:

The rattlesnake is found in no other quarter of the world besides America ... She never begins an attack, nor, when once engaged, ever surrenders: She is therefore an emblem of magnanimity and true courage ... she never wounds 'till she has generously given notice, even to her enemy, and cautioned him against the danger of treading on her.

Franklin goes on to write:

I confess I was wholly at a loss what to make of the rattles, 'till I went back and counted them and found them just thirteen, exactly the number of the Colonies united in America; and I recollected too that this was the only part of the Snake which increased in numbers ... 'Tis curious and amazing to observe how distinct and independent of each other the rattles of this animal are, and yet how firmly they are united together, so as never to be separated but by breaking them to pieces. One of those rattles singly, is incapable of producing sound, but the ringing of thirteen together is sufficient to alarm the boldest man living.⁷

If we interpret what Ben Franklin wrote in December 1775 about the coming together of the image of a rattlesnake and the motto, “Don't Tread on Me” in terms of collective psyche, archetypal defenses, and group spirit, the following conclusions seem apparent: the collective psyche of the times was caught by a revolutionary fervor in which the yearning for freedom (what I am calling “the group spirit”) became identified with the defiant defense of “freedom” (what I am calling “the archetypal defense of the group spirit”). The image of the rattlesnake, coupled with the words “Don't Tread on Me,” fused the central value of the group with its ardent defense. One might even say that the archetypal defense of the group spirit first appeared in the infancy of our nation's development, much as was described by the Michael Fordham quote earlier in this paper.

Ben Franklin saw the rattlesnake as “an emblem of magnanimity and true courage.” I do not think that is how most people would describe the rattlesnake today. Franklin viewed the snake's nature as being positive. And, indeed, if the serpent's aggression were mobilized to

protect the group Self — the about-to-be born sense of nationhood and freedom — one can imagine it would be seen as an ally. But, an archetypal defense of the group spirit is neither good nor bad — it simply is, and I would argue that in this first symbolic image of our country the rattlesnake represents a primal instinct of defensive aggressiveness at the group level of the psyche. Furthermore, there is something in all of us at the level of our group lives that can spring into reflexive, emotional action when triggered by a sense of danger — whether it is around issues of race, ethnicity, gender, nationality, or a host of other group identities and loyalties. For the sake of our group's survival, we can become like the rattlesnake — either the good rattlesnake of Ben Franklin or the paranoid, defensive rattlesnake of a more modern psyche—or we can be struck dumb in terror when we come across the rattlesnake in members of other groups — or we can be both at the same time. The symbol of the rattlesnake does suggest that any aggression requires a lethal response and seems to valorize a reflexive rather than reflective response to threat.

FREEDOM AND ARCHETYPAL DEFENSES OF THE GROUP SPIRIT: A GEORGE BUSH SPEECH IN 2005

There is a 250-year segue from the appearance of the “Don't Tread on Me” flag to George Bush's speech of December 14, 2005, on the eve of the historic vote for a Parliament in Iraq. But, in terms of the psychology we are exploring, the gap in time is of little consequence: the fundamental process underlying both events — the activation of archetypal defenses of the group spirit — remains the same. Just as the “Don't Tread on Me” rattlesnake became the symbol of the colonies' newly-born freedom as well as the defense of that freedom, I want to point out how analogous archetypal defenses of the group spirit have shaped the text of George Bush's speech. The focus of this paper is not on whether it was right or wrong to invade Iraq or, for that matter, right or wrong to begin the American Revolutionary War. Nor is it a question of whether archetypal defenses of the group spirit are good or bad. Rather, the questions I want to ask of George Bush's speech have to do with teasing out the ways in which the psychology of archetypal defenses of the group spirit has structured both George Bush's response to 9/11 and the American invasion of Iraq. In that context, consider the almost schematic logic of how this primitive group psychology works by looking at George Bush's statements regarding our nation's group spirit and its defense:

1. CORE VALUES OF THE AMERICAN GROUP SPIRIT:

We are living through a watershed moment in the story of freedom.

Our efforts to advance freedom in Iraq are driven by our vital interests and our deepest beliefs. America was founded on the principle that all men are created equal. And we believe that the people of the Middle East desire freedom as much as we do.⁸

In his speech, Bush identified our most sacred values as being centered on “the story of freedom” and “the principle that all men are created equal.” He states explicitly that he believes our values to be what is most desired and valued by the people of the Middle East.

