



# Introversion isn't Obama's problem, his inability to tell the truth is

By Gene Healy

November 11, 2013

It never fails. Whenever a president's approval ratings tank, out come the deep think pieces about how the president's personality flaws explain his political dilemma and ours.

Vanity Fair's Todd Purdum has the latest entry with a 3,000 word thumbsucker titled "[Obama the Loner: The Trouble with the President's Self-Reliant, Closed-Off Attitude.](#)"

[President Obama](#), it seems, doesn't enjoy schmoozing, small talk and pressing the flesh. And that, according to Purdum, has something to do with why Americans have soured on his scandal-racked, power-abusing, blunder-prone presidency.

Obama's "resolute solitude — his isolation and alienation" from other Washington players — is "his greatest weakness," Purdum argues.

Purdum's not the first to lay this charge. The New York Times' Maureen Dowd periodically wails that Obama acts like "President Spock" instead of being our "feeler-in-chief." And, "he's an introvert," says [Game Change](#) author John Heilemann, and that's why he's in trouble.

It's a common trope — and as a congenital introvert, I'm sick of it. Obama is a terrible president, but, contra Purdum, that's got nothing to do with his "penchant for solitude." Extroverts: You're not gonna hang this on us!

As Jonathan Rauch explained in his classic 2003 Atlantic article, "[Caring for Your Introvert](#)," introverts are not necessarily antisocial or misanthropic -- we're people who are wired to enjoy solitude and need it to recharge after social interaction.

And, dammit, we're "among the most misunderstood and aggrieved groups in America." Introversion, Rauch wrote, is "not a choice. It's not a lifestyle. It's an orientation."

In that light, Purdum's argument is so incoherent and self-contradictory, it's hard not to suspect him of rank "lonerphobia."

Obama's "go-it-alone approach," Purdum claims, "insulate[s] him from engagement in the management of his own administration."

He asks, "were Obama's aides too afraid to tell him" about tapping Angela Merkel's cellphone or the problems with healthcare.gov?

Er, probably not, given that, several paragraphs later, Purdum tells us "no one in Washington is afraid of Obama." (Because he's not chummy enough?)

Purdum lacks a single convincing example of what victories more backslapping, jawboning and congressional "beer summits" would have delivered to the president.

When you find yourself writing sentences like, "it's hard to imagine that Obama did not do himself at least some real harm in September by abruptly canceling the annual congressional picnic at the White House," it might be time to reevaluate your argument.

The notion that presidents need to be chirpy and chatty as a drive-time morning DJ is a distinctly modern one — and it's not clear it's led to better presidents.

A 2004 study of presidential personality types found that "current presidents tend to be very extroverted (about 90th percentile), while early presidents tended to be more introverted than most present-day Americans."

In his influential 1972 book, [\*The Presidential Character\*](#), political scientist James David Barber argued that we should pick presidents by their personality type.

The "active-positive" president — the ideal voters should seek — tackles the job with manic energy and zest, and "gives forth the feeling that he has fun in political life."

The "passive-negative" sees the office as a matter of stern duty, and his "tendency is to withdraw." Among Barber's "active-positives" were crusading meddlers like FDR, Truman and JFK; his "passive-negatives" included the Cincinnatus-like figures Washington, Eisenhower and the under-appreciated Calvin Coolidge, who cut taxes, shrank spending and delivered peace and prosperity.

Introverts — present company excepted — can make good presidents. Obama's current predicament stems in large part from his flexible relationship with the truth — a personality flaw that has nothing to do with his sometimes solitary nature.

Besides, given the disaster his presidency has become, you can't blame the guy for wanting some alone time.

*GENE HEALY, a Washington Examiner columnist, is vice president at the [Cato Institute](#) and author of "The Cult of the Presidency."*