Aggression, Impulse, and Power:
The Political Psychology of Emotional Regulation and Leadership

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Introduction

"Is aggression instinctual or learned? Is it an appetitive drive or an instrumental action? A character syndrome or a cultural manifestation? By an answer, it is believed that we can resolve the why of our social conflict, violence, and war" (Rummel, 1977). These questions capture humanity's enduring struggle to understand aggression and conflict. The idea that "we do not learn to be aggressive. It is in our nature" suggests that aggression is an inherent aspect of human behavior, yet its manifestations are clearly shaped by both biological impulses and social contexts (Rummel, 1977). **Aggression** is any behavior intended to cause harm or damage to another person, group, or entity, often with the goal of domination or control (Goldstein, 1975).

Research has shown that "anger is a common antecedent of aggressive behavior, and uncontrolled anger can lead to aggression and violence" (Denson et al., 2011). And while individuals are typically motivated to regulate their anger and aggressive impulses, "the fact that they are not always able to effectively do so suggests the presence of additional mechanism[s]" (Denson et al., 2011). Aggression, then, is not merely an emotional response but something that, at times, overtakes rational thought and impairs judgment.

The evolution of weaponry from spears, rocks, and swords to guns, cannons, bombs, and drones illustrates how modern warfare has increasingly distanced combatants from the act of killing. The distancing effect of modern warfare not only removes combatants from the act of killing but also further detaches political leaders from the human consequences of war. Whereas military leaders in history, such as George Washington, fought alongside their troops and faced their enemies directly, today's leaders make life-and-death decisions from bunkers and back rooms, relying on secondhand intelligence rather than firsthand experience. This growing

detachment raises fundamental ethical questions about the responsibility of leaders in warfare and the role of technology in shaping modern conflict.

All of this raises profound questions: If killing becomes psychologically easier, will humans engage in it more frequently, and what inhibitions remain when physical proximity no longer applies? With countless conflicts already plaguing our world, the stakes of these questions are higher than ever. Aggression and violence in political leadership are not solely the result of institutional strategy or geopolitical necessity; they are shaped by a complex interplay between the internal psychology of leaders, the dynamics within advisory groups, and the broader pressures between nations.

While this paper primarily focuses on political leadership in the United States, it's important to recognize that these dynamics are not universally applicable. In many other nations, particularly those without the same level of technological development, the detachment from violence that characterizes U.S. drone warfare or cyber operations may not exist. Leaders in less technologically advanced contexts may be more physically present in conflict or constrained by different institutional norms. Thus, this analysis is situated within the specific context of U.S. political decision-making and assumes access to modern technologies of war.

At the core of leadership behavior lies **personality**: an enduring pattern of thought, emotion, and action that shapes how individuals perceive and respond to the world. Political leaders bring their unique psychological makeup into the decision-making arena, and these traits deeply affect how they interpret threats, weigh risks, and manage conflict. According to Cottam et al. (2014), "the beliefs, motivations, and personality traits of political leaders significantly impact their choices," especially in uncertain or high-pressure situations (p. 31). Personality, therefore, does not operate in a vacuum but interacts with group dynamics and international

pressures to shape the trajectory of political decision-making. Understanding the personality traits of leaders is essential to understanding their propensity for aggression, and their capacity for restraint.

This paper argues that intra-individual factors, especially emotional regulation and self-control, can significantly influence a leader's decision-making in moments of crisis. Through a comparative analysis of Presidents George W. Bush and John F. Kennedy, I explore how emotional and cognitive traits shaped their responses to high-stakes threats, how intra-group dynamics either reinforced or checked those impulses, and how intergroup narratives and international tensions magnified their choices. By disentangling these levels of analysis, this research aims to highlight the psychological vulnerabilities within executive decision-making and propose strategies to support emotionally intelligent leadership in an era of high-tech, high-stakes global conflict.

Literature Review & Theoretical Framework

The current literature on aggression, emotional regulation, and leadership provides important insights into how individuals process threats and make high-stakes decisions. However, significant gaps remain, particularly when applying these psychological frameworks to national leaders in wartime. One of the primary challenges is that modern warfare, including drone strikes and cyber conflict, has introduced new moral and cognitive dilemmas that researchers are only beginning to understand. The classified nature of many military operations further complicates empirical study, leaving scholars to work largely with case studies and psychological inferences rather than hard data. Moreover, it is often difficult to disentangle a

leader's personality from the influence of advisors and the broader political context, making it challenging to isolate the individual psychological factors that shape decision-making.

To address these complexities, this paper uses a multilevel framework to analyze political aggression. This framework divides behavior into three interacting domains: intra-individual, intra-group, and intergroup processes.

