

MADNESS AND POLITICS: THE CASE OF JAMES FORRESTAL

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INTRODUCTION

The stigma of insanity or mental illness can have far-reaching and long-lasting effects upon the individual so labelled. The suggestion of mental incompetence, once made, may come to permeate every aspect of a person's existence, influencing others' interpretations of his or her smallest actions. Experiments by Temerlin (1), Rosenhan (2), and others have demonstrated that the suggestion of mental illness is, in itself, sufficient to cause even mental health professionals to regard normal individuals as seriously ill and to interpret normal behavior as symptomatic. Furthermore, the frequent necessity of reasoning backwards to discover the possible causes of mental distress often ensures that much of an individual's past behavior as well will be reinterpreted in the light of an alleged mental illness, regardless of what other factors may have influenced the actions or statements in question. One such case is that of James Forrestal. This paper will examine some of the facts and fallacies pertaining to him.

James Forrestal was the First Secretary of Defense of the United States, holding that position from 1947 until 1949. He had previously served as an administrative assistant to President Roosevelt and then as Secretary of the Navy in the Roosevelt and Truman administrations. Forrestal earned a reputation as a competent and dedicated public servant, but disagreed with Truman on a number of important issues and his readiness to fight for unpopular and controversial positions earned him many enemies. Eventually, his resignation was requested. Apparently tense and exhausted prior to this event Forrestal may have deteriorated rapidly afterwards. After an apparent suicide attempt, he was examined by William Menninger and his illness was diagnosed as "severe depression of the type seen in operational fatigue during the war." (3, p. 7) He was then flown to Bethesda Naval Hospital, and confined to the sixteenth floor of the hospital. Several weeks later he fell to his death from an unguarded window.

Forrestal's hospitalization and subsequent suicide raised serious questions concerning the tensions associated with high office. The diagnosis of a psychotic condition, however, had even more profound effects. The Russians used it avidly to cast doubt upon American foreign policy in general and American policy makers in particular. It now appears that much of Forrestal's life and career, and perhaps especially the controversial positions he took, have been reinterpreted by Americans as well as Russians as merely symptoms of his alleged illness. In 1963, he became the subject of a psycho-biography by Arnold Rogow (3). Rogow states frankly that he wrote the book to explore the causes of Forrestal's illness and, as is sometimes the case with such works, the interpretations of major events in the subject's life leave little doubt that the starting point was a psychiatrist's diagnosis. Under different circumstances, however, a great deal of the information contained in the biography could, and possibly would, be given an entirely different interpretation.

The following table presents some of the details of Forrestal's life, Rogow's interpretation of events, and alternative explanations which, in the opinion of the authors, are at least equally consistent with biographical data cited by Rogow:

TABLE 1. *Facts of the life of James Forrestal, and two sets of interpretations for them.*

FACT (from Rogow)	ROGOW'S INTERPRETATION	THE AUTHORS' ALTERNATIVE INTERPRETATION
Forrestal's Early Life		
His mother was a stern disciplinarian who often beat her sons with a strap.	Forrestal developed a passive-dependence on his mother which he later had trouble resolving.	This may have had no negative effect on Forrestal. Millions of children (including Forrestal's two brothers) have been beaten without later being labelled mentally ill.
Forrestal was a sickly child who worked hard at athletic endeavors to build up his slight body.	He came to regard his earlier passive-dependence as feminine and was trying to prove his masculinity.	He was a strongwilled, self-reliant boy determined to overcome his handicaps.
When he became rich and successful he bought his widowed mother a fur coat and an apartment in New York.	Forrestal was overcompensating for his guilt in having opposed his mother's choice of his career (priest) and having left the Catholic Church.	He was a kind and thoughtful son, or perhaps was engaging in conspicuous consumption.
His mother never lived in the apartment or wore the coat.	She rejected him, increasing his anguish.	Because she died a few months later, she had no opportunity to use his gifts.
The Political Controversies		
Forrestal took a "tough" stand on many Cold War issues.	He was overcompensating for profound doubts about his masculine identity.	His analysis of the situation led him to perceive a threat and he acted accordingly.
He fought tenaciously in defending his unpopular stands on foreign and domestic policy, even carrying an issue to Capitol Hill if he felt it necessary.	He lacked self-confidence.	He was unusually self-confident and courageous.
The "Breakdown"		
Forrestal suffered from loss of appetite and stomach trouble.	Physical symptoms of mental distress.	The loss of appetite was due to the stomach trouble, which could have had a number of causes.

