

Dreams and Politics: How Dreams May Influence Political Decisions

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ABSTRACT *Throughout history dreaming has influenced leaders of religion, culture and politics, in both overt and subtle ways, although written dream reports relevant to politics are not easy to find. Dreams can provide creative inspiration in all fields of human endeavour; capture one's subliminal impressions of other people; preserve memories of trauma; and express deep feelings about social as well as personal and spiritual issues. This article highlights the relevance of dreams to politics; briefly reviews historical examples of dreams from several cultures; summarises some recent research on political attitudes in the USA; and draws attention to environmental dreams as a rising political concern. Copyright © 2012 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.*

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DREAMING REFLECTS OUR DEEPEST CONCERNS

Since 1953, sleep scientists have known that all humans have four or five periods of rapid eye movement sleep every night, during which we have active dreams, whether or not we recall them. Research on dreams has intensified in the last two decades, fostered by the growth of the inter-disciplinary International Association for the Study of Dreams (IASD) (<http://www.asdreams.org>), which publishes both a popular magazine, *Dreamtime*, and a peer-reviewed academic quarterly journal, *Dreaming* (<http://www.asdreams.org/idxjournal.htm>), which carries articles that discuss current research findings. It is now clear that, in general, dreams reflect the emotionally relevant issues on our minds, expressed in a metaphoric language based primarily on our individual and cultural experience and, to some degree, they seem to be seeking ways to resolve the issues, or at least to find different perspectives on them (Barrett, 2001). Bulkeley, a leading dream scholar and researcher, suggests that:

The empirical research on large collections of dream reports has in fact shown that dreaming reflects, in rather clear and accurate terms, the principal relationships, activities and emotional concerns of a person's life ... [but that] To date, very little research has been done on the possible continuities between dream content and political ideology. (Bulkeley, 2006, p. 224)

Yet we should expect that people in the midst of political, economic or military turmoil will be having disturbing dreams and nightmares, which will affect not only their health but also

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their political attitudes; while those in positions of leadership may dream not only about the problems they face but also about possible solutions. Barrett's (2001) book, *The committee of sleep*, offers hundreds of examples of creative problem-solving through dreams, in fields of human endeavour from song-writing to military strategy.

Unfortunately, we can only know about such dreams if the dreamers choose to record them, and to allow publication. In Western society dreams have been widely considered "unscientific" or irrelevant and, by and large, and with a few notable exceptions, ignored by biographers. Most of those leaders whose dreams have been recorded have attributed such dreams to some form of spiritual guidance, in which they received insight, direction, or firm encouragement to step forward. In the political arena, acknowledging such guidance may risk the politician's reputation, and so strong motivation is needed to reveal such dreams, such as that provided by religious faith or, in some cases, a sense of family destiny. Yet dreams are universal, and I suspect that many of the world's liberation movements and humanitarian causes have been launched by individuals who have been inspired by their dreams. For example, the American feminist Rupprecht (1996) wrote a chapter on "Sex, gender and dreams" in Bulkeley's book, *Among all these dreamers* (Bulkeley, 1996), showing how the depth of emotion in dreams has both fuelled and challenged the movements for women's and gay liberation.

Equally, many of the world's violent feuds and wars have no doubt been seeded by the personal experience of violence, intensified by post-traumatic dreams and flashbacks, creating a desire for revenge or revolution. For example, Miller (1983) has given us a view of the daily brutality of Adolf Hitler's father towards his young son, which resulted in the young Hitler's terrifying nightmares and hallucinations, which no doubt contributed to his inhuman political philosophy. The post-trauma dreams of war veterans and political refugees bear witness to the tortures and terrors they have endured, as vividly recorded by several researchers in their respective chapters of Barrett's (1996) book, *Trauma and dreams*. A recent edition of *Dreamtime* carries an article by Kahn (2011) about a young Rwandan activist whose family was massacred in 1994, and who had a dream that he was urging the United Nations Assembly to respond to the victims of genocide; he is already making a film about it.

