

How Do the Personalities of American Presidents Affect the Making of U.S.  
Foreign Policy?

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## Abstract

The president of the United States is one of the most important international individuals. As such, understanding the way he makes foreign policy decisions is crucial. This paper will examine the role that key president personalities have played into these decisions. It will provide a discussion of personality categorization systems, using three presidential case studies as examples. Through this it will be shown that not only does personality affect foreign policy decisions, but also that it does so in a significant manner.

## Introduction

In his article on personality and politics, Fred Greenstein addresses the correlation between personality and policy decisions. He argues, “[t]he personalities of political actors impinge on political affairs in countless ways, often with great consequences.”<sup>1</sup> This paper examines how the personality of the president of the United States affects his (and perhaps one day, her) decisions on foreign policy.

The American president is one of the most powerful and influential people in terms of international politics. This is because he is the leader of one of the great superpowers of the twentieth and beginning of the twenty-first century. America also has the largest military and economy in the world, with a 2009 GDP of 14.3 trillion dollars, nearly three times larger than the next largest, Japan.<sup>2</sup> The U.S. holds one of the five permanent seats on the United Nations Security Council, giving it veto power over what policies and actions are taken by the U.N., affecting the future of the entire world.<sup>3</sup> These

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<sup>1</sup> Fred Greenstein, “Can Personality and Politics Be Studied Systematically?” in *Political Psychology*. Edited by John Jost and Jim Sidanius. New York: Psychology Press, 108.

<sup>2</sup> Steven W. Hook. *U.S. Foreign Policy*. (Canada: SAGE Publications, 2014), 4.

<sup>3</sup> “Current Members.” *United Nations Security Council*. Accessed on January 2, 2015, <http://www.un.org/en/sc/members/>.

mean that the U.S. has significant influence in matters of global war and economy. With this in mind, and hypothesizing that a president's personality affects his policymaking, it is therefore useful to examine personality and foreign policy together in order to determine their relationship.

First, this paper will explain the president's role in foreign policy decision-making. Next, categorizations of personality and how each affects foreign policy will be analyzed. Finally, three specific personality case studies of past U.S. leaders will look at personality during presidential terms.

## **The President, Policy, and Personality**

### **The President and Foreign Policy**

The president of the U.S. enjoys many formal powers, such as a legislative veto and being the Commander-in-Chief of the military. These powers also extend to foreign policy. As stated by the United States Constitution, Article II, Section II, the president, "shall have Power, by and with the Advice and Consent of the Senate, to make Treaties... [and] shall appoint Ambassadors."<sup>4</sup> This outlines the Founding Fathers' desire to project a consistent image abroad, despite a large separation of powers domestically. That is not to say that the president has been given free reign over all foreign matters; checks on presidential foreign policy decisions do occur through Congress and the courts. These powers are in place to ensure that, in matters of international affairs, the president is performing in a legal way that is in the best interest of the United States.

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<sup>4</sup> "The Constitution of the United States." *Constitutionus.com*. Accessed on November 9, 2014, <http://constitutionus.com/>.

The president is also the one who makes the final decision on how often the country will engage with others around it. Before the First World War, the United States heavily favored isolationism, considering the distance from Europe to be a distance from their problems. Since the World Wars, public ideology has shifted towards interventionism, or the view that it was the U.S.'s duty to help countries in need of aid.

Today, the president has the largest single impact on foreign policy in the United States, seeing as how often and in what way the president chooses to engage with the rest of the world has a large bearing on the U.S.'s standings worldwide. Though he does have to keep Congress and the courts informed of his actions, most international relations are conducted under presidential control. He directs troop placements around the world, and chooses the targets and contents of U.S. treaties and agreements. It is the president who is the overarching head of the State Department, the United States governmental department in charge of interacting in world affairs. Therefore, it is important to understand the motivations behind a president's decisions.

### **Personality Measurements**

When considering motivations behind a decision, personality is a large factor. However, psychologists and social scientists have struggled with giving a clear definition of personality. *Webster's Dictionary* defines it as "the totality of an individual's behavioral and emotional characteristics."<sup>5</sup> For the most part, this paper uses the term personality as Barber explains it: as a combination of psychological factors such as

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<sup>5</sup> *Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary*. (Massachusetts: Merriam-Webster Inc. Publishers, 1989), 878.

character (the way the President sees and reacts to life around him), worldview, and style.<sup>6</sup>

This definition takes into account many different factors about a president and the way he thinks; however, an all-encompassing definition of personality does not exist. There are many theories that look at certain aspects of personality, attempting to create the most accurate and encompassing picture of a person possible. Each has its problems, such as the inability to collect and classify all parts of a person's belief system, or by only looking into one part of a person's personality, excluding others in the process. It is important to remember as one reads through these theories that each only considers one part of a personality. People and presidents cannot simply be categorized based on an outward appearance they give to the world. Pushing them to fit into these boxes takes away not only the part of their personality they choose not to show, but also the parts that they do show that do not match within a specific category. Overall, personality can be a good indicator of a president's possible foreign policy, but no analysis is definitive.