2. ATTACK ON CORE VALUES:

September 11, 2001, our nation awoke to a sudden attack, and we accepted new responsibilities. We are confronting new dangers with firm resolve.

We saw the future the terrorists intend for our nation on that fateful morning of September 11, 2001. That day we learned that vast oceans and friendly neighbors are no longer enough to protect us.

In his speech, George Bush repeated his belief that 9/11 has inaugurated a new era in which what is most sacred to our nation and its spirit will be under ongoing attack

3. DEFENSE OF CORE VALUES THROUGH AGGRESSIVE COUNTERATTACK:

We are hunting down the terrorists and their supporters. We will fight this war without wavering.

We cannot allow the world’s most dangerous men to get their hands on the world’s most dangerous weapons. In an age of terrorism and weapons of mass destruction, if we wait for threats to fully materialize, we will have waited too long.

Finally in this speech, President Bush asserts that the threat of ongoing attack justifies the mobilization of every defensive/aggressive action we can muster to protect our national spirit.

The “logic” of these arguments is very simple and easy to follow — to many so simplistic that it has become the source of derision by citizens in the United States and elsewhere. But, it is a mistake to think that

because the “logic” is so simple — like the reactions of a single-celled organism — that it is not effective or gripping at the level of the collective psyche. Indeed, this is the kind of “logic” that rouses the emotions of the collective psyche and stimulates the reflexive activation of the archetypal defenses of the group spirit. It is our modern day rattlesnake with its very clear message: “Don’t Tread on Me.”

DR. ATOMIC: THE BOMB AS AN INCARNATION OF AN ARCHETYPAL DEFENSE OF THE GROUP SPIRIT

If the “Don’t Tread on Me” flag provided a natural segue to George Bush’s December 2005 speech justifying our aggressive defense of freedom in the United States and the Middle East, George Bush’s speech is itself a natural segue to our consideration of America’s development of the atomic bomb in World War II. In terms of the thesis we are developing in this paper, one could say that one archetypal defense of the group spirit begets the next archetypal defense of the group spirit. Consider again the following words from George Bush’s speech:

We cannot allow the world’s most dangerous men to get their hands on the world’s most dangerous weapons. In an age of terrorism and weapons of mass destruction, if we wait for threats to fully materialize, we will have waited too long.⁹

Just sixty years before Bush uttered these words, the same sentiments were fueling the United States’ feverish efforts to develop an atomic bomb. It was feared that Hitler and the Nazis — also “the world’s most dangerous men” — were well on their way to developing a nuclear device of their own. In a very real sense, the scientists at Los Alamos believed they were engaged in a scientific race to save the human race, and the historical truth seems to be that their belief was justified by what was later learned about Hitler’s efforts to develop an atomic device which he planned to drop first on London. It is an objective fact of history that the development of the atomic bomb was a necessity, dictated by the very real threat that Hitler would be the first to create such a weapon.

Karlyn Ward’s recent review of John Adam’s new opera, *Dr. Atomic*, in this journal¹⁰ offers an excellent psychological description and analysis of Robert Oppenheimer, the Manhattan project he led, and the awesome scientific, ethical, and religious conflicts associated with developing the first nuclear weapon. The actual creation of the bomb in 1945 and the story that Adams tells about its creation are

separated by sixty years. In the decades between the creation of the bomb and the opera about its creation, I would argue that the bomb has taken up residence in the collective psyche as an incarnation of an archetypal defense of the group spirit. The story of the bomb's birth is one of the most important narratives of our era because it chronicles the creation of a modern archetype, not just a weapon. The atomic bomb is the ultimate modern concretization of an archetypal defense of the group spirit. Such weapons are both absolutely real and absolutely symbolic. They serve as centerpieces of global military strategy and as centerpieces of global psychological, symbolic reality. The opening chorus of Dr. Atomic summarizes precisely this situation: the creation of the modern archetypal defense of the group spirit:

A weapon has been developed
that is potentially destructive
beyond the wildest nightmares
of the imagination;
a weapon so ideally suited
to sudden unannounced attack
that a country's major cities
might be destroyed overnight
by an ostensibly friendly power.
This weapon has been created
not by the devilish inspiration
of some warped genius
but by the arduous labor
of thousands of normal men and women
working for the safety of their country.¹¹

The last lines of the chorus are central to our discussion. There are two essential points to be noted here:

1. "...the bomb is the creation of normal men and women"—or, the energies of the collective and its psyche have been harnessed to create an "archetypal defense."
2. "...working for the safety of their country"—or, in the language of our thesis, to protect the values, spirit, and very existence of their group. In other words, I think that Adams is not only telling the story of the actual building of the bomb, but his opening chorus is telling us that the group spirit has been mobilized to create a defense of its Self.

