

Why the big fuss over Bush's colonoscopy?

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Every year hundreds of thousands of middle-aged Americans endure a procedure known as a colonoscopy, the examination of the mucosal lining of the large intestine with a flexible fiber-optic scope. After subsisting for about 24 hours on a diet of clear liquids and several doses of laxatives, the patients arrive at a hospital or physician's office for the procedure. In order to reduce the discomfort that would otherwise make the examination a distinctly unpleasant experience, they generally choose to be mildly sedated. When the procedure is completed, within 20 to 30 minutes, patients regain full possession of their mental faculties and physical abilities almost immediately. Only one restriction is placed on their activities in the aftermath of the procedure. They are not permitted to operate a motor vehicle for several hours. Patients are told by their physicians that they must be driven home or back to work by a family member or friend.

All in all, a colonoscopy is no big deal ... except, it now seems, when the large intestine to be explored belongs to the current occupant of the White House. Then, what is for everyone else little more than a pain in the ass is elevated to an event of constitutional moment.

On the eve of the president's colonoscopy, it was announced with great solemnity that Mr. Bush had decided (or, more correctly, he had been instructed) to invoke the 25th Amendment of the Constitution, which provides for the transfer of power to the vice president while the chief executive is incapacitated and unable to discharge the duties of his office.

The amendment was drafted and ratified in the aftermath of the assassination of President John F. Kennedy in November 1963. Several hours after Kennedy had been pronounced dead, he was succeeded by Vice President Lyndon Baines Johnson. For the next 14 months, the office of the vice president remained vacant.

The 25th Amendment was designed to deal with this constitutional anomaly and also to address one further unsettled question: What is to be done when the president is, for whatever reason, significantly incapacitated, though still alive, and physically incapable of even formally dealing with the responsibilities of his office? This question had rankled lawmakers and scholars of the Constitution since the administration of Woodrow Wilson. The 28th president suffered a stroke in 1919 that left him effectively incapacitated during the last year of his term. While close aides and physicians kept the seriousness of Wilson's condition from the public, the power of the presidency was wielded by none other than his strong-willed wife, Edith Galt.

The purpose of the 25th Amendment was to prevent similar abuses of presidential powers and, more broadly, to cope with an unanticipated crisis of executive authority.

However, President Bush's invocation of the 25th Amendment, with all its far-reaching constitutional and political significance, was out of all proportion to the situation that existed on Saturday morning. Why was it necessary to formally transfer presidential powers to Vice President Richard Cheney while Bush underwent a minor non-surgical procedure? Was the situation that existed on Saturday morning so fundamentally different from that which exists when Mr. Bush takes a nap?

Far more is involved here than the fatuous official explanation that the president was being exceptionally cautious "in time of war." In the context of the history of the American presidency, the transfer of power on such feeble grounds reveals a great deal about the state of American democracy.

As a review of American history would illustrate, no political relationship has been fraught with so much tension and bitterness as that of the president and the vice president. From the days of Washington and

Adams or Jefferson and Burr, all the way to Kennedy and Johnson