- At the **intra-individual level**, political aggression is shaped by emotional regulation, impulsivity, and cognitive complexity. These psychological traits determine how a leader manages anger, weighs options, and either suppresses or acts on aggressive impulses. Studies have shown that "anger-inducing interpersonal provocation has been described as 'perhaps the most important single cause of human aggression'" (Denson et al., 2011), and that such anger can impair self-control even on unrelated tasks. Deficits in inhibitory control and heightened impulsivity are also linked to aggression and psychiatric risk (Pawliczek et al., 2013), indicating that personal traits play a powerful role in decision-making under pressure.
- At the **intra-group level**, decision-making is influenced by the dynamics within a leader's inner circle—advisors, military officials, and executive staff. Groupthink, loyalty, and pressure to conform can override critical analysis and reinforce emotionally charged responses. These group dynamics shape how information is filtered and how aggressively or cautiously a leader ultimately responds. In the case of war, advisors can either amplify a leader's emotional instincts or serve as critical checks on their impulses.
- Finally, at the **intergroup level**, leaders operate within the larger geopolitical landscape of nationalism, enemy construction, and perceived international threats. These forces shape how conflict is framed, often activating us vs them mentalities that intensify

aggression and reduce inhibition. Political narratives, media rhetoric, and cultural anxieties contribute to an environment where aggressive decisions may feel justified or even expected.

Many studies focus on these domains in isolation, but few explore how they interact in political leadership. A leader with poor emotional regulation (intra-individual) may surround themselves with loyalists who reinforce their worldview (intra-group), and together, they may react aggressively to perceived threats from rival nations (intergroup). These levels are not separate silos but overlapping forces that shape how war and conflict are initiated or avoided.

One critical gap in the existing literature is the difficulty of disentangling individual-level psychological traits from contextual or structural influences. When leaders act aggressively, to what extent is that behavior a result of their own disposition, and to what extent is it shaped by external pressures, such as advisors, national narratives, or global events? This question complicates causal attributions, particularly when examining real-world cases where multiple factors operate simultaneously. Understanding this interplay is essential for developing effective interventions: are we targeting the person, the environment, or both? Few studies systematically address this question, and future research must work to isolate how much of leadership aggression stems from internal impulses versus surrounding conditions.

While I emphasize intra-individual factors in this paper, particularly emotion regulation, impulsivity, and cognitive complexity, I do not discount the complexity of political decision-making. Intra-group dynamics and intergroup forces such as institutional pressure, national identity, and global conflict narratives play undeniable roles in shaping presidential behavior.

However, this analysis will emphasize individual factors, such as emotion regulation, impulsivity, personality, and cognitive complexity, not to reduce decisions to psychology alone, but to highlight how these traits interact with broader forces. This approach does not deny the influence of broader structural or contextual variables, but rather seeks to explore and fill the current gap as to how personality can act as a powerful mediator between systemic conditions and actual decision-making at the highest levels of leadership.

Finally, despite the growing psychological literature on aggression, few models have been adapted to explain presidential behavior specifically. This paper addresses that gap by applying psychological research to the case studies of U.S. presidents and exploring how internal disposition, group dynamics, and international pressures collectively shape wartime decision-making. With a better understanding of these multi level processes, we can develop interventions to promote emotional regulation and reduce the likelihood of impulsive political aggression in the modern age.

Psychological Perspectives on Aggression

Aggression, self-control failures, impulsivity, and cognitive complexity are all key concepts in understanding how national leaders make decisions, particularly in high-stakes situations. By combining research from experimental studies and surveys on aggression regulation and decision-making, this paper highlights the psychological mechanisms that shape national leaders' choices.

While early theorists like Konrad Lorenz made significant contributions to understanding aggression, more recent research has expanded and substantiated his claims, offering a deeper,

more nuanced understanding of how aggression functions beyond just broad, undefined "mechanisms." This evolving body of work provides insight into the psychological and situational factors that contribute to aggression in leadership, shedding light on why some leaders may be more prone to warlike decisions than others.

Aggression and Inhibition

First, aggression is not entirely within our explicit cognition, making it difficult to regulate under certain conditions. If aggression were fully controllable, with no external inhibiting or triggering factors, leaders would always be able to choose peace—but history has repeatedly shown that is not the case. One theory of aggression suggests that **self-regulation** is a primary predictor in violence and actually acting on aggressive instincts. A fundamental part of self-regulation is the ability to filter and limit what we focus on, as "at a basic level, inhibitory processes control the contents of consciousness as well as the operation of processing activities, restricting attention to only the relevant aspects of the environment and limiting processing to only those necessary for the task at hand" (Bjorklund & Harnishfeger, 1995). In complex, high-pressure contexts, however, it becomes nearly impossible to disentangle the individual's internal impulses from the surrounding stimuli, raising the question of whether a leader's capacity for self-control would look different if the external environment were altered.

However, it is clear that given the overwhelming amount of information people encounter, constantly narrowing focus is essential for functioning effectively, particularly in social contexts. Discipline plays a crucial role in restricting attention, as "inhibition is central to the control of social behavior. It permits us to withhold strong emotional responses…while we consider the personal and social implications of our actions" (Bjorklund & Harnishfeger, 1995).

A person's ability to regulate aggression, especially in high-stakes or emotionally charged situations, depends heavily on their capacity for self-regulation.

This discipline and inhibition, however difficult, are not for nothing, though. Cooperation, empathy, and even strategic social interactions lead to better outcomes, reinforcing the idea that "in hominid evolution, as social complexity increased, the pressures to cooperate and compete with other members of the group can be seen as the driving force of intelligence" (Bjorklund & Harnishfeger, 1995).

