

# **BORDER SECURITY AND THE SELF<sup>1</sup>**

**M. Chet Mirman, Ph.D.  
Highland Park, Illinois**

## **Abstract**

Conspicuously absent in our national debate about border security are discussions of the psychological issues driving this debate. This paper addresses the role that the personal terror of falling into a state of defenselessness in the face of persecution plays in perpetuating the need for walls of various types—both personal and international.

## **Introduction**

Border security, arguably the dominant focus of Donald Trump's 2016 election campaign, and later of his presidency, has from the beginning been a highly charged political issue. Much has been said about the benefits and the problems with his plan to build "a great big beautiful wall," as well as about his antagonism to immigrants. This antagonism has been particularly focused on immigrants of color—both those wanting to enter our country and those already here.

Conversations about Trump have focused on his policies, attitudes and personality (and, I might add, what has been described by numerous mental health professionals as a serious personality disorder [Lee, 2017]). Conspicuously absent, however, is a discussion of the psychology of the country, particularly that of his core supporters, that has made his preoccupation with border security such an effective political tool for him. This paper, therefore, is not about Donald Trump, per se. It's about the psychological state that he has been extraordinarily effective in fostering for his political and personal purposes. Of particular importance is Trump's ability to activate the anxieties, and the sense of vulnerability,

---

<sup>1</sup> A version of this paper was originally presented at the 2019 IFPE Conference in Toronto

associated with the psychological state referred to by Melanie Klein as the Paranoid Schizoid Position (Klein, 1946). Equally important are the solutions that he has offered to address the fears that he has stirred up, all of which align so well with the primitive concerns associated with this psychological state.

### **The Paranoid Schizoid Position**

The Paranoid Schizoid Position refers to a state of mind that characterizes the first months of development. Lacking the capacity to manage its own dangerous feelings of aggression, and needing to protect the fragile good from the destructiveness of the primitive bad, the helpless infant protects itself from this annihilating inner danger by separating the good from the bad. The infant accomplishes this both within and outside the self, and by projecting the dangerous, aggressive, bad feelings outward. But the price paid for purchasing this *inner* safety is the creation of an *external* danger as this projection transforms the danger of annihilation from within, into the dangers of a hostile, persecutory external world. The helpless infant is at the mercy of thoughts, feelings and perceptions that are now experienced as external persecutory forces that he/she is powerless to control or understand. This split, which protects the good from contamination by the bad, allows the infant to hold on to the experience of mother as all good (at least while she's not experienced as all-bad), and enables the infant to introject, and so identify with, the good object. In other words, safety is obtained in the paranoid schizoid position by separating, to use Grotstein's words "the endangering" from "the endangered" (Grotstein, 1985).

Characteristic of the Paranoid Schizoid position is the absence of guilt or empathy, as others are perceived as *objects* rather than as *subjects*. Others are not experienced as persons of intrinsic value characterized by with their own inner world of experience—a world of meaning, purpose, feelings and concerns. Rather, they are experienced as either good objects that are

loved, or bad objects that are hated or feared as dangerous things that impinge on the self. As Ogden (1989) has written, paranoid schizoid individuals can value others for what they can do for them, but there is no real concern for that other. They are treated more like possessions: "One does not have *concern* for one's possessions... even the most important of them... An object can be damaged or used up, but only a subject can be hurt or injured" (p. 23).

Importantly, and of particular relevance to this paper, Klein referred to the Paranoid Schizoid mode of experience as a *position* because, in addition to being a *stage of development*, it is also a *state or a mode of experience*, that persists throughout life. In other words, even adults are prone to regressing to this way of experiencing themselves vis-a-vis the world in order to manage anxiety associated with a perceived threat when it arises. The Paranoid Schizoid Position is a universal, perfectly normal stage of development but regressions to this position later in life are a common, transient form of psychopathology that most of us are susceptible to, in varying degrees of frequency, duration and intensity.

### **Bion's Basic Assumption Groups**

The British psychoanalyst Wilfred Bion (1961) applied Klein's ideas to groups, contrasting the normal functioning of what he referred to as *work groups* with the more primitive functioning of *basic assumption groups*. A work group is a group of people whose collective orientation more closely resembles the depressive position and so is able to address problems more realistically and thus more effectively. The collective orientation of a basic assumption group, on the other hand, is that of the paranoid schizoid position, resulting in more primitively driven behavior that interferes with the ability to problem solve effectively.