Perhaps even more chilling and speaking directly to the issue of creating an archetypal defense of the group spirit are Oppenheimer's own words:

We waited until the blast had passed, walked out of the shelter and then it was extremely solemn. We knew the world would not be the same. A few people laughed, a few people cried. Most people were silent. I remembered the line from the Hindu scripture, the *Bhagavad-Gita*: Vishnu is trying to persuade the Prince that he should do his duty; and to impress him he takes on his multi-armed form and says, “Now I am become Death, the destroyer of worlds.” I suppose we all thought that, one way or another.¹²

From this statement, it is clear that Oppenheimer was living close to — even in touch with — the archetypal realm. And, he wasn’t just speaking for his psyche alone when he quoted Vishnu as saying, “Now I am become Death, the destroyer of worlds.” He was speaking for the collective psyche of his group. I believe that Oppenheimer understood that he and all his coworkers had become — like Vishnu — the embodiment of an “archetypal defense” that could bring death and destroy worlds. Presumably every suicide bomber in Palestine and Iraq knows and even celebrates the same truth — that to defend what one believes to be most sacred, the very “spirit of the group,” one may be called upon to “become Death.” In that sense, an individual can identify with and become an agent of the archetypal defense of the group spirit.

DR. ATOMIC AND CONFLICT IN THE MIDDLE EAST

A fascinating link between *Dr. Atomic* and the current conflict in the Middle East (Iraq, Iran, Palestine, Israel, et al.) is that nuclear weapons often take center stage in both dramas. In the case of the opera, the bomb itself is the major character and literally occupies center stage throughout the production. In the War in Iraq, the fear of the bomb became a major player. What makes the unfolding of these narratives so chilling is that in both cases the original motivation/rationale for building the bomb in World War II or for destroying the ability to make the bomb in Iraq became more or less irrelevant once the ventures were underway. As you recall, it was the race with the Germans to develop the bomb that precipitated the Manhattan project. But, when the Germans surrendered, American work on the bomb’s development continued despite the outraged protests of the younger scientists at Los Alamos. They felt that a legitimate rationale for building the bomb no longer existed with the collapse of Hitler. In the case of the War in Iraq, the suspicion that Saddam Hussein was doing everything he could to obtain weapons of mass destruction was given as a primary reason for going to war. After launching the war, that “reason” vanished

before the eyes of the international community, but the Bush administration continued to maintain that the war was right for other reasons, such as the likely support of terrorists by the Hussein regime. This interesting parallel is worth exploring — that even though the original reasons for building the first nuclear device in 1945 and for launching the Iraq war dissolved, both projects had such deep psychological momentum that they still seemed essential and could not be stopped.

I would argue that this momentum was far more powerful than the rational reasons put forward for both ventures because of the existence of archetypal defenses of the group spirit. Once these psychological defenses of the collective psyche are mobilized for whatever reasons, the momentum for destructive, murderous activity on a grand scale is very hard to slow down or stop. In this regard, one is reminded of what Fordham wrote about the **“persistence of the defense after the noxious stimulation had been withdrawn.”** Whether in the individual or group psyche, once such powerful defenses have been set in motion, they seem to have to run their course which may well last far longer than the original precipitating threat, injury, or fear may seem to justify. For this reason, the reactions precipitated by these defenses can be likened to an autoimmune response in the body politic in which defenses proliferate and begin to take over a group. Domestic surveillance comes to mind as a contemporary American example in which the fear of terrorism and the desire to defend the country has led to increasing spying on ourselves which itself poses a threat to the very freedoms that lie at the core values of the group. Or, another sort of inflammatory, defensive proliferation was the increase of US nuclear weapons from 200 in 1950 to over 18,000 by 1960 as a reaction to the Soviet threat during the Cold War. Once set in motion, archetypal defenses of the group spirit seem to gain strength and momentum in a self-perpetuating emotional response in the group psyche — not unlike a “wave” that gets going at certain sporting events in which the crowd reaction reinforces and intensifies the crowd’s enthusiasm and support for the “home team.”

