

# Trump says he shares his famed uncle's science genius. A friend says the uncle 'would have been horrified.'

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John G. Trump, a professor at MIT, won the National Medal of Science. (MIT Museum)



By **Michael Kranish**

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The famed scientist John G. Trump once explained his theory of how to treat one malady by the “direct injection of electrons” into patients’ skin. To treat another disease, he cited tests that showed it was possible to use electrons to “destroy or inactivate hepatitis virus in blood plasma.”

But, President Trump’s uncle [said](#), “We unfortunately were not able to persuade anybody to try this,” because there had been “some casualties among volunteers.”

The president has long said that he and his uncle, who taught physics at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and died in 1985, represent a rare breed of “super genius,” benefiting from the same genes.

It is not known whether the president, in his widely condemned recent suggestion that disinfectant be injected into the body to kill the novel [coronavirus](#), was somehow vaguely channeling his uncle’s theories. What is clear is that Trump has sought repeatedly to present himself as a man of scientific knowledge largely because his uncle was so renowned — and that his efforts in recent weeks have only highlighted the vast gulf between them.

John Trump's thoughts about killing hepatitis are detailed in the [oral history archive at MIT](#). While he could not proceed with his theory, the idea behind it was based on his rigorous study of science. He had a career celebrated for his achievements in saving the lives of cancer patients, cleaning the environment, helping the U.S. military win World War II through radar technology and receiving the National Medal of Science.

President Trump has for years cited the genes he shares with his uncle to try to demonstrate that he, too, has a scientific intellect, an effort that he has stressed while dealing with the novel coronavirus.

*[\[Sign up for our Coronavirus Updates newsletter to track the outbreak. All stories linked in the newsletter are free to access.\]](#)*

“I really get it,” the president said March 6 about benefiting from his bloodline, as he discussed the coronavirus at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. “Maybe I should have done that instead of running for president.”

During his campaign, he told CNN: “I had an uncle who went to MIT who is a top professor. Dr. John Trump. A genius. It’s in my blood. I’m smart.” He [told](#) the Boston Globe that he and his uncle “have very good genetics.”

A family friend who knew John Trump personally said the scientist would have recoiled at Donald Trump’s claim of scientific knowledge when promoting unproven drugs and other treatments.

“The John Trump I knew would have been horrified,” said John Van de Graaff, whose father, the famed scientist Robert Van de Graaff, was John Trump’s longtime business partner.

Van de Graaff told The Washington Post that he joined his father in many conversations with John Trump, and recalled him as a man dedicated to the rigorous testing of ideas who would not have approved of the way the president has blurted out dangerous supposed remedies for the novel coronavirus.

“He would have been distressed by a great deal of what President Trump has done,” Van de Graaff said. “He would have said, ‘Look at the science!’”

The White House did not respond to a request for comment.

In his remarks about the virus, Trump has promoted the use of an anti-malaria drug, hydroxychloroquine, saying that it could be a “game changer” and that patients had nothing to lose.

The Food and Drug Administration, however, later [warned](#) that the drug had not been proved effective to treat the coronavirus and that using it without proper supervision could lead to health complications and even death.

Separately, Trump suggested at a White House briefing that scientists study whether injecting disinfectant into the body could wipe out the virus. But after health officials warned the public against the intake of such products, the president [said](#) he was being sarcastic.

Trump has justified his forays into dispensing scientific advice by citing what he calls his shared traits with his uncle. Yet some who have studied John Trump say they see no justification for linking the intellect of the two men.

Edward Fenner spent five years working on a graduate [research paper](#) at York University of Canada that focused on the partnership between Robert Van de Graaff and John Trump. Fenner said: “What strikes me most is how different [President Trump] is from his uncle. I wish his uncle was alive to inspire the president a little bit. I think he would have been shocked and horrified at his reckless statements.”

Within the Trump family, the idea that the president and his uncle share a unique intellectual capability is embraced. John Trump’s daughter, Christine Philp, said in a telephone interview with The Post that she recalls her family and Donald Trump’s family going on outings together, and she believes that her father and the president share common traits.

“I think he has a good background of being very smart,” Philp said of the president’s family genes. She said his detractors are influenced by “fake news,” echoing a Trump talking point.

*[Trump has referred to his Wharton degree as ‘super genius stuff.’ An admissions officer recalls it differently.]*

Trump’s claim that he shares his uncle’s intellect has not been substantiated in terms of academic records or awards. Trump has said that his admission to what was then called the Wharton School of Finance at the University of Pennsylvania is evidence of “super genius stuff” because, he said, it was the “hardest school to get into, the best school in the world.”

