
The Confident Incompetent

Why We Elevate the Leaders Who Destroy Us

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Introduction

Why do we so often entrust power to the very people least equipped to exercise it? From corporate boardrooms to the highest offices of state, the same paradox recurs: individuals who display unearned confidence, charisma, and a talent for manipulation are elevated above those with genuine expertise and integrity. This is not a random failure of judgment. As the psychological and institutional evidence reveals, our selection systems are often rigged in favour of the "Confident Incompetent."

What follows is an examination of how these leaders rise, how they govern through fear and silence, and the catastrophic "bill" that institutions must eventually pay for their tolerance. Drawing on extensive research and case studies—from the NASA Challenger disaster to the Volkswagen emissions scandal—we explore a culture where impression management has replaced actual competence. It is a journey into the heart of modern leadership, revealing that our preference for strong, certain voices may be the very thing hollowing out our organisations and nations from within.

Chapter 1: Why We Choose the Wrong Leaders

A leadership failure rarely begins with an obvious warning. More often, it begins with applause. In a boardroom, a candidate speaks in clean, certain sentences. They have a plan, an answer and an unmistakable sense of personal authority. In national politics, a figure promises to cut through complexity, restore order and make difficult

problems simple again. The appeal is immediate. When institutions feel slow, uncertain or remote, certainty can look like competence.

But it is not the same thing.

Across the material examined here, a persistent pattern emerges. Organisations and electorates repeatedly struggle to distinguish demonstrated capability from its performance. They reward confidence, charisma, speed and theatrical decisiveness while overlooking the less visible qualities on which sound leadership depends: judgement, humility, integrity, evidence-based thinking and a willingness to hear unwelcome information.

The result is a paradox. The people most skilled at appearing ready to lead may not be those most able to do so.

The seduction of certainty

Uncertainty creates demand for confidence. During a crisis – whether financial, political, organisational or social – people understandably want someone who seems in control. A leader who communicates absolute certainty can offer emotional reassurance, even when the issue itself is complex and the proposed solution is implausibly simple.

The sources argue that this preference can become a cognitive shortcut: perceived confidence is treated as evidence of competence [21096]. Candidates who project certainty gain an advantage over those who acknowledge trade-offs, uncertainty or the limits of their knowledge – yet those admissions may be signs of sound judgement rather than weakness.

This is where the material invokes the Dunning-Kruger effect: people with limited knowledge may overestimate their abilities, while more knowledgeable people may express greater caution about what they do not know [21096]. In leadership selection, that imbalance can be decisive. The overconfident candidate appears decisive; the expert appears hesitant. One gives a reassuring answer; the other explains why the answer requires more evidence.

The danger is not merely that people make occasional errors of judgement. It is that whole systems can be structured to favour the wrong signal. Democracies may elevate candidates who campaign effectively rather than govern effectively. Organisations may promote employees who are highly visible and adept at managing impressions rather than those whose work creates durable value [21102; 21088].

The confidence on display may be real. It may even be sincere. But sincerity is not proof of competence.

Two arenas, one vulnerability

National politics and organisational leadership differ in their scale, consequences and formal methods of selection. A chief executive answers to a board, investors and internal governance structures; a national leader answers to an electorate, a party and democratic institutions. Yet both environments share a central vulnerability: selectors can mistake persuasive performance for leadership ability.

In democratic systems, charisma can create an emotional bond between a candidate and their supporters. Leaders who present themselves as direct, authentic or rebellious can appear to offer clarity in situations that feel chaotic or neglected. During economic uncertainty or social upheaval, a promise of decisive action may carry more weight than detailed competence or ethical consistency [21099].

This helps explain why voters can support leaders whose moral conduct or practical qualifications are contested. Fear, group identity, political loyalty and the desire for immediate results can all encourage people to set aside concerns about integrity [21089; 21092]. The leader becomes more than a candidate: they become a vehicle for a group's hopes, grievances or need for reassurance.

In organisations, the equivalent figure is often the political operator. Rather than winning votes, this person wins influence through office dynamics: triangulation, informal alliances, ambiguity and careful management of perception [21086]. Their value may be difficult to assess because their influence lies partly in making their own contribution visible while rendering the contribution of others less clear.

In both cases, selection rewards the person who controls the story rather than the person who can do the work.

The action fallacy

There is a third error in leadership selection, and it is perhaps the most seductive of all: the assumption that leadership is demonstrated through visible activity [21093].

Bold announcements, rapid interventions, dramatic gestures and constant motion are easy to see. They are also easy to mistake for effectiveness. A leader who creates urgency can look energetic. A leader who declares a crisis can look courageous. A leader who offers a sweeping answer can look decisive. Yet none of these

behaviours necessarily demonstrate that they have understood the problem, assessed the evidence or considered the consequences.

The action fallacy is especially powerful because prevention is difficult to celebrate. A methodical leader who avoids a crisis through planning, careful risk assessment and quiet competence may seem less heroic than one who takes charge after a crisis has already erupted. The former leaves little spectacle behind; the latter leaves a compelling story.

This distorts how organisations and nations define success. Leaders are praised for being forceful in emergencies, while those who ask difficult questions, slow a decision down or insist on evidence may be seen as obstructive. Yet the sources repeatedly suggest that effective leadership depends precisely on these less dramatic practices: listening, identifying risks, acknowledging uncertainty and creating conditions in which dissent can be voiced safely [21090; 21091].

Visible noise is not governance. Nor is it management.

