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# **THE POLITICAL PERSONALITY OF U.S. PRESIDENT BARACK OBAMA**

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Presenter Aubrey Immelman and discussant Peter Suedfeld (Photo: Irina Rogozar-Kolpakova)

## Abstract

### The Political Personality of U.S. President Barack Obama

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This paper presents the results of an indirect assessment of the personality of U.S. President Barack Obama, from the conceptual perspective of personologist Theodore Millon. Information concerning Obama was collected from biographical sources and media reports and synthesized into a personality profile using the Millon Inventory of Diagnostic Criteria (MIDC), which yields 34 normal and maladaptive personality classifications congruent with Axis II of *DSM-IV*.

The personality profile yielded by the MIDC was analyzed on the basis of interpretive guidelines provided in the MIDC and Millon Index of Personality Styles manuals. Obama's primary personality patterns were found to be Ambitious/confident and Dominant/asserting, with secondary features of the Accommodating/cooperative and Conscientious/respectful patterns. The combination of Ambitious and Accommodating patterns in Obama's profile suggests a *confident conciliator* personality composite.

Leaders matching the confident conciliator personality prototype, though self-assured and assertive, are characteristically gracious, considerate, and benevolent. Confident conciliators are charming and agreeable, with a special talent for settling differences; they favor mediation and compromise over force or coercion as a strategy for resolving conflict and are driven primarily by a need for achievement. Relative to other chief executives in similar positions, they are likely to be less driven by power, with a stronger need for affiliation.

The major implication of the study is that it offers an empirically based personological framework for anticipating Obama's leadership style as president.

## Introduction

This paper reports the results of a psychodiagnostic case study of Barack Hussein Obama, 44<sup>th</sup> president of the United States, conducted during the 2008 presidential campaign.

Conceptually, the study is informed by Theodore Millon's (1969, 1986a, 1986b, 1990, 1991, 1994, 1996, 2003; Millon & Davis, 2000; Millon & Everly, 1985) model of personality as adapted (Immelman, 1993, 1998, 2002, 2003, 2005) for the study of personality in politics.

I employ the terms *personality* and *politics* in Fred Greenstein's (1992) narrowly construed sense. Politics, by this definition, "refers to the politics most often studied by political scientists — that of civil government and of the extra-governmental processes that more or less directly impinge upon government, such as political parties" and campaigns. Personality, as narrowly construed in political psychology, "excludes political attitudes and opinions . . . and applies only to nonpolitical personal differences" (p. 107).

Personality may be concisely defined as:

a complex pattern of deeply embedded psychological characteristics that are largely nonconscious and not easily altered, expressing themselves automatically in almost every facet of functioning. Intrinsic and pervasive, these traits emerge from a complicated matrix of biological dispositions and experiential learnings, and ultimately comprise the individual's distinctive pattern of perceiving, feeling, thinking, coping, and behaving. (Millon, 1996, p. 4)

Greenstein (1992) makes a compelling case for studying personality in government and politics: "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" (p. 124).

That perspective provides the context for the current paper, which presents an analysis of the personality of Barack Obama and examines the political implications of his personality profile with respect to presidential leadership and executive performance.

The methodology employed in this study involves the construction of a theoretically grounded personality profile derived from empirical analysis of biographical source materials (see Immelman, 1999, 2003, 2005).

A comprehensive review of Millon's personological model and its applicability to political personality has been provided elsewhere (e.g., Immelman, 1993, 2003, 2005). Briefly, Millon's model encompasses eight attribute domains: expressive behavior, interpersonal conduct, cognitive style, mood/temperament, self-image, regulatory mechanisms, object representations, and morphologic organization (see Table 1).

**Table 1**  
*Millon's Eight Attribute Domains*

Attribute	Description
Expressive behavior	The individual's characteristic behavior; how the individual typically appears to others; what the individual knowingly or unknowingly reveals about him- or herself; what the individual wishes others to think or to know about him or her.
Interpersonal conduct	How the individual typically interacts with others; the attitudes that underlie, prompt, and give shape to these actions; the methods by which the individual engages others to meet his or her needs; how the individual copes with social tensions and conflicts.
Cognitive style	How the individual focuses and allocates attention, encodes and processes information, organizes thoughts, makes attributions, and communicates reactions and ideas to others.
Mood/temperament	How the individual typically displays emotion; the predominant character of an individual's affect and the intensity and frequency with which he or she expresses it.
Self-image	The individual's perception of self-as-object or the manner in which the individual overtly describes him- or herself.
Regulatory mechanisms	The individual's characteristic mechanisms of self-protection, need gratification, and conflict resolution.
Object representations	The inner imprint left by the individual's significant early experiences with others; the structural residue of significant past experiences, composed of memories, attitudes, and affects that underlie the individual's perceptions of and reactions to ongoing events and serves as a substrate of dispositions for perceiving and reacting to life's ongoing events.
Morphologic organization	The overall architecture that serves as a framework for the individual's psychic interior; the structural strength, interior congruity, and functional efficacy of the personality system (i.e., ego strength).

