

The Nature of Narcissism

Essay by **Rose McDermott**, Brown University

Published on **15 June 2018** | issforum.org

Editor: Robert Jervis, Joshua Rovner, and Diane Labrosse

Web and Production Editor: George Fujii

Shortlink: <http://tiny.cc/PR-1-5BE>

Permalink: <http://issforum.org/roundtables/policy/1-5BE-Narcissism>

PDF URL: <http://issforum.org/ISSF/PDF/Policy-Roundtable-1-5BE.pdf>

In his January 2017 introductory essay to the *America and the World* roundtable, “President Trump and IR Theory,” Robert Jervis wrote, “...a Trump foreign policy that followed his campaign statements would be hard to square with Realism, although it would be difficult to say what alternative theory, if any, it vindicated.”¹ We now have a lot more evidence about the extent to which Trump has defied numerous expectations regarding the power of external constraints to enforce consistency in policy across administrations. He has pulled out of the Paris climate accords; left the Trans Pacific Partnership Trade (TPP) agreement; pulled out the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action designed to delay or prevent Iranian nuclear proliferation (JCPOA); and now seems more intent on saving Chinese jobs at China’s ZTE Corporation than American jobs in the coal belt. Although he maintains a core of unfailing support among his base, he has defied the policy prescriptions of establishment republicans as well as populists in many arenas from trade and immigration policy to tax policy, respectively. Even more uniquely, he has consistently fought against his own bureaucracy, particularly in the realm of criminal justice and intelligence, attacking both communities with consistent fury on Twitter as though he himself were not head of these agencies.

So, to return to Jervis’s sanguine query, what alternative theory can explain Donald Trump? Here is where I think IR theory offers much less insight or accuracy than clinical psychology and psychiatry in trying to understand the source of Trump’s behavior. Indeed, Dr. Brandy Lee, a psychiatrist at the Yale school of medicine, recently edited a volume, *The Dangerous Case of Donald Trump: 27 Psychiatrists and Mental Health Experts Assess a President*,² which speaks to the concerns that many mental health care experts have about Trump’s capacity as President. Although the main controversy surrounding this volume involves whether it

¹ Robert Jervis, “Policy Series: President Trump and IR Theory,” H-Diplo/ISSF Policy Series, *America and the World—2017 and Beyond* (2 January 2017), <https://issforum.org/roundtables/policy/1-5b-jervis>.

² Brandy Lee, *The Dangerous Case of Donald Trump: 27 Psychiatrists and Mental Health Experts Assess a President* (New York: Thomas Dunne Books, 2017).

breaks the so-called Goldwater rule, which prohibits psychologists and psychiatrists from diagnosing people they have neither seen nor treated, the editor argues that she is merely trying to raise the alarm about Trump's dangerousness, which trained professionals may be able to see, based on observation, before the public does.³ While the authors put forth a range of potential diagnoses which might explain Trump's unique pattern of behavior, everyone agrees on one aspect of his character: his indisputable narcissism. In short, Trump appears to have one true north, and that is cultivating, protecting, and promoting his own grandiose self-image. In short, the most parsimonious explanation for Donald Trump's behavior across multiple domains lies in his malignant narcissism. And, although there are notable exceptions, most prominently represented by the classic work of Robert Jervis,⁴ standard international relations theory in general gives short shrift to the influence of individual-level differences on international outcomes.⁵ However, as we see standard international relations theory fail to explain Trump's behavior in the international arena, it would behoove scholars to engage more seriously in the first level of analysis, and think seriously about how individual differences can influence outcome in both idiosyncratic and definitive ways. Voluminous work drawn from clinical psychology can deeply inform this view in ways that are not possible using standard theories of international relations. In the case of Trump, the most relevant work relates to the influence of narcissism on decision making and behavior. And, from this perspective, there is certainly cause for serious concern regarding the potential for negative foreign policy outcomes resulting from his pathology.

Narcissism is an increasingly common diagnosis, which can appear in two different manifestations. One is as a transient disorder (a so-called Axis I disorder) and another is as an enduring personality trait or characteristic, known as a personality disorder (a so-called Axis II disorder). According to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders IV-R classification, the lifetime prevalence of narcissistic personality disorder runs about 6.2%, with much higher rates for men (7.7%) than women (4.8%).⁶ In addition, the disorder often co-occurs with other psychiatric conditions, again primarily in men. Note that this represents a relatively high rate of prevalence in the general population. Jerrold Post, a psychiatrist and political scientist who helped develop a technique for assessing leadership at a distance, has written extensively on narcissism. He argues that narcissism is more prevalent in political circles precisely because political careers disproportionately attract those who seek the spotlight and desire to be the center of attention.⁷ In this way, narcissistic individuals naturally gravitate toward the political arena. And, importantly for observers,

³ Bandy Lee, "Trump is now dangerous—that makes his mental health a matter of public interest" (opinion), *The Guardian*, 6 January 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/jan/07/donald-trump-dangerous-psychiatrist>.

