

How Brain Shutdown Explains Core Support for Trump and Clinton

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We've evolved a capacity to circumvent rational and independent thinking to maintain social bonds, which explains core support for Trump and Clinton.

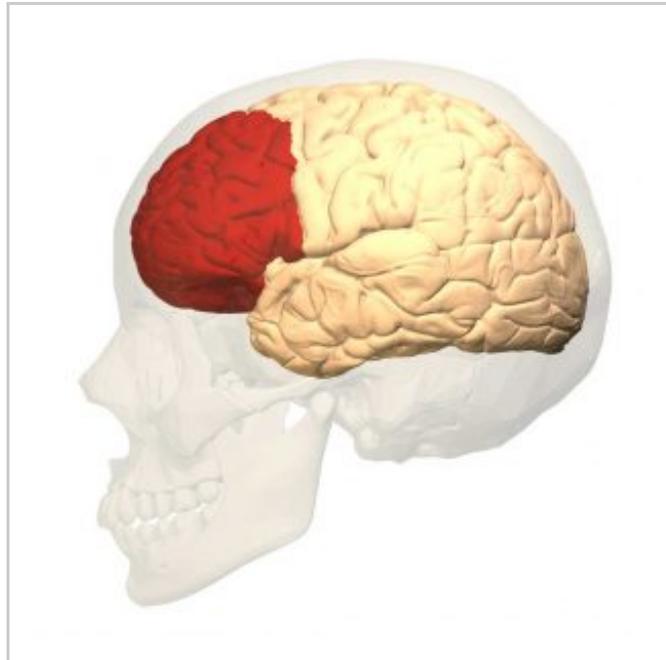
What a choice! More than 150 million natural-born citizens old enough to be President of the United States and we winnowed it down to these two extraordinary candidates—extraordinary in so many important ways. Donald Peaches Trump vs. Hillary Cream Clinton ... how did we get so lucky?

Do we owe this master stroke to the intricacies of the primary process—the super-ness of Super Delegates, the ability of Independents to vote in some states but not in others, the serenity of the caucuses, the sublime wisdom of Reince Priebus and Debbie Wasserman Schultz? Or are we indulging in Peaches & Cream because a counterintuitive aspect of human nature worked its magic? Probably a big bolus of both, but I am not clever enough to ponder the perplexities of the primaries, so please consider a recent discovery in neuroscience: areas of our brains that handle critical thinking turn *off* when needy areas are stroked by words that they long to hear.

It happens, for example, when true believers listen to a speaker who reinforces their core beliefs. A Professor of Functionally Integrative Neuroscience, a Professor of Magnetic Resonance Research, a Professor of Anthropology, and

a Professor of Religion put religious and non-religious subjects in an MRI to look for differences in brain activity while they listened a voice recording of a highly rated preacher. If you guessed that Professor Schjoedt and his colleagues found that nothing special happened in the brains of non-believers, but something striking happened in the brains of believers, you guessed right.

Indeed, the medial and dorsolateral prefrontal cortices of believers shut down. Hemoglobin molecules coursing through those brain areas retained oxygen because surrounding neurons were not burning fuel, so they resonated at a different frequency. And there was a dose-response curve—the more devout the religious subjects rated themselves to be, the more complete the turn-off of brain regions



that perform what psychologists call *executive function*—the ability to objectively evaluate information, make decisions based on that information, and act on those decisions. Put differently, the preacher’s words short circuited believers’ ability to think independently, to think outside the box.

The opposite of *executive function* is inside-the-box thinking. The most inside box is our relationship with our self—our self-image. Successful management of self is key to managing our other inside box—our social network. Both inside boxes require careful maintenance of core values. From children’s dependence on their parents to business peoples’ dependence on their connections, we survive by maintaining values that form our identity and are shared across our social networks. So we have evolved a capacity to circumvent clear thinking when maintaining beliefs that strengthen social bonds is more important for survival than thinking outside the box. Prefrontal cortical shut-down is the mechanism for Simon and Garfunkel’s observation that “A man hears what he wants to hear and disregards the rest.” Put more roughly, we get stupid for a reason. We dumb down to manage our self-image so that we can present an effective self to others. We fend off challenges, including rational challenges, so we can agree about contentious issues with people we depend upon.

Although the professors' experiment compared religious to non-religious people, turning off *executive function* to protect beliefs that strengthen social bonds is not limited to religious beliefs *per se*. Because we evolved by natural selection, and because social networks are critical to human survival, protecting any convictions that keep us at peace with ourselves and *in* with our *in-crowd*, including deeply shared political convictions, could generate the same mind-numbing effect. Put differently, because religious convictions are such powerful facilitators of group cohesion, they are low hanging fruit for detecting the underlying phenomenon with an MRI.

