

***Coverage of Richard M. Nixon in Newsweek, Time, and U.S. News & World Report,***

**1974-1994**

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by Russell Witcher

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To illustrate Richard Nixon's capacity for survival, a Nixon associate once remarked that if Nixon ever had a heart attack, he would rescue himself by giving himself mouth-to-mouth resuscitation (Ambrose, 1991). After his resignation from the presidency following the Watergate scandal, Nixon faced the question, unique to him among all Americans, of what a man could do after being forced to resign the highest office in the land.

This study examines how the three U.S. based national newsweeklies covered Richard Nixon during the years of his attempted rehabilitation, from the grim days of late-summer 1974 when Nixon, in exile at San Clemente, called his small, post-presidential staff together for a meeting and asked that it determine what could be done about the nation's economy (Anson, 1984) to that overcast day in April 1994 when the former president was eulogized by presidents and reporters alike (Kalb, 1994). This 20-year period is not as heavily studied as Nixon's presidential years, but it is an important period because of Nixon's careful campaign to recover his public standing by making use of the media.

The question explored here is whether Newsweek, Time, and U.S. News & World Report differed in their coverage of the post-presidency of Richard Nixon and whether the former president received increasingly positive coverage in these three periodicals as time passed during this 20-year period.

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The purpose of this study is to assess Nixon's coverage in Newsweek, Time, and U.S. News & World Report by employing quantitative methods to carry out a content analysis of the articles about the former president published in the three major newsweeklies during his post-presidential years. The significance of this study rests in the fact that Nixon's attempt at rehabilitation presented a difficult and historically unprecedented challenge for the interpretive press. Perhaps no American politician has been so closely associated with the press for so long as Richard Nixon, for Nixon's public life covered virtually the last half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century from his investigation in congress of Alger Hiss in the 1940s until his death in 1994. In fact, with the release of presidential tapes and memoirs of Nixon associates and reporters who covered his career, media coverage of Nixon continues today.

The three national newsweeklies, Newsweek, Time, and U.S News & World Report closely covered Nixon's political career. Lentz writes of their societal function:

Freed of the unrelenting tyranny of the daily deadline, the news magazines engaged in a pseudo-historicity, reconstituting the world week by week on terms understandable and acceptable to readers who, nuances of ideology aside, resembled each other more than they differed. (Lentz, 1990, pp. 338-39) It is also observed that the newsweeklies direct their content to the middle class (Lentz, 1990).

A review of various American magazine histories helps account for the ideological differences among the three newsweeklies. Although Time magazine, under the direction of its co-founder Henry R. Luce, was decidedly conservative, the magazine became less so with Luce's death in 1967 (Taft, 1982). Henry Grunwald (1997), managing editor of Time from 1968 to 1977, wrote he was opposed to Time adding an editorial page, preferring instead to continue the magazine's "old recipe of blending information, interpretation and judgments" (p. 441) within the news articles. Henry Luce once told a college audience when asked how

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he could call Time a newsmagazine when it was so full of opinion: "Well, I created the word 'newsmagazine.' I guess I can define it any way I damn well please" (Clurman, 1988, pp. 2-3).

Time magazine subscribes to the hero theory of history by focusing on newsmakers rather than events, and this people-centered perspective of reporting has been characteristic of Time since its founding in 1923 (Wood, 1971). This perspective continues at Time with its Person of the Year covers and its special issues devoted to the 100 most influential people during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, culminating in a Person of the Century in December 1999.

Newsweek, which was founded in 1933, was merged in 1937 with Today, a magazine founded by Vincent Astor and Averell Harriman (Lentz, 1990). Newsweek was a supporter of Franklin Roosevelt until Astor and editor Raymond Moley became disillusioned with the New Deal (Tebbel and Zuckerman, 1991). Washington Post owner Philip Graham purchased it in 1961 (Taft, 1982), and it has been left-leaning ever since (Gans, 1980). Newsweek moved to the left on the ideological spectrum after its purchase by Graham as Graham brought close connections with the Kennedy White House (Lentz, 1990). Although Time and Newsweek are less partisan than Time was during the days of Henry Luce's conservatism, they still "regularly blend – and blur – fact and opinion" (Shaw, 1986, p. 215). In fact, critics see both Time and Newsweek as liberal media organs (Lentz, 1990; Shaw, 1986).

