

**Political Dreaming:
Dreams of the 1992 Presidential Election**

Kelly Bulkeley

A couple of years ago I was working my way through the major works of Calvin Hall, as part of my doctoral dissertation research. As I read Hall's book The Meaning of Dreams (1966), I came across the following passage:
"Dreams contain few ideas of a political or economic nature. They have little or nothing to say about current events in the world of affairs....Presidential elections, declarations of war, the diplomatic struggles of great powers, major athletic contests, all of the happenings that appear in newspapers and become the major topics of conversation among people are pretty largely ignored in dreams." (11)

For some reason this passage bothered me. Of course I understood Hall's basic point, that we usually dream about personal matters like the health of our body and the relationships we have with family and friends. And I knew that other dream experts basically agreed with Hall; most psychologists, sleep laboratory researchers, and writers of popular books on dreams also regard dreams as

speaking solely to the personal life concerns of the dreamer.

But still, I was bothered. Hall's claim seemed too strong, too sweeping. The more I thought about it, the more examples I found that challenged Hall. Jung's autobiography Memories, Dreams, Reflections (1965) presents a number of his dreams that spoke directly to the political situation of his world. Charlotte Beradt's moving book The Third Reich of Dreams (1966) contains dozens of dreams of people living in 1933-1939 Germany--dreams that directly addressed the rising political power of Nazism.¹

Carl Schorske (1987) wrote a fascinating article on the striking political references in Freud's "Count Thun" dream. Cross-cultural studies are filled with dreams that have direct relevance to the dreamer's social and political world.² And I myself have had many dreams in which politicians and political events play a prominent role.

As scattered as these references to politically-relevant dreams were, I felt there were enough of them to

refute Hall's claim, at least in its simplest form:
politics do appear in people's dreams, and people do
dream about the political affairs of their communities.

But now I had two new questions to ask. First, what do
such dreams mean? Are these dreams really about poli-
tics, or are they just using political imagery to express
other kinds of meaning? And second, why are dream re-
searchers like Hall so insistent that dreams are not
relevant to political affairs, and relate only to per-
sonal, subjective realms of the dreamer's life?

As the 1992 U.S. Presidential election approached, I
realized I had a perfect opportunity to explore these
questions in more detail. This election promised to be
an exciting, passionately-waged contest. Fear about the
economy, anger at incumbents, disgust with "politics as
usual", hopes for real change--no election campaign in
years had stirred up such deep, powerful emotions in the
American electorate. I decided that if people did not
dream about politics during this Presidential election,
then Hall was right and I would just drop the subject.
But I thought that if people did dream about the elec-

tion, I might be able to get a better understanding of 1) what those dreams meant and 2) why the field of dream studies has such difficulties in recognizing the political relevance of our dreams.

In the weeks leading up to the 1992 U.S. Presidential election I conducted a small study on how people's dreams were responding to the campaign. I asked twelve people to keep detailed dream diaries from October 25 to November 8, the two weeks straddling the election. These people did not know what my study was about. I also asked a second group of about 40 people to tell me if they had any dreams relating to the Presidential campaign. The members of these two groups were quite varied in terms of age, education, occupation, geographical residence, and political outlook³.

My basic finding was that many people dreamed about the Presidential election. Not everyone in my study had dreams that referred to the candidates or the election campaign, but many people did have such dreams. Among my "blind" subjects, six of the twelve people (50%) had at least one dream relating to the election. Of the 113

total dreams reported by the twelve subjects, ten dreams related to the election, or about 9% of the total dreams.

I want to emphasize that my study was not based on an absolutely random sample. If my findings have any value, it is not for what they prove, but rather for what they suggest about the relationship between dreams and politics.

