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Studies in Intelligence, Vol. 23, No. 1, Spring 1979

The leadership of the Communist world is dominated by men in their late 60s and 70s. Both the collector and the political analyst need to be aware of the ways in which the psychological reactions of aging leaders can subtly injure leadership.

AGING COMMUNIST LEADERS:
PSYCHOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

J. M. Post, M.D.

Often the old are uncontrollable; their tempers make them difficult to deal with.

Euripides

A continuing concern in predicting governmental decisions and evaluating the potential for aggressive action by Communist nations is the judgment and emotional stability of the leadership. And currently the Communist leadership is dominated by aging leaders, men in their late 60s or older.

The four ranking Soviet leaders are all in their 70s. Brezhnev is 72, Kosygin 74, Kirilenko 72, and Suslov 76. The average age of the 14 full Politburo members is 67, fully half of the full members are 65 years old or more.

Eastern Europe also has a preponderance of aging leaders. Most prominent is Marshal Tito of Yugoslavia, age 86. Both Janos Kadar of Hungary and Erich Honecker of East Germany are 66. Enver Hoxha of Albania is 70. Bulgarian First Secretary Todor Zhivkov is 67; Edward Gierek of Poland is 66, as is Gustav Husak of Czechoslovakia. Nicolae Ceausescu of Romania, 61, is the youngest East European chief of state.

The new Standing Committee of the Political Bureau of the People's Republic of China is composed, in rank order, of Hua Kuo-feng, Yeh Chien-ying, Teng Hsiang-ping, Li Hsien-nien, and Wang Tung-hsing. China watchers by no means believe that Yeh (80), Teng (74), and Li (71), all veterans of the Long March, have subordinated themselves to the younger and relatively inexperienced Hua Kuo-feng (59). The average age of the 23 full Politburo leaders is 66, more than half are 65 or older.

Other Asian Communist countries have the same preponderance of aging leaders. In the People's Republic of Vietnam, for example, Pham Van Dong is 72, Le Duan, 71; Le Duc Tho 68, Vo Nguyen Giap, 66, and the most senior of the senior citizens, Ton Duc Thang, President of Vietnam, is 90.

Psychological Reactions of Later Life

And so from hour to hour we ripe and ripe, And then from hour to hour we rot and rot, And thereby hangs a tale.

Shakespeare

Perhaps the most important generalization to be made about the intellectual and behavioral capacities of aging individuals is that we can make no wide-ranging generalizations. Some individuals may show significant normal or even "organic" effects of the aging process as early as their 50s, while other individuals may function

APPROVED FOR RELEASE
DATE 08/18/92

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with no apparent decline in their intellectual or creative powers well into their 80s. Particularly if an individual has had a rewarding and self-actualizing career, he may in old age contribute a dispassionate wisdom based on a lifetime's experience. A contemporary example of a leader who performed extremely effectively, indeed often brilliantly, until just before his death at age 79 is Chou En-lai. Yet, ironically, many of his leadership efforts were devoted to moderating the extreme reactions of the aged Mao Tse-tung, whose political leadership was significantly affected by the ravages of age.

Normal Psychological Reactions to Old Age

Even though there may be no evidence of organic deterioration, some of the psychological reactions of an individual in his later years differ qualitatively from those of younger men.

For many, the idea of losing their occupational status may be very threatening, particularly when the career has been extremely rewarding. This often leads to a sense of nostalgia, a tendency to see the present in terms of the past, and to look to the past both for solutions and reassurance. The threat of loss of position and the increasing awareness of failing physical powers may lead some to react defensively and become hyperindependent and preoccupied with demonstrating power and strength.

Though he has watched a decent age go by, A man will sometimes still desire the world.

Sophocles

Time is of the essence. The same ambitions, wishes, feelings, yearnings, and desires that motivated the aging individual when younger are present in his old age. It has been remarked by a specialist in geriatric psychiatry that "old wishes never die, they don't even fade away." Although it is rare for an aged individual to think of himself as old, as he becomes increasingly aware of the ebbing of time he often experiences an increasing urgency to make his mark. He may ask, "What have I accomplished? How much time do I have left?" This perception that time is short tends to become especially pronounced when serious physical illnesses develop.

There may be highly creative consequences of the psychological reactions to the perception that remaining time is short, for an individual may feel impelled to invest his remaining time with significance. This is movingly described by Montaigne.

Especially at this moment, when I perceive that my life is so brief in time, I try to increase it in weight; I try to arrest the speed of its flight by the speed with which I grasp it, and to compensate for the haste of its ebb by my vigor in using it. The shorter my possession of life, the deeper and fuller I must make it.

