ANALYSIS OF PRESIDENTIAL CHARACTER:  
THE BARBER-THESIS AND ITS CRITIQUE

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INTRODUCTION

Graham T. Allison's *Essence of Decision* (1971) has presented a serious challenge to the view that one can understand presidential action (or its absence) merely through familiarity with the "logic of the situation," by demonstrating that his Model I—the Rational Actor Model—does not fully account for what the Kennedy administration did and failed to do during the Cuban Missile Crisis. A President’s performance is bound to involve idiosyncrasies and inconsistencies, both at the individual and group levels, and a number of attempts to create a theoretical framework for such irrationalities have met with varying success. Three different approaches to their sources and dynamics may be distinguished.

One approach focuses on the President as an individual, and seeks to explain what appears to be his non-rational behavior in terms of his personality needs and motivations. James David Barber's *The Presidential Character* (1972, 1977), which we shall discuss at length in this paper, falls into this category. A second approach pays special attention to the cognitive dynamics of small groups surrounding the Chief Executive. Irving Janis’s *Victims of Groupthink* (1972) examines the systematic distortion of information in the decision-making process at the White House in this perspective. A third approach attempts to understand presidential performance in its relation to the organizational procedures and bureaucratic politics involving large-scale, more or less permanent governmental apparatuses. Allison’s Model II
represents this strategy.  

**THE PRESIDENTIAL CHARACTER**

In *The Presidential Character*, Barber tries to explain the dynamics of presidential performance by the interaction between the President's personality and the situational factors that he must deal with.

Personality consists of character, world view, and style. The President's style is defined as his "habitual way of performing his three political roles: rhetoric, personal relations, and homework." In other words, it refers to his mode of coping with and adapting to these role demands. His world view is identified as "his primary, politically relevant beliefs, particularly his conceptions of social causality, human nature, and the central moral conflicts of the time." Character denotes "the way the President orients himself toward life," his stance in confronting experience, especially *vis-a-vis* himself. Here his self-esteem takes on significance.

According to Barber, these three elements of the President's personality take shape through his interpersonal experiences at different stages of life. Childhood forges his character, adolescence his world view, and early adulthood develops his style as he achieves his first political success.

Barber discusses the external factors that the President must adapt to in terms of the power situation and the "climate of expectations." The former consists of the ingredients of "the power mix in Washington" such as "[t]he support he has from the public and interest groups, the party balance in Congress, the thrust of Supreme Court opinion," while the latter comprises the quest for reassurance, the demand for a sense of progress and action, and the need for a sense of legitimacy.

In Barber's framework, character forms the core of the President's personality. Although it does not determine world view and style, character greatly constrains—or "provides the main thrust and broad direction" in—their formation. The centrality of character is given the following expression as well: "Character is the force, the motive..."
power, around which the person gathers his view of the world and from which his style receives its impetus.

The emphasis on character exerts a decisive influence on Barber's strategy of inquiry, which may be reconstructed as follows: first, construct a typology of presidential character; classify past Presidents each into one of the categories; and then, explain their performance as Presidents in terms of their character types with a view to drawing hypotheses from the results of these historical explanations. In other words, Barber's approach consists of three steps; namely, typology-construction, classification, and diagnosis. Although his stated goal is prediction, we shall lay it aside for the moment, on the ground that prediction becomes possible only when the validity of analytical framework and research strategy as they relate to historical data has been established.

Barber adopts two dimensions to build the typology: activity (active or passive?) and affect (positive or negative?). The former refers to how much energy one invests in his Presidency, the latter to how one feels about what he does. On the basis of these two dimensions, Barber distinguishes four character types of Presidents; namely, active-positive, active-negative, passive-positive, and passive-negative. In view of their paramount importance in Barber's scheme, his description of these four types will be reproduced here. (For the sake of brevity, I quote from his 1971 article, which provides a somewhat more concise account of each type than his later book).