Some theorists, such as realists and liberal institutionalists, argue that personality is mostly irrelevant in terms of foreign policymaking. Political realists take the approach that regardless of a president's personality, his ultimate goal is to maximize his and his country's power.<sup>7</sup> Realists say that the world's natural state is anarchy, with no state completely ruling the others and each state working in its own interest. Politics, to a realist, is a game in which each player is trying to gain as much power as possible;

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<sup>6</sup> James D. Barber. *The Presidential Character*. (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1972), 8.

<sup>7</sup> "Political Realism." *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Accessed on February 26, 2015, <http://www.iep.utm.edu/polreal/>.

therefore, no matter how a president interacts with others in terms of foreign policy, he is always working towards his own country's interests in terms of power.

Liberal institutionalists agree that the world is in a state of anarchy and that politics can be seen as a sort of game. However, they posit that a president (or world leader) will choose to try to cooperate with the world. According to them, personality may have a small effect on how they interact with others, but it is not a large enough factor to determine international relations decisions. They claim that the possible benefits of international collective security will override personality in terms of a president's foreign policy decisions.<sup>8</sup> Here, one can also look at those who see international relations as a structure-based system. Rather than seeing actors as a changeable factor in foreign policy, these individuals believe that the structure of international relations and governments are set up in a way that one single person cannot make a difference. These are the people who claim that it does not matter who wins the presidency, as each candidate would end up doing roughly the same work.

This paper will challenge this claim. It will argue that the international world can be changed by a single individual, and the personality of this person can play a large role in his/her foreign policy decisions. The president of the United States, as stated before, is directly in charge of how the U.S. interacts with other countries. It is he who makes treaties, chooses representatives to go to other countries, and represents the U.S. and its interests. The way and amount he chooses to engage with those around him (both countries and colleagues) *must* have some effect on the foreign policy outcomes. Looking

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<sup>8</sup> Neorealism and neoliberal institutionalism: born of the same approach?" *E-International Relations Students*. Accessed on February 27, 2015, <http://www.e-ir.info/2012/06/11/neorealism-and-neoliberal-institutionalism-born-of-the-same-approach/>.

into the role personality plays and its possible effects on U.S. foreign policy can help to decipher past political moves and predict possible future ones.

This paper will focus on the method of loose categorization used by James Barber, demonstrating that personality is indeed influential in decision-making. Here presidents are categorized according to two simple scales: active or passive, and positive or negative. Active presidents use their time as effectively as possible, preferring to do hands-on work for hours on end; passive presidents, tend to take a step back and allow others to work through current events. Positive and negative refer to the president's attitude towards his job. A positive president, as Barber writes, "has *fun* in political life,"<sup>9</sup> while a negative president may see his position as a burden.

With a combination of high levels of activity and an accepting attitude towards politics, active-positive personalities usually have a healthy dose of self-esteem, leading them to be driven towards success. They will usually have a preferred style of management, but will be open to other modes of operation. These presidents (John F. Kennedy, for example) genuinely enjoy getting involved in their work, and do not understand when others do not.

Active-negatives also throw themselves into the hard work of their jobs. Unfortunately, despite all of this work, they receive "relatively low emotional reward for that effort."<sup>10</sup> Barber describes these presidents as ambitious and writes that they seek to gain as much personal power as possible. Possibly the most infamous example of an active-negative president is Richard Nixon. He put a lot of effort into his work, struggling with issues such as the Vietnam War. However, Nixon had a frustrating presidency; one

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<sup>9</sup> James D. Barber. *The Presidential Character*. (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1972), 11.

<sup>10</sup> James D. Barber. *The Presidential Character*. (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1972), 12.

could tell he was serving out of a sense of duty (ambitiously, but out of a sense of duty), rather than a love of the job. This negativity only increased as the events of the Watergate Scandal unfolded. After all of this, with great work but little emotional reward, and in the midst of a huge governmental scandal, Nixon resigned.

Presidents whose main goal is to gain the love of their people are passive-positive. These are leaders who try their hardest to be amiable and work toward cooperation to “help soften the harsh edges of politics.”<sup>11</sup> These presidents cherish the human connection they make with others and attempt to create bonds and friendships in order to get work done. Barber does point out that they may not be lovers of the politics game, with its many levels and roughness, but they are hopeful enough to continue to try. He writes of them, “[t]hey accentuate the positive. They boost. They sympathize.”<sup>12</sup> The example given in *The Presidential Character* of a passive-positive president is William Howard Taft. During his time in office, Taft did what was necessary for him. He did not start many big initiatives, but like the positive president he was, he did what he did with a smile on his face. He loved to be loved by the public, which contributed to his uncertainty when it came to policymaking.<sup>13</sup> He tried to create a new foreign policy system for the U.S., with an emphasis on relations with South America. Unfortunately, this system proved to be, “generally unsuccessful. United States trade with China actually declined under Taft.”<sup>14</sup> By passively letting things unfold and dealing with one problem

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<sup>11</sup> James D. Barber. *The Presidential Character*. (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1972), 13.