Another truly treacherous aspect of the dynamics of the archetypal defenses of the group spirit is their capacity to generate an isomorphic or reciprocal response in other groups. Bush’s statement, “We cannot allow the world’s most dangerous men to get their hands on the world’s most dangerous weapons,” ends up getting turned on its head not just by Iran, but also by others who had not been seen as a threat by us. For instance, many Europeans, who are outside of our projec-

tive field of the “terrorists,” have seen Bush’s shadow clearly in his own remarks, and have come to regard the US government as composed of “the world’s most dangerous men.”

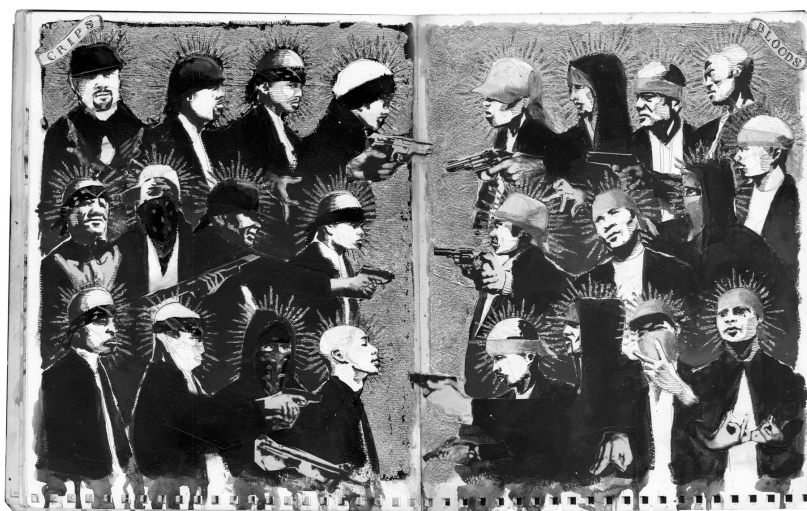
It has come as a great surprise to many Americans that the United States is seen as the world’s greatest threat. What does a country do in the face of “the world’s most dangerous men” and “who are the world’s most dangerous men?” Here is what Jojjat-el-Eslam Mohssen Gharavian, a senior cleric and spiritual advisor to the current President of Iran, said about nuclear weapons and the United States in his Fatwa of February 15, 2006: “Whereas the entire world has nuclear arms, it is only natural that this form of weapon will be available to us for the purpose of a retaliatory strike against those aspiring to attack us with nuclear weapons.”¹³ The perplexing, contemporary geopolitical logic of who gets to possess the “Bomb” takes us full circle to the “Don’t Tread on Me” flag, whose motto of defiance is now ironically being shouted at the United States by Iranians. In his New York Times OP-ED piece, a scholar of Persian history, Abbas Amanat, notes: “Painful collective memories have made Iran’s pursuit of nuclear energy a national symbol of defiance that has transcended the motives of the current Islamic regime.”¹⁴

Earlier in the essay, I pointed out how the “group spirit” of freedom in the American Revolutionary flag was conflated with its archetypal defense in that symbolic expression. There are many who think that the creation of the Bomb has led America back to that original state of being, i.e., that we have allowed the spirit of who we are to get too identified with the defense of who we are. In the contemporary version of that conflation, the possession of ultimate weaponry exists not only for the defense of who we are, but itself has become one with who we are. E.L. Doctorow argues this most convincingly when he writes:

We have had the bomb on our minds since 1945. It was first our weaponry and then our diplomacy, and now it’s our economy. How can we suppose that something so monstrously powerful would not, after forty years, compose our identity? The great golem we have made against our enemies is our culture, our bomb culture — its logic, its faith, its vision.¹⁵

Doctorow might be saying: what started as a legitimate weapon based on historical necessity has transformed itself in our collective psyche into a symbol and archetypal defense with which we have become unconsciously identified. Doctorow’s argument is that America

itself has become what Oppenheimer feared in himself when he quoted Vishnu: “Now I am become Death, the destroyer of worlds.” As America has edged towards “becoming Death, the Destroyer of Worlds,” it has found its mirror image in the Islamic suicide bombers whose actions proclaim: “We too love death — so you will never defeat us.”