When style overwhelms substance

Charisma is not inherently harmful. Confidence is not a vice. Decisiveness can be necessary. The problem begins when these qualities are treated as substitutes for competence, accountability and moral judgement.

The evidence in the source material points to a wider selection failure. Systems privilege the candidate who seems strongest, loudest or most certain, while under-rewarding humility, emotional intelligence and a demonstrated record of sound decisions. The consequence is that leaders can acquire authority before they have shown they deserve trust.

This failure is reinforced by public and organisational impatience. Complex problems rarely have simple solutions, but simple solutions are easier to communicate. Genuine expertise involves qualification, ambiguity and difficult trade-offs; performative certainty removes these discomforts. It gives followers a clearer story, even if it offers a weaker basis for action.

The confident incompetent thrives in this gap between appearance and proof. The challenge, then, is not simply to find more capable individuals. It is to change what selectors – voters, boards, senior managers and institutions – choose to reward. Until leadership selection places greater weight on evidence, integrity, accountability and the capacity to learn, charisma will continue to outrun competence. And the applause will keep coming before the damage is visible.

Chapter 2: How Power Becomes Toxic

The incompetent leader is not always recognisable by obvious failure. Some arrive with impressive reputations, persuasive narratives and a record of short-term victories. Others appear capable because they are forceful in a crisis, comfortable with conflict or skilled at making difficult decisions look simple.

The more troubling cases are not merely leaders who lack the necessary knowledge or judgement. They are leaders whose personal qualities actively damage the people and systems around them. Arrogance, dishonesty, insecurity, narcissism and a lack of empathy can combine to produce a style of leadership that is not simply ineffective, but corrosive.

The distinction matters. A leader may fail because a situation exceeds their experience, because the system around them is defective or because they do not recognise their own limitations. Another leader may respond to the same uncertainty by manipulating information, suppressing disagreement and protecting their self-image at the expense of the organisation or the public. The first is a failure of capacity. The second is a failure of character – one that can turn an individual weakness into a collective danger.

When confidence becomes blindness

Arrogance is among the clearest warning signs identified in the source material. It is not merely a matter of unpleasant manners or an inflated sense of importance. Arrogance alters how a leader processes information.

A leader who overestimates their own ability is less likely to recognise a gap in their knowledge. They may interpret expert advice as an inconvenience, disagreement as disloyalty and caution as weakness. Because they are convinced they understand the situation, they no longer need to examine it closely. Their confidence becomes a barrier between themselves and reality.

The consequences can be severe. Valuable insights from team members are dismissed, alternative interpretations are ignored and strategic decisions are made without a proper understanding of the risks [21101]. The leader may still appear decisive – and may even become more decisive as the evidence against their judgement accumulates. But decisiveness without self-awareness is not strength. It is a form of strategic blindness.

The material connects this directly to the Dunning-Kruger effect introduced in the previous chapter: the person who knows least may speak as though they know most,

while the genuine expert hesitates [21096]. In a selection process that rewards certainty, this creates a structural advantage for the wrong candidate. At national level, the consequences may take the form of poor governance – a leader who presents a complex public problem as one requiring only willpower or an uncomplicated pledge. In an organisation, the same pattern appears in the executive who dismisses technical specialists or the manager who believes that authority alone compensates for inadequate understanding.

The scale is different. The psychological mechanism is the same.

The insecurity beneath the display

Arrogance and insecurity may appear to be opposites. In practice, the sources present them as closely connected. An insecure leader can become preoccupied with controlling how they are perceived, particularly when they feel threatened by the competence of those around them.

This produces micromanagement, defensiveness and an inability to accept constructive criticism [21101]. The leader does not experience disagreement as useful information. They experience it as a challenge to their status.

From there, the organisation's attention shifts. Instead of asking whether a decision is sound, people begin asking how it will be received. Instead of identifying risks, they consider who might be blamed if the risks become visible. Instead of improving an idea, they learn how to avoid embarrassing the person who proposed it. This is how personal insecurity becomes a collective condition.

In organisations, an insecure leader may surround themselves with people who are less likely to challenge them, favouring loyalty over expertise and familiarity over independent judgement. In national politics, a similar leader may frame criticism as an attack on the wider group – the party, the movement, the nation. The dispute is no longer about whether a policy has failed. It becomes a test of loyalty.

That transformation protects the leader. It also makes honest assessment more difficult. Once criticism is presented as betrayal, followers must choose between belonging and candour. Many will choose belonging, particularly when the leader has made their identity central to the group's sense of itself [21099].

The dark triad of leadership

To understand the most destructive forms of incompetence, it is necessary to examine what psychologists often call the "Dark Triad": the overlapping traits of narcissism, Machiavellianism and psychopathy. The source material discusses these

qualities not as clinical diagnoses of specific individuals, but as profound risks to the health of any institution.

The common thread is the instrumentalisation of others – the habit of using people as tools rather than treating them as stakeholders.

Narcissism centres attention on the leader's own image and perceived importance. Success becomes inseparable from personal credit, while failure must be redirected elsewhere. Information is valued according to whether it supports the leader's preferred story: positive signals are amplified, warnings are minimised, and those who reinforce the leader's image are treated as constructive while those who expose weaknesses may be treated as disloyal [21096]. In a company, this can mean that a leader's ambition takes precedence over the long-term health of the organisation. In national leadership, personal popularity or symbolic victory can become more important than the practical consequences of policy.

