

Why the rush to get US Vice President Cheney back on the job?

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Under the US Constitution, the vice president of the United States has no prescribed duties except the largely formal one of presiding over the Senate, where he exercises only the power to cast a deciding vote in the event of a tie. Otherwise, the vice president is held in reserve, to succeed to the presidency in the event of death or incapacity of the president.

Something very different is at work in the Bush administration, as evidenced by the obscene haste in rushing Richard Cheney back to work after his angioplasty, the second serious heart procedure the vice president has undergone in four months. Cheney left George Washington University Medical Center Tuesday morning and returned directly to work in his official residence. He was back at his desk in the White House the following day.

Angioplasty is a medical procedure with serious consequences even in the best of circumstances, and Cheney's are hardly the best. The vice president is 60 years old and has had heart disease for at least 20 years, including four heart attacks—the first of which occurred when he was 37—and a quadruple bypass operation, one of the most complicated and intrusive of surgical procedures.

Medical authorities commenting in the press were careful not to openly criticize Cheney's quick return to work, but it is clear that no conscientious cardiologist would advocate that a recovering heart patient plunge back immediately into a stressful job. A boss who ordered a subordinate back to work under such conditions would be considered inhumane. Such an action is both extraordinary and reckless.

Cheney, of course, does not occupy just any job. He plays a central—or, more precisely, *the* central—role in the Bush administration, at the summit of the American government and the center of world politics. According

to his own doctors, there is a 40 percent chance that he will suffer another such episode of chest pain from scar tissue forming around the metal brace, or stent, which holds open his artery. According to the Duke Data Bank for Cardiovascular Disease, there is a 1 in 10 statistical probability, given his medical condition, that Cheney will die before completing his four-year term in office.

The statements about this episode coming from Bush administration spokesmen range from the silly to the bizarre. They have uniformly downplayed the significance of the heart problem, described the emergency operation as a “precautionary measure,” and dismissed any concern over Cheney's immediate return to work.

Perhaps the strangest comments came from Bush himself, who first avowed that he was no doctor, then pronounced the opinion that Cheney was fully recovered and capable of performing his duties. (This from the man who concealed Cheney's heart attack last November—or perhaps was not even informed of it by his handlers.)

For any modern American administration, the incapacity of the vice president would constitute a significant political problem, simply because the vice president is next in the line of succession to the presidency. Eight vice presidents—John Tyler, Millard Fillmore, Andrew Johnson, Chester Arthur, Theodore Roosevelt, Harry Truman, Lyndon Johnson and Gerald Ford—have succeeded to the presidency on the death (or in Ford's case resignation) of a president.

After Johnson succeeded the assassinated John F. Kennedy in November 1963, the office of vice president lay vacant for 14 months. This prompted passage of the 25th Amendment to the US Constitution in 1967, providing that in the event of such a vacancy

the president nominates a new vice president, with the approval of a majority of each house of Congress. The importance of this provision became clear when Ford replaced Nixon's disgraced vice president, Spiro Agnew, in 1973—clearing the way for the ouster of Nixon himself and Ford's assumption of the presidency. President Ford in his turn named Nelson Rockefeller as vice president.

In the present case, the possible incapacity of the vice president constitutes a full-blown political crisis because, as the media is well aware, Vice President Cheney is the man actually running the country. According to press accounts of the internal functioning of the Bush administration, Cheney has assumed the following roles:

- * chief of personnel, heading up Bush's transition team which selected his cabinet, White House staff and lower-level appointees.

- * chief authority on national security matters, working with Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, Cheney's mentor in Republican politics, and Secretary of State Colin Powell, his partner in the 1991 Persian Gulf War.

- * chief arbiter of budget matters, as chairman of the budget review board, the group of senior officials who reviewed budget requests from cabinet members and federal agencies.

Cheney is, moreover, the administration's point man in dealings with Congress.

According to the *Washington Post*, which published a detailed article March 2 on the functioning of the budget review board, President Bush had “little hands-on involvement” in budget decisions, while Cheney “played a role similar to the one President Clinton did over the last eight years,” serving as the final decision-maker on disputed budget items. Not a single decision by the Cheney-led group was appealed to Bush, the newspaper said.

The accounts of Cheney's activities on the day of his hospitalization demonstrate his centrality in the day-to-day operations of the White House. After ignoring twinges of chest pain on Saturday and again on Sunday, he held a meeting with Colin Powell, just back from his trip to the Middle East, and other meetings with top officials during the day, before calling his doctor and checking into the hospital at 3 pm.

Meanwhile, George W. Bush, the nominal president,

was on the road selling his tax cut plan to enrich the wealthy in a series of media events.

Cheney's role in the government underscores the fraudulent and anti-democratic character of the new administration, which only came to power because of the systematic suppression of votes in Florida and the unprecedented intervention of the Supreme Court to halt a legally authorized vote recount.

Bush, with no discernable capacities either as an administrator or an intellect, but having a famous name and a saleable public persona (“compassionate conservatism”), serves as a front man. The real business of the government is transacted by direct representatives of big business—former Halliburton CEO Cheney, former Alcoa CEO Paul O'Neill (Treasury), former G.D. Searle CEO Donald Rumsfeld (Defense), former Eli Lilly executive Mitch Daniels (OMB)—and, of course, former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs Colin Powell, the political general *par excellence*.

These relationships are well understood in official Washington, but covered up by the corporate-controlled media as well as the Democratic Party, which mounted only a token opposition to the pseudo-constitutional coup d'etat through which the Republicans took control of the White House, and has since then gone to great lengths to affirm the supposed legitimacy of the new administration.

But despite the best efforts of the Democrats to prop up Bush, the new administration is politically fragile and feels it has little leeway for carrying through its program of social reaction and militarism. As Cheney's latest brush with mortality illustrates, the American ruling elite is relying on a team at the height of government that pairs palpable ignorance with demonstrated infirmity—a formula for political crisis of the first order.



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