

Who is the Most Memorable American President?

Episodic vs. semantic memory loss and president recall in Alzheimer's disease

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Background/Rationale

Episodic memory loss is a hallmark of Alzheimer's disease (AD), with recall of recent events becoming progressively difficult. We assessed a commonly used tool, the recollection of U.S. presidents, in evaluating episodic vs. semantic memory loss among AD patients compared to spouse controls.

Methods

Thirty-six patients (12 men, 24 women) with possible or probable AD were asked to "give the names of five U.S. presidents" and concurrently administered the MMSE. Twenty-three spouses (12 men, 11 women) were controls. The year 1980 demarcated 'remote' vs. 'recent' presidents.

Results

Patients were older, had lower MMSE scores ($p<0.001$), and recalled fewer presidents than controls ($p<0.005$), after controlling for age. Among patients, men were more educated than women ($p<0.05$) and recalled more presidents ($p<0.001$). No gender differences were observed in controls.

Conclusions

Patients with Alzheimer's disease preferentially recalled remote presidents, supporting retention of semantic memory in this group. There were no gender differences between groups.

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And the remote presidential winners are...

George Washington



Abraham Lincoln



And the recent presidential winners are...

William Clinton



George W. Bush



Table 1: Alzheimer's Patients vs. Controls: Demographics & President Recall Data

		Patients (N=36)	Controls (N=23)	P value
Age (years)		78.47 ± 9.24	73.52 ± 7.91	0.04
Education ¹		1.89 ± 0.67	2.26 ± 0.96	NS
MMSE scores ²		24.53 ± 4.87	28.70 ± 1.66	0.005
No. of presidents recalled (out of 5) ^b		3.50 ± 1.58	5.00 ± 0.00	<0.001
Presidents most recalled	Remote	Washington (18/36) 50%	(10/23) 44%	NS
		Jefferson (12/36) 33%		
		Lincoln (16/36) 44%	(9/23) 39%	
		F.D. Roosevelt (8/36) 22%		
	Recent	Kennedy	(9/23) 39%	<0.001
		Clinton (14/23) 61%		
		G.W. Bush (11/36) 31%	(9/23) 39%	

¹ 0=less than high school; 1=high school; 2=college; 3=grad/med/law

² Age controlled for as appropriate, but had no significant effect on MMSE and number of presidents recalled. p values are from Student's t tests.

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