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The Emperor's New Weirdness

By David Macaray
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For those people who are able to find humor in virtually any circumstance or situation, no matter how gruesome or dire, wouldn't it be funny if the U.S. President were mentally ill?

And we're not speaking here of a president who is merely destructively stubborn (LBJ), or repulsively cocky (George W. Bush), or basically full of crap (Reagan). We're speaking of a president who displays the obvious and disturbing signs of a low-level pathology.

Of course, one can argue that imaginative historians have trafficked in "amateur psychology" for centuries. Not only are unconventional accounts of behavior far more titillating than the boilerplate stuff, but sometimes a bizarre explanation is the only one that suffices.

Consider: Caligula was considered certifiably "insane," Catherine the Great was labeled a "nymphomaniac," Uganda's Idi Amin was said to have "lost his mind" due to tertiary syphilis, and Richard Nixon was portrayed as a classic "paranoid." (Speaking for myself, I always thought Senator Jesse Helms was "touched," but that's another conversation.)

Still, as lurid and melodramatic as some these accusations have been, there is no reason to automatically assume they aren't true. There is no compelling reason to believe that in a political system, like ours, based almost entirely on sound bites and campaign money, you couldn't accidentally elect a person who was mentally ill. And that would be even truer of an "undemocratic" system where people became leaders via heredity, military coup, or decree.

Accordingly, in 1999, a couple of Cornell University psychology professors (Dr. David Dunning and Dr. Justin Kruger) developed a theory which inevitably came to be known as the “Dunning-Kruger Effect.”

Broadly speaking, the Dunning-Kruger Effect is defined as “a cognitive bias in which unskilled individuals suffer from illusory superiority, mistakenly rating their ability much higher than is accurate. This bias is attributed to a metacognitive inability to recognize their [own] ineptitude.” It’s internal, and it’s physical, so in a sense, it’s a case of one’s mental circuitry going haywire.

Obviously, this condition is way more serious than some annoying eccentricity or obnoxious personal habit. What makes D-K so alarming is that it is all-encompassing and life-altering. A mindset that not only inhibits people from objectively assessing their own abilities and skills but results in dumb or inexperienced people becoming convinced they’re not only “qualified,” but “experts.”

Decades before Professor Dunning and Kruger codified their observations into what became a respected academic theory, British philosopher Bertrand Russell summed it up thusly: “The trouble with the world is that the stupid are cocksure and the intelligent are full of doubt.”

Which brings us to Donald Trump. Is it possible that this man is more than the swaggering egotistical buffoon he appears to be? Could he actually be “sick”? After all, Trump seems to believe he knows more about intelligence than intel people, more about commerce than trained economists, more about women than Gloria Steinem, and more about the Civil War than actual historians.

All of which is making people—including diehard Republicans in the same White House—increasingly uncomfortable. And by “uncomfortable” we mean “scared.” Even if we don’t completely accept the D-K hypothesis, something clearly ain’t right. At this point, I’d almost be relieved to find out he was a nymphomaniac.