

# International Political Science Review

<http://ips.sagepub.com/>

---

## **Cognitive Style and Foreign Policy: Margaret Thatcher's Black-and-White Thinking**

Stephen Benedict Dyson

*International Political Science Review* 2009 30: 33

DOI: 10.1177/0192512108097055

The online version of this article can be found at:

<http://ips.sagepub.com/content/30/1/33>

---

Published by:



<http://www.sagepublications.com>

On behalf of:



International Political Science Association (IPSA)

**Additional services and information for *International Political Science Review* can be found at:**

**Email Alerts:** <http://ips.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts>

**Subscriptions:** <http://ips.sagepub.com/subscriptions>

**Reprints:** <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav>

**Permissions:** <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav>

**Citations:** <http://ips.sagepub.com/content/30/1/33.refs.html>

>> [Version of Record](#) - Jan 14, 2009

[What is This?](#)



## Cognitive Style and Foreign Policy: Margaret Thatcher's Black-and-White Thinking

STEPHEN BENEDICT DYSON

**ABSTRACT.** Margaret Thatcher was a key late-20th-century political figure, with a major part of her influence felt in international affairs. Her colleagues and interlocutors agree that Thatcher was a distinctive and forceful individual. Yet, few studies have sought to systematically investigate her worldview and leadership style, and evaluate their impact upon her policy choices. Here, I apply Hermann's conceptual complexity content analysis scheme to the entirety of Thatcher's responses to foreign policy questions in the House of Commons, finding that she scores significantly lower in complexity than both the average world leader and the average post-1945 British prime minister. This aspect of cognitive style, which has been associated with stark, black-and-white worldviews, is shown to have strongly conditioned Thatcher's foreign policy decisions in the Falklands crisis, her relationship with Ronald Reagan, her evaluation of the Soviet Union and of Mikhail Gorbachev, and her attitude toward German reunification. I conclude, then, that Thatcher's personality is key to understanding her time in office, and that she presents a vivid example of how individuals matter in politics.

*Keywords:* • Thatcher • Foreign policy • Personality • Reagan  
• Falklands

---

The former cabinet minister David Howell was once asked to reflect upon Margaret Thatcher's style of leadership: given her strong views, were ministers confident in raising issues in an open way for debate? After a pause, Howell suggested not:

There is a deterring effect if one knows that one is going to go not into a discussion where various points of view will be weighed and gradually a view may be achieved, but into a huge argument where tremendous battle lines will be drawn up and everyone who doesn't fall into line will be hit on the head. (quoted in Hennessy, 1987: 61)

Howell, and most other Thatcher-era ministers who experienced the assertiveness of the prime minister at first hand, would be in equal parts amused and chagrined by the reluctance of academic observers to carefully consider personality as part of an explanation for events. This seems especially important in the case of an individual as vividly drawn as Margaret Thatcher, yet, as Garnett (2007: 173) notes in reviewing recent work, the literature on the lady has generally sought structural explanations for her actions and considered personality as responsible mainly for a few colorful incidents along the way. Indeed, the best work in the recent literature – Campbell's two-volume study – carefully constructs a vivid portrait of Thatcher's role at the center of political life for over a decade, yet on the penultimate of its 1300 pages there is still hesitancy as to the importance of her personality: "there remains the question of how far Margaret Thatcher, as an individual, inspired and drove the policies that bore her name, or to what extent she simply rode a global wave" toward outcomes that would have been much the same "whoever had been in power" (Campbell, 2003: 800). This coyness in considering individual personality, style, and belief systems as causally significant, suggests Rod Rhodes (1995: 23), is an unfortunate feature of work on the British prime ministership:

The systematic analysis of leadership influences is still in its infancy in the UK ... There is no equivalent to the sophisticated analysis of how leadership personality transmutes into characteristic institutional and policy styles which figure large in accounts of the US presidency.

Especially in foreign policy, where the workaday constraints of domestic politics can often seem to be less onerous, a good-sized literature, admittedly largely based on the US case, now focuses upon understanding the politically relevant individual characteristics of leaders and assessing the importance of these individuals to events (for a review see Winter, 2003). I suggest here that understanding of the Thatcher-era is enriched if we take the importance of her personality seriously, and offer a means of doing so with some rigor. More specifically, I focus upon her cognitive style of information processing, finding that she exhibited a profoundly "black-and-white" view of international affairs. This aspect of leadership style can be measured through systematic content analysis of verbal output – here I use as materials Thatcher's responses to questions in the British House of Commons – and is manifest in an approach to policy of certainty, rigidity, and dichotomy: defining features of the Thatcher years.

The prime minister's foreign policy record, taken from the Falklands through to her attitude to German reunification, consistently reflects the impact of her personal cognitive style. The study, then, combines a quantitative content analysis approach to uncovering the Thatcher worldview with a more qualitative analysis of the role of this worldview in British foreign policy. The wider point is that personality should be seen as causally significant under certain circumstances and that multi-method approaches, combining the rigor of quantitative content analysis and the contextual richness of qualitative approaches, are especially apposite when dealing with the difficult question of the role of the individual in macropolitical events. As a first step, I introduce content analysis methods for the measurement of individual characteristics "at-a-distance."

### **Conceptual Complexity and At-a-Distance Measurement**

The central focus of at-a-distance approaches is the verbal output of political leaders, with the assumption being that this output, when processed according to content analysis schemes derived from underlying psychological concepts, can reveal information which helps us to understand the beliefs, motives, and personalities of key figures (Schafer, 2000: 512; Winter, 2003: 114). As Suedfeld et al. (2003: 246) state: "thought processes underlie spoken or written communication," and therefore the inference can be made that "the (thought) process and the (spoken or written) product are related and that the product reflects some important aspects of the process."