Meanwhile, U.S. News & World Report has been consistently conservative in outlook, even after its purchase in 1984 by liberal Mortimer Zuckerman (Nourie and Nourie, 1990). Zuckerman, who made his fortune in real estate, named himself editor-in-chief of the magazine in 1985 (Nourie and Nourie, 1990), a position he holds today. U.S. News' position as a conservative publication has been steady since its founding in 1948 by David

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Lawrence (Lentz, 1990). Lawrence was a critic of the New Deal, communism and the civil rights movement. At its height, his syndicated column ran in more than 300 newspapers as well as in U.S. News & World Report (Lentz, 1990).

Therefore, it is suspected that there will be differences among the three newsweeklies in their viewpoints of Nixon. Objectivity has been defined as being based on the notion that “news is accurate, comprehensive and neutral, and consists of independently verifiable facts that are clearly separated from expression of opinions or values” (Murdock, 1980, p. 460). No assertion is made here that the newsweeklies are or even claim to be objective. Focusing on them allows one to examine positive, negative, and neutral coverage during the years of attempted rehabilitation by Nixon.

Nixon’s attempt to remain on the world stage has been viewed as his attempt to erase the negative image of Watergate and not because he was trying to establish world peace (Kalb, 1994). Although it is difficult to ascribe motives, Stephen Hess of the Brookings Institution claims that Nixon’s attempt at rehabilitation made him a great ex-president if not president (Hernandez, 1994).

A modification of John Merrill’s (1965) study of bias in Time magazine, this study looks at assertions about former President Nixon. Merrill’s (1965) study found that Time magazine “subjectivizes” (p. 563) its news through the use of descriptors such as adjectives, adverbs, attribution, and outright opinion that are positively or negatively affective. This reporting practice is particularly problematic because opinion is not labeled as such but is instead interspersed throughout a news story.

In that study, ten consecutive issues of Time magazine during the presidencies of Harry Truman, Dwight Eisenhower, and John F. Kennedy were randomly selected (Merrill,

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1965). The Truman coverage that was studied began with the April 2, 1951 issue of Time; the Eisenhower coverage started with the January 24, 1955 edition; and the Kennedy coverage that was examined began with the November 23, 1962 issue of Time. Time's coverage of President Truman was overwhelmingly negative, its coverage of President Eisenhower was strongly positive, and its depiction of President Kennedy was relatively balanced. Time used "colorful and subjective" (Merrill, 1965, p. 567) language to portray individuals in the news. The periodical was guilty of "preferential or prejudicial treatment" (Merrill, 1965, p. 569) of its news subjects through the use of words that were either positively or negatively affective. In this regard, then, Merrill considered Time to be biased.

In another study, Time was neutral toward President Johnson, supported President Nixon before Watergate and opposed him after the scandal broke, supported President Ford, and opposed President Carter (Fedler, Meeske, and Hall, 1979). In that study, (Fedler et al., 1979) bias was defined as "any expression of opinion or variance from neutrality" (p. 354). That study also found that the magazine, through the use of language that carried either favorable or unfavorable connotations, was preferential in its news treatment of individuals. The authors concluded that Time remained subjective in its news coverage. A second follow-up study examined the Democratic primary campaign coverage of John F. Kennedy in 1960, Robert Kennedy in 1968, and Edward Kennedy in 1980 appearing in both Time and Newsweek (Fedler, Smith, and Meeske, 1983). Two of the hypotheses examined in that study were that Time's coverage would be more slanted, positively or negatively, than Newsweek's and that both periodicals would be more favorable toward John Kennedy than his brothers. The first hypothesis wasn't supported, while the second was.