The Debates

A number of dreams reacted to the four Presidential and Vice Presidential debates that were held prior to the election. The reactions were not favorable. Hank, a government employee in his late 30's, dreamed this right after the first Presidential debate:

"I am watching something like a presidential debate on TV...Bush is attacking Clinton because of a mistake that Clinton made in managing his financial accounts. Clinton apparently let one of his accounts get overdrawn, and has lost the account as a result. Bush is saying that this is bad...A woman reporter comments that Clinton's position in the campaign was so strong that he is still a little bit ahead of the president, even after his mistake. She says to Bush that, if it weren't for this mistake, Clinton would have been able to "wipe your wild side for being so soft". Bush is enraged at this comment. He loses control of his emotions. He leaves his podium, goes over to the reporter and physically attacks her. I can't believe this is happening. I tell my father that "George Bush just lost it." Some people are trying to subdue the president and get him back to

his podium. The woman reporter is very shaken, and leaves the stage. Then there is a view of the room from straight overhead. As some people are leaving, some other people throw food at them. The whole situation degenerates into a fight, with people throwing things at each other and running around the room."

Hank proudly noted that this dream came before the rambunctious Vice Presidential debate, which many pundits referred to as a "food fight". Maggie, an artist from Chicago in her early thirties, also dreamed of the political campaign as a kind of food fight:

"I am running down a spiral staircase. The staircase is in the middle of a duplex office where there is a food fight/political fight going on. I don't want any part of it."

This same distaste for the childish behavior of the candidates prompted Carla, a retired copywriter from Texas, to dream this the night after the Vice-Presidential debate:

"I was watching a 2-year old, blond baby boy. I latched the screen doors, but he hit the screen door and the hook slipped free and he ran out. I ran after him, calling, "Danny Quail, come back here. How did you get loose?" When I brought the child back I looked at the latch and saw the problem. The part that held the hook wasn't made right. It was too thick."

Carla says she knew in the dream that she was misspelling Vice President Quayle's last name, and thinks it may be a reference to his infamous misspelling of "potato(e)".

Ross Perot

The candidate who appeared most often in people's dreams was Ross Perot. Perot's strong personality, controversial ideas, and roller-coaster candidacy made him the object of huge voter interest. Thus, it is not surprising that people would dream about him. What is surprising is that the people in my study tended to dream about him in very anxious, very skeptical terms. Julie, a community activist in her 40's from California, reported that

"On Oct. 22 I dreamt of Ross Perot all night! I was with him sometimes. I was nearby him at other times. And I watched his face on TV also during my dream. I woke up with a strong feeling of irritation."

Julie's dream seems to reflect her reaction to Perot's late reentry into the race, and to the heavy media blitz that accompanied it. For those last couple weeks of the campaign, Perot literally was everywhere.

Most of the Perot dreams referred to his prickly personality. Maggie had a long dream of hurrying around New York because she was late for a breakfast appointment. Towards the end she dreams

"I am in a big hurry but try to stop and buy olive oil and hot peppers. I stop in a very old country store/warehouse type place. They are very friendly and very, very slow. Ross Perot is the

shop keeper and I know if I try to rush him he'll get angry and won't serve me and all the time I have already waited for him will be wasted. I think I still leave without my goods because I cannot wait any longer."

Tim, a 30-year old writer in Los Angeles, also dreamed of

being intimidated and somewhat frightened by Perot:

"Perot is in the living room of my parents' old house...talking to about thirty people. He's answering some question with a parable about a horse-like Australian rodent. He's describing the animal in detail. I grow impatient and interrupt him, "Fine, the thing is horse-like, Australian, and a rodent, so what? What does it do?" The crowd doesn't share my impatience and I'm embarrassed."

The following Perot dream was told to me by Jean, a young woman who works at the Marshall Fields department store in Chicago:

"For some reason I was going to work at a state mental hospital which was being closed down. People were carrying files out, wheeling patients away. It was a big, dingy building. I and some others were waiting for the new boss to come. Much to our surprise, Ross Perot arrived. He stated that he would be running the hospital and we would work for him. He was dressed casually in a tacky purple and white outfit. He looked ridiculous. The rest of the staff gathered, and instead of taking the elevator we all walked up the stairs to prove our dedication and endurance. The climb was longer than expected and we were all complaining and some people were sick. Ross didn't know how much farther we had to go, anymore than we did. One man had a fall and broke his neck... Although there were nurses there, none would help him but me. Ross didn't know what to do."

Jean said she feels the dream is a commentary on the "lunacy" of the country, and the "double lunacy" of thinking a "crazy man could be the leader of a mental hospital".