<sup>12</sup> James D. Barber. *The Presidential Character*. (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall Inc., 1972), 174.

<sup>13</sup> James D. Barber. *The Presidential Character*. (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall Inc., 1972), 177.

<sup>14</sup> “American President: A Reference Resource,” *University of Virginia Miller Center*. Accessed on March 21, 2015, [www.millercenter.org/president/taft/essays/biography/5](http://www.millercenter.org/president/taft/essays/biography/5).



and area of the world at once, other areas and relationships suffered. Overall, Taft's passive personality meant less work on foreign affairs overall.

The final category Barber gives in his book is passive-negative. Due to their lack of motivation to work on huge issues and lack of personal reward for this work, passive-negative presidents tend to shy away from a lot of conflict. Citizens who may not desire to become entangled in foreign issues can see this passivity as a good thing. Though this may seem like a less-effective model for leadership, this was actually what the Founding Fathers had in mind for the presidency. George Washington favored the idea of a president who withdrew from major politics and preferred minimal governance. A more modern example of a passive-negative president given by Barber is Calvin Coolidge. As his presidency wore on, Coolidge began to feel the weight of his work. He withdrew from those around him, abandoning activities such as exercise for solitary contemplation.<sup>15</sup> He felt the toll of his responsibilities and the work they entailed.

Along with personality categorizations, in his textbook Hook looks into three types of managerial styles a president may use. Managerial styles affect the mood or setting of those who are advising or speaking with the president; thus, different management styles encourage different types of advising and policy outcomes.

The first style of management is the formalistic model. In this model, there is an emphasis on hierarchy. Here, each advisor works his or her information up a chain, relaying important information to whomever is chosen to have personal contact with the president.<sup>16</sup> Hook gives the example of the Nixon administration, where advisors would speak only to the national security advisor, Henry Kissinger, who was the sole direct

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<sup>15</sup> James D. Barber. *The Presidential Character*. (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall Inc., 1972), 146.

<sup>16</sup> Steven W. Hook. *U.S. Foreign Policy*. (Canada: SAGE Publications, 2014), 122.

contact with Nixon regarding policy. The formalistic system does not allow for a lot of direct communication with the president, but does have the advantage of being organized.

The second model Hook describes is the competitive model, wherein advisors do have access to the president, but are encouraged to participate in open debate with their peers. This style was used by Dwight Eisenhower, who believed that in order for the president to make the best decision, he needed to hear the different viewpoints of people in the field.<sup>17</sup> The competitive model gives differing opinions a chance, and allows each person a say. However, it has the potential to create deep rivalries between advisors.

The third model is the collegial model. As with the competitive model, here many advisors are given direct access to the president. However, it is collaboration and teamwork, rather than competitiveness, which is encouraged from advisors. Hook writes that President Bill Clinton was best remembered for using the collegial model, gathering his advisors together to talk through policy issues.<sup>18</sup>

One can see how these different models of management could lead to different foreign policy decisions and responses. In the formalistic model, only one individual is relaying what he/she thinks is relevant information to the president. Similarly, this individual and the president are the only two discussing foreign policy options. Here it is much easier for the president to react with intuition and personal desires, having only his national security advisor to convince.

With the competitive and collegial models there are more players involved in the actual policymaking process. This means that more and varied opinions will be discussing issues. In a competitive setting, foreign policy often comes down to who can

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<sup>17</sup> Steven W. Hook. *U.S. Foreign Policy*. (Canada: SAGE Publications, 2014), 124.

<sup>18</sup> Steven W. Hook. *U.S. Foreign Policy*. (Canada: SAGE Publications, 2014), 124.

argue his/her point of view best. In the collegial model, foreign policy is shaped by what sort of consensus the group can come up with. Both have potential problems: brilliant orators who may not have the best plan might get their way in the competitive model, and an inability to reach an agreeable consensus or group think might dominate the collegial model. Overall, it is up to each individual president to weigh the costs and benefits to each managerial style, and adopt the one he finds most effective for his style of leading.

From these descriptions, one can see that an active and/or negative president may be more likely to use the formalistic model, in order to allow more control over decisions being made; a passive and/or positive president perhaps would prefer the competitive approach in order to hear others make their points. In this respect, one can see just how vital personality is to the shaping of decision-making. Personality influences how the president makes decisions, his managerial style, and how this leads to different types of foreign policy overall.

Knowing that personality plays a role into the type of managerial style a president will use, thereby affecting foreign policy, it is still important to remember that no one personality style is “better” than another. Certain styles may be more proficient in certain situations, though which is preferable depends on each individual. During warfare, some may want the president to be a more active player, getting involved in the conflict and sending troops to win. However, some may desire a passive president, who does not engage more than necessary and may favor diplomacy over fighting. Neither is better than the other, each just offers a different way of handling a situation. Similarly, it should be remembered that an overarching personality type is not the end all-be all of a president’s decisions. A president may make decisions based on other factors, such as the

external world, the people or Congress's opinions, and the advice given from coworkers. Personality categorizations provide a loose framework with which to examine a president's decisions and the thought-processes behind them.