“Bloods and Crips.” Rival groups — whether it be the Bloods and Crips or the Jungians and Freudians — can easily fall into conflicts in which the predominant exchange is between their archetypal defenses of the group spirit which can carry arms in many forms — from guns to laws to propaganda to cartoons. (Jake Messing, by permission. Mixed media painting, 14 x 22 in, from the “Martyrs” series, which can be viewed at www.jakemessing.com.)

Although the creation of the atomic bomb and the current war in Iraq have been separated in time by sixty years, they are linked by the fact that both have required the vast mobilization of human and material resources. And, in both cases, this has been justified by the argument that the very future of Western civilization has been at stake. Such a threat in the collective psyche leaves us all with the terrible dilemma of sorting out how to respond to this most primitive psychological defensive reaction in the group and in ourselves. A psychological fact is undeniable: the archetypal defenses of the American group spirit have been mobilized at the deepest level of the collective psyche by recent events around the world. Should the alarm that this induces (which is now actually color coded according to severity by the US government) be responded to as if the threat is real — or dismissed as politically induced hysteria or manipulation for other reasons? Did Hitler pose a

real threat? Did Saddam Hussein pose a real threat? Does George Bush pose a real threat? Once the dread of these destructive forces, expressed on the faces of a country's leaders, is unleashed in the collective psyche, how do we evaluate them? Or do they demand that we reflexively defend our group because its very survival is at stake? These tormenting questions lead to the next example: Steven Spielberg's *Munich*.

MUNICH

Steven Spielberg's film, *Munich*,¹⁶ has stirred considerable controversy in its evocative retelling of the events surrounding the murder of eleven Israeli athletes by the Palestinian group Black September at the Munich Olympic games in 1972. Once again, for the purposes of this essay, I am going to examine certain aspects of the film primarily from the point of view of the collective psyche, the group spirit, and its archetypal defenses.

Viewing the film is a wrenching experience of the inexorable unfolding of a nightmare that will not stop. It is a nightmare that keeps adding to its own horror story — a waking nightmare of the implacable conflict between two groups of people that devours the individual lives of its citizens. It demonstrates two recurring themes that are the central concern of this essay:

1. What happens when the group Self is attacked and its center becomes inflamed?
2. What happens at the affective/instinctual level of the personal psyche when the collective psyche is stirred up at its core?

Two lovemaking scenes, one near the beginning of the movie and one near the end of the movie, carry these central themes.

At the beginning of the movie, we are introduced to the drama of the Munich massacre in a collective way. We learn about the event as if we were watching television in 1972, and familiar American broadcasters of that era — Peter Jennings, Howard Cosell, Jim McKay — tell us what is happening. The mortified reactions of ordinary Israelis as they watch this on television show us that these Olympians are felt as the fathers, brothers, husbands, and sons of every Israeli family and that their murder is a profound wound and death threat to Israel's actual survival, as well as its spirit. Equally true, witnessing the Palestinians' fascinated and emotional identification, as *they* watch the events unfold, shows us that the members of Black September are the avenging angels of a group whose spirit has been mauled for decades. The spirit

of each group has been badly traumatized; the collective of each group has become inflamed at its core; and this inflammation expresses itself in the mobilization of a group response that is murderous, impersonal, primitive, and without individual human concern.

In a scene that is deeply moving for its subtle mix of personal and impersonal forces in human affairs, Golda Meir herself tells us what the Israelis are planning as a response to the Munich massacre. She issues a prophetic warning about what happens when the “collective” or “group psyche” awakens to such a nightmare: “Every civilization finds it necessary to make compromises with its own values.” Or — we might translate — when the archetypal defenses of the group spirit are mobilized, the group may betray its own values in favor of what it believes is necessary for survival. In the case of *Munich* that means recruiting assassins to avenge the deaths of the slain Olympian athletes who have come to embody the “group spirit” of Israel.

