ONE MAN'S WICKEDNESS
Malignant Narcissism and Major Blunders in International Relations

by

Daniel B. Landau

B. A. Print Journalism
University of Southern California, 1992

SUBMITTED TO THE DEPARTMENT OF POLITICAL SCIENCE
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF SCIENCE IN POLITICAL SCIENCE
AT THE
MASSACHUSETTS INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

JUNE 2004

© 2004 Daniel B. Landau. All rights reserved.

The author hereby grants to MIT permission to reproduce
and to distribute publicly paper and electronic
copies of this thesis document in whole or in part.

Signature of Author: ____________________________

Department of Political Science
May 7, 2004

Certified by: ____________________________

Stephen W. Van Evera
Professor of Political Science
Thesis Supervisor

Accepted by: ____________________________

Stephen Ansolabehere
Professor of Political Science
Chairman, Graduate Program Committee
ONE MAN’S WICKEDNESS
Malignant Narcissism and Major Blunders in International Relations

by

Daniel B. Landau

Submitted to the Department of Political Science
on May 7, 2004, in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of Master of Science in
Political Science

ABSTRACT

Malignant narcissism is a personality syndrome marked by hubris, paranoia, and reckless indifference to the human consequences of decisions. Malignant-narcissistic leaders tend to commit major blunders in international relations. Examples include Saddam, Hitler, Stalin, Mussolini, Mao, and Nasser.

Seventeen hypotheses are presented on malignant narcissism, exploring its relationships to cognition, domestic political systems, and blunders in international relations. The hypotheses are illustrated with historical examples to support their plausibility. Saddam is explained as a malignant narcissist who was especially prone to blunders throughout his political career.

Thesis Supervisor: Stephen W. Van Evera
Title: Professor of Political Science
I. Introduction.................................................................................................................. 4
II. Malignant Narcissism .................................................................................................. 9
   A. Personality Disorders in the DSM-IV .................................................................... 10
   B. Malignant Narcissism as a Personality Syndrome ............................................. 16
   C. Malignant-Narcissistic Leaders: A Field Guide .................................................. 21
   D. Objections and Rebuttals ...................................................................................... 31
III. Hypotheses ................................................................................................................ 37
   A. Malignant Narcissism and Cognitive Distortion .................................................. 38
   B. Malignant Narcissism in Different Political Systems ......................................... 44
   C. Malignant Narcissism and International Blunders ............................................. 59
IV. Saddam Hussein ....................................................................................................... 77
   A. The Long Crisis, 1991-2003 .............................................................................. 78
   B. Opportunistic Aggression, 1990 ......................................................................... 81
   C. Vulnerability to Surprise Attack, 2003 ............................................................... 82
   D. Squandered Opportunities for Peace, 1980-1988 ............................................. 83
   E. Failure to Be Coerced, 1991 and 2003 ............................................................... 84
   F. Economic Meltdown, 1990-2003 ..................................................................... 86
V. Conclusion ................................................................................................................... 89
VI. Works Cited ............................................................................................................. 96
VII. Appendices ............................................................................................................. 102
I. **INTRODUCTION**

Long before he became the tyrant of Iraq, Saddam Hussein’s life was marked by violence. His stepfather routinely beat him with a stick, and the boy Saddam dealt with the humiliation and rage by beating stray dogs to death with an iron bar. Saddam escaped this environment at age eight by running away from home to live with his uncle, a notoriously violent ex-army officer who had served time in prison for participating in a coup attempt. At 19, already the leader of a gang of Ba’ath Party thugs with a growing reputation for brutality, Saddam murdered his first human victim.¹

Upon becoming leader of Iraq in 1979, Saddam moved to make his power absolute with a series of bloody purges, in which loyal associates of twenty years were summarily murdered. Wanton violence became the hallmark of Saddam’s regime. In the *Anfal* campaign of 1988, tens of thousands of Kurds were murdered with poison gas, and then more than a million surviving Kurds were relocated to concentration camps in the deserts of southern Iraq.

In leading Iraqi relations with the rest of the world, Saddam was not only brutal but incompetent. Iraq was at war almost constantly during the quarter-century of Saddam’s rule, with devastating consequences for the Iraqi people.

In 1980, after only a few months in power, Saddam launched a war of opportunistic aggression against Iran, still convulsing from the 1979 Islamic revolution. After two years of savage fighting, an Iraqi cabinet minister expressed sympathy with an Iranian peace proposal: Saddam had him dismembered. Unanimity prevailed among the cabinet, and the war dragged on for another six years. By the time the guns fell silent, the war had severely damaged the Iraqi economy, cost hundreds of thousands of lives, and achieved nothing.

The smoke had barely cleared when Saddam ordered the conquest of Kuwait in 1990. Having nearly bankrupt Iraq in the long war with Iran, Saddam hoped a short, successful war would boost his popularity and stabilize his regime. Instead, the world imposed a series of crippling sanctions, causing widespread suffering and further damaging the Iraqi economy.

Coercive threats against Saddam’s regime consistently failed to achieve their objectives. In 1991, the threat of attack from a 14-nation coalition fielding half-a-million troops did not persuade Saddam to order Iraqi withdrawal from Kuwait. In the war that followed, an estimated 100,000 Iraqis were killed.² Twelve years of sanctions and bombing caused widespread suffering among the Iraqi people but did not elicit compliance with U.N. demands.

Finally, in 2003, when the United States gave him a choice between exile and the destruction of his regime, Saddam chose the latter. As he braced for an offensive he was convinced would come east out of Jordan, American tanks rolled north out of Kuwait and crushed his regime in a matter of weeks.³ Saddam had kept Iraq at war for 22 of the 25 years of his regime, killing well over a million people and consigning the survivors to poverty and foreign military occupation.

Just about every move Saddam made in his foreign policy was a blunder. In this paper a blunder is defined as an action that leaves the subject population significantly worse-off than it would have been in the absence of that action. Saddam’s decisions kept him in power for a quarter of a century, but betrayed the people of Iraq. They trusted him to lead, and he rewarded them with violence and poverty.

---

Like Hitler and Stalin, Saddam Hussein is a malignant narcissist. His personality “is marked by extreme self-absorption, grandiosity, paranoia … with no constraints on conscience, and a willingness to use ‘whatever aggression is necessary.” One political psychologist enumerates the traits of the malignant narcissist as “messianic ambition for unlimited power, absence of conscience, unconstrained aggression, and a paranoid outlook.” Another lists grandiose self image and proclivities toward fantasy; underlying feelings of inferiority and defensiveness; deficient grounding in shared values and genuine human relationships; and paranoia as a major defensive mechanism.

In addition to their malignant-narcissistic personalities, Hitler, Stalin and Saddam also share the dubious honors of having committed some of the worst blunders in international politics. Stalin ignored intelligence warnings and left the Soviet Union vulnerable to Nazi Germany’s surprise attack, and Hitler guaranteed the ultimate destruction of the Third Reich by declaring war on the United States.

It is no coincidence that these malignant-narcissistic leaders – “MNLs” – have made such grievous blunders. Indeed, malignant narcissism is at the root of their decisions: the central thesis of this paper is that MNLs are much more likely than other leaders to lead their countries into major blunders.

Political science is still in the early stages of exploring the links between malignant narcissism and international relations. This paper seeks to advance this research by proposing and demonstrating the plausibility of seventeen hypotheses on malignant narcissism, political

---


leaders, and the causal mechanisms of major blunders in international relations. The goal is to make the concept of malignant narcissism methodologically useful to the scholar of foreign policy decision making and international relations.

It is a rare event that a malignant narcissist achieves absolute power. But like an asteroid striking the earth, this rare event can have apocalyptic consequences. As the Roman slave-turned-pundit Publilius Syrus put it, "one man’s wickedness may easily become all men’s curse."\(^8\) This paper seeks to understand how.

The rest of this paper is in four parts. Part II develops a definition of malignant narcissism. Extant definitions have applied Justice Stewart’s criterion for defining obscenity: “I know it when I see it.” In pursuit of a more methodologically useful definition, this paper recombines psychiatric diagnostic criteria into three overlapping core traits: hubris, paranoia, and reckless indifference. It is in the confluence of these traits that malignant narcissism can be found.

Part II continues with a rogue’s gallery of MNLs from the twentieth century. Six are profiled: Saddam, Hitler, Stalin, Mussolini, Mao, and Nasser. Each displayed hubris, paranoia, and reckless indifference, defining each as a malignant narcissist; but each displayed them in different proportions, with different implications for behavior.

Finally, Part II concludes by addressing some methodological objections that could be raised against this paper’s definition and application of malignant narcissism. It is the position of this paper that individuals matter to the course of history and that personality shapes their actions. Malignant narcissism is a rare but important personality syndrome that deserves closer attention.

Part III is the heart of the paper, presenting seventeen hypotheses on malignant narcissism, domestic politics, and international blunders. The hypotheses are deduced from the definition of malignant narcissism developed in Part II, and their plausibility is illustrated with examples from the careers of the six MNLs profiled. The first four hypotheses outline cognitive mistakes MNLs are likely to make in their conduct of statecraft. The seven hypotheses in the second set describe the interactions between MNLs and their domestic political systems, addressing issues of selection for power, constraints on behavior, and institutional malleability. The six hypotheses in the third set identify the international blunders MNLs are likely to make, generally involving their propensity to wage war.

Part IV is a closer look at the political career of Saddam Hussein, a hardcore malignant narcissist and international blunderer extraordinaire. In his quarter-century in power, Saddam created and maintained a state of permanent crisis in Iraq by waging two aggressive wars, failing to anticipate surprise attacks, squandering opportunities for peace, failing to respond appropriately to coercion, and utterly wrecking the Iraqi economy.

Finally, Part V concludes with a look at some of the leaders in power today who are probably malignant narcissists, and potential international ramifications. The paper closes with a call to study the political consequences of malignant narcissism in greater depth. The conclusion is followed by three appendices that summarize various aspects of the argument in graphic form.
II. MALIGNANT NARCISSISM

This section seeks to define malignant narcissism in terms that make it methodologically useful. To do so, the components of malignant narcissism are distilled from an inventory of specific personal traits. Examples of these traits include grandiose fantasies of power; preoccupation with loyalty and betrayal; lack of empathy and remorse; near-inability to tell the truth; and reckless overconfidence. These traits are then recombined into three thematic clusters: hubris, paranoia, and reckless indifference.

The list of traits is drawn from the diagnostic criteria for personality disorders in the fourth edition of the American Psychiatric Association’s Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, or DSM-IV. As the “IV” implies, it is an evolving document, periodically revised. Psychiatrists are people too, and while some revisions to the DSM reflect the professional consensus on advances in psychiatric knowledge, others are the product of politicking within the APA.

But it remains a useful resource by outlining ideal types against which to compare real cases:

Personality characterizations are like analytical models: they cannot be perfect precisely because they are models. If they were perfect, they would not be models; they would be the modeled object itself. The utility of the model is not its perfection of the object but the capturing of essential or important features in something simpler than the object. The utility of personality characterizations … is not their accuracy or completeness but the capture of some important aspects of … behavior in something far less complex … something we can hold in our minds and easily manipulate to project future behavior.

---


A. Personality Disorders in the DSM-IV

The general diagnostic criteria for personality disorders are defined as follows:

A. An enduring pattern of inner experience and behavior that deviates markedly from the expectations of the individual’s culture. This pattern is manifested in two (or more) of the following areas:

1. cognition (i.e., ways of perceiving and interpreting self, other people, and events)
2. affectivity (i.e., the range, intensity, lability, and appropriateness of emotional response)
3. interpersonal functioning
4. impulse control

B. The enduring pattern is inflexible and pervasive across a broad range of personal and social situations.

C. The enduring pattern leads to clinically significant distress or impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of functioning.

D. The pattern is stable and of long duration, and its onset can be traced back at least to adolescence or early adulthood.

E. The enduring pattern is not better accounted for as a manifestation or consequence of another mental disorder.

F. The enduring pattern is not due to the direct physiological effects of a substance (e.g., a drug of abuse, a medication) or a general medical condition (e.g., head trauma).  

There are three personality disorders that together encompass the traits that define malignant narcissism: Narcissistic Personality Disorder; Paranoid Personality Disorder; and Antisocial Personality Disorder. Each has its own set of diagnostic criteria outlined in DSM-IV.

1. Narcissistic Personality Disorder

The word narcissism derives from Narcissus, the youth in Greek mythology who was so obsessed with his own image that it consumed him. In concept, if not in name, narcissism has

---

been regarded as a character flaw since antiquity. Augustine called it *praesumption* and considered it to be the worst of man’s sins.\textsuperscript{12} Weber called it vanity and warned that it could lead to irresponsibility and a lack of objectivity, the two worst failings of a leader.\textsuperscript{13}

It was Freud who first called it narcissism (*Narcissmus*), releasing it from moral judgment and reframing it in psychoanalytic terms as the investment of libido in the ego.\textsuperscript{14} Narcissism is an emotional investment in oneself. It incorporates and transcends simple self-awareness, which is a phenomenon of perception and cognition, but not necessarily affect, or emotion. The narcissist is not only aware of himself, but cares more deeply about what happens to himself than he cares about what happens to others.

A moderate degree of narcissism is normal and healthy, but dosage matters: elixir in moderation becomes poison in excess. The emotional energy that most people invest in family and friends, the narcissist turns inward. When narcissism emerges as the dominant characteristic in a personality, it is maladaptive or pathological, and becomes a personality disorder.

**Narcissistic Personality Disorder** is defined in DSM-IV as follows:

A pervasive pattern of grandiosity (in fantasy or behavior), need for admiration, and lack of empathy, beginning by early adulthood and present in a variety of contexts, as indicated by five (or more) of the following:

1. has a grandiose sense of self-importance (e.g., exaggerates achievements and talents, expects to be recognized as superior without commensurate achievements)
2. is preoccupied with fantasies of unlimited success, power, brilliance, beauty, or ideal love
3. believes that he or she is “special” and unique and can only be understood by, or should associate with, other special or high-status people (or institutions)
4. requires excessive admiration


5. has a sense of entitlement, i.e., unreasonable expectations of especially favorable treatment or automatic compliance with his or her expectations
6. is interpersonally exploitative, i.e., takes advantage of others to achieve his or her own ends
7. lacks empathy: is unwilling to recognize or identify with the feelings and needs of others
8. is often envious of others or believes that others are envious of him or her
9. shows arrogant, haughty behaviors or attitudes.  

In modern usage, "the concept of narcissism has been extended from the restricted domain of mental illness to encompass many tendencies among ostensibly normal individuals."  

Narcissism refers to a broad spectrum of attitudes and behaviors, and it has been argued that the difference between a healthy person and a vicious tyrant is only one of degree.  

A person can be profoundly narcissistic without necessarily suffering adverse effects. In certain walks of life, especially those with opportunities for individual glory, narcissism can be a significant professional asset. Some examples include the performing arts, sports and politics. 

The DSM-IV criteria for Narcissistic Personality Disorder are useful for identifying the behavioral markers for the narcissism at the core of malignant narcissism, but they do not capture the full spectrum of the syndrome. Two other personality disorders have characteristics that are manifest in the personality of the malignant narcissist: Paranoid Personality Disorder and Antisocial Personality Disorder. 

---

15 DSM-IV: 294. The diagnostic code for Narcissistic Personality Disorder is 301.81.
2. **Paranoid Personality Disorder**

The old joke about paranoia is that “you’re not paranoid – they really are out to get you!” The hallmark of Paranoid Personality Disorder is not suspicion itself, but the absence of doubt that suspicion may not be warranted. Brain imaging of paranoid patients suggests that they have “an impaired ability to judge whether their fears are rational.” Therefore, “all attempts to convince them that their beliefs are mistaken fail. Because they have no doubt about their delusions, they are immune to reason.”

**Paranoid Personality Disorder** is defined in DSM-IV as follows:

A pervasive distrust and suspiciousness of others such that their motives are interpreted as malevolent, beginning by early adulthood and present in a variety of contexts, as indicated by four (or more) of the following:

1. suspects, without sufficient basis, that others are exploiting, harming, or deceiving him or her
2. is preoccupied with unjustified doubts about the loyalty or trustworthiness of friends or associates
3. is reluctant to confide in others because of unwarranted fear that the information will be used maliciously against him or her
4. reads hidden demeaning or threatening messages into benign remarks or events
5. persistently bears grudges, i.e., is unforgiving of insults, injuries, or slights
6. perceives attacks on his or her character or reputation that are not apparent to others and is quick to react angrily or to counterattack
7. has recurrent suspicions, without justification, regarding fidelity of spouse or sexual partner.

Pathological paranoia can severely compromise judgment and impair cognition, as fantasies of persecution overwhelm rational thought processes. Even in milder forms, though,

---

20 DSM-IV: 288-289. The diagnostic code for Paranoid Personality Disorder is 301.0. The section concludes with a note to clinicians, omitted from the main text above for readability, but included here for completeness: "Does not occur exclusively during the course of Schizophrenia, a Mood Disorder with Psychotic Features, or another Psychotic Disorder and is not due to the direct physiological effects of a general medical condition. If criteria are met prior to the onset of Schizophrenia, add ‘Premorbid,’ e.g., ‘Paranoid Personality Disorder (Premorbid).’

13
paranoia can have a corrosive effect on personal and professional relationships. In a political leader, paranoia is a double-edged sword: too little is dangerous for the leader, and too much is dangerous for everyone else.