James Barber suggests that the best way to predict a president's worldview and how he will act is to look at past events in his life, where he came from and what he overcame and achieved to get to his position of power<sup>19</sup>. In order to demonstrate this and take a closer look at exactly how personality has shaped a president's foreign policy while in office, the next section offers three case studies of well-defined, public presidential personalities: Franklin Roosevelt, whose utilized his personality to connect with the public and enter into the first World War; Lyndon Johnson, whose forceful and persistent personality caused him to stay engaged in the Vietnam War without seeing a victorious outcome; and George W. Bush, whose active personality was seen as a negative and whose perceived personality by the public caused questions of competency.

## Case Studies

### Franklin D. Roosevelt

Franklin Roosevelt certainly provides a case of a president's personality being important, in Roosevelt's case by gaining the public's trust and inspiring both action and loyalty. He was voted into office for four terms, causing Congress to limit the number of times one can be elected. Born January 30, 1882, Franklin Delano Roosevelt used his personality and new technology to revolutionize the president's role.

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<sup>19</sup> James D. Barber. *The Presidential Character*. (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall Inc., 1972), 6.

FDR, as he is commonly referred to, was a wealthy young man from New York. He desired from a young age to work in politics, like his distant cousin and former president Theodore Roosevelt.<sup>20</sup> This was difficult because at the time citizens tended to vote for what were seen as “common men” instead of the “privileged.”<sup>21</sup> However, in the long run his upper-class origins paid off. His biographer writes, “[Roosevelt’s] unstinting optimism and his self-confidence grew out of his youthful experiences as the only child in a home of privilege.”<sup>22</sup> It also helped to shape his empathy towards others, as his parents taught him that it was the duty of those whom are better off to help others. He was quite close to his mother, who had a very clear outline for what she wanted her son’s life to be and was not afraid to meddle to keep it this way.<sup>23</sup>

Franklin Roosevelt entered politics first as a Senator for New York in 1911, with his sights on the White House. One of the obstacles to this, though, was an unexpected illness. Roosevelt was unable to run for office due to contracting polio, which rendered him unable to walk without assistance. This damaged his political image, and many believed this setback would end his career. Roosevelt was determined that no such thing would happen. Even though it was late in his life, Roosevelt’s illness helped to shape his personality to be a better president: “his disability gave him experience with hardship and deprivation that someone from his background would otherwise be unlikely to encounter. This helped link him to the people suffering economic hardship during the Great

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<sup>20</sup> “Franklin D. Roosevelt” *The White House*. Accessed on March 4, 2015, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/1600/presidents/franklindroosevelt>.

<sup>21</sup> Robert S. McElvaine. *Franklin Delano Roosevelt*. (Washington D.C.: Congressional Quarterly Inc., 2002.), 15.

<sup>22</sup> Robert S. McElvaine. *Franklin Delano Roosevelt*. (Washington D.C.: Congressional Quarterly Inc., 2002.), 16.

<sup>23</sup> Robert S. McElvaine. *Franklin Delano Roosevelt*. (Washington D.C.: Congressional Quarterly Inc., 2002.), 22.

Depression.”<sup>24</sup> It was this connection that won Franklin Roosevelt the 1932 presidential election.

FDR would be classified as an active-positive president, the key part focused on here being active. Soon after his election, Roosevelt was eager to get things done; the Great Depression had left many unemployed and in need of assistance. He would have rather experimented with many things and failed than to simply have let the country be. FDR said of himself, “I have no expectation of making a hit every time I come to bat... What I seek is the highest possible batting average.”<sup>25</sup> His New Deal and public works programs, designed to bring America out of the Depression, proved popular and led to Roosevelt’s re-elections in 1936, 1940 and 1944. During his presidency, he led the United States out of the Depression, through the attack on Pearl Harbor and World War II, and put into motion the creation of the nuclear bomb.

In terms of international affairs, Roosevelt’s personality shaped the positions and actions he took. He still preferred action to idleness, and he wanted to be involved in the world despite leading an isolationist country. He “felt constrained by public opinion from acting as forcefully as he would have liked”<sup>26</sup> in world affairs. His Fireside Chats with the public showed his desire to act, while still acknowledging that such action was not public opinion. At the beginning of World War II in Europe, Roosevelt went on the radio, reassuring his people that he would stay out of war as long as possible, but also making

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<sup>24</sup> Robert S. McElvaine. *Franklin Delano Roosevelt*. (Washington D.C.: Congressional Quarterly Inc., 2002.), 23.

<sup>25</sup> James D. Barber. *The Presidential Character*. (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall Inc., 1972), 233.

<sup>26</sup> Robert S. McElvaine. *Franklin Delano Roosevelt*. (Washington D.C.: Congressional Quarterly Inc., 2002.), 133.

the point that entering into war was a possibility. He saw the War as an opportunity for flexing American power and establishing a more capitalist, rather than communist, world.

