The Warren Harding Error: Why We Fall for Tall, Dark, and Handsome Men
by Malcolm Gladwell

Early one morning in 1899, in the back garden of the Globe Hotel in Richwood, Ohio, two men met while having their shoes shined. One was a lawyer and lobbyist from the state capital of Columbus. His name was Harry Daugherty. He was a thick-set, red-faced man with straight black hair, and he was brilliant. He was the Machiavelli of Ohio politics, the classic behind-the-scenes fixer, a shrewd and insightful judge of character or, at least, political opportunity. The second man was a newspaper editor from the small town of Marion, Ohio, who was at that moment a week away from winning election to the Ohio state senate. His name was Warren Harding. Daugherty looked over at Harding and was instantly overwhelmed by what he saw. As the journalist Mark Sullivan wrote, of that moment in the garden:

"Harding was worth looking at. He was at the time about 35 years old. His head, features, shoulders and torso had a size that attracted attention; their proportions to each other made an effect which in any male at any place would justify more than the term handsome— in later years, when he came to be known beyond his local world, the word "Roman" was occasionally used in descriptions of him. As he stepped down from the stand, his legs bore out the striking and agreeable proportions of his body; and his lightness on his feet, his erectness, his easy bearing, added to the impression of physical grace and virility. His suppleness, combined with his bigness of frame, and his large, wide-set rather glowing eyes, heavy black hair, and markedly bronze complexion gave him some of the handsomeness of an Indian. His courtesy as he surrendered his seat to the other customer suggested genuine friendliness toward all mankind. His voice was noticeably resonant, masculine, warm. His pleasure in the attentions of the bootblack's whisk reflected a consciousness about clothes unusual in a small-town man. His manner as he bestowed a tip suggested generous good-nature, a wish to give pleasure, based on physical well-being and sincere kindliness of heart."

In that instant, as Daugherty sized up Harding, an idea came to him that would alter American history: Wouldn't that man make a great President?

Warren Harding was not a particularly intelligent man. He liked to play poker and golf and to drink and, most of all, to chase women; in fact, his sexual appetites were the stuff of legend. As he rose from one political office to another, he never once distinguished himself. He was vague and ambivalent on matters of policy. His speeches were once described as "an army of pompous phrases moving over the landscape in search of an idea." After being elected to the U.S. Senate in 1914, he was absent for the debates on women's suffrage and Prohibition— two of the biggest political issues of his time. He advanced steadily from local Ohio politics only because he was pushed by his wife, Florence, and stage-managed by the scheming Harry Daugherty and because, as he grew older, he grew more and more irresistibly distinguished-looking. Once, at a banquet, a supporter cried out, "Why, the son of a bitch looks like a senator," and so he did. By early middle age, Harding's biographer Francis Russell writes, his "lusty black eyebrows contrasted with his steel-gray hair to give the effect of force, his massive shoulders and bronzed complexion gave the effect of health." Harding, according to Russell, could have put on a toga and stepped onstage in a production of Julius Caesar. Daugherty arranged for Harding to address the 1916 Republican presidential convention because he knew that people only had to see Harding and hear that magnificent rumbling voice to be convinced of his worthiness for higher office. In 1920, Daugherty convinced Harding, against Harding's better judgment, to run for the White House. Daugherty wasn't being facetious. He was serious.

"Daugherty, ever since the two had met, had carried in the back of his mind the idea that Harding would make a 'great President,'" Sullivan writes. "Sometimes, unconsciously, Daugherty expressed it, with more fidelity to exactness, 'a great-looking President.'" Harding entered the Republican convention that summer sixth among a field of six. Daugherty was unconcerned. The convention was deadlocked between the two leading candidates, so, Daugherty predicted, the delegates would be forced to look for an alternative. To whom else would they turn, in that desperate moment, if not to the man who radiated

common sense and dignity and all that was presidential? In the early morning hours, as they gathered in the smoke-filled back rooms of the Blackstone Hotel in Chicago, the Republican Party bosses threw up their hands and asked, wasn't there a candidate they could all agree on? And one name came immediately to mind: Harding! Didn't he look just like a presidential candidate? So Senator Harding became candidate Harding, and later that fall, after a campaign conducted from his front porch in Marion, Ohio, candidate Harding became President Harding. Harding served two years before dying unexpectedly of a stroke. He was, most historians agree, one of the worst presidents in American history.