George Bush

President Bush tried to present himself in the 1992 campaign as a champion of "family values" and of experienced leadership. The dreams I gathered suggest that he succeeded in this. Jean, who describes herself as a "die-hard Republican", had the following dream:

"Bush and Quayle are in town, to give a speech, and I'm asked to set things up and cook dinner for them. It's fine, I'm proud to do it all. I cook dinner for 12,000 people, set up the speaker's hall, and work everything out with the secret service agents. The dinner goes off, it's finished, and they say goodbye to me. I feel very good about it all."

In this dream Jean plays the traditional role of a hostess: taking care of her guests, cooking their dinner, helping them to be safe and comfortable. Although the work seems rather demanding (where do you find place settings for 12,000 people?), Jean gets great satisfaction out of it. Her dream suggests that traditional "family values" provide her with a sense of security and fulfillment.

Of the three candidates, President Bush appeared least often in the dreams of people in my study. This supports the conclusion of most political analysts that Bush lost the election because he was "out of touch" with the real-life concerns of voters.

Bill Clinton

Bill Clinton argued that he would be an agent of change as President. In people's dreams Clinton often did appear as a force for change--but also as a person who is somewhat unknown, and perhaps unaware of what true changes need to be made. Patty is a young woman working in a Chicago accounting firm. Although her job pays well, she is not happy with it; she has begun going to cooking school at night to become a chef. She dreamed the following:

"I am on the top of a high-rise building, looking across the way into an apartment's picture window...I am with someone I feel comfortable with, although this person's identity is unknown to me. Through the apartment window I see a half dozen or more owls looking out...I then look down to my right and see Bill Clinton seated beside me.

My feeling is one of slight surprise and friendliness towards him. I immediately say, "Oh, Hi Clinton...I'm sorry but I can't recall your first name...You know, with the continual emphasis on the name Clinton by the media..." He responds

that his name is Bill, and we exchange conversational niceties of "glad to meet you's", while continuing to observe the owls."

Patty said that the dream addresses her hopes and fears about switching jobs: the dream image of Clinton embodies the concept of change. Interestingly, Patty does not really know Clinton that well in the dream--she doesn't recognize him at first, and when she finally does she can't remember his first name. It's as if the "change" that Clinton represents is, at the present moment, an unknown factor.

Jay, a writer from Wisconsin, also dreamed of Clinton as a figure of change. But like Patty's dream, Jay's dream indicates a concern that it's hard to grasp what exactly Clinton will do--what kind of change he will bring.

"Clinton is at the Shedd Aquarium in Chicago...The aquarium is extremely dark...Some sort of voting or polling is occurring which shows Bush beating him really badly. At this point a huge, portentous voice proclaims, "Clinton will have a huge answer!" I understand this to be a response from "God" as to what Clinton must do to win the election--what he must "sacrifice", offer. Then I am catapulted into the scene, into the aquarium which is now crammed with people, followers of Clinton...I, unfortunately, am attempting to make my way against the overwhelming human dream tide flowing against me...but no matter how hard I try I make no progress against such a flow of energy...I have something, some message, some warning? It is terribly important to deliver..."

Jay felt that Clinton's call for a "New Covenant" at the Democratic convention was an inspiring vision of a changed, renewed nation. But, Jay also felt that Clinton the politician might not understand, or be willing to make, the frightening sacrifices that will be required to achieve those changes.

Before the Election: Skepticism

In the days leading up to the election, people's dreams showed a strong feeling of skepticism towards politicians and the whole campaign process. Patty dreamed that
"I am in a large public place watching political ads on a huge video screen...The ad compares two candidates to two sandwiches--comparing and contrasting. I recall a vision of a huge "pastrami-like" sandwich. I begin to argue with people next to me, who prefer "sandwich A" while I prefer "sandwich B"."

Patty's dream reflects the feeling of many voters that political ads are nothing more than slick efforts to "sell" a candidate, as if he or she were a sandwich. Sheri, a 51-year old administrative assistant, had a dream with a similar sense of skepticism, mixed with a degree of despair about the promises of politicians.

"I'm talking to a woman I know. She's at my house. Her husband, DL, is running for office. I

ask if she thinks he'll follow through and serve the full term if I vote for him. She says yes."

