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POST POLITICS

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## [Bush: Perhaps the Most Toxic Leader of Our Time](#)

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As President George W. Bush exits the White House, the trail of destruction he leaves behind bears many earmarks of a toxic leader. Toxic leaders, by virtue of their dysfunctional personal qualities and destructive behavior, inflict serious and enduring harm on their followers, as well as many others who happen to cross their path.

In fact, the "quick and dirty" measure of toxic leaders is that they leave us worse off than they found us. Few could deny that the label "toxic leader" seems custom-made for our forty-third president, who turns over the keys to the Oval Office in just a few days. Bush has left the US in disarray domestically and has diminished our position internationally. Mostly, he has done this through a combination of incompetence, arrogance, and stubbornness, characteristics which President Bush shares with many other toxic leaders.

Incompetence draws toxic leaders into poor decisions. Arrogance keeps toxic leaders from recognizing the inadequacy or downright destructiveness of their choices. And stubbornness makes toxic leaders persist on their poisonous course even when others shine a spotlight on its toxicity.

But these traits aren't even the worst of toxic leadership. Incompetence, arrogance, and stubbornness actually fall on the mild end of the "toxic" spectrum, compared to those of other deliberately evil leaders.

If incompetence, arrogance, and stubbornness were the only claims against Bush, it would be tragic enough. Unfortunately, Bush has earned the title of a full-fledged toxic leader by violating the basic standards of human rights of both ordinary American citizens, as well as our alleged opponents. Reports from Guantanamo and Abu Ghraib prisons provide telling evidence of Bush's willingness to abrogate the very human rights that we Americans so dearly prize. And he does so, while whistling (to paraphrase FDR), "You have everything to fear, including fear itself."

### **Traits of Toxic Leaders**

Toxic leaders commonly first charm, but then manipulate, mistreat, undermine, and ultimately leave their followers in a diminished, if not totally incapacitated, state. I don't mean to blame the victim, but there are many reasons -- over which we have some control -- why toxic leaders rise to power and remain in office. Here are just a few:

- Psychological reasons: Humans are programmed to follow authoritarian leaders. Ever since we were kids, we've been told by our parents to do what we are told and everything will be fine.
- Existential reasons: We worry about our safety and survival, and leaders who promise us that everything will be okay soothe our fears.
- Psychosocial: We often give power to those who we think can succeed better than we can; if we thought we could perform heroically, we'd want to be the leader ourselves.

Understandably, saints rarely seek elected office. So, leadership is left to us ordinary human beings, many of whom prefer to do our own thing. There are several reasons why the best candidates don't seek office, but two major factors are:

- The inconvenience of leadership: Being a leader is a big responsibility, and it can dramatically change our lifestyle: less time with family, longer working hours, and a lot more stress. Consequently, we step aside for others who are willing to take on the added burden, even if they aren't exactly perfect for the job. It's easier to let someone else do the job and then criticize that individual than it is to do it ourselves.
- Leadership roles often attract the wrong people because we incorrectly consider leadership a privilege, offering power and prestige. Not surprising, then, that the most narcissistic, neurotic, and power-hungry individuals usually elbow their way to the front of the line.

### **Looking to the future**

As we enter a new, historic era of American political leadership, let's hope we can begin to rethink leadership and recognize our own individual leadership responsibilities. Perhaps we can engage in the "Valuable Inconvenience of Leadership," where we set aside some of our own cherished projects and contribute to the common good. In the process, we'll discover our own leadership gifts.

We can't leave it all to the leader and still expect to avoid toxic excesses. By helping to shoulder the burdens of leadership,

perhaps we can also begin to restore the American spirit at home and reestablish an honorable - maybe even exemplary - image abroad.

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