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And we all need to give our *executive function* periodic time outs—to fly on autopilot while we sort out who we are. Most of us mix some level of reassurance about deeply held convictions with additional forms of solace. In days of yore, mugs of beer held high while proffering the religious and political exclamation “God save the Queen!” followed by reassuring shouts of “Hear! Hear!” served to calm the nerves of many medial and dorsolateral prefrontal cortices. Beer still plays a big role, but today we also combine reassurance of core convictions with yoga, pilates, music, wine, rum punch, dank marijuana, and for more than a few, synthetic opiates. So Karl Marx was right about religion being “the opiate of the masses,” but Marx’s masses were not more weak-minded than the elite. Opium was prohibitively expensive, but religious and political reassurance were free.

Actually, religion and politics, the two things we’re not supposed to talk about in polite company, were and remain more than free. Most of us get them, whether we want them or not, through indoctrination from birth. So on a regular basis we use whatever it takes to put ourselves into a state of relative reverie. Those needed chill-outs are antithetical to evaluating information, making decisions, and acting off the grid—so we tend to get defensive about the particulars of our religious and political convictions (thus the polite company ban) because we are, in a real MRI-detectable sense, addicted to them.

Trump

But can shut-down of *executive function* enable Trump supporters to overlook his most impulsive plans for implementing “Americanism, not globalism”—like building a one-thousand five-hundred mile-long wall on the Mexican border for twenty-five-thousand million (25 billion) dollars ... with the very peachy addendum of having Mexico pay for it? And how about the return of water-boarding and even more enhanced interrogation torture techniques ... not to

mention quickly destroying ISIS without getting involved in another messy Middle East war? Ironically, the profound power of cortical shut-down can be appreciated by contemplating Trump's professed devotion to the Bible ("Nobody reads the Bible more than me").

Like the rest of us, Trump is appalled by ISIS because their ranks include many vicious, murdering, subjugating, genocidal rapists (far worse than Mexicans, according to Peaches ... except for the murder and rape bits). Also like most of the rest of us, in order to blind himself to the dark side of his most revered religious text so he can maintain an inside-the-box faith that it is a guide to universal morality, Trump's prefrontal cortices turn off when he reads biblical passages that command believers to behave like ISIS and Boko Haram. For example:

"When you draw near to a city to fight against it, offer terms of peace to it. And if its answer to you is peace and it opens to you, then all the people who are found in it shall do forced labor for you and shall serve you. But if it makes no peace with you, but makes war against you, then you shall besiege it; and when the LORD your God gives it into your hand you shall put all its males [men and boys] to the sword, but the women and the little ones [girls], the cattle, and everything else in the city, all its spoil, you shall take as booty for yourselves; and you shall enjoy the spoil of your enemies, which the LORD your God has given you. Thus you shall do to all the cities which are very far from you, which are not cities of the nations here.

"But in the cities of these peoples that the Lord your God gives you for an inheritance you shall save alive nothing that breathes, but you shall utterly destroy them, the Hittites and the Amorites, the Canaanites and the Perizzites, the Hivites and the Jebusites [the people of Jerusalem], as the Lord your God has commanded; that they may not teach you to do according to all their abominable practices which they have done in the service of their Gods, and so to sin against the LORD your God" (Deuteronomy 20:10-18).

In case the above verses induced some snoozing in your prefrontal cortices, the first paragraph instructs believers to offer distant non-believers a choice between: 1) enslavement, or 2) death to men and boys, rape of women, and maintenance of girls until they are old enough to "enjoy" (seven days after first menses)—not unlike treatment inflicted upon the Yazidis by ISIS and upon schoolgirls by Boko Haram. The second paragraph commands genocide of non-believers who live in the believers' Promised Land—and there can be no doubt that these verses demanded absolute genocide—the apex of in-group morality:

“They should be utterly destroyed, and should receive no mercy but be exterminated as the LORD commanded Moses” (Joshua 11:20).

“Utterly destroy all that they have; do not spare them, but kill both man and woman, infant and suckling” (I Samuel 15:3).

“You will make them as a blazing oven when you appear. The LORD will swallow them up in his wrath and fire will consume them. You will destroy their offspring from the earth and their children from among the sons of men” (Psalms 21:9-10).