This is the final scene of a long dream in which Sheri deals with a troubling romantic relationship. In waking life she had been seeing a married man for many years, and while he told Sheri he was unhappy with his marriage he had in fact done nothing to end it. Sheri felt that her dream was illustrating her reluctance to believe the words of both husbands and politicians--they won't be "faithful" to what they've said. Sheri voted for Perot and was extremely unhappy with Clinton, which makes sense given the charges about his marital infidelities and his alleged tendency to "play loose" with the truth.

After the Election: Hopes and Disappointments

For those who voted for Clinton, his victory was cause for great celebration. Julie, the community activist from California, dreamed

"I recall being a guest for a few days at an old friend's home and marvelling at the remodelling job she did...She was very creative, I thought. She put in an art gallery, a meeting room, a business environment and clean, modern furnishings with ample room for growth...I am surprised and pleased. This is more modern and forward thinking than I expected."

Julie said that her feelings in the dream "were exactly my

feelings that resulted from the election the next day. I was surprised and pleased that we are becoming more flexible, modern, clean, and socially open."

The clearest example of a celebratory "victory dream" comes from Maggie, the Chicago artist:

"It is very dark out. Clinton and Gore have both given their acceptance speeches and are standing side by side. There is a spot light on them and everything but them is black. They have one of their arms around each other--shoulder to shoulder. Then (while keeping an arm around each other) they position themselves so that the tops of their heads touch and they are facing me--and the rest of the audience behind me. They sing "Amazing Grace". I am impressed that they sing, that they have the courage to do so alone because they have pretty bad voices--and they sing flat."

For a person like Maggie, who had never voted for the winner of a Presidential election, Clinton's victory truly felt like an act of divine providence.

Some Clinton voters, however, felt a twinge of anxiety mixed in with their excitement. I had been a strong supporter of Clinton during the campaign, and I was thrilled when he won the election. However, the night after the election I had the following dream:

"I'm with my son, sitting outside a bank building.

Clinton, Gore, and two others drive up in a car.
I hope they'll stop and say hi, but they don't.
They smile at us, but walk by into the bank."

When I reflected on the dream, I realized that I felt like a homeless person in it--sitting on a sidewalk with my child, asking some affluent people for a little token of recognition, only to be politely shunned. The dream made me look beyond my election-night optimism and ask a more sober, and sobering, question: is Clinton going to ignore the voters who had supported him and head "straight to the bank" to seize the spoils of his victory?

Those who voted for candidates who did not win were, naturally, saddened and disappointed. Rose, a retired engineer who lives outside Washington, D.C., had this somewhat mournful dream the night after the election:

"I am at the White House, I feel, a guest at a party or reception for the President, Bush...I am allowed to take a picture of the President before he goes downstairs...In one of the upper rooms is a glass case, open at the top, into which are placed a large assortment of souvenirs of the President. Guests are allowed to take these and I'm enthralled and surprised by the variety of things...I cram my souvenirs into my evening purse which is small and suitable for an evening party like this."

Rose is an independent who voted for Bush because of his strong pro-life position. Her dream suggests that the Bush

"party" is over--the time has come to celebrate his successes, gather whatever memories his supporters want to keep, and move on.

Concluding Reflections

So to return to the first of those two questions that initially motivated my study, what do these dreams mean? My strong impression is that the dreams express these people's feelings about their political world. One of the basic functions of dreaming is to help us make sense of things that are confusing, strange, or frightening⁴. In the fall of 1992, many people felt that the political state of the U.S. was confusing, strange, and frightening. It thus should not surprise us that people's dreams would express their concerns and hopes about the Presidential Election.

My other strong impression is that the dreams are not simply using political images to "symbolize" personal meanings. A Freudian interpreter might argue that a "manifest" dream about Bill Clinton is only masking a "latent" content having to do with the dreamer's relationship with his or her father. Similarly, a Jungian interpreter might claim that a nightmare of Ross Perot is only symbolically expressing the dreamer's

unconscious fears of the "Ross Perot-like" parts of him or herself. I am emphatically opposed to such reductionistic, one-dimensional views. The dreams I gathered certainly related to the dreamer's personal lives, to their inner worlds--but they just as certainly related to the dreamer's political lives, to the outer world. A dream of Bill Clinton probably does say something about how one feels about one's father; but it probably also says something about how one feels about Bill Clinton. If there's anything we know about dreams, it's that they always have many dimensions of meaning. Dreams never mean just one thing.