*Note.* From *Disorders of Personality: DSM-IV and Beyond* (pp. 141–146) by T. Millon, 1996, New York: Wiley; *Toward a New Personology: An Evolutionary Model* (chapter 5) by T. Millon, 1990, New York: Wiley; and *Personality and Its Disorders: A Biosocial Learning Approach* (p. 32) by T. Millon and G. S. Everly, Jr., 1985, New York: Wiley. Copyright © 1996, © 1990, © 1985 by John Wiley & Sons, Inc. Adapted by permission of John Wiley & Sons, Inc. and Theodore Millon.

## Method

### *Materials*

The materials consisted of biographical sources and the personality inventory employed to systematize and synthesize diagnostically relevant information collected from the literature on Barack Obama.

*Sources of data.* Diagnostic information pertaining to Obama was collected from two autobiographies and a broad array of approximately 150 media reports that offered useful, diagnostically relevant psychobiographical information.<sup>1</sup>

*Personality inventory.* The assessment instrument, the second edition of the Millon Inventory of Diagnostic Criteria (MIDC; Immelman & Steinberg, 1999), was compiled and adapted from Millon's (1969, 1986b; 1990, 1996; Millon & Everly, 1985) prototypal features and diagnostic criteria for normal personality styles and their pathological variants. Information concerning the construction, administration, scoring, and interpretation of the MIDC is provided in the Millon Inventory of Diagnostic Criteria manual (Immelman, 1999).<sup>2</sup> The 12-scale (see Table 2) instrument taps the first five "noninferential" (Millon, 1990, p. 157) attribute domains previously listed in Table 1.

The 12 MIDC scales correspond to major personality patterns posited by Millon (1994, 1996), which are congruent with the syndromes described on Axis II of the fourth edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV)* of the American Psychiatric Association (APA; 1994) and coordinated with the normal personality styles in which these disorders are rooted, as described by Millon and Everly (1985), Millon (1994), Oldham and Morris (1995), and Strack (1997). Scales 1 through 8 (comprising 10 scales and subscales) have three gradations (a, b, c) yielding 30 personality variants, whereas Scales 9 and 0 have two gradations (d, e) yielding four variants, for a total of 34 personality designations, or types. Table 2 displays the full taxonomy.

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<sup>1</sup> Full data set and references available upon request from the author.

<sup>2</sup> Inventory and manual available to qualified professionals upon request.

**Table 2**  
***Millon Inventory of Diagnostic Criteria: Scales and Gradations***

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Scale 1A:	Dominant pattern a. Asserting b. Controlling c. Aggressive (Sadistic; <i>DSM-III-R</i> , Appendix A)
Scale 1B:	Dauntless pattern a. Adventurous b. Dissenting c. Aggrandizing (Antisocial; <i>DSM-IV</i> , 301.7)
Scale 2:	Ambitious pattern a. Confident b. Self-serving c. Exploitative (Narcissistic; <i>DSM-IV</i> , 301.81)
Scale 3:	Outgoing pattern a. Congenial b. Gregarious c. Impulsive (Histrionic; <i>DSM-IV</i> , 301.50)
Scale 4:	Accommodating pattern a. Cooperative b. Agreeable c. Submissive (Dependent; <i>DSM-IV</i> , 301.6)
Scale 5A:	Aggrieved pattern a. Unpresuming b. Self-denying c. Self-defeating ( <i>DSM-III-R</i> , Appendix A)
Scale 5B:	Contentious pattern a. Resolute b. Oppositional c. Negativistic (Passive-aggressive; <i>DSM-III-R</i> , 301.84)
Scale 6:	Conscientious pattern a. Respectful b. Dutiful c. Compulsive (Obsessive-compulsive; <i>DSM-IV</i> , 301.4)
Scale 7:	Reticent pattern a. Circumspect b. Inhibited c. Withdrawn (Avoidant; <i>DSM-IV</i> , 301.82)
Scale 8:	Retiring pattern a. Reserved b. Aloof c. Solitary (Schizoid; <i>DSM-IV</i> , 301.20)
Scale 9:	Distrusting pattern d. Suspicious e. Paranoid ( <i>DSM-IV</i> , 301.0)
Scale 0:	Erratic pattern d. Unstable e. Borderline ( <i>DSM-IV</i> , 301.83)

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*Note.* Equivalent *DSM* terminology and codes are specified in parentheses.

### *Diagnostic Procedure*

The diagnostic procedure, termed *psychodiagnostic meta-analysis*, can be conceptualized as a three-part process: first, an *analysis* phase (data collection) during which source materials are reviewed and analyzed to extract and code diagnostically relevant content; second, a *synthesis* phase (scoring and interpretation) during which the unifying framework provided by the MIDC prototypal features, keyed for attribute domain and personality pattern, is employed to classify the diagnostically relevant information extracted in phase 1; and finally, an *evaluation* phase (inference) during which theoretically grounded descriptions, explanations, inferences, and predictions are extrapolated from Millon's theory of personality based on the personality profile constructed in phase 2 (see Immelman, 1999, 2003, 2005, for a more detailed account of the procedure).

### **Results**

The analysis of the data includes a summary of descriptive statistics yielded by the MIDC scoring procedure, the MIDC profile for Barack Obama, diagnostic classification of the subject, and the clinical interpretation of significant MIDC scale elevations derived from the diagnostic procedure.