FACT (from Rogow)	ROGOW'S INTERPRETATION	THE AUTHORS' ALTERNATIVE INTERPRETATION
The "Breakdown" (cont.)		
He scratched his head frequently.	Extreme nervous tension.	Walter Millis, the editor of Forrestal's diaries, declares this was a long-standing habit. (1)
He thought he was being followed.	He was paranoid.	He was being followed by Secret Service Chief U. E. Baughman, whom Truman assigned to the task, and possibly by Israeli agents as well, whom Rogow admits had been following Forrestal's aides.

Some of the problems involved in after-the-fact interpretations of events should be evident here. They are especially numerous when dealing with a controversial public figure such as Forrestal, as adequate attention must be paid to the socio-political context in which the events occurred. Sources, motives, and political intrigues must be carefully considered. For example, many of the reports of strange or nervous behavior on the part of the Secretary of Defense came from radio broadcasts by Drew Pearson, whose reliability is questionable. Jack Anderson, Pearson's protege, has since declared that Pearson "hectorated Forrestal with innuendos and false accusations." (4)

Such treatment of a historical figure can have far-reaching consequences. Using Rogow as his source, Otto Friedrich, in *Going Crazy*, refers to Forrestal as "mad as King Lear" (5, p. 205) and includes a long list of additional "symptoms." Among these are maintaining "a kind of clearinghouse for tales of Communist subversion fed by reports from J. Edgar Hoover, and such militant clerics as Francis Cardinal Spellman and Fulton J. Sheen . . ." (5) The implication is that Forrestal's behavior was irrational. Note, however, that he was in distinguished company. Hoover, Spellman, and Sheen, while contributing to the "clearinghouse," were apparently not "as mad as King Lear." While Forrestal was certainly a staunch antiCommunist, he was not a "head hunter"; he defended prospective Atomic Energy Commission Chairman David Lilienthal against Senate charges of being a Communist sympathizer on several occasions*. Rogow concedes that Forrestal was an avid reader who often exchanged books with his friends and was a genuine student of Marxism. His alleged "clearinghouse" may reflect mainly the interests of a concerned and highly intelligent man. The "irrational" conclusions he reached as a result of his readings in Marxism were that something akin to the Cold War was inevitable, that the Soviet Union would exploit the power vacuums left by the defeats of Germany and Japan, and that Russia would expand. However, Friedrich insists on presenting these concerns as symptoms of abnormality.

We do not deny that Forrestal was under great stress at the end of his career. However, we have found no convincing evidence that he was dangerously psychotic or incapable of discharging his duties while in office. There is no justification for saying that his policies and positions were somehow the products of a diseased mind, unless we are willing to make the same assumptions about literally millions of people who have entertained similar beliefs. Nevertheless, they have been interpreted as such in Forrestal's case.

The final tragedy of the Forrestal case, therefore, is that the man himself, and his

*Forrestal's defense of Lilienthal should also pose problems for those who have labeled Forrestal as antisemitic.

ideas and contributions, have been lost in discussions of his "illness". In addition to previous examples, we may note that his prediction that the United States would be at war very shortly was dismissed as "paranoid" despite the fact that it was fulfilled only a few months later by the Korean conflict. Similarly, perhaps his most controversial position was his opposition to the partition of Palestine and the creation of Israel in 1948. Truman (6) presents this as an example of extremely poor judgment on Forrestal's part despite the fact that the latter was supported by the joint Chiefs of Staff and almost the entire State Department. Yet the reasons Forrestal gave for his position — that it would eventually endanger relations with other Middle Eastern nations, threaten our oil supplies, and possibly lead to military entanglements in the area — seem all too prophetic today. However we may feel about the wisdom of Truman's pro-Israel policy, Forrestal's opposition to it can hardly be dismissed as the raving of a madman. Forrestal also emphasized guerilla warfare as the tactic of the future, a warning that long went unheeded in our involvement in Indochina.

Today, however, Forrestal seems to be remembered, not for his prescience and courage, but for his suicide and alleged insanity. Perhaps this is just one example of how the label of mental illness may keep holders of unconventional but possible valuable ideas from being heard. Dismissing such people may often amount to courting ignorance in the name of psychiatric knowledge.

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