

## At Least Goldwater Kept His Eyes Open

During the recent high profile trial over the hush money payments made to a porn star (and then written off as a *business expense*), the defendant chose, while in the courtroom and during the proceedings, to **close his eyes** for substantial periods of time.

Some claimed that he had fallen asleep; at times, he may well have dozed off for a bit. But make no mistake: he was *conscious* for the bulk of the time his eyelids were down. He claimed, in the moment, that he was “concentrating,” trying to “listen intensely” and “take it all in.” Few, if any people gave his statement any purchase. “Sleepy Don” and “Sleepy Joe” fits a pattern we like to use with the elderly.



Why don't people believe him? Probably because, in this case, the stakes are too high, the content is pretty lurid, and the average person on the street can only imagine “he fell asleep” as the only reason he would close his eyes in a court room. According to [eyewitnesses](#), the defendant managed to keep those lids closed for lengthy periods of time by anyone's measure. This is no mean feat, as most adults cannot willfully keep their eyes closed for much more than a few minutes while conscious. Try it sometime; it reminds me of a scene from [Altered States](#), that is, if you keep at it long enough. Humans, on average, do not handle sensory deprivation very well. To maintain our sense of equilibrium, we start to project, to *fill in the void* if we find ourselves staring into it for too long.

So, what should we make of his odd behavior? It's not a small thing, or a behavioral tic, or a normal response to what anyone would consider a stressful situation. In all of his years on a public stage, the defendant has never closed his eyes for more than a moment or two, like any of us in the course of a normal day. In order to respond to the question, we must suspend the “[Goldwater Rule](#)” long enough to hazard an informed guess. Not a formal clinical diagnosis, but a working theory based on what is publicly known about the subject, his public history, and the context. Be advised, what follows is a somewhat informed guess from someone who is *not* a trained psychologist ...

There are, I think, two dominant threads we must account for. The first is what I would describe as a crisis in **object constancy**, and the second is an apparent effort to restore **homeostatic feeling** in the face of tectonic uncertainty. On the surface, of course, there is an element of enforced self-control. It is one of the very few instances, and one of the only places, where the defendant absolutely had to keep his mouth shut. Or face contempt charges and the [Bobby Seale](#) gag. The defendant, as we saw in the 2020 presidential debate, is famously not very good at controlling his mouth. There's also the cognitive dissonance of witnessing a normal, well-run trial and then bellowing about how it is rigged moments after leaving the room. He's grown comfortable with that, however.

Below the surface, the defendant's [family history](#) suggests he may have had a difficult time staying in the good graces of a father who was, shall we say, less than benign or steady in praise of his children. This makes it very difficult for a child to develop “[object constancy](#)”: i.e., the ability to retain a bond with another person — especially when one is upset, angry, or disappointed by their actions. In short, the defendant likely struggles to understand that objects and people retain the same traits even when he is not actively watching them. His father may have suffered from it, too. It's a hard chain to break.

Those who lack object constancy find it difficult to retain positive feelings about someone if that person makes a mistake or disagrees with them in any way. In extreme cases, any minor offense will trigger the person to completely devalue the offender. In this context, everyone around the person is either high status and special (“just the best”) ... or low status and worthless (“scum” or “thugs”). Constancy thus becomes a big problem: “yeah, but what have you done for me lately” becomes the only measure used to assess someone’s value or status, and their internal jury is always out.

In most cases, a serious lack of object constancy will socially and financially cripple a person. For those who are given enormous sums of money, however, it is merely embarrassing. A cursory review of news stories about the defendant offers plenty of examples of how this deficiency plays out. Just ask Lindsay Graham or Ted Cruz, or Mike Pence, or any his ex-wives. If for no other reason, the defendant will be remembered for the [spectacular turnover](#) in his White House. Effective leadership, of course, requires more than someone yelling “You’re fired.”

The mechanics of how he survives without object constancy are pretty obvious, in this particular case. Those who would remain on the upside must offer their oath of fealty to any of the “[big lies](#)” he likes to project. Whether it is something as minor as the size of the inauguration crowd or as important as the outcome of a presidential election, the only thing that matters is that you pay lip service to the obvious falsehood in order to prove that you will do anything to stay in his favor. At this stage, it has become a form of public extortion. And we all get to pay the price, at least until he loses that critical mass of the devout and is forced back into an exile that he has definitely earned.

Which brings us to those homeostatic feelings. There is a primal drive all creatures share: we seek to treat our pain and conserve our pleasure. As Antonio Damasio describes it in [The Strange Order of Things](#), homeostasis is the force that ensures that “life is regulated within a range that is not just compatible with survival but also conducive to flourishing, to a projection of life into the future of an organism or a species.” For the defendant, his personal brand of homeostasis seems to require a great deal of public adulation, blind loyalty, an ever expanding mass of *unearned* wealth, and as much Diet Coke as he can pour into that enormous mouth. It can never end for him. He cannot erase the pain of his childhood, he cannot bring himself to leave the public stage, and he cannot grow in any direction.

It is – all of it – a recipe for personal and political death. No different than the other great dictators in our past. A little more garish, perhaps, and a lot less intelligent. He has created this great petri dish of poison, and insists we all must pay for it, and then wallow in it with him. If we try to maintain this great wobbly balancing act over his immense personal void, he *will* take us all down with him. For you see, he has no interest in the future of our species, he is only interested in maintaining the pretense that *he* will always go on. And if he must keep us trembling with fear, and doubting each other’s intent, and keep us in a permanent state of chaos, he most certainly will. It’s all he has – there are no actual ideas in there, much less a coherent platform or philosophy beyond the [Hobbesian](#) admonition that in chaos we are due “no arts; no letters; no society; and which is worst of all, continual fear, and danger of violent death; and the life of man, solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.”

Let us put this orange Leviathan to bed come November; we owe our children that much.

-- Steven Peterson, 2024