Machiavellian behaviour treats relationships, information and institutions as instruments for acquiring or retaining power [21086]. The political operator who embodies this trait does not resolve disagreements directly. They communicate different versions of events to different people, rely on informal understandings that can later be denied and use ambiguity as a source of control. Their influence depends on keeping responsibilities unclear – because when contributions are difficult to measure, credit can be claimed selectively and blame can be redirected.

Psychopathic traits, as they appear in the examined material, relate to a fundamental absence of empathy and a willingness to disregard the harm caused to others in pursuit of a goal [21087; 21101]. A leader with these tendencies may be highly effective at navigating power while being destructive at the task of leadership itself. Political skill is not the same as leadership competence. A person can be a master at managing impressions while being entirely incapable of governing fairly or building a resilient organisation.

While these categories overlap, they should not be collapsed into one another. Each contributes a different type of toxicity. A narcissistic leader demands admiration; a Machiavellian leader manufactures division; a leader with psychopathic tendencies may simply be indifferent to the lives they disrupt.

The appeal of unrestrained power

The material approaches toxic leadership through a further lens, drawing on Nietzschean ideas about the Übermensch – the figure associated with strength,

exceptionalism and the rejection of conventional morality [21084; 21086]. The purpose is not to suggest that Nietzsche provides a simple explanation for every dominant leader. Rather, the sources use the concept to explore why the image of a leader who stands above ordinary rules can be so appealing.

In periods of crisis or uncertainty, conventional restraints may appear to many people as obstacles rather than safeguards. Compromise looks like weakness. Procedure looks like delay. The leader who promises to break through these constraints can therefore seem liberating.

Followers who feel powerless may project their desire for control onto a leader who appears to possess it. The leader becomes a symbol of mastery over chaos. Their refusal to apologise, their contempt for convention and their willingness to confront enemies can be experienced as a form of vicarious strength [21099]. This helps explain why ethical violations do not always reduce support. They may be reinterpreted as evidence that the leader is strong enough to ignore rules – the same behaviour that would normally suggest dishonesty or irresponsibility recast as authenticity, courage or independence.

The danger is clear. Once conventional morality is treated as weakness, there may be no agreed limit to what the leader is permitted to do. The rejection of restraint can begin as an attractive promise of renewal and end as a justification for domination.

Why toxic traits survive selection

If these traits are so damaging, why do they continue to reach positions of power?

Part of the answer lies in the gap between visible performance and underlying capability. Arrogant leaders often look certain. Narcissistic leaders may possess compelling visions. Ruthless leaders can appear decisive. During uncertainty, these qualities become even more attractive because they promise order and mastery [21094; 21099].

Another part of the answer is systemic. Selection processes can favour the candidate who is most persuasive, visible or politically connected rather than the one who has shown the greatest integrity or judgement. In democratic systems, charisma may outweigh expertise. In organisations, social connections and perception management may outweigh actual contribution [21088].

The people best equipped to lead may also be less willing to pursue power. Humility can make a person less likely to claim exceptional ability. Awareness of complexity

can make them less comfortable offering absolute answers. Ethical restraint can make them less competitive in systems that reward aggression.

That creates a vacuum. When capable people hesitate, those who are more ambitious, more certain or less constrained by moral considerations may find it easier to advance. Power then selects for the qualities that help people acquire it, rather than the qualities required to use it well.

The toxic leader does not always seize power by appearing dangerous. Often, they first appear reassuring – offering certainty when others feel confused, strength when others feel exposed and a simple explanation when reality has become difficult to bear.

By the time the confidence has been revealed as blindness, the system may already have been reorganised around it.

Chapter 3: The Culture of Silence

Bad leadership is rarely sustained by one disastrous decision. More often, it survives through a sequence of smaller behaviours: a warning dismissed, a mistake concealed, a critic isolated, an informal promise left deliberately vague.

Each act may appear manageable in isolation. Together, they create a system in which people stop speaking openly, leaders hear only what confirms their own beliefs and failure becomes difficult to distinguish from normal practice. The result is not simply an unpleasant workplace or an unpopular government. It is a culture of compliance – one that protects authority while weakening the institution beneath it.

Spillers and fillers

The source material offers a foundational distinction between two broad leadership styles: "spillers" and "fillers" [21085].

Spillers motivate through fear and anxiety. They create pressure, uncertainty and insecurity, relying on the knowledge that people will work harder – or at least obey more quickly – when they fear punishment, humiliation or exclusion. Fillers operate differently. They encourage growth, confidence and development. Their aim is not merely to extract compliance but to create the conditions in which people can contribute, learn and take responsibility [21085].

The difference may not be immediately visible in a set of results. A spiller can produce rapid movement. Targets may be met, deadlines reached and difficult

decisions may appear to have been taken without hesitation. But the apparent efficiency conceals a deeper deterioration. Employees begin to focus on self-preservation rather than the quality of their work. They avoid risks – not because the risks are unacceptable, but because being associated with a failed decision may be dangerous.

The organisation becomes quieter, but not healthier.

A filler leader may seem less dramatic. They may spend more time listening, explaining and allowing others to develop. Such methods can appear slower, especially in a culture that treats visible activity as proof of effectiveness. But the purpose is different: to build the confidence and judgement of the people who must identify problems before they become crises.

Fear can enforce silence. It cannot create candour.

The short life of fear

Fear-based leadership is attractive because it produces an immediate response. A leader threatens consequences, sets an uncompromising demand or makes an example of someone who has failed. The message travels quickly: do not challenge the leader; do not bring bad news; do not become the next person blamed.