3. **Antisocial Personality Disorder**

Antisocial Personality Disorder is the diagnosis DSM-IV assigns to the psychopath. The nature of the psychopath was recognized early in the 19th century as being something apart from simple insanity. Some people who appeared otherwise sane and intelligent were capable of committing horrific deeds with no apparent awareness of wrongdoing. Originally this syndrome was called “moral insanity,” defined as

> madness consisting in a morbid perversion of the natural feelings, affections, inclinations, temper, habits, moral distributions and natural impulses, without any remarkable disorder or defect in the intellect or knowing and reasoning faculties and particularly without any insane illusion or hallucination.\(^{21}\)

As psychiatry matured such people came to be known as psychopaths. As the pathologically antisocial nature of the disorder became better understood, the common appellation changed to sociopath, and moral insanity became catalogued in DSM-IV as Antisocial Personality Disorder.\(^{22}\)

**Antisocial Personality Disorder** is defined in DSM-IV as follows:

A. There is a pervasive pattern of disregard for and violation of the rights of others occurring since age 15 years, as indicated by three (or more) of the following:

1. failure to conform to social norms with respect to lawful behaviors as indicated by repeatedly performing acts that are grounds for arrest

2. deceitfulness, as indicated by repeated lying, use of aliases, or conning others for personal profit or pleasure


3. impulsivity or failure to plan ahead
4. irritability and aggressiveness, as indicated by repeated physical fights or assaults
5. reckless disregard for safety of self or others
6. consistent irresponsibility, as indicated by repeated failure to sustain consistent work behavior or honor financial obligations
7. lack or remorse, as indicated by being indifferent to or rationalizing having hurt, mistreated, or stolen from another

B. The individual is at least age 18 years.

C. There is evidence of Conduct Disorder with onset before age 15 years.\(^{23}\)

The diagnostic criteria in DSM-IV for Antisocial Personality Disorder have been roundly criticized for failing to capture the malevolent nature of the psychopath, focusing instead on markers for petty criminality.\(^{24}\) Still, the DSM-IV criteria are useful for identifying traits of the psychopath that are typical in kind, if not in degree.

Psychopaths run the gamut from simple bullies to serial killers.\(^{25}\) Rare and very dangerous, the true psychopath has no conscience, and therefore often ends up at the edge of society, on death row for killing without remorse, or in military units where the ability to do so is a professional asset.\(^{26}\)

---

\(^{23}\) DSM-IV: 291-292. The diagnostic code for Antisocial Personality Disorder is 301.7. As in the section on Paranoid Personality Disorder, this section concludes with a note to clinicians: “The occurrence of antisocial behavior is not exclusively during the course of Schizophrenia or a Manic Episode.”


B. MALIGNANT NARCISSISM AS A PERSONALITY SYNDROME

These three personality disorders as defined in DSM-IV do not fully describe the complex personality syndrome of malignant narcissism. Recall that DSM stands for “Diagnostic and Statistical Manual” – its purpose is to allow mental health professionals to determine the distribution of various psychiatric conditions within a population. The definitions of personality disorders, therefore, are deliberately narrow.

Malignant narcissism is a broader syndrome, incorporating traits that are distributed among three separate personality disorders. Malignant narcissists are rare, extraordinary individuals: the depth and breadth of their syndrome breaks the boundaries of the DSM-IV not because the document is inadequate, but because it is geared toward the typical, not the extreme.

In this section, the individual diagnostic criteria from the various personality disorders are treated as markers to be recombed into a profile of the malignant-narcissistic personality. For example, the third criterion from Paranoid Personality Disorder (p. 13, above), is summarized as “reluctance to confide,” and is tagged “P3.” These markers are then recombed into the three defining traits of the malignant narcissist: hubris, paranoia, and reckless indifference.

All three are manifestations of narcissism, but each emphasizes a different facet. “Hubris” highlights the malignant narcissist’s grandiose lust for power. “Paranoia” emphasizes the dark side of being at the center of attention. “Reckless indifference” captures the narcissist’s impulsive disregard for any interests but his own. These three traits are explained in greater detail in the paragraphs that follow.
1. Hubris

The hubris of the malignant narcissist is manifest in his grandiose (N1) fantasies of power (N2) and unique destiny (N3), and his sense of entitlement (N5).\(^{27}\)

Grandiosity and fantasies of power point toward the etiology of malignant narcissism. All malignant narcissists were children once, and the historical record suggests that most of them were physically and emotionally abused. The emotional landscape of the abused child is a morass of fear and rage, as the child struggles to cope with the feelings of helpless humiliation, and consequent self-loathing, that abuse engenders. The scars of abuse linger in the brain, conditioning the adult to respond to threats as the terrified child he once was.\(^{28}\)

One coping mechanism is to retreat into a fantasy world where the child has ultimate power. As the child grows stronger, he may begin to act out his power fantasies upon those weaker than himself, often animals. As noted in the introduction, as a boy Saddam Hussein used to murder stray dogs. Similar rumors persist about the childhood behavior of Mussolini and Stalin. As the boys grow into men, their victims begin to include people, and as the men grow into leaders, their victims begin to include whole nations.

The malignant narcissist is preoccupied with fantasies of power, and deficient in the ability to test objective reality against his fantasies. The preoccupation with power gives rise to grandiose fantasies, and the reality-testing deficiency means that the malignant narcissist is unrealistically optimistic about his own abilities to realize these fantasies. In other words, he is overconfident, and this can support an otherwise inexplicably high tolerance for risk.\(^{29}\)

---


\(^{29}\) Glad, B. (2002).
2. *Paranoia*

The second trait is paranoia. The malignant narcissist *suspects deceit* (P1) because he *sees hidden denigration* (P4) and *phantom attacks* (P6); therefore, he is *preoccupied with doubts about the loyalty* of his retainers (P2) and is *reluctant to confide* in them (P3).

Paranoia is rooted in narcissism. Not all narcissists are paranoid, but all paranoids are narcissistic in that their fantasies of persecution place them at the center of attention. “Clearly, there is more than a little self-importance at the heart of these delusions.”

Paranoia is a prominent defense mechanism among malignant narcissists, who reject any suggestion that they are not at the center by reframing it in their minds as an attack. Always suspicious and ready for betrayal, the paranoid narcissist sees himself as surrounded by enemies. For malignant narcissists seeking political power, this can be adaptive behavior.

Once in power, however, paranoia can become counterproductive. Like hubris, paranoia has a corrosive effect on the ability to check one’s own perceptions against reality. Not only does it taint perception with suspicion, but it poisons the atmosphere between leaders and advisors. Advice is likely to be misperceived as a personal attack, or as a lie. As a consequence, the paranoid leader does not ask, and his advisors do not tell. The result is that corrective checks on the MNL’s distorted view of the world tend to disintegrate.

3. *Reckless Indifference*

The third defining trait of the malignant narcissist, reckless indifference, is less coherent than hubris or paranoia, incorporating a range of behaviors from simple irresponsibility to psychopathic sadism. All of the markers from Antisocial Personality Disorder are included, but

---

alone they fail to capture the malignance of malignant narcissism. The addition of some markers from the other two personality disorders – Narcissistic and Paranoid – completes the picture.

First, the markers for Antisocial Personality Disorder: **reckless indifference** is manifest in *repeated unlawful behavior, dishonesty, impulsivity, aggressiveness, recklessness, irresponsibility*, and a *lack of remorse* (A1-A7). For the full portrait, add a *sense of entitlement* (N5); a proclivity toward *interpersonal exploitation* (N6); a *lack of empathy* (N7); and a *tendency to respond to any kind of ego threat, including criticism, with aggression, rage, or violence* (P6).

As noted above, these are the behaviors of the psychopath. Without empathy to constrain their behavior, their relationships are *hyperinstrumental*: psychopaths “treat people as if they were tools to be used or food to be eaten.” Psychopaths “do not experience any feelings of guilt. They know neither regret nor self-accusation on moral grounds.” Not all narcissists are psychopaths, but all psychopaths are pathologically narcissistic. Indeed, “the outstanding trait of hyperinstrumentals is their extreme narcissism.”

Emphasis on the narcissism at the core of the psychopathic personality is what separates this paper’s characterization of “reckless indifference” from the simple Antisocial Personality Disorder in DSM-IV. Reckless indifference incorporates and transcends Antisocial Personality Disorder by completing the profile of the psychopath with essential narcissistic features.

For example, trait P6, above, is the *tendency to respond to any kind of ego threat, including criticism, with aggression, rage, or violence*. Even though DSM-IV categorizes that behavior as paranoid, it is actually deeply narcissistic, lending credence to the conceptualization of paranoia and reckless indifference as manifestations of narcissism.

---

33 All three quotes from Wolman (1999): 97-98.
Trait P6 is also the marker for narcissistic rage, one of the behaviors that separates simple from malignant narcissism. In the gnomic words of the Jedi sage Yoda, “fear leads to anger,” and in malignant narcissists, anger boils into rage. Stalin was “given to bouts of red-faced fury,” and Mao was known for his “intense and withering fury.” When Hitler flew into a rage, “his eyes became fixed, his face reddened and darkened to purple, [and] a large blue vein running down his forehead bulged.”

As intimidating as these explosions of rage must have been to those who witnessed them, the calms between the storms also had their terrors. For one who is close to a malignant narcissist, “there is apprehension that the rage which is barely below the surface and barely contained may at any minute lead to violence.” In Hitler’s case,

it was as much the unpredictable onset of these rages as their passion that threw everyone into helpless confusion. And of course for hours or days afterward, there was the tension, the waiting to learn whether this particular storm would pass off without incident or had been the prelude to new terror and murder.

So what is malignant narcissism? It is hubris plus paranoia, or hubris plus reckless indifference; or, in the worst cases – Saddam, Hitler, Stalin – hubris plus both. Hubris plus paranoia can also be called paranoid narcissism; hubris plus reckless indifference, psychopathic narcissism. When hubris combines with paranoia and reckless indifference, the result is narcissism at its most malignant.

---

41 See Appendix 1, “A Map of Malignant Narcissism” (p. 102, below).
C. MALIGNANT-NARCISSISTIC LEADERS: A FIELD GUIDE

"Countries have gone to war partly because Nasser or Saddam Hussein is 'another Hitler', without much critical attention being given to this thought."42 The purpose of this section is to develop guidelines to evaluate whether Nasser or Saddam really were avatars of Hitler, or if the analogy is spurious. More generally, how can we identify malignant-narcissistic leaders?

Not all narcissistic leaders are malignant. On its own, hubris is a common trait among political leaders, in whom it often manifests as energetic charisma. Narcissistic leaders who manifest neither paranoia nor reckless indifference are called reparative narcissists.43 Reparative narcissistic leaders seek to raise their followers closer to the ideal that is their own self image. The term comes from the same etymological root as "reparations": reparative narcissists want to give something back, to share their unique gifts with others. Examples include several American presidents, including Wilson, Franklin Roosevelt, and Kennedy.44 Examples beyond the United States include Churchill, Ataturk, and Gandhi.

Personalities develop and change over time. As Erikson put it, every personality is a combination of capacities created in the distant past and of opportunities divined in the present; a combination of totally unconscious preconditions developed in

individual growth and of social conditions created and recreated in the precarious
interplay of generations.\textsuperscript{45}

Some MNLs can start their careers as reparative narcissists, but turn malignant over time.

"The political condition the leader finds himself in may be responsible for the expression of
certain latent tendencies within him that never might have been realized under other
circumstances."\textsuperscript{46}

The "certain latent tendency" that curdles reparative into malignant narcissism is
paranoia, which often does not manifest in a personality until midlife.\textsuperscript{47} Paranoia does not
materialize out of thin air: narcissism is a necessary precondition, and politics is an excellent
incubator. It is therefore not surprising to see a reparative narcissist go malignant, especially if he
has spent much of his life in politics.

Psychopathic narcissism is different, in that it manifests in childhood and adolescence.
Therefore, it can be identified prior to and independent of the political environment. Political
expediency does not make a psychopathic narcissist; instead, that personality type is formed and
functioning well before he enters political life. Indeed, it constitutes a powerful motive to pursue
politics, with its promise of power and adulation.

This has important methodological implications. It is not difficult to tar the whole
concept of malignant-narcissistic leadership with the brush of tautology. It looks like this:
"MNLs blunder because they are malignant narcissists, and we know they are malignant
narcissists because they blunder." But in this paper, psychopathic narcissism is assigned based
on traits exhibited in childhood and adolescence, well before political considerations began to
motivate behavior. Take Mussolini's background, for example: he stabbed his first victim when

\textsuperscript{46} Ludwig, A. M. (2002). \textit{King of the Mountain: The Nature of Political Leadership}. Louisville, University Press of
Kentucky: 268.
\textsuperscript{47} Friedman, R. A. (2003).
he was only a schoolboy, at nine years of age. No plausible argument could be made that he did so for reasons of state.

Paranoid narcissism, which often does not manifest until midlife, presents a more difficult methodological quandary: selection bias. The leaders mentioned in this paper—paranoid, psychopathic, or just malignant—only merit mention because they have made blunders. "The danger of circularity is obvious, but tautology can be avoided by reconstructing personality from some response patterns and using the reconstruction to explain others." For example, Stalin is selected for his blunders, and then labeled a malignant narcissist; the label is justified by Stalin's personal background and political behavior; and political blunders are explained with reference to malignant narcissism. A certain amount of post-hoc reasoning is inevitable—it makes the head spin.

Another epistemological pitfall is the difficulty of diagnosis at a distance. "Psychoanalyzing political leaders is a dicey business, and psychiatrists are quick to caution that without extensive research or personal contact ... nothing can be said with certainty about [their] psychological makeup." One obstacle presents itself in the tendency of tyrants to transform their early biographies into official hagiography. To foster their personality cults, many tyrants historically have purged the records of their youths, replacing them either with blank space, as Hitler did, or with messianic myths, as with the elder and younger Kim in North Korea. This is not a serious problem, since the truth has an irrepressible tendency to bubble to the surface over time. In the decades since the end of the Nazi regime, Hitler has become one of the most

biographically examined men in history. Similarly, the end of the Cold War has allowed biographers fresh looks at the early lives of Stalin and Mao.52 And a goldmine of data awaits in the trial of Saddam Hussein.

"Accurate assessment of this structural attribute [narcissism] requires a high degree of psychodiagnostic expertise; moreover, it is extremely difficult to evaluate this attribute at a distance."53 But it can be done: outstanding recent examples of psychobiography include Victor on Hitler, Rancour-Laferriere on Stalin, and Volkan and Itzkowitz on Nixon.54 A book-length psychobiography of Saddam has yet to be written, but Jerrold Post, a major contributor to the literature on malignant narcissism, has written several incisive profiles.55 Selection of the examples in this paper is based on consensus opinions in the psychobiography literature, leavened with knowledge of history, other psychological insights, and a dose of common sense.

To return from methodology to etiology, what turns a child into a psychopathic narcissist who craves political power? Some inferences can be drawn from the biographical evidence. Based on an admittedly small sample of six, the childhoods of psychopathic narcissists appear to share some salient features. These include severe physical and emotional abuse; murky paternity; violent, domineering father figures; and meek, submissive mothers.

Abused children become megalomaniac tyrants? Not all of them, obviously, but every megalomaniac tyrant – the psychopathic ones, not the paranoid ones – started out as an abused

child. The psychopathic narcissist spends his entire life trying to cope with the powerless humiliation and rage he felt as a child. In some societies, he can “become a corporate executive, a lawyer, a cult leader or a politician. His ambition, paranoia and violence might then [be] modulated by legal codes and tempered by the checks and balances of a free society.”56 In other societies, propelled by grandiose fantasies of absolute power and a psychopathic lack of scruples, he could become a serial killer; or, if the political conditions permit, leader of a nation.

But he is still coping with his childhood, and often blunders as a consequence.57 Acting out “his fantasies of omnipotence using a nation as his theater and its citizens as his props” may soothe his tortured soul, but usually has horrific consequences for the nation.58

The theater-of-fantasy metaphor bears further scrutiny. Almost to a man, malignant-narcissistic dictators are serious movie fans. Kim Jong-II has a personal library of over ten thousand titles, and once fancied himself a director; and Nasser once was late for a coup because he was seeing a movie! Hitler, Stalin, and Mussolini also were major movie buffs. Again, not every movie fan becomes a tyrannical dictator, but it is striking how many tyrannical dictators liked to take a break from torture and murder to see a movie.

The six psychopathic narcissists on whom this paper’s abused-child hypothesis is based are the following: Saddam, Hitler, Stalin, Mussolini, Kim Jong-II, and Bokassa. The evidence is worth a brief perusal.

It was noted in the introduction that Saddam as a boy was routinely beaten by his stepfather, and that he displaced his humiliation and rage by beating stray dogs to death with an iron bar. That is the simple version. Other accounts of his childhood report that

---

57 This is the central thesis of Victor, G. (1998).
one of his favorite amusements was to heat the bar … over a fire and then stab an animal in the stomach as it passed by. With practice he became so good at this that he could rip the animal open and almost split it in half with one stroke.  

Hitler’s “early years were spent … under the smothering protectiveness of an over-anxious mother in a household dominated by the threatening presence of a disciplinarian father,” an alcoholic of murky ancestry who beat him every day. When Hitler was ten, his father beat him so badly he went into a coma for several days. The “beatings were behind the sense he would carry through life of having been betrayed, a victim entitled to revenge.”

That Hitler was a malignant narcissist is beyond dispute. Victor does not call him that by name, but meticulously documents the existence of every single marker for hubris, paranoia, and reckless indifference.