This study is more directly influenced by research of Father Charles Coughlin's coverage in the periodical press over time (Ogles and Howard, 1984). The researchers

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looked at assertions about the radio priest in Newsweek and Time concerning the direction of the statements and conducted a trend analysis of those assertions. The trend analysis accounted for positive, negative, and neutral statements about Father Coughlin from 1931, when he was first cited in The Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature, until 1942, the last consecutive annual mention of Coughlin in the Reader's Guide. They found no statistically significant difference in direction between Newsweek's and Time's coverage and found more negative than positive assertions about Coughlin over time in three different types of periodicals, including the two newsweeklies. The authors also conducted a trend analysis of five major themes about Father Coughlin appearing in the periodicals. The themes that were charted in the coverage of Father Coughlin during the 1931-1942 period were anti-Semitism, pro-Nazism, pro-fascism, demagoguery and rabble-rousing, and questionable veracity. **Method** While Nixon denied that his continued involvement in foreign and political affairs was an attempt at a comeback because there wasn't anything "to come back to" (Nixon, 1990, p. 80), this research charts the coverage of his 20-year post-presidential career in the three national newsweeklies to determine whether, indeed, there was something to come back to: a measure of public respectability. While a study of the press cannot necessarily reflect what the public at large thought about a person or issue, it can reveal what was on the public agenda and "the boundaries and critical points of debate" (Caudill, 1989, p. xv).

This study is based on a directional analysis of news stories about Richard M. Nixon in the three major U.S. mass circulation newsmagazines – Newsweek, Time, and U.S. News & World Report. The study covers the period from Nixon's resignation from the presidency in 1974 until his death in 1994. The Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature was used to identify stories about Nixon in these newsweeklies. A total of 240 news stories were

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identified, and a census of all of those stories was conducted.

The author, serving as the primary coder, examined all articles and listed and counted instances of what he considered positive, negative, or neutral assertions. A second coder coded a random sample of 10 percent, or 24, of the articles for intercoder reliability. The percentage of agreement between the two coders in the study was 97 percent. It is important to add, however, that Scott's [1] (Scott, 1955) formula reduces this raw percentage of agreement. Using Scott's pi to account for agreement between the two coders that may have occurred through chance, the percentage of agreement is reduced to 86 percent.

The author read the 24 articles and placed brackets around the assertions about Nixon. Assertions not dealing with Nixon were not bracketed. Quotations from Nixon were also excluded. The second coder was asked to read and evaluate each bracketed assertion. Copies of each of the 24 articles were available to the second coder in the event that the coder wanted to look at an article to place an assertion in context. The assertions were numbered and classified as “-“ negative, “0” neutral, and “+” positive. The second coder was trained for the task by evaluating assertions in articles unrelated to the current topic. This research is intended to look at coverage by newsweekly reporters of Richard Nixon rather than at individuals quoted by the newswEEKLIES, so the opinions of those interviewed by the magazines aren't included in the content analysis. In addition, since the nature of newsweekly columnists is to give opinion, those columns are not studied. Finally, what few times Nixon's books were mentioned in the newswEEKLIES, it was in the context of a news story rather than as a back-of-the-book book review. Therefore, only news articles are included in the analysis.

A chi-square analysis was performed to determine whether there was a significant difference among the three newswEEKLIES. If there was no significant difference in the

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newsweeklies' coverage, all positive and negative assertions were to be combined for the remainder of the analysis. If there was a statistically significant difference, the positive and negative coverage was to be analyzed separately for each newsmagazine. A percentage of positive, negative, and neutral assertions was determined for each year, and the percentage of positive, negative, and neutral assertions was charted for that period.

After the direction analysis was completed, the author examined the assertion statements to determine if any themes about Nixon occurred in the newsweeklies. Subsequently, thematic categories were developed, and a trend analysis for these themes was charted for the 20-year period. The number of references per theme was depicted on a decade-to-decade basis. Looking at the themes about Nixon during this period will tell how the three newsweeklies framed their coverage of Nixon during the two decades.

An assertion is a single statement of meaning. An assertion could be a sentence, part of a sentence, or even a single word. For example, in the sentence: "Alice is an attractive, intelligent girl," there are three assertions: 1) Alice is attractive; 2) Alice is intelligent; and 3) Alice is a girl. The first two assertions would be judged favorable, while the third assertion is neutral.

A theme is the plural of assertion. A theme may contain a minimum of two assertions having the same essential meaning. A single statement of meaning is an assertion. When the assertion recurs, it is a theme.