For a time, this can look like control.

The longer-term effects are more damaging. Fear discourages employees from reporting errors, weakens trust and undermines the willingness to speak openly [21084; 21085]. Instead of treating mistakes as information, the organisation treats them as evidence of personal failure. The response is predictable: people hide problems until they can no longer be hidden.

The Volkswagen emissions scandal illustrates this dynamic precisely. A culture of blame and fear discouraged transparency and contributed to employees prioritising immediate demands over integrity [21084]. The pressure to deliver was not neutral. It operated within a system in which failure carried consequences, while concealment could appear to offer temporary protection. No single employee needed to believe that deception was admirable. It was enough for them to believe that honesty was unsafe.

The same pattern operates in national politics, though through different instruments. Political supporters may be encouraged to fear opponents, outsiders or the consequences of dissent. Criticism is then presented not as information that could improve governance, but as a threat to the group's survival. In an organisation, the

fearful employee conceals a defect. In a nation, the fearful citizen may conceal disagreement. In both cases, the leader receives a less accurate account of reality.

The political web

Not all corrosive behaviour is loud. Some of it operates through ambiguity.

The source material describes political operators who use triangulation, informal agreements and perception management to manipulate their environment [21086]. Their influence depends partly on keeping relationships and responsibilities unclear. Rather than resolving a disagreement directly, they communicate different versions of events to different people. Rather than establishing a clear agreement, they rely on informal understandings that can later be denied or reinterpreted.

Triangulation turns colleagues into intermediaries and competitors. Trust weakens because no one is certain which conversations are taking place elsewhere. Ambiguity then becomes a source of power: if responsibility is unclear, credit can be claimed selectively and blame can be redirected.

The political operator's power diminishes when individual contributions are clearly visible [21086]. Transparency is therefore not merely an administrative virtue. It is a direct threat to manipulation. Clear responsibilities, explicit decisions and visible contributions make it harder to rewrite events after the fact.

This is one reason principled professionals can be disadvantaged in political environments. They may assume that competence and hard work will speak for themselves. But where perception is being actively managed, performance does not automatically become reputation. Someone else may be deciding what the performance means.

When loyalty replaces truth

The most dangerous political culture is not one in which everyone openly agrees. It is one in which disagreement becomes costly.

Leaders who surround themselves with compliant followers and yes-people create an echo chamber that filters reality [21096]. These followers reinforce the leader's assumptions, confirm the leader's preferred interpretation and avoid introducing information that might provoke anger or embarrassment. At first, the leader may appear to benefit. Meetings are orderly. Public statements are consistent. The team seems united. But unity achieved by suppressing disagreement is fragile. It gives the leader confidence without necessarily giving them accurate information.

Over time, the organisation loses the capacity to challenge itself. Ideas become narrower. Alternative perspectives disappear. Evidence that contradicts the established view is treated as a nuisance or an attack.

This pattern is starkly evident in the NASA Challenger and Columbia disasters. The sources describe a culture in which expert warnings were minimised, dissent was suppressed and repeated safety concerns became normalised [21089; 21091]. Management's commitment to mission success contributed to a false sense of security: because earlier problems had not produced catastrophe, continuing to accept them began to seem reasonable [21091; 21092]. The lesson is not that every expert warning is automatically correct. It is that a serious institution must be able to examine warnings without treating the act of raising them as disloyal.

A leader who demands loyal followers may believe they are protecting unity. In practice, they may be eliminating the very mechanism that allows an organisation to detect danger.

The messenger becomes the problem

One of the oldest ways to preserve a failing system is to punish the person who identifies the failure.

Scapegoating, blame and the suppression of bad news are recurring characteristics of poor leadership [21084; 21095]. When a leader refuses to accept responsibility, the problem must be located elsewhere. An employee is careless. A department is incompetent. An adviser is obstructive. A critic is malicious. This response serves two purposes: it protects the leader's image and warns others not to raise similar concerns.

The organisation learns that the safest course is not to solve a problem but to avoid being associated with it. People stop asking who made a flawed decision and start asking who can be held responsible. The energy that might have gone into correction is redirected towards defence.

In a company, this can turn an error into a concealed liability. In a national government, it can turn policy failure into a contest over enemies and excuses. The scale differs, but the governing instinct is the same: preserve the appearance of competence by externalising blame.

The cost is cumulative. Employees lose trust in one another because they cannot be sure who will be sacrificed when something goes wrong. Citizens lose confidence in institutions that appear incapable of acknowledging error. The leader may remain

secure for a time, but the system becomes less able to respond honestly to new problems.

Normalisation of deviance

The most dangerous stage of institutional decline arrives when abnormal behaviour becomes ordinary.

The source material uses the term "normalisation of deviance" in its discussion of NASA's safety failures [21089]. The pattern begins when a departure from an accepted standard occurs without immediate disaster. Because nothing visibly terrible happens, the departure is tolerated. It happens again, and familiarity makes it less alarming. Eventually, the risk is no longer treated as an emergency. It is treated as part of the job.

This is not the same as consciously deciding that safety no longer matters. It is a gradual adjustment in what the organisation considers acceptable. A warning is discounted because it has been raised before. A technical irregularity is reclassified as familiar. A deadline is prioritised over a safeguard. Each compromise becomes evidence that the previous compromise was survivable.