Stalin was also dogged by false rumors about his paternity. Like Hitler, he nurtured “hatred for his drunken father,” who beat him brutally. Years after Stalin’s death, one eyewitness to his childhood recalled that “his harsh home life left him embittered. He was an embittered, insolent, rude, stubborn child with an intolerable character.”

As a Bolshevik revolutionary and ultimately as tyrant of the Soviet Union, Stalin’s willingness to kill came “not from madness but from a ruthless political calculus, combined with mythic paranoia and cruelty.” Stalin was not insane – he was a malignant narcissist. His

---

personality was marked by “ambition and talent for intrigue,” or in the terminology of this paper, hubris and paranoia.\textsuperscript{67} Also, he was a psychopath, with a surprising ability to charm people, even as he prepared to kill them.\textsuperscript{68} In his relationships he displayed the hyperinstrumentalism of the consummate malignant narcissist: “In Stalin’s world, both friends and rivals, intimates and unknown millions, were, in Nikita Khrushchev’s words, merely ‘temporary people.’”\textsuperscript{69}

\textbf{Mussolini’s father}

was a failed socialist revolutionary, hopelessly in debt, a heavy drinker, and a notorious womanizer…. In the end, all the words the boy would hear – 	extit{humanity, altruism, honesty, courage, idealism, socialism, Catholicism} – mattered far less in his upbringing than the heavy leather strap his father wielded without reference to any ideas of revolution, reform, or social justice.\textsuperscript{70}

Although he is often remembered as but a strutting buffoon, comic relief from the dark looming memory of Hitler, the popular caricature of \textit{Il Duce} fails to capture the reality of the savage thug that was Mussolini. His propensity for violence long predated his political ambitions. Before he turned 20 he had been implicated in a number of rapes and violent assaults – indeed, he boasted of them.\textsuperscript{71}

His political career was marked by an enthusiasm for violence. He came to power in 1922 in a paramilitary coup, and left office in 1945 as a hunted fugitive. Having lived by the gun, he died by it, shot by vengeful partisans. Ultimately, the 23-year reign of Mussolini was an abject disaster for Italy. Even after the ill-fated imperial forays into Ethiopia and Albania, Mussolini

\textsuperscript{67} Kakutani, M. (2004).
\textsuperscript{68} Montefiore, S. S. (2004).
\textsuperscript{69} Kakutani, M. (2004).
steered Italy into a catastrophic war that it could have avoided. It is estimated that one million Italians died as a direct result of Mussolini’s policies, most of them during World War II.72

Kim Jong-II had a childhood described as “a disturbing mix of the Brothers Grimm and Caligula.”73 Unlike the others, Kim is an MNL by birthright: his father was Kim Il-Sung, tyrant of North Korea and center of the most pervasive personality cult ever. It is not known whether the elder Kim beat his son, and it is moot: he enslaved a nation and started the Korean War. While he was doing these things, his young son was taste-testing his father’s food for poison.

Jean-Bedel Bokassa, self-styled emperor of the Central African Republic, has many of the features of the typical tyrant. Although information about his past is sparse, it seems reasonable to assume that his traumatic childhood must have warped his psyche. His father, who was the local headsman of his tribe, was jailed and then beaten to death by company officials when Bokassa was six years old after he freed some villagers who had rebelled against the French company that relied on forced labor. Bokassa’s mother was so distraught by her husband’s death that she committed suicide.74

As an adult, Bokassa was a breathtakingly grandiose, emotionally unstable alcoholic, who eventually came to see himself as a living god. Upon seizing power from his cousin, he had himself crowned emperor in a ceremony that cost over $200 million and effectively bankrupted the Central African Republic. ... He could be quite charming and witty at times during dinner parties, although his hosts were apt to become anxious because of rumors about his cannibalism when he eyed them hungrily throughout the evening.75

As these six examples suggest, inside every psychopathic-narcissistic leader there is a terrified child trying to cope with a volcano of rage. The key to recognizing these leaders for

what they are can be found in their childhoods: how they were treated, and how they dealt with it. From that background, in the right political conditions, tyrants emerge.

This section began by pointing out that the “next Hitler” appellation so often slapped on the enemy of the moment is usually done so without much thought. The examples raised were Nasser and Saddam. Like Hitler, Saddam is a malignant narcissist, right in the center of the map: he manifests hubris, paranoia, and reckless indifference in abundance.

But Hitler is the wrong model for Nasser. In Nasser, Anthony Eden saw the spirit of Mussolini. The appraisal was mostly geopolitical: he regarded them both as “Mediterranean” thugs in the pockets of European powers – Germany in the case of Mussolini, and the Soviet Union in the case of Nasser – who dared challenge British hegemony in the Middle East.\textsuperscript{76} Beyond the geopolitical parallels, Eden was also responding to the undeniable charisma of the two men. But there the parallel ends.

Unlike Hitler or Mussolini, Nasser is an example of a reparative narcissist who turned malignant. He possessed both great charisma and a sense of ordained mission, which together point to a reparative narcissistic personality. This characterization is strengthened by what is known of his family life: “A quiet man renowned for his attentiveness and humor, he lived frugally, faithfully with his wife and children, and, in a country notorious for graft, was by all accounts incorruptible.”\textsuperscript{77} But by 1967, Nasser had become “overweight and glassy-eyed – the result, perhaps, of his worsening diabetes – irascible and paranoid.”\textsuperscript{78} How did it happen?


\textsuperscript{78} Ibid.
The psychobiography of Mao offers instructive parallels. Mao was qualitatively different from Saddam, Hitler, Stalin, or Mussolini, all of whom displayed psychopathic tendencies by early adolescence.\textsuperscript{79} Unlike them, Mao did not have an abusive childhood. He was intelligent and stubborn, and during his strict Confucian upbringing he had his share of adolescent showdowns with his father. But they were almost always resolved peacefully, even creatively.\textsuperscript{80}

As a result, Mao entered political life as a reparative narcissist, confident, charismatic, keenly interested in China’s tribulations, and constantly searching for political solutions. He found them in communism, joining the Chinese Communist Party in 1921, only a few months after its establishment. His rise in the Party during the 1920s was not the result of Machiavellian intrigue, but of his intelligence, dedication and charisma.

Paranoia came to Mao later in life. “Some people … develop a delusional disorder in middle or late life, having had no trace of paranoid thinking before.”\textsuperscript{81} Mao had all the prerequisites for midlife paranoia: he was profoundly narcissistic, and as a powerful leader with real enemies in a time of civil war, paranoia had survival value for him.

The addition of paranoia to his hubris tipped Mao from reparative to malignant narcissism. His first major act as a malignant narcissist came in 1934, when he supervised a purge of extraordinary ferocity.\textsuperscript{82} It paid handsome dividends in political capital: only a year later, Mao became the supreme leader of the Chinese communists. Malignant narcissism having demonstrated its instrumental value, Mao became steadily more ruthless. He was never a sadist, but learned to rationalize away decisions with horrific human consequences. As the leader of the most populous nation on earth, Mao made decisions that killed tens of millions of people.

\textsuperscript{79} On Mao’s moral rejection of sadism as a young man, see Spence, J. D. (1999a).: 25.
\textsuperscript{81} Friedman, R. A. (2003).
Nasser, Mao – and for that matter, Nixon – are examples of reparative narcissists drawn to leadership as young men, who eventually succumbed to paranoia after years in politics.

Ludwig’s description of the process is worth quoting in full:

If Freud’s maxim that the child is father to the man holds true, then crucial information must be missing about these leaders as children, or the explanation for their later behavior lies elsewhere. But if the reason for their behavior does not lie in the past, then where else can it be? In examining the early lives of these individuals, I have come to the conclusion that much of the answer paradoxically lies in their futures. What modern psychological theories fail to take into account is that certain extraordinary circumstances can transform the nature of people, perhaps not radically, but enough to make a difference. The very process of gaining absolute power seems to be such an extraordinary circumstance that it is capable of bringing out certain latent tendencies in rulers that might never have come into being under ordinary conditions. The child still gives rise to the man, but the wielding of ultimate power then may unleash the potential monster that later consumes the man. 83

D. OBJECTIONS AND REBUTTALS

There are two broad objections that could be raised against the notion of explaining international blunders as results of malignant-narcissistic leadership. First, political science as a discipline is skeptical that personality is a useful variable, for several reasons. One reason is the perennial debate over the role of individuals in history. Marx’s famous dictum that “men make their own history” within historical, path-dependent constraints, is at odds with the prevailing wisdom in American postwar positive political science, in which political systems impose an irresistible logic of their own. 84

Even if individuals are significant, the first objection continues, personality as a variable offers little explanatory traction. Either human nature is constant, in which case it fails to explain variations in political behavior; or personality is infinitely variable, imposing impossible data

83 Ludwig, A. M. (2002): 156. See Appendix 2 (p. 103 below) for a map of malignant-narcissistic leaders.
requirements on any theory of personality in politics and making theoretical parsimony impossible.

The second objection that could be raised against this thesis is that malignant narcissism is just a synonym for insanity. The assumptions of rationality that underpin most political-science theories are imperfect, but productive: they allow for parsimony in theory and testability in hypotheses. To invoke the insanity defense for international blunders, the objection maintains, would be to heedlessly discard one of the basic models of political science.

The sections that follow address these objections and offer rebuttals. Individuals and their personalities matter in international relations, and in some cases malignant narcissism is the key to explaining how.

1. Personality Matters

In the bloody twentieth century, war killed perhaps 100 million people, so the number of people wounded, raped, displaced and otherwise traumatized must approach a billion. Ultimate responsibility for this avalanche of human suffering can be assigned to a handful of men: Hitler, Stalin, Hirohito and Mao among them account for at least half.\textsuperscript{85} None of them acted alone, of course. Their decisions were implemented by enormous bureaucratic and military organizations in a world engulfed by global war. Yet it is these men who gave the orders that set the armies marching.\textsuperscript{86}

It was not their personalities alone that motivated their murderous policies. Each of them, after all, was responding to an international situation seething with violence, where threats and


\textsuperscript{86} I disagree with the received wisdom that Hirohito, the Showa Emperor of Japan, was an unwilling puppet of militarists who had hijacked the state. That image is a postwar construct. See Ruoff, K. J. (2001). \textit{The People's Emperor: Democracy and the Japanese Monarchy, 1945-1955}. Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Asia Center; and Bix, H. P. (2000). \textit{Hirohito and the Making of Modern Japan}. New York, HarperCollins Publishers Inc.
opportunities lurked around every corner. And each of them had immense domestic political pressures to respond to, in violent politics where political success and physical survival were often inseparable. It is easy to argue that these men simply did what they had to do.

Ultimately, however, international-systemic and domestic-political considerations only define the range within which a leader may act. The direction of the wind does not determine the direction of the ship, only define the arc within which sailing is possible; it is the captain who decides on which heading within that arc the vessel shall sail.

It is personality that shapes the individual response. “Political institutions and processes operate through human agency. It would be remarkable if they were not influenced by the properties that distinguish one individual from another.”  

But leadership personality remains an under-theorized variable in political science. Outside the subfield of political psychology, political scientists “routinely subordinate the choices made by individuals to large and impersonal forces,” privileging the study of processes and institutions over the study of individual leaders. This is even true of events in which the participants themselves believe personality to have been significant.

Political scientists are in the minority on this. Policymakers, pundits, the press, and the public all regard individual leaders and their personalities as decisive elements in international politics. Relations with other countries are often personalized, the person of the leader representing the country as a whole.  

---

This paper does not argue that "knowledge of human nature is the beginning and end of political education."\textsuperscript{90} No matter how powerful a leader, narcissism is usually not necessary and almost never sufficient to explain a major foreign policy decision. Explanations at the other levels of analysis, including bureaucratic, domestic and international politics, remain relevant. Nevertheless,

typological studies of political and other actors [are] of potentially great importance: if political actors fall into types with known characteristics and propensities, the laborious task of analyzing them de novo can be obviated, and uncertainty is reduced about how they will perform in particular circumstances.\textsuperscript{91}

Scholars remain skeptical because personality is a notoriously elusive variable. Even the definition is vague: "Personality is an umbrella term that includes what is commonly known as character, temperament, moral standing, and humanness." It comprises not only these abstract inner qualities, but also actions and behaviors. Specifically, "the term refers to observable, customary, and – under average expectable circumstances – repeating patterns of an individual’s day-to-day behavior."\textsuperscript{92}

Even assuming that a given individual’s personality can be described with enough accuracy to be useful, two more hazards lurk. The first is infinite variability. If, as common experience would suggest, there are as many personalities as there are people, then any theory of political behavior that purports to depend on personality is useless: infinite variability would require infinite data.

The second is the belief that human nature is essentially constant. Classical realists from Thucydides to Morgenthau argued that the roots of international strife are planted in the dark soil of human nature. Hobbes is notorious for his misanthropic take on human nature. Picking up on

\textsuperscript{91} Greenstein (1992): 120.
\textsuperscript{92} Volkan, V. D. & N. Itzkowitz (1997): 11.
this theme, Waltz argued that the undifferentiated venality of human nature neutralizes its value as an explanation of international conflict.\textsuperscript{93}

Malignant narcissism offers a way between the Scylla of personality proliferation and the Charybdis of classical pessimism. People may be rotten, but some people are much more rotten than others.\textsuperscript{94} And while tyrants are indeed different from you and me, they tend to be so much like each other that their behavior is full of regular patterns, making malignant narcissism as predictable a personality type as possible within the uncertainties intrinsic to the study of humans with free will.

2. **Malignant Narcissism Is Just Another Name for Insanity**

It is important to distinguish between psychopathic behavior and psychotic behavior. *Psychosis*, as defined in DSM-IV, is a cognitive disorder marked by delusions, hallucinations, and incoherent speech and behavior.\textsuperscript{95} Psychosis is what lay observers understand as insanity.

Malignant narcissists are not psychotic – they are psychopathic. Their cognitive skills are intact: psychopaths are often intelligent, articulate, even charming, qualities that serve them well in politics. Their dysfunction is not of cognition, but of character. The psychopath has no moral compass, no conscience, acting without empathy and without remorse. There is no insanity defense here.


\textsuperscript{95} DSM-IV, 153-161.
Nor are malignant narcissists irrational. "Irrational here describes acting under pressures that the actor would not admit as legitimate if he were conscious of them."96 Rational behavior, on the other hand, is "motivated by conscious calculation of advantages, calculation that in turn is based on an explicit and internally consistent value system."97 Note the word "conscious" in both definitions. The malignant narcissist is not a madman in a psychotic frenzy: when he decides and acts, he is aware of what he is doing and why he is doing it.

Assumptions of rationality are often clumsily applied in political science. When political scientists do treat individual decisions as important variables, "they posit rationality, defining away personal characteristics and presuming that the behavior of actors can be deduced from the logic of their situations."98 Unfortunately, the logic of their situations can sometimes only be understood with reference to personal characteristics.

Especially in the presence of a strong personality syndrome, such as malignant narcissism, it is personal characteristics that shape the preferences within which a leader makes a rational choice. This illuminates a weakness of the rational-actor approach to the study of foreign policy decision making: it focuses on the decision process itself, defined as choosing among alternative preferences, without developing an understanding of how the decision maker forms his preferences.

The influence of malignant narcissism on the decision process is greater at this earlier stage, when a leader is forming his preferences, than later in the decision process when he is often constrained by a variety of domestic and international political factors. For this reason, hypotheses "about the origins of the preferences are as important to understanding the foreign


The next section of this paper rises to meet that challenge, presenting a series of hypotheses on the role of malignant narcissism in domestic and international politics.

III. HYPOTHESES

The hypotheses are in three groups. The four hypotheses in the first group deal with the relationship between malignant narcissism and cognitive distortion. The argument is that MNLs do not estimate risk accurately; they usually misinterpret the intent behind the actions of another state; and they fail to learn from their own mistakes, and therefore tend to repeat them.

The second group of seven hypotheses deals with the MNL in the domestic political environment. Different political systems select for different kinds of leaders, which suggests that MNLs have an easier time coming to power in some systems than in others. Once in power, MNLs face a variety of constraints on their actions, imposed by political systems with different degrees of malleability. These factors combine to delimit the universe of possibilities within which MNLs make foreign policy decisions and international blunders.

The six hypotheses in the third set offer a typology of the international blunders MNLs are likely to make. The first hypothesis, that MNLs deliberately create crisis situations and work to maintain them, is the antecedent condition for the five blunders to follow. To summarize, MNLs start wars, do not know how to stop them, and drive their countries to economic ruin.
A. MALIGNANT NARCISSISM AND COGNITIVE DISTORTION

This section presents four hypotheses on the cognitive mistakes MNLs tend to make. The first hypothesis is a qualification of this paper’s central thesis: the more malignant a narcissistic leader, the more blunders he is likely to make. The three hypotheses that follow are corollaries that explain why. First, MNLs do not estimate risk accurately. Second, they often misinterpret the behavior of other states. Finally, their personality syndrome inclines them to repeat mistakes.

1. The more malignant the narcissistic leader, the more blunders he is likely to make.

The history of Syrian and Iraqi foreign policy under Hafiz al-Asad and Saddam Hussein, respectively, supports this hypothesis. Their international positions and domestic ideologies were remarkably similar: each ruled an Arab state with multiple religious groups within its arbitrary borders, surrounded by powerful neighbors; each saw himself as the heir to Nasser’s pan-Arab nationalism and leadership of the Ba’ath Party. Their foreign policies, however, had little in common.