A prime example of how aggression operates within the intra-individual and external levels is the **General Aggression Model (GAM)**, which explains how personal traits and situational factors interact to produce aggression through affective, cognitive, and arousal states. Though it has been applied in studies of violent crime, its relevance here lies in how it helps explain the internal psychological processes national leaders may undergo during decision-making. GAM explains aggression as a process occurring in three stages: "(1) person and situation inputs, (2) internal states (especially affect, cognition, and arousal), and (3) outcomes of appraisal and decision-making processes" (DeWall et al., 2011). This model reinforces the idea that aggression is not purely a rational choice but influenced by cognitive and emotional states.

In this model, research has "calculated that most robberies are short-term, limited-benefit activities, with the median loss for robbery (i.e., taking something from someone else using real or threatened force) is less than $50 and the median loss for burglary (i.e., trespassing and committing theft or other offense) is approximately $100" (DeWall et al., 2011). These findings suggest that many violent crimes are driven more by impulsivity than calculated decision-making. This connection is further supported by data showing that violent crimes are

more likely to occur late at night, when individuals are fatigued and their capacity for self-regulation is diminished, demonstrating the role of basic physiological needs, such as sleep, in shaping impulsive and aggressive behavior.

The I³ Theory of Aggression

Second, the I³ (pronounced I-cubed) theory explains aggression through three key pillars: instigation, impellance, and inhibition. According to Denson et al. (2011), "instigating triggers, impelling forces, and inhibiting forces determine aggressive behavior. In the presence of an instigating trigger (e.g., provocation), aggression occurs when impelling forces overpower inhibiting forces." This model helps to clarify why aggression manifests in some situations and not others. Although the I³ Theory is grounded in intra-individual responses, the forces that drive these responses, like provocation, rejection, or disrespect, are often interpersonal. Instigators and impellers may arise from a person's environment, but they usually involve actions or characteristics of others that the individual interprets as threatening or aggravating. In this way, the I³ theory operates across both intra-individual and inter-individual levels: it explains how internal self-regulation interacts with external social dynamics to produce or inhibit aggression.

The I³ theory functions like an equation, where "instigating and impelling risk factors combine additively and interactively to determine the strength of the aggressive urge people experience, whereas disinhibitory risk factors determine whether this urge results in aggressive behavior or is overridden in favor of non-aggressive behavior" (DeWall et al., 2011). **Instigators** refer to "discrete social dynamics that trigger the urge to aggress," which can include hostile cognitive, affective, and physiological tendencies (DeWall et al., 2011). These are the moments

that provoke an aggressive response, whether through direct confrontation, perceived disrespect, or other social triggers.

Impellers, on the other hand, are "dispositional or situational factors that psychologically prepare the individual to experience a strong urge to aggress when encountering the instigator" (DeWall et al., 2011). These factors can be personality traits, past trauma, or environmental stressors that make a person more likely to react aggressively when faced with provocation. When **disinhibitory mechanisms,** such as stress, alcohol, or cognitive fatigue, weaken a person's self-control, aggression is more likely to occur.

The I^3 theory places particular emphasis on **self-control** as a determining factor in whether aggression is expressed or suppressed. Self-control is "defined as the capacity to override a particular response to align with another" and is associated with "a variety of positive outcomes including enhanced personal and relationship wellbeing" (DeWall et al., 2011). Research highlights that "self-control failure is a crucial predictor of aggression toward strangers and romantic partners." The ability to regulate one's impulses is key to avoiding aggressive behavior, but when self-control is depleted, individuals are more vulnerable to the effects of instigators and impellers. This reinforces the idea that most people would not deliberately choose an outcome that worsens their situation if they had the ability to avoid it. However, when impelling factors overpower self-control, aggression can emerge despite a person's best interests.

Self-Control as a Muscle

Finally, self-control is not an unlimited resource and acts similarly to a muscle. Research has shown that "self-control relies on a limited resource, akin to energy or strength that becomes depleted after exertion, an effect dubbed 'ego depletion'" (DeWall et al., 2011). When people are

worn out (whether physically, mentally, or emotionally) they're simply less able to regulate themselves and "override their aggressive urges" (DeWall et al., 2011). High-pressure leadership roles, in particular, are exhausting and emotionally draining, increasing the likelihood of aggression-driven decisions. And this makes sense: When we're tired or overwhelmed, it's much harder to pause, reflect, and choose a better response. And when someone is constantly in situations where they have to exercise restraint, their reserves can run out faster, making it even more likely that they'll snap. Although this theory primarily concerns the individual's capacity for regulation, the challenges to self-control, such as constant social demands, political pressure, or public criticism, are frequently driven by interactions with others. In political leadership, these stressors often come from advisors, constituents, or international actors, making the self-control process socially situated even if it operates internally.

