



# A First-Rate Madness: Uncovering the Links Between Leadership and Mental Illness

By Nassir Ghaemi

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## A First-Rate Madness: Uncovering the Links Between Leadership and Mental Illness By Nassir Ghaemi

**An investigation into the surprisingly deep correlation between mental illness and successful leadership, as seen through some of history's greatest politicians, generals, and businesspeople.**

In *A First-Rate Madness*, Nassir Ghaemi, who runs the Mood Disorders Program at Tufts University Medical Center, draws from the careers and personal plights of such notable leaders as Lincoln, Churchill, Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr., JFK, and others from the past two centuries to build an argument at once controversial and compelling: the very qualities that mark those with mood disorders- realism, empathy, resilience, and creativity-also make for the best leaders in times of crisis. By combining astute analysis of the historical evidence with the latest psychiatric research, Ghaemi demonstrates how these qualities have produced brilliant leadership under the toughest circumstances.

Take realism, for instance: study after study has shown that those suffering depression are better than "normal" people at assessing current threats and predicting future outcomes. Looking at Lincoln and Churchill among others, Ghaemi shows how depressive realism helped these men tackle challenges both personal and national. Or consider creativity, a quality psychiatrists have studied extensively in relation to bipolar disorder. *A First-Rate Madness* shows how mania inspired General Sherman and Ted Turner to design and execute their most creative-and successful-strategies.

Ghaemi's thesis is both robust and expansive; he even explains why eminently sane men like Neville Chamberlain and George W. Bush made such poor leaders. Though sane people are better shepherds in good times, sanity can be a severe liability in moments of crisis. A lifetime without the cyclical torment of mood disorders, Ghaemi explains, can leave one ill equipped to endure dire straits. He also clarifies which kinds of insanity-like psychosis-make for despotism and ineptitude, sometimes on a grand scale.

Ghaemi's bold, authoritative analysis offers powerful new tools for determining who should lead us. But perhaps most profoundly, he encourages us to rethink

our view of mental illness as a purely negative phenomenon. As *A First-Rate Madness* makes clear, the most common types of insanity can confer vital benefits on individuals and society at large-however high the price for those who endure these illnesses.

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### Editorial Review

#### Review

“A glistening psychological history, faceted largely by the biographies of eight famous leaders... *A First-Rate Madness* is carefully plotted and sensibly argued.”

— BOSTON GLOBE

“Ghaemi isn’t the first to claim that madness is a close relative of genius, or even the first to extend the idea into politics. But he does go further than others... His explanations are elegant, too—intuitively accurate and banked off the latest psychiatric research.”

— NEWSWEEK

“A provocative thesis... Ghaemi’s book deserves high marks for original thinking.” —THE WASHINGTON POST

“Ghaemi is a remarkably disciplined writer, and he examines both psychiatry and history with impressive clarity and sensitivity. *A First-Rate Madness* will almost certainly be one of the most fascinating books of the year, not just because of the author’s lucid prose and undeniable intelligence, but because of his provocative thesis: “For abnormal challenges, abnormal leaders are needed.”” --NPR.ORG

“Provocative, fascinating.” —SALON.COM

#### About the Author

Nassir Ghaemi, M.D., is a professor of psychiatry at Tufts University School of Medicine and director of the Mood Disorders Program at Tufts Medical Center in Boston. He has published more than a hundred scientific articles and several books on psychiatry.

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