## Results

In a chi-square test analyzing the direction of assertions about Richard Nixon in the three newsweeklies, it was discovered that there is a highly significant difference (chi-square =

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34.87, 4 d.f.,  $p < .001$ ) in the direction of coverage among Newsweek, Time, and U.S. News & World Report. (See Table 1.) As a result, this analysis examined each of the newsweeklies' coverage of Richard Nixon on an individual basis rather than collectively.

In all three newsweeklies, assertions about the former president were, for the most part, neutral. Newsweek, Time, and U.S. News & World Report each had more than 80 percent of neutral assertions during the 20-year period under study. What these findings suggest is the presence of objectivity in all three newsweeklies. Newsweek and Time were similar to each other in that each had a slightly higher percentage of negative than positive assertions about Nixon. Conversely, U.S. News & World Report, though containing less than half the number of assertions overall than either Newsweek or Time, had approximately four times the number of positive assertions than negative about President Nixon. While Table 1 gives an overall view of the newsweekly coverage of Nixon, a trend analysis was also done, depicting a percentage of positive, negative, and neutral assertions about Nixon on a year-to-year basis in each of the newsweeklies. (See Figures 1 through 3.)

There was an increase, in percent, in the positive assertions about Nixon in each of the newsweeklies over time from August 9, 1974, until his funeral in 1994; however, the increase wasn't a steady increase over the 20-year period under study. Still, Newsweek had only 3 percent of positive assertions about Richard Nixon in 1974 and 11 percent positive assertions in 1994. Time had 6 percent of positive assertions about Nixon in 1974 and ended with 12 percent of positive assertions in 1994. Meanwhile, U.S. News & World Report started with 1 percent of positive assertions in 1974 and had 15 percent of positive assertions about President Nixon in 1994.

Newsweek had three years in which Nixon received at least 20 percent positive assertions (1984, 1985, and 1987) and three years of at least 20 percent negative assertions

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(1987, 1991, and 1992). Meanwhile, Time also had three years in which Nixon received 20 percent positive assertions (1982, 1983, and 1990) and another three years of at least 20 percent of negative assertions (1977, 1988, and 1991). Finally, U.S. News & World Report had five years in which Nixon received at least 20 percent positive assertions (1984, 1987, 1988, 1990, and 1991) and one year of at least 20 percent negative assertions (1987).

Articles from these years were examined again to determine if there were particular events that might explain why these years contained a higher percentage than usual of either positive or negative assertions about Nixon. In 1977, for instance, Time had a relatively high percentage of negative assertions about Nixon. The magazine wrote several articles about the series of interviews that Nixon did with David Frost that was broadcast that year. In 1984, both Newsweek and U.S. News & World Report contained a higher percentage than typical of positive assertions about the former president. That was the year that CBS broadcast excerpts of a video memoir by Nixon on its 60 Minutes show. The broadcast received favorable coverage in the two newsweeklies. Also noteworthy for Nixon in 1984 was a particularly well-received speech to the American Society of Newspaper Editors. In 1985, Newsweek had a higher-than-average percentage of positive assertions about Nixon. Noteworthy events for Nixon that were mentioned in the Newsweek articles were his first appearance since Watergate at a Republican National Committee-sponsored event, being named arbitrator for a salary dispute between major league baseball owners and umpires, and an article about the previous year's presidential election that depicted Nixon as a major adviser in Ronald Reagan's re-election campaign.

Curiously, in 1987, there was an unusually high percentage of both positive and negative assertions about Nixon in Newsweek and U.S. News & World Report. A couple of events seem noteworthy in that year's coverage. First, Newsweek covered the Richard Nixon

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Presidential Conference at Hofstra University, while U.S. News & World Report wrote a story about Stephen Ambrose's publication of the first volume of his multi-volume biography of Nixon. Perhaps a reason Nixon had a high percentage of both positive and negative assertions is that both of these events marked a beginning of a scholarly attempt to put Nixon and the Nixon presidency into a more balanced historical perspective. 1990 was a noteworthy year for positive assertions about Nixon in both Time and U.S. News & World Report. Both magazines published articles about the dedication of the Richard Nixon Library and Birthplace that year. Meanwhile, in 1991, both Newsweek and Time had a relatively high percentage of negative assertions about Nixon. Both magazines ran stories about a new batch of unflattering Watergate audiotapes that had been released that year by the National Archives. Finally, in 1992, Newsweek had a high percentage of negative assertions about Nixon. The magazine ran a fairly long article about the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Watergate break-in.