I think that there are facts about people's appearance— their size or shape or color or sex— that can trigger a set of powerful associations. Many people who looked at Warren Harding saw how extraordinarily handsome and distinguished-looking he was and jumped to the immediate— and entirely unwarranted— conclusion that he was a man of courage and intelligence and integrity. They didn't dig below the surface. The way he looked carried so many powerful connotations that it stopped the normal process of thinking dead in its tracks.

The Warren Harding error is the dark side of rapid cognition. It is at the root of a good deal of prejudice and discrimination. It's why picking the right candidate for a job is so difficult and why, on more occasions than we may care to admit, utter mediocrities sometimes end up in positions of enormous responsibility. Part of what it means to take rapid cognition and first impressions seriously is accepting the fact that sometimes we can know more about someone or something in the blink of an eye than we can after months of study. But we also have to acknowledge and understand those circumstances when rapid cognition leads us astray.

Over the past few years, a number of psychologists have begun to look more closely at the role these kinds of unconscious— or, as they like to call them, implicit— associations play in our beliefs and behavior, and much of their work has focused on a very fascinating tool called the Implicit Association Test (IAT). The IAT was devised by Anthony G. Greenwald, Mahzarin Banaji, and Brian Nosek, and it is based on a seemingly obvious— but nonetheless quite profound— observation. We make connections much more quickly between pairs of ideas that are already related in our minds than we do between pairs of ideas that are unfamiliar to us. What does that mean? Let me give you an example. Below is a list of words. Take a pencil or pen and assign each name to the category to which it belongs by putting a check mark either to the left or to the right of the word. You can also do it by tapping your finger in the appropriate column. Do it as quickly as you can. Don't skip over words. And don't worry if you make any mistakes.

Male   Female

.... John..................
.... Bob...................
.... Amy..................
.... Holly.................
.... Joan...................
.... Derek.................
.... Peggy.................
.... Jason..................
.... Lisa....................

That was easy, right? And the reason that was easy is that when we read or hear the name "John" or "Bob" or "Holly," we don't even have to think about whether it's a masculine or a feminine name. We all have a strong prior association between a first name like John and the male gender, or a name like Lisa and things female.

That was a warm-up. Now let's complete an actual IAT. It works like the warm-up, except that now I'm going to mix two entirely separate categories together. Once again, put a check mark to either the right or the left of each word, in the category to which it belongs.

Male or Career   Female or Family

.... Lisa........................
.... Matt.......................
.... Laundry...............
 .... Entrepreneur........
.... John........................
.... Merchant...............
 .... Bob........................
.... Capitalist..............
.... Holly....................
.... Joan.......................
.... Home....................
.... Corporation..........
.... Siblings..................
.... Peggy....................
.... Jason.......................
.... Kitchen..................
.... Housework............
.... Parents....................
.... Sarah........................
.... Derek......................

My guess is that most of you found that a little harder, but that you were still pretty fast at putting the words into the right categories. Now try this:

Male or Family   Female or Career

.... Babies..................
.... Sarah....................
.... Derek.................
.... Merchant..............
.... Employment........
..................John........................
.... Bob........................
.... Holly....................
.... Domestic................
.... Entrepreneur.........
.... Office....................
.... Joan.......................
.... Peggy....................
.... Cousins...............
.... Grandparents.........
..................Jason....................
.... Home....................
.... Lisa........................
.... Corporation..........
.... Matt.......................

Did you notice the difference? This test was quite a bit harder than the one before it, wasn't it? If you are like most people, it took you a little longer to put the word "Entrepreneur" into the "Career" category when "Career" was paired with "Female" than when "Career" was paired with "Male." That's because most of us have much stronger mental associations between maleness and career-oriented concepts than we do between femaleness and ideas related to careers. "Male" and "Capitalist" go together in our minds a lot like "John" and "Male" did. But when the category is "Male or Family," we have to stop and think— even if it's only for a few hundred milliseconds— before we decide what to do with a word like "Merchant."