At-a-distance measures offer several benefits to the study of leaders, in particular mitigating the problems of access to the leader, and to data about them, that have bedeviled such work in the past. Politicians, a garrulous subset of the population, are almost constantly producing materials of interest to the user of at-a-distance methods. However, these methods are not a panacea for all the ills of leadership studies. In developing clear-cut content analytic schemes, there is a danger of losing the contextual richness apparent in more traditionally biographical approaches. There is also the danger, if the researcher is not careful, of analyzing words spoken by leaders that may in fact have been written by aides, and, if a sampling design is used, of drawing on an unrepresentative body of materials for analysis (see Schafer, 2000, for a discussion of some pitfalls). With proper attention to these issues, however, the potential does exist to produce valid and reliable data on the individual characteristics and decision-making propensities of political leaders, and a substantial research literature using these techniques has emerged.

Individual complexity has been among the most studied of the characteristics developed for use with at-a-distance methods. Lower conceptual complexity has been linked to a black-and-white worldview, and a tendency to divide the political world into starkly drawn, often dichotomous, categories such as "us and them"; "good and evil"; "friend and enemy." This dichotomizing tendency is much less pronounced in individuals with a higher complexity score, who have been found to see the world in more equivocal and nuanced "shades of gray" (see Hermann, 1980; Nydegger, 1975; Preston, 2001; Schroder et al., 1967; Tetlock, 1985; Ziller et al., 1977). Information processing in an individual with a lower complexity cognitive architecture tends toward the development of and adherence to a small number of key principles and beliefs, and the top-down imposition of these schemata upon new evidence. Sensitivity to nuances, and especially to information discrepant with existing beliefs, is lessened. Pre-existing framings of actors, issues, places, and things become deeply entrenched and dominant within the cognitive system. They are then defended through processes of selective perception, biased information search, and selective information encoding and retrieval (Glad, 1983; Nydegger, 1975; Vertzberger, 1990; Ziller et al., 1977).

Thomas Preston, expanding the scope of the concept for political scientists, studied the types of advisory systems and decision-making processes favored by leaders with varying complexity scores. His conclusion was that lower complexity leaders were less receptive to advisors who offered alternatives to a preferred course of action, and would take measures to marginalize persistent offenders. These individuals, with stark views of the world, already knew what they thought

about a given problem and did not value highly the opportunity to revisit their conclusions. Higher complexity leaders, by contrast, valued and encouraged decision-making input that challenged their own views, and would actively solicit dissent if it did not appear organically (Preston, 2001).

While some have drawn conclusions as to what are more or less desirable cognitive styles in political leaders, the prime aim of research into conceptual complexity is to empirically document, rather than judge in a normative sense, the information processing tendencies of figures of interest. As Wallace and Suedfeld (1988: 441) justifiably aver: "There are obviously situations where lowered complexity may be adaptive: when decisions must be made immediately; ... when one faces an implacable opponent who will not negotiate; when single-minded devotion to a cause is necessary for morale or to overcome unfavorable odds; or when well-structured methods are more effective than innovation."

Margaret G. Hermann has developed and refined a measure of conceptual complexity that is quite straightforward, relying upon a frequency-count content analysis of words spoken by the subject of interest (Hermann, 1980). A dictionary of words indicative of nuanced, contingent cognitive processes and words indicative of a less nuanced process is utilized. Words coded as positive evidence of complexity include "trend," "possibly," "perhaps," and "sometimes." Words counted as evidence of negative complexity include "always," "never," and "absolutely." The final complexity score for a text sample is the ratio of positive complexity coding decisions to the total number of coding opportunities. In adopting Hermann's measure, I am also able to take advantage of the automation of the scheme. With the actual analysis conducted by the content analysis software program "Profiler Plus," problems of inter-coder reliability effectively disappear (see Young, 2000).

As material for coding I collected the universe of Thatcher's responses to foreign policy questions in the House of Commons across her time as prime minister from *Hansard*, the official record of the British parliament. I use these materials as they are more spontaneous than set piece speeches, and so more likely to give an accurate picture of the prime minister rather than of her aides and speechwriters. Although, of course, the prime minister is able to do some preparation in anticipation of questions in the House, there is still a substantial unscripted element, with many questioners selected by the Speaker without consultation with the prime minister. These responses were divided into half-year segments, a decision reflecting the trade-off between having as fine-grained measures of complexity as possible – ideally we would track scores from day-to-day – and having each measure based upon a sufficient volume of words so that the results are not biased by a small number of coding decisions.<sup>1</sup>

Finally, to provide some substantive interpretation for Thatcher's complexity scores, I compare them with an existing dataset comprising every post-1945 British prime minister, also constructed from *Hansard* materials using the procedures already described. In addition, Thatcher's scores are compared with a larger and heterogeneous dataset of world political leaders.<sup>2</sup>

## *Results*

In Figure 1, Thatcher's half-year complexity scores across her time in office are reported, as well as her scores on specific topics: the Falklands, the Soviet Union, and the question of German reunification. Thatcher's scores are substantially and