When a work group is faced with anxiety that it lacks the capacity to control, it regresses back to a basic assumption group, falling into one or more of the different emotional states that are

intrinsic to basic assumption groups. One of these emotional states is referred to by Bion as *dependency*—a state that involves the group’s search for an omnipotent leader who will magically take care of the group’s anxiety by solving all of its problems (1961). Another emotional state associated with basic assumption groups is that of *fight or flight*—a state that leads the group to organize around the need to fight or get away from a common enemy. It should be noted that this enemy can be found either outside or within the group. Basic assumption groups function as closed systems that are controlled by collective dynamics and in which external realities are either minimized (consider the concept of “fake news”) or ignored altogether.

## **The Wall**

### **The Arsonist as Firefighter: “Solving” the Problems He Keeps Creating:**

It seems pretty unlikely that President Trump has ever read either Melanie Klein or Bion but his behavior suggests an intuitive understanding. He appears to understand the insecurities of the paranoid schizoid position, and knows how to manipulate groups to regress into basic assumption groups. He is masterful in his ability to stoke the fears of many Americans who worry that aliens (both outside and within our borders) are threatening not only “our way of life,” but more basically, our very survival. Genuine economic hardships, along with the many social changes that have been occurring—changing values, the integration of formerly marginalized groups, and the growing presence of people from other countries that look different than “us” present a perfect storm of conditions that engender a collective sense of “us versus them” vulnerability. He has fomented these fears, and repeatedly sounded the alarm about the need to build a “great big beautiful wall” to protect us from the dangerous “other,” the perfect symbolic solution to this primal fear of “invasion” by dangerous outsiders. He has essentially created a danger by tapping into and accentuating a collective sense of insecurity about being defenseless in the face of an invasion of our country, and then has provided a simplistic and

questionably effective, but highly appealing, response to that danger. He kicked off his election campaign by characterizing Mexicans seeking to immigrate to the U.S. as “bringing drugs. They’re bringing crime. They’re rapists.”<sup>2</sup> Referring to Mexicans who were trying to immigrate he said that, “these aren’t people. These are animals.” He repeatedly sounded the alarm with unsubstantiated claims about the hordes of dangerous Central Americans (some of whom he claimed are terrorists from the Middle East) who were pouring across our southern border. Speaking to a crowd in Michigan he claimed that San Diego is “being just overrun” by immigrants. He has intensified the fears and concerns of a good number of Americans who genuinely fear “the other”—especially the other of color, who are more visibly different from them. His scapegoating is of course not limited to Hispanics: he has also vilified Muslims, implying that they are not Americans (even those born here and those Americans of Muslim faith who were elected to Congress), and that they are, in large part, terrorists. This is consistent with his earlier attempt to ban people from a number of Muslim countries from entering the U.S. And his attitude toward Blacks has been on full display in many of his statements, including his characterization of African countries as “shithole countries” and his call to African Americans to vote for him because, “what the hell do you have to lose?”<sup>3</sup>

The statistics show a jump in white supremacist hate crimes during Trump’s election campaign, an increase that has continued throughout his presidency, but the following few examples help to bring this problem to life: An American citizen of Mexican heritage and his mother were

---

<sup>2</sup> Statement made by candidate Donald Trump in his June 16, 2015 presidential campaign announcement speech. Cited by Michelle Ye Hee Lee, in the *Washington Post* (July 8, 2015): Retrieved from <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/fact-checker/wp/2015/07/08/donald-trumps-false-comments-connecting-mexican-immigrants-and-crime/>

<sup>3</sup> Statement made by candidate Trump to a mostly white audience in a suburb of Lansing, Michigan on August 19, 2016. Cited in *BBC News* (November 16, 2016): Retrieved from <https://www.cnn.com/2016/08/19/politics/donald-trump-african-american-voters/index.html>

filmed being verbally abused by a White woman who, echoing Trump's verbiage, claimed that Mexicans are "rapists," "animals" and "drug dealers."<sup>4</sup> A man who murdered 50 Muslims in New Zealand hailed Trump as a "symbol of renewed white identity."<sup>5</sup> A Kansas man shot two Indian men in a bar after yelling at them to "get out of my country."<sup>6</sup> A 21-year-old man posted a 2300-word social media diatribe about the "Hispanic invasion of Texas" twenty minutes before killing 22 people at a Wal-Mart in El Paso.<sup>7</sup> The *Unite the Right* rally by white supremacists in Charlottesville that led to the death of a peaceful counterdemonstrator and was followed up by Trump declaring that there are "very fine people on both sides."<sup>8</sup>

