



Written by [Joe Wolverton, II, J.D.](#) on August 9, 2011

New Book Claims Crazy Leaders Are the Best Leaders

According to the thesis of a new book, nearly every one of the great and powerful leaders of history have at least one trait in common: They were (are) mentally ill.

In a purposefully provocative new book entitled [First-Rate Madness](#), Nassir Ghaemi, professor of psychiatry at Tufts University School of Medicine, claims that some of history's most noteworthy and respected leaders demonstrated signs of being mentally disturbed in one way or another.

Evidence of mental illness, writes Ghaemi, is not only a common thread running throughout these leaders' personalities, but it is the presence of that trait that distinguishes them in the field of public service.



Ghaemi predicates this belief on a combination of historical records and modern analytical studies in the field of depression and mania. He insists that a careful examination of the records and the data reveals the startling "fact" that "mild symptoms" of mental disquiet increases the sufferer's capacity to lead by enhancing the qualities of "empathy" and "creativity."

The online culture magazine Salon.com conducted an [interview](#) with Ghaemi, focusing on Hitler's reputed bipolar disorder, as well as "Churchill's genius" and what lessons can be learned by appreciating the benefit to the governed of the madness of their governors. Part of that interview is reproduced below.

When asked by Salon why it seems, according to information provided in the book, that manic depression seems to increase a person's capacity for leadership in a crisis, the author explained:

There's extensive psychological research on this. Depression has been shown to enhance realism. In one experimental study, for example, depressed people were more aware of when they realistically controlled a task, whereas people without depression sensed they had more control than they really did. People who have depression also have higher empathy scores. Mania has been widely associated with creativity. Both depression and mania (especially mild manic symptoms) have been shown to enhance resilience to trauma. In studies of people who experienced disaster or war trauma, people with mild manic symptoms seemed to have less post-traumatic stress symptoms.

One of the examples used by Ghaemi of a leader who was successful "largely because of his manic depression" was General William Sherman, the Union general notorious for burning his way through the South. Said Ghaemi:

At that point, the classic strategy for war, from Napoleon onward, had involved large armies of men directly assaulting each other in frontal assaults or flanking moves. That was basically what



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Lee and Grant did. But Sherman [likely as a result of his mania] decided to fight what's since been called "total war." He actually avoided the other army in his march through Georgia and the South and instead burned Atlanta and destroyed farms. That had two effects: the direct destruction of the economic capacity of the South to fight the war and striking terror in the lives of the civilians. That kind of economic and psychological warfare hadn't been thought of before. Sherman also allowed his communication lines to be cut, which wasn't part of the traditional military strategy. These were very radical notions that broke the back of the South and were the most influential factor in ending the war.

As for the development of the traits of empathy and resilience, deemed by Ghaemi to be necessary in an effective leader, he points out in the book that often extreme hardship in youth tends to serve as the richest soil in which to cultivate the empathy and resiliency that are two hallmarks of strong, respected leaders. As Ghaemi told Salon:

Many people who experience traumas [like terrorism or war] don't develop PTSD or other illnesses. So the question is, what keeps those people from getting sick? What creates resilience? The psychological research suggests that personality is a major factor. Resilience seems to be associated with mild manic symptoms, but you can't develop resilience unless you've already experienced trauma. Many of these leaders faced adversity in their childhood and adulthood, and that seemed to make them better able to handle crises. It's like a vaccine. You get exposed to a little bit of a bacteria then you can handle major infections and I think trauma and resilience and hyperthymic personality seem to follow a similar path.

The most notorious among the cadre of leaders cited as examples by Ghaemi was Adolf Hitler. Ghaemi joins the throng of historians who speculate that Hitler suffered from bipolar disorder.

I think he had bipolar disorder. In the early to middle phase of his career, his mania and depression actually helped him, but then beginning in 1937 he got amphetamines fed to him intravenously, and he continued to do so for most of the rest of the war. That really destabilized his bipolar disorder and made him have more and more manic-depressive episodes. I think that's why he became more irrational over time.

In a curious twist, the Salon interviewer asked Ghaemi if he believed the sane among us were at a disadvantage when it came to becoming highly respected and effective leaders.

I think one message from this research is that sanity is overrated. We shouldn't be trying to seek leaders who are cardboard cutouts of what we conceive to be normal and healthy. This research should allow us to have more flexible attitudes toward our own emotions and show us that the stigma against mental illness is very harmful, not just for the mentally ill but also for the mentally healthy. We should appreciate and understand that a little anxiety and a little depression and a few mood swings can actually be useful and helpful. And when they're severe we should be able to get them treated in a matter-of-fact way, instead of stigmatizing them.

As for the current occupant of the White House, the interviewer insists that President Obama is "good at compromise" and therefore likely rather sane and therefore disqualifying himself from achieving a level of leadership and popularity enjoyed by FDR or Churchill. As for this proposition, Ghaemi explained:

I didn't discuss Obama and other current leaders in the book, because there are documentation and confidentiality issues, and a lot of speculation would have to happen. That said, Obama has



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said himself that he thinks he's very normal. This no-drama-Obama persona is meant to reassure people about his normality, but I think that when you look at his memoir there's a sense of a much more complex and profound person who may have experienced a great deal of anxiety and maybe some depression growing up, being half-white half-African-American. The [sane] parts of his psychology may hinder his leadership in terms of not being creative, and that may not be as useful in a crisis. But to whatever extent he's not fully completely average, he'll have some psychological reservoir to draw on to think more creatively and realistically about the current situation.

As for the reasonable accusation that the retroactive diagnosing of prominent figures from history is a folly and an exercise in irrational speculation, Ghaemi argued:

I don't base diagnoses on symptoms — I'm not saying that because someone is sad they're depressed. I'm basing it on independent lines of evidence that are used in scientific research on psychiatric diagnoses, like genetics, course of illness, and treatment effects. It's actually a strength to be looking at historical figures because much of the documentation about the psychological state of leaders comes out decades or centuries after they die. For instance, Churchill's doctor published his diaries first describing Churchill's depression a decade after Churchill died.

A salient objection to the method employed by Ghaemi to prove his theory is that the sample of "leaders" upon which the studies were conducted all seem to be men renowned less for their ability to lead than for their ability to mislead and take advantage of manufactured crises and fears of the populace to advance their own cause and the cause of the advance of the war machine.

Photo of Adolf Hitler



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