If prefrontal cortical shut-down can enable billions of people to gloss over these and many similar biblical passages in order to help maintain the soothing notions that “God is Love” and The Bible is a guide to morality, surely Trump’s core supporters can do the same with his most draconian pronouncements and apparent misogyny—not because they are a basket of deplorables, but because they are *Homo Sapiens*. As the Israeli psychologist George Tamarin found, even children protect indoctrinated beliefs by shutting down their capacity to think critically when they are read the story of Joshua committing genocide in Jericho. But when a fictional “General Lin” is substituted for Joshua, and a “Chinese Kingdom 3000 years ago” is substituted for Israel in the same biblical passages (Joshua 6:20-21), Israeli children are highly critical of General Lin.

As the old song goes, “You’ve got to accentuate the positive and eliminate the negative.” Believers do that. And when it comes to accentuating the positive, if Trump keeps his *executive function* functioning when he reads the following biblical verses, he may be inspired by some of the rewards on offer:

“Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage, and the ends of the earth your possession” (Psalms 2:8).

“Thus says the LORD: ‘The wealth of Egypt and the merchandise of Ethiopia, and the Sabeans, men of stature, shall come over to you and be yours, they shall follow you; they shall come over in chains and bow down to you. They will make supplication to you, saying: ‘God is with you only, and there is no other, no god besides him’” (Isaiah 45:14).

“And nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising ... Foreigners shall build up your walls, and their kings shall minister to you ... that men may bring to you the wealth of the nations, with their kings led in procession. For the nation and kingdom that will not serve you shall perish; those nations shall be utterly laid waste” (Isaiah 60:10-12).

My take on Donald Trump is that when he flies on autopilot his need to lead—to be a ‘the-boss-is-always-right’ boss—becomes pathological. Put more pointedly, I suspect that if Peaches had been one of the ready-to-throw stone

throwers when Jesus said “Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her” ([John 8:7](#)), Trump would have thrown his stone ... and when the rest of the throwers followed his lead, he would have touted their following as proof that he is without (serious) sin, that he is the right leader, and that he did the right thing.

Clinton

And Cream? Core supporters tout her intelligence, her knowledge of international politics, and her inside-the-beltway political savvy. Her religious advisor adds her religiosity: “Mrs. Clinton is far more religious than many understand, and always has been, carrying a Bible in her purse, joining a prayer group in the Senate and making time every day to digest scripture.” But according to Peaches, “This is the legacy of Hillary Clinton: death, destruction and weakness.” Unfortunately, intelligence, knowledge of international politics and inside-the-beltway political savvy—the ability to get things done both here and abroad—are as compatible with death and destruction as they are with religiosity.

But again, Trump went too far, overstating his case. “Weakness” does not belong in a description of Hillary Clinton. In true “Onward Christian Soldier” mode, she voted in favor of death and destruction in Iraq and subsequently pronounced that exercise in inside-the-box thinking to have been a mistake. Did she miss-take a bad decision for a good decision? Or did she miss-take a popular-at-the-time decision for a popular-for-a-long-time decision? The fact that she was subsequently the #1 perpetrator of death and destruction in Libya, and in consequence the insinuation of ISIS in North Africa, points to the latter miss-take. And when asked by Judy Woodruff about her role in the Libya catastrophe, Clinton dissembled as follows:

WOODRUFF: Secretary Clinton, one question on foreign policy. You were described in a recent acclaimed book by Mark Landler as being the—quote—the “house hawk” in the Clinton war cabinet. And we know that you—and you talked about this—you encouraged the president to intervene in Libya in 2011. Recently, President Obama said his worst mistake in office was probably failing to plan for the day after what he thought was the right thing to do in intervening there. How do you see your responsibility in that?

CLINTON: Well, first of all, it’s important to remember where we were and why the president made the decision he did, because this was a presidential decision. I have advised the president. Sometimes, he follows my advice. Sometimes, he doesn’t. Sometimes, he uses a combination of what he hears from his advisers. We were looking at a potential disaster, as Gadhafi threatened to massacre large numbers of his population. The Europeans, our Arab allies were urging us to help them to try to prevent that. After due diligence, we came up with a way of supporting their efforts that didn’t cost a single American life. And we saved a lot of Libyan lives. Now, could we have done more after the Gadhafi regime was ended? Well, that’s always second-guessing. And I’m sure that there’s more we could have done, but let’s look at what we did do. We, along with the U.N. and others, helped to superintend two free and fair elections, something that is still quite an accomplishment by the Libyan people. They chose moderate leaders. Unfortunately, preexisting rivalries within the country has prevented the government from really being able to act on behalf of the nation. So, of course, if there were more things to be done that we could have influenced, I think that’s something we should be looking at and evaluating, because Libya still is a country that is struggling to be successful.