It is interesting to consider that the principal actors in the current drama in the Middle East, Anwar Sadat of Egypt and Menahem Begin of Israel, both have serious heart conditions. It may be that their perceptions that their time is short contributed to their willingness to participate in the creative diplomatic initiatives that began in December 1977.

This sense of urgency in reaction to the perception of diminished time imparts an exaggerated quality to personality needs and drives, so that long-standing personality patterns and pre-existing attitudes appear to be intensified. This is particularly true for individuals from cultures where a premium is placed on youth, ambition, and strength. Old age in such cultures can be particularly threatening.

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In contrast, in cultures emphasizing strong family ties, where religious values stress tranquility and wisdom, the aged individual may be revered as a prophet and given a place of honor. In such countries, the approach of death may be accepted with equanimity, and therefore the distorting influence of advancing age upon political behavior may be correspondingly diminished. Chou En-lai is a particularly striking example. He reacted quite stoically to the cancer which ultimately took his life at age 78, and from all outward indications was able to approach the tasks of government with his characteristic good judgment, balance, and intelligence. A current example in the non-Communist world exemplifying the influence of culture on the impact of age is Morarji Desai, the 61-year-old Prime Minister of India, a deeply religious man who sees his election as Prime Minister as an unfolding of his Karma. In contrast to the sense of urgency which impels many Western leaders at the end of their lives, there is almost a complacent lack of urgency for Desai, whose religion teaches him that life will unfold and he will have time to accomplish his God-given destiny. This lack of urgency may interfere with his political efficacy, should he not be impelled to take strong enough measures to attack India's major problems.

Psychological Manifestations of Hardening of the Arteries

There is no one-to-one correlation between age and cerebral degeneration. Many men in their 70s and 80s function at a very high level with little or no impairment to their creative and intellectual capacities, while younger men may show significant interference with their functioning. But once the march of symptomatic cerebral arteriosclerosis or other pre-senile cerebral degeneration has begun, a pattern of "organic" functional disturbance usually follows which can reliably be expected to become more severe.

Rigidity of Thought

Afflicted individuals demonstrate a progressive impairment in their capacity to think abstractly. Thinking becomes more concrete, rigid, and inflexible. There is a tendency to see things in black and white terms as the ability to discriminate nuance and subtle shades of difference diminishes. Responses become less flexible and more stereotyped, so that afflicted individuals are seen as becoming more "stubborn." It is difficult to change a mental set. For a leader suffering from organic brain damage, it might be difficult to stop a plan, once it is set in motion, despite compelling evidence and advice to the contrary. Although there were rational political reasons for many of Mao Tse-tung's moves, in addition to his perception that his time was short, psychological effects of his cerebral arteriosclerosis may well have contributed to the pace of the Cultural Revolution.

Impairment of Intellect and Judgment

There is a general decline of intellectual capacities. Concentration and memory, particularly recent memory, are usually especially affected. There is an associated impairment of judgment. Impulses which had earlier been checked by the restraints of judgment may now be more easily expressed. Thus, an individual may behave more aggressively or be more easily provoked.

Emotional Lability

Emotional reactions in general become less well controlled, afflicted individuals are irritable, easily provoked to anger, tears, or euphoria, and are more sensitive to slight. Depressive reactions are common.

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Earlier Personality Reactions Become Exaggerated

As a man grows older, he becomes more like himself

Anonymous

Aging individuals do not tend to mellow, rather, earlier personality traits tend to intensify. As with the normal aging individuals, the basic personality and life style remain intact, but long-standing attitudes and drives are expressed in an exaggerated way. The characteristically distrustful person may become frankly paranoid. Both the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China provide striking historical examples. Always distrustful, Joseph Stalin in his last years was in a clinical paranoid state, blatantly exemplified in "the doctor's plot." Similarly, during the Cultural Revolution, it was striking to observe the number of individuals loyal to Mao from the days of the Long March who fell from his favor and were politically disgraced (Mao's distrust was not without basis in all cases, for there had been discernible shifts in the loyalty of many of these individuals, partly in reaction to their growing disenchantment with the leadership being provided by the aged Mao.)