The collapse of the Soviet Union at the end of the 1980s threatened Iraq and Syria with a rise in the regional power of the United States and Israel. Faced with the loss of their superpower protector, Saddam Hussein and Hafiz al-Asad steered their states in very different directions: Iraq attacked and Syria appeased. Iraq directly challenged American hegemony by seizing Kuwait, while Syria reined in its previous support for international terrorists, supported the international coalition against Iraq, and even put out stuttering peace feelers toward Israel.\(^{100}\)

These divergent courses correspond nicely with the differing degrees of malignant narcissism in the two leaders. Fueled by monstrous hubris, Saddam was more ambitious and

grandiose than Asad, as evident in the scale of the monuments each erected in his own honor; and much more confident, unrealistically so, in his own abilities, indicating a certain deficiency in reality-testing capabilities. As a result, Saddam was “aggressive, reckless, and extremely expansionist, [while] Asad was defensive, cautious, and only modestly expansionist.”

The following table illustrates that hardcore malignant narcissists such as Hitler and Saddam have made more blunders than paranoid or psychopathic MNLs such as Mao and Mussolini.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MNL</th>
<th>Total Blunders</th>
<th>Blunders/Years in Power</th>
<th>Creating Crisis</th>
<th>Aggressive War</th>
<th>Surprise Attack</th>
<th>Squandered Peace</th>
<th>Coercive Failure</th>
<th>Economic Meltdown</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Saddam</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hitler</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stalin</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mussolini</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mao</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nasser</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2. MNLs do not estimate risk accurately.

“The certainty of ultimate success to which narcissists feel entitled leads to both a sense of omnipotence and a feeling of invulnerability, that they cannot go wrong. This underlies the narcissist’s capacity for risk-taking.” In other words, the malignant narcissist’s poor judgment of risk is a product of hubris: grandiose fantasies of power and unique destiny, combined with a sense of entitlement.

But not hubris alone: as the name implies, reckless indifference, the defining trait of the psychopathic narcissist, is what allows hubris to get away with it. If hubris is the accelerator,
reckless indifference is the defective brakes. Some of the features of reckless indifference that allow hubris to speed unchecked include impulsivity, recklessness, irresponsibility, and a lack of remorse. As a group, these traits indicate that the malignant narcissist rarely contemplates the consequences of his actions in enough depth to recognize risk when he sees it.

The malignant narcissist is rarely aware of being wrong. “Because the narcissist is so vulnerable to injury psychologically, he cannot afford to acknowledge ignorance.” Consequently, “dogmatic certainty with no foundation of knowledge is a posture frequently struck by the narcissist.”105 Or as the Fascists were fond of saying, “Mussolini is always right.”106

Even if he is aware of the high risks in a given situation, he may not care. The lack of empathy that is so characteristic of malignant narcissism plays a significant role in a leader’s assessment of risk. Amartya Sen describes homo economicus as a “social moron,” but it would be more accurate to describe Rational Man as a psychopath.107 Unburdened by the conscience that compels most people to include empathetic considerations in their decisions, the psychopath is free to calculate choices based entirely on his own interests, as defined in pathologically narcissistic terms.

As a group, MNLs have been notorious risk takers. Hitler, who considered himself a gambler, was the worst of them in this regard.108 From the remilitarization of the Rhineland to the declaration of war against the United States, many of Hitler’s decisions astonish in their recklessness. That he was often lucky is not in contention; the point is that his propensity to risk huge losses in pursuit of small gains was a product of his malignant narcissism.

106 Of course, they said it in Italian.
3. **MNLs often misinterpret the behavior of another state.**

An inability to read the signals of other states can have serious consequences. "As long as the basic beliefs about the other side's intentions are wrong, policy will lead down a blind alley," to put it mildly.\(^{109}\) Misinterpretation of threatening behavior can leave a state vulnerable to surprise attack: in the spring of 1941, Stalin may have been the only Soviet who did not think Germany was preparing to attack, and unfortunately for the USSR, his was the only opinion that mattered.

A special case of misinterpretation is the overestimation of threat. Many leaders, not just malignant narcissists, publicly overestimate the level of threat confronting their states at any given time. There are often political incentives to do so: for example, a leader may be trying to justify high spending on a weapons system, the production of which is important to a domestic political constituency. MNLs, however, are particularly prone to overestimating threats to the states they lead for both psychological and instrumental reasons.

Malignant narcissists are paranoid, which predisposes them to discern threatening patterns in even the most benign circumstances. This tendency is aggravated by stress, which aggravates the MNL's predisposition to overestimate threats to the state he leads. "Under stress, individuals become more like themselves," and malignant narcissists become even more paranoid than they usually are.\(^{110}\)

[To] the extent that individuals do have significant compulsive, narcissistic, or paranoid elements in their personalities (as many successful individuals do), under stress these traits can be expected to magnify, and they can approach the extreme descriptions portrayed [in DSM-IV].\(^{111}\)

---


\(^{111}\) Post (1991a): 477.
Overestimation of threat also serves an instrumental purpose for the MNL by adding to his political power. People are more willing to let their leader amass power during times of danger, when they believe that he is what stands between them and the abyss. This dynamic is not new to modern dictators. Plato described it as a tactic of ancient tyrants:

When he has disposed of foreign enemies by conquest or treaty, and there is nothing to fear from them, then he is always stirring up some war or other, in order that the people may require a leader.\textsuperscript{112}

This game is dangerous for the players, but interesting to the political scientist: this is how spirals begin. Jervis defines a situation as a spiral when threatening behavior intended to coerce compliance is instead met with defiance and counter-threats.\textsuperscript{113} The following paragraphs explain how an MNL’s overestimation of threat, whether for psychological or instrumental reasons, can trigger a spiral.

Overestimation can lead to overstatement, a feature of the blood-curdling rhetoric so often heard from MNLs. “Words do not convey beliefs for the narcissist. Their only use is instrumental.”\textsuperscript{114} But that is cold comfort to a neighboring state when the MNL is howling about the existential threat it poses to his people. After all, if the neighboring state “believes that others know that it is not a threat, it will conclude that they will arm or pursue hostile policies” – or frightening rhetoric – “only if they are aggressive.”\textsuperscript{115} And now the neighboring state is scared.

If the neighboring state protests, the MNL is not likely to modulate his tone, for two reasons. First, he is likely to interpret his neighbor’s protests through his own “instrumental language” filter: he is only ranting, and is likely to assume that the protesting neighbor is doing the same. Second, he is unlikely to understand that the neighbor could possibly see him as a

\textsuperscript{114} Post (1993): 110.
threat. This is a normal cognitive weakness, amplified by the MNL’s inability to empathize.\textsuperscript{116} The shrill rhetoric continues unabated, and now the neighboring state is really scared.

The perverse result is that MNL’s overestimation and overstatement of threat could become a self-fulfilling prophecy, as the neighboring state takes measures to protect itself from the ranting madman next door. “Arms procured to defend can usually be used to attack,” and now a security dilemma obtains.\textsuperscript{117} Inevitably the MNL, already predisposed to overestimate threats for psychological reasons, will interpret his neighbor’s new assertive posture in the worst possible light, and a spiral of mutual misperception and hostility has begun to spin out of control.

4. \textit{MNLs fail to learn from their mistakes and therefore tend to repeat them.}

Santayana’s aphorism is especially true of malignant narcissists, for several reasons. Many MNLs simply refuse to accept that they can make mistakes, and their sycophants are not eager to correct that particular misconception. Stalin, for example, “was so feared that if he mispronounced a word while giving a speech” – not an uncommon occurrence, since Russian was not his native language – “every subsequent speaker repeated the mistake.”\textsuperscript{118}

In the unlikely event that the MNL somehow becomes aware of his mistake, he is likely to shrug it off. A key characteristic of the psychopathic personality is the absence of remorse. Even if the MNL accepts that he made a mistake, he will not necessarily regret it, or make any effort to avoid repeating it.

Another reason is a kind of learning disability that afflicts malignant narcissists. People tend to accept or reject new information based on whether it is consistent with their own personal

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{117} Jervis, R. (1976): 64.
\bibitem{118} Kakutani, M. (2004).
\end{thebibliography}
experience. Colloquially, in unfamiliar situations most people “go with what they know.” More formally, under conditions of uncertainty people tend to exhibit an autoheuristic bias.

For malignant narcissists, this autoheuristic bias is extreme.\textsuperscript{119} Since they are unable to empathize with other people, they are unable to learn from other people’s mistakes. The result is a kind of tunnel vision, blinding them to alternatives outside the narrow scope of their own experience. Great statesmen do not think this way. Bismarck said that fools learn from experience, but the wise learn from the experience of other people.\textsuperscript{120} Or as Benjamin Franklin put it, “experience keeps a dear school, but fools will learn in no other.”\textsuperscript{121}

Nasser had a blind spot for Israeli surprise attacks, which struck Egypt twice during his rule. More remarkable is the fact that he provoked both of them, with a naval blockade in 1956 and bloodcurdling incitements to annihilation in 1967.

Nasser’s admirer Saddam Hussein demonstrated a similar reluctance to learn from his own mistakes. Having gravely damaged the Iraqi economy during the long war with Iran, Saddam in 1990 was looking for a quick way to shore up the economy. Apparently, the lesson that “war does not pay” had not yet sunk in when he ordered the conquest of Kuwait.

B. MALIGNANT NARCISSISM IN DIFFERENT POLITICAL SYSTEMS

“Occasionally in history there is a confluence of events, in which the severe psychopathology of a leader is allowed to flourish.”\textsuperscript{122} This section offers hypotheses on how such a confluence comes to be: what are the conditions that allow malignant narcissists to scale the heights of political power?

\textsuperscript{119} Post (1993b): 110.
\textsuperscript{120} Waltz, K. N. (1959): 220.
Aspirants to power face different challenges and opportunities in different types of political systems:

In other words, would-be rulers tend to gravitate to the kinds of leadership positions and create those kinds of government that let them express their natural tendencies best. In that way, those behaviors that are socially maladaptive in one kind of government can become socially adaptive in another.\textsuperscript{123}

Specifically, different political systems select for different kinds of leaders, constrain their leaders in different ways, and exhibit different degrees of malleability when their leaders attempt to change them. This section argues that governments with strong institutions tend to select against malignant narcissists, constrain them best, and prove the least malleable. Processes and events that weaken institutions, such as revolutions, change the selection criteria in favor of malignant narcissists, ease constraints on their behavior, and prove more malleable before their attempts to change the system.

1. **MNLs are over-represented in politics.**

The conventional wisdom used to be that unhealthy personalities could not survive the vicissitudes of politics.\textsuperscript{124} On the contrary: certain kinds of unhealthy personalities thrive in the political arena. Behaviors that are maladaptive in most settings can actually be assets in political advancement. Indeed, “if the ranks of leaders were stripped of individuals with narcissistic personality features, they would be seriously depleted, for the upper levels of government and industry are filled with successful narcissists.”\textsuperscript{125}

With its promise of power and prestige, politics draws narcissists as moths to a flame. Almost all political systems reward narcissism. The leader is the focus of attention, so positions of leadership call out to narcissists with the promise of the approbation and acclaim they crave.

\textsuperscript{123} Ludwig, A. M. (2002): 270.


\textsuperscript{125} Post, J. M. (1991a): 479.
The promise of power lures reparative narcissists, who want to lead by example, and malignant narcissists, who want to lead by force.

"It is probably not an exaggeration to state that if individuals with significant narcissistic characteristics were stripped from the ranks of public figures, the ranks would be perilously thinned."126 In fact, powerful leaders who are not narcissistic seem to be the exceptions to the rule. Ulysses S Grant is a rare example: it would be difficult to find a political autobiography more imbued with the spirit of humble service than his.127

Paranoia is another personality trait that is maladaptive in normal society but offers certain advantages in political life.128 "In politics, mild paranoia is probably an asset; no politician could survive for long with a rosy and trusting view of the world."129 Shakespeare recognized this: as Henry IV says in iambic pentameter, "uneasy lies the head that wears a crown."130

Since both narcissism and paranoia are central to malignant narcissism, it is reasonable to hypothesize that malignant narcissists are present in politics in numbers out of proportion to their representation among the general population. "People do not appear to be randomly distributed in political roles, though the patterns of their distribution appear to be complex and elusive."131 It is an open question: "the incidence of psychopathological and other motivational bases of

---

political orientations needs to be established by empirical inquiry." The quantitative research necessary to discern those patterns and determine that incidence has yet to be conducted.

The answer is important. It could be that some of the dysfunctions of perception and cognition that plague international relations may be aggravated by the prevalence of malignant narcissists in positions of power. In addition to obvious real-world ramifications, this would have implications for current theories of international relations. It could be that Wendt and Mearsheimer are both right!

Wendt’s argument is that “anarchy is what states make of it.” He sees international strife taking root among lost opportunities for cooperation. But this view of anarchy as a permissive condition does not account for the origins of negative energy in the system. Malignant narcissists “are convinced that the world is a jungle full of shrewd, selfish, and greedy beasts. In such a world everyone must look out for himself or herself, selfishness and greed being condoned as necessary self-defense strategies.” If the international system resembles Hobbes’ state of nature, it could be because psychopaths lurk there, and only a few could cause a lot of trouble.

In his theory of offensive realism, Mearsheimer argues that states seek to maximize relative power as an intrinsic function of statehood under anarchy. But is it possible that the malignant narcissists in charge have motivated the historically aggressive orientation of state power? Even in states not led by MNLS, the strategies employed to cope with neighboring MNLS would tend toward the aggressive. The two explanations are not mutually exclusive; there are complex reciprocal relationships between the strategic position of a state and the kinds of leadership that emerge.

---

2. *Democracies are more effective at keeping malignant narcissists out of power.*

Democratic political systems select against malignant narcissists. Healthy democracies are difficult to hijack because the democratic process is a mechanism for screening potential leaders. "Trustworthiness and consistency," rare virtues among MNLs, "are qualities rewarded by voters in democratic systems."\(^{136}\)

The rise to power of a malignant narcissist can be framed as a collective-action problem. Therefore, any mechanism that facilitates the formation of opposing coalitions would hinder the rise to power of a malignant narcissist. The small standing committees and strong political parties characteristic of parliamentary democracies are just such mechanisms, providing fora within which political coalitions can evaluate the personality, and balance the power of any individual actor who may threaten their interests. Malignant narcissists, with their blinding ambitions, present grave threats, and are generally weeded out.

This is especially true in parliamentary systems with strong political parties. In parliamentary systems such as those in Britain or Japan, even dull politicians can count on the political and financial support of their parties in exchange for loyalty. This can lead to politics without charisma: witness John Major. Within Weber’s typology, politics without charisma is reduced to bureaucracy.\(^{137}\)

The best exemplar of the Weberian archetype of a charisma-free, purely bureaucratic state is modern Japan. Extraordinarily resistant to executive leadership, the bureaucratic organs of the Japanese state not only implement policy, they also bear significant responsibility for the


\(^{137}\) Weber in Gerth & Mills (1946).
formulation of policy.\textsuperscript{138} Japanese politics is corrupt, and avarice is often amply rewarded, but vanity is not. Narcissism is actually an impediment to success in the Japanese system.

But in a democracy driven by personality politics, where candidates must forage for their own funding and political support, narcissism can be a valuable asset. The marketing of the self is an endeavor that plays to the narcissist’s particular strengths, especially optimism and charisma. It remains to be empirically demonstrated, but it is likely that American presidents have been more narcissistic than have European prime ministers.

The hypothesis that democracies select against malignant narcissists suggests a mechanism behind the democratic peace, and therefore has implications for international relations theory. “It may be that one contributing factor to the democratic peace is that democracies are more likely to produce leaders whose behavior can be predicted and thus trusted, especially by other democratic leaders.”\textsuperscript{139}

3. \textit{Rigidly hierarchical political systems are vulnerable to takeover by malignant narcissists.}

The winner-take-all nature of power in despotic systems encourages extreme political tactics and therefore selects for malignant narcissism. Paranoia, for example, “may even confer an adaptive advantage in some instances. After all, someone who is always watching his back and is mindful that his peers are driven by self-interest is more likely to have a competitive edge when one is needed.”\textsuperscript{140} Leninist political systems in particular tend to reward the paranoid machinations of malignant narcissists. The rigid pyramidal organizational structures that


\textsuperscript{139} Byman & Pollack (2001): 139.

\textsuperscript{140} Friedman, R. A. (2003).
characterize Communist and Ba’athist regimes tend to be Darwinian jungles of zero-sum competition, where many strive but ultimately only one can rule. To be paranoid in such an environment is to be prudent, because it is likely that someone really is out to get you.

Stalin "is the classical example of a paranoid individual whose paranoia helped him rise to the top of a highly centralized political structure."\(^\text{141}\) As Lenin lay dying in late 1923, "the struggle in the Kremlin [between Trotsky and Stalin] began in earnest. It was a fight not merely for power, but for life. Each of the claimants knew how to make political enemies pay in blood."\(^\text{142}\) Bereft of conscience and extraordinarily sensitive to negative attention aimed in his direction, Stalin the paranoid narcissist had a distinct advantage in this fight, and won it.

4. *States are vulnerable to hijacking by malignant narcissists during and after mass revolutions.*

There are significant "advantages a malignant narcissist has in securing power in a chaotic or otherwise difficult situation."\(^\text{143}\) The problem of collective action suggests a mechanism. Keeping a malignant narcissist out of power can be framed as a collective good, but to provide that good entails high specific costs, and therefore the good is likely to be underprovided.\(^\text{144}\) Malignant narcissists can take power when no single actor in society is willing to bear the cost of preventing them from doing so, and when opposing coalitions can not or will not successfully form.