In fact, as [The Post reported last year](#), the undergraduate school attended by Trump accepted more than 40 percent of applicants, and Trump was interviewed by an admissions officer who was his older brother’s close friend. That admissions officer, James Nolan, said it was “not very difficult” to get into the school at the time, and he did not believe that Trump was a “genius.”

## Celebrated scientist



John Trump was one of the century's most celebrated scientists. He was awarded medals by two presidents, Harry Truman and Ronald Reagan, as well as by Britain's King George VI. He helped develop radar equipment that proved crucial in World War II.

John Trump in June 1952.  
(MIT Museum)



John Trump was born in 1907, part of the wider Trump family that had settled in New York. His father was Fred Trump, the president's grandfather. When John Trump was 11 years old, Fred Trump died of the flu during the 1918 pandemic. John Trump's brother, also named Fred Trump, would be the president's father.

As John and Fred grew up together, John attended college and headed for a career in science, while Fred focused on real estate development.

After attending the Polytechnic Institute of Brooklyn, Columbia University and MIT, John Trump became a scientist at the Massachusetts school, where he spent the next four decades on a variety of groundbreaking projects.

After the setback in his effort to kill the hepatitis virus, Trump helped develop a 2 million-volt machine that could be used to treat hospital patients, particularly cancer patients who needed powerful but highly selective treatment, protecting adjacent tissues. It was one of his greatest medical accomplishments, saving and extending lives.

The military came calling. During World War II, Trump developed radar that helped American forces and produced jamming equipment that undermined enemy communications. His work was considered so valuable that he accompanied U.S. forces in Europe to improve handling of the devices.

In the midst of the war, John Trump was working for the National Defense Research Committee when he was [asked by the FBI to investigate](#) whether the Serbian American electrical engineer Nikola Tesla had invented a “death ray” beam machine that might have gotten into enemy hands.

Trump went to the New Yorker Hotel room where Tesla had died and spent three days examining his papers, before concluding there was nothing to indicate that the scientist had a “workable” idea for such a weapon. Some of Tesla’s papers went missing, leaving questions about what information Trump based his decision upon.

## Science and the environment

John Trump later turned his scientific genius to solving environmental problems, including an effort to clean certain types of waste, which the Associated Press covered in a story headlined “Sewage Sludge Problem Solved.”

The [story](#) quoted John Trump as saying he thought the venture was “very important” because it showed that electron beams could be used to destroy viruses that lived in sewage, a comment that tied together the value of environmental policy and public health.

Yet President Trump has cited his uncle in explaining his claim that climate change, which [the World Health Organization has tied to a rise in viruses](#), is a “hoax,” [as he has said on Twitter](#).

Asked in a 2016 [interview](#) by the Associated Press about research by scientists who said climate change “is nearing a point where this can’t be reversed,” candidate Trump responded: “No, no. Some say that and some say differently. I mean, you have scientists on both sides of it. My uncle was a great professor at MIT for many years. Dr. John Trump. And I didn’t talk to him about this particular subject, but I have a natural instinct for science, and I will say that you have scientists on both sides of the picture.”

In fact, 97 percent of climate scientists agree that the temperature is warming, which is “extremely likely due to human activities,” [according to NASA](#).

Trump’s doubts about climate change brought him into contact with William Happer, a Princeton physicist who said in an interview he doubts studies that say the Earth is significantly warming. When Trump talked to Happer about an eventual year-long position as a science adviser, he asked whether Happer was familiar with his uncle.

When Happer replied affirmatively, the president surprised him by bringing up what Happer called “some technical details” about John Trump’s work. Still, Happer said, “I didn’t have the feeling he had a deep knowledge, but it showed he had apparently heard his uncle talk about this.”

As for Trump’s belief that his shared genes give him scientific intelligence, Happer said: “Relatives are all different from each other. I don’t think that means a whole lot.”

After John Trump died in 1985, Reagan awarded him [a posthumous National Medal of Science](#) “for his introduction of new machines and methods for the widespread beneficial application of ionizing radiation to medicine, industry and atomic physics.”

A former business partner, Denis Robinson, wrote an [obituary](#) for Physics Today that remains one of the most vivid portraits of John Trump. It sharply contrasts with the president’s traits of attacking enemies, airing grievances and extolling unproven ideas.

John Trump “was remarkably even tempered, with kindness and consideration to all, never threatening or arrogant in manner, even when under high stress,” Robinson wrote in 1985. “He was outwardly and in appearance the mildest of men, with a convincing persuasiveness, carefully marshalling his facts.”

*Alice Crites contributed to this report.*