But why, turning to my second question, have so many dream researchers ignored, downplayed, or entirely denied the possibility that some dreams have a political dimension of meaning? I imagine Calvin Hall might defend himself by saying people don't dream about politics very much because politics aren't as emotionally important to them as are more personal subjects like relationships, health, and sex. Thus, he might argue, his claim that we do not dream about political affairs like Presidential elections is simply a description of the facts⁵.

It does seem that politics are not very important to people in American society⁶. Indeed, sociologists like Robert Bellah have argued that a serious problem in American society is the ever-worsening split between the public realm of political affairs and the private realm of personal affairs⁷. Our society's political system has become so complex and impersonal that many people feel alienated from it; more and more people see no point in actively participating in a system that is controlled by businessmen, lawyers, lobbyists, and bureaucrats. As a result many people are simply giving up on the public world of politics, and seeking fulfillment in purely private, individual affairs like shopping and watching television. The problem, of course, is that the wider this public/private split becomes and the more alienated people feel from politics, the easier it is for the wealthy and powerful to keep their control of our political system.

So it is accurate to say that Americans do not dream much about politics because we do not care much about politics. But it is not accurate to say, as Hall does, that dreams never relate to politics and that dreams cannot relate to politics.

On the contrary, the "facts" are that at certain times our dreams do relate, clearly and directly, to the political

affairs of our community⁸. Indeed, if Bellah and other sociologists are right about the dangerous public/private division in American society, we in the dream studies field must be very, very careful not to make that division worse. By suggesting that dreams are only about the personal life concerns of the dreamer, and by quickly interpreting away political images in dreams as nothing more than "symbols" of those personal concerns, dream researchers may be contributing to the dangerous separation of public from private life in American society. Instead of merely "describing the facts", we may actually be creating them.

I will close by describing some of the constructive applications of a more careful and sophisticated study of dreams and politics. One clear implication is that dreams can be a powerful source of political self-awareness. Dreams provide insight into our deeper-lying feelings about politics and reveal to us the interplay of personal and political issues in our lives. Sheri's dream of the politician/husband who might or might not serve his whole term is a perfect example of this. The issue of fidelity, of keeping one's promises, is very important both in Sheri's personal life and in the broader political world; her dream brings this connection to

Sheri's awareness, offering her an opportunity to reflect on the relationship between her feelings about personal fidelity and political fidelity. Patty's dream of watching the owls with Clinton is also an excellent example. For her, it is the issue of change that connects her personal life and the political world. Patty's dream brings forth the interplay of her uncertain feelings about changing jobs and about Bill Clinton's call for political change. The dream enables her to explore the relationship between her reactions towards change in the personal and the political realms.

Another implication is that dreams could help people defend themselves against the insidious effects of negative political advertisements. It's one of the most distressing features of contemporary American politics that voters are so deeply influenced by ads that unfairly and dishonestly slander opposing candidates. When pollsters ask voters what they think about such "attack ads", people generally claim these ads have no effect on them; but when election time comes, the winning candidate is all too frequently the one who has done the best job of persuading voters to fear and distrust the other candidate. The effectiveness of negative ads, then, seems to lie in their ability to manipulate unconscious fears:

consciously, people ignore these ads; but unconsciously, the ads evidently succeed in stirring up people's fears, and influencing their votes. Perhaps voters could better resist the devious appeal of negative political ads if they devoted greater attention to their dreams. If we look to our dreams with an eye for their political relevance (in addition to their psychological relevance), we can develop a better understanding of the intimate relationship between the personal and the political realms of our lives. With that increased understanding to guide us, we may be better able to recognize how political advertisements often seek to stimulate our unconscious fears as a means of influencing our political beliefs, and our votes.