The false sense of security is powerful. Past survival is mistaken for proof that the system is safe. Yet the absence of catastrophe may simply mean that the organisation has been fortunate – or that the consequences have not yet arrived. The NASA examples show the danger of this process in a high-stakes setting. Repeated safety concerns were downplayed while management continued to place weight on mission success and operational demands [21089; 21091; 21092]. The organisation did not merely fail to hear a warning once. It developed a culture in which warnings could be heard and still fail to change decisions.

That is a more profound failure than ignorance. It is the institutionalisation of dismissal.

When compliance looks like success

A corroded system can look successful from the outside.

Targets may be met because employees are afraid to report that they are unrealistic. Public confidence may appear high because criticism has been delegitimised. A company may present a smooth performance because internal warnings are not reaching the public. A government may project unity because dissent has been reframed as disloyalty [21087].

Fear may increase output while reducing honesty. Loyalty may create unity while excluding truth. Decisiveness may accelerate action while preventing reflection. Political skill may secure influence while damaging trust.

The institution does not fail because no one sees the problem. It fails because the system has learned to treat seeing the problem as more dangerous than living with it.

Once that happens, compliance becomes more valuable than competence. The people who remain are not necessarily those who know the most, but those who have learned what must not be said.

And when silence is mistaken for agreement, failure has already begun.

Chapter 4: The Bill That Arrives Later

Leadership failure is rarely a single event. It is a process – one that can take years to become visible and decades to repair. By the time the damage is undeniable, the people who created the conditions for it may have long since moved on, leaving others to manage the consequences of decisions they did not make.

This is the central paradox of tolerating bad leadership: the costs are real, but they are deferred. Short-term results can look like success. Compliance can look like unity. Silence can look like agreement. And by the time the bill arrives, the connection between cause and consequence has become difficult to trace.

The false comfort of short-term success

The source material is unambiguous on this point: short-term financial or political gains can encourage institutions to tolerate destructive behaviour [21087]. A leader who produces immediate results may be protected from scrutiny even when their methods are weakening the organisation's future capacity.

This is one of the central paradoxes of bad leadership. The behaviours that make a leader appear effective in the short term can undermine the conditions required for lasting effectiveness. Fear may increase output while reducing honesty. Loyalty may create unity while excluding truth. Decisiveness may accelerate action while preventing reflection. Political skill may secure influence while damaging trust.

The institution does not fail because no one sees the problem. It fails because the system has learned to treat seeing the problem as more dangerous than living with it.

Delay makes responsibility difficult to assign. The people who created the culture may no longer be present when the consequences arrive. Those who inherit the damage are then expected to repair it – without necessarily understanding what produced it, or being given the resources to address it.

A leader may claim achievement while leaving behind reduced trust, damaged morale, weakened procedures and a public less able to agree on reality. The catastrophe is not always the final event. Sometimes it is the gradual loss of the capacity to prevent one.

NASA: when warnings become inconvenient

The NASA cases are presented in the source material not simply as technical failures, but as failures of leadership, communication and institutional culture [21089].

The central problem was not that expert concerns did not exist. Warnings from engineers and other specialists were raised – and were not adequately integrated into management decisions. Operational pressure and the demand for mission success took precedence over the concerns of those who understood the risks [21089; 21092].

This is a recurring feature of bad leadership. The warning is not necessarily denied outright. It may be acknowledged, discussed and then set aside. The process can appear reasonable: the risk is described as familiar, the problem is considered manageable, or the institution points to the fact that similar difficulties have not yet produced disaster. That response creates a dangerous form of reassurance. The absence of an earlier catastrophe is treated as evidence that the underlying practice is safe. Risk is not removed; it is reclassified.

The source material describes this as the "normalisation of deviance" [21089]. A departure from accepted safety practice occurs. Nothing immediately goes wrong. The departure is tolerated. It happens again, and familiarity makes it less alarming. Over time, the abnormal becomes part of the accepted operating environment.

The organisation has not solved the problem. It has adjusted its expectations around it.

The false sense of security that follows is powerful. Repeated exposure to risk makes the risk feel ordinary. A system begins to measure safety by what it has survived rather than by the standards it is supposed to maintain. In the NASA examples, the source material connects this directly to the minimisation of evidence and the

suppression of dissent [21089; 21091; 21092]. The institution's confidence in mission success became stronger than its willingness to reconsider the assumptions on which that success depended.

Engineers who raised concerns could be portrayed – explicitly or implicitly – as slowing progress. Managers felt pressure to defend an established decision rather than reopen it. Once a mission had acquired symbolic importance, questioning it appeared to threaten the organisation itself.

But an institution is not protected by preventing criticism. It is protected by being able to examine criticism before the consequences become irreversible.

Volkswagen: when fear becomes a business practice

The Volkswagen emissions scandal provides a different illustration of the same cultural mechanism [21084].

In the source material, the scandal is linked to a culture of blame and fear. Engineers faced pressure to meet aggressive goals, while the organisation discouraged the open reporting of failure [21084]. The problem was not simply that a product failed to meet expectations. The surrounding culture made it dangerous to admit that the expectations could not be met honestly.

This is how fear can turn an organisational demand into an ethical crisis.

If employees believe that reporting a problem will bring punishment, humiliation or professional consequences, they have an incentive to conceal the problem. If leaders celebrate only success, bad news becomes a threat to the person carrying it rather than information the organisation needs. Concealment can develop into deception, particularly when the original demand remains in place and no acceptable solution is offered.