The list goes on and on and, though, there has always been, and probably always will be, an undercurrent of racism, bigotry and hatred of the "other"—Trump has helped make white supremacist hatred of "the other" more mainstream. It seems pretty clear that much of this shift is connected to the constant drumbeat of his warnings about the dangers both outside and within our country. Appealing to the primal fear of persecution and contamination, he warns us

---

<sup>4</sup> Video of white female Trump supporter berating a Mexican American man and his mother doing yardwork. She cited Trump's claims about Mexicans as the basis for her belief that Mexicans are rapists. Video shown in article by Brooke Seipel in *The Hill* (June 26, 2018): Retrieved from <https://thehill.com/homenews/news/394113-white-woman-cites-trump-calls-man-rapist-and-animal-in-viral-video>

<sup>5</sup> Cited in article by Rachel Frazen in *The Hill*(March 15, 2019): Retrieved from <https://thehill.com/policy/international/434238-new-zealand-suspect-wrote-in-manifesto-he-supported-trump-as-a-symbol-of>

<sup>6</sup> Cited in article by John Eligon, Alan Blinder and Nida Najar in *The New York Times*(February 24, 2017): Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/24/world/asia/kansas-attack-possible-hate-crime-srinivas-kuchibhotla.html>

<sup>7</sup> Cited in article by Charles Ventura and N'dea Yancey-Bragg in *USA Today* (August 5, 2019): Retrieved from <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2019/08/04/el-paso-walmart-shooting-what-we-know/1913941001/>

<sup>8</sup> Cited in article by Meghan Kenneally, "What to know about the violent Charlottesville protests and anniversary rallies" in *ABCNewsToGo.com*: <https://abcnews.go.com/US/happen-charlottesville-protest-anniversary-weekend/story?id=57107500>

of the ongoing invasion by brown foreigners who want to take over our country and of the need to keep them out in order to protect the nation. Additionally, he tells us, there is already an infection of alien others within our borders and so we must cleanse our country by expelling these contaminating forces. Whether they are invaders from “shithole countries,” terrorists from the Middle East, or drug dealing murderers and rapists from the south, the message is clear: we are in danger from all sides, and even from within.

A closer look at the behaviors and attitudes of his core supporters reveals a striking similarity to the dependency groups described by Bion (1961). The anxiety that he has been stirring up promotes the formation of a dependency-oriented form of assumption group, along with the group’s need for an omnipotent leader who will solve all their problems and thus alleviate their anxiety—the anxiety that Trump has himself been relentlessly promoting. Trump has, of course, been setting himself up as that leader by stoking these fears and then presenting himself as the one—the only one—who can solve all of our problems. Claiming to be a “stable genius” with “great and unmatched wisdom,” he has actually said all of the following:

- “I know more about ISIS than the generals do;”
- “I know more about the courts than any human being on earth;”
- “Nobody knows more about trade than me;”
- “I know more about renewables than any human being on earth;”
- “I understand money better than anybody;”
- “Nobody in the history of this country has ever known as much about infrastructure as Donald Trump;”
- “There’s nobody bigger and better at the military than I am;”
- “There is nobody who understands the horror of nuclear more than me;”
- “I think I know it [the economy] better than the Federal reserve;”

- “I know more about offense and defense than the ...generals will ever understand;”  
and the *coup de grace*:
- Trump’s speech at the 2016 Republican Convention where he said that the nation is in crisis, that terrorism and attacks on police threaten the American way of life, that the United States suffers from domestic disaster and international humiliation, that we are filled with shuttered factories and crushed communities. “I am your voice”, Trump proclaimed... “I alone can fix it. I will restore law and order.”<sup>9</sup>

Trump regularly promotes the idealization of himself in the eyes of his supporters, telling them that he is an omnipotent leader who has all the answers. This, of course, appeals to the primitive, assumption group desire for an idealized leader who will magically solve all of their problems. He has been extraordinarily effective in his efforts to plant himself in that role in their psyches, and it has produced a surprising degree of loyalty. Of course, there are some Trump supporters who simply like the fact that he has been committed to cutting taxes, reducing regulations, nominating conservative judges, and/or aligning with the conservative Israeli government currently in power. But, there are a significant number of supporters who have been essentially brainwashed into ignoring their own prior, clearly stated, values and policy preferences (such as reducing budget deficits, promoting free trade, having a more muscular foreign policy, and pressing for human rights in repressive countries like Russia and China). They can be said to have “drunk the Kool-Aid” in that they have been seduced individually to regress to the paranoid schizoid position and seduced, as a group, to regress to a dependency oriented basic assumption group.