After drawing us into its orbit by allowing us to participate in the collective view and reactions to Munich, the film gradually introduces us to the individual protagonists whose lives we will follow. Avner, the chief protagonist, is going home to his pregnant wife as he deliberates about whether to accept his new role as avenger of the group spirit. We observe him in bed, at the end of the first lovemaking scene with his wife, and the scene is tender, intimate, and very personal. The collective is about to shatter their early-married life, but it has not yet entered Avner’s lovemaking fantasies. What develops over the course of the film is that every time the protagonist gets close to his wife — every time he calls her or has some sort of contact with her, every time he has the hint of a personal life and a personal psyche — he (and we) are immediately brought back to the reality of the collective nightmare of Munich through a series of flashbacks in which the protagonist “sees” and “experiences” in his fantasies the details of what happened at Munich. In that sense, the collective events keep invading his individual psyche at the moments of his most personal experience. This increasing contamination and confusion of his individual psyche with the collective psyche is at the heart of the film, and I think it is at the heart of what happens when the personal and collective psyches in an individual begin to get infected with one another at the intersection of the group self and the personal spirit.

I think there is a psychological as well as dramatic genius to Spielberg’s progressive use of the flashback sequences to show what happened in the Munich massacre. Dramatically, the viewer keeps

circling around the unfolding horror of the events in Munich as they reveal themselves slowly in the hero's imagination over the course of the film. This allows the climactic events at Munich to parallel the psychological development of the film's main character. The murder at Munich and the character's fantasy life become one in the final lovemaking scene. The rhythm of the flashback sequences allows one to experience the gradual penetration of horror and rage into the psyche of the individual. Ultimately, I think it shows how the individual and the group have become one in Avner as his identity becomes that of assassin in his role as archetypal defender of the group spirit. It is at the affective and instinctual level of this merging that I think the film is most successful. Avner makes love in a trance, dazed and caught between two worlds. He is totally unrelated to his wife who witnesses his dissociation and says simply, "I love you." Rage, horror, fear, love, hate, sex, aggression, and profuse sweat play across his face in an emotional swirl in the reliving of the final moments of his compatriots at Munich. One wonders if this possession by the events and emotions of Munich are both the peak of the fever in Avner and the beginning of its lysis. Perhaps his sweat indicates a fever break in which the complete identification of his psyche with Munich is experienced to the core of his being, and, at the same time, the sweat marks the beginning of his dis-identification with that possession. Afterwards it does seem that Avner is no longer able to identify with being the avenging angel of the Israeli group-spirit. He decides to remain in New York and breaks his unofficial but very real relationship with Mossad.

It is through this glimpse into Avner's emotional life that we get our best sense of what happens when archetypal defenses of the group spirit are activated in the psyche of the individual and the collective. Avner's agony in the final lovemaking scene gives us an almost microscopic view of the nature of the inflammatory process that takes hold of the emotional life of the individual and the group. In the grips of it, it is hard to imagine a cure, other than the fever running its course and breaking—loosening both the individual and the collective from its grip.



An “axis of evil” is created when cultures and their complexes collide. *This can happen anywhere—between the West and Islam on a global scale, between Israel and Palestine (as shown in Munich, between the Bloods and Crips in Los Angeles, or between two conflicting groups in a Jung Institute).* The collage demonstrates in image form how a true “axis of evil” is created in a horrifying dance of destruction symbolized by the paired serpents of the archetypal defenses facing off against one another when the sacred spirits of the group are attacked—symbolized in this image by the crescent and the Mosque for Islam and by the candles of Western Christian and Jewish cultures. When core values are assaulted as in the 9/11 attack or aggression by Western troops in Islamic lands, the archetypal defenses of the conflicting groups, “headed” by the figures of bin Laden and Bush, generate the most terrible experience of mass and personal horror behind which lurks the ultimate symbol of modern destruction—the atomic bomb. Personal lives, cultural values and archetypal forces collide and compete in the collective psyche. (Collage: Dyane Sherwood and Jacques Rutzky. All images but the last were taken from the internet. From top left: atomic bomb exploding; American bomb exploding in Iraq, 2003; bin Laden; Bush; 9/11 twin towers; Iraqi mosque; Gadsden rattlesnake; candles and flags placed in spontaneous memorial 9/11; Jihadists pose on internet video prior to beheading Kim Sun Il, a Christian working in Iraq; US soldier threatens prisoner with dog at Abu Ghraib prison; medieval painting showing European Christians attacking a Moslem walled city)

CONCLUSION

The threat of military attack is not the only way to arouse archetypal defenses of the group spirit. With mass media as the primary means of global communication, the recent wireless transmission of cartoons from one part of the world to another was sufficient to mobilize millions of people into a frenzy of protest about their sacred center being violated. Jokes, slurs, slogans, traumatic images such as photos of prison torture and humiliation — and a host of other weapons — can be used to provoke, prod, and agitate groups into a sense of being besieged and devalued. Indeed, almost every day newspapers seem to be reporting on some eruption of archetypal defenses of the group spirit of one group in relation to another. The phenomenon is ubiquitous and the cure is elusive. Indeed, it is my opinion that these eruptions are inexorable, nonrational, and primitive.