Obama received 32 endorsements on the 170-item MIDC. Judging from endorsement-rate deviations from the mean (see Table 3), data on Obama's expressive behavior are overrepresented in the data set, while data on his cognitive style were the most difficult to obtain.

The assessment of cognitive style relies substantially on inference, a difficult task when appraising a subject at a distance. In contrast, the relatively high endorsement frequency for the more directly observable domain of expressive behavior is consistent with previous studies.

Descriptive statistics for Obama's MIDC ratings are presented in Table 3.

**Table 3**  
*MIDC Item Endorsement Rate by Attribute Domain for Barack Obama*

Expressive behavior	9
Interpersonal conduct	6
Cognitive style	5
Mood/temperament	6
Self-image	6
Sum	32
Mean	6.4
Standard deviation	1.4

Obama's MIDC scale scores are reported in Table 4. The same data are presented graphically in the profile depicted in Figure 1.

**Table 4**  
*MIDC Scale Scores for Barack Obama*

Scale	Personality pattern	Raw	RT%
1A	Dominant: Asserting–Controlling–Aggressive (Sadistic)	7	20.6
1B	Dauntless: Adventurous–Dissenting–Aggrandizing (Antisocial)	3	8.8
2	Ambitious: Confident–Self-serving–Exploitative (Narcissistic)	7	20.6
3	Outgoing: Congenial–Gregarious–Impulsive (Histrionic)	3	8.8
4	Accommodating: Cooperative–Agreeable–Submissive (Dependent)	5	14.7
5A	Aggrieved: Unpresuming–Self-denying–Self-defeating (Masochistic)	1	2.9
5B	Contentious: Resolute–Oppositional–Negativistic (Passive-aggressive)	1	2.9
6	Conscientious: Respectful–Dutiful–Compulsive (Obsessive-compulsive)	4	11.8
7	Reticent: Circumspect–Inhibited–Withdrawn (Avoidant)	2	5.9
8	Retiring: Reserved–Aloof–Solitary (Schizoid)	1	2.9
	Subtotal for basic personality scales	34	100
9	Distrusting: Suspicious–Paranoid (Paranoid)	0	0.0
0	Erratic: Unstable–Borderline (Borderline)	0	0.0
	Full-scale total	34	100.0

*Note.* For Scales 1–8, ratio-transformed (RT%) scores are the scores for each scale expressed as a percentage of the sum of raw scores for the ten basic scales only. For Scales 9 and 0, ratio-transformed scores are scores expressed as a percentage of the sum of raw scores for all twelve MIDC scales (therefore, full-scale RT% totals can exceed 100). Personality patterns are enumerated with scale gradations and equivalent *DSM* terminology (in parentheses).

The MIDC profile yielded by Obama's raw scores is displayed in Figure 1.<sup>3</sup> Obama's most elevated scales are Scale 2 (Ambitious) and Scale 1A (Dominant), both with scores of 7, followed by Scale 4 (Accommodating), with a score of 5, and Scale 6 (Conscientious), with a score of 4. The primary Scale 2 and 1A elevations are in the *present* (5–9) range, while the two secondary elevations (Scales 4 and 6) are at the lower threshold of that range. No other scale elevation is of any psychodiagnostic significance.

Based on the cut-off score guidelines provided in the MIDC manual, all of Obama's scale elevations (see Figure 1) are well within normal limits.