---

<sup>9</sup> Cited by Yoni Appelbaum in *The Atlantic* (July 21, 2016): retrieved from <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2016/07/trump-rnc-speech-alone-fix-it/492557/>



When, back in January of 2016, Trump bragged about the loyalty of his supporters, saying, “I could “stand in the middle of Fifth Avenue and shoot somebody and I wouldn’t lose any voters,”<sup>10</sup> most people laughed because they didn’t understand something that he understood all too well: His base doesn’t support him because they agree with his policies. They support him because of the *nature of their attachment to him*. He appears to intuitively understand that he is an idealized figure with supporters who not only overlook his breaking of the law, but who allow him to shape what they value and believe. This point was driven home to me when, during the Mueller probe, in the heat of the focus on possible collusion with Russia in the 2016 election, I was watching a TV interview of one of Trump’s supporters from a small rural town in Kentucky—someone who prior to Trump would have most certainly been rabidly anti-Russian. To my amazement the interviewee shrugged off the Russian involvement in our elections, saying that it wasn’t really a big deal—“they all do that”—and that maybe it was time we got along better with the Russians. Trump has been able to keep their support in the face of numerous violations of their core values, and as well as policies that run counter to the own economic interests. Even more striking, he has been able to divide the country into groups with conflicting beliefs about what is actually true. Any news that he doesn’t like he is able to successfully label (at least in the eyes of his base) as “fake news” or a “hoax.” His more than 16,000 demonstrated lies in his first three years in office (Kessler, G.; Rizzo, S. & Kelly, M., 2020) are of no import to them, as their oft repeated “they all lie” makes Trump’s lies ordinary and unremarkable. His inner circle has participated in this assault on truth by claiming that there is no such thing as truth or falsehoods—there are just “alternate facts.” As is true of many demagogic autocrats, he has been able to make his desired narrative into their believed-in

---

<sup>10</sup> Cited by Kristen East in *Politico* (2016, January 23). Retrieved from <https://www.politico.com/story/2016/01/donald-trump-shooting-vote-218145>

narrative, and they continue to protect him at the cost of their own intellectual integrity. In the words of Groucho Marx: “Who are you going to believe, me or your lying eyes?”

### **How Genuine Concern About Border Security Would Actually Look:**

Trump clearly understands the power of symbols and images to manipulate people. Displaying typical demagogic behavior, he appears to be more interested in using his fight for a “great big beautiful wall” to inflame passion and promote allegiance to himself than he is in effectively addressing the legitimate border issues that may actually exist. Putting aside for the moment the fact that not only do illegal immigrants increase the size of our economy, contribute more in tax revenues than they collect, and commit proportionately less crime than the rest of the country, Trump’s preoccupation with a powerful symbol of protection against external dangers is leading to the ironic outcome of siphoning resources away from more effective forms of border security. This includes things like hiring more judges to help evaluate asylum requests, and hiring more personnel to work at the official border crossings, where most of the illicit drugs are actually getting in (contrary to his claim that the drugs are coming in where he wants to build his wall). Never mind the fact that providing financial assistance to the primary countries of origin of many of these immigrants (like Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador) has been effective in helping to slow the rate at which individuals have been coming here from those countries. And, despite the fact that contrary to Trump’s claims of a border crisis, illegal immigration across our southern border has actually been steadily declining since 2007. “He is determined to cut this funding, thereby exacerbating the problem but pleasing the individuals whose fears he keeps stoking. He understands that provoking primitive fears and promising symbolic solutions is a far more effective way of activating his base and strengthening their loyalty than actually having an effective border policy.

### Three Levels of Defense

The terror of being defenseless in a dangerous world helps to perpetuate a state of **Defensiveness** (characterized by the need for walls of various types) that interferes with the ability to move to a state of relative **Nondefensiveness**. This first state, a state of **Defenselessness**, is characterized by a heightened sense of helplessness, a paranoid fear of being persecuted, a general sense of danger, and insecurity about one's boundaries. This then leads to more rigid, less permeable boundaries, a diminution in the capacity for empathy, and hostility toward perceived persecutory threats, all characteristic of a state of **Defensiveness**.