A careful analysis of a deeply entrenched, intractable cultural complex with its associated archetypal defenses of the group spirit might be thought of as equivalent to diagnosing an illness of the collective psyche. And, if we are able to diagnose the illness, we might then ask—what is the cure? We know at the individual level, one has to suffer a complex repeatedly until finally its toxic effects may be digested and transformed in some alchemy of the psyche. If that is the case, we might ask if Muslims, Jews, and Christians could learn to digest and transform their cultural complexes in some alchemy of the collective psyche. There seems to have been little real progress in such a process. In the United States, blacks and whites have been trying to digest and transform their interacting cultural complexes for three hundred and fifty years. There has been some progress, but recent studies show that professed attitudes of tolerance are belied by tests designed to measure implicit attitudes.¹⁷

Still, one should try to imagine ways in which heated up cultural complexes and their archetypal defenses of the group spirit might be resolved. Do they get resolved simply by running their course like a fever — like McCarthyism did in the 1950's or perhaps neo-conservatism might in this decade? In that case, the cure is simply a matter of time, of waiting for the activated archetypal defenses of the group spirit to fall back into the cultural unconscious as they lose psychic energy.

Another way in which one might envision a cure or healing for these collective maladies is the occasional emergence on the scene of a charismatic leader who in his or her personhood carries the transcendent function for the collective psyche. It is as if there is a

perfect fit between the experiences of a “chosen” individual which resonates with the experiences and needs of a group or even conflicting groups, pointing to a previously unimagined way to transcend roadblocks to resolution. Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Nelson Mandela, Desmond Tutu come to mind as being the kinds of leaders who embody a transcendent spirit for the collective psyche that leads to the vision of a real cure of cultural conflicts. Perhaps Barack Obama has the potential to embody in his being a transcendent function that might point to real reconciliation and healing of the entrenched cultural complexes that divide black and white communities in America. Another way of saying this is that some gifted individuals may have the capacity to experience in their psyches the cultural complexes that divide groups into warring factions and hold these cultural complexes in their psyches in such a way that an authentic experience of the transcendent comes alive in them. They must also have the ability to communicate this transcendent vision to the group.

In the meantime, most of us muddle along with the reality that many of these cultural conflicts are well beyond our efforts as individuals or as members of a group to find a cure. There is always the possibility that the “transcendent function” in the collective psyche can percolate up from “below”—i.e., from everyday citizens who are moved to act for real healing in the social and political realm. In such a case, it is not a bold, visionary leader who embodies the transcendent function and leads the way, but something that bubbles up in the collective psyche that is carried simultaneously by many “average” people.

ENDNOTES

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ABSTRACT

Thomas Singer, "Unconscious Forces Shaping International Conflicts: Archetypal Defenses of the Group Spirit from Revolutionary America to Confrontation in the Middle East," *The San Francisco Jung Institute Library Journal*, 2006, 25:4, 6–28. This essay explores a primitive psychological structure of the collective psyche that is activated by acute and chronic threat to the basic security and spirit of the group. It is argued that archetypal defenses of the group spirit are universal and can be observed in ethnic groups, racial groups, gender groups, religious groups, national groups, professional groups. Several examples are explored to demonstrate how archetypal defenses of the group spirit express themselves in conflicts between groups. In the cultural and political life of groups, flags, operas, movies, speeches and the concrete development of weapon systems all exemplify the archetypal defenses of the group spirit.

KEY WORDS

9/11, archetypal defense, atomic bomb, Benjamin Franklin, Christian, collective psyche, collective Self, core values, crusade, cultural complex, "Don't Tread on Me," *Dr. Atomic*, Gadsden flag, George Bush, group spirit, Saddam Hussein, Islam, Israel, Jew, Manhattan Project, Middle East, momentum, *Munich*, Robert Oppenheimer, personal spirit, terror, trauma, Vishnu, war, word association test.