The good news is that self-control can be trained: "Only practicing self-control [can build] self-control capacity" (Muraven, 2010). In this sense, self-control functions like a muscle: it can get stronger with repeated use. Just like a runner can't complete a marathon on day one but can train their body and mind to push through, leaders can build the cognitive and emotional stamina needed to make level-headed decisions, especially under pressure. This kind of endurance is crucial for resisting aggression and maintaining control in high-stress political or social situations. Understanding these dynamics is essential for creating systems or training that actually help leaders regulate themselves better and avoid unnecessary or reactive conflict.

Self-control also has deeper implications for moral leadership. One study found that "self-control produces the indirect effects of moral courage on the leader's outcomes through ethical leadership by providing the inner directive to alter one's immediate response to fear and take action to conform with ethical expectations despite fear" (Sosik et al., 2018). In other words,

the ability to pause and act thoughtfully—not impulsively—helps leaders choose what they believe is truly right, even when it's unpopular or risky. That takes real courage. It's so easy to cave under pressure and choose the violent or seemingly easy route, especially when emotions are running high. But leaders like Martin Luther King Jr. and Gandhi have shown us what it means to resist that urge—to hold fast to your principles even in the face of violence, oppression, and fear. That level of moral clarity and self-regulation isn't just rare; it's something that has to be actively built and protected.

Levels of Analysis in Political Aggression

Case studies consistently show that character strengths like honesty, humility, empathy, and moral courage are essential for effective leadership. However, as Sosik et al. (2018) explain, these traits only manifest in ethical behavior when paired with strong self-control. This reinforces the idea that good leadership depends heavily on the ability to regulate impulses and avoid reactive aggression. Leaders with better self-control tend to make more thoughtful decisions and foster positive environments.

Intra-Individual Factors: Emotion Regulation in Leadership

To fully understand what drives this kind of leadership, it is important to consider the idea of **cognitive complexity**. A large body of research has focused on this, especially in studies of political leaders. Cognitive complexity is closely tied to emotional intelligence, and together, they influence a leader's approach to decision-making. As one source explains, "Cognitive style is how a president is able to absorb, process, and then base decisions on the vast amounts of information constantly coming through the Oval Office… Emotional intelligence is the

capability of the president to use emotions to help further the goals of an administration" (Pantalone, 2020). The ability to resist impulsive behavior is deeply connected to how leaders absorb and process information. These concepts provide a useful framework for understanding how psychological factors influence whether or not national leaders choose aggression. They also offer insight into how we might design interventions that reduce the likelihood of unnecessary conflict by helping leaders build the tools they need to stay grounded and make thoughtful decisions.

George W. Bush: A Case of Impulsivity and Low Cognitive Complexity

One of the most revealing case studies on the role of impulsivity and self-control in leadership is that of George W. Bush and the Iraq War—an event that, in hindsight, has been deemed largely unnecessary and that led to widespread public discontent. In the lead-up to the war, Bush relied heavily on emotional rhetoric, famously declaring, "We are at war," a phrase that evoked urgency and fear rather than careful deliberation. Instead of weighing all possible diplomatic options, President Bush "issued an ultimatum for Saddam Hussein to leave Iraq or face military force," a decision that came across as both emotional and impulsive (Foster, 2023). The Administration's message resonated with the public that "already [had] a heightened fear of terrorist attacks on the homeland after 9/11," and that fear helped justify military action (Foster, 2023). This response, however, was shaped not only by Bush's leadership style but also by the broader national trauma, media framing, and a political climate that equated dissent with disloyalty—factors that made the public more receptive to war. As a result, "the Administration's argument was sufficient to mobilize public and congressional support for a war that otherwise would have been nearly impossible to sell" (Foster, 2023).

Over the past two decades, Bush's personality has been analyzed extensively, and research has almost unanimously found that he exhibited both impulsivity and poor self-control while in office. One study describes his leadership style as "less studied, more spontaneous, freewheeling — possibly impatient or impulsive" (Foster & Keller, 2014). This impulsivity is unsurprising, considering Bush had never actually seen or been in combat.

Alongside impulsivity, Bush also showed signs of poor self-control. One study highlights "Bush's relative paucity of personality traits related to conscientiousness (e.g., sustained focus and attention to detail)" (Foster & Keller, 2014, p. 18). Without the ability to focus or attend to detail, regulating impulsive tendencies becomes even more difficult. Discipline plays a crucial role in this kind of regulation, especially when it comes to managing aggression. Bush's low conscientiousness, combined with high impulsivity, meant he lacked the tools necessary to pause, reflect, and consider the broader consequences of his actions, something especially dangerous in a leadership role during wartime.

Furthermore, Bush's cognitive complexity was notably lower, indicating that he did not absorb and process information deeply. For example, in the lead-up to the Iraq War, he often framed the conflict in binary terms—such as good versus evil or "you're either with us or against us"—rather than engaging with the nuanced regional, sectarian, and geopolitical complexities of the Middle East. This inability to engage deeply with complex information likely contributed to his decision to invade Iraq, a choice he framed as part of the broader War on Terror, despite no weapons of mass destruction being found, exposing the intelligence failures that initially justified the war.

