

# U.S. Presidents' narcissism linked to international conflict

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The most narcissistic U.S. presidents since 1897 preferred to instigate conflicts with other great power countries without seeking support from allies, a new study suggests.

Results showed that of the presidents measured, those highest in narcissism—including Lyndon B. Johnson, Teddy Roosevelt and Richard

Nixon—were about six times more likely to initiate a dispute with another great power in any given year than a president with average levels of narcissism.

The inclination to "go it alone" in international disputes fits with the desire of those high in narcissism to boost their own reputation and self-image and appear tough and competent to others, said John Harden, author of the study and a doctoral student in [political science](#) at The Ohio State University.

"More narcissistic U.S. presidents differed from others in how they approached foreign policy and world politics," Harden said.

"They were more likely to weigh their personal desires more heavily than political survival or the country's interests when it came to how they handled some disputes."

The study was published online recently in the journal *International Studies Quarterly*.

Harden studied presidents from 1897—roughly the time the United States became a great power in the world—through George W. Bush in 2009.

In order to measure presidential narcissism, Harden used a [dataset from 2000 created by three researchers](#) to assess the personalities of presidents.

These researchers tapped the knowledge of presidential historians and other experts who had written at least one book on a president. Each expert completed a personality inventory with more than 200 questions about the president they studied.

How valid could it be to complete a personality test for another person? It actually works very well, Harden said. Other research has had people complete the same personality inventory used by the historians on behalf of an acquaintance. Results showed that these people answered the personality questions very similarly to the acquaintances themselves.

Using the personality test results for the 19 presidents from 1897 to 2008, Harden analyzed five facets of the test that relate with a common measure of grandiose narcissism: High levels of assertiveness and excitement-seeking and low levels of modesty, compliance and straightforwardness.

Harden determined those five factors are correlated with narcissism in a separate analysis using a general population sample.

"These facets describe people who want to be in charge, seek the spotlight, brag about their accomplishments and are willing to lie and flatter to get what they want. They certainly would be willing to insult others, too," Harden said. "So it is a pretty good description of a narcissist."

Based on these results, Lyndon Johnson was the president who scored highest on narcissism, followed by Teddy Roosevelt and then Richard Nixon.

The president who scored lowest on narcissism was William McKinley, followed by William Howard Taft and Calvin Coolidge.

"The results are in line with common assessments of the presidents," Harden said.

"Ethically principled McKinley, sensitive and often overwhelmed Taft, and taciturn Coolidge are at the bottom of the list. Meanwhile, self-

absorbed and image-conscious figures like Johnson, Roosevelt and Nixon are at the top."

To see how narcissism was related to international conflict, Harden used another dataset, called Militarized Interstate Disputes. This data includes all instances where one country threatened, displayed, or used force against another from 1816 to 2014.

Harden looked specifically at disputes started unilaterally by the United States against other great powers, such as the Soviet Union and China. Any conflicts in which the United States sought support from allies were not counted as a unilaterally initiated great power dispute.

Many of these disputes are not well-known by the public, Harden said, but created a great deal of tension among [world leaders](#).

For example, Nixon initiated Operation Giant Lance in 1969, which sent a squadron of B-52s armed with nuclear weapons to patrol the glacier caps near Moscow. Johnson launched the so-called Lightning Bug War in 1964, sending drones on missions deep inside China.

In his study, Harden took into account and controlled for a wide range of factors other than the narcissism of the president that may have played a role in these conflicts—including, but not limited to, the president's political party, whether the [president](#) was in his final term and whether he had military experience, whether the country was war-weary or in a recession, whether the government was unified under one political party and whether the incident occurred during the Cold War.

After taking all of these factors into account, results showed that the probability that the United States would unilaterally initiate at least one great power [dispute](#) in any given year was about 4%. For presidents highest in narcissism, the likelihood was around 29%, more than six

times higher. For presidents who were at the low end of the narcissism scale, the probability was less than 1%.

"The raw data speaks for itself. The three most narcissistic presidents had unilaterally initiated great power disputes that made up 33% to 71% of all disputes they initiated. Meanwhile, the bottom three had none," Harden said.

There are several reasons why more narcissistic presidents would have a greater likelihood of starting fights with other great [power](#) nations without allied support, Harden said.

For one, they would only want to deal with great powers.

"Why would a leader who focuses on their historical notability and image 'waste their time' with lesser status powers?" he said.

They also would work without partners because they don't want to share the spotlight and wouldn't believe that others would have anything to contribute.

Leaders high in narcissism also behave in ways that increase tensions, such as taking actions to project strength. They are willing to accept risks. They also behave dramatically and send unclear signals, Harden said.

While the public and some political scientists may believe that U.S. presidents act with the best interests of the country at heart, Harden said this study provides evidence that some leaders use their office to make themselves feel powerful and important.

"Leaders high in [narcissism](#) don't want the same things from their position as others do," Harden said. "For them, the world truly is a

stage."

**More information:** John P Harden, All the World's a Stage: US Presidential Narcissism and International Conflict, *International Studies Quarterly* (2021). [DOI: 10.1093/isq/sqab048](https://doi.org/10.1093/isq/sqab048)

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