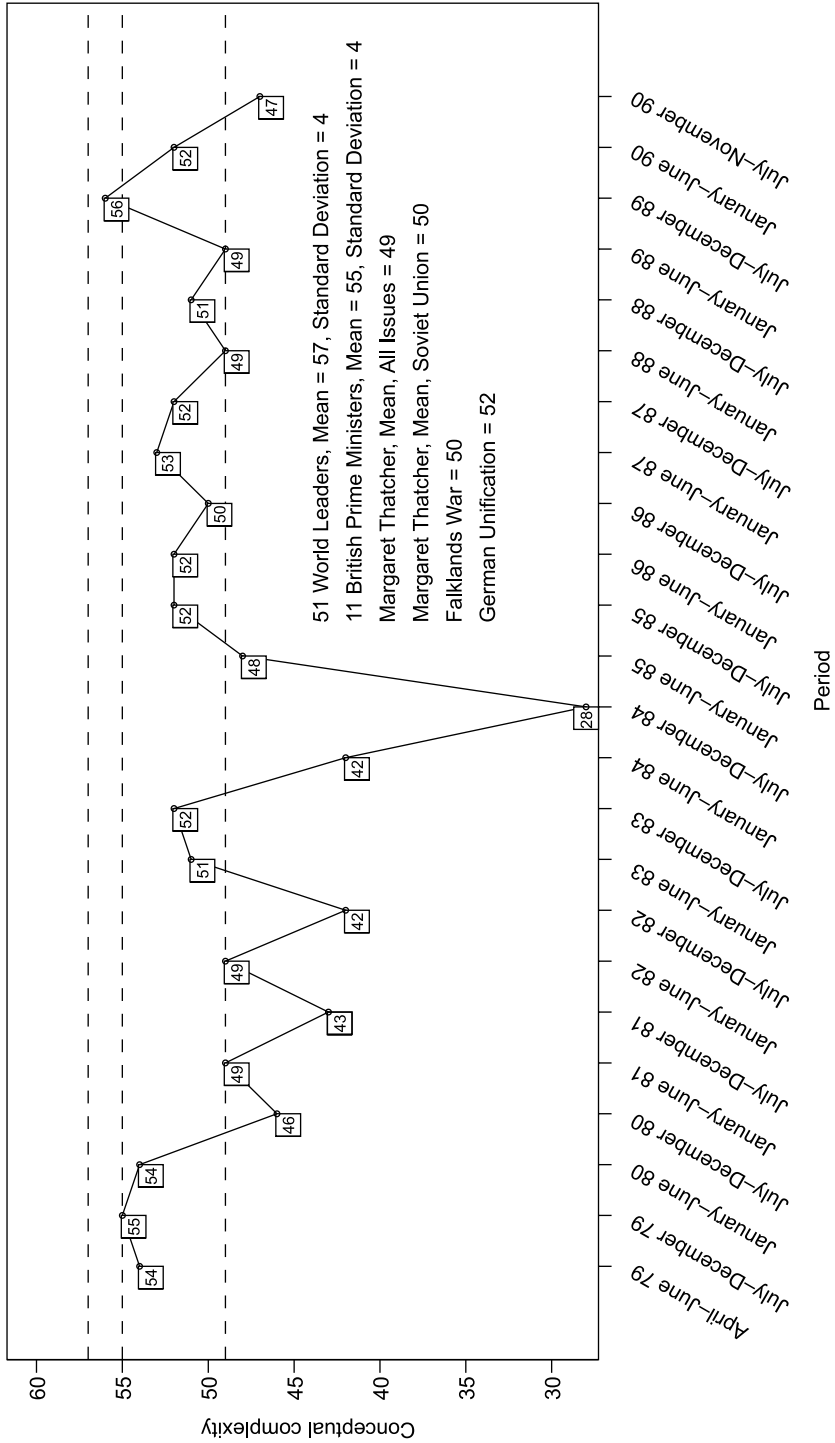


FIGURE 1. Margaret Thatcher's Conceptual Complexity Scores

consistently lower than those of both the average world leader and the average post-1945 British prime minister. Indeed, her mean complexity score is the lowest of all post-1945 prime ministers, and is rivaled only by Tony Blair's mean score of 51 (see Dyson, 2006). The impact of uneven word count across the measurement units, while substantially mitigated by the aggregation into biannual segments, is observed in the July–December 1984 period – the one real outlier.

### **The Thatcher Style: Black-and-White Thinking**

The content analysis data suggest that Thatcher would exhibit behavior consistent with a lower complexity cognitive style. In the remainder of the article, the evidence of the Thatcher record, reconstructed from the recollections and analyses of colleagues and observers, is examined in this light.

Thatcher's colleagues and biographers found a tendency toward black-and-white thinking to be one of the foremost characteristics of her leadership. Anthony King (1985: 132) notes "a disposition to see the political world as divided into friends and enemies, goodies and baddies," while Francis Pym, the former foreign secretary, found that "she likes everything to be clear-cut: absolutely in favor of one thing, absolutely against another" (Pym, 1984). Thatcher described herself in an interview before taking office as not "a consensus politician or a pragmatic politician, but a conviction politician." Accordingly, she wanted in Cabinet "only people who want to go in the direction in which every instinct tells me we have to go" (quoted in Gilmour, 1992: 3). She was in politics, she said, "because of the conflict between good and evil, and I believe that in the end good will triumph" (Young, 1989: 352). Exemplifying the tendency of the lower complexity individual to divide the world into friends and enemies, Thatcher's constant refrain when considering colleagues was "is he *one of us*?" (Young, 1989), meaning: could the individual in question be counted upon to carry the wishes of the prime minister forward with the minimum of fuss? As Sir Bryan Cartledge, who served Thatcher for a time as Private Secretary (Overseas Affairs), put it, "Margaret Thatcher's decisions were taken with reference to a few deeply, even passionately, held personal convictions and beliefs against which proposals or individuals were measured: if found wanting, the proposal or individual was discarded without further ado" (Cartledge, 2003: 158).

Thatcher's strong adherence to fundamental principles and difficulty in seeing opposing viewpoints could lead her into clashes with colleagues. Long-time Chancellor of the Exchequer Nigel Lawson noted that during Cabinet meetings, "when there was an issue on which she had already formed a firm view, she would start with an unashamedly tendentious introduction of her own, before inviting the responsible and sometimes cowed Minister to have his say" (Lawson, 1992: 128). Another ex-minister agrees:

In Cabinet, she spoke first, outlining what she proposed to do, what the policy of the government was going to be. The dissidents came next. They did not always get a chance to complete their case because she would interrupt them, sometimes offensively in that she would tell them in very simple language that what they were advocating was simply not on. Then she would sum up. The summing up would be a restatement of the action she had proposed at the beginning of the meeting. (quoted in Harris, 1988)

In terms specifically of foreign policy, Thatcher came into office with extremely limited experience, having held no previous position with international responsibilities and having traveled little in her pre-political life. A senior minister went so far as to say that upon coming into office “the prime minister, quite frankly, literally did not know where Calais was.” She had a “small town hostility to Europeans and a *Daily Express* understanding of foreign affairs.” The only non-British people she found agreeable were Americans, but this was because “she did not regard them as foreign” (Sharp, 1997: 28). Preston (2001), in his comparative study of US presidents, found that a lack of experience exacerbates the tendency toward a simplified schema of world politics in lower complexity leaders, suggesting these individuals, with a black-and-white cognitive style unleavened by worldliness, became almost “maverick” in their reliance upon their own belief sets in decision making. In these circumstances, not only direct knowledge of international affairs but also the capacity to acquire it can be retarded. Indeed, when Thatcher was dispatched on a crash course in world travel by concerned civil servants, the trip “resembled more closely a transportation of the manners and teachings of Downing Street across the globe” (Young, 1989: 248).