These conditions tend to obtain during revolutions. The breakdown of political and social institutions amplifies the friction faced by opposing coalitions. The institutional void left by mass


revolution shifts the political advantage away from coalitions and toward aggressive individual actors. Mass revolutions tend to be violent, which provides cover for private violence.

States in the throes of revolution tend to be politically malleable, at least temporarily. Revolutions also tend to discredit the old regime in ways that leave ideological vacuums. Any aspirant with a flag, a slogan, and enough hubris can fill the void, if he is paranoid enough to survive and ruthless enough to eliminate rivals. "Mussolini understood, in a way that a handful of catastrophically powerful modern men understood, that no ground is more fertile for the growth of illusion than the soil of shattered illusion."\(^\text{145}\)

Malignant narcissism may also suggest an auxiliary reason why revolutionary states tend to get involved in wars. Revolutionary states tend to ignite wars for mutually-reinforcing structural and ideological reasons. Structurally, states in chaos are vulnerable to the predations of their neighbors, and in many cases weak revolutionary states seek security in an aggressive military posture, which further destabilizes the military situation. Ideologically, many revolutionary states seek to spread their revolutionary gospel to other states, and military conquest is sometimes an effective vehicle for the transmission of ideas.\(^\text{146}\)

If revolutionary states are vulnerable to takeover by malignant narcissists, as this hypothesis suggests, then perhaps the risk-tolerant, aggressive character of their leaders can help to explain their propensity toward violent conflict. The Ayatollah Khomeini is one example; Napoleon is another. Neither of them started a war – Iran and France both were first attacked by neighbors – but both of them prolonged the wars for years and years.\(^\text{147}\)

\(^{147}\) Byman & Pollack (2001): 132-133 (Khomeini); 125-128 (Napoleon).
5. **One MNL is almost never succeeded in power by another**

Propelled by paranoia, MNLs are constantly purging the ranks of the ambitious, leaving only sycophants and apparatchiks. This hypothesis, of course, only applies to situations in which the MNL has a say in his succession. This rules out situations when MNLs have been ousted by foreign military intervention, as happened to Idi Amin and Saddam Hussein. The following table summarizes some examples.

**Table 2**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MNL</th>
<th>Successor</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hitler</td>
<td>Doenitz</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stalin</td>
<td>Khrushchev</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nasser</td>
<td>Sadat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mao</td>
<td>Deng</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The exception is when the son succeeds the father. Sons of MNLs tend toward the psychopathic. Uday Hussein, son of Saddam, was notorious for shooting people at parties; Kim Jong-II, son of Kim Il-Sung, is “a man who imprisons a loyal servant for using the wrong ashtray, a film buff who pays homage to a favorite actress by having her kidnapped.”

Kim Jong-II is the exception, in that he survived long enough to succeed his father. Stalin’s son died in a German prison camp when Stalin refused to exchange him; Mao’s son was killed by American bombing during the Korean War; Hafiz al-Asad’s elder son died in a car crash that may or may not have been an accident; and Uday Hussein was killed in a shootout with American forces in 2003. Kim Jong-II, meanwhile, was just lucky: as a child, he used to taste-test his father’s meals for poison.

---

149 Ibid.
6. **Silent Sycophants: Advisors to MNLs tend to withhold or distort important factual information and critical policy evaluation.**

The relationship between the narcissistic leader and his advisors is where the difference between reparative and malignant narcissism can be seen most clearly. Narcissists crave adulation, and narcissistic leaders surround themselves with coteries of admirers to provide it. Advisors to reparative narcissistic leaders supply admiration, but also connections to political and social reality. Among advisors to malignant narcissistic leaders do not. Indeed, the moment of transformation from reparative to malignant narcissism is when the leader, grown grandiose and paranoid, stops taking advice.

Even in non-pathological situations, “merely by making their expectations or preferences known, policymakers can encourage their subordinates to report or emphasize information supportive of those expectations and preferences.” Among advisors of a narcissistic leader, groupthink can set in as they buy in to the overconfidence of their leader. When the policymaker is a malignant narcissist, he is likely to enforce unanimity with rage or lethal violence.

Advisors brave enough to risk the wrath of an MNL also risk being ignored or even disbelieved. Malignant narcissists are incorrigible liars. As one psychiatrist puts it:

Sociopaths lie on every possible occasion, and feel no regrets, no remorse, and no guilt. Sociopaths lie consciously and intentionally in order to enable them to take advantage of other people. Sociopaths are deliberate liars who use lying for deceiving and cheating, and always for their own gain.

---

153 Wolman (1999): 45. Recall that sociopath is a synonym for psychopath.
Furthermore, he continues, they are convinced that everyone else is also a pathological liar. "My sociopathic patients ... cannot believe that there are people who tell the truth and even feel guilty when they tell a lie. My sociopathic patients assure me that people who deny their lies are compulsive liars."\textsuperscript{154}

MNLs cultivate a culture of dishonesty around them. Hitler regarded himself as the greatest of liars; Saddam confounded his military with deliberate disinformation campaigns.\textsuperscript{155} Therefore, even on those rare occasions when an advisor is intrepid enough to be "the first bringer of unwelcome news," the MNL often will not believe him.\textsuperscript{156} Stalin, for example, responded to news of Barbarossa by branding early reports of the invasion as lies.\textsuperscript{157}

The advisor who brings bad news may not be believed, but the advisor who dares criticize the MNL risks provoking rage or violence. Because the malignant narcissist is paranoid, he interprets criticism as a threat, and responds with an aggressive counterattack. Hitler's personality was a toxic stew of "hypersensitivity to personal criticism ... inability to engage in rational argument and, instead, rapid resort to extraordinary outbursts of uncontrolled temper."\textsuperscript{158}

Rage is not the worst that can happen to an advisor who tells a malignant narcissist something he does not want to hear. To punish an army general who had been "overheard speaking ill" of him, Saddam Hussein had the man's tongue cut out before he and his son were executed and their homes razed.\textsuperscript{159} On another occasion, during the Iran-Iraq War of the 1980s, he had the Iraqi Minister of Health dismembered for suggesting that Saddam consider an Iranian peace proposal. Malignant narcissists, in other words, tend to shoot the messenger, or worse.

\textsuperscript{154} Ibid.
For advisors of MNLs, silence is a rational strategy for political and personal survival. Imagine having to present a malignant-narcissistic tyrant with some unpleasant truth, such as, “your policies are starving millions of Chinese,” or “the Germans / Israelis / Americans are about to attack us.” The probability that he will believe you is low; the probability that he will fly into a purple rage and have you and your family killed is high. In this situation, silence is golden.

Considering that an advisor is usually one of many, this could be seen as a collective-action problem. If the Germans / Israelis / Americans are indeed about to attack, then Stalin / Nasser / Saddam’s circle of advisors has a powerful interest as a group in keeping the MNL informed, so that the Soviet Union / Egypt / Iraq is not destroyed by surprise attack. But the risk of telling the MNL is too high for any single individual advisor to bear, and the collective good – preparedness – is underprovided.

As the triple-threat example of the Germans / Israelis / Americans demonstrates, this is a recurring problem for narcissistic leaders. Historical examples abound of narcissistic leaders who terrorized subordinates into silence, with unfortunate consequences.

In Egypt in 1967, Nasser was shielded from full knowledge of the Israeli surprise attack by advisors fearful of incurring his wrath. Nasser “could turn ferocious toward anyone who made even the faintest suggestion of an insult,” which had a chilling effect on the willingness of his advisors to bring him any news that did not reflect favorably on his judgment.160

At dawn on June 5, 1967, waves of Israeli bombers raced up the Nile delta on a mission to destroy the Egyptian air force in a preemptive strike. By the end of that Monday morning, some 300 aircraft, almost the entire Egyptian air force, lay smashed in neat rows of smoldering ruins that lined the runways.

---

Before the war, the commander of the Egyptian air force had assured Nasser that any preemptive strike would destroy only ten percent of Egypt’s combat aircraft, and that the Israeli attackers would be decimated in the process.\textsuperscript{161} Nasser therefore welcomed initial news of the Israeli attack, expecting that Israel “would find itself isolated abroad, the Egyptian army would defeat the attack, and Nasser’s preeminent position in the Arab world would be reaffirmed.”\textsuperscript{162}

Nevertheless, “by 10:00 – the height of the second wave – when the air force claimed to have downed 161 Israeli bombers, Nasser became suspicious.” He tried to reach the commander of the air force, but could not. “Nasser remained in the dark, not the least because no one in the army or the government dared enlighten him.” Not until 4:00 that afternoon, nearly twelve hours after the first Israeli jets thundered across the Nile delta, did Nasser learn the awful truth, and then only by personally visiting Supreme Headquarters. Not one of his senior officers, not even the stalwart Anwar Sadat, had had the courage to speak truth to power.\textsuperscript{163}

7. \textit{Do-Nothing Deputies: Deputies of MNLs are unlikely to display initiative in the formation or execution of policy.}

If the advisors who surround malignant narcissistic leaders are afraid to speak lest they incur the wrath of their liege, it logically follows that they would be afraid to act. The truism that “talk is cheap” applies especially to the malignant narcissist, who uses language for entirely instrumental reasons.\textsuperscript{164} The corollary is also true, that “actions speak louder than words.” More formally, “significant actions usually incur some cost or risk, and carry some evidence of their


\textsuperscript{164} Post (1993b): 110.
own credibility. And actions are less ambiguous as to their origin."\textsuperscript{165} The result is that the safest
course of action for the deputy of a malignant narcissistic leader is usually to do nothing at all.

Powerful narcissistic leaders encourage this tendency by weaving themselves so deeply
into the fabric of the state that they become indispensable:

The narcissist in power has special psychological advantages in terms of
sustaining his grandiose self-image. He can actually restructure his reality by
devaluing or even eliminating those who threaten his fragile self-esteem.\textsuperscript{166}

Mussolini picked off rivals individually, whereas Saddam, Stalin and Hitler preferred
bloody wholesale purges.\textsuperscript{167} The rivals need not pose any actual threat: the paranoia of the MNL
ensures that purging is thorough.\textsuperscript{168} Over time – often a very short time – the MNL remakes the
state in his own image.\textsuperscript{169} The result is that checks on behavior are cleared away, making an
understanding of the malignant narcissistic personality even more important to understanding the
conduct of the state.

Mussolini, Stalin and Saddam Hussein all were surrounded by do-nothing deputies:
bureaucrats and officers who dared not act on their own initiative. For Italy, the Soviet Union,
and Iraq, the consequences were never good.

"Mussolini was always intent on giving the appearance of \textit{doing.}" He "was anxious
always to create the impression that he was omnipresent and involved in all aspects of Italy’s
life." Unfortunately, his obsessive need for control, and the micromanagement it engendered,
seriously disrupted the functions of the state. "Most officials and bureaucrats were actually
reluctant to do their jobs, for fear that the Duce would not approve. Individual initiative \ldots was

\textsuperscript{166} Post (1993b), citing Volkan, V. D. (1980).
\textsuperscript{167} Hitler’s slaughter of the S.A. leadership during the “Night of the Long Knives” was regarded by Mussolini as
\textsuperscript{168} In 1940, for example Stalin had Trotsky murdered, even though the former had already been in power for 16
years, and the latter was living in exile, more accurately retirement, in Mexico.
stifled. Instead of getting things done and done efficiently, Mussolini’s go-getter pose ... frequently produced official paralysis.”  170

The ship of state is especially likely to founder when the MNL is incapacitated, because none of his do-nothing deputies is willing to take the wheel. Depression is an especially perilous condition. “Fidel Castro’s severe depression and reclusiveness after the death of Celia Sanchez, his lover, led to a slowdown in many governmental activities for several months.”  171

Stalin’s reaction to the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union is another example of depression in the MNL dragging the state down with him. Having so long regarded German aggression against the Soviet Union as beyond the realm of the possible, Stalin was emotionally shattered by Barbarossa. As the reality of the disaster set in, Stalin sank into a stupor: “witnesses remember a quite different Stalin, ashen-faced, shaken, unable to absorb the shock of the early defeats.”  172 For over a week he hid in his summer retreat, depressed, lethargic, and resigned to meeting a grim fate.

A decade of purges had left the Soviet state hollow: any center of power that may have challenged Stalin’s absolute rule had long since been dissolved. Thousands of bureaucrats and officers had been imprisoned or killed; the survivors had learned to keep their heads down and obey.  173 Therefore, Stalin’s “absence, given the need not to make any autonomous decisions that might later be given the official party-line disapproval by the boss, also caused paralytic delays among even top military leaders.”  174

---

With absolute power to reshape his environment, Stalin had hammered the Soviet state into a brittle shell for his narcissistic personality.\(^{175}\) "The temporary collapse of Stalin's will left a vacuum at the centre of Soviet decision-making."\(^{176}\) The bitter fruit was that his emotional incapacitation during Barbarossa paralyzed the Soviet state in the face of its most dire crisis.

Saddam Hussein is a great admirer of Stalin, and his decades in power similarly corroded the effectiveness of the Iraqi military. During the Iran-Iraq War, the "over-centralized chain of command failed to make even the most mundane tactical decisions in a timely and advantageous manner."\(^{177}\) Inertia trumped initiative, opportunities were lost, and the war became a grinding slaughterhouse of attrition for eight years. When the United Nations finally brokered a peace, both sides were poorer by hundreds of thousands of lives, and billions of dollars, and neither side had gained or lost any territory of substance. It had been a major international blunder.

C. MALIGNANT NARCISSISM AND INTERNATIONAL BLUNDERS

As seen in the example of the Iran-Iraq War, blunders are defined by consequences, not intent. If Iraq had successfully toppled Khomeini's regime, the war would not have been a blunder - a bloody, immoral war of wanton aggression, perhaps, but not a blunder. The same goes for the conquest of Kuwait: if the world had acquiesced, Iraq would have controlled one-fifth of the world's oil supply, prosperity would have returned, and for the people of Iraq, if not Kuwait, it would have been a great success.

But the world did not acquiesce, and even though Saddam clung to power for an additional thirteen years, the people of Iraq suffered terribly. It was only a success, therefore, "if

\(^{175}\) Volkan (1980): 131-152.
\(^{176}\) Overy (1995): 257.
you measure success by his ability to stay in power and overlook the miseries his rule … inflicted on his country’s … people.”¹⁷⁸ But if you measure political success in more humane terms as the most good for the most people, then malignant narcissists are categorical failures as political leaders, and prone to committing blunders. For the purposes of the hypotheses to follow, a blunder is defined as an action that leaves an MNL’s subject population significantly worse-off than it would have been in the absence of that action.

Of course, it is not only malignant narcissists who blunder, and not all blunders are committed by malignant narcissists. Table 3 illustrates the point.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Malignant Narcissistic Leaders (MNLs)</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>International Blunders</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>MNLs making international blunders</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>➢ Saddam Hussein, entire career</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>➢ Hitler, 1941 war against U.S.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>➢ Stalin, 1941 surprise attack from Germany</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Successful Foreign-Policy Decisions</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>MNLs making successful decisions</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>➢ Stalin, 1946 withdrawal from Iran</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>➢ Gaddafi, cooperation with international WMD inspectors</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Malignant narcissistic leaders are prone to the following six blunders in their conduct of international relations:

1. They deliberately create crisis situations and work to maintain them.

2. They tend to start wars of aggression.

3. They are vulnerable to surprise attacks and tend to mismanage them when they occur.

4. They tend to protract wars unnecessarily by rejecting peace feelers.

5. They tend to protract wars unnecessarily by not yielding to military coercion.

6. They tend to mismanage their domestic economies, weakening their states.

This section explores the implications of these hypotheses, and supports their plausibility with historical examples.

1. **MNLs deliberately create crisis situations and work to maintain them.**

The first hypothesis in this section establishes the enabling condition for the hypotheses to follow. MNLs are prone to committing international blunders because they deliberately create crisis situations and work to maintain them.

It is not only malignant narcissists who stir up crises: in the words of a State Department official, “we create and enjoy crises.... There is a sense of elation that comes with crises.” But the malignant narcissist draws a special kind of energy from a crisis, especially one in which he is the center of attention. Narcissists thrive on attention. For malignant narcissists, attention need not be positive: it is as gratifying to be feared as it is to be loved. From this perspective, MNLs are in the enviable position of being able to generate international crises almost at will, situations that guarantee they will be the focus of worldwide attention, positive or negative.

For thirteen years, Saddam played hide-and-seek with the world as the United Nations tried to determine whether Iraq had weapons of mass destruction. For the Iraqi people it was an economic and humanitarian disaster, as Saddam’s manipulation of international sanctions destroyed the Iraqi standard of living. But for Saddam they were glory years, as he was on front pages around the world almost every day.

Unfortunately, crises lead to stress, and stress degrades the quality of decision making. For MNLs, crisis stress aggravates their pathological tendencies. "The paranoid reaction characteristic of crisis behavior" inclines MNLs under stress toward "maladaptive accentuation in the direction of aggression and escape." Mistakes are inevitable, and some of them become blunders.

A spiral of threat and counter-threat is high international crisis. The MNL already has a predisposition to overestimate threats and respond to them with reckless aggression. This conspires with his instrumental interest in maintaining a state of crisis to make spirals much more likely when one of the leaders involved is a malignant narcissist.