**Active-positive** The combination represents a congruence between action and affect typically based on relatively high self-esteem and relative success in relating to the environment. There is an orientation toward productiveness as a value and an ability to move flexibly among various orientations toward action as rational adaptation to opportunities and demands. The self is seen as developing over time toward relatively well defined personal goals. The emphasis on rational mastery in this pattern can lead to mistakes in
appreciating important political irrationalities.

Active-negative The basic contradiction is between relatively intense effort and relatively low personal reward for that effort. The activity has a compulsive quality; politics appears as a means for compensating for power deprivations through ambitious striving. The stance toward the environment is aggressive and the problem of managing aggressive feelings is persistent. Life is a hard struggle to achieve and hold power, hampered by the condemnations of a perfectionistic conscience.

Passive-positive This is the receptive, compliant, other-directed character whose life is a search for affection as a reward for being agreeable and cooperative rather than personally assertive. The contradiction is between low self-esteem (on grounds of feeling unlovable, unattractive) and a superficial optimism. A hopeful attitude helps the person deny inferiority and elicit encouragement from others. The dependence and fragility of this character orientation make disappointment in politics likely.

Passive-negative The factors are consistent but do not account for the presence of the person in a political role. That is explained by a character-rooted orientation toward doing dutiful service; the compensation is for low self-esteem based on a sense of usefulness. Typically the person is relatively well-adapted to certain nonpolitical roles, but lacks the experience and flexibility to perform effectively as a political leader. The tendency is to withdraw from the conflict and uncertainty of politics to an emphasis on vague principles (particularly prohibitions) and procedural arrangements.8)

Thus, while the active-positive Presidents find their office basically in harmony with their personality, those under the other headings must perform their duty in such a manner as to satisfy psychological needs that derive from their inner contradictions and low self-esteem.
As Barber characterizes in a more laconic style: "Active-positive Presidents want most to achieve results. Active-negatives aim to get and keep power. Passive-positives are after love. Passive-negatives emphasize their civic virtue."²⁹)

The foregoing analysis enables one to comprehend Barber's framework in its entirety. Figure 1 represents my attempt to illustrate it.
Relying mostly on biographical accounts, Barber classifies the thirteen most recent Presidents (at the time of his writing) in the following way:

William Howard Taft—passive-positive  
Woodrow Wilson—active-negative  
Warren G. Harding—passive-positive  
Calvin Coolidge—passive-negative  
Herbert Hoover—active-negative  
Franklin D. Roosevelt—active-positive  
Harry S. Truman—active-positive  
Dwight D. Eisenhower—passive-negative  
John F. Kennedy—active-positive  
Lyndon B. Johnson—active-negative  
Richard M. Nixon—active-negative  
Gerald R. Ford—active-positive  
Jimmy Carter—active-positive

Although the distinction between classification and diagnosis is sometimes fuzzy, Barber draws some generalization from his diagnostic accounts of past Presidents. For one thing, each of the four types resonates with one of the four themes that supposedly underlie the American political culture; namely, the drive for power, search for affection, quest for legitimacy, and creative politics. The active-negative President finds support in the public which demands toughness and sanctifies effort. The passive-positive type has the strongest appeal to the people craving for love and a sense of community. The passive-negative mind best responds to the nation's outcry for legitimacy. And the active-positive spirit strikes the right chord in the heart of those who desire to see creativity and initiative emanating from the Oval Office.

On the other hand, each type tends to incur a specific sort of danger both to himself and to the polity. The most notable is the pro-
clivity for "rigidification" in the case of the active-negative President. The passive-negative type is prone to drift, while the passive-positive Chief Executive is apt to forget the hard realities of politics lurking behind an affectionate President-people relationship. Even the active-positive President, thought to be the most adaptive, "in his haste to make things happen, may too quickly and easily knock down the 'formalities' that hold the democratic order in place."10)

CRITIQUE OF THE PRESIDENTIAL CHARACTER

Alexander L. George reviews *The Presidential Character* and makes a wide range of criticisms in "Assessing Presidential Character," included in Aaron Wildavsky, ed., *Perspectives on the Presidency* (1975). In this section, I shall take up some of his points which I consider the most important, reorganizing them and supplementing them with my own arguments.