Associates felt Thatcher was interested in neither specific knowledge about the outside world nor the niceties of foreign diplomacy. She had, her foreign affairs advisor Percy Craddock (1997: 21) notes, “little sense of the forces moving the other side in international exchanges; of the history, the prejudices, the aspirations which drove her opposite numbers to adopt positions differing from her own but in their eyes equally valid.” Nicholas Henderson, ambassador to the United States during the early Thatcher years, concurs that she “doesn’t really believe that there’s any such thing as useful negotiation. She doesn’t see politics as it is, which is a lot of give and take” (Young, 1989: 381). Instead, there were fixed principles to be pursued – the promotion of British interests in an anarchical world, the alliance with the United States, and the opposition to communism. These goals were seen by the prime minister, says Craddock, as “zero-sum games, which Britain had to win.” More seasoned diplomatic hands, who would counsel compromise and cooperation, were dismissed as “wet and waffly,” and even “defeatists.” A common complaint was that her advisors “brought her problems but no answers. The thought that for a middling power in a disorderly world there would be few answers in the crossword-puzzle sense and many compromises seemed not to occur” (Craddock, 1997: 22).

In short, the Thatcher style in foreign affairs accords very closely with expectations given her lower complexity score. She divided the outside world, as well as her government colleagues and advisors, into starkly drawn categories of “friend and enemy,” within a wider context of a struggle between good and evil. In internal debate, she could be tendentious, aggressive, and highly suspicious of suggestions to compromise upon what she saw as imperative policy goals (Genovese, 2003: 381–3). The impact of her strongly held schema upon her policies was exacerbated by a lack of international experience, and, once she began of necessity to see more of the world beyond Britain, her views were set so firm as to be relatively impervious to new information. These are classic dispositions associated with the cognitive architecture of lower complexity decision makers.



### Falklands

These tendencies were strongly in evidence during the Falklands crisis, the major foreign policy event of her early tenure. The Argentinian invasion of April 2, 1982 came as a surprise to the British government, but Thatcher responded in characteristically clear fashion: “we have got to get them back” (Thatcher, 1993: 179). She very quickly framed the situation in stark terms of Argentinian aggression and British virtue. Accompanying this was a resistance to a compromise diplomatic solution, and a belief that ultimately military force would be necessary. Thatcher rejected the counsel of the Foreign Office, and especially her diplomatically minded foreign secretary, Francis Pym:

I received advice from the Foreign Office which summed up the flexibility of principle characteristic of that department. I was presented with the dangers of a backlash against the British expatriates in Argentina, problems about getting support in the UN Security Council, the lack of reliance we could place on the European Community or the United States, the risk of the Soviets becoming involved, the disadvantage of being looked at as a colonial power. All these considerations were fair enough. But when you are at war you cannot allow the difficulties to dominate your thinking. You have to set out with an iron will to overcome them. And anyway what was the alternative? That a common or garden dictator should rule over the Queen’s subjects and prevail by fraud and violence? Not while I was Prime Minister. (Thatcher, 1993: 181)

Sir Nicholas Henderson, the British ambassador to the US, found himself in the firing line on this. Henderson, and Foreign Office colleagues, sought to sensitize the prime minister to the need, if not to pursue a genuine diplomatic strategy, to at least give the outward impression of being reasonable for the sake of world opinion: “The problem was, of course, that the PM veered the whole time towards being uncompromising, so that the rest of us, and particularly the FCO participants, constantly found themselves under attack from her for being wet, ready to sell out, unsupportive of Britain’s interests, etc.” (Campbell, 2003: 148).

Nor was it only the British Foreign Office that she despaired of. American Secretary of State Alexander Haig, dispatched by President Reagan to try to avoid a shooting war between the major US ally in Europe and the major US ally in Latin America, received similar treatment from Thatcher’s Manichean mindset. Haig, received in the drawing room at 10 Downing Street, found Thatcher in determined mode and in the grip of dubious historical analogies:

After I had explained the American proposals to Mrs. Thatcher, she rapped sharply on the tabletop and recalled that this was the table at which Neville Chamberlain sat in 1938 and spoke of the Czechs as a faraway people about whom we know so little and with whom we have so little in common. A world war and the death of over 45 million people followed. She begged us to remember this: Do not urge Britain to reward aggression, to give Argentina something taken by force that it could not attain by peaceful means ... She was in a forceful mood, embattled, incisive. (Haig, 1984: 272–3)

Thatcher remained concerned throughout the crisis with an essentially monochrome framing of events focused around the need to subordinate diplomacy to the military timetable. Negotiations would not resolve the conflict, she determined, and their sole purpose was to buy time for the British naval task

force to position itself around the islands. Diplomatic proposals, right up to the beginning of fighting, were rejected by Thatcher, who felt they were simply attempts to obfuscate by the Argentine government, accepted at face value by a naïve and spineless British Foreign Office (Campbell, 2003: 137). The Falklands crisis was therefore resolved by force, culminating in the Argentine surrender at the Islands' capital city of Port Stanley on 12 June.

Thatcher's decision-making style and behavior in the Falklands crisis is a vivid example of some of the characteristics of individuals scoring lower on conceptual complexity: division of the world into stark categories of "them and us," "good and evil," and a propensity to discount alternatives to the course of action originally settled upon or to reconsider the fundamental principles and assumptions of a policy.