The source material presents the Volkswagen case as an example of employees being driven towards concealment by unrealistic pressure and a punitive culture [21084]. No single employee needed to believe that deception was admirable. It was enough for them to believe that honesty was unsafe.

The cost then arrived on several levels: damage to reputation, financial penalties, loss of trust and a weakening of operational integrity [21084]. A culture that once appeared to be demanding excellence was revealed as having made honesty structurally unsafe.

It is tempting to describe such scandals as the misconduct of a few individuals. Individual responsibility remains important, but the material insists on a wider interpretation. A culture of fear changes the behaviour of many people at once. It shapes what employees report, what managers pass upwards and what leaders are able – or willing – to know. If everyone understands that failure will be punished but that meeting the target will be rewarded, the organisation has created an incentive structure in which concealment can seem rational.

That does not make deception acceptable. It explains how an institution can move towards it while continuing to describe itself as successful.

From institutional failure to social fracture

The consequences of poor leadership extend beyond the boundaries of any single organisation. The source material describes a broader social pattern in which communities that feel ignored or excluded become vulnerable to resentment and political exploitation [21100; 21101].

Where people believe that decisions are made without understanding their lives, confidence in institutions weakens. This creates an opening for leaders who present themselves as the voice of the overlooked. Such leaders may identify genuine grievances. But the source material warns that grievances can also be channelled towards division and political control [21100].

The leader's task then changes. Instead of addressing the causes of discontent, they cultivate the emotion produced by it. Resentment becomes evidence of belonging. Opponents become representatives of the distant system that has supposedly ignored the community. A complicated failure of governance is reduced to a conflict between "us" and "them".

The political reward can be considerable. A leader who gives people an enemy may gain loyalty without solving the problem that created the anger. Recognition can be confused with representation. A leader may speak forcefully about people's grievances while using those grievances to strengthen their own position. The community is mobilised, but not necessarily served.

In this way, national leadership can reproduce the same pattern found in toxic organisations: criticism is redirected, responsibility is externalised and loyalty is made more important than evidence.

The different scales of collapse

An organisation and a nation do not fail in precisely the same way.

A corporate failure may destroy a product, damage a reputation, impose financial costs and weaken employee morale. The Volkswagen example illustrates how a culture built around fear can compromise both ethical standards and institutional credibility [21084]. A national failure can affect a much wider social fabric. When leaders exploit resentment or disregard the needs of marginalised communities, the consequences may include deeper division, injustice and weakened trust in public institutions [21100; 21101]. The damage is not confined to one balance sheet or one workforce. It can shape how citizens understand one another and whether they believe collective governance is possible at all.

Yet the underlying structure is familiar. Both systems can prioritise short-term results over long-term integrity. Both can reward leaders for confidence and visible action. Both can suppress information that threatens the preferred narrative. Both can preserve a leader's authority by blaming others for consequences the leadership helped create.

The difference is not whether the pattern exists, but how far its effects travel.

Refusing the bargain

The source material ultimately points towards a different standard: transparency, accountability, ethical consideration and the protection of open communication [21101].

That standard requires more than removing one failed leader after the damage is visible. It requires institutions to examine the conditions that allowed the failure to continue. Were warnings heard? Were dissenters punished? Were targets unrealistic? Did the system reward concealment? Did leaders measure only outcomes, or also the methods used to achieve them?

For organisations, this means treating safety, honesty and employee confidence as part of performance rather than as obstacles to it. For nations, it means taking public grievances seriously without allowing them to be converted into instruments of division.

Neither setting can eliminate risk or guarantee wise leadership. But both can decide whether warnings are treated as an asset or a threat.

The disasters and collapses described in the source material are therefore not only stories about leaders who made mistakes. They are stories about systems that tolerated the behaviour surrounding those mistakes – fear, silence, denial, pressure and the refusal to learn.

The most expensive failure may not be choosing the wrong leader.

It may be allowing that leader to remain in place until everyone can finally see the cost.

Video Sources

21084 - Just Culture Conversations with Tony & Paul - Part 1: The Problem of Fear and Blame - 00:10:35

21085 - Fear Driven Workplaces | Bill Treasurer - 00:03:39

21086 - Why Smart People Lose At Office Politics - 00:19:09

21087 - The Dirty Player: Why Toxic Bosses Create Chaos on Purpose - 00:26:20

21088 - Why They Keep Giving You More Work But No Promotion: Why Good Employees Never Move Up - 00:17:11

21089 - The Columbia Disaster: A Failure of Culture and Lessons Learned - 00:08:27

21090 - Former NASA Engineer Explains Why Great Cultures Still Miss Big Problems - 00:25:57

21091 - The Tragedy of The Space shuttle Columbia | The Mission That Changed NASA Forever - 00:52:49

21092 - The Columbia Space Shuttle Disaster Explained | Full Documentary - 00:54:15

21093 - Why do we celebrate incompetent leaders? | Martin Gutmann | TEDxBerlin - 00:16:13

21094 - Why do so many incompetent men become leaders? | Tomas Chamorro-Premuzic | TEDxUniversityofNevada - 00:09:33

21095 - These Are Warning Signs of Poor Leadership - 00:06:19

21096 - Why the Most Foolish People End Up in Power - Machiavelli Knew This - 00:28:45

21097 - What do we do about bad leaders? | Barbara Kellerman | TEDxNewRiver - 00:17:54

21098 - Why do we get the wrong leaders? Brian Klaas at Science and Cocktails - 00:53:01

21099 - Why People Worship Corrupt Leaders - Nietzsche's Dark Truth - 00:25:21

21100 - Katherine Cramer | The Politics of Resentment in contemporary US | Populism Conference Amsterdam - 00:43:44

21101 - On the Issues: Professor Katherine Cramer - 01:02:26

21102 - Why Democracy Rewards Idiots – Plato Saw It Coming 2,400 Years Ago - 00:23:42

BOX - THE THEORY IN PRACTICE: DONALD TRUMP'S SECOND TERM

The patterns described in this article do not belong only to the world of corporate management or historical case studies. They are visible, in real time, in the conduct of one of the world's most powerful leaders. The following text is not based on video sources but on questions posed to AI to relate the actions of the politician to the findings of this article.