In my view, aside from the fact that his presentation leaves much to be desired in terms of the clarity of distinctions between typology, classification, and explanation, Barber's framework and methodology as explicated in the previous section invite three major criticisms.

First, in constructing the character typology, Barber fails to take account of the multiplicity of the layers of psychological processes, which comprise phenomenology, psychological dynamics, and developmental experiences, to use the terminology George attributes to Fred I. Greenstein. In consequence, Barber casually assumes that, if a President displays, say, the active-positive pattern on the surface, he must also possess the psychodynamic and developmental traits supposedly associated with that particular character type. As a result, each of the four types becomes extremely rich in content and highly complex as we have seen (in its somewhat abridged form). As George points out:

A character type of the kind Barber has postulated is a *composite* of the three levels of analysis. What is more, his typology presumes a causal theory linking stated patterns of
behavior at the phenomenological level with underlying dy-
namics and the developmental experiences that account for
them.11)

Typology and definitional statements cannot establish such a causal
linkage, however; it requires empirical analysis.

Second, in using the typology to account for presidential perform-
ance, Barber does not pay sufficient heed to alternative explanations.
In some of the examples that Barber cites, external factors may have
imposed such great constraints on the options open to the President
that his personality may have been of little relevance in determining
the course of his actions. In other cases, his world view or style might
explain his behavior better than his character would. For instance,
one need not stretch one's imagination too much to conceive of Hoover's
"rigidification" on the relief issue as originating mainly from his com-
mitment to laissez-faire philosophy rather than from the necessity to
fulfill personality needs associated with his putatively active-negative
character.

Or, to take another example, factors other than President Johnson's
personal character may well have played a crucial role in the escalation
process of the Vietnam War. As a matter of fact, a host of attempts
have been made to explain the process in terms of one or more of such
a wide variety of presumed causes as international power relations,
ideological anticommunism, the mechanism of the American political
system ("The system worked!"),10 and "groupthink." In order to
make his theory more plausible, therefore, Barber would have to
demonstrate not only that LBJ's cumulative decisions to step up
military involvement in Vietnam derived chiefly from his character
as opposed to his world view or style, but also that, other things being
equal, somebody of a different character type—say, Kennedy—would
have adopted a significantly different set of policies toward the conflict
in Indochina. Barber does suggest that Kennedy would have done
just this, and his contention here rests upon his classification of Kennedy
among the active-positive Presidents, who are supposedly "more open
to evidence because they have less need to deny and distort their perceptions for protective purposes." Even if one approves Barber's classification and diagnosis concerning Kennedy and Johnson, the fact remains that he fails to weigh the personality explanation against any possible alternatives. Furthermore, the validity of such classification and diagnosis is needless to say predicated upon the reliability of his data sources and the treatment he accords them.

This leads to our third criticism: the problem of data gathering. In both the classificatory and diagnostic processes, Barber relies almost entirely on memoirs and accounts of outside observers. Such published sources may frequently fail to report incidents and activities that are indispensable to grasping the phenomenological traits of a President in their totality and/or fathoming his psychodynamic and developmental experiences. Indeed, Barber himself concedes that "there may be errors of fact and quotation in this book." But he quickly dismisses their significance, saying that, "[u]nless errors reverse or substantially alter the interpretation, the argument stands." The problem is that, in some cases, discrepancies do seem to "reverse or substantially alter the interpretation."

Let us take the portrait of President Eisenhower as an example. Barber summarizes the General's personality as manifested in his Presidency as follows:

A character attracted by duty but repelled by politics, with a commonsensical, centrist view of the world, using a style stressing central coordination (though succeeding better on the rhetorical level), Eisenhower presided high over the neither regions of policy.