Indeed, it appears from the evidence entirely possible that another leader, with a different cognitive style, would have followed a different path and either avoided sending a task force to reclaim the islands or settled the dispute diplomatically once the task force had arrived and the point been made. Foreign Secretary Francis Pym was tireless in seeking a diplomatic solution, and pushed this to the point of soliciting support within Cabinet for such a compromise against the wishes of Thatcher, actions which contributed to his sacking once the conflict was concluded. Other figures, such as Defense Secretary John Nott, took full note of the logistical difficulties and military risks in reclaiming the islands and were unconvinced that even the step of assembling a task force was wise. Had, then, either of the two senior Cabinet ministers with international responsibilities been prime minister in Thatcher's place, it seems plausible to suggest that the Falklands crisis would have unfolded very differently. As Campbell (2003: 141) notes, Thatcher's contribution to the crisis was the unwavering conviction that if there was any military way to do it, the islands should be reclaimed by force: "it is this judgment that colleagues doubt that any other modern Prime Minister, or potential alternative Prime Minister in 1982, would have made."<sup>3</sup>

### **Thatcher, Reagan, and Gorbachev**

Here, I consider the most momentous events of the Thatcher era in foreign affairs terms, addressing her involvement with the key actors and events surrounding the end of the Cold War.

Thatcher's relationship with Ronald Reagan was famously close. Reagan, whom previous research has found to be an archetypal black-and-white thinker, framed the world in terms that appealed to Thatcher. As Betty Glad (1983: 45) has documented, Reagan's cognitive architecture focused upon good and evil, the division of the outside world into friends and enemies, and an approach to political life centered on the concepts of victory and defeat. As Hugo Young notes in his definitive account of the Thatcher years, in the early 1980s there was "almost nothing that divided the Thatcher from the Reagan view of the world. What typified it and infused it was, above all else, a wonderful measure of certainty." In particular, "their view of the Soviet Union" as a hostile state that had taken advantage of a misguided, overly nuanced Western policy of *détente* "was identical" (Young, 1989: 251). Thatcher found Reagan's ideological certainty a tonic to the caution she perceived among her own colleagues and foreign affairs corps, and noted that the President and herself were "a good team" because "we shared the same analysis of the way the world worked" (Thatcher, 1993: 324–5).

This is not to say that they represented a perfect fit, however. Ironically enough, Thatcher and Reagan each embodied stereotypes of the other's nation:

Thatcher had all the important qualities of a high-flying American business executive, being hard-working, single-minded, fascinated by detail and a swift master of every brief. She was fierce, impatient, sharp, fearless, and inexhaustible. Reagan, by contrast, had most of the vices of a languid upper-class Englishman of the type Mrs. Thatcher had spent years trying to exclude from her cabinet. (Young, 1989: 252)

Thatcher harbored no illusions concerning the work ethic and intellectual capacity of her American interlocutor, commenting that “[h]e had an accurate grasp of the strategic picture but left the tactical detail to others” (Thatcher, 1993: 325). Geoffrey Smith, who produced an extended study of the Thatcher–Reagan relationship, reports her rather more candid contemporaneous reaction. Thatcher, upon meeting Reagan for the first time, was “shocked” by his lack of interest in detail (Smith, 1991: 45). “Not much grey matter, is there?” she was said to have reflected (Campbell, 2003: 262).

On certain issues, she found him dangerously idealistic and would despair in private of his flights of fancy. On nuclear weapons, which Thatcher saw as the cornerstone of Western defense but Reagan came to see as inherent evils that should be either negotiated away (as in his Reykjavik proposals) or rendered obsolete (as in “Star Wars”), she found him unreliable (Thatcher, 1993: 466–7). These points of divergence, in particular Thatcher's value of hard work and being impeccably briefed and Reagan's somewhat less than total embodiment of these virtues, magnify the importance of their shared cognitive style in explaining their close relationship.

Of course, brute considerations of military and economic interest provide strong incentives for British prime ministers to keep relations with American presidents in good repair. However, relations are not always as close as Thatcher–Reagan, which, along perhaps with Churchill–Roosevelt and, in a pinch, Blair–Bush, stand as the high points of the modern alliance. As argued above, Thatcher and Reagan's closeness was rooted in the clarity of their international worldview. Indicative of the importance of the two leaders' cognitive style to the closeness of their interactions is the cooling in the US–UK relationship after Reagan was replaced by George Bush, a president whose conceptual complexity has been measured as much higher than that of Thatcher and Reagan. Thatcher, in her memoirs, indicates that the increased distance was caused by their different worldviews. Bush, she wrote, “had never had to think through his beliefs and fight for them when they were hopelessly unfashionable as Ronald Reagan and I had had to do. This means that much of his time ... was taken up with reaching for answers to problems which came to me quite spontaneously, because they sprang from my basic convictions” (Thatcher, 1993: 782–3). Barilleaux and Rozell (2003: 145) concur: the differences in Bush's and Thatcher's “ideas and styles kept them from enjoying the rapport that Thatcher and Reagan had developed.”

The significance of the Reagan–Thatcher partnership was magnified by developments in the Soviet Union. Thatcher, like Reagan, had come into office as a virulent anti-communist following administrations on both sides of the Atlantic that had sought to relax East–West tension. “Détente,” she said while still leader of the opposition, “sounds a fine word ... But the fact remains that throughout

this decade of détente, the armed forces of the Soviet Union have increased, are increasing, and show no signs of diminishing” (Young, 1989: 170). The Soviets, she later wrote, used détente as a cover for “covert aggression, while the West had let slip its defences” (Thatcher, 1993: 65). On coming to power she told *Time* magazine that “domination of the world by the Communist system” was still the objective of Soviet foreign policy. Indeed, Thatcher had been a life-long anti-communist, and her manifesto for election to Parliament in 1950 embodied sentiments identical to those she would hold as prime minister: “Every conservative desires peace,” but “the threat to peace comes from Communism, which has powerful forces ready to attack anywhere. Communism waits for weakness, it leaves strength alone. Britain must therefore be strong, strong in her arms, strong in her faith, strong in her own way of life” (Young, 1989: 169).