The attack on Pearl Harbor was the justification Roosevelt needed. Now he could convince the public to follow him as he stepped out into the world, becoming a leader of the Allied Powers. Roosevelt had been closely following the international conflicts leading up to World War II; however, with Congress's Neutrality Acts, which legally prohibited the United States from engaging in the war overseas, he had been forced to merely be a spectator.<sup>27</sup> He had watched as Japan took Manchuria from China, Franco came into dictatorial power in Spain, and Hitler began his European conquests. Due to his active personality, Roosevelt struggled to follow Congress's rules to stay out of the growing Eurasian conflicts. His foreign policy during this time was to aid the U.S.'s allies (mainly Britain and France) with as much as the U.S. could give.<sup>28</sup> When Pearl Harbor opened the doors to American involvement in the war, the active president was finally able to reach out to the rest of the world.

Roosevelt is credited with being one of the greatest presidents to date. He exuded not only confidence, but also approachableness to others. His presence provided stability during a time shortly after all had seemed lost. Barber writes, "however chaotic the structure of the power beneath him, there would be no ambiguity as to who was on the top...Power was where he was."<sup>29</sup> Roosevelt seemed a steady presence, at ease with

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<sup>27</sup> "American President: A Reference Resource," *University of Virginia Miller Center*. Accessed on March 21, 2015, [www.millercenter.org/president/fdroosevelt/essays/biography/5](http://www.millercenter.org/president/fdroosevelt/essays/biography/5).

<sup>28</sup> "American President: A Reference Resource," *University of Virginia Miller Center*. Accessed on March 21, 2015, [www.millercenter.org/president/fdroosevelt/essays/biography/5](http://www.millercenter.org/president/fdroosevelt/essays/biography/5).

<sup>29</sup> James D. Barber. *The Presidential Character*. (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall Inc., 1972), 242.

being in charge. His self-confidence allowed for Roosevelt to take chances and make moves, without a crippling fear of failure. The positive aspect of his personality meant that he enjoyed his job, rather than seeing it as a duty. Roosevelt wanted to help his country, and people were able to pick up on this. He reached out to them in such ways as his Fireside Chats, where he would simply talk to the public. They appreciated being “involved” in the processes. Roosevelt was able to take complex foreign issues, such as what was going in the World War, and give personal explanations for why he was trying to get the United States involved.<sup>30</sup> The fact that he was able to stay so connected with others, yet still effectively project his image of power, greatly influenced his success.

Franklin Roosevelt’s strong personality is well documented. During his presidency, FDR was very firm that he was the one in charge and making decisions. However, it is his love of his job and his connection with those around him that are remembered. He focused getting things done while in office, both at home and abroad. His personality helped to shape the stances he took in foreign policy as well, readying himself and the country for the possibility of battle during World War II. For his policies, his connection with others, and the things he achieved while in office, Roosevelt will always be remembered as a great president.

### **Lyndon B. Johnson**

While Roosevelt was voted into office four times, Lyndon Johnson gained the presidency only after the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. His six years as

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<sup>30</sup> “The Fireside Chats,” *History*. Accessed on April 8, 2015, <http://www.history.com/topics/fireside-chats>.



president created an image still held to this day: a man willing to go to extremes in order to get his way and protect his reputation.

Lyndon Johnson, sometimes called LBJ, was born August 27, 1908, the first of five children. During his youth, his mother, Rebekah, coddled him; in his biography of Johnson, Woods writes that one of the constants throughout Lyndon's life would be "his mother's gushing."<sup>31</sup> Rebekah had big dreams for her son, so in order to achieve them she took a great interest in ensuring that Lyndon received a proper education. Rebekah and Lyndon maintained a "special relationship, according to both, one of mutual dependency,"<sup>32</sup> from his toddler years when they would recite poetry together, through Johnson's adulthood and rise to political power.

Johnson's entrance into the political world came as he was elected as a U.S. Representative in 1937. From here he was eventually elected Congressman, then Senator, then the youngest Senate Majority leader for the Democratic Party.<sup>33</sup> During his early political work, Johnson gained a reputation for having a dedicated work ethic. Despite illnesses and social obligations, Lyndon Johnson and his staff worked as much as they could to serve the interests of Johnson's constituents. Long to-do lists and full days were in order. As Woods writes of LBJ, "[h]is ambition, his need to control, his overwhelming sense of responsibility his perfectionism, and the feeling...that enough was never enough, drove him mercilessly. He was on the go every waking hour..."<sup>34</sup> Lyndon Johnson

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<sup>31</sup> Randall B. Woods. *LBJ: Architect of American Ambition*. (New York: Free Press, 2006), 161.

<sup>32</sup> Randall B. Woods. *LBJ: Architect of American Ambition*. (New York: Free Press, 2006), 22.

<sup>33</sup> "Lyndon B. Johnson" *The White House*. Accessed on September 30, 2014, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/about/presidents/lyndonbjohnson>.