When psychologists administer the IAT, they usually don't use paper and pencil tests like the ones I've just given you. Most of the time, they do it on a computer. The words are flashed on the screen one at a time, and if a given word belongs in the left-hand column, you hit the letter e, and if the word belongs in the right-hand column, you hit the letter i. The advantage of doing the IAT on a computer is that the responses are measurable down to the millisecond, and those measurements are used in assigning the test taker's score. So, for example, if it took you a little bit longer to complete part two of the Work/Family IAT than it did part one, we would say that you have a moderate association between men and the workforce. If it took you a lot longer to complete part two, we'd say that when it comes to the workforce, you have a strong automatic male association.

One of the reasons that the IAT has become so popular in recent years as a research tool is that the effects it is measuring are not subtle; as those of you who felt yourself slowing down on the second half of the Work/Family IAT above can attest, the IAT is the kind of tool that hits you over the head with its conclusions. "When there's a strong prior association, people answer in between four hundred and six hundred milliseconds," says Greenwald. "When there isn't, they might take two hundred to three hundred milliseconds longer than that— which in the realm of these kinds of effects is huge. One of my cognitive psychologist colleagues described this as an effect you can measure with a sundial."

If you'd like to try a computerized IAT, you can go to www.implicit.harvard.edu. There you'll find several tests, including the most famous of all the IATs, the Race IAT. I've taken the Race IAT on many occasions, and the result always leaves me feeling a bit creepy. At the beginning of the test, you are asked what your attitudes toward blacks and whites are. I answered, as I am sure most of you would, that I think of the races as equal. Then comes the test. You're encouraged to complete it quickly. First comes the warm-up. A series of pictures of faces flash on the screen. When you see a black face, you press e and put it in the left-hand category. When you see a white face, you press i and put it in the right-hand category. It's blink, blink, blink: I didn't have to think at all. Then comes part one.

European American or Bad   African American or Good

.... Hurt..................
.... Evil..................
.... Glorious..................
.... Wonderful..................

And so on. Immediately, something strange happened to me. The task of putting the words and faces in the right categories suddenly became more difficult. I found myself slowing down. I had to think. Sometimes I assigned something to one category when I really meant to assign it to the other category. I was trying as hard as I could, and in the back of my mind was a growing sense of mortification. Why was I having such trouble when I had to put a word like "Glorious" or "Wonderful" into the "Good" category when "Good" was paired with "African American" or when I had to put the word "Evil" into the "Bad" category when "Bad" was paired with "European American"? Then came part two. This time the categories were reversed.

European American or Good African American or Bad
.... Hurt..................
.... Evil..................
.... Glorious..................
.... Wonderful..................

And so on. Now my mortification grew still further. Now I was having no trouble at all.
Evil? *African American or Bad.*
Hurt? *African American or Bad.*
Wonderful? *European American or Good.*

I took the test a second time, and then a third time, and then a fourth time, hoping that the awful feeling of bias would go away. It made no difference. It turns out that more than 80 percent of all those who have ever taken the test end up having pro-white associations, meaning that it takes them measurably longer to complete answers when they are required to put good words into the "Black" category than when they are required to link bad things with black people. I didn't do quite so badly. On the Race IAT, I was rated as having a "moderate automatic preference for whites." But then again, I'm half black. (My mother is Jamaican.)

So what does this mean? Does this mean I'm a racist, a self-hating black person? Not exactly. What it means is that our attitudes toward things like race or gender operate on two levels. First of all, we have our conscious attitudes. This is what we choose to believe. These are our stated values, which we use to direct our behavior deliberately. The apartheid policies of South Africa or the laws in the American South that made it difficult for African Americans to vote are manifestations of conscious discrimination, and when we talk about racism or the fight for civil rights, this is the kind of discrimination that we usually refer to. But the IAT measures something else. It measures our second level of attitude, our racial attitude on an unconscious level— the immediate, automatic associations that tumble out before we've even had time to think. We don't deliberately choose our unconscious attitudes. And as I wrote about in the first chapter, we may not even be aware of them. The giant computer that is our unconscious silently crunches all the data it can from the experiences we've had, the people we've met, the lessons we've learned, the books we've read, the movies we've seen, and so on, and it forms an opinion. That's what is coming out in the IAT. The disturbing thing about the test is that it shows that our unconscious attitudes may be utterly incompatible with our stated conscious values. As it turns out, for example, of the fifty thousand African Americans who have taken the Race IAT so far, about half of them, like me, have stronger associations with whites than with blacks. How could we not? We live in North America, where we are surrounded every day by cultural messages linking white with good. "You don't choose to make positive associations with the dominant group," says Mahzarin Banaji, who teaches psychology at Harvard University and is one of the leaders in IAT research. "But you are required to. All around you, that group is being paired with good things. You open the newspaper and you turn on the television, and you can't escape it."