Both Thatcher and Reagan made the same cognitive journey from hard-line anti-communist to leading advocate of engaging with the reform efforts of Mikhail Gorbachev. In fact, Thatcher did so first. As she recounted to George Urban (1996: 132), an academic who occasionally advised her on foreign policy, “I was talent-spotting in the Soviet leadership, and that’s how Gorbachev came to visit me here at Chequers. I immediately hit it off with him and that’s when I coined the phrase ‘we can do business with him’. My whole relationship with Gorbachev was ... based on that first meeting.” This type of snap judgment can be characteristic of leaders with straightforward cognitive styles – placement of a new actor into one of the two categories “friend” or “enemy” is made quickly and, once made, is highly resistant to change. This was characteristic of Thatcher’s interpersonal style throughout her career. While secretary of state for education in Ted Heath’s government, she commented that “I make up my mind about people in the first ten seconds, and I very rarely change it” (Young, 1989: 162). As Smith (1991: 146) notes, “this was one of her more dangerous habits, but in the case of Gorbachev it worked.”

Indeed, Thatcher stuck with Gorbachev far beyond the point where others judged him a viable agent of governance in the USSR, and after many had transferred their hopes onto Russian President Boris Yeltsin, Thatcher was still talking about the need to bolster Gorbachev’s position (Campbell, 2003: 299). Some of her advisors, Peter Riddell (2003: 12) reports, felt that “the personal aspects of her approach predominated too much and made her unwilling to see the limitations” of Gorbachev. Leaders with a more complex schema may wait longer before forming a definitive judgment on a new international actor, or may form a more contingent judgment, waiting for a greater amount of evidence to emerge (Breslauer and Lebow, 2004: 183). In this context it is highly significant that Reagan’s successor, George Bush, with the benefit of years of accumulated evidence as to Gorbachev’s good intentions, adopted a “wait and see” attitude toward his efforts at international rapprochement during the key year of 1989 (Chollet and Goldgeier, 2003).

What did Gorbachev do in order to be placed in the “friend” category, when he was the leader of a state in the “enemy” box? Gorbachev came across as sharp and in full command of the facts, qualities which Thatcher valued. She also saw similarities in their leadership situations: modernizers determined to reform an entrenched, failing, socialist order (her view of socialism being characteristically undifferentiated: the British version was merely a less assertive and well-armed cousin of the Soviet exemplar) (Harris, 1988: 209–10). Finally, Gorbachev’s

criticisms of the Soviet system allowed her to keep her cognitive system in balance: the Soviet system was still evil, indicating she had been right all along, and here was quite spectacular evidence straight from the mouth of its new leader. However, the man at the top desired change and was trustworthy, meaning that cooperation was possible and even desirable. As Betty Glad notes, this was the same cognitive maneuver subsequently performed by Ronald Reagan (Glad, 1987: 620). Breslauer and Lebow, concurring, add also that Reagan, like Thatcher, had a tendency to reduce issues to personalities, and did so in the case of Gorbachev (Breslauer and Lebow, 2004: 183). Indeed, these were not unrelated judgments. Thatcher formed a relationship with Gorbachev prior to Reagan meeting him, and was able to vouch for the new Soviet leader to her American ally: "I was saying to Ron Reagan, this is a man that I can do business with and, because I believe the same things as you do, this is a man you can do business with without compromising any of your beliefs" (Smith, 1991: 173).

Thatcher's choices here did contribute to events in important ways. Her initial adoption of a renewed Cold War stance in some ways legitimated Reagan's similar posture, and the prime minister herself thought it extremely important that the US not be isolated in its efforts to renew both the military and rhetorical offensive against the USSR (Campbell, 2003: 287). Thatcher then convinced Gorbachev that the USSR could not win a renewed arms race and that Reagan would not give up the Strategic Defense Initiative (Campbell, 2003: 299). To the extent that one accepts the argument that Reagan's arms build up and rhetorical aggression against the Soviets laid at least part of the groundwork for Gorbachev's "new thinking" in foreign affairs, Thatcher's supporting role in this requires some acknowledgment. Perhaps of even greater significance was her snap judgment as to the intentions of Gorbachev, and her subsequent advocacy on his behalf to Reagan. Many surrounding the President counseled caution in dealing with the unknown Soviet leader, but Thatcher was a respected, reliable, and experienced voice indicating that Reagan should take Gorbachev seriously. As Bumgardner (2003: 64) notes, history may come to regard this as the most significant result of the Thatcher-Reagan relationship.

### **The "German Problem"**

As the Cold War came to a close and Soviet power retreated, the issue of German reunification came to the fore. This engaged several of Thatcher's less positive instincts. Firstly, she had encountered problems in her approach to "Europe" throughout her premiership, and regarded Germany, along with France, as having been hostile to her wishes and, in her worst moments, as running the European project as a Franco-German club seeking to marginalize the UK. She had, of course, fought a huge battle over Britain's budgetary contribution to the Community throughout her early years in office, the impulse to escalate which had been too tempting to resist: "it was, for her, almost the perfect issue. The problem suited her angular mind and her instinct for aggression. It was very black and white ... there would be a winner and a loser" (Young, 1989: 313). The confrontation was characteristically put in "them" and "us" terms, as she sought to get back "our money," a formula that occasionally became "my money." That she had eventually achieved a substantial rebate did not stay her suspicion of the union project,

which by its very nature was built upon constant negotiation and compromise of the kind she found intolerable: "In Europe, negotiation never ends ... Little is cut and dried, and, since cut and driedness was the part of her style in which Mrs. Thatcher took most pride, there were always likely to be incandescent difficulties between her and the people she resolutely declined to see as partners" (Young, 1989: 338). The prime minister, Cartledge recalls, "enjoyed a good fight (so long as she won) and made sure that nearly every major Euro-meeting in which she took part turned into one" (Cartledge, 2003: 159).