DEFINITION

In this article I use the term "dream" to include a range of experiences covered by the definition given in the *Concise Oxford dictionary* (Fowler, Fowler, & Sykes, 1976) as "a series of pictures or events in mind of sleeping person" (p. 315). This may include visions, nightmares, memory-dreams and premonitions as well as typical metaphoric dreams, since all may involve the emergence of unconscious material into consciousness when recalled. All dreams of course require the dreamer's own choice of language in order to be communicated to others, and involve the dreamer's own interpretation of what it means in the real-life context. Religious traditions consider that many such dreams are "revelations" from a divine source beyond human knowledge, while therapists may assume that they are created within the human psyche, perhaps at different levels. Either way, there is a quality of mystery in the experience of dreaming, which leaves room for much more research. In the following discussion of "political" dreams, I refer to three groups of dreams: those which represent some form of divine guidance; those which are taken as inspiration; and paranormal or psi dreams.

POLITICAL DREAMS IN HISTORY

Dreams as divine guidance

The Hebrew people have a strong tradition of prophetic dreaming, as recorded in their scriptures from *Genesis* onward. Abraham had a series of visionary dreams in which YHWH (God) blessed all his descendants and made a solemn covenant with him (Gen. 15:18): “To your descendants I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates. The covenant was reconfirmed to Abraham’s grandson Jacob (Gen. 28:13–15); and great powers of interpretation were attributed to Jacob’s son Joseph, whose appointment to political power in Egypt was the result of his interpreting Pharaoh’s warning dreams.

Abraham’s descendants included not only the people descended from his legitimate son Isaac, son of his wife Sarah, who became known as the Jews, but also those from Ishmael, son of his maid Hagar, the Arabic people of the desert. Ever since, both peoples have believed in their God-given right to occupy the lands of the Fertile Crescent, a “right” which has led to the bitter conflict between these peoples and which continues to threaten the peace of the world today.

The Arabic people followed their own Prophet Muhammad who, in AD 610, received a series of dramatic visions from Allah, through the Angel Gabriel, instructing him in the faith of Islam (meaning “Surrender”), as recorded in the sacred book the Q’ran: “You are the apostle of God,” Muhammad was told, and he proceeded to lead his people in establishing the new faith, which spread rapidly through the Middle East and northern Africa (see Bulkeley, 2008). Islamic culture continues to hold dreams in reverence, especially if the Prophet Muhammad appears in them (of which more later).

In Europe, the Christian faith spread from Jerusalem through the Roman Empire, at first under persecution, then rapidly under the new Emperor Constantine. The crucial moment came in AD 315 when Constantine led his army to victory in the battle for Rome. He told the historian Eusebius that he attributed his victory to guidance received in a vision the day before the battle, when he saw a sign of the Cross in the sky, bearing the inscription “CONQUER BY THIS”. This vision was that night followed by a dream in which Constantine was commanded to use the sign in battle; and so, in the morning, he had the sign inscribed on the shields of his soldiers (cited in Kelsey, 1974, pp. 125–126). After this victory, persecution against the Christians ceased, and the Holy Roman Empire was established in Europe, in an uneasy secular–religious partnership with the Catholic Church, led by the Eastern Patriarchs and the Pope in Rome.

Many of the subsequent leaders of the early Church and mediaeval saints were guided by their visions, including the 15th-century female warrior Joan of Arc, whose visions bade her to leave her sheepfold and lead the armies of France against the English invaders. Only powerful motivation like obedience to a divine call could have enabled a woman at that time to achieve this.