Low cognitive complexity is not only associated with a lack of depth in decision-making, but also with lower self-control: "Cognitive complexity is linked to executive function, which

governs impulse control, attention, and planning" (Weigard et al., 2021). In other words, when a leader struggles to mentally juggle multiple perspectives and possible outcomes, they're more likely to act quickly and emotionally, rather than strategically. Supporting this, another study found that "cognitive efficiency measures…form a robust, temporally stable factor that correlates with questionnaire measures of self-control" (Weigard et al., 2021). The findings suggest that self-control is not just about willpower—how efficiently someone can handle different types of mental tasks may determine how well they can regulate their behavior across situations.

What Bush lacked in cognitive complexity, however, he made up for in charisma, which likely kept him in office for a second term: "George W. Bush's personable, confident, socially responsive, outgoing tendenc[ies] enabled him to connect with critical constituencies [and]" (Foster & Keller, 2014, p. 19). This engaging and charming social style made him likable to many and helped him maintain support, even as his policies came under scrutiny. However, perhaps if Bush had dedicated more time to developing the skills necessary to curb impulsive decision-making, he would have approached the situation differently. Instead, the decision to begin a conflict of such magnitude took just six days—an alarmingly short time frame for a choice that had profound global consequences (Pfiffner, 2010).

John F. Kennedy: Growth Through Regulation and Reflection

John F. Kennedy's handling of the Bay of Pigs invasion and the Cuban Missile Crisis also provides a compelling case study of how self-control and emotional regulation can shape leadership decisions. While not a direct contrast to Bush—since JFK also experienced failures during his presidency—his response to those failures sets him apart. The Bay of Pigs is generally

regarded as a major failure, one that not only damaged the administration's credibility but also spurred psychological research on politics and groupthink.

"On April 17, 1961, 1400 United States trained and equipped Cuban exiles landed on a beachhead in the Bay of Pigs, Cuba" (The Bay of Pigs, n.d.). The plan, developed by the CIA during the Eisenhower administration, had been passed on to Kennedy before he even took office. From the start, the pressure was on. As the CIA and military advisors pushed the urgency of action, Kennedy was told they had to act fast: "In addition, these men discussed 'a particularly urgent question' regarding 'the use to be made of a group of…Cubans now in training in Guatemala, who cannot remain indefinitely where they are'" (Binder, n.d.).

Although warned that the plan "held little chance of success," Kennedy still moved forward with the invasion (Binder, n.d.). External geopolitical pressures, including the mounting Cold War tensions and the need to appear strong in the face of communism, weighed heavily on him. The intergroup dynamics between the U.S., Cuba, and the Soviet Union created a high-stakes environment that amplified the pressure to act decisively. The Bay of Pigs is one of the most widely cited historical examples of groupthink, a concept originally developed by Irving Janis (1972).

Janis argued that cohesive groups striving for unanimity may suppress dissenting opinions and overlook risks, leading to disastrous outcomes—an exact description of the advisory dynamics that led to Kennedy's approval of the failed invasion. This rushed, aggressive decision by Kennedy and his team, motivated more by fear and early presidential pressure than by sound strategic thinking, ended in failure and humiliation. Even Kennedy himself struggled to "find a concrete explanation [for the Bay of Pigs invasion] beyond the real fear that should Castro continue to rule communism stood knocking at the United States' backdoor" (Binder,

n.d.). The failed operation only worsened tensions with Cuba and served as a wake-up call for Kennedy.

However, what followed showed Kennedy's capacity for growth. After the invasion failed, JFK did what many presidents do not have the courage or humility to do—he admitted he was wrong and restructured how foreign policy decisions were made moving forward. He adjusted his approach, placing more emphasis on critical thinking and diverse perspectives. As one analysis puts it, "The president must be able to take in large amounts of rapid information while carefully analyzing that information. This analysis must then allow them to come to a decision on a course of action that is unaffected by personal emotions" (Pantalone, 2020, p. 8). Kennedy's willingness to learn from failure and regulate his emotional response was key to how he successfully handled the Cuban Missile Crisis just a year later.

While Kennedy may have acted rashly in this moment, the failure of the Bay of Pigs became a turning point that pushed him to develop more caution, humility, and control, traits that would come to define his leadership during the Cuban Missile Crisis just a year later. Rather than doubling down on the decision or shifting blame, Kennedy made a conscious effort to improve his emotional regulation and self-control. He immersed himself in self-help and historical literature, seeking to understand how poor decision-making had led to large-scale conflict in the past: "He had been reading The Guns of August, a book by Barbara Tuchman on how growing tensions and faulty decision-making resulted in global conflict in World War I" (Pantalone, 2020). This wasn't just a symbolic gesture; it reflected a genuine desire to learn from history and avoid repeating the same mistakes, especially at a moment when the world was on edge. This personal evolution—marked by cognitive complexity, emotional restraint, and deliberate

reflection—firmly places Kennedy as a case study in how intra-individual development can reshape not only leadership style, but the fate of international diplomacy.

Intra-Group Dynamics: Groupthink, Loyalty, and Team Structure

The influence of leadership teams and advisory environments further shaped each president's decision-making. These intra-group dynamics reveal how groupthink, loyalty, and internal structure can either reinforce or check a leader's psychological tendencies.