Good Days and Bad Days

Afflicted individuals have both good days and bad days. The course of cerebral arteriosclerosis is often characterized by wide fluctuations, but is invariably downhill. For some the decline is very gradual, while for others it may be quite precipitous. The disparity between observations made on good days and bad days on occasion has led to erroneous conclusions concerning the mental state of the individual. Thus, if a senior official observed Mao Tse-tung on one of his better days when he was more alert and in reasonably good contact, there would be a tendency to invalidate the reports of poor health. On the other hand, there have been occasions when observations made during a period of particular fatigue or confusion led the observer to underrate the capability of the individual to function. What is particularly important is to assess the entire pattern and not to either overrate or underrate the individual's capabilities on the basis of one particular observation. If one can with some certainty diagnose cerebral arteriosclerosis, even though an individual apparently may be alert on a particular occasion, the other features already enumerated, in particular decline of intellectual abilities and problems with judgments, are nevertheless operating.

Denial of Disability and "Groupthink"

A particular problem with aging individuals whose capacities have been affected by age is the tendency to deny the extent of disability. When a leader manifests this

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denial, it has particular consequences, as it may lead him to grasp the reins of power more tightly at the very time when he should be relinquishing them. On the one hand, the circle surrounding a leader may often be able to insulate him from decision-making responsibilities during periods of extreme disability. But considering the increased suspiciousness, emotional irritability, and denial of disability often characteristic of early symptomatic cerebral arteriosclerosis, it would not be surprising to note that there would be a natural tendency for the leadership group to foster distorted perceptions of political reality. If the somewhat suspicious leader becomes frankly paranoid so that "he who is not with me is against me," the subordinate who actively disagrees with his leader may find himself out of a job. Thus some of the psychological qualities of the aging period may promote a sycophantic leadership circle unwilling to upset the leader by disagreeing with him.

It is interesting to speculate on the group influences which may occur when a number of aged individuals as a group determine policy. The group dynamics literature suggests that individual psychological tendencies may become reinforced and exaggerated in a group setting, with a tendency to seek solutions that will not strain group consensus. Thus, even though particular individuals might have only subtle signs of the encroachments of age, with only early increases in inflexibility, there may be a summation effect mitigating against individual innovative behavior. If this is so, the judgments and decisions of aging individuals functioning as a group may have contributed to some of the inflexibility of Soviet policy and some of the more regressive policy moves of recent years.

The Example of Leonid Brezhnev

Of the four ranking members of the Soviet leadership only Brezhnev demonstrates clear signs of the psychological effects of age on his political behavior. In many ways Brezhnev epitomizes both the normal and "organic" effects of the aging process. Although most of the reporting describes Brezhnev as providing effective leadership and for the most part being in control of his intellectual faculties, reports suggesting psychological effects of the aging process are increasing in frequency. There have been significant fluctuations in Brezhnev's condition. During the "down" periods, which tend to occur when he is fatigued or ill, he has demonstrated problems with his concentration and intellectual functions.

Numerous physical ailments have afflicted Brezhnev during recent years leading some to question whether he is losing his grip. The ouster of Podgorny in May of 1977 caused Kremlin watchers to conclude that Brezhnev was strongly in control. This was a move that had been bruited about for at least five years, but the question remains why Brezhnev felt impelled to act at that time. There were assuredly significant political determinants for this move, but it may be that a contribution to Brezhnev's decision to consolidate his political power was a psychological need to deny his failing physical powers. Psychologically reacting to his internal perceptions of his own failing physical strength, he may have felt impelled to demonstrate that he was strongly in control by increasing his status through securing two of the top three positions.

The recent reshuffling of the Politburo may well be a further example of the same phenomenon. The widespread press reactions were that Brezhnev remained politically strong despite his physical weakness. The *Washington Post*, for example, led off its description of the Politburo move as follows: "Leonid Brezhnev, beset with deafness, flagging energy and other infirmities of age as he nears his 72nd birthday, demonstrated anew last week that his political clout . . . remains vigorous in his 15th year of power." We would again suggest that a contribution to Brezhnev's decision to

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consolidate his political power may have been a need to demonstrate he was politically healthy despite his multiple illnesses

The bulk of Embassy reporting would indicate that Brezhnev is for the most part in control of his mental faculties and capable of providing effective leadership. But there is evidence to suggest that he has difficulties with intellectual conceptualization and intermittent problems with concentration, orientation, and memory. The conceptual difficulties have been noted on a number of occasions during the past several years. A senior Western European diplomat observed that Brezhnev had difficulty synthesizing two related statements into one. Both French and U.S. officials have found that Brezhnev was able to deal with major substantive points, but lacked the mental flexibility to field discussions of detailed issues.

The intermittent problems with concentration, orientation, and memory were striking in their severity at times. In state visits to West Germany and France in 1977 and again to West Germany in 1978, marked difficulties in concentration were observed that had not been previously noted, which led to difficulties in negotiating. French observers found Brezhnev's endurance was quite limited and his attention span short, so he seemed unable to absorb and concentrate on details. A senior U.S. observer noted problems with memory for recent events, which contributed to the appearance of disorientation, the specific details of his schedule often eluded him, and he seemed confused about which days particular events were to occur.

