

THE AMERICAN PSYCHOANALYTIC ASSOCIATION
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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:

A STATEMENT ON THE USE OF PSYCHIATRIC OPINIONS IN THE POLITICAL REALM
BY THE AMERICAN PSYCHOANALYTIC ASSOCIATION

Comments solicited from psychiatrists have been used in a recent article to support conclusions about the mental stability of a political candidate. The American Psychoanalytic Association views with concern such use of professional opinion; unverified impressions, when offered by specialists in any field, may be regarded as authoritative and scientific when in fact they can be neither.

It is understandable that some members of the professions dealing with mental illness might wish - out of a sense of social responsibility - to share their knowledge with the public in order to make a contribution to one of the most important activities in a democracy: the choice of a leader. However, professional judgments regarding the mental stability of any person have to be based on carefully evaluated psychological data which must be secured through a detailed review of the life history and a thorough clinical examination. Such information is most reliable when obtained in a therapeutic relationship in which there is the expectation of confidentiality and the wish to be relieved from emotional suffering as a motivation for self-revelation. These conditions do not exist in a political campaign. Not only are the available data about the emotional stability of a public figure different from those with which the psychiatrist and psychoanalyst usually work, but the strong feelings aroused impair that objectivity which is necessary for scientific assessment of behavior. Psychiatrists and psychoanalysts, no less than other people, are subject to the insecurities and emotions which may distort judgement and are inevitably

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stirred up during a political campaign.

Although the presence of severe and crippling mental illness is, of course, disqualifying, these conditions do not escape public recognition. Apart from such instances, however, there are no valid, well established psychological criteria which can be applied in the evaluation of the personality of a political leader. It is not the presumed underlying bases of behavior which count, but how these are resolved in final aims and actions. At the present state of our knowledge, therefore, judgments about a political candidate must be based on his views, the political company in which he moves, his past opinions and actions, and those aspects of his character which are open to the scrutiny of all, rather than on an assessment of his emotional conflicts and idiosyncrasies.

Like other citizens, the psychiatrist or psychoanalyst has the right to take sides in public affairs and to express his opinions, privately or publicly, about the candidates competing for office. In so doing he will, of course, draw from his personal experiences, predilections and biases as well as from his scientific knowledge. The American Psychoanalytic Association is convinced, however, that such private views must not be regarded as scientific inferences that are derived from valid and secure observations. It believes that the use of such views about the psychological fitness of a candidate during an election campaign serves no constructive purpose in the political life of the nation and is potentially damaging to science in general and to psychiatry and psychoanalysis in particular.

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