On the other hand, a state of relative **Nondefensiveness** is characterized by greater flexibility, more openness to experience, a more empathic connection with the world, and an **attitude of faith** that is the basis for a more spiritual life.<sup>11</sup> Individuals who are relatively nondefensive are more open to data and better able to see the world, to borrow the Buddhist term, "in its suchness," rather than through a lens distorted by fears and wishes. Such individuals are more likely to experience others—both within the group and outside the group—as human beings with their own subjective experiences, and thus are better able to have empathy and compassion for them and treat them with respect.

### A Progressive Solution to a Problem of Regression

It is suggested that the antidote to such demagogic, regression-promoting behavior by our president is not further demagoguery on the other side; it is the promoting of a more evolved narrative to describe the current state of affairs, along with a realistic, **developmentally progressive** vision for the direction we need to go. This would involve neutralizing Trump's

---

<sup>11</sup> Note: this should not be confused with the attitudes of some conservative religious groups, a large number of which support Trump—a support that a number of writers have argued is actually **because of, and not despite**, his racist beliefs (Butler, 2019).

fear mongering by “appealing to our better angels,” but not by only appealing to those angels. It would require clearly, and relentlessly, pointing out his regular use of this regression-promoting tactic, and equally important, effectively addressing the social and economic issues that leave so many Americans feeling vulnerable and thus susceptible to his demagoguery. In short, the answer to Trump’s use of a narrative that activates a collective regression to a more primitive defensive orientation is not the promotion of more defensiveness. It is to encourage a collective move forward by presenting an alternative, progressive narrative that is both substantive and reassuring in that it speaks to the fears, insecurities and very real concerns that so many Americans face today, and recognizes their suffering as fellow human beings.

#### **APRIL 2020 ADDENDUM**

A version of this paper that was presented originally at the 30th Annual conference of the International Forum for Psychoanalytic Education in Toronto, Ontario, in October 2019, predated the COVID-19 pandemic. Not surprisingly, Trump’s vilification of the other has continued in his handling of the pandemic. In the early stages of the spread of the virus he regularly referred to the pandemic as the “Chinese Virus,” tapping into the collective anxiety about the virus and organizing those concerns into fear about being harmed by an identifiable foreign other. Speaking to the primitive fear of being invaded – in this case having one’s body literally invaded by a foreign agent – he predictably resorted to his *modus operandi* of promoting a collective Paranoid Schizoid state (Bion’s Basic Assumption Group) along with the accompanying sense of danger from a harmful other - in this case, the Chinese. Later, in April, he issued an executive order that stated that, “the entry into the United States of aliens as immigrants is hereby suspended.” This order was ostensibly to protect American jobs from foreigners, but the need to protect ourselves from dangerous outsiders is, of course, a familiar refrain.

M. Chet Mirman, Ph.D. can be contacted at: [chetmirman@gmail.com](mailto:chetmirman@gmail.com)

## References

Bion, W. (1961). *Experiences in Groups*, New York, NY: Tavistock Publications/Basic Books.

Butler, A. (2019, September 27). White Evangelicals Love Trump and Aren't Confused

About Why. No One Should Be. *Think: Opinions, Analysis and Essays*.

Retrieved from <https://www.nbcnews.com/think/opinion/white-evangelicals-love-trump-aren-t-confused-about-why-no-ncna1046826>

Grotstein, J. (1985). A proposed revision of the psychoanalytic concept of the death instinct.

*Yearbook of Psychoanalysis and Psychotherapy* 1:299-326. Hillsdale, NJ: New Concept Press.

Kessler, G., Rizzo, S., & Kelly, M. (2020, January 20). President Trump made 16,241

false or misleading claims in his first three years. *Washington Post*. Retrieved

from <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2020/01/20/president-trump-made-16241-false-or-misleading-claims-his-first-three-years/>

Klein, M. (1946). Notes on some schizoid mechanisms. *The International Journal of*

*Psychoanalysis*, 27, 99–110.

Lee, B. (2017, October 3). *The Dangerous Case of Donald Trump: 27 Psychiatrists and*

*Mental Health Experts Assess a President*. New York, NY: Thomas Dunne Books.

Ogden, T. (1989). *The Primitive Edge of Experience*, Northvale, NJ: Jason Aaronson, Inc.