Further, the issue of German reunification ran consecutively with Thatcher's increasingly troubled relationship with the European economic and monetary union project, which she had resisted tenaciously. Her *bête noire*, and the "enemy" upon which her "us and them" worldview settled, was the integrationist president of the European Commission, Jacques Delors. He was, Campbell (2003: 596) notes, perfectly suited for the role as "he was both a foreigner and a socialist, so that by fighting him she united in one crusade her two great causes, British patriotism and the defeat of socialism." She had only recently been effectively forced to join the "Exchange Rate Mechanism" by the threat of her two most senior ministers, Foreign Secretary Geoffrey Howe and Chancellor of the Exchequer Nigel Lawson, to resign if she refused (Campbell, 2003: 612). Thatcher had been defeated by members of her own government on an issue which she saw as threatening British sovereignty: "I had too few allies to continue to resist and win the day" (Thatcher, 1993: 722). She was not, then, in the best frame of mind on European issues during the later years of her premiership.

Onto this troubled terrain came German reunification, the foreign policy issue Thatcher herself regards as her biggest failure (Thatcher, 1993: 813). With the collapse of Soviet power the East German regime was unsustainable, and West Germany under Chancellor Kohl was strongly in favor of rapid reunification. Thatcher reacted virulently. Her foreign policy advisor Percy Craddock (1997: 110) recalls that:

To her it was an unpalatable irony that, after the expenditure of British blood and treasure in two world wars, we should be faced with a Germany able once again to dominate Europe. She had grown up during the second of those wars and for her, as for many of her contemporaries, the concept of Germany was indelibly marked by that experience.

She said privately to George Urban (1996: 104) that "there are things that people of your generation and mine ought never to forget. We've been through the war and we know perfectly well what the Germans are like, and what dictators can do, and how national character doesn't change." This was less a Germany policy, and more "an anti-German disposition" (Sharp, 1997: 223). Thatcher was in a minority in opposing German reunification and, crucially, President Bush, seeking to reorient America's European alliances more closely toward Germany, was in favor. Thatcher therefore had little leverage and was unsuccessful in seeking to prevent the reunion (Davis and Wohlforth, 2004: 149–51). Her black-and-white framing of the situation, relying upon a schema of German national character that was very deeply held and hugely resistant to the available evidence about modern Germany, played a very significant role in her policy stance on this issue, and her wider interactions with the integrationist Europe of her era.

## Conclusion

Thatcher's style – a stark framing of the world based upon essentially dichotomous categorizations – was a key aspect of her political personality and, consequently, an important factor in events while she was in office. Her cognitive architecture shaped her behavior, and to a large extent British foreign policy, in the key episodes and relationships of her time in office. Whilst a full consideration of all the factors that shaped her policies and her premiership is beyond the scope of this article, it does seem reasonable to say that a different individual, faced with the same situations that confronted Thatcher, would have made different choices.

Two broader points can be made in conclusion. First, evidence derived from both quantitative content analysis and more qualitative accounts of the prime minister has here produced congruent results. Indeed, it seems that multi-method work should have a particularly important role to play in addressing the notoriously vexed question of leader personality and its impact, as each method is strong where the other is weak. Qualitative studies provide richness, context, and a validity check for the perhaps more reliable and replicable quantitative content analytic approaches. Where different methods produce similar results, a research design emphasizing triangulation has much to recommend it.

Second, the article makes a point with wider implications than issues of Thatcher as leader and the foreign policy events of a decade. It is of vital importance that we take full account of the individual make-up of significant international figures in a manner that is rigorous and non-dogmatic. We should not proceed by assumption on the issue of the causal importance of individuals – not all leaders have psychological characteristics as distinctive as those of Thatcher, nor are all circumstances amenable, even in principle, to the impact of individual agency. The importance of individuals to events is a question that is both context-specific and empirical in nature, and should be ruled neither in nor out by assumption.

## Notes

1. Analysis was also performed on the materials in quarter-year units: Thatcher's mean complexity score was two points lower at 47, and the range (20–60) and standard deviation (7.8) were greater than the half-year data, due to several quarter-year segments containing very few complexity coding opportunities. In lowering the mean score, the quarter-year measure gives disproportionate weight to several quarter-year periods where the word count is low and the majority of coding decisions were for negative complexity. Of course, the quarter-year unit of analysis could be used here without altering the substance of the argument.
2. Provided by Michael Young, Social Science Automation, via personal communication.
3. Although Tony Blair recently said he would have fought for the Falklands too as it was "the right thing to do" (Deborah Summers, "Blair: I would have fought for Falklands too," *The Guardian*, March 23, 2007, URL [accessed August 12, 2007]: <http://www.politics.guardian.co.uk/politics/2007/mar/23/foreignpolicy.uk>). Blair also scores low in conceptual complexity and his foreign policies have often exhibited the clear-cut framing of events we associate with this trait – see Stephen Benedict Dyson, "Personality and Foreign Policy: Tony Blair's Iraq Decisions," *Foreign Policy Analysis* 2(1) (2006): 289–306.