Crises eventually resolve, or relax, or get overshadowed by other events. MNLs become adept, therefore, at maintaining crisis conditions. One way to do this is to segue from one crisis to the next with barely a pause to regroup. Saddam Hussein and Slobodan Milosevic provide examples to illustrate this behavior.

---

181 See, for example, Post on Saddam in Peterson, S. (2003).
185 To Mao’s chagrin, the Chinese attack on India in October 1962 went virtually unnoticed by a world preoccupied with the Cuban Missile Crisis.
From 1980 to 1988, Iraq fought Iran in a bloody, exhausting war reminiscent of the Western Front in World War One. The Iran-Iraq War was at once a grueling stalemate and a bloodbath of attrition. By the time the combatants agreed to terms, the economies of both sides were wrecked and more than a million people had been wounded or killed.

The war left the Iraqi military exhausted and hollowed out. Always paranoid and on the lookout for conspiracies against him, “Saddam had been reluctant to keep any senior commander in his post for sufficient time to build up a personal following or to get into a position where he could conspire with others.” Therefore, by the end of the 1980s, Iraqi “generals who had made their names in the war with Iran were retired, dead, or under arrest.”¹⁸⁷

Armed with a collapsing economy and a military purged of any real leadership, Saddam ordered the conquest of Kuwait in the summer of 1990. Overnight he went from relative obscurity to international superstardom, and for the next fourteen years, Saddam was one of the most closely watched political figures in the world.¹⁸⁸

The lesson was not lost on Saddam’s admirer in the Balkans, Slobodan Milosevic. Like Saddam’s Iraq in the 1980s, Milosevic’s Serbia in the 1990s was mired in a grinding war notable mostly for genocidal slaughter of innocents. By the end of the Bosnian nightmare in 1995, Serbia was economically imploding and internationally ostracized.

Like Saddam, Milosevic did not choose to reach out to the world in the spirit of peaceful cooperation. Instead, he sent the Serbian military to Kosovo to wage a campaign of murderous persecution against ethnic Albanians.

The Saddam-Milosevic parallel continues. In both Kuwait and Kosovo, American-led bombing campaigns savagely punished occupying forces on the ground, but in both cases the

MNL refused to yield to coercive force. It took an actual invasion in Kuwait and an imminent invasion in Kosovo to drive Iraqi and Serbian forces out.\textsuperscript{189}

And the parallel continues! At time of writing (April 2004), both Saddam and Milosevic find themselves in chains: Saddam is in American custody in Iraq awaiting justice, and Milosevic is on trial at The Hague for war crimes. In light of these outcomes, what motivates MNLs to continue to generate and maintain international crises?

At the core of the decision to ignite an international crisis is a calculation of costs and benefits that, while rational, is processing severely compromised data. First, the benefits: recall that to the malignant narcissist, all attention is welcome. Before he was pulled from his spider hole in December 2003, Saddam spent almost fourteen years as one of the most famous people in the world. Journalists, academics, the United Nations and the President of the United States all spent significant time and energy concentrating on Saddam and wondering what he would do next. It was a nightmare for millions of people, but for Saddam they were the best years of his life.\textsuperscript{190}

That brings up the question of cost, more specifically, what the MNL perceives the costs to be, and how he weighs them. “Because the narcissist sees everything as revolving around himself, there is a tendency to equate one’s self-interests with the interests of the nation.”\textsuperscript{191}

Louis XIV neatly framed the congruence the narcissistic leader perceives between his own interests and the interests of those he rules: \textit{l'etat, c'est moi} – I am the state.


\textsuperscript{190} Note the title of Jerrold Post's psychological profile of Saddam during the Kuwait Crisis: Post, J. M. (1993a). The Defining Moment of Saddam's Life: A Political Psychology Perspective on the Leadership and Decision-Making of Saddam Hussein During the Gulf Crisis.

\textsuperscript{191} Post (1993b): 110-111.
Furthermore, "narcissists crave opportunities for self-enhancement, and some tasks offer more self-enhancement value than others."\(^{192}\) The interests of the MNL, therefore, are likely to be in areas that offer opportunities for personal aggrandizement, and the less glamorous business of state is likely to be neglected. The epitome of such a policy would have to be the waging of war. More statues in public squares are dedicated to conquerors than to zoning reformers.\(^{193}\)

Once a crisis is triggered, crisis stress can aggravate the impulsive recklessness to which the MNL is prone. This can lead to a host of blunders: aggressive war followed by coercive failure, as seen in the cases of Saddam and Milosevic; internal revolution leading to economic meltdown and military vulnerability, as happened when Mao triggered the Cultural Revolution.

Mao was 72 years old when he set off the Cultural Revolution, elderly, ill, and afraid of dying. A special kind of crisis occurs when the MNL confronts the looming shadow of his own mortality.\(^{194}\) "The end of the heroic life can be particularly unsettling for the narcissistic leader."\(^{195}\) For the malignant narcissist, the prospect of his own mortality is the ultimate threat to his brittle self image, which is why he is so often a hypochondriac, as Hitler was, and heavily medicated, as both Hitler and Mao were.\(^{196}\) He is likely to respond as he does to all threats: with rage and aggression. "The end of life is unthinkable to the consummate narcissist, and the narcissistic leader's reactions to frustrated dreams of glory can produce nightmares for his followers."\(^{197}\) The examples of Mao and Hitler amplify the point.

---


\(^{195}\) Post (1993b): 119.


\(^{197}\) Post (1993b): 119.
For Mao, unleashing the massively destructive Cultural Revolution was a response to what he feared was the approach of death. In the winter of 1965-66, Mao contracted severe bronchitis, with a fever of 104 degrees Fahrenheit. While treating him, his personal physician also tried to wean the sickly old man from his dangerous addiction to sleeping pills, with limited success. As Mao aged and his health deteriorated, he grew increasingly isolated from the daily realities of Chinese life and from the concerns of his senior comrades in the Communist Party leadership. Worried that they were planning to remove him from power, Mao plunged the Chinese nation into a fratricidal civil war. The Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution was "an immense and contorted movement that for years wrought terror and disorder on China." It is unknown exactly how many people were killed in the chaotic frenzy of internecine violence, but the number is in the millions.

While the Cultural Revolution is usually regarded as an internal Chinese disaster, it actually had several adverse effects on Chinese foreign relations, and therefore qualifies as an international blunder. As the Red Guards rioted and burned down foreign embassies, country after country cut off diplomatic contact. By 1968, China’s single surviving international relationship was with the tiny hermit state of Albania. Meanwhile, exasperated with the constant ideological harangues of the Chinese cadres sent to support them in their war against the United States, the Vietnamese Communists sent them home. In the depths of the Cultural Revolution, the People’s Republic was on the brink of full-scale civil war, internationally isolated, and bereft of allies. His country having dug itself into this severely compromised international position,

Mao then chose to start a war with the Soviet Union over a minor border dispute. Afraid that he might die alone, Mao pushed the two communist giants to the brink of nuclear war, so that at least China would die with him.

Mao was not the first MNL who wanted to take his own country with him to the grave: Hitler provides another chilling example of a malignant narcissist to whom the looming end of his own life provoked decisions that have long been dismissed as simply insane. Hitler was obsessed by the specter of his own mortality. In 1945, when confronted with the imminent collapse of his thousand-year Reich after barely a decade, Hitler responded by condemning the German people to destruction. He felt that the German people had failed him, and therefore deserved to die with him. "If the German people cannot wrest victory from the enemy, then they shall be destroyed. Yes, then they deserve to perish," he said.²⁰⁴

Especially as the Red Army closed in on Berlin during the final months of the war, Hitler accelerated a scorched earth policy intended to punish the German people for their weakness.²⁰⁵

"He was deliberately attempting to let the people perish with himself. He no longer knew any moral boundaries; a man to whom the end of his own life meant the end of everything."²⁰⁶

2. MNLS start wars of aggression.

There are a number of traits that predispose the MNL to use military force as the instrument of first resort. He perceives threats in benign circumstances, and assumes that efforts to explain away threatening activity are disingenuous, as his own explanations would be. Perceiving threats, he is quick to respond with impulsive aggression, including military action. He is absolutely confident of success, and would reject criticism of his plans if any of the

sycophants around him were courageous enough to offer it. Launched in haste for the wrong reasons, the wars of the malignant narcissist often end as blunders.

Obvious motives for war include greed and ambition, but such broad concepts offer little analytical traction to explain the outbreak of war at specific times, in specific places. To explain the particulars, the scholar must turn attention to the individual leaders who give the orders that set the armies marching. After all, it is the individual leader who must assess the opportunity and weigh the means against his motives, and then decide.

Mussolini’s imperial adventure in Ethiopia provides a case in point. It has been argued that “the spectacle of fascism exuded war and narratively prefigured the imperialistic outcome of the totalitarian state’s aims.” That may be true, but it does not address the question of why Ethiopia, and why 1935. Those decisions were made by Mussolini, an MNL who neither sought nor accepted advice on the matter.

He did it for his own aggrandizement, which was quick in coming. “The people of Italy rose in a tumult of support for the invasion, with spontaneous celebrations and rallies everywhere.” The people of Ethiopia had less to celebrate: it is unknown how many were killed, perhaps 30,000 in the initial invasion, but it is known that Italian aircraft dropped nearly 1600 mustard-gas bombs and deliberately targeted hospitals. The Ethiopian aggression, though not necessarily a blunder for Italy, is a good example of a war triggered by a malignant narcissist with no compelling reasons of state.

Hitler’s declaration of war against the United States, on the other hand, was one of the worst blunders in history. By doing so, he transformed “a run of easy conquests with minimal

German casualties and the prospect of an early end to the war into a bloodbath threatening the existence of Germany."\textsuperscript{211}

His decision to do so has long been one of the central historical puzzles of the Second World War, indeed of the twentieth century. He justified it publicly at the time as preemption, beating FDR to the punch, but the explanation rings about as true as anything else Hitler ever said.

Even after Japan’s attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941, it is unclear whether the U.S. Senate would have declared war on Germany. There was much sympathy for Germany in the United States and fear and hatred of the Soviet Union.\textsuperscript{212}

By the time Hitler declared war, three days had passed since Congress had declared war on Japan. The \textit{Reuben James} incident in September had not provoked it to follow the president to war against Germany, and it is unlikely that Congress was prepared to divert its attention from war with Japan while the wreckage of Pearl Harbor still smoldered.

Historians explained the declaration of war by Hitler’s obligation to honor Germany’s pact with Japan, but two considerations argue against that. The pact with Japan called for German intervention if Japan was attacked, not if Japan initiated a war. In addition, as Hitler said to military staff in 1939, “Agreements are to be kept only as long as they serve a certain purpose.”\textsuperscript{213}

To those two considerations, add a third: “Japan did not reciprocate by declaring war on the Soviet Union and thereby relieving Hitler’s major front.”\textsuperscript{214}

Hitler’s statement about agreements hints at his motives like a fin hints at a shark in the water. To kill the metaphor with explanation, the fin is Hitler’s frank admission that actions need not be guided by any principle but expediency. The shark it is attached to is a monster of malignant narcissism.

\textsuperscript{211} Victor, G. (1998): 188. This section relies heavily on Victor’s insightful analysis. See also Haffner, S. (1979), on whom Victor relies considerably.
\textsuperscript{213} Ibid. For a summary of some historians’ views, see Doenecke, J. D. and J. E. Wilz (1991). \textit{From Isolation to War, 1931-1941}. Arlington Heights, Ill., Harlan Davidson, Inc: 176-177.
\textsuperscript{214} Doenecke, J. D. & J. E. Wilz (1991): 176.
Seen through the lens of malignant narcissism, Hitler’s decision makes sense, even as it still horrifies. Hitler understood no distinction between his emotional needs and Germany’s strategic interests. His primary emotional need was to cope with the bottomless well of self-loathing at the center of his being.

He would often mention victory and the destruction of Germany in the same breath, and it would become apparent to some of his associates that for him there was no basic difference between them. Victory over the part of himself he loathed would come only with his death. And since he had identified himself with Germany, victory for the nation would become inseparable from its destruction.²¹⁵ By declaring war on the United States, Hitler got his victory, guaranteeing that the war would end with the destruction of Germany.

3. **MNLs are vulnerable to surprise attacks.**

“A surprise attack is an attack against a target that is not prepared for it due to mistaken estimates of whether, when, where, and how the enemy will strike.”²¹⁶ MNLs are particularly prone to making or accepting such mistaken estimates. The fundamental reason is rooted in their narcissistic inability to empathize: they neither understand nor tolerate those who think differently than they do.

Paranoia amplifies these tendencies. Unable to understand that someone else may see things differently, the MNL may impute sinister motives to an advisor’s alternative interpretation of a situation and reject it. Clinging to his distorted image of the international environment, the MNL is easy to surprise.

“In 1941 Stalin rejected all messages from Soviet intelligence, his military commanders, Winston Churchill, and even the German ambassador in Moscow, suggesting that Hitler was

---

planning to attack Russia.” 217 Ironically, the one voice Stalin chose to believe was Hitler’s, and the blitzkrieg on the eastern front caught Soviet forces entirely unprepared.

“Given the plainly aggressive actions of Germany in the months preceding its attack,” the Soviet Union was only surprised by Barbarossa because Stalin filtered out all information that could possibly have presented him with a threatening image of the Germans…. The reasons that Stalin was convinced that Germany was not going to attack are important and are not based on the actions of the German government or the intelligence-gathering structure of the Soviet army so much as on the personality dynamics of Stalin himself. 218

Of course, the converse of this hypothesis is not necessarily true: being taken by surprise does not imply that a leader is a malignant narcissist. History is rife with surprise attacks on stable, legitimate governments led by healthy, intelligent people. Examples include Pearl Harbor, the Yom Kippur War, and September 11. Golda Meir’s misperception of Egyptian and Syrian intent owes little to narcissism and much to the Israeli politics of military mobilization. 219

Nasser, on the other hand, was particularly vulnerable to surprise attack, blindsided by Israel not once but twice, first in 1956 and then again in 1967.

4. MNLs squander opportunities for peace.

The third blunder, wasting opportunities for peace, is a result of the malignant narcissist’s indifference to human wellbeing. MNLs often protract wars for years, wasting millions of lives.

Immediately after the 1967 war, Israel offered to return conquered territories to its Arab neighbors in exchange for recognition and peace. Humiliated and depressed after Egypt’s military humiliation, Nasser refused. It would take another six years of bloodshed before Nasser’s successor, Sadat, negotiated an end to Egypt’s perpetual war with Israel.

Nasser’s admirer Saddam found himself in a similar situation after the 1991 Gulf War. The United Nations offered an exchange in which Iraq would renounce weapons of mass destruction, and the world would leave Iraq in peace. Saddam chose war instead, toying with international inspectors, defying U.N. resolutions, and provoking the United States. In 2003 he did it again, refusing to abdicate under threat of invasion. At no point in Saddam’s political career did he ever choose the path to peace.

5. MNLs rarely respond to coercion.

Coercion must be distinguished from brute force. Coercion relies on the threat of force to change behavior, as opposed to the application of “brute” force.\(^\text{220}\) If the target fails to change behavior under coercive threat, brute force may be applied – but at that point coercion has failed.

The threat of force has failed to coerce a number of MNLs in recent history. In 1950, Mao disregarded the threat posed by American airpower to the Chinese heartland when he decided to commit forces to the Korean peninsula.\(^\text{221}\) In 1999, NATO bombing failed to persuade Milosevic to withdraw Serbian forces from Kosovo. And from 1990 to 2003, Saddam Hussein was unmoved by economic sanctions, bombing, and the threat of invasion.

A notable counterexample is Stalin’s withdrawal of Soviet forces from Iran in 1946. Pape’s theory of coercion argues that success depends upon “the ability to thwart the target state’s military strategy for controlling the objectives in dispute.”\(^\text{222}\) In Iran in 1946, Britain and the United States had this ability, and were therefore able to coerce Stalin. The prospect of civilian suffering, a few months after the end of a war that had killed 20 million Soviets, would

not have swayed Stalin. But the likely prospect of a humiliating military defeat evidently persuaded him that Iran was not worth the risk.

The personality of the malignant narcissist features three characteristics that would predispose him to disregard coercive threats. First, he may not understand the gravity of the threat, since he is likely to be surrounded by advisors who shield him from bad news. Second, there is the core narcissistic trait of a lack of empathy: as long as the threat is against his population and not his person, the malignant narcissist is not swayed by the prospect of their suffering – witness Saddam Hussein’s behavior during a decade of UN sanctions against Iraq. Finally, the malignant narcissist characteristically responds to threats not with compliance, but with impulsive and reckless aggression.

The implications of this hypothesis cast an unsettling shadow over theories of rational deterrence. How does one deter a malignant narcissistic leader who is convinced of his own infallibility, brooks no dissent, is indifferent to the human costs of war, and responds to threats with aggression?

6. **MNLs ruin the economies of the states they lead.**

Economic meltdown is often a side effect of the blunders described above. War is rarely good for economic health, especially for the losing side. Even for the winners, conquest does not pay very well. Economic collapse can also remove the barriers to pestilence, war’s ancient henchman. By the end of World War Two, for example, Italy’s economy was in ruins, and one result was the return of malaria across the entire peninsula, reversing more than two decades of mostly-successful eradication attempts.

---

Some of history’s worst economic meltdowns stayed contained within national borders. While they were not international blunders, they did tend to be major blunders, and the leaders who let them happen were often malignant narcissists. Three examples are here for that reason.

