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Facing Realities

Like Gorby? Don't trust Putin? Spooked by Cheney? Here's why

By JEFFREY KLUGER

I always knew there was a reason I don't like Kim Jong Il. It's not his pursuit of nuclear weapons. O.K., it's partly his pursuit of nuclear weapons, but hey, if you're a despot with a spare centrifuge and a free mountain, knock yourself out. The other part is, well, I just don't like his face. There's a visible smugness atop the looniness that seems to cry out for a vigorous slapping.

I'm not proud of my reason for wanting to slap Kim Jong Il. Shouldn't we be beyond just not liking someone's face? I always thought so, but recently the folks at Princeton University reassured me that, nope, it's perfectly fine and in fact entirely human. A study by psychologist Alex Todorov shows that we form opinions about a person with a 100-millisecond glance at the face alone. What's more, you can't even blame your higher brain for such bias. The impulse seems to arise in the primitive amygdala. If your prefrontal cortex is your summa cum laude lobe, the amygdala is Barney Rubble. Says Todorov: "This is a case of a high-level judgment being made by a low-level brain structure."

Todorov has a special interest in politicians, people for whom physiognomy can be destiny. Take Mikhail Gorbachev. After the ursine Leonid Brezhnev, Gorby was Kris Kringle. His rounded cheeks, his careless hairlessness, even his great red spot all left him looking disarmingly rumped. That was a guy who not only could dismantle an empire and knock down a wall but would also remember to keep caramels in his pocket for the grandkids. Vladimir Putin, by contrast, is less gentle grandpa than live mink. President George W. Bush may have looked into Putin's soul and been reassured by what he saw, but he might have found less to like if he'd paid closer attention to the Russian leader's beady eyes and take-no-prisoners cheekbones.

The U.S. too has leaders whose faces reveal as much as their résumés. Bill Clinton's image as affable rascal is partly due to his having the twinkly

look of a man who enjoys his indulgences. He even sprouted a bit of a drinker's nose despite the fact that, by all accounts, he has no taste for the stuff. In this case, form seems to want to follow function.

There's more science than sorcery in the way we eyeball faces and respond to what we see. Our species wouldn't survive if we weren't suckers for what's called neoteny--features like large eyes, an oversize head and a gumball nose that signal babyishness. We swoon at such traits in people and animals, which is one evolutionary explanation for why we rush to the aid of a lost child or stray puppy instead of, you know, eating them. Stanford University studies showed that the same area of the brain that responds to faces also processes objects like cars and sculptures, explaining the huggable appeal of the VW Beetle and the porcelain cherub.

Facial symmetry appeals to us too. Dick Cheney's least trustworthy feature is easily his smile, a lopsided thing that makes him look as if half his face is pleased with something while the other half is paying bills. Research at Columbia University revealed that when some people see fleeting, subliminally projected images of fearful faces, their brain's fright center lights up. If fear is infectious, perhaps a dishonest face makes us feel similarly slippery or a surly face leaves us feeling sour--hardly what politicians want to stir up in voters.

The mingling of face and temperament raises the question of whether the two co-evolve or one produces the other. Was John Kerry's hangdog face responsible for his sullen campaigning? Did Richard Nixon grow his shadowy stubble, or did his shadowy stubble grow him? The British weekly *New Scientist* has touched on this, exploring what is known as nominative determinism--the common case of people whose names echo their jobs. There is the director of penal reform Frances Crook, the marine biologist Steven Haddock. American culture has been rife with such synchronicity--pitcher Rollie Fingers, Senator George McGovern. "Are these whimsicalities of chance," Carl Jung once asked, "or the suggestive effects of the name?"

If names drive careers and faces drive personas, we should have sympathy for politicians consigned by countenance to personalities they might not have chosen. As the midterm elections end and presidential hopefuls look ahead to 2008, there are perils for both the lovely and the unlovely. Those easy on the eye should take care not to overstate the point (MITT ROMNEY: MORE SYMMETRICAL THAN EVER!). Those with aesthetic hurdles should consider whether it's finally time for that eye lift or chin tuck. Remember, candidates think of November as a time to face the voters, but for the electorate, it's often a time to vote the faces.

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