

Head cases: The mental health of saints and presidents

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [August 22, 2006](#) issue

Being president of the United States undermines one's mental health or else an inordinate number of people with mental disorder have been elected to the post. According to psychiatrists at Duke University (reported in the June *Atlantic Monthly*), 16 of the 37 presidents from Washington to Nixon "may have suffered from a mental illness." In ten cases this was manifested during their time in office and "probably impaired job performance." Depression, anxiety, bipolar disorder and alcoholism, in that order, were the prominent afflictions. Franklin Pierce lost a son and almost went mad. William Howard Taft faced presidential anxiety by overeating and suffered "massive obesity and obstructive sleep apnea."

Some citizens may be shocked by this news. Those who study religious history are less fazed, since secular cases pale next to religious ones, especially among the saints. Hilary Mantel (in the *London Review of Books*, March 4, 2004) made a registry of canonized figures who showed signs of mental illness. That allows us to make some comparisons. If John Adams, Theodore Roosevelt and Lyndon Johnson suffered from bipolar disorder, Thérèse of Lisieux suffered bipolar "ecstasies." Thomas Jefferson experienced social phobia; Calvin Coolidge, social phobia plus depression plus hypochondriasis. Social-phobic St. Margaret of Cortona bought a razor and almost succeeded in slicing through her nostrils and upper lip. They talked her out of it at the last minute.

Afflicted with depression were James Madison, John Quincy Adams, Rutherford B. Hayes, James Garfield, Herbert Hoover and Dwight Eisenhower, along with Abraham Lincoln, who had "depression with psychotic features." Depressed? St. Veronica Giuliani, at the instructions of her superior, cleaned the floor of her cell with her tongue, along the way swallowing spiders and their webs.

Ulysses S. Grant and Richard Nixon exhibited signs of alcohol abuse or alcohol dependence. St. Catherine of Siena drank pus from a cancerous sore, and St. Angela

of Foligno drank water contaminated by the putrefying flesh of a leper.

Warren Harding suffered from somatoform disorder; Woodrow Wilson, from “personality change due to stroke.” St. Maria Maddalena de’ Pazzi lay naked on thorns, and St. Eustochia of Messina stretched her arms on a rack she had constructed.

The Duke scientists know that doing retrospective diagnosis is risky. And we must stress that the saints did saintly things through charities and work for justice, and the presidents did positive presidential things. These people were not *only* mentally disturbed, and many of them made creative use of their disturbed state. Think of Lincoln’s “depression with psychotic features.” Would we who share the benefits of his presidency have preferred some blithe optimist to have held office between 1861 and 1865?