In more recent times, Martin Luther King changed the history of America through his courageous leadership of Black Americans in the movement for Civil Rights in the 1950s and 1960s, symbolized by his great speech of liberation: “I Have a Dream.” He did indeed experience a kind of vision when his home was under attack by racists, at midnight on 27 January, 1956, as he described in his book, *Strength to love* (King, 1986). Sitting in his kitchen, and at the end of his tether, he turned to God for help:

At that moment I experienced the presence of the Divine as I had never before experienced him. It seemed as though I could hear the quiet assurance of an inner voice, saying, “Stand up for righteousness, stand up

for truth. God will be at your side forever.” Almost at once my fears began to pass from me. My uncertainty disappeared. I was ready to face anything. The outer situation remained the same, but God had given me inner calm. (King, 1986, p. 113)

In the 1970s the indigenous Māori people of New Zealand were becoming more articulate about the unjust loss of their land under its early colonial government. One of their leaders, Dame Whina Cooper, was gravely ill, when she had a dream—which might even have been a near-death-experience—that she had died and gone to heaven. She was walking along a road towards her relatives when she met God in the form of a man whose eyes “flashed and flickered” so that she could hardly look at him:

He said to me in Māori, “Where are you going?” And I said, “I’m coming up to heaven.” “Oh no, you’re not. Not yet. Your work’s not completed.” So I had to turn round and walk back. After that I thought, oh well, I’ll just have to keep going. (cited in King, 1983, pp. 204–205)

The following year, in 1975, Dame Whina led the Māori Land March on the New Zealand Parliament, a *hiko* (march) which ignited a major renaissance of Māori culture, including a legal Tribunal to make reparation for the land claims (see <http://www.waitangi-tribunal.govt.nz>).

Dreams as inspiration

Jesus of Nazareth, the focus of the Christian faith, did not see himself as a political leader, in spite of his contemporaries’ hopes during the Roman occupation of their country: “My kingdom is not of this world,” he told the Roman Governor (John 18:36), advocating instead a patient policy of goodwill, even towards enemies. His own reported visionary experiences of temptation in the desert had emphasised a refusal of political power; yet the non-violent value-system he taught has subsequently given profound inspiration to many political movements in history: not only to Black Americans (such as Martin Luther King), but also to Māori leaders. In the 1870 s, at Parihaka, Taranaki, New Zealand, and under siege by the British Army, Chief Eruera Te Whiti, respected as a prophet, and one of a long line of Māori prophets who experienced dreams, visions and prophecies (Scott, 1975), trained his villagers to resist the soldiers without violence—a stance which represents a remarkable piece of New Zealand history.

A clear example of a historic political dream comes from Mahatma Gandhi, an Indian Hindu who had been greatly impressed by the non-violent teachings of Jesus. In 1919 Gandhi had publicly protested against the passing of the Rowlatt Acts (legislation passed by the Imperial Legislative Council of India which allowed for trial without jury and internment without trial), by which the British further denied self-government to the Indian people. Gandhi was deeply moved by the injustice to his people; at the same time he also respected the institution of the law. He reported his resolution:

The idea came to me last night in a dream that we should call upon the country to observe a general hartal [hunger strike]. Ours is a sacred fight, and it seems to be in the fitness of things that it should be commenced with an act of self-purification. Let all the people of India, therefore, suspend their business on that day and observe the day as one of fasting and prayer. (cited in Barrett, 2001, p. 150)

Newspapers across India called for a strike on 6 April 1919, which was widely observed; and so began the long campaign for India’s independence.

In this 21st century, the USA has elected its first Black President, Barack Obama. He also has drawn inspiration from his dreams, as described in his autobiography, *Dreams from my father* (Obama, 2004). This book is essentially about his search for identity, since he was the son of a white American woman and a black African man, both gifted scholars, who met at university in Hawaii. In 1963, when Barack was 2 years old, his father deserted them to take up a scholarship at Harvard. Obama cited two significant dreams in his book. A year after he heard of his father's death in 1982, he had a moving dream of visiting his emaciated father in jail, and embracing him, which seems to have been symbolic of Obama beginning to claim the African side of his identity. Later, on a visit to Kenya to meet his extended family and learn their history, he had another memorable dream, in which he encountered a fearful African figure:

... a giant figure looming as tall as the trees, wearing only a loincloth and a ghostly mask. The lifeless eyes bored into me, and I heard a thunderous voice saying only that it was time, and my entire body began to shake violently with the sound, as if I were breaking apart. (Obama, 2004, p. 372)

Although Obama does not provide an interpretation, this seems to be an archetypal figure, perhaps symbolic of his ancestors demanding recognition. We can speculate on the impact of both dreams, reminding him that he has a double identity within himself. The question is how this affects his politics, consciously or unconsciously.