<sup>34</sup> Randall B. Woods. *LBJ: Architect of American Ambition*. (New York: Free Press, 2006), 132.

utilized his active personality even in his early years, in order to complete as many tasks as possible.

After twelve years of congressional service, Johnson was added to the ticket as John F. Kennedy's vice president. He served in this position from 1961 to November 22, 1963 when then-President John F. Kennedy was assassinated. In a hospital safe-zone, accompanied by his wife and a still-blood-spattered Jackie Kennedy, Lyndon Johnson was sworn in as President of the United States.<sup>35</sup> Though affected by his compatriot's passing, Johnson was quick to move into place as leader of the "free world." As Barber writes in his analysis of LBJ as an active-negative president, it was "immediately after the eulogy for President Kennedy...Johnson, with tears still on his face..." began to meet with officials concerning the issue of Vietnam.<sup>36</sup> Johnson's obsession with the failed war began here, where he doubted his ability to win in any way, yet felt too invested to quit. Barber writes that Johnson began to see the Vietnam War as his own personal responsibility; how he watched it falling apart, but was too stubborn to let it go. Though the war was already seemingly an unfixable mess, Johnson's personality played a direct role in its outcome; his insistence to not back down kept the U.S. in the volatile area and allowed for more bloodshed.

Lyndon Johnson is a good example of how personality not only affects how a president rules and makes foreign policy decisions, but also how one's personality can become a remembered attribute. As an active-negative president, Lyndon Johnson buried himself deep within his work. His days were long and packed with work; even his leisure

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<sup>35</sup> Randall B. Woods. *LBJ: Architect of American Ambition*. (New York: Free Press, 2006), 420.

<sup>36</sup> James D. Barber. *The Presidential Character*. (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall Inc., 1972), 32.

time was consumed with thoughts of politics.<sup>37</sup> A lot of this had to do with his tendency to feel a sense of personal responsibility for the political circumstances around himself. He had claimed the Vietnam situation as a personal cause, hoping to be able to resolve it as the crowning glory of his presidency. David Coleman stated that, “[u]nhappy with U.S. complicity in the Saigon coup yet unwilling to deviate from Kennedy’s approach to the conflict, Johnson vowed not to lose the war. If anything, he encouraged his closest advisors to work even harder...”<sup>38</sup> Coleman also writes that Johnson felt less sure of his foreign policy moves than his predecessor, causing him to want to complete the war in order to show his abilities.<sup>39</sup>

Already seemingly incapable of receiving much emotional reward from his work, the failings in Vietnam increased Johnson’s work depression. He was quoted as saying of his job, “[t]he load is unbearable,” describing himself as, “the loneliest man in the world.”<sup>40</sup> This turned into an unhealthy cycle for the president, as stress from the pressure from Vietnam made him more isolated, which made him work even harder, which made the shortcomings faced even more disappointing. Soon this stress turned to paranoia. Deep distrust for his advisors and peers planted itself in Johnson’s mind. He retreated into himself, calling anyone who dared to challenge him a “Nervous Nellie,” assuming that those who did not agree were against him.

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<sup>37</sup> James D. Barber. *The Presidential Character*. (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1972), 52.

<sup>38</sup> David Coleman, “Lyndon Johnson and the Vietnam War: Introduction to the Digital Edition,” *Presidential Recordings of Lyndon B. Johnson*, accessed on April 11, 2015, <http://presidentialrecordings.rotunda.upress.virginia.edu/essays?series=Vietnam>.

<sup>39</sup> David Coleman, “Lyndon Johnson and the Vietnam War: Introduction to the Digital Edition,” *Presidential Recordings of Lyndon B. Johnson*, accessed on April 11, 2015, <http://presidentialrecordings.rotunda.upress.virginia.edu/essays?series=Vietnam>.

<sup>40</sup> James D. Barber. *The Presidential Character*. (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall Inc., 1972), 53.

Overall, Lyndon Johnson possessed an outgoing and brusque personality; he would often use this in order to get his way in policymaking. This can be seen as Johnson tried to persuade fellow members of Congress. He was quick to initiate personal contact and flattery, touching lovingly those who agreed with him and standing near and glaring over those who did not. To those that disagreed with him, he used not only the humiliation and bullying, but also intimidation in the form of shouting and towering over his opponents.<sup>41</sup>

His foreign policy also revolved around his determination to get what he wanted, by his own admission. Private recordings have been found from 1964 and 1965 have him saying to his wife, “I can’t get out [of Vietnam], and I can’t finish it with what I have got. And I don’t know what the hell to do!”<sup>42</sup> This statement goes back to the idea of Johnson wanting people to respect him. It had been shown through his need to be surrounded by those who he considered “loyal” and who agreed with his perspective. He worried that pulling troops out of Vietnam would be seen as a U.S. failure, and that he would be seen as personally responsible. The active part of his personality, causing him to want to continue and win the Vietnam War, fought with the growing realization that victory was not a possibility. However, his personality did not allow him to see any other option than continuing the fighting. The longer the war went on, the more critical and angry the public became; his intervention in the East was seen as unnecessary and

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<sup>41</sup> Randall B. Woods. *LBJ: Architect of American Ambition*. (New York: Free Press, 2006)

<sup>42</sup> Michael Beschloss, “I Don’t See Any Way of Winning” *Newsweek*, last edited November 11, 2001, [www.newsweek.com/i-dont-see-any-way-winning-149405](http://www.newsweek.com/i-dont-see-any-way-winning-149405).