On a number of nostalgic occasions, Brezhnev has shown easy tearfulness when mourning lost comrades. Although the emotional display may be explained by the nature of the situation and by the emotionality often associated with the Russian national character, such observations have been more in evidence in recent years and are consistent with the emotional reactions of aging individuals.

* This is in part a function of the Soviet political system's cycle. December is the month for accounting for economic performance over the year, and consequently a time of great stress for the leadership. With the completion of this exercise, Brezhnev and other senior leaders traditionally go on vacation. Since 1974 Brezhnev's vacations have always been accompanied by speculations concerning his health.

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The evidence taken *in toto* suggests that age is having both a normal and "organic" psychological impact on Brezhnev. It seems likely that arteriosclerosis causes a subtle interference with Brezhnev's functioning on a continuing basis, not just during the "down" periods. The outlook for Brezhnev, even with the best of available medical care, is for a progressive decline in his intellectual faculties and judgment and increasing difficulties with problem solving requiring fine intellectual discrimination. Difficulties with concentration are likely to increase in frequency and to be especially apparent under prolonged stress. There will continue to be major fluctuations with Brezhnev's condition, with both the frequency and gravity of the "down" periods becoming more pronounced. As physical illnesses supervene, they will add additional stress and compound his problems in bringing full intellectual resources to his leadership.

The Impact of Age Upon the Ranking PRC Leaders

If a family has in its midst an old person it possesses a jewel

Chinese Proverb

Of the three PRC leaders older than 70, the individual most clearly affected by age is Yeh Chien-ying, 80 years old. His health has been obviously frail for some time, but signs of the effects of age on his mental functioning became apparent only in the past year. Visitors who have met with Yeh have not commented upon significant intellectual deterioration, but several observations do suggest early pre-senile symptoms are occurring.

There have now been three televised occasions when observations of Yeh strongly suggested a decline in cerebral function. Both at Mao's funeral and a year later at the dedication of his mausoleum, Yeh was noted to be confused and disoriented and had to be helped to the appropriate position for protocol purposes. The most persuasive observation was of Yeh delivering an address at the ceremony commemorating the 50th anniversary of the founding of the People's Liberation Army. In a strong emotional reaction, Yeh became visibly disturbed, broke into open weeping and temporarily found it difficult to continue. As in the case of Brezhnev, this was certainly an emotional occasion, but in this case the suddenness and intensity of emotional reaction were quite striking and highly suggestive of the emotional lability associated with cerebral arteriosclerosis.

At the recently concluded Fifth National People's Congress, Yeh was removed from his position as Minister of Defense and elected to the largely ceremonial chairmanship of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress. This move may well have been in response to recognition of the fragile state of Yeh's health. But the PRC leadership apparently continues to believe that "with the ancient is wisdom and in length of days understanding," for Yeh was replaced as Minister of Defense by Hsu Hsiang-chien, 76 years old. At the same time, the important post of Minister of the Seventh Ministry of Machine Building, in charge of producing planes and guided missiles for the Chinese Air Force, was given to Sung Jen-chung, 74 years old.

*Aging Communist Leaders***Implications**

One of the most important implications of this paper is implicit in the title. The use of the word *aging* rather than *aged* implies a process. An individual is not in full command of his intellectual resources one moment and senile the next. The traits described in this article are for the most part quantitative rather than qualitative in kind. Easily recognizable when an individual has full-blown cerebral arteriosclerosis, earlier they may be very subtle in their influence, only intermittent in their expression, and detectable only when the observer is actively searching for them. There is probably little dispute at this time that Brezhnev's political leadership has been significantly affected by the inroads of age. But several years ago, when the manifestations were much less obvious, there was considerable controversy as to whether age had reduced Brezhnev's leadership effectiveness, a controversy which to some degree still persists.

With the passage of time, other aging Communist leaders can be expected to show normal psychological reactions to old age as well as "organic" interferences with intellectual equity and judgment as a consequence of cerebral arteriosclerosis. Of particular importance is the interaction between diminished judgment and exaggerated pre-existing attitudes and drives.

It is a rare situation where the influence of age is determinative. But to ignore the impact of age is often to ignore a significant influence on political behavior and decision-making. The challenge, both for the collector in the field and the analyst, is to detect signs that age is affecting political behavior early when the manifestations are subtle and the influence is only slight.

(Classified paragraphs in this article are as indicated.)

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