

# Fear and loathing abound in the 'off-label' presidential election of 2016

**Name-calling. Grandiosity. Pressured speech. Excessive cockiness. Serial lying. Hostility. And more: irritability, hyperthymic temperament, low energy, high energy, wacky ideas, verbal bullying, sexual innuendo, lability, aggression, lack of insight, messianic behavior, history of attempted stabbing, exuberant predictions, moodiness, and bizarre thoughts.**

A day in the psychiatry clinic? No—just scenes from that high-stakes festival of intense human competitiveness gone awry: the current presidential election. Alas, we have no FDA-approved treatments for any of these unusual political behaviors.

More stunning is how blind some loyal voters are to the flaws of their candidate of choice. They seem to be joyfully intoxicated by sharing the unusual beliefs of the candidate, in a cultish *folie en masse* of epidemic proportion.

Other (rational) voters are stunned and jarred by what they see and hear; they appear to be in need of Rx: an intellectual antiemetic.

## The rise of uber-narcissism

A certain amount of narcissism is, understandably, necessary to run

for the nation's highest office and to believe, against all odds, that winning is certain despite microscopic favorability in the polls. In this election cycle, the cup of narcissism has run over; yet, to adoring fans, narcissism only adds a wondrous halo to their candidate.

The history of the United States is rife with similar behavior by elected officials, including our revered Founding Fathers.<sup>1</sup> But today's psychiatrists, witnessing this national charade, are perplexed and question the rationality of the national psyche. Established rules for seeking the Presidency have been demolished and the show goes on as if heightened narcissism is the new normal in human behavior.

## Giving voice to my colleagues' consternation

Here are a few thoughts that might cross the mind of psychiatrists as they watch, with a frown and pursed lips, this unconventional election cycle:

**From a psychoanalytic perspective,** the *id* has left the *ego* in its dust, and the *super-ego* went home to hide.

**When boorishness trumps civility,** hillarious consequences ensue.

**The gullibility of voters** deserves serious scientific study. Jeste and Harris<sup>2</sup>

continued on page 26



**Henry A. Nasrallah, MD**  
Editor-in-Chief

**If only neuroscientists would develop and license vaccines to inoculate presidential candidates against demagoguery, dishonesty, and pandering**

**To comment on this editorial or other topics of interest,** visit [www.facebook.com/CurrentPsychiatry](http://www.facebook.com/CurrentPsychiatry), or go to [CurrentPsychiatry.com](http://CurrentPsychiatry.com) and click on the "Contact us" link.



## Editorial Staff

EDITOR John Baranowski  
MANAGING EDITOR Erica Vonderheid  
ASSOCIATE EDITOR Patrice Kubik  
WEB ASSISTANTS  
Tyler Mundhenk, Kathryn Wighton

## Art & Production Staff

CREATIVE DIRECTOR Mary Ellen Niatas  
ART DIRECTOR Pat Fopma  
DIRECTOR, JOURNAL MANUFACTURING  
Michael Wendt  
PRODUCTION MANAGER Donna Pituras

## Publishing Staff

PUBLISHER Sharon J. Spector  
ASSOCIATE DIRECTOR, eBUSINESS  
DEVELOPMENT Joshua Norton  
MARKETPLACE ACCOUNT MANAGER  
Linda Wilson  
CONFERENCE MARKETING MANAGER  
Kathy Wenzler