The Ukrainian famine of the early 1930s was a grievous blunder. In the ordinary meaning of the word, it was not a “blunder” at all, for it was an intentional policy: indeed, it has been called Stalin’s war against the peasantry, waged in a campaign to crush Ukrainian nationalism.\textsuperscript{225} But in this paper, blunders are defined by their humanitarian consequences, not their political intent, and by that definition the famine in the Ukraine was a whopper.

It was actually the second part of Stalin’s war against Ukrainian nationalism. The first part had been a campaign of systematic murder targeting Ukrainian intelligentsia and kulaks, or yeoman farmers, waged with bullets. The second part, a campaign against the Ukrainian peasantry, was waged with bread.

The famine was not caused by drought or crop blight or social unrest. The Soviets simply confiscated Ukrainian grain and shipped it to other parts of the empire, where some of it rotted away in silos. The result was “execution by hunger” on a horrifying scale: the Soviet census of 1939, six years after the famine, counted some three million fewer Ukrainians than there had been in 1926, seven years before the famine, representing a ten percent loss in population. They did not emigrate: Soviet troops on the border enforced that. Considering the demographic trends in Ukraine and the rest of the Soviet Union at this time, it is not unreasonable to estimate that Stalin’s “hidden holocaust” killed as many people as Hitler’s more notorious one.\textsuperscript{226}

Politically, it was a success for Stalin. In the words of one Soviet officer, “it took a famine to show them who is master here. It has cost millions of lives but the collective farm system is here to stay. We have won the war!” 227

In terms of loss of life, the worst economic meltdown of all time would have to be China’s Great Leap Forward. Beginning in 1958, this attempt at crash collectivization claimed an estimated twenty million lives by the time it was abandoned in 1961. Mao’s paranoid narcissism is directly to blame, as he silenced all criticism of his policies with boiling rage.

Peng Dehuai, commander of Chinese forces during the Korean War, was usually the only advisor with the courage to tell Mao the truth. In 1950, when Mao’s son Anying was killed by American incendiary bombs, Peng sent a personal telegram, but it was blocked from reaching Mao by an inner circle fearful of his reaction. This resulted in an awkward encounter a few months later, when Peng traveled to Beijing to brief Mao on the war, and opened the conversation with condolences: it was the first time Mao had heard the news. 228

Eight years later, Peng’s forthright honesty would trigger a narcissistic rage reaction in Mao that changed the course of Chinese history. By 1958, Mao had become increasingly worried about the creeping bureaucratization of the Chinese Communist revolution, which implied a diminished role for charismatic leadership and thereby threatened his fragile narcissistic ego. 229 He responded with the most intensive social engineering project in human history, the Great Leap Forward, in which the Chinese nation was reorganized into a giant communist experiment.

The Great Leap Forward was an abysmal disaster, causing massive social and economic dislocation throughout a country just beginning to recover from a generation of war and

revolution. By the time the insanity was abandoned in 1961, twenty million Chinese had starved to death, and the median age of those dying had fallen below ten years.\textsuperscript{230}

The only senior official with the courage to confront Mao about the failing policy was Peng Dehuai, now Minister of Defense.\textsuperscript{231} Peng had toured the country over the winter and had seen firsthand the looming catastrophe that Mao’s reckless economic engineering promised to bring down upon the Chinese nation. He had to answer to his conscience, and his loyalty was to the Party and the nation, not to Mao himself, who had once abandoned Peng on a battlefield.\textsuperscript{232} He expressed his doubts about the policy in a private letter he personally gave to Mao.\textsuperscript{233}

The letter itself was rather gentle, praising the Great Leap as a mixed success with some errors. “But more galling than anything Peng wrote was the way in which he had arrogated to himself the right to sit in judgment.”\textsuperscript{234} Mao’s reaction was one of the hallmarks of malignant narcissism: he “exploded with rage.”\textsuperscript{235} Feeling personally threatened by Peng’s criticism of economic policy, Mao responded with aggression.

Even for Mao, it was not easy to discredit one of the great heroes of the Revolutionary War, who had led the Chinese Volunteers in Korea; a man with a reputation for incorruptibility, who lived as an ascetic and was morally unassailable.\textsuperscript{236}

But Mao succeeded in destroying Peng’s reputation and career, and in the process made it clear that he would brook no dissent.

Instead of treating the letter as a private communication from a trusted colleague, Mao circulated it to all the senior cadres present, and launched a personal denunciation of Peng. … The bitterness of Mao’s attack startled those at Lushan, and marked a key juncture in CCP history. Criticism of policy within senior party

\textsuperscript{230} Spence (1999b): 553.
\textsuperscript{231} Spence (1999b): 551.
\textsuperscript{232} Short (1999): 493.
\textsuperscript{233} Spence (1999a): 145.
\textsuperscript{234} Short (1999): 496.
\textsuperscript{235} Spence (1999a): 145.
\textsuperscript{236} Short (1999): 500.
ranks had now been treated by Mao as an attack on his own leadership and foresight.237

The chilling effect of Mao’s narcissistic rage reaction on his advisors had horrific consequences. During the 1960s, unconstrained by conscience or counsel, Mao launched China into three foreign wars and the Cultural Revolution, during which Peng Dehuai was killed.

In 2004, another MNL is leading his country to economic collapse. In Zimbabwe, Robert Mugabe has been confiscating white-owned farms, with disastrous results. “His chaotic land redistribution campaign begun in 2000 caused an exodus of white farmers, crippled the economy, and ushered in widespread shortages of basic commodities.”238 As detailed below in the Conclusion, Robert Mugabe is probably a paranoid narcissist, and the fact that his country is having an economic meltdown is no accident.

IV. SADDAM HUSSEIN

So far this paper has defined malignant narcissism; identified malignant-narcissistic leaders; deduced hypotheses linking malignant narcissism to various political behaviors; and demonstrated the plausibility of these hypotheses with historical examples drawn from the careers of malignant-narcissistic leaders. Before concluding, however, a brief look at the career of Saddam Hussein is in order.

Saddam was the inspiration for this research project, which grew out of a deceptively simple question: why do bad guys seem to run the world?239 More specifically, in a world of robust domestic and international political structures and systems, why are toxic individuals able to do so much damage? That they can do so is not an original observation: Hesiod noted that “oft

239 MIT political science professor Stephen Van Evera raised the question in a conversation we had shortly after September 11, 2001. “Bad guys” is a euphemism.
hath even a whole city reaped the evil fruit of a bad man."\textsuperscript{240} The question this paper set out to answer is \textit{how}, and to a lesser extent, \textit{why}.

This section summarizes the numerous international blunders Saddam committed during almost a quarter-century in power. His blunders are presented in the same order as the hypotheses they support: his regime was one long crisis, during which he waged two wars of international aggression, succumbed to surprise attack, squandered opportunities for peace, failed to yield to coercion, and utterly destroyed the Iraqi economy.

\textbf{A. THE LONG CRISIS, 1991-2003}

The standoff between Iraq and the United Nations over weapons of mass destruction is an excellent example of how an MNL can deliberately maintain a crisis for years to support his own aggrandizement, even as his actions cause widespread suffering.

Before the 2003 Iraq War, when it was widely assumed that Iraq possessed and was hiding WMD, it was possible to make a strategic argument for the long crisis. Iraq was under real threat: all the neighbors and most of the world's major powers wanted Saddam removed. Also, Iraq did not have much of a credible conventional deterrent, with much of its military capability having been destroyed in the 1991 Gulf War and then further degraded by years of international sanctions.\textsuperscript{241} Therefore, maintaining a stockpile of WMD was a reasonable strategic choice to protect Iraq from aggression.

In the aftermath of the war, however, that argument is less persuasive. At time of writing (April 2004), no nuclear, biological, or chemical weapons, or the means to make them, have been


discovered in Iraq. And yet, everything about the prewar behavior of Saddam’s regime suggested Iraq was hiding WMD.

Saddam was bluffing. Iraq did not need WMD to deter the neighbors, as long as nobody knew that and remained convinced that Iraq had them. “Some U.S. officials even think Iraqi defectors who surfaced before the war saying Saddam was still making WMD were double agents dispatched by Saddam to spread disinformation to deter his enemies.”242 Saddam was acting “like someone who puts up a sign warning BEWARE OF DOG without having a dog.”243

It is possible, however, that Saddam thought he had a dog! A culture of duplicity permeated the Iraqi government and military. “No Special Republican Guard units had chemical or biological weapons – but … all of the officers believed that some other Special Republican Guard unit had them.”244 Even senior officers in the Iraqi military believed Iraq had WMD.

Fear severely hampered communication in Saddam’s Iraq. Before the war, American agents had attempted to undermine Iraqi morale by calling Iraqi officers on their private phones, hoping to convince them that if the United States could find their private phone numbers, the U.S. could also find the officers themselves with cruise missiles. This attempt at psychological warfare did not succeed. “Instead, the Iraqis believed the calls were part of a ‘loyalty test’ mounted by Mr. Hussein’s secret services…. Afraid of arrest, incarceration, torture and even death, they refused to cooperate.”245

Did the paranoid strangulation of important strategic information, such as the existence or nonexistence of WMD, reach all the way up to Saddam? Imagine you were one of a small number of Iraqi officials who knew that Iraq had been completely disarmed of WMD in the

1990s, but had never dared to tell Saddam. When would you tell him? Recall that in 1967, not a single one of Nasser’s advisors told him that the Egyptian air force had been destroyed, even though Nasser the paranoid narcissist was a pussycat compared with the advisor-dismembering, malignant-narcissistic psychopath Saddam.

The possibility that Saddam did not know Iraq had no WMD is intriguing but moot: either way, he wanted the rest of the world to think Iraq did have WMD, and succeeded, for twelve years.

The reasons go beyond deterrence. As explained below in Section F, Saddam used the suffering of the Iraqi people as a political tool during the years of UN sanctions. If he had come clean about WMD, the sanctions would have been lifted and he would have lost his foil. Without sanctions on which to blame their suffering, it is possible the Iraqi people would have started to blame Saddam, with potentially adverse consequences for the stability of his regime. 246 Saddam was trapped behind his own smoke and mirrors.

Whether they existed or not, Iraq’s WMD were also weapons of massive narcissism, keeping global attention focused on Saddam for more than a decade. As one of the reasons for Saddam to maintain the WMD bluff, Hans Blix cites “national pride.” 247 He is more correct than he realizes. Malignant narcissists treat the states they lead as projections of their own egos, and Saddam was no different. 248 Unable to distinguish between national pride and his own, Saddam played the WMD crisis for twelve years.

B. Opportunistic Aggression, 1990

Freedman and Karsh argue that Saddam “had not occupied Kuwait for reasons of power-seeking or political aggrandizement.” Rather, they continue, “the invasion had been a desperate attempt to shore up his regime in the face of dire economic straits created by the Iran-Iraq War.” Saddam may indeed have seen conquest as a solution to economic problems at home, but if anything this only demonstrates a lack of creativity in his leadership. After all, it had been the protracted waging of aggressive war against Iran that had put Iraq in economic crisis in the first place.

Less belligerent policy options are not hard to imagine. As one of the most heavily armed states in the world at the end of the 1980s, Iraq could have converted some of its armaments into money by selling them secondhand. Or Iraq could have approached the World Bank, or national banks, or private investors, and taken out loans against future oil revenue. More in line with Saddam’s way of thinking, Iraq could have pressed Iran for war reparations, or even extorted Kuwait with the threat of invasion or another use of force.

But Saddam did not do any of these things, deciding instead to invade a neighboring country for the second time. And then, having presented the world with a fait accompli in Kuwait, he fumbled again: by not seizing the oil fields of northern Saudi Arabia, Saddam missed the opportunity to control fully one-third of the oil in the world, while simultaneously preempting the slow, heavy American military buildup that ultimately drove his forces from Kuwait.

Of course, the conquest of Kuwait turned out to be completely counterproductive. “This economic plight had not only remained after the invasion of Kuwait but had been significantly

---

aggravated by the sanctions” imposed by the coalition.\textsuperscript{250} Considering the Iraqi economy’s heavy reliance on foreign trade, it is not surprising that the sanctions quickly reduced Iraqi GNP by over fifty percent, while the value of Iraqi currency plummeted.\textsuperscript{251} If economic solvency had really been Saddam’s goal, aggression against Kuwait was a self-defeating way to achieve it. Ultimately, “Kuwait, the Palestinian cause, Iraqi lives: all were important only so long as they served the perpetuation of Saddam.”\textsuperscript{252} The invasion of Kuwait was a blunder, and Saddam’s malignant narcissism was the cause.

C. Vulnerability to Surprise Attack, 2003

As American forces massed in Kuwait for the invasion of Iraq in the spring of 2003, Saddam remained “convinced that American forces would never invade Iraq and oust him from power.” Instead, he expected a repeat of the 1998 Desert Fox campaign: intensified allied bombing, maybe a few cruise missiles, and then back to the status quo ante bellum.\textsuperscript{253}

He was wrong. Desert Fox had been the product of a Clinton Administration preoccupied with Monica Lewinsky at home and Al Qaeda abroad. Five years later, there had been a sea change in Washington: the president was now the scion of a family with close ties to the House of Sa’ud, the regime in the Middle East with the most to gain from the removal of Saddam from power.\textsuperscript{254} Furthermore, the president was surrounded by advisors such as Dick Cheney and Paul Wolfowitz, who had spent a decade agitating for a war against Iraq.\textsuperscript{255} Finally, George W. Bush was the son of a man Saddam had tried to murder!

\textsuperscript{250} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{251} Rogers, E. S. (1996): 60.
\textsuperscript{252} Freedman & Karsh (1991): 35.
\textsuperscript{253} Hoenball, M. (2003).
Nevertheless, Saddam was surprised not only that the U.S. attacked at all, but that the invasion came out of Kuwait:

Despite the broad news coverage of the American and British buildup in Kuwait, the Iraqi Defense Ministry insisted that Jordan would be the launching pad for the invasion.... That assessment was a wild misinterpretation of a series of Special Operations raids by relatively small numbers of elite troops in the western desert, which began before the major land force crossed out of Kuwait. The goal of the Special Operations missions was to destroy border posts and blind the Iraqi military in those zones as American and allied commandos hunted for unconventional weapons and missiles [in] that vast, desolate terrain.\footnote{Shanker, T. (2004). True story: during the spring of 2003, I regularly appeared on New England Cable News as a commentator on the crisis in Iraq. During one viewer call-in show, a mother called and said that her eleven-year-old son had asked why the media coverage of the buildup in Kuwait was so relentless — he thought that it risked revealing the American strategy to Saddam. I explained that Saddam already knew the invasion would come from Kuwait, because there was nowhere else it could come from: Iran and Syria were not friendly, Turkey was not cooperating, and Jordan was too far away. Even in the thick of researching and writing this paper, I had underestimated Saddam’s capacity for self-deception!}

How had Saddam been so mistaken? The most promising explanation is that he was surrounded by a claque of sycophants who did not dare to tell him the truth.\footnote{Hosenball, M. (2003).} In the weeks leading up to the war, “members of Mr. Hussein’s inner circle routinely lied to him and each other about Iraqi military capacities.”\footnote{Shanker, T. (2004).} It is not a stretch to imagine that this “Stalinist, paranoid leadership circle ... disconnected from reality in peace and in war,” was not able to effectively process the obvious implications of the American military buildup in Kuwait.\footnote{Ibid.}

This is as extreme an example of vulnerability to surprise attack as can be imagined. The American invasion of Iraq in 2003 was debated before the United Nations for a year, and still caught Saddam Hussein by surprise.

**D. Squandered Opportunities for Peace, 1980-1988**

The sycophants who surrounded Saddam were terrified of contradicting the tyrant. The consequences of offering unwelcome advice could be extreme:
In 1982, when the war with Iran was going very badly for Iraq and Saddam wished to terminate hostilities, Khomeini, who was personally fixated on Saddam, insisted there could be no peace until Saddam was removed from power. At a cabinet meeting, Saddam asked his ministers to candidly give their advice, and the Minister of Health suggested Saddam temporarily step down, to resume the presidency after peace had been established. Saddam reportedly thanked him for his candor and ordered his arrest. His wife pleaded for her husband’s return. The next day, Saddam returned her husband’s body to her in a black canvas bag, chopped into pieces. This powerfully concentrated the attention of the other ministers who were unanimous in their insistence that Saddam remain in power.\(^\text{260}\)

The result of this grisly exercise in policy non-evaluation was that the Iran-Iraq War continued in a war of position and grinding attrition that reminded observers of the Western Front in World War One.

In 1986, tired of six years of bloody stalemate, some of Saddam’s generals convinced him “to let them win the Iran-Iraq War in spite of himself.”\(^\text{261}\) Even with Saddam’s reluctant approval, the war dragged on for another two years. By the time the United Nations brokered a peace agreement, the war had lasted eight years. But apparently that was not long enough for Saddam, who purged the group of generals whose changes in strategy had ended the war!

E. FAILURE TO BE COERCED, 1991 AND 2003

From August 1990 to January 1991, a coalition of fourteen nations gathered in the Saudi desert, assembling the most powerful expeditionary force since the Second World War. As the number of allied troops topped half a million, backed by the most powerful air forces and navies in the world, Saddam refused to withdraw Iraqi forces from Kuwait.\(^\text{262}\) That decision cost probably 100,000 Iraqi lives during the ensuing Gulf War.\(^\text{263}\)

\(^{263}\) Freedman & Karsh (1991): 37n.
"Saddam Hussein did not concede Kuwait from August to January because the Coalition had not yet demonstrated his inability to hold it."264 Not yet demonstrated with brute force, but loudly implied with coercive intent: with some 1600 aircraft in theater, it was clear that the coalition had the ability to shatter Iraqi forces in Kuwait from the air. Saddam may have been indifferent to the fate of the Iraqi people, but why would he volunteer the destruction of his military?