Donald Trump's second term as President of the United States, which began in January 2025, offers a striking illustration of several of the mechanisms this article describes – not as a clinical diagnosis, but as a case study in how the dynamics of confident incompetence can operate at the highest level of national governance.

LOYALTY ABOVE EXPERTISE

Perhaps the most consistent feature of Trump's cabinet selections in his second term has been the primacy of personal loyalty over professional qualification. Several appointees were chosen not for their expertise in the relevant policy area, but for their public alignment with Trump's political positions and their demonstrated willingness to defend him personally. The article describes leaders who "surround themselves with compliant followers and yes-people," creating an echo chamber that "filters reality." The result, this article warns, is that "the leader is protected from discomfort, but also from learning."

THE ACTION FALLACY IN THE OVAL OFFICE

Trump's governing style has been characterised by a high volume of executive orders, dramatic announcements and rapid interventions across multiple policy areas simultaneously – from trade tariffs to federal workforce reductions to foreign policy reversals. This matches precisely what this article calls the "action fallacy": the assumption that visible movement and decisive gestures are proof of effective

leadership. The spectacle of constant action can make a leader appear in control, even when the underlying decisions have not been carefully assessed for consequences.

BLAME, EXTERNALISATION AND THE ABSENT APOLOGY

Throughout his political career and into his second term, Trump has shown a consistent pattern of externalising blame. Policy difficulties are attributed to predecessors, opponents, the media, the judiciary or international partners. This article identifies this as one of the most corrosive features of poor leadership: "When a leader refuses to accept responsibility, the problem must be located elsewhere." The cost, the article notes, is cumulative – citizens lose confidence in institutions that appear incapable of acknowledging error.

DISSENT AS DISLOYALTY

Officials who have publicly disagreed with Trump – including members of his own administration – have typically been removed, marginalised or publicly attacked. This pattern reflects this article's warning about leaders who reframe criticism as a threat to belonging: "The national leader may say: 'You are challenging the nation.'" When disagreement is treated as betrayal, the space in which evidence can be discussed independently of loyalty narrows significantly.

EXPLOITING RESENTMENT

This article draws on research into rural consciousness and political disenfranchisement to describe how genuine grievances can be channelled into division rather than addressed. Trump's political base has consistently included communities that feel overlooked by urban elites and coastal institutions. This article acknowledges that such grievances can be real. The danger it identifies is when a leader "cultivates the emotion produced by discontent" rather than addressing its causes – using resentment as a source of loyalty rather than as a signal requiring a policy response.

A NOTE OF CAUTION

This comparison is not a verdict. The article's framework is drawn from research into leadership psychology and organisational behaviour, not from political science or journalism. Applying it to a sitting president involves interpretation, and reasonable people may weigh the evidence differently.

What the framework does offer is a set of questions worth asking of any leader, regardless of political affiliation: Are warnings being heard? Is dissent being protected? Is blame being externalised? Is loyalty being valued above truth?

Those questions do not belong to one side of the political spectrum. They belong to anyone who wants to understand whether the leader they are watching is building something – or consuming it.

BOX - THE THEORY IN PRACTICE: DUTCH POLITICS

The mechanisms described in this article are not confined to the United States. Dutch politics offers its own instructive examples – two figures in particular whose public conduct illuminates several of the article's central themes. The following text is not based on video sources but on questions posed to AI to relate the actions of the two politicians to the findings of this article.

GEERT WILDERS AND THE RHETORIC OF THREAT

Geert Wilders, leader of the Party for Freedom (PVV) and the largest party in the Dutch parliament after the November 2023 elections, has built a political identity around a single, consistent message: the Netherlands is under existential threat from asylum seekers and Islam, and only he is willing to say so.

This article describes how leaders can exploit genuine public anxiety by offering a simple explanation for complex problems. Wilders' rhetoric about asylum seekers and asylum seeker centres – including repeated calls to "close the borders" and inflammatory comparisons that have led to multiple legal proceedings – fits the pattern this article calls the "seduction of certainty." Complex questions of migration policy, housing, integration and international law are reduced to a single enemy. The leader who names the enemy most loudly appears to understand the problem most clearly.

This article warns that this dynamic is particularly powerful "during economic uncertainty or social upheaval, when a promise of decisive action may carry more weight than detailed competence or ethical consistency." Wilders has governed – as the dominant coalition partner in the Dutch government in parts of 2024 and 2025 – in precisely such a climate, with housing shortages, rising costs and institutional distrust creating fertile ground for the politics of threat.

Equally relevant is this article's observation about dissent. Within the PVV, there is effectively no internal democracy: Wilders is the party's sole member, and parliamentary candidates serve at his discretion. This article describes leaders who eliminate the possibility of opposition, creating an echo chamber in which "the leader is protected from discomfort, but also from learning." A party structure that makes disagreement structurally impossible is a textbook example of this mechanism.