Paranormal or psi dreams

Telepathic, clairvoyant and precognitive dreams do not fit into our current scientific paradigm, although they do occur, reported more readily in indigenous than in Western cultures. Nevertheless, an enormous amount of research, under rigorous conditions, has been undertaken, perhaps most curiously by both the Soviet Union and the USA during the Cold War, during which time both countries employed clairvoyants for military purposes. Between 1975 and 1995, the US Army employed Dale Graff, an aerospace physicist, to head Project Stargate, which recruited and trained people with clairvoyant ability to undertake "remote viewing" tasks, such as identifying the location of hostages and missing aeroplanes, and ascertaining the purpose of mysterious construction sites. Graff has described some of his experiences in his book, *Tracks in the Psychic Wilderness* (Graff, 1998), though much remains "classified". In his ground-breaking book, *The Conscious Universe*, Radin (1997), director of the Consciousness Research Laboratory at the University of Nevada, has carefully summarised the statistical evidence for the existence of psi phenomena, and speculated on possible future social and political applications.

Declared political examples of precognition are hard to find, but perhaps the best known is President Abraham Lincoln's precognitive dream of his own assassination shortly before his death in 1865. Less well known is the recurring dream he reported at his cabinet meeting on the day of his death: "I seemed to be in a singular and indescribable vessel that was moving with great rapidity toward a dark and indefinite shore" (cited by Logan & Logan, 2005, p. 42) Lincoln himself is reported as interpreting these recurring dreams as indications of victory to come in the Civil War—dreams which had buoyed up his spirits to continue the fight.

DREAMS AND POLITICAL ATTITUDES

Bulkeley, a past president of the IASD, has been researching the dreams of Americans as a way of studying political psychology. He has presented the results of a survey comparing the sleep and dream experience of 234 self-described Liberals ($n=134$) and Conservatives ($n=100$), women and men, gathered between 2001 and 2004 during George W. Bush's (Republican, i.e. Conservative) presidency (Bulkeley, 2006). He compared the results with those collected from a similar survey gathered between 1996 and 2000, during Bill Clinton's (Democratic, i.e. Liberal) presidency. Acknowledging the limitations of small samples, Bulkeley drew some tentative conclusions, among which were that Conservatives, especially the men, slept more soundly, and dreamed in more "mundane" imagery; while Liberals, especially the women, had more disturbed sleep and more detailed dreams with "fantastic" elements. He speculated that this could be due to the more open mind set of Liberals. More interesting, however, was his comparison between the two surveys, held in different political climates, revealing that each group had more "bad dreams and nightmares" when the other party held the reins of power. One brief example he quoted was: "I was onstage singing "If I Had a Hammer" to President Bush, who was my sole audience, who didn't appreciate my talents and had me forcibly removed by his henchmen" (Bulkeley, 2006, p. 231). This may be only an indicative study, but it suggests the possibility that "bad dreams" may contribute to motivating political change in a democracy. They certainly reflect anxieties about perceived political trends.

In another piece of research, again conducted during the Presidency of George W. Bush, and published in his book *American Dreamers*, Bulkeley (2008) studied 1500 dreams of a group of 10 individuals of varying political perspectives who kept dream journals for a year. His main findings were that:

1. Conservatives are more likely to sleep well and report fewer dreams, and Liberals are more likely to sleep worse and report more dreams.
2. The most religiously observant Americans . . . report better sleep and fewer dreams than the least religious Americans.
3. A surprisingly frequent type of dream among both Conservatives and Liberals is a nightmare about work . . . [most of the group] struggled financially during the journal-keeping year. Their job-related dreams reveal a profound populist frustration with the economic status quo (Bulkeley, 2011).