In addition, an analysis was done to determine if any themes emerged from the 20-year coverage of the former president. As mentioned previously, a theme is defined as the plural of assertion. From positive and negative assertions about Richard Nixon, 18 themes were identified. (See Table 2.)

Twelve of the identified themes were determined to be negative. These include assertions depicting the former president as a discredited/disgraced figure, a rambling speaker, a haunting/haunted presence, a sympathetic/tragic figure, a liar, filled with self-pity, an isolated figure, a divisive figure, petty/resentful, malicious, amoral/corrupt, and physically awkward. On the other hand, six of the themes were determined to have a positive connotation. These include assertions about Nixon as a determined individual, a rehabilitated figure, an elder statesman, a master of foreign policy, intelligent, and an adept

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politician. The examination of themes was divided into decades because this gives a clearer indication of the degree of rehabilitation of Nixon's image in the nation's newsweeklies.

In the first decade following Nixon's resignation from the presidency, the largest number of assertions in Newsweek was associated with negative themes: Nixon as a discredited/disgraced figure, a haunting/haunted presence, and a figure of sympathy or tragedy. As for the latter theme, one might interpret it as positive, but Ambrose (1991) in the epilogue to his three-volume biography of Nixon concludes that Nixon would not. To give perspective to these figures, all three of these themes in Newsweek had either disappeared or were negligible in the second decade of coverage. Additionally, the most prominent theme about Nixon in the second decade of Newsweek's coverage was positive: Nixon as a rehabilitated figure. This theme was virtually invisible in the magazine's first decade of coverage, indicating that Nixon's image improved over time in Newsweek.

Similarly, Nixon had a high number of assertions pertaining to the discredited/disgraced theme in Time during the first decade under analysis – a theme that was much less prominent in the magazine's second decade of coverage. In addition, the theme of rehabilitation was minor in the first ten years of Nixon's post-presidency but became the major theme in the last ten years. One difference between Newsweek and Time concerned the theme of Nixon as a master of foreign policy. This was a prominent theme in Time, particularly during its first ten years of coverage, the only positive theme to be prominent in the first decade of reportage in any of the newsweeklies.

Finally, no themes, positive or negative, were prominent in U.S. News & World Report's first decade of coverage of the former president. Therefore, U.S. News & World Report wasn't as opinionated as either Newsweek or Time during the first decade of coverage because all of the 18 themes identified were either positively or negatively connotative. A

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similar result about U.S. News & World Report in comparison to Newsweek and Time was found in a study of coverage of Martin Luther King Jr. from 1955 until 1968 (Lentz, 1990). U.S. News lacked the “vivid prose” (Lentz, 1990, p. 15) of its two newsweekly competitors, with the researcher concluding: “Had its competitors not existed, U.S. News almost would have had to invent one or the other so that its drabness would not appear pointless” (Lentz, 1990, p. 15). The vivid prose was also lacking in this study, at least during its first decade of coverage of the former president. This was less true during U.S. News’ second decade of coverage of former president Nixon because two major themes were noted in the magazine’s coverage during this period. Like Newsweek and Time, U.S. News & World Report had several assertions under the theme of rehabilitation during the second decade of coverage. The magazine also had another major positive theme, Nixon as master of foreign policy, in its second decade of post-resignation reportage.

The most obvious changes in the newsweeklies from the first decade to the second decade were the dramatic decrease of assertions under the discredited/disgraced theme in Newsweek and Time and, conversely, the major increase of assertions in the rehabilitated theme in all three newsweeklies.

### Conclusions

The significance of this study rests in the fact that the three newsweeklies were not as biased as expected in the case of Nixon. All three newsweeklies had more than 80 percent of neutral assertions during the 20-year period under study.