The IAT is more than just an abstract measure of attitudes. It's also a powerful predictor of how we act in certain kinds of spontaneous situations. If you have a strongly pro-white pattern of associations, for example, there is evidence that that will affect the way you behave in the presence of a black person. It's not going to affect what you'll choose to say or feel or do. In all likelihood, you won't be aware that you're behaving any differently than you would around a white person. But chances are you'll lean forward a little less, turn away slightly from him or her, close your body a bit, be a bit less expressive, maintain less eye contact, stand a little farther away, smile a lot less, hesitate and stumble over your words a bit more, laugh at jokes a bit less. Does that matter? Of course it does. Suppose the conversation is a job interview. And suppose the applicant is a black man. He's going to pick up on that uncertainty and distance, and that may well make him a little less certain of himself, a little less confident, and a little less friendly. And what will you think then? You may well get a gut feeling that the applicant doesn't really have what it takes, or maybe that he is a bit standoffish, or maybe that he doesn't really want the job. What this unconscious first impression will do, in other words, is throw the interview hopelessly off course.

Or what if the person you are interviewing is tall? I'm sure that on a conscious level we don't think that we treat tall people any differently from how we treat short people. But there's plenty of evidence to suggest that height— particularly in men— does trigger a certain set of very positive unconscious associations. I polled about half of the companies on the Fortune 500 list— the list of the largest corporations in the United States— asking each company questions about its CEO. Overwhelmingly, the heads of big companies are, as I'm sure comes as no surprise to anyone, white men, which undoubtedly reflects some kind of implicit bias. But they are also almost all tall: in my sample, I found that on average, male CEOs were just a shade under six feet tall. Given that the average American male is five foot nine, that means that CEOs as a group have about three inches on the rest of their sex. But this statistic actually understates the matter. In the U.S. population, about 14.5 percent of all men are six feet or taller. Among CEOs of Fortune 500 companies, that number is 58 percent. Even more striking, in the general American population, 3.9 percent of adult men are six foot two or taller. Among my CEO sample, almost a third were six foot two or taller.

The lack of women or minorities among the top executive ranks at least has a plausible explanation. For years, for a number of reasons having to do with discrimination and cultural patterns, there simply weren't a lot of women and minorities entering the management ranks of American corporations. So, today, when boards of directors look for people with the necessary experience to be candidates for top positions, they can argue somewhat plausibly that there aren't a lot of women and minorities in the executive pipeline. But this is not true of short people. It is possible to staff a large company entirely with white males, but it is not possible to staff a large company without short people. There simply aren't enough tall people to go around. Yet few of those short people ever make it into the executive suite. Of the tens of millions of American men below five foot six, a grand total of ten in my sample have reached the level of CEO, which says that being short is probably as much of a handicap to corporate success as being a woman or an African American. (The grand exception to all of these trends is American Express CEO Kenneth Chenault, who is both on the short side— five foot nine— and black. He must be a remarkable man to have overcome two Warren Harding errors.)

Is this a deliberate prejudice? Of course not. No one ever says dismissively of a potential CEO candidate that he's too short. This is quite clearly the kind of unconscious bias that the IAT picks up on. Most of us, in ways that we are not entirely aware of, automatically associate leadership ability with imposing physical stature. We have a sense of what a leader is supposed to look like, and that stereotype is so powerful that when someone fits it, we simply become blind to other considerations. And this isn't confined to the executive suite. Not long ago, researchers who analyzed the data from four large research studies that had followed thousands of people from birth to adulthood calculated that when corrected for such variables as age and gender and weight, an inch of height is worth $789 a year in salary. That means that a person who is six feet tall but otherwise identical to someone who is five foot five will make on average $ 5,525 more per year. As Timothy Judge, one of the authors of the height-salary study, points out: "If you take this over the course of a 30-year career and compound it, we're talking about a tall person enjoying literally hundreds of thousands of dollars of earnings advantage." Have you ever wondered why so many mediocre people find their way into positions of authority in companies and organizations? It's because when it comes to even the most important positions, our selection decisions are a good deal less rational than we think. We see a tall person and we swoon.