This clearly identified economics as a major drive of party politics in a democratic society and helps to explain the great current disillusion in American politics at this time of financial collapse. Idealism is not enough.

4. The continuity of waking and dreaming extends to political ideals, beliefs and attitudes.

This finding showed that we dream about political issues when they become an emotionally salient concern to us (Bulkeley, 2011).

What these dreams do, of course, is create metaphor and stories that bridge between public issues and personal experience, e.g. would I vote for a man who tries to silence my singing?

Another study, reported by Van De Castle (2008), examined 333 dreams about Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama, collected early in 2008 through an online site during the selection of candidates for the US Presidency. Both candidates were perceived in strongly emotional terms, idealized or flawed, and included some dreams that predicted Obama would be assassinated. Van de Castle concluded with a summary of candidates' emotional traits as reflected in the dreams, such as Obama being somewhat "aloof" and Clinton "rather ruthless"—qualities which seem to have been confirmed in subsequent press reports.

DREAMING UNDER DIFFERENT POLITICAL REGIMES

What about the impact of totalitarian or non-democratic regimes on dreaming?

During the rise of Hitler in Germany in the 1930s, Beradt quietly collected and coded hundreds of dreams which reflected the depth of fear, intolerance and persecution in society, and smuggled them out of the country. In 1966 she published them in a book, *The Third Reich of Dreams*, including a telling quote from one young man: "I no longer dream about anything but rectangles, triangles and octagons, all of which somehow look like Christmas cookies. You see, it was forbidden to dream" (p. 53).

In 1990, Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait to repossess oilfields which he claimed used to belong to Iraq. He claimed authority to do so "because he had a dream in which he was told to take back the oilfields" (Barrett, 2001, p. 154). Barrett subsequently did research on the dreams of Kuwaitis during the Iraqi occupation, and discovered that "some Kuwaitis had dreamed of the Iraqis leaving. Those dreams were a source of great inspiration and made the occupation bearable" (p. 155). I suspect that similar dreams of hope have sustained many people under captivity, dating back at least as far as the Prophet Ezekiel's vision that the "dry bones" of Israel would come alive again when they were freed from Babylon's control (Ezekiel 37:3).

To add to this picture, Edgar (2004), an English anthropologist researching Muslim traditions of dreaming for over 20 years, has called for an urgent study of Islamic dream interpretation because of its active use by Al-Qaeda and Taliban leaders. In his article "The Dream Will Tell: Militant Muslim Dreaming" (Edgar, 2004), he cited sources reporting that the Taliban leader Mullah Omar was inspired by a dream of the Prophet Mohammed asking him to take action to save Afghanistan from corruption and foreign powers. In doing this, Omar followed the example of Abdul Rahman, a previous ruler of Afghanistan (1880–1901), who claimed in his autobiography that he had seen a vision of the Prophet choosing him to lead the country, thereby claiming a higher level of legitimacy over his rivals. In a later article, Edgar (2008) quoted from an interview he tape recorded in 2007 with Rahimullah Yusufzai, then BBC correspondent in Peshawar, Pakistan, and one of the few journalists who had actually interviewed Mullah Omar. Yusufzai verified the influence of dreams on the Mullah: "I was told by so many Taliban leaders, commanders, fighters, 'Look, you know, Mullah Omar is a holy man and he gets instructions in his dream and he follows them up'" (cited in Edgar, 2008, p. 6).

More disturbing are the transcripts of captured videotapes, and released by the US Government in 2002, showing Osama bin Laden anticipating the 9/11 terror attacks in 2001 and emphasizing to some of his followers the need for secrecy about their dreams, *because they included explicit images of planes hitting buildings*; in his paper on the relevance of the social dreaming matrix, Lawrence (2005) quoted specific examples from these tapes. Two of the people who planned the 9/11 attack, interviewed after the event, reported "the many dreams

and visions of the “brothers” in the run-up to 11 September” (Fouda, 2003, cited by Edgar, 2004, p. 109). It is clear that dreams can be used for evil purposes as well as for good.