With the passage of time, emotions over the Watergate scandal have cooled somewhat and the Nixon presidency can be put into perspective in relation to controversial revelations

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about previous and subsequent presidencies. That perspective seemed to begin to unfold while Nixon was still alive with events such as the academic symposium on the Nixon presidency at Hofstra University in 1987 and the publication of Stephen Ambrose's three-volume biography of Nixon. Once the 1980s began, Nixon began to emerge from his seclusion to have an influence to varying degrees on Presidents Reagan, Bush, and Clinton, particularly on Russian affairs. While Nixon's legacy will never be free from Watergate, a more dispassionate look at the man and his career can only be healthy if it will allow future leaders to learn from his mistakes. Late in his life, even Nixon seemed to sense this. Nixon was quoted in reaction to President Clinton's possible stonewalling of his own involvement in the Whitewater scandal: "Didn't anyone learn anything from Watergate?" (Crowley, 1998, p. 310)

With this in mind, perhaps future researchers can examine other post-presidencies and their subsequent coverage in the national media to determine whether the coverage differed from outlet to outlet and whether the coverage was more positive than negative over time. Did Herbert Hoover's image improve over time after he left the presidency? Did Harry Truman or Jimmy Carter or George Bush have a more positive image after leaving the White House? Or, conversely, did the reputations of more popular presidencies such as those of Dwight Eisenhower or Ronald Reagan languish over time in the various media outlets?

Nixon wrote in 1990 that he used five methods to try to influence opinion leaders: books, speeches, columns, television interviews, and backgrounders to editorial boards of leading newspapers, newsmagazines, and TV networks. Clearly, Nixon believed in his ability to influence the agenda. Each man who has lived beyond his tenure as president has had the opportunity to influence the legacy of his presidency. Some have been more successful in this endeavor than others, but all who have served in that office have done so with the

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knowledge that history will judge their presidency and that judgment is subject to revision.

Finally, future research should examine the assumption that the newsweeklies are biased based on the findings in this study that the overwhelming number of assertions in all three newsweeklies was neutral rather than positive or negative.

**TABLE 1**

**DIRECTION OF ASSERTIONS ABOUT RICHARD NIXON IN NEWSWEEK,  
TIME, AND U.S. NEWS & WORLD REPORT, 1974-1994 IN PERCENT**

	<b>Newsweek</b>	<b>Time</b>	<b>U.S. News</b>
Positive	7.35	6.92	10.03
Negative	9.34	8.22	2.51
Neutral	83.31	84.86	87.46
Total	100.00	100.00	100.00
Number	1,402	1,532	638

Chi-Square = 34.87, 4 d.f., p <.001

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Observed values

	<b>Newsweek</b>	<b>Time</b>	<b>U.S. News &amp; World Report</b>
Positive	103	106	64
Negative	131	126	16
Neutral	1,168	1,300	558
Total	1,402	1,532	638

**NEWSWEEK, TIME, AND U.S. NEWS & WORLD REPORT COVERAGE OF  
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NUMBER OF ASSERTIONS PER THEME PER DECADE

	1974-1983			1984-1994		
	N	T	U	N	T	U
Discredited	23	18	0	3	3	3
Determined	3	3	1	2	6	1

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Rambling speaker	4 1 0	0 1 0
Haunting presence figure	11 1 0 10 5 0	0 0 0 Sympathetic 0 0 0
Rehabilitated	2 2 0	25 17 18
Elder statesman	0 1 0	5 2 5
Liar	0 8 0	1 1 0
Self-pitied	2 5 0	1 0 1
Isolated figure	1 4 0	4 0 0
Divisive figure	0 1 0	3 3 0
Petty	1 1 0	3 1 1
Malicious	4 3 0	6 2 1
Amoral/corrupt	2 0 0	2 0 2
Master of foreign policy	6 15 0	5 7 12

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Intelligent	0 1 0	0 2 5
Adept politician	0 0 0	6 3 1
<u>Awkward</u>	<u>0 1 0</u>	<u>1 4 1</u>

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[1] Scott maintains, "By chance alone, one would expect better agreement on a two-category than on a five-category scale.... ( $P_i$ ) ... corrects for the number of categories in the code."