More concretely, Eisenhower "resisted detail, resisted involvement in the niggling issues that so often make the difference in politics," and was largely successful, though not without the cost of getting out of touch with his responsibilities, in rising "above any number of low-level issues, so he tried to do in the matter of Joseph McCarthy."
This account of Barber's forms a sharp contrast to Greenstein's illustration of Eisenhower's extensive activity and adroit leadership ("hidden hand leadership"). As Greenstein observes:

Eisenhower was politically astute and informed, actively engaged in putting his personal stamp on public policy, and applied a carefully thought-out conception of leadership to the conduct of his presidency.17)

As a matter of fact, according to Greenstein, one of the most striking examples of Eisenhower's hidden hand leadership was his "behind-the-scenes participation in the sequence of events that culminated in the Senate's censure of Joseph McCarthy."18)

This remarkable divergence between the two authors derives from the difference in the data source that each bases his argument on. Whereas, as stated above, Barber draws almost solely on published records, Greenstein's portrayal is an outgrowth of his research into unpublished documents housed in archival libraries.19) Setting aside the question of what the "true" Eisenhower was like, the fact that access to unpublished sources enables one to suggest a picture of a President diagonally opposed to that advanced by Barber diminishes the reliability of his classification and diagnostic accounts.

ADDITIONAL REMARKS

The foregoing argument should not be taken as an attempt generally to discredit the endeavors to locate the sources of the seeming irrationalities and idiosyncracies of presidential performance in the heart and mind of the President himself as an individual. Such efforts should continue. Moreover, the focus on the President's personality does not necessarily contradict the approaches concentrating on small-group process or bureaucratic organization. While the limitation of space precludes any detailed discussion, attempts have been made to connect them.

For example, Alexander George proposes to redefine the concepts
of “world view” and “style” as “belief system” and “cognitive style,” respectively, with a view to linking them to the recent developments in cognitive psychology, by which personality has come to be looked upon mainly as an information-processing system. The concept of cognitive style is said to be especially instrumental in bringing together the above-mentioned three approaches, as George notes:

Working with the variable of cognitive style will facilitate the important task of moving from the study of the executive qua individual to a study of his interactions with representatives of the larger organization over which he presides. In the most general sense, a President’s cognitive style constrains the nature of his participation with others in small-group decision making and shapes his orientation to the organizational processes of search, evaluation, and choice, and to the phenomenon of bureaucratic politics within the organization.20)

Thus, the cognitive psychology approach may well deserve serious attention on the part of those concerned with clarifying the riddles of the Presidency and presidential decision-making.

Notes
1) To the extent that it emphasizes that “where you stand depends on where you sit,” Allison’s Model III also partakes of this framework.
3) Ibid., pp. 7–8.
4) Ibid., p. 8.
5) Loc. cit.
6) Ibid., p. 11.
7) Ibid., pp. 445–446.
10) Ibid., p. 246.
12) Leslie H. Gelb with Richard K. Betts, The Irony of Vietnam: The System Worked (Brookings, 1979), ch. 1 provides a thumbnail account of nine different (plus the authors' own) suggested explanations.
13) Barber, op. cit., p. 454.
14) Ibid., p. ix.
15) Ibid., p. 163.
16) Ibid., p. 162.
18) Ibid., p. 586.
19) In particular, Greenstein makes extensive use of the Whitman File at the Eisenhower Library, which is named after Eisenhower's personal secretary, Ann Whitman, and which became available to researchers in the mid-1970s. Drawing on this file, Richard Immerman in "Eisenhower and Dulles: Who Made the Decisions?" Political Psychology, 1-2 (Autumn 1979) also calls into question the conventional image (as is propounded by Barber) of Eisenhower as an apolitical figure.
20) George, op. cit., p. 100. In his later work, George attempts to show that the President's cognitive style goes a long way toward determining the structure and operation of the foreign policy-making system. See Presidential Decisionmaking in Foreign Policy: The Effective Use of Information and Advice (Westview, 1980), ch. 3.