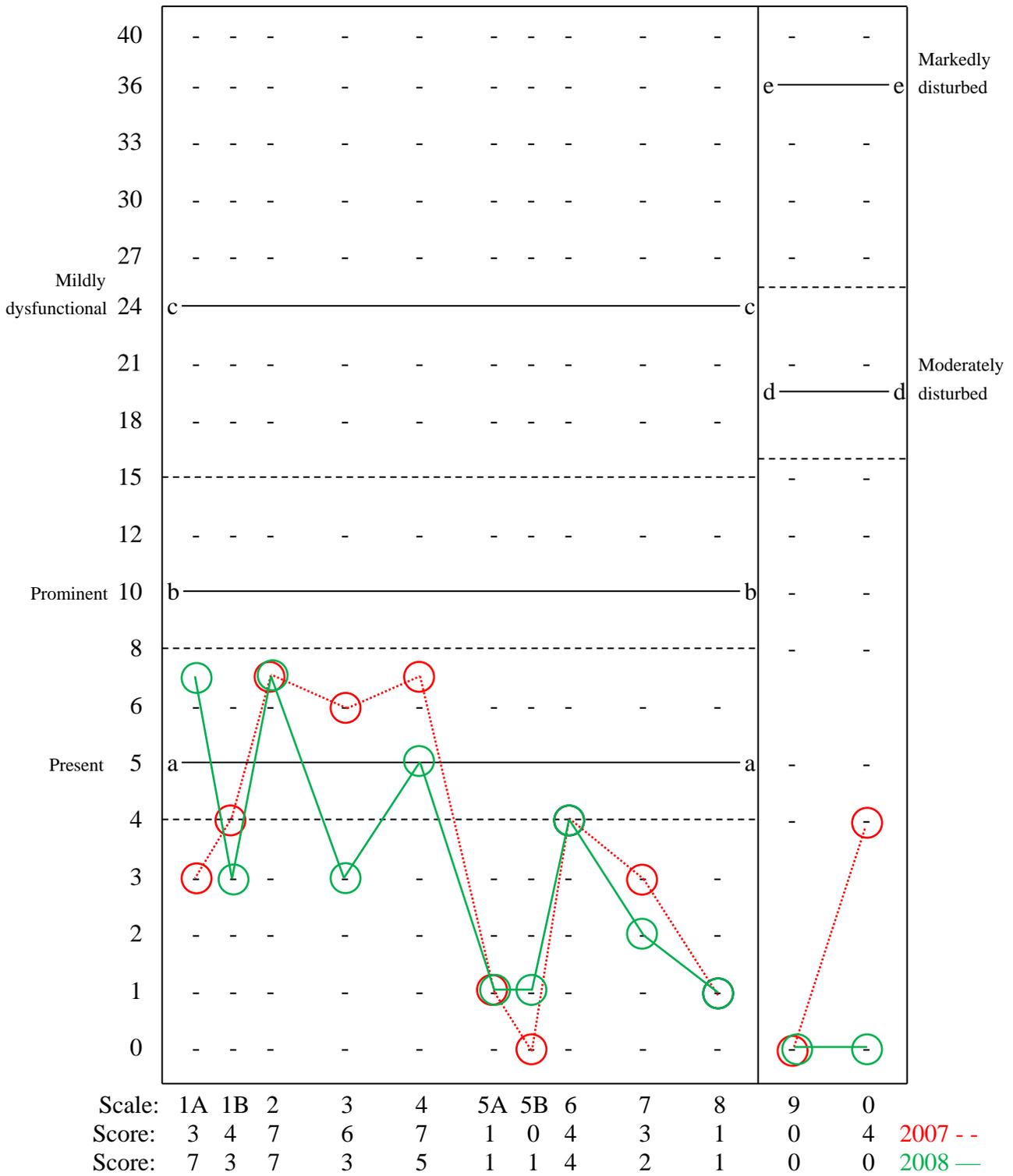
In terms of MIDC scale gradation (see Table 2 and Figure 1) criteria, supplemented by clinical judgment, Obama was classified as primarily an Ambitious/confident personality, infused with Conscientious/respectful and Dominant/asserting features, the latter being somewhat offset by a distinctive Accommodating/cooperative tendency.<sup>4</sup> The combination of Ambitious and Accommodating patterns in Obama's profile suggests a *confident conciliator* personality composite.

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<sup>3</sup> See Table 2 for scale names. Solid horizontal lines on the profile form signify cut-off scores between adjacent scale gradations. For Scales 1–8, scores of 5 through 9 signify the *presence* (gradation *a*) of the personality pattern in question; scores of 10 through 23 indicate a *prominent* (gradation *b*) variant; and scores of 24 to 30 indicate an exaggerated, *mildly dysfunctional* (gradation *c*) variation of the pattern. For Scales 9 and 0, scores of 20 through 35 indicate a *moderately disturbed* syndrome and scores of 36 through 45 a *markedly disturbed* syndrome.

<sup>4</sup> In each case the label preceding the slash signifies the categorical personality pattern, whereas the label following the slash indicates the specific scale gradation, or personality type, on the dimensional continuum; see Table 2.

**Figure 1. Millon Inventory of Diagnostic Criteria: Profile for Barack Obama**



## Discussion

The discussion of the results examines Obama's MIDC scale elevations from the perspective of Millon's (1994, 1996; Millon & Davis, 2000) model of personality, supplemented by the theoretically congruent portraits of Oldham and Morris (1995) and Strack (1997). The discussion concludes with a brief synthesis of the political implications of Obama's personality profile.

With his slightly elevated Scale 2, Obama emerged from the assessment as a *confident* type, a normal, adaptive variant of the Ambitious pattern. His slight elevation on Scale 1A (Dominant), in my opinion, is not of great consequence; it is at the lower threshold of what would typically be expected in any individual in a high-level leadership position. The interpretation of Obama's profile must also account for secondary elevations on Scale 4 (Accommodating) and Scale 6 (Conscientious).

Compared with other presidential candidates I've studied since 1996, Obama's profile is unusual in that it is relatively flat, with no elevations in the *prominent* or *dysfunctional* ranges.

### *Scale 2: The Ambitious Pattern*

The Ambitious pattern, as do all personality patterns, occurs on a continuum ranging from normal to maladaptive. At the well-adjusted pole<sup>5</sup> are confident, socially poised, assertive personalities. Slightly exaggerated Ambitious features<sup>6</sup> occur in personalities that are sometimes perceived as self-promoting, overconfident, or arrogant. In its most deeply ingrained, inflexible form,<sup>7</sup> the Ambitious pattern manifests itself in extreme self-absorption or exploitative behavior patterns that may be consistent with a clinical diagnosis of narcissistic personality disorder.