Johnson was “utterly vilified” by opponents.<sup>43</sup> This added to the negative aspect of his personality. Johnson, who saw his work as an increasing burden, could not enjoy any small victory gained. His focus remained on the problem as a whole, unsatisfied until he could complete it well enough for his own standards. It can be seen that through his personality, through his need to attain achievement and his persuasive tactics, he struggled and tried to guide the United States through such issues as the communist threat and engagement in the Vietnam War.

His background was an important influence on his personality. During his youth and home life, he was fawned over by his mother. Johnson had grown to believe that what he said was important, that his work mattered. He found a love for argument and used his persuasive techniques as he climbed the political ladder. Some were incredibly intimidated by Lyndon Johnson’s intensity and refusal to see any possible path but his own; some were turned off the amount of hard work he expected of others, without receiving a large amount of emotional reward. However, to Johnson, this was the way to conduct business. Believing that he knew better than others, he berated and cajoled his hardest in order to achieve his goals.

### **George W. Bush**

Examining President George W. Bush’s personality during his time in office can be split into two fields. First, one can study how his personality as perceived by the American people played a role in Bush’s presidency, public approval of his decisions, and the international presence he held for the United States. Second, one can look at

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<sup>43</sup> “American President: A Reference Resource,” *University of Virginia Miller Center*. Accessed on March 21, 2015, [www.millercenter.org/president/lbjohnson/essays/biography/5](http://www.millercenter.org/president/lbjohnson/essays/biography/5).

Bush's leading style and personality characteristics in the case of his actual foreign policymaking decisions.

George W. Bush, son of previous president George H. Bush, was born in New Haven, Connecticut, but his family quickly relocated to Texas. He spent his formative years watching his father work hard in the oil fields. While young, he attended elite secondary schools in Texas, and was eager to return home after getting his degrees from Yale and Harvard.<sup>44</sup> When his father was elected president, Bush Jr. benefitted from seeing this political world and the contacts his father made. He came to understand what the job "president of the United States," entailed and was eager to give it a try himself. Unfortunately, his time in office led to a mostly negative view of Bush himself, as well as the work he did.

George W. Bush's climb to office did not go as expected. He started as a governor from Texas in 1995, serving until he ran for the presidency in 2000. This seemed a bold move, as he did not have as much experience as a typical candidate, and his opponent Al Gore was finishing up his own vice presidency.<sup>45</sup> His victory was tainted by the amount of recounts and close calls needed to announce his win. It certainly did not help that the 2000 election was one of the few where a candidate won presidency through electoral votes, but not popular votes. This meant that Bush entered office without a majority, which created early hostility. He maintained average polling figures for a president at the beginning of his term, despite any negative public feelings towards his election. He used his early time in office to work on domestic affairs, such as education and taxes. The

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<sup>44</sup> "George W. Bush" *The White House*. Accessed on December 30, 2014, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/1600/presidents/georgewbush>.

<sup>45</sup> Gary L. Gregg II and Mark J. Rozell, *Considering the Bush Presidency*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 1.

public stood behind Bush even stronger after the attacks of September 11, 2001. A feeling of extreme patriotism swept the nation, and Bush was seen as the hero leader. However, as one war became two, with Bush entering into Iraq as well as Afghanistan, and time dragged on, the public became more and more wary of their leader.

George W. Bush's ability to do his job was questioned harshly, especially by those in the media. These journalists and writers created a "dumb" identity for him, claiming he was incapable of being in charge.<sup>46</sup> A good example of this is the popular television show *Saturday Night Live (SNL)*. During Bush's presidency, and after, *SNL* has running skits that showed him and his vice president, Dick Cheney, as completely incompetent. Credible news sources also questioned his actions, asking whether multiple wars in the Middle East were a good idea. The differences between Iraq and Afghanistan as countries and as conflicts caused confusion for most people. They were not able to distinguish between the war fighting terrorism in Afghanistan from the war to find and destroy weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. This Middle East confusion led them to believe that both wars were the same and that neither was worth American time. Despite any evidence to the contrary, the public perceived Bush's actions as the wild shots in the dark of a man who was not qualified to be running one of the most influential countries in the world.