## Editor-in-Chief Emeritus

James Randolph Hillard, MD

## Frontline Medical Communications

CHAIRMAN Stephen Stoneburn  
EVP DIGITAL BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT/CFO  
Douglas E. Grose  
PRESIDENT/CEO Alan J. Imhoff  
PRESIDENT, CUSTOM SOLUTIONS JoAnn Wahl  
VICE PRESIDENT, FINANCE Dennis Quirk  
VICE PRESIDENT, OPERATIONS Jim Chicca  
VICE PRESIDENT, AUDIENCE DEVELOPMENT  
Donna Sickles  
VICE PRESIDENT, CUSTOM PROGRAMS  
Carol Nathan  
VICE PRESIDENT, CUSTOM SOLUTIONS  
Wendy Raupers  
VICE PRESIDENT, eBUSINESS DEVELOPMENT  
Lee Schweizer  
VICE PRESIDENT, HUMAN RESOURCES  
& FACILITY OPERATIONS Carolyn Caccavelli  
VICE PRESIDENT, MARKETING & CUSTOMER  
ADVOCACY Jim McDonough  
VICE PRESIDENT, SALES Mike Guire  
VICE PRESIDENT, SOCIETY PARTNERS  
Mark Branca  
CORPORATE DIRECTOR, RESEARCH  
& COMMUNICATIONS Lori Raskin  
EDITORIAL DIRECTOR Karen J. Clemments

Subscription Services: (800) 480-4851

In affiliation with Global Academy  
for Medical Education, LLC

VICE PRESIDENT, MEDICAL EDUCATION  
& CONFERENCES Sylvia H. Reitman, MBA  
VICE PRESIDENT, EVENTS David J. Small, MBA

**FRONTLINE**  
MEDICAL COMMUNICATIONS

7 Century Drive, Suite 302  
Parsippany, NJ 07054  
Tel: (973) 206-3434  
Fax: (973) 206-9378  
www.frontlinemedcom.com

Published through an  
educational partnership  
with Saint Louis University



continued from page 21

reviewed the evidence for a neurobiology of wisdom; The National Institutes of Health should fund research into how some voters believe the candidate of their choice will provide them with *everything* they wish. The chicken in every pot expands to 100 in every pot, and money grows on trees (at least on 1% of the forest!).

**From an evolutionary standpoint,** survival of the fittest has become survival of the most bombastic.

**The zeitgeist reflects an electorate** that oscillates agonizingly from surprise to anger to cynicism to disgust.

**The traditional internal conflict** (studied by political scientists) of choosing between 2 reasonably meritorious candidates has been transformed into a conflict over whether to vote at all.

**This is the least nuanced** presidential campaign—*ever*.

**All decision-making in politics is unconscious,** political scientist Jon A. Krosnick proposed. In this election, however, candidates' enunciations are so overt that it's hard to believe there's anything left in the unconscious. Freud spoke of the "primary process" arising from the unconscious; he definitely was not referring to the primary process we experienced during this election cycle.

**From a neuropsychiatric perspective,** the limbic system has kicked the cortex in the metaphorical *derrière* in this election campaign.

**Unabashed display of character flaws,** personal shortcomings, and biases prove that anyone can run for

president in a democracy, and that some voters will display a flight of reason and vote for a flawed candidate.

**Even an inept demagogue can be misperceived** as a savior by followers. Some voters could use a few sessions of insight-oriented therapy or cognitive-behavioral therapy for their unrealistic expectations.

**It is dizzying, mentally, to watch candidates' verbal acrobatics** as they try to pass several litmus tests to satisfy disparate demands of sundry constituencies and mendaciously flip-flop on many issues—ignoring the fact that everything they have said was recorded or videotaped. Intellectual transvestism is a political sin, and sinners abound.

**Oh, for a Jenner, Pasteur, or Sabin to discover vaccines for the intellect**

Writing this editorial has been therapeutic. It feels good to ventilate about this bizarre election process that has the nation in its grip. I would feel much better if neuroscientists would develop and license vaccines that would broadly inoculate candidates against demagoguery, dishonesty, and pandering and voters against mind-boggling gullibility.

That would make elections so boring. But also so on-label....

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Henry A. Nasrallah".

Henry A. Nasrallah, MD  
Editor-in-Chief

## References

1. Gartner JD. The hypomanic edge: the link between (a little) craziness and (a lot of) success in America. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster; 2005.
2. Jeste DV, Harris JC. Wisdom—a neuroscience perspective. *JAMA*. 2013;304(14):1602-1603.