Normal, adaptive variants of the Ambitious pattern (i.e., confident and self-serving types) correspond to Oldham and Morris's (1995) *Self-Confident* style, Strack's (1997) *confident* style, and Millon's (1994) *Asserting* pattern. Millon's Asserting pattern is positively correlated with the five-factor model's *Extraversion* and *Conscientiousness* factors and negatively correlated with its *Neuroticism* factor (Millon, 1994, p. 82). It is associated with "social composure, or poise, self-possession, equanimity, and stability" — a constellation of adaptive traits that in stronger doses shades into its dysfunctional variant, the narcissistic personality (Millon, 1994, p. 32). In combination with an elevated Outgoing pattern (Scale 3), it bears some resemblance to Simonton's (1988) *charismatic* executive leadership style.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Relevant to Barack Obama.

<sup>6</sup> Not applicable to Barack Obama.

<sup>7</sup> Not applicable to Barack Obama.

<sup>8</sup> Marginally applicable to Barack Obama.

Millon (1994) summarizes the Asserting (i.e., Ambitious) pattern as follows:

An interpersonal boldness, stemming from a belief in themselves and their talents, characterize[s] those high on the . . . Asserting [Ambitious] scale. Competitive, ambitious, and self-assured, they naturally assume positions of leadership, act in a decisive and unwavering manner, and expect others to recognize their special qualities and cater to them. Beyond being self-confident, those with an . . . [Ambitious] profile often are audacious, clever, and persuasive, having sufficient charm to win others over to their own causes and purposes. Problematic in this regard may be their lack of social reciprocity and their sense of entitlement — their assumption that what they wish for is their due. On the other hand, their ambitions often succeed, and they typically prove to be effective leaders. (p. 32)

Oldham and Morris (1995) offer the following portrait of the normal (*Self-Confident*) prototype of the Ambitious pattern:

Self-Confident [Ambitious] individuals stand out. They're the leaders, the shining lights, the attention-getters in their public or private spheres. Theirs is a star quality born of self-regard, self-respect, self-certainty — all those *self* words that denote a faith in oneself and a commitment to one's self-styled purpose. Combined with the ambition that marks this style, that . . . self-regard can transform idle dreams into real accomplishment. . . . Self-Confident [Ambitious] men and women know what they want, and they get it. Many of them have the charisma to attract plenty of others to their goals. They are extroverted and intensely political. They know how to work the crowd, how to motivate it, and how to lead it. (p. 85)

Strack (1997) provides the following description of the normal (*confident*) prototype of the Ambitious pattern, based on Millon's theory, empirical findings from studies correlating his Personality Adjective Check List (PACL; 1991) scales with other measures, and clinical experience with the instrument:

Aloof, calm, and confident, these personalities tend to be egocentric and self-reliant. They may have a keen sense of their own importance, uniqueness, or entitlement. Confident [Ambitious] individuals enjoy others' attention and may be quite bold socially, although they are seldom garish. They can be self-centered to a fault and may become so preoccupied with themselves that they lack concern and empathy for others. These persons have a tendency to believe that others share, or should share, their sense of worth. As a result, they may expect others to submit to their wishes and desires, and to cater to them. . . . When feeling exposed or undermined, these individuals are frequently disdainful, obstructive, or vindictive. In the workplace, confident [Ambitious] persons like to take charge in an emphatic manner, often doing so in a way that instills confidence in others. Their self-assurance, wit, and charm often win them supervisory and leadership positions. (Adapted from Strack, 1997, pp. 489–490, with minor modifications)

Millon's personality patterns have well-established diagnostic indicators associated with each of the eight attribute domains of expressive behavior, interpersonal conduct, cognitive style, mood/temperament, self-image, regulatory mechanisms, object representations, and morphologic organization. Millon's (1996) attribute domains accentuate the maladaptive range of the personality patterns in his taxonomy — in the case of the Ambitious pattern, the exploitative pole of the confident–self-serving–exploitative continuum (see Millon & Davis, 2000, pp. 273–277). The major diagnostic features of the prototypal adaptive variant of the Ambitious pattern are summarized below.

**Expressive behavior.** The core diagnostic feature of the expressive acts of Ambitious individuals is their *confidence*; they are socially poised, self-assured, and self-confident, conveying an air of calm, untroubled self-assurance, without being conceited or arrogant, as is often the case with less adaptive variants of this pattern (adapted from Millon, 1996, p. 405; Millon & Everly, 1985, pp. 32, 39).

**Interpersonal conduct.** The core diagnostic feature of the interpersonal conduct of Ambitious individuals is their *assertiveness*; they stand their ground and are tough, competitive, persuasive, hardnosed, and shrewd without being entitled or exploitative, as is sometimes the case with less adaptive variants of this pattern (Millon, 1996, pp. 405–406; Millon & Everly, 1985, pp. 32, 39).

**Cognitive style.** The core diagnostic feature of the cognitive style of Ambitious individuals is their *imaginativeness*; they are inventive, innovative, and resourceful, and ardently believe in their own efficacy, without the cognitive expansiveness or unconstrained self-glorifying fantasies of maladaptive variants of this pattern (Millon, 1996, p. 406; Millon & Everly, 1985, pp. 32, 39).

**Mood/temperament.** The core diagnostic feature of the characteristic mood and temperament of Ambitious individuals is their social *poise*; they are self-composed, serene, and optimistic, and are typically imperturbable, unruffled, and cool and levelheaded under pressure, without the insouciance, irrational exuberance, or narcissistic rage characteristic of less adaptive variants of this pattern (Millon, 1996, p. 408; Millon & Everly, 1985, pp. 32, 39).