Like many tyrants, Saddam maintained parallel military organizations: one to fight Iraq’s wars, and a second to defend Saddam from the first.265 The forces deployed in Kuwait were in the first category, and therefore in Saddam’s calculus were expendable.266

To some degree, American military planners were aware of this. In September 1990, during the planning stages of the Gulf War, Air Force Chief of Staff General Michael Dugan gave an interview to the Washington Post in which he outlined his preferred strategy to coerce Iraqi withdrawal from Kuwait. “The best way to hurt Saddam,” Dugan argued, would be to focus the air campaign on Saddam himself, his family, and his bodyguards.267 Killing Saddam would cause Iraqi power to collapse. Dugan was fired for voicing this opinion, not because he was wrong, but because he said it in public.

Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Colin Powell agreed that targeting Iraqi forces and infrastructure would not convince Saddam to withdraw from Kuwait. He advised the Senate that such a strategy failed to take into consideration Saddam’s demonstrated willingness

“to callously expend Iraqi lives and to care not a whit about what happens to the citizens of his country.”

Well said.

Twelve years later, the United States tried to coerce Saddam again, demanding WMD disarmament on threat of invasion. Since Iraq evidently had no weapons of mass destruction, why did Saddam refuse? Recall that Saddam did not believe the U.S. would carry out its threat. In addition to the silence of the sycophants described above, it is also probable that Saddam was counting on the specter of WMD to deter an American invasion. By that logic, surrendering his phantom WMD would have encouraged an American attack, not forestalled it. Ultimately, his failure to be coerced in 2003 turned out to be the final blunder of his political career.

F. ECONOMIC MELTDOWN, 1990-2003

Saddam’s stubbornness in the face of crippling economic sanctions levied by the international community caused great hardship for the Iraqi people. After a decade of sanctions, Iraqi per-capita income had fallen to one-fifth of what it had been in the 1980s.

Sanctions were initially imposed as a pressure tactic following the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. Once the Gulf War ended, the rationale for maintaining sanctions was ostensibly shifted to Iraq’s WMD programs, though the common perception at the time was that sanctions would continue as long as Saddam remained in power. Under UN Security Council Resolution 687, Iraq was to eliminate all its missile systems, WMD, and associated infrastructure in order for sanctions to be lifted.

Critics of the sanctions argued that it was not fair to make the Iraqi people suffer for Saddam’s military ambitions. Recognizing this, the UN established an oil-for-food program under Security Council Resolution 986, which allowed Iraq to trade oil for food, medical products, and other humanitarian needs. Saddam opposed the program, which never succeeded in

---

alleviating the suffering of ordinary Iraqis.\textsuperscript{272} Iraqi elites, meanwhile, were always able to get what they needed from other countries and from the black market.\textsuperscript{273}

Saddam’s opposition and the consequent failure of the oil-for-food program “suggest that most of the blame for the suffering under sanctions lies with the Iraqi regime,”\textsuperscript{274} which was “more interested in maximizing the nation’s suffering for propaganda purposes than [in] relieving it.”\textsuperscript{275} And the propaganda was successful: instead of being coerced by the sanctions, Saddam used them as props in his political theater.

The official story in Iraq was that the economic meltdown was a diabolical plot against the Iraqi people by the Zionists and their stooges in the U.S. and the UN, and that Saddam was what stood between the Iraqi people and real suffering:

Saddam was always the first item on the television news. He would go out to meet members of the public and ask them who they had to thank for their prosperity. Their predictably fulsome answers would take up much of the news.\textsuperscript{276}

Whether they believed their own answers or not, the story is instructive. It casts doubt on the assertions of Iraqi officials captured after the 2003 war that “Saddam’s top strategic objective was to persuade the United Nations to relax the sanctions on his regime.”\textsuperscript{277} No one was under any illusions that Saddam was moved by the suffering of his people, but it is startling to see how he was able to exploit it in the service of his own narcissistic need for adulation.

\textsuperscript{272} Byman, D. L. (2001): 501. In April 2004, the United Nations announced it was opening an investigation into corruption in the Iraqi oil-for-food program.
\textsuperscript{277} Hosenball, M. (2003).
The sanctions never worked as intended. It is estimated that more than half a million Iraqi children died as a consequence of the sanctions.\textsuperscript{278} As one observer caustically put it, "the only 'box' that sanctions put Iraqis into [was] coffins."\textsuperscript{279}

Shifting the burden of sanctions from the leadership to the people is by no means unique to the regimes of malignant narcissists.\textsuperscript{280} But by highlighting some of the MNLs' traits—especially hubris and reckless indifference—malignant narcissism offers a better understanding of why economic sanctions, and other coercive strategies based on threatening the general population, are so rarely successful. In light of the widespread human suffering caused by these feckless strategies, using them against nations led by malignant narcissists puts their people in double jeopardy and is morally wrong.

V. CONCLUSION

Every year, Parade magazine publishes its list of the ten worst dictators still in power.281

In 2004, the list featured the following, beginning with the worst:

1. Kim Jong-Il, North Korea
2. Than Shwe, Burma
3. Hu Jintao, China
4. Robert Mugabe, Zimbabwe
5. Crown Prince Abdullah, Saudi Arabia
6. Teodoro Obiang Nguema, Equatorial Guinea
7. Omar Al-Bashir, Sudan
8. Saparmurat Niyazov, Turkmenistan
9. Fidel Castro, Cuba
10. King Mswati III, Swaziland

Several dictators who had been on the list in 2003 did not reappear: Saddam Hussein is in American custody, and Charles Taylor, former president of Liberia, is in exile in Nigeria. Muammar Qaddafi of Libya and Alexander Lukashenko of Belarus remain in power, however, and can be considered numbers eleven and twelve, respectively.

It is very likely that at least half of these men are malignant narcissists. The most promising candidates are Kim, Mugabe, Obiang, Niyazov, Castro, and Qaddafi.

Kim Jong-Il is almost certainly a malignant narcissist. His father probably was, and as argued above, sons of MNLs – if they survive to take power, which is rare – usually become

---

MNLs themselves. To describe Kim Jong-Il's childhood as abusive fails to capture the bizarre reality:

North Korean hagiography insists he was born on sacred Mount Paektu in an event marked by the auspicious appearance of a double rainbow. He actually was born in a military camp in Soviet Siberia, where his father, then a communist guerrilla leader, was hiding from the Japanese occupying Korea during World War II. Kim Jong Il's mother died when he was 7, and he seems to have been desperate to ingratiate himself with his father. As a young man, he taste-tested his father's food for poison.282

Kim has spent his life compensating for the powerlessness and humiliations of his childhood by living out his grandiose fantasies. Like Saddam, Hitler, Stalin and Mussolini, Kim is a film buff, with a personal library of over 10,000 titles. Unlike previous MNLs, however, Kim was not satisfied with the vicarious experience of watching other people's films. In 1978, he had one of South Korea's premier actresses kidnapped along with her husband, a director, and "over 2½ years, the couple made 21 movies, each of which was edited by Kim Jong-Il."283

He is almost certainly a psychopath. While he has been described as personally charming, he once had a bodyguard and his family sent to the gulag for leaving a cigarette butt in one of his private ashtrays.284 His indifference to human suffering combines with his monstrous hubris to fuel appalling recklessness. While the Korean people "boiled grass for food,"285 Kim has pursued the development of nuclear weapons so relentlessly that it has brought his Spartan state to the brink of war with the United States twice in less than a decade. If push came to shove on the Korean peninsula, and Kim's grip on power were threatened, his malignant narcissism suggests that he would want the Korean people to die with him. If he has nuclear weapons, the danger that he might eventually use them is very high.

---

283 Ibid.
284 Ibid.
285 Ibid.
Robert Mugabe, leader of Zimbabwe, is likely a reparative narcissistic leader gone malignant, like Mao or Nasser. “After leading an anti-colonial war of liberation, Mugabe was elected independent Zimbabwe’s first prime minister, with widespread domestic and international support.” But that was almost a quarter of a century ago, and he is still in power.

Mugabe is now eighty years old and facing his own mortality with the recklessness that is typical of malignant narcissists. By ruthlessly confiscating and redistributing land owned by minority white farmers, Mugabe has managed to pull the rug out from under his country’s economy, which has collapsed into a worthless heap in less than five years. Zimbabwe, once one of postcolonial Africa’s success stories, is on its way to becoming another failed state.

Teodoro Obiang Nguema, the corrupt dictator of Equatorial Guinea, has decided that he is allowed “to kill without anyone calling him to account and without going to Hell.” He is not the first psychopathic tyrant to terrorize Equatorial Guinea: that dubious honor goes to his late uncle, Macias Francisco Nguema, who collected the skulls of his victims as a hobby.

Macias was probably schizophrenic, as evidenced by the “daily conversations with the voices in [his] head.” That did not stop him from winning the presidency in the first election after independence. As Equatorial Guinea’s first president, he immediately exploited the institutional malleability of the young country by sweeping away any constraints on his power:

He banned all political parties, established one-party rule, repealed the constitution, and assumed absolute powers. But that was not enough. Reluctant to delegate authority, he appointed himself president for life; commander-in-chief of the army; and grand master of education, science, and culture, and assumed all executive, legislative, judicial, and military powers. ... Inspired by his past work in a civil-service job, Macias steadily lowered the bar for excellence within the government. When competent government workers and administrators kept exceeding that standard, he fired, tortured, jailed, or killed them.... The after he

---

287 Ibid.
289 Ludwig, A. M. (2002): 221; see also 251, 186.
had filled all these now vacant positions with people he could trust, who were mostly relatives and thugs, he launched his ambitious economic plan for the country, which in record time brought economic chaos. Government workers were not paid, all public services were stopped, public transportation came to a halt, and all communications and utilities became inoperable.\textsuperscript{290}

In 1979, Macias was thrown out of power and sentenced to death by his nephew Obiang, who has now been in power for a quarter of a century. In 1995, oil was discovered in Equatorial Guinea, and today the per-capita annual income is $4500. But that average is deceptive: while Obiang stashes his oil wealth in offshore accounts, two-thirds of the population makes do with an income of less than a dollar a day. Nevertheless, "there is no poverty in Guinea," he declares, and he would know, since he “is in permanent contact with the Almighty.”\textsuperscript{291}

**Saparmurat Niyazov**, tyrant of Turkmenistan, exhibits a number of features that suggest he is a malignant narcissist. At age seven, he was orphaned in an earthquake. He could have experienced this as parental rejection and divine protection simultaneously: both feelings are commonplace in the backgrounds of narcissistic leaders.\textsuperscript{292} As dictator, he has coped with these feelings by fostering a pervasive cult of personality, the centerpiece of which is a gigantic sculpture of his infant self astride the globe, which dominates the main square in the capital.\textsuperscript{293}

In addition to his cult of personality, he displays other signs of malignant narcissism. Turkmenistan is apparently a malleable state, and Niyazov is doing his best to make it into an extension of his own narcissistic ego:

He is stripping the country of the essential elements of a stable future, like education and functioning economic and political institutions. [He] has made such a regular habit of firing or jailing his ministers that he has turned the government into a talent vacuum.\textsuperscript{294}

\textsuperscript{294} Ibid.
His gutting of the educational system is likely to become a blunder, as it is laying the groundwork for an Islamic revolution:

Niyazov has effectively destroyed primary education in Turkmenistan. Schoolchildren study almost exclusively from a single text, a disorganized, quasi-religious memoir-cum-national history written, of course, by the president.\footnote{Ibid.}

Foreign-funded Islamic schools are filling this educational void, quietly proselytizing a generation of Turkmen youth. The country is also rich in natural gas and a major transit corridor for heroin. “This is the kind of place that can show up on the front page in a few years and take everyone by surprise.”\footnote{Theodore Karasik, an expert on Central Asia at RAND, quoted in Greenberg, I. (2003).}

Castro, like Mugabe, Mao, and Nasser, is most likely a reparative narcissist gone malignant. As a young revolutionary fighting a repressive, corrupt dictatorship, Castro possessed ambition, intelligence, and magnificent charisma. But now he is 77 years old, and has spent nearly two-thirds of his life as a dictator. As with so many narcissistic leaders, advancing age and decades in power have aggravated his paranoia. Some of it is warranted: the U.S. sponsored an unsuccessful invasion of Cuba in 1961, nearly went to nuclear war over Cuba in 1962, and tried to assassinate him at least eight times.\footnote{Ludwig, A. M. (2002): 112.}

Castro is profoundly narcissistic, his identity inseparable from that of the entire Cuban nation.\footnote{Ludwig, A. M. (2002): 171.} This projection of ego has a dark side. Like Hitler and Mao, when confronted with the possibility of his own destruction, he wanted his nation to die with him. Years after the peaceful resolution of the Cuban Missile Crisis, Castro told Robert McNamara that he had encouraged Khrushchev to launch a nuclear strike on the United States in the event of an American invasion...
of Cuba. He wanted the Cuban people die with him in a nuclear holocaust: if he could not have Cuba, no one could. Some of Castro’s more dictatorial decisions can be explained away as necessary responses to political circumstances – but not that one. And if the other MNLs profiled in this paper are any indication, Castro’s hubris, paranoia, and reckless indifference will only get worse as he ages.

Unless, of course, he has a sudden change of heart, as seems to have happened to Muammar Qaddafi. As the absolute dictator of Libya for over three decades, Qaddafi has waged wars of aggression against his neighbors, sponsored international terrorism, and pursued the development of weapons of mass destruction. As he ages, we would expect to see his behavior become more reckless and dangerous.

But in recent years he seems to have mellowed. Libya has not aggressed against a neighbor in over a decade, and has reversed its position on terrorism. Not only has Libya stopped sponsoring terrorists, but Qaddafi has also admitted Libyan responsibility for the bombing of Pan Am flight 103 in 1988, and has been quietly cooperating, or at least not obstructing, American and European anti-terrorism efforts. Then, in late 2003, Qaddafi announced that Libya’s WMD programs were terminated and available for public inspection.

What accounts for this about-face? Pundits point to Afghanistan and Iraq, where American military power toppled unfriendly regimes in a few short weeks, and argue that Qaddafi does not want to be the next target in the American cross-hairs. Unfortunately for this paper, that explanation does not square with Qaddafi’s highly probable malignant narcissism.

Two explanations are possible. The first is that Qaddafi is not a malignant narcissist, but rather a simple dictator trying to rule an unruly country. The second, more intriguing possibility

---

is that sometimes the leopard can change his spots. Especially in cases of reparative narcissists gone malignant, perhaps the possibility exists that the malignancy can sometimes go into remission.

Qaddafi would not be the first. In 1971, more than five years after fears of impending mortality prompted him to launch the Cultural Revolution, Mao accepted Nixon's offer to end a generation of bitter hostility between China and the United States. Qaddafi may be following in his footsteps. For the peace of the Middle East and the world, we can only hope.

The goal of this paper has been to demonstrate that the concept of malignant narcissism can be useful in the analysis of international relations when applied with some methodological rigor. As the examples have shown, however, the implications go beyond the theoretical: one man's wickedness can indeed become all men's curse. For this reason, the continued study of malignant-narcissistic leadership, and leadership personality in general, should become an important research direction in political science.

The hypotheses in this paper are submitted as a preliminary agenda, to be confirmed or falsified, and hopefully to yield more refined hypotheses in pursuit of a more robust theory. The political science community should pursue this research for the sake of the people of Iraq, Germany, Russia, Italy, China, and Egypt, and all the other places tyranny has flourished. As John Adams once said of the restless American colonists, they "have a right, an indisputable, an unalienable, indefeasible, divine right to that most dreaded and envied kind of knowledge, the character and conduct of their rulers." 300

---

VI. WORKS CITED


APPENDIX 1: A MAP OF MALIGNANT NARCISSISM

VII. APPENDICES
APPENDIX 2: A MAP OF MALIGNANT-NARCISSISTIC LEADERS

- Early Mao
- Later Mao
- Early Nasser
- Later Nasser
- Saddam, Hitler, and Stalin
- Mussolini

HUBRIS

PARANOIA

MALIGNANT NARCISSISM
### Appendix 3: Coding for Blunders

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MNL</th>
<th>Total Blunders</th>
<th>Blunders/ Years in Power</th>
<th>Creating Crisis</th>
<th>Aggressive War</th>
<th>Surprise Attack</th>
<th>Squandered Peace</th>
<th>Coercive Failure</th>
<th>Economic Meltdown</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hitler</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>Rhineland 1936 Czechoslovakia 1938 Poland 1939</td>
<td>Poland 1939 France 1940 USSR 1941 USA 1941</td>
<td>UK 1940</td>
<td>Poland 1939</td>
<td>Germany 1939-1945</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stalin</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>Iran 1946 Berlin 1948</td>
<td>Poland 1939 Finland 1939 Baltics 1940</td>
<td>Germany 1941</td>
<td>E. Eur. 1945</td>
<td>Ukraine 1933</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mussolini</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>Ethiopia 1935</td>
<td>Ethiopia 1936 Albania 1939 WWII 1940</td>
<td>USA 1943</td>
<td></td>
<td>Italy 1940-1945</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>