⁴ Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976).

⁵ Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Long Grove: Waveland Press, 2010).

⁶ The manual is American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders: DSM-5* (Arlington: American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Prevalence statistics are from F. S. Stinson, D. A. Dawson, R. B. Goldstein, S. P. Chou, B. Huang, S.M. Smith, and B. F. Grant, "Prevalence, Correlates, Disability, and Comorbidity of DSM-IV Narcissistic Personality Disorder: Results from the Wave 2 National Epidemiologic Survey on Alcohol and Related Conditions," *The Journal of Clinical Psychiatry* 69:7 (2008), 1033.

⁷ Jerrold M. Post, *Narcissism and Politics: Dreams of Glory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

narcissism is not a disorder easily hidden; by definition, narcissists need constantly to call attention to themselves and their putative skills, talents, attractiveness and accomplishments.

So, what exactly is narcissism and what are its consequences? Again, referring to the standard reference of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual, narcissistic personality disorder is characterized by a persistent pattern of grandiosity, need for admiration, and lack of empathy indicated in at least five of the following nine tendencies: a grandiose sense of self-importance, exaggerating achievements and talents, expecting to be recognized as superior without commensurate achievements; being preoccupied with fantasies of unlimited success, power, brilliance, beauty, or ideal love; believing that one is “special;” requiring excessive admiration; having a sense of entitlement, i.e., holding unreasonable expectations of especially favorable treatment or automatic compliance with one’s expectations; being interpersonally exploitative, i.e., taking advantage of others to achieve his or her own ends; lacking empathy; being unwilling to recognize or identify with the feelings and needs of others; being envious or believing others are envious; being very arrogant or haughty in behavior. These characteristics then lead to persistent particular predictable impairments in functioning across various domains, including an excessive need for external validation and self-esteem that closely mirrors these external reinforcements.

Narcissists’ abilities to manage their own emotions are almost entirely dependent on these external referents; they cannot manage their own internal states on their own. Their goals are almost entirely based on gaining others’ admiration and approval. Narcissists lack empathy, and while they may initially appear to care about what other people think, closer inspection reveals that concern to be almost entirely restricted to what others think about the narcissist. Personal relationships are shallow and often transactional, in that they exist only to serve personal gain, and are characterized by the need for adulation. Behaviorally, narcissists are antagonistic and exploitative, going out of their way to seek attention and approval from others.⁸ Most clinical experience shows that narcissists can often be very charming and charismatic on first blush, but because their self-esteem is so fundamentally fragile, once they sense the first hint of criticism, disapproval or disagreement, what is often referred to as pricking the narcissistic bubble, they typically fly into a rage and do what they can to destroy the source of the criticism in order to deny its veracity. There are several theories about the sources of narcissism, as well as subtle distinctions in manifestations based on sub-types, but for our current purposes, the main point is that this particular pattern of tendencies can make sense of patterns of decision-making and behavior that might otherwise not cohere if they were analyzed from the perspective of traditional international relations theory, policy coherence or political ideology.

What are the effects of such predilections on political decision making? Although I first became aware of the myriad behavioral manifestations and implications of narcissism many years ago in a couple of undergraduate psychology classes in Abnormal Psychology at Stanford University, the profound and endemic clinical significance and prevalence of narcissism were reinforced when I later took the core classes in Psychiatry at the Stanford Medical School some years later. I did not really think seriously about its application to the realm of international relations and foreign policy until much later, although I did write about what I believed to be its influence in the case of Edward Snowden, the former CIA employee and contractor who leaked classified

⁸ APA, *DSM-5*.