**Self-image.** The core diagnostic feature of the self-perception of Ambitious individuals is their *certitude*; they have strong self-efficacy beliefs and considerable courage of conviction, without the overly admirable sense of self or egotistic sense of superiority frequently evident in maladaptive variants of this pattern (Millon, 1996, p. 406).

**Regulatory mechanisms.** The core diagnostic features of the unconscious regulatory mechanisms of Ambitious individuals are *rationalization* and *fantasy*; however, these ego defenses are only minimally present in adaptive variants of this pattern (Millon, 1996, p. 407).

**Object representations.** The core diagnostic feature of the internalized object representations of Ambitious individuals is their *contrived* nature, where the inner imprint of significant early experiences that serves as a template for perceiving and reacting to current life events consists of illusory and changing memories, permitting problematic experiences to be transmuted into more admirable images and percepts; however, those structural residues are minimally present in adaptive variants of this pattern (Millon, 1996, pp. 406–407).

**Morphologic organization.** The core diagnostic feature of the morphological organization of Ambitious individuals is the *spuriousness* of the interior design of their personality system, resulting in a deficiency of the inner skills necessary for regulating impulses, channeling needs, and resolving conflicts; however, such deficits in ego strength are rarely present in adaptive variants of this pattern (Millon, 1996, pp. 407–408).

### ***Scale 1A: The Dominant Pattern***

As noted earlier, I don't believe the Dominant pattern (Scale 1A) plays a central role in Obama's personality functioning beyond accounting for a threshold level of assertiveness and competitiveness. As do all personality patterns, the Dominant pattern occurs on a continuum ranging from normal to maladaptive. In the case of Obama, only the normal variant — associated with assertive, strong-willed personalities — has any bearing.

The normal, adaptive variant of the Dominant pattern corresponds to Strack's (1997) *forceful* style and the *managerial* segment of Leary's (1957) managerial–autocratic continuum. According to Millon (1994, p. 82), Controlling (i.e., Dominant) individuals tend to be emotionally stable and conscientious. In combination with the Conscientious (Scale 6) pattern, an elevated Dominant pattern points to a presidential style that Simonton (1988) has labeled *deliberative*. Strack (1997) provides the following description of the normal (*forceful*) prototype of the Dominant pattern, based on Millon's theory, empirical findings from studies correlating his Personality Adjective Check List (PACL; 1991) scales with other measures, and clinical experience with the instrument:

Like confident [Ambitious] persons, forceful [Dominant] individuals can be identified by an inclination to turn toward the self as the primary source of gratification. However, instead of the confident [Ambitious] personality's internalized sense of self-importance, forceful [Dominant] people seem driven to prove their worthiness. They are characterized by an assertive, dominant, and tough-minded personal style. They tend to be strong-willed, ambitious, competitive, and self-determined. Feeling that the world is a harsh place where exploitiveness is needed to assure success, forceful [Dominant] individuals are frequently gruff and insensitive in dealing with others. In contrast to their preferred, outwardly powerful appearance, these individuals may feel inwardly insecure and be afraid of letting down their guard. In work settings, these personalities are often driven to excel. They work hard to achieve their goals, are competitive, and do well where they can take control or work independently. In supervisory or leadership positions, these persons usually take charge and see to it that a job gets done. (Adapted from Strack, 1997, p. 490, with minor modifications)

### ***Scale 4: The Accommodating Pattern***

As noted earlier, my clinical judgment, informed by considerations of theoretical coherence, suggests that Obama's Dominant (Scale 1A) features are offset by a secondary Accommodating tendency. The Accommodating pattern, as do all personality patterns, occurs on a continuum ranging from normal to maladaptive. In the case of Obama, only the normal variant — associated with cooperative, conciliatory personalities — has any significance.

The normal, adaptive variant of the Accommodating pattern corresponds to Strack's (1997) *cooperative* style and Millon's (1994) *Agreeing* pattern. The Accommodating pattern also overlaps with the *docile* and *cooperative* segments of Leary's (1957) *docile–dependent* and *cooperative–overconventional* interpersonal styles. Millon's Agreeing pattern is highly correlated with the five-factor model's *Agreeableness* factor. The Accommodating style is equivalent to Simonton's (1988) *interpersonal* executive leadership style.

According to Millon (1994) the Accommodating pattern (which he labels *Agreeing*)

is akin to the normal “cooperative” segment of Leary’s [1957] cooperative–overconventional interpersonal style, representing an accommodating, participatory, compromising, and agreeing pattern of behavior. . . . [The Accommodating pattern] corresponds . . . to the Big-Five’s Factor II, Agreeableness . . . in conveying a self-respecting concordance with others; a congenial obligingness is voluntary rather than being coerced or being a product of self-derogation. Those who fit the congenial/Agreeing [Accommodating] pattern are notably cooperative and amicable. Disinclined to upset others, they are willing to adapt their preferences to be compatible with those of others. Trusting others to be kind and thoughtful, they are also willing to reconcile differences and to achieve peaceable solutions, as well as to be considerate and to concede when necessary. Cordiality and compromise characterize their interpersonal relationships. (p. 34)

Millon (1996) further notes that Accommodating personalities in the adaptive range of the pattern tend to demand little from others, are relatively uncritical, and are invariably gracious, even to those they may dislike (p. 335).