This impulsive style also revealed itself in Bush's appointments. As researchers note, these traits "render him susceptible to errors of judgment… 'impulsiveness' . . . . [as well as] favoring loyalty and friendship over competence-for-the-position in making appointments to high-level public office" (Foster & Keller, 2014, p. 12). This tendency to prioritize personal relationships over qualifications points to emotionally driven decision-making rather than logical, strategic choices. It also means that not only Bush himself, but many of the people he surrounded himself with during his presidency, may not have been the most capable for their roles.

Kennedy's emotional maturity led him to fundamentally change the way he made decisions. Rather than relying on hierarchy and closed circles, he restructured his leadership style to promote open dialogue and honest dissent. In fact, his "idea of instilling candid debate to avoid groupthink has become a guiding principle in many business school classrooms and boardrooms" (Hansen, 2013). Kennedy's ability to acknowledge failure, reflect deeply, and actively change his approach stands as a model for how self-control and sound decision-making can be learned and strengthened over time.

After the Bay of Pigs, John F. Kennedy faced an even more intense challenge: the Cuban Missile Crisis. Despite "the stakes of these events concerning Cuba [being] extraordinarily high, causing levels of stress over possible armed conflict to also be very high" (Pantalone, 2020, p. 8), Kennedy approached the situation with a calm, calculated mindset that reflected everything he had learned from his earlier failure.

Rather than relying on instinct or group consensus, Kennedy structured a decision-making process where officials "divide[d] into sub-groups, with one developing a position paper arguing for the military strike, the other for the blockade. They then swap papers, dissecting and criticizing one another. In this way, the groups are able to probe decisions and surface pros and cons" (Hansen, 2013). This method allowed him to hear competing arguments and carefully weigh each option.

Intergroup Factors: National Identity, Threat Perception, and Global Narratives

Bush and Kennedy also operated in distinct intergroup contexts, shaped by nationalism, perceived threats, and geopolitical narratives. These external forces informed how they framed conflict and justified aggression—or restraint.

Bush governed in a post-9/11 world, where national trauma and fear defined public sentiment. The idea that America was under constant threat created a context in which emotionally reactive policies—like the invasion of Iraq—felt justified. Framing Saddam Hussein as a key threat to national security aligned the decision with a broader War on Terror narrative.

Kennedy operated in the Cold War but resisted similar escalation. During the Cuban Missile Crisis, he chose actions that allowed the Soviet Union to de-escalate without humiliation. He "was sure to not declare victory arrogantly for the United States or outright blame Russia or

Cuba for the crisis" (Pantalone, 2020). Instead, he emphasized a mutual easing of tensions—a choice that prioritized long-term stability over short-term dominance.

Integrating the Three Levels

The contrasting case studies of Bush and Kennedy reveal how aggression in leadership emerges not just from personal psychology, but from its interaction with group structure and international context. In Bush's case, his low cognitive complexity and self-control (intra-individual) were reinforced by loyalty-based appointments and emotionally charged advisors (intra-group), and magnified by the post-9/11 geopolitical landscape steeped in fear and reactive nationalism (intergroup). These forces converged to produce a decision-making environment where aggression was swift, emotionally driven, and poorly deliberated.

Kennedy's case during the Cuban Missile Crisis, by contrast, illustrates the potential for regulation and reflection to counteract aggression. His emotional development from the Bay of Pigs and cognitive flexibility (intra-individual) informed his restructuring of advisory processes to promote open dialogue and dissent (intra-group), which enabled him to respond strategically and diplomatically to Cold War tensions (intergroup). Rather than succumbing to pressure, Kennedy modeled restraint in the face of a nuclear crisis.

John F. Kennedy's leadership, shaped by failure, reflection, and growth, ultimately set a powerful example of emotional regulation, self-control, and courage under pressure. He believed in collaboration and adaptability, expecting his team to evolve alongside the demands of the moment: "Responsibilities evolved as the work needed changed. It was the expectation of Kennedy that each person working on his staff would assist one another" (Colvin-White, 2008, p. 33). More than anything, Kennedy valued moral strength and conviction in leadership, firmly

holding that "courage necessitates a permanent place in politics" (Kennedy, 1956, p. 33). Through the way he led—especially in moments of crisis—a clear vision of what Kennedy stood for was born, and it continues to influence how we define presidential leadership today (Colvin-White, 2008).

These case studies make clear that while structural pressures, advisory dynamics, and global tensions all play critical roles in shaping a leader's environment, the final decision rests with the individual. A leader does not act in isolation—but neither are they absolved by circumstance. The choices they make, especially in moments of crisis, reflect the unique constellation of their personality traits, emotional regulation, and moral compass. Bush and Kennedy were both influenced by the people and systems around them, yet their responses diverged because of who they were. Leadership, then, is not merely a product of external forces—it is a test of character. And in that test, the responsibility and consequences of action ultimately belong to the person at the top.

Discussion & Implications

The findings from psychological research make clear that emotional regulation and self-control are also crucial to effective decision-making. Individuals who develop stronger regulation skills are more capable of solving problems and managing interpersonal situations (Romero-López et al., 2021). In leadership, these same skills can mean the difference between impulsive action and thoughtful restraint. These qualities are not just personality traits; they're key predictors of how leaders respond to high-stakes situations, including whether they escalate or de-escalate conflict.