My suggestion to a person who advocates destroying governments that keep a lid on people who have “preexisting rivalries” (i.e., hatreds hotter than molten lava) is: if you can’t guess what the consequences of bombing the caldera of a dormant volcano might be, even though you just did that by ‘mistake’ and we are all still living with the consequences, keep your bomb doors shut. Unfortunately, Cream’s attitude toward Iran is “distrust and verify” and she is itching to bomb Iran’s nuclear reactors. Anyone who doesn’t know that she is a bomb-first-ask-questions-later hawk, and an it’s-OK-to-make-Palestinians-pay-for-what-Germans-did-to-Jews Zionist, should keep their prefrontal cortices active while reading her recent “How I Would Reaffirm Unbreakable Bond With Israel—and Benjamin Netanyahu.” Indeed, as argued by Asher Schechter in Haaretz, both Clintons’ retro-Zionism is deadhead strong and is ultimately bad for Israel (notice the button that Bill wore during the Democratic Convention).

The issue isn’t whether she can get things done. The issue is what she is likely to do.

“Distrust and verify” could lead to an inspection regimen so intrusive that Iran would refuse to cooperate. That refusal would, in turn, bolster a charge that Iran is ‘again’ pursuing nuclear weapons (and this time it would be ‘nuclear’ weapons, as distinct from Bush junior’s ‘nuculer’ weapons, which will make the charge more convincing). The Iranian counterpart of Iraq’s Tariq Aziz would then appear to be sincere and honest because, like Aziz, he *would be* sincere and honest when asserting that Iran is not pursuing nuclear weapons—but like Aziz, he will be pilloried as a propagandist while Cream beats the drums for a war that will help her secure a second term. She will even try to hide her hawkishness by claiming that she was a foundational force behind the Iran agreement, and so came to the realization that we must destroy Iran’s nuclear potential only after Herculean soul-searching. All that will work because her core supporters will silence their prefrontal cortices in order to overlook the reality that Clinton’s disagreement with then-Senator Kerry over Iran policy is why Obama went with Kerry as Secretary of State for his second term. Yes, Cream is intelligent, knowledgeable and savvy. The issue isn’t whether she can get things done. The issue is what she is likely to do.

War crimes aside, the practical problem with bombing Iran’s nuclear facilities is that Iran would respond by firing all of its non-nuclear missiles at Israel (Iran does not have nuclear bombs and they are a long way from being able to build a nuke small enough to be delivered by a missile). That, in turn, would unleash the balance of the U.S. arsenal stationed on Diego Garcia ... stationed on Diego Garcia for the purpose of bombing Iran. Unlike Libya and Iraq, Iran was not an imperialist/colonialist fabrication that forced groups with “preexisting rivalries” to live together. Iran is an ancient, powerful nation that we used to call Persia ... and it has substantive, long-term allies, namely China (since 200 B.C.) and Russia (since 1521).

My take on Hillary Clinton is that the decision-making and action-taking components her *executive function* work well. Unfortunately, however, her religiously inspired, knee-jerk, hair-trigger self-righteous indignation toward dictators who criticize Israel and voice support for Palestinians (as distinct from Muslim dictators who keep their mouths shut about that issue) overrides the objective-evaluation-of-information component of her *executive function*. So she reverts to her Methodist upbringing autopilot mode when it comes to thinking about the consequences of destroying anti-Zionist governments, in turn destroying the people that she soldiers forth to help, and so further desecrates any moral standing that the United States may have recovered since devastating Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, Iraq, Afghanistan and Libya.

Vote For ...?

If I had to vote for Peaches or Cream, I would vote for Peaches. He is so transparently sophomoric that he would not be able to anesthetize the *executive function* of any Democrats in congress and his support from Republicans would be limited to less than 75% ... so he would not be able to loosen the purse strings for his most outlandish objectives, even in the unlikely event that Republicans retain majorities in both houses ... and his ability to use executive authority would be thwarted by the Supreme Court (vastly more sophisticated people than Peaches, even as presently constituted). Clinton, in distinction, could get support from about 50% of Democrats and about 95% of Republicans for bombing Iran. So even though Trump could wreak a moderate amount of havoc, Clinton is the more dangerous candidate. Better to get the Trump lunacy behind us and hope for two worthwhile candidates in 2020.