Strack (1997) provides the following portrait of the interpersonal style of the normal (*cooperative*) prototype of the Accommodating pattern, based on Millon’s theory, empirical findings from studies correlating his Personality Adjective Check List (PACL; 1991) scales with other measures, and clinical experience with the instrument:

Cooperative [Accommodating] persons are often cooperative, reliable, considerate of others, and deferential. They may appear even-tempered, docile, obliging, or self-effacing. When faced with difficult or stressful situations, cooperative persons may seek others to provide authority, leadership, and direction. (Adapted from Strack, 1997, p. 489)

### ***Scale 6: The Conscientious Pattern***

Finally, Obama’s profile reveals a small secondary Conscientious tendency. As do all personality patterns, the Conscientious pattern occurs on a continuum ranging from normal to maladaptive. In the case of Obama, only the normal variant — associated with earnest, polite, respectful personalities — has any relevance, and minimally so (because of the very modest Scale 6 elevation).

The normal, adaptive variant of the Conscientious pattern corresponds to Oldham and Morris’s (1995) *Conscientious* style, Millon’s (1994) *Conforming* pattern, Strack’s (1997) *respectful* style, and the *responsible* segment of Leary’s (1957) *responsible–hypernormal* interpersonal continuum. As might be expected, Millon’s Conforming pattern is correlated with the five-factor model’s *Conscientiousness* factor (see Millon, 1994, p. 82). Adaptive variants of the Conscientious pattern have “a well-disciplined and organized lifestyle that enables individuals to function efficiently and successfully in most of their endeavors,” in contrast to “the driven, tense, and rigid adherence to external demands and to a perfectionism that typifies the disordered [compulsive] state.” They “demonstrate an unusual degree of integrity, adhering as firmly as they can to society’s ethics and morals” (Millon, 1996, pp. 518–519).

As stated by Oldham and Morris (1995):

Conscientious-style people . . . [have] strong moral principle[s] and absolute certainty, and they won't rest until the job is done and done right. They are loyal to their families, their causes, and their superiors. Hard work is a hallmark of this personality style; Conscientious types *achieve*. . . . Conscientious traits . . . [include] hard work, prudence, [and] conventionality. (p. 62)

Being principled, scrupulous, and meticulous, conscientious individuals “tend to follow standards from which they hesitate to deviate, attempt to act in an objective and rational manner, and decide matters in terms of what they believe is right.” . . . Maintaining their integrity “ranks high among their goals” while “voicing moral values gives them a deep sense of satisfaction.” The major limitations of this personality style are (a) its “superrationality,” leading to a “devaluation of emotion [which] tends to preclude relativistic judgments and subjective preferences”; and (b) a predilection for “seeing complex matters in black and white, good and bad, or right or wrong terms” (Millon, 1996, p. 519).

Millon (1994) summarizes the Conscientious pattern (which he labels *Conforming*) as follows:

[Conscientious individuals possess] traits not unlike Leary's [1957] responsible-hypernormal personality, with its ideal of proper, conventional, orderly, and perfectionistic behavior, as well as bearing a similarity to Factor III of the Big-Five, termed Conscientiousness. Conformers are notably respectful of tradition and authority, and act in a reasonable, proper, and conscientious way. They do their best to uphold conventional rules and standards, following given regulations closely, and tend to be judgmental of those who do not. (p. 33)

Strack (1997) provides the following portrait of the normal (*respectful*) prototype of the Conscientious pattern, based on Millon's theory, empirical findings from studies correlating his Personality Adjective Check List (PACL; 1991) scales with other measures, and clinical experience with the instrument:

Responsible, industrious, and respectful of authority, these individuals tend to be conforming and work hard to uphold rules and regulations. They have a need for order and are typically conventional in their interests. . . . A formal interpersonal style and notable constriction of affect can make some respectful [Conscientious] persons seem aloof and withholding. . . . Indecisiveness and an inability to take charge may be evident in some of these persons due to a fear of being wrong. However, among co-workers and friends, respectful [Conscientious] personalities are best known for being well organized, reliable, and diligent. They have a strong sense of duty and loyalty, are cooperative in group efforts, and show persistence even in difficult circumstances. (Adapted from Strack, 1997, p. 490)

### ***Leadership Implications***

The present study offers an empirically based framework for anticipating Obama's performance as chief executive. As noted earlier, the combination of Ambitious and Accommodating patterns in Obama's profile suggests a *confident conciliator* personality composite, which forms a personological substrate (i.e., psychological driver) for his leadership style.

Leaders who match the *confident conciliator* personality prototype, though self-assured and assertive, are characteristically gracious, considerate, and benevolent. Confident conciliators are

charming and agreeable, with a special talent for settling differences; they favor mediation and compromise over force or coercion as a strategy for resolving conflict and are driven primarily by a need for achievement. Relative to other chief executives in similar positions, they are likely to be less driven by power, with a stronger need for affiliation.