When it came to foreign policy, Bush appeared very certain of his actions. He took a swift move on 9/11, declaring a war on terror in general when a specific country

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<sup>46</sup> Examples include popular web articles such as: <http://nymag.com/daily/intelligencer/2013/04/bush-terrible-president-also-not-a-smart-man.html>, [http://www.slate.com/articles/news\\_and\\_politics/bushisms/2004/05/the\\_misunderestimated\\_man.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/bushisms/2004/05/the_misunderestimated_man.html), and [http://www.slate.com/articles/news\\_and\\_politics/the\\_big\\_idea/2006/02/out\\_of\\_gas.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/the_big_idea/2006/02/out_of_gas.html). Other such articles also exist, as the Internet has provided an endless amount of places for people to voice opinions on public figures.

was not to blame.<sup>47</sup> He stressed that this fighting was against al Qaeda and the terrorists, not the Islamic religion itself.<sup>48</sup> His active personality was helpful in this time of crisis. Bush was ready to deal with the tragedy in New York, but also was able to look at how to deal with the issue of terrorism abroad.

Even with a war underway, George W. Bush's active personality lead him to trying to accomplish more. During this time, Bush had received many reports that Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein was hiding illegal weapons of mass destruction. A more passive president may have decided to wait on making a move in Iraq until the War on Terror was officially completed. Seeing an opportunity to take care of another enemy, he expanded his fighting to Iraq as he searched for these WMDs. Whether smart or not, Bush went into action with some sort of plan. The media had created such a bumbling personality for him, that each step he took was met with mistrust and skepticism. The negative aspect of his personality meant that the more Bush worked but was not taken seriously, the harder he worked and the less emotional reward he found in his job.

Though many American citizens may not have had much faith in his ability to be an effective president, George Bush spent his time in office doing what he thought was best. He tried to implement helpful plans, such as his educational reforms. He may have been a clever politician, but public speaking was not his strong suit; his mishaps during speeches provided more ammunition for the other side to use against him. Whether his incompetence was grossly overstated by the media or correct, the perception was there,

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<sup>47</sup> Robert Draper. *Dead Certain: The Presidency of George W. Bush*. (New York: Free Press, 2007).

<sup>48</sup> "American President: A Reference Resource," *University of Virginia Miller Center*. Accessed on March 21, 2015, [www.millercenter.org/president/gwbush/essays/biography/5](http://www.millercenter.org/president/gwbush/essays/biography/5).



meaning that Bush had to work even harder, first to implement change and laws, and second to convince the public that these were good options. Rather than give in to the public's negative views, he tried to gain trust and continue his duties.

Loosely categorized, George W. Bush would fall into the active-negative section. These presidents, as stated before, use their time in office to complete as many tasks as possible, but do so without emotional gratification. Bush tried to pass many domestic laws and to engage with the international world. In the beginning of his time in office, this was very easy. Many Americans felt vulnerable after the 9/11 attacks and were willing to follow the president's lead in whatever way he felt best. However, any positive feelings that may have come from this were shrouded by the negative perceptions many had of him. Not only did he spend his time trying to run the country, but he also had to work to prove to everyone that he was doing a good job. His active personality pushed him to overwhelm the military forces, by entering into two separate wars in the Middle East, which was viewed negatively by the public and only served to cause more questioning of Bush's abilities. Feeling like his job was a duty to be performed must have only been increased by the feelings of being swamped and the low public approval he carried.<sup>49</sup>

During his time in office, Bush's active personality caused him to get the United States heavily involved in the Middle East. Unfortunately, multiple wars were a large stress on the United States. This, along with the perception of Bush as dumb due to his poor public speaking skills, led to a lot of mistrust by his own electors. And although he was reelected, led the country through the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks, and passed many

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<sup>49</sup> Gary L. Gregg II and Mark J. Rozell, *Considering the Bush Presidency*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

helpful reforms, what will most be remembered about George W. Bush will be the question of whether or not he was competent enough to be president. As shown, though, it cannot be mistaken that Bush was very active during his time in office.

## **Conclusion**

The President of the United States holds a lot of power in the international world. Because of this, it is important to understand how these decisions are made. One large factor in this is a president's personality. To analyze the role of personality in foreign policymaking, this paper has used the classification system of James Barber on personality and how each type deals with conflict. To better demonstrate the effect of personality on a president, three case studies of past leaders have been presented. First, Franklin Roosevelt and how his active personality lead the United States through World War II, beginning as an isolationist state and emerging as a fully-engaged world power. Next, Lyndon Johnson was examined, how his active personality formed an obsessive persistence to resolve the Vietnam War. Finally, George W. Bush and the idea of perceived personality were looked at, in terms of the public's doubt that he was qualified to do his job correctly. These case studies demonstrated that a president's personality does indeed help to shape foreign policymaking during his time in office.

It has been demonstrated here that not only does the president directly affect how and what foreign policy decisions are made, but that his personality will affect how he does this. For example, if he lives in a time of war (as all three case studies did) and he is active, he will be more prone to try to continue and resolve this conflict. A passive president may, on the other hand, try to wrap up any conflict quickly, and would be less

likely to try to go out and actively resolve issues. Positive presidents may include more advisors into their decision-making process, which means more varied input and more possible points of view; a negative president may prefer to keep decision-making between himself and a select few, meaning that outcomes are more based around his desires for foreign policy. Although future decisions cannot be predicted through a president's personality alone, it plays a significant role and warrants attention.

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