After the 9/11 attacks, there was a general rise in anxiety in the US population, which noticeably increased the incidence of disturbing dreams and nightmares on all issues of concern, to such a degree that the International Association for the Study of Dreams (IASD) set up a specific website and telephone hotline to respond to public enquiries about nightmares (International Association for the Study of Dreams, 2011a); it is also hosting a research project regarding dreams about 9/11 (International Association for the Study of Dreams, 2011b).

DREAMING FOR PLANET EARTH: ENVIRONMENTAL CONCERNS

Finally, I would argue that our dreams are currently contributing to the rapid growth of green politics, as ordinary citizens become moved by seeing the pollution and destruction of nature in their environment. Often our dreams express a love of trees, wilderness, rivers, beaches, hills, mountains, and the wild creatures that depend on them, and thus can stir us to action. Schroeder (1996), a scientist, describes how a vivid dream of communicating with a wolf awoke him to the need for more balance between head and heart in the field of resource management. Other writers show how the cultures of indigenous people, reinforced by dreams, have constantly emphasised how humans are a part of nature, and that we destroy it at our peril. In Western culture and psychology, there is now a strong movement of ecopsychology which seeks to raise our awareness of the ecological—a movement and an argument which are familiar to readers of *Psychotherapy and Politics International*. Perhaps less familiar is the Australian Aboriginal experience and concept of the Dreaming, which is an experience/phenomenon/reality deeply embedded in the landscape; dispossessed Aboriginal peoples still struggle for their voice to be heard about the destruction of *songlines* or dreaming tracks heedlessly wrought by big mining companies in the outback of Australia (for a current example of which, see Marks, 2011).

Spretnak, a leading activist and author of *The Spiritual Dimension of Green Politics*, draws strength from her practice of meditation, and adds:

I am also drawn to the wisdom tradition of the Christian mystics and “creation spirituality,” which honours the natural world as the most profound expression of the Divine. To a lesser extent, I have studied Taoism and Native American spirituality, which turns out to be a bittersweet experience. To explore a philosophy of life as profoundly Nature-based as either of these paths is to realize how far our society is from comprehending, let alone abiding by, the deepest levels of ecological wisdom. (Spretnak, 1986, pp 17–18)

Over the past 25 years, we have become aware of the double threat of pollution and climate change to the survival of all life on Earth. In recent years I have been collecting striking examples from the dream workshops I run in New Zealand. Here are summaries of three examples.

- A woman dreamed she was walking along a peaceful west-coast beach, when suddenly she was dismayed to see it change into a crowded built-up resort with a busy road along the waterfront, and its beauty was destroyed. She fears for our coastal scenery.

- A man dreamed of road-works with heavy machinery invading his peaceful rural landscape. Then there was an explosion, and all the big machines scrambled comically over one another in their haste to escape. In a second scene he was looking at a kind of “graveyard” of rusting machines. He is active in conservation work.
- A man who had previously worked as a logger was looking at a panoramic scene of stumps on clear-felled land, while the sea beyond it was completely choked with logs and debris. An army of zombie-men with trucks and tractors were marching across. He was aware of standing in dim light in a special grove of native trees which had somehow escaped felling. As a result of this shocking vision, he now spends a lot of time in reforestation projects. (The full dream is available on my website: <http://www.dreamwork.co.nz>)

CONCLUSION

There must be a great many more examples of dreams that have influenced political leaders, tucked away in unpublished diaries and draft autobiographies, but until they are valued as potential sources of insight into the political decisions of people and their leaders, we will not hear about them. Meanwhile, I hope the examples referred to here may be enough to alert us all to the deep unconscious processes affecting national and international conflict in our time. Psychotherapists and counsellors need to be aware that our dreams reflect not only intra-psyche personal concerns, but also the tides and currents in our society, which may be calling for social or political action. Sadly, I am not sure that we yet respect or even recognize this potential.

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