In terms of the hypothesized links between Millon's personality patterns and concomitant leadership styles (Steinberg, 2008; Steinberg & Immelman, 2008), the following general expectancies regarding Obama's likely leadership style as chief executive can be inferred from his personality profile:

- Ambitious, self-assured, gracious, considerate
- Preference for mediation and compromise over force or coercion as a strategy for resolving conflict
- High need for achievement; moderate need for affiliation; low need for power
- More pragmatic than ideological
- More task- than relationship oriented
- Likely to act as a strong advocate in his administration, using his powers of persuasion to advance his policy vision
- Preference for gathering information from a variety of sources rather than relying solely on advisors and administration officials
- In dealing with members of Congress, may show preference for avoiding unnecessary conflict by trying to remain above the fray in heated, highly divisive debates
- Preference for articulating and defending his policies in person rather than relying on staff and administration officials to speak for him

## Conclusion

I conclude this paper with a newspaper column, published the weekend before the November 2008 presidential election, in which I summarized Obama's major personality strengths and limitations and attempted to anticipate the likely tenor of an Obama presidency, based on the personality profile reported in the present study.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> *Note.* A slightly edited version of this article was published under the title "Sen. Barack Obama: Is he tough enough?" as part of a special election feature, "Who Are These Candidates?" in the *St. Cloud Times* (p. 7B), November 1, 2008.

## Barack Obama: A Question of Toughness

By Aubrey Immelman

October 31, 2008

Among the many leaders I have studied — presidential candidates as well as foreign adversaries as a consultant to the U.S. military — Barack Obama is something of a rarity.

First, Obama seems almost uniquely free of “psychological warts”; his personality profile is as smooth as his eloquence on the podium. Second, with the exception of Nelson Mandela and Bill Bradley, who unsuccessfully challenged Al Gore for the 2000 Democratic nomination, Obama is the only high-level leader I’ve studied — foreign or domestic — who can truly be called a conciliator.

Taken together, three studies I’ve conducted since 2007 with student research collaborators in the Unit for the Study of Personality in Politics at the College of St. Benedict and St. John’s University reveal Obama as an ambitious, self-confident, modestly dominant leader who is outgoing, congenial, and accommodating.

### Double-edged sword

Obama’s combination of confidence, dominance, and congeniality fits the profile of a charismatic leader. Psychologically, Obama’s self-confidence and congeniality are qualities at the heart of his exceptional ability to inspire followers, articulate a vision, and connect with people. However, it’s also a double-edged sword, for those are the very qualities that also suggest a president — like Bill Clinton — overly concerned with self-validation and the need for affirmation.

In office, the executive performance of confident, ambitious leaders like Obama, who is only modestly dominant, is driven by four core qualities: power, pragmatism, ideology, and self-validation. Because of their strong belief in their own skills and talents, consolidating their power is an important driver for their leadership behavior but, because they are not driven by a naked quest for power, they favor pragmatism as a strategy for achieving success.

However, because of the extraordinary confidence leaders like Obama have in their own ideas and potential for success, their pragmatism may be tempered by strong idealism and an ideology-driven desire to transform society.

### A deliberative rarity

A notable (though not central) aspect of Obama’s personality is that, among presidential candidates I have studied since 1996, Obama is one of the few that can be labeled conscientious or deliberative — a trait he shares with former presidential candidates Al Gore and Mitt Romney.

This suggests that as president he will be attentive to detail and well equipped to appreciate the long-term implications of his policy objectives. For voters looking for a new, more thoughtful direction in presidential policymaking, that would be a plus.

### **The other ‘Bradley effect’**

That brings me to the Bradley effect. No, not former Los Angeles mayor Tom Bradley — an African-American who lost the 1982 California gubernatorial race despite being ahead in the polls going into the election — but 2000 Democratic presidential hopeful Bill Bradley.

As noted above, Obama is the only leader I’ve profiled who is substantially accommodating, agreeable, and conciliatory.

That’s nice, but we live in a dangerous world and accommodating leaders have a tendency to be conflict-averse.

### **The ‘right stuff’?**

For voters, the key question should not so much be whether Obama has the right stuff to move the nation in the right direction, but whether he has what it takes to prevail in the dog-eat-dog world of international politics.

Accommodating personalities like Obama have a strong need to reconcile differences and are able to concede when necessary. But that begs the question, When is it really necessary to make concessions?

On the other side of the coin, cordiality and compromise characterize accommodating leaders; they are respectful and gracious, even with adversaries and people that they don’t like very much. That tendency could be significant on the domestic front to change the tone in Washington, something President Bush promised but failed to deliver.

### **‘Confident conciliator’**

With his unique amalgam of ambition, charisma, and agreeableness (what I call a “confident conciliator”), Obama has the capacity to maneuver his way skillfully in Washington, to seek consensus, and to break the gridlock — assuming his idealism does not get in the way of pragmatic necessity.

So, as the clock runs down to the day of decision on Tuesday, the question for undecided voters should no longer be “Who is Barack Obama?” but whether Obama is tough enough to pull the trigger unflinchingly in — God forbid — the event it becomes a necessity to secure America’s vital national security interests in a post-9/11 world.

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