CAROLINE VAN DER PLAS AND THE POLITICS OF RESENTMENT

Caroline van der Plas, former leader of the Farmer-Citizen Movement (BBB), rose to national prominence by giving voice to Dutch farmers during the nitrogen crisis – a genuine and painful policy conflict that threatened the livelihoods of thousands of agricultural families. Her appeal was real, and the grievances she articulated were legitimate.

But this article draws a careful distinction between a leader who addresses the conditions that produced resentment and one who cultivates the emotion for political gain. Drawing on research into rural consciousness, the article notes that communities which feel overlooked by urban elites are vulnerable to leaders who "recognise their anger" without necessarily resolving its causes.

Van der Plas has been notably effective at performing solidarity with farmers – the tractors, the flags, the language of the "forgotten Netherlands" – while her party's actual policy influence in coalition negotiations has been modest. This article's framework raises a pointed question here: is the resentment being addressed, or is it being preserved as a source of loyalty?

There is also a pattern worth noting in Van der Plas's public communication style. She has consistently presented herself as an outsider, a plain-speaker and an opponent of the political establishment – while simultaneously operating as a coalition partner within that establishment. This article describes this as a recognisable form of political performance: the leader who "controls the story rather than doing the work."

A SHARED MECHANISM

What connects Wilders and Van der Plas – despite their very different styles and constituencies – is the underlying dynamic this article identifies most clearly: the transformation of genuine public grievance into personal political capital.

This article does not suggest that the grievances are invented. Housing pressure, migration policy and the nitrogen crisis are real problems that Dutch institutions have handled imperfectly. The question the article poses is a different one: does the leader use the grievance to build something, or to build themselves?

A leader who addresses resentment creates policy, accepts trade-offs and explains complexity. A leader who cultivates resentment keeps the wound open, because a wound that heals is no longer useful.

THE SAME CAUTION APPLIES

As with the analysis of Trump's second term, this comparison is not a verdict. It is an application of a framework – one drawn from leadership psychology and organisational research – to publicly observable behaviour. Reasonable people will interpret that behaviour differently, and political context always matters.

What the framework offers is not a conclusion but a set of questions. Are the grievances being addressed or amplified? Is complexity being explained or eliminated? Is the leader building institutional capacity – or personal dependency?

Those questions are worth asking in The Hague as much as in Washington.

BOX - METHODOLOGICAL JUSTIFICATION: THE HUMAN-AI ARCHITECTURE

FROM EXECUTION TO ARCHITECTURE

The production of this report serves as another practical case study in the evolution of modern work. A first similar report was published about the impact of AI. The text of this report, largely compiled by AI from video sources, shows that the successful application of Artificial Intelligence is not a replacement for human agency, but a mandate for its evolution. The human researcher involved transitioned from a traditional "executor" of analysing and writing tasks to a "Director" or an "Architect of Outcomes". In an era where AI can process vast transcripts and draft complex analyses, the human value-add has shifted to Meta-Cognition - identifying which geopolitical and economic problems are worth exploring - and Strategic Synthesis - combining disparate AI-generated insights into this coherent and relevant report. This collaboration represents a "Human-in-the-Loop" methodology, where the algorithm provides the analytical muscle while the human provides the ethical and strategic compass.

DATA ACQUISITION AND AUTOMATED TRANSCRIPTION

The foundation of this research was a curated selection of high-level video content (YouTube).

To manage the scale of the data, a custom PHP-based automation was developed to interface with the TranscriptAPI.

- The Process: This script systematically retrieved raw transcripts, ensuring that metadata - such as video titles, author information, and precise timestamps - was preserved.
- The Goal: By automating the "execution" of data retrieval, the researcher was freed to focus on the "architecture" of the inquiry.

INTERROGATIVE ANALYSIS (THE Q&A FRAMEWORK)

Rather than allowing the AI to generate generic summaries, a rigorous interrogative method was employed using GPT-4o. The AI was asked to collect information about some ten different topics and contributed to this selection based on the video sources.

The AI was strictly constrained to the provided transcript. This ensured that the resulting data remained grounded in the primary source material, preventing "hallucinations" and preserving the unique nuances of the expert speakers.

The outputs were consolidated into a structured CSV format, creating a searchable and verifiable knowledge base for the final drafting phase.

The results of the AI analyses on the videos from a playlist are available via this link:

- The Confident Incompetent

NARRATIVE SYNTHESIS AND EDITORIAL REFINEMENT

The final stage involved the synthesis of these structured insights into the report. This was performed using Gemini 3 Flash and GPT 5.1 and 5.2, acting as a sophisticated research assistants.

- Strategic Synthesis: The AI integrated the collected data with the broader available full transcripts. The human architect guided this process by defining the narrative arc and ensuring that the tone remained professional and aligned with British English (UK) standards.

- Citations and Verification: A systematic referencing system was maintained throughout, ensuring that every claim in the report can be traced back to the original video source via the consolidated reference list. However, some hallucinations were noticed, so the referencing may contain errors.

THE SYNERGY OF INTELLIGENCE

This methodology demonstrates that the future of high-level research lies in the synergy between human and machine. The AI provided the speed and scale necessary to process thousands of minutes of video to an acceptable non-scientific report, while the human researcher provided the Empathy, Ethics, and Strategic Vision required to turn raw data into a meaningful contribution to the discourse on in this case incompetent leaders.

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