Based on his study of other countries, Lawrence Britt's 14 characteristics typical of Fascism can be used at the governmental level as a checklist to assess the extent to which any nation, ours or others, has descended into the morass:
- Powerful and Continuing Nationalism;
- Disdain for the Recognition of Human Rights;
- Identification of Enemies/Scapegoats as a Unifying Cause;
- Supremacy of the Military;
- Rampant Sexism;
- Controlled Mass Media;
- Obsession with National Security;
- Intertwining of Religion and Government;
- Protection of Corporate Power;
- Suppression of Labor's Power;
- Disdain for Intellectuals and the Arts;
- Obsession with Crime and Punishment;
- Rampant Cronyism and Corruption;
- Fraudulent Elections.

Useful as these criteria may be for assessing national status, they fail to account for how a nation's citizenry comes to allow its country to adopt such an 'ethic'. Nationally, Fascism embodies the supremacy of the state over the wants or needs of its individual citizens. In the ideal of Fascist leaders, the citizenry voluntarily subjugates its well-being to the welfare of the state and its ruling class in a gesture that objectively would seem almost altruistic: surrendering their individuality for the good of the whole. How are the governmental characteristics cited above consistent, or at odds, with typical behaviors of ordinary citizens at the individual, personal level?

At risk of sounding like old fogeys, some my age-cohort sense changes over the last decade or two in the behavior of many of our countrymen, changes that reflect not voluntary subjugation of individuals to the general good, but rather an appropriation and defense of personal perogative and entitlement regardless of their effect on others. At first these expropriations of personal privilege seem trivial:

from little rudenesses, incivilities and discourtesies like entering a lecture or performance late, disrupting the field of view of other attendees;

little cheats presumed to harm no one such as detecting but not correcting a favorable arithmetic error in a bill;
to more problematic activities such as obstructing a narrow sidewalk, walking two or more abreast, bowling oncomers into the shrubbery or off the curb; or running red lights or stop signs, when no one is coming.

Gentle readers are invited to compile their own lists limited only by their experience or imagination: doing for your own benefit whatever you think you can get away with, regardless of its impact, potential or actual, on others. I suspect most of us were brought up to think ill of such behaviors, to avoid them ourselves or at least to feel guilty when we realize we've engaged in them.

So if they are becoming more prevalent, why? What's happened that more and more of our compatriots' upbringing is either lacking or fails to inhibit their problematic behaviors? Where are the inhibitors in our culture that once circumscribed our propensity for our most egregious behaviors within limits not readily violated?

One contributor is easily perceived in commercials viewed daily, if not hourly, on much of commercial TV. Try this experiment: watch a advertisement NOT from the point of view of a potential consumer but as a critic of the social behavior of its participants. Keep track of the fraction of commercials viewed, four to eight per break, that display duplicity, deceit, deception, dishonesty, gulling the innocent or ignorant, up to outright stupidity and unwarranted violence. Quite apart from the question why any thoughtful person would wish to purchase goods or services represented by such reprehensible behaviors, what do merchants imagine is the draw of such vignettes? I suppose some are deemed humorous but I recall, after viewing violent cowboy films as a child, my acting out the tough and ruthless, violent and vengeful behavior of the characters on my chums. Is the constant barrage of unseemly, unethical, insensitive behavior in commercials in effect condoning, if not actively encouraging, the same in impressionable youth of whatever chronological age?

In his film "Fanny and Alexander", Bergman has the latter utter what has to be for a youth one of the most unbelievable flashes of insight in all literature; in response to his stern father's demand, "Why do you lie?": "To gain advantage." Consider the little cheats, the little lies, the little deceits and betrayals above. Aren't they each and all the product of a will to co-opt some personal advantage at the expense of others: The supreme importance of self over and above all consideration of the rights or welfare of others?

Although Britt's characteristics of Fascism are easily found in numerous international venues, I think they are merely symptoms of an underlying pathology, present in both personal and national behaviors: narcissism, a fundamental attribute of sociopathic, psychopathic behavior from the interpersonal to the international. At the personal level socio- and psycho-paths behave as though their personal interests were the prime, if not the only, consideration governing their behavior. At the international level, most "failed states", our own included, justify any
level of treachery toward, or atrocity against, other nations or peoples, even their own, in terms of the overarching importance of the "national interests".

But truly whose are these "national interests"? What is the connection between states' and personal behavior? No state is ever a discrete, integral entity unto itself. Each is directed, ultimately, by individuals, or collections of individuals, who deem themselves the state or its representative: L'Etat c'est moi! Aren't 'national interests' in fact those of the individual or individuals, or their clients, deemed to represent the nation?

Narcissistic behavior by nations results from uncontrolled narcissistic impulses on behalf of, or by, nations' leaders or representatives. A nation that breeds, trains, rewards or sustains narcissism, that selects or elects narcissists as its representatives or leadership, will inevitably display international behaviors consistent with the primacy of self-interest, whether personal or national, over the welfare of others, of the community of nations as a whole. The general weal is not well served by a million, or a billion, points of greed.

What can we individuals do to minimize the predominance and effect of narcissism? Nationally, little, it might seem on the basis of the most recent election. Individually, a first step might be to interdict and counteract one's own personal narcissistic impulses; when you catch yourself taking advantage of others for personal gain, stop and reconsider. A second, potentially more problematic, step might be actively to resist, refuse to cooperate with, perhaps even interdict other's narcissisms. For one example boycott products associated with repellent behavior, corporate or commercial. Let others know that rampant self-service, putting others' welfare and well-being at risk for their own benefit, is personally, socially and fiscally unacceptable. Beyond these measures, continue to encourage and support those moral and ethical leaders, clerical or secular, who put the welfare of the truly needy before the grimy ambitions of nationalistic politicians and lobbyists for entrenched interests.

A bumperstick seen in some areas of the country - Partnership for an Idiot-Free America - might well be adapted to read: Partnership for a Narcissism-Free America.

(c) Copyright 2004 by AxisofLogic.com