information about United States surveillance programs.⁹ I came to think about the influence of narcissism more systematically when working on a book on intelligence. This book, *Intelligence Success and Failure: The Human Factor*, co-authored with Uri Bar-Joseph, examines three sets of matched cases of intelligence success and failure involving the Soviet Union, Israel, and the United States.¹⁰ We did not go into the book expecting to have it emerge as a study of narcissism, but in many ways that is what happened. The big surprise of this study, and our findings, was how endemic, powerful, and pervasive narcissism was across time and space, and how deeply its presence compromised any kind of rational or reasonable decision making, even or especially among powerful leaders. In the case of the Soviet Union failing to properly prepare for the German invasion in June 1941 despite adequate warning, the fault really lay at the feet of Soviet Leader Joseph Stalin, although his narcissism was certainly compounded by paranoia as well. In the case of their repeated failures to properly learn from past failings, General Douglas MacArthur and his coterie of sycophants, otherwise known as the Bataan Boys, refused, to their profound detriment, to accept any information which ran counter to the grandiose views of the master. Similarly, Israeli Director of Military Intelligence Eli Zeira's arrogance contributed to the catastrophic failure to properly prepare for the 1973 attack against the Israelis on Yom Kippur. Although we actually wrote the book long before Trump was even a viable presidential candidate, much less elected president, the narcissism we found to be so disastrous in earlier cases is deeply resonant in President Trump's patterns of behavior.

There are numerous examples that illustrate Trump's narcissistic tendencies, beginning from his first days in office, when he repeatedly insisted that the crowds present at his inauguration were the largest in history, when the most cursory of visual comparisons showed them to be absolutely dwarfed by Barack Obama's crowds, among others. Indeed, more than any other single explanation, the factor that seems to unite Trump's policies is a desire to overturn all of Obama's accomplishments. While a simple explanation might blame racism as the source of this motivation, and that may certainly constitute a contributing cause, many pundits have pointed to the time that Obama publically humiliated Trump at the White House correspondents' dinner as the moment which inspired him to run for office. This kind of public humiliation would certainly be more than sufficient to inspire relentless opposition, as well as a desire to dominate and prove oneself superior to the accuser, on the part of a narcissist.

Trump's accusations that Obama bugged Trump tower during the campaign show a similarly self-referential preoccupation, especially in light of his inability to produce any evidence in support of such a claim. More recent accusations directed at the FBI for placing spies in his campaign, and his exaggeration about the severity of such an offense, are equally striking for the preoccupation with his own self-image over any real concern regarding potential Russian interference in an American election. Any leader who put country over party, much less self, would and should prove much more concerned about the potential for foreign interference in a domestic election, not least because of the harbinger such action portends regarding future interference, than attempts to uncover those who might leak or report on such investigations. The entire

⁹ Loch K. Johnson, Richard J. Aldrich, Christopher Moran, David M. Barrett, Glenn Hastedt, Robert Jervis, Wolfgang Krieger *et al.*, "An INS Special forum: Implications of the Snowden leaks," *Intelligence and National Security* 29:6 (2014): 793-810.

¹⁰ Uri Bar-Joseph and Rose McDermott, *Intelligence Success and Failure: The Human Factor* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017). See the H-Diplo/ISSF Roundtable review at <http://issforum.org/roundtables/10-15-human-factor>.

history of the Mueller investigation into foreign interference shows that Trump's interest has only aligned with his own personal fate, even to the point of attacking his own Justice Department. His tweets have amounted to little more than asserting that there has been no collusion, and attacking the media and the Justice Department for undertaking a witch hunt against him.

Trump has now gone so far as to claim unprecedented presidential powers by having his lawyers argue that he cannot be guilty of obstruction because he has complete freedom of action over all Justice Department investigations. In the realm of foreign policy, Trump cancelled the scheduled meeting with North Korean leader, Kim Jung Un, after it appeared that Kim might cancel on him. Standard international relations theory would predict and encourage an American president to allow the other side to cancel first, because this would upset the South Koreans and Chinese, and they would blame North Korea, whereas Trump cancelling upset those allies, including the European allies, producing unnecessary collateral damage. Although the summit meeting still took place, Trump's initial cancellation clearly demonstrates one of the myriad ways he prioritizes his self-regard over the welfare of the nation. Similarly, Trump's inability to recognize how statements made by National Security Council (NSC) Adviser John Bolton and Vice President Mike Pence comparing North Korea to Libya, where the Libyan leader was decapitated subsequent to giving up his nuclear weapons, would be received by the North Korean leadership similarly demonstrates his lack of empathy.¹¹ His statements regarding the success of the summit amounted to little more than self-praise for his own skills in deal-making, and ostensible ability to get to know, understand, and manipulate another leader quickly and easily. This appears a particularly strange comment in light of his unnecessarily picking a fight with America's closest allies, and other leaders of the G-7, only two days prior. Most strikingly, Trump accused Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau of being 'weak' and 'dishonest' in the wake of comments Trudeau made which were infinitely milder and more respectful in tone than any of the insults Trump leveled at him or the other leaders of the G-7 both before and after this meeting. In clinical parlance, Trump's response can appear to be nothing other than sheer projection onto others of his own rage at being opposed.