There has never been any rigorous, focused research on dreams and politics, and my study of the 1992 U.S. Presidential election is nothing more than a preliminary exploration of the issues and questions that future research might consider in more detail⁹. But I feel strongly that we can learn a great deal from giving more attention to this subject. It promises to expand our understanding of dreams into new areas that many dream researchers have denied even exist. It also promises to give us insights into how Western society might overcome one of its more troubling problems--for

dreams show us that the sharp division of our lives into public and private realms is nothing but an artificial separation of aspects of experience that are in fact deeply connected to each other.

References

- Bellah, Robert, Madsen, Richard, Sullivan, William M., Swidler, Ann, and Tipton, Steven M. (1985). Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Beradt, Charlotte. (1966). The Third Reich of Dreams. Trans. Adriane Gottwald. Chicago: Quadrangle Books.
- Bulkeley, Kelly. (1994). The Wilderness of Dreams: Exploring the Religious Meanings of Dreams in Modern Western Culture. Albany, New York: State University of New York Press.

Hall, Calvin. (1966). The Meaning of Dreams. New York: McGraw-Hill.

Jung, Carl G. (1965). Memories, Dreams, Reflections. Trans. Richard and Clara Winston. New York: Vintage.

Moffitt, Alan, Kramer, Milton, and Hoffmann, Robert (eds.). (1993). The Functions of Dreaming. Albany, New York: State University of New York Press.

Schorske, Carl E. (1987). "Politics and Patricide in Freud's Interpretation of Dreams". In Harold Bloom (ed.), Sigmund Freud's The Interpretation of Dreams: Modern Critical Interpretations. New York: Chelsea House.

Tedlock, Barbara (ed.). (1987). Dreaming: Anthropological and Psychological Interpretations. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Von Grunebaum, G.E., and Callois, Roger (eds.). (1966). The Dream and Human Societies. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Endnotes

1. See my essay, "Dreaming in a Totalitarian Society: A Reading of Charlotte Beradt's The Third Reich of Dreams", Dreaming (in press).

2. See Tedlock (1987) and Von Grunebaum and Callois (1966).

3. The names of the dreamers and some of the details of the dreams have been changed to insure the anonymity of

the dreamers.

4. See Moffitt, Kramer, and Hoffmann (1993).

5. I'm always suspicious of simple "descriptions of the facts". They have a funny way of masking the facts rather than revealing them. Hall frequently characterizes his content analysis method of dream research as a purely "objective" means of describing dreams and dreaming. I have challenged Hall on this point in much more detail in section 3 of The Wilderness of Dreams.

6. Even in the exhaustingly long campaign of 1992, barely 50% of the country's total registered voters cast ballots--and huge numbers of eligible voters never even bothered to register.

7. Robert Bellah, Richard Madsen, William M. Sullivan, Ann Swidler, and Steven M. Tipton, Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985). Bellah says, "The most distinctive aspect of twentieth-century American society is the division of life into a number of separate functional sectors: home and workplace, work and leisure, white collar and blue collar, public and private... 'Public' and 'private' roles often contrast sharply, as symbolized by the daily commute from green suburban settings reminiscent of rural life to the industrial, technological ambience of the workplace. The split between public and private life correlates with a split between utilitarian individualism, appropriate in the economic and occupational spheres, and expressive individualism, appropriate in private life... Viewing one's primary task as 'finding oneself' in autonomous self-reliance, separating oneself not only from one's parents but also from those larger communities and traditions that constitute one's past, leads to the notion that it is in oneself, perhaps in relation to a few intimate others, that fulfillment is to be found. Individualism of this sort often implies a negative view of public life. The impersonal forces of the economic and political worlds are what the individual needs protection against. In

this perspective, even occupation, which has been so central to the identity of Americans in the past, becomes instrumental--not a good in itself, but only a means to the attainment of a rich and satisfying private life." (43, 45, 163)

8. I discuss the question of how to interpret and understand the political relevance of dreams in more detail in section 3 of The Wilderness of Dreams.

9. Beginning with Bill Clinton's Inauguration in January of 1993, Bruce and Julia Miller began collecting "Dreams of Bill" from all over the country--asking people through newspaper ads, television and radio talk-shows, etc., if they had experienced any dreams of President Clinton. The Millers have received a huge response, and are working on a book documenting their findings. Although theirs will not be a "scientific" study either, their work strongly supports my claim that there is something here to study.