## References

- Barilleaux, R.J. and Rozell, M.J. (2003). "Bush and Thatcher: Managing the End of the Cold War," in S. Pugliese (ed.), *The Political Legacy of Margaret Thatcher*. London: Politicos, pp. 141–56.
- Breslauer, G.W. and Lebow, R.N. (2004). "Leadership and the End of the Cold War: A Counterfactual Thought Experiment," in R.K. Hermann and R.N. Lebow (eds), *Ending the Cold War: Interpretation, Causation, and the Study of International Relations*. New York: Palgrave-Macmillan, pp. 161–88.
- Bumgardner, Larry (2003). "Thatcher and Reagan: Soul Mates for Liberty," in S. Pugliese (ed.), *The Political Legacy of Margaret Thatcher*. London: Politicos, pp. 58–70.
- Campbell, John (2003). *Margaret Thatcher: The Iron Lady*. London: Jonathan Cape.
- Cartledge, Sir Bryan (2003). "Margaret Thatcher: Personality and Foreign Policy," in S. Pugliese (ed.), *The Political Legacy of Margaret Thatcher*. London: Politicos, pp. 157–60.
- Chollet, Derek H. and Goldgeier, James M. (2003). "Once Burned, Twice Shy? The Pause of 1989," in William C. Wohlforth (ed.), *Cold War Endgame*. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, pp. 141–74.
- Craddock, Percy (1997). *In Pursuit of British Interests*. London: John Murray.
- Davis, James W. and Wohlforth, William C. (2004). "German Unification," in R.K. Hermann and R.N. Lebow (eds), *Ending the Cold War: Interpretation, Causation, and the Study of International Relations*. New York: Palgrave-Macmillan, pp. 131–57.
- Dyson, Stephen Benedict (2006). "Personality and Foreign Policy: Tony Blair's Iraq Decisions," *Foreign Policy Analysis* 2(1): 289–306.
- Garnett, Mark (2007). "Banality in Politics: Margaret Thatcher and the Biographers," *Political Studies Review* 5: 172–82.
- Genovese, M.A. (2003). "Margaret Thatcher: Revised, Revisited, Re-examined, and Re-appraised," in S. Pugliese (ed.), *The Political Legacy of Margaret Thatcher*. London: Politicos, pp. 368–93.
- Gilmour, I. (1992). *Dancing with Dogma: Britain under Thatcherism*. London: Simon & Schuster.
- Glad, B. (1983). "Black and White Thinking: Ronald Reagan's Approach to Foreign Policy," *Political Psychology* 4: 33–76.
- Glad, B. (1987). "Ronald Reagan's Midlife Crisis and the Turn to the Right," *Political Psychology* 10: 593–624.
- Haig, A.M. (1984). *Caveat: Realism, Reagan, and Foreign Policy*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Harris, K. (1988). *Thatcher*. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson.
- Hennessy, Peter (1987). "The Prime Minister, the Cabinet and the Thatcher Personality," in Kenneth Minogue and Michael Biddiss (eds), *Thatcherism: Personality and Politics*. New York: St. Martin's Press, pp. 55–71.
- Hermann, M.G. (1980). "Explaining Foreign Policy Behavior Using the Personal Characteristics of Political Leaders," *International Studies Quarterly* 24: 7–46.
- King, A. (1985). "Margaret Thatcher: The Style of a Prime Minister," in A. King (ed.), *The British Prime Minister*. London: Macmillan.
- Lawson, N. (1992). *The View from No. 11: Memoirs of a Tory Radical*. London: Bantam.
- Nydegger, R.V. (1975). "Information Processing Complexity and Leadership Status," *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 11: 317–28.
- Preston, T. (2001). *The President and His Inner Circle: Leadership Style and the Advisory Process in Foreign Affairs*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Pym, F. (1984). *The Politics of Consent*. London: Hamish Hamilton.
- Rhodes, R.A.W. (1995). "From Prime Ministerial Power to Core Executive," in R.A.W. Rhodes and Patrick Dunleavy (eds), *Prime Minister, Cabinet and Core Executive*. London: Macmillan, pp. 11–37.
- Riddell, P. (2003). "Margaret Thatcher: The Lady Who Made the Weather," in S. Pugliese (ed.), *The Political Legacy of Margaret Thatcher*. London: Politicos, pp. 9–20.



- Schafer, M. (2000). "Issues in Assessing Psychological Characteristics at a Distance: An Introduction to the Symposium," *Political Psychology* 21(3): 511–27.
- Schroder, H., Driver, M., and Streufert, S. (1967). *Human Information Processing*. New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston.
- Sharp, Paul (1997). *Thatcher's Diplomacy*. New York: St. Martin's Press.
- Smith, Geoffrey (1991). *Reagan and Thatcher*. New York: W.W. Norton.
- Suedfeld, P., Guttieri, K., and Tetlock, P.E. (2003). "Assessing Integrative Complexity at a Distance: Archival Analyses of Thinking and Decision Making," in J.M. Post (ed.), *The Psychological Assessment of Political Leaders* (pp. 246–70). Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Tetlock, P. (1985). "Integrative Complexity of American and Soviet Foreign Policy Rhetorics: A Time-Series Analysis," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 49: 565–85.
- Thatcher, M. (1993). *The Downing Street Years*. New York: HarperCollins.
- Urban, George (1996). *Diplomacy and Disillusion at the Court of Margaret Thatcher*. London: I.B. Tauris.
- Vertzberger, Y.Y.I. (1990). *The World in Their Minds*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Wallace, M.D. and Suedfeld, P. (1988). "Leadership Performance in Crisis: The Longevity–Complexity Link," *International Studies Quarterly* 32: 439–52.
- Winter, D.G. (2003). "Assessing Leaders' Personalities: A Historical Survey of Academic Research Studies," in J.M. Post (ed.), *The Psychological Assessment of Political Leaders*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Young, Hugo (1989). *The Iron Lady*. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux.
- Young, M.D. (2000). "Automating Assessment at a Distance," *The Political Psychologist* 5: 17–23.
- Ziller, R.C., Stone, W.F., Jackson, R.M., and Terbovic, N.J. (1977). "Self–Other Orientations and Political Behaviour," in M.G. Hermann (ed.), *A Psychological Examination of Political Leaders* (pp. 337–53). New York: Free Press.

---

### Biographical Note

STEPHEN DYSON is Assistant Professor of Political Science at the University of Connecticut. He has published articles in scholarly journals including *Foreign Policy Analysis*, *Political Psychology*, and the *Journal of Information Technology and Politics*. His book *The Blair Identity: Leadership and Foreign Policy* is forthcoming with Manchester University Press. ADDRESS: Department of Political Science, University of Connecticut, Storrs, CT 06269, USA [email: stephen.dyson@uconn.edu].

*Acknowledgment:* An earlier version of this article was presented at the 2007 Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, Chicago, IL, 28 February to 3 March.