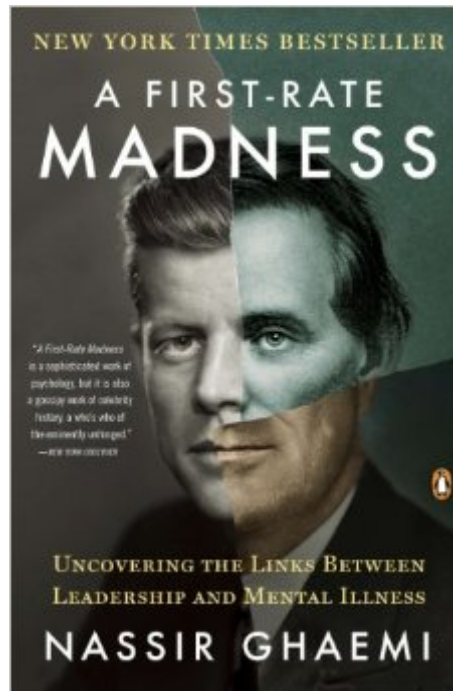


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# A First-Rate Madness: Uncovering The Links Between Leadership And Mental Illness



## Synopsis

This New York Times bestseller is a myth-shattering exploration of the powerful connections between mental illness and leadership. Historians have long puzzled over the apparent mental instability of great and terrible leaders alike: Napoleon, Lincoln, Churchill, Hitler, and others. In *A First-Rate Madness*, Nassir Ghaemi, director of the Mood Disorders Programme at Tufts Medical Center, offers and sets forth a controversial, compelling thesis: the very qualities that mark those with mood disorders also make for the best leaders in times of crisis. From the importance of Lincoln's "depressive realism" to the lacklustre leadership of exceedingly sane men as Neville Chamberlain, *A First-Rate Madness* overturns many of our most cherished perceptions about greatness and the mind.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

This is the best book I have read all year. First of all, Dr. Ghaemi is a world-class psychiatrist; he is THE expert on issues of mood disorder (my wife is a psychiatrist and says that Dr. Ghaemi is the very best in the nation in his Continuing Medical Education teaching). So, he truly knows what he is writing about. The structure of the book essentially follows the pattern of a chapter which describes the state-of-the-art in psychiatry as to a given diagnosis, followed by mini-biographies in two chapters of two historical figures who are exemplars of leadership with the particular diagnosis that Dr. Ghaemi has described. The manner in which he uses historical evidence to arrive at his diagnosis is seamless. Among the historical figures profiled are Lincoln, General Sherman, Hitler,

Gandhi, Churchill, Martin Luther King, Jr., FDR and JFK. There is a profile of Ted Turner, unusual because he is the only living example profiled (and the only non-political leader). Toward the end of the book there is extensive commentary about Nixon, Dubya, Tony Blair and some insights about Clinton, Truman, Eisenhower and even Newt Gingrich along the way. I have read at least one biography of each figure he profiles (except for Ted Turner). I can vouch for the historical accuracy of Dr. Ghaemi's book in all regards except for two minor points about FDR: he was not a member of Woodrow Wilson's cabinet and he was not Secretary of the Navy (he was #2, the Assistant Secretary of the Navy). The endnotes are also a magnificent treasure-trove of information. Superb book, well-written by someone who knows his material.

First, let me say that Dr. Ghaemi deserves high praise for his premise, which is highly creative and deserving of respectful consideration. The effort he put into securing and analyzing the mental health records of the the leaders whom he studies is impressive. Next, let me say that Dr. Ghaemi carefully sought to be even-handed and even fair in his review of political figures. In ne instance, he comments on some admirable actions of Richard Nixon, which, in my experience, is unheard of. The book is worth reading. However, my score reflects my belief that the connection between leadership and mental illness is unproven by Dr. Ghaemi's own examples. He uses Sherman's march through the South in the Civil War as an example of General Sherman's superior leadership caused by his mental illness. One may argue that the success attributed to Sherman might be better attributed to a better armed and trained army with the winds of victory at its back led by superior, and not so mentally ill, subordinate officers. In my opinion, Abraham Lincoln stands as the equal of George Washington of the history of American presidents. Lincoln, by many accounts, struggled with depression and difficult personal relationships many times in his life. Did this increase his capacity for empathy and resilience? Possibly. Did this empathy with others affect his approach to the war? I am doubtful. In the dark days of the war, did resilience that he may have developed in the dark days of his personal life support him mentally? Perhaps. As a approach to fighting the war, Lincoln's sought a general who "would fight," which General McClellan essentially failed to do and for which Lincoln fired him. But what Lincoln meant by "fight" was a general who would take casualties.

When I am torn between a 4 and a 5 I read all the other reviews. I rate this book a five because it advances appreciation for the integration of psychology with history, and contributes somewhat--not the last word--to the rather vital discussion of why so many of our "leaders" are pedestrian, and what marks those who rise to extraordinary heights in the face of complex near catastrophic

challenges. Those critical of the book for the relatively brevity of the biographic sections, and the occasional mistakes, are in my view missing the huge point that really matters: in a time of extreme complexity and ambiguity, leaders with the most open of minds capable of very unconventional thinking are vital, and it just so happens that what some call lunatic fringe or borderline personality have "the right stuff" for such times. I have five pages of notes on this book. Below are some highlights and a few quotes. The author refers to an inverse law of sanity and early on quotes Sherman as saying "In these times it is hard to say who are sane and who are insane." That is precisely how I feel as I watch Wall Street, Big Oil, the Military-Industrial Complex, and a two-party tyranny with a lame President pretending they have not already driven the Republic over the cliff. The author's core argument is that in times of crisis, mentally ill leaders do better. While he exaggerates for effect, his essential argument is that "the establishment" produces sterile "well-adjusted" leaders who are best at following convention and staying within their "lanes in the road."

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