Of course narcissists rarely act alone, and cannot attain their widest impact without the compliance and support of those sycophants who surround them. Sometimes such individuals simply want access to power, or believe that the leader will help facilitate other goals that are near and dear to their hearts. Those close to narcissists know that once they antagonize the narcissist, they will be ejected from their circle. Narcissists cannot tolerate being told no, or being dominated, lectured to, or made to feel less than or inadequate to anyone else, no matter how important, skilled, or valuable the other person might be. In the case of a president like Trump, the examples of weak-kneed submission on the part of the Republicans in Congress are endless, with the consequence that an unusually large number of his supporters have decided not to run for office again, anticipating their own electoral defeats. Moreover, the casualties of his ire in his first months in office are myriad and seemingly unprecedented in number: Reince Preibus, Steve Bannon; Sean Spicer, Michael Flynn; H.R. McMaster, Rex Tillerson; and so on. Ironically, of course, the immediate impact of narcissism is worst on those closest to the narcissist, who must constantly provide unrelenting approval and praise or be subject to unmitigated rage. In fact, the sycophants who validate narcissistic preoccupation over national welfare are the ones who are most guilty of true collusion, for they perpetuate the narcissist's self-absorption to the detriment of the wider public. Indeed, for the larger mass public, which is subject to the vagaries of narcissistic leadership, the consequences could prove much more dangerous and potentially lethal over time. Narcissists are not driven by any genuine concern about the welfare of others; they care only for

¹¹ I am grateful to Robert Jervis for this helpful insight on North Korea.

appearance. Neither are they driven by any true political ideology that would impose consistency on policy; they care only about approval. The real problems emerge because they cannot tolerate any information that puts them in a bad light, or points out any real limitations or deficiencies in their performance. Sometimes the narcissist will just put a positive spin on a negative outcome, but this does not always work, and the consequences in such a case where delusion meets reality can prove dire. For example, narcissists will consistently reject information that may prove important for protecting others, as indeed both Stalin and MacArthur did, causing numerous possibly unnecessary deaths, although of course the scale differs greatly across various exemplars such as the two mentioned here. Certainly soldiers would have died in both conflicts regardless, but with better preparation, fewer might have been killed.

Against all evidence to the contrary, such as his three notable bankruptcies and the many lawsuits leveled against him for violating contracts, President Trump presents himself as a great deal maker. But even casual observation shows him to be more of a show horse than a work horse. His insistence on rule by chaos provides a distraction that captures the public's attention in the way showmen prefer, but the reality is that such disorganization merely reveals his pathology. His psychological limitations are hidden in plain sight; the country has become the blank screen against which he is constantly projecting his bottomless need for constant adoration and approval. Even the most extreme national obsession will prove insufficient to satisfy the internal emptiness that consumes narcissists, while the least little opposition or criticism will only inspire new bursts of outrage. The country has become the container that is expected to hold his disorder in check; the question is whether its institutions, and its people, are strong enough to do so, especially when so many followers share the disorder.

Narcissists and those who serve them, who are themselves frightened by the powerful narcissist's rage, or share in the disorder, are by definition incapable of recognizing their limitations. It is thus almost impossible for them to self-correct. But we must at least recognize that we have become the screen upon which a narcissist is projecting his emptiness, rage, and his deep sense of personal inadequacy and impotence. Therefore, public accountability becomes central to our understanding of how to mitigate the impact of such individuals. The public needs to take responsibility to vote against people who demonstrate such tendencies, but the challenge of course comes from the fact that narcissists tend to be attracted to other narcissists, and as narcissism becomes more common in the population, as has increasingly been the case recently, the likelihood of electing more narcissists only increases. Therefore, remaining vigilant and aware of its profoundly negative consequences should be a prime concern for the public and unaffected decision makers. This insight does not portend well for our current situation.

Rose McDermott is the David and Mariana Fisher University Professor of International Relations at Brown University and a Fellow in the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. She received her Ph.D. (Political Science) and M.A. (Experimental Social Psychology) from Stanford University and has taught at Cornell, UCSB, and Harvard. She has held fellowships at the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study, the Olin Institute for Strategic Studies and the Women and Public Policy Program, all at Harvard University. She has been a fellow at the Stanford Center for Advanced Studies in the Behavioral Sciences twice. She is the author of four books, a co-editor of two additional volumes, and author of over two hundred academic articles across a wide variety of disciplines encompassing topics such as experimentation, emotion and decision making, and the biological and genetic bases of political behavior.