A deeper understanding of emotions also plays a vital role in self-regulation: “A person who is aware of feeling ‘sad’ is able to access their need to grieve. A person who is aware of feeling ‘angry’ is able to recognize injustice and access their need to defend themselves. A person who is only aware of a more global feeling of ‘bad,’ however, may not know what they need in that situation: that is, how to utilize the emotion” (Roberton et al., 2012). This explains why leaders like Bush, whose decision-making was marked by vague emotional appeals and reactive behavior, were more prone to aggression. Meanwhile, Kennedy’s ability to name, process, and learn from emotional experiences—like his response to the Bay of Pigs—allowed him to shift his leadership approach and avoid unnecessary escalation during the Cuban Missile Crisis. Clearly, psychological patterns can directly shape policy decisions and global outcomes.

At the neurological level, these behaviors are tied to the brain’s executive functions. Research “emphasize[s] the role of specific regions in the prefrontal cortex (PFC) that support top-down control over anger and aggressive urges” (DeWall et al., 2011). These regions broadly support emotion regulation and self-control, and “many violent individuals have abnormalities in the structure and function of these regions,” underscoring the biological roots of aggression (DeWall et al., 2011).

Still, biology is not destiny. Evidence shows these traits can be developed over time. One study found that after targeted emotional regulation interventions, children showed improved emotional and inhibitory control, leading to reduced aggressiveness and greater self-regulation, suggesting the ability to manage emotions and resolve interpersonal conflicts (Romero-López et al., 2021). This suggests that while impulsivity and aggression may be rooted in biology or early experiences, they are not fixed traits—leaders can build the skills necessary to regulate their responses. In the context of political leadership, this matters. The contrasting examples of Bush

and Kennedy highlight how emotional regulation, or the lack of it, can fundamentally alter the course of history.

Strategies for Implementation

If emotional regulation and self-control play a critical role in leadership, then building regulatory and institutional frameworks to support those traits becomes essential for global stability. Ensuring that leaders have the endurance to regulate their emotions in high-stakes situations could reduce the likelihood of impulsive, aggressive decision-making and promote long-term, rational policy outcomes. This research contributes significantly to political psychology and policymaking, particularly in designing interventions that help leaders manage aggression, emotional exhaustion, and decision fatigue.

One study outlines several practical strategies to support emotional regulation and reduce the likelihood of aggression. These include: "1) allow the body to rest and restore self-control, 2) reexamine existing organizational policies that might inadvertently reduce employees' self-control, and 3) create a culture that deters negative behaviors in moments of reduced self-control" (Hansen, 2013). These steps recognize that even the most capable individuals are vulnerable to burnout and poor decision-making when their self-regulatory systems are depleted. Supporting rest, reflection, and a healthy organizational environment can make a measurable difference in how leaders perform under pressure.

The methods people use to express aggression also evolve over time and are often strategic. Research shows that "Indirect aggression, when executed successfully, is highly effective and minimizes risks to the aggressor" (Walker & Richardson, 1998). This implies that aggression in leadership is often not random, but calculated and directed at particular targets. It

also means that providing leaders with tools to recognize these patterns—and redirect them—can improve not only outcomes but also ethical standards in governance. Furthermore, "the choice of methods for expressing aggression (e.g., physical versus verbal, direct versus indirect) relates to changes throughout the life-span," suggesting that targeted support and training can be adapted to different stages of leadership development (Walker & Richardson, 1998). While intelligence is not a prerequisite for leadership, there are clear and necessary steps that individuals can and should take for their personal development—and, ultimately, for the country's benefit.

Policy Recommendations

At all levels of leadership, from local governance to global diplomacy, there should be measures in place to ensure that those in power develop the cognitive and emotional skills necessary to manage stress, regulate impulses, and make ethical decisions. These findings have broader implications for justice, diplomacy, and world peace. They emphasize the need for structured, evidence-based strategies aimed at reducing political aggression and promoting thoughtful, measured decision-making. In high-stakes environments where leaders face constant pressure, even small changes in regulation, support, and structure can significantly alter outcomes (Yam et al., 2017).

One promising area of development lies in psychosocial interventions. A meta-analysis by DiGiuseppe & Tafrate (2003), which reviewed 50 studies involving 1,841 adult participants and 81 effect-size tests, found that a range of therapeutic techniques had a substantial impact on managing anger and aggression. The methods studied included cognitive restructuring, self-instructional training, relaxation training, problem-solving, exposure therapy, behavioral self-management, and anxiety management, among others. The review reported large effect

sizes: and noted the “maintenance of gains over time” (McGuire, 2008). These findings show that aggression is not an unchangeable trait—it can be addressed and improved through targeted, evidence-based approaches. Programs like these could be implemented at both national and international levels to support leaders, diplomats, and political actors in developing stronger self-regulation skills.

Beyond interventions, systemic and structural changes are necessary to reduce conditions that promote unethical or impulsive behavior. As one study notes, “the hectic and fragmented workdays of leaders may increase the likelihood that they violate ethical norms” (Yam et al., 2017). This points to the importance of not just individual effort, but institutional responsibility. Organizations and governments should prioritize better scheduling, workload distribution, and reflective space, especially around decisions that carry ethical weight. “Overloading their managers with work may increase the likelihood of their leaders transgressing ethical norms,” making ethical lapses not merely personal failings, but systemic vulnerabilities that must be addressed (Yam et al., 2017).

Another policy recommendation involves increasing the presence of women in leadership roles. Gender research has consistently shown that “female adolescents scored as more socially intelligent and as more indirectly aggressive than male adolescents,” and this trend tends to continue throughout the lifespan (Walker & Richardson, 1998). Physical aggression is more strongly associated with traditional male gender roles, while women are “discouraged from initiating or participating in physical aggression” and instead “may learn alternative ways to express aggression (irritability and indirect aggression), which are more permissible in our society” (Walker & Richardson, 1998). Furthermore, “women reported that aggressive behavior would cause them feelings of guilt and anxiety about the other’s suffering and also expressed

concern for their own welfare, should the other person retaliate" (Walker & Richardson, 1998). This suggests that, even when expressing aggression, women often consider its emotional and social impact more carefully. Encouraging broad female leadership could bring a shift toward more relational, regulated approaches to conflict and decision-making—something increasingly necessary in global politics.

Finally, psychological assessments could be used more proactively in leadership selection and development. "Previously aggressive males are more likely to become aggressive under severe role stress, while previously unaggressive males do not seem to rely heavily on aggression under similar circumstances." (Liu & Kaplan, 2004). These patterns show that aggression is not a one-size-fits-all response—it varies based on gender, past behavior, and stress levels. By understanding how different individuals respond to stress, institutions can better identify who is equipped to lead under pressure and where support or training may be needed.

Lessons Learned

Aggression in leadership is not merely a byproduct of strategy or necessity—it is the outcome of a deeply human struggle between impulse and restraint, fear and reflection, power and principle. While rooted in biology and shaped by situational forces, aggression is not inevitable. Through an examination of intra-individual psychology, intra-group dynamics, and intergroup narratives, we see how aggression can be either amplified or mitigated by the way leaders process emotions, manage stress, and make decisions under pressure. Yet these levels often overlap in practice, making it difficult to disentangle whether a leader's behavior is driven more by personal disposition, internal group pressures, or external group threats. The movement between these levels is fluid—emotions and cognition at the individual level are influenced by

loyalty to group identity, which is in turn shaped by how leaders frame intergroup conflict. The case studies of George W. Bush and John F. Kennedy offer a striking contrast between impulsivity and reflection, between a leader who escalated conflict and one who learned from it.

Conclusion

Bush's hasty decision-making, influenced by heightened national fear and a closed advisory structure, reflects the danger of emotional reactivity and poor self-regulation. His case underscores how low cognitive complexity and depleted self-control can lead to aggressive choices with long-term consequences. In contrast, Kennedy's evolution—spurred by early failure—demonstrates the power of reflection, humility, and emotional growth. His thoughtful handling of the Cuban Missile Crisis remains a powerful example of how emotional regulation and cognitive flexibility can steer a nation away from war and toward peace.

Importantly, the paper also highlights that aggression is not fixed—it is malleable. Emotional regulation, like any skill, can be developed with practice and support. Leaders are not immune to the psychological forces that shape all human behavior, but they carry a greater burden: their failures of regulation can affect millions. Therefore, cultivating emotional intelligence and self-control in leadership is not just advisable—it is essential for the future of diplomacy and peacebuilding.

The implications are clear. If aggression can be reduced by improving psychological resilience, then training programs, institutional reforms, and policy changes must prioritize emotional competence in those who lead. From building rest and reflection into leadership structures to creating cultures that discourage impulsivity, the strategies proposed here offer a

path forward. These are not abstract ideals—they are grounded in decades of psychological research and reinforced by lived history.

Ultimately, this research calls for a paradigm shift in how we think about leadership. Rather than valorizing dominance or quick action, we must begin to value composure, regulation, and ethical clarity. In an era of high-tech warfare and emotionally charged politics, the most dangerous leaders will not be the weakest or the least intelligent—they will be those most unable to pause, process, and restrain themselves when it matters most. To prevent unnecessary conflict and promote global stability, we must invest in leaders who can not only command power, but control themselves in the face of it.

In the end, aggression in leadership is not just a matter of politics—it is a matter of psychology, biology, and humanity. The decisions of national leaders are shaped as much by their emotional regulation and cognitive control as by strategy or ideology. The contrast between George W. Bush and John F. Kennedy shows that leadership rooted in impulse and fear can escalate conflict, while leadership grounded in reflection and restraint can preserve peace. As technology continues to distance leaders from the physical consequences of war, it becomes even more urgent to ensure that those in power possess the emotional tools necessary to pause, think critically, and choose diplomacy over destruction. Aggression may be part of our nature, but regulation is part of our evolution—and if we are to move forward as a global society, we must actively cultivate that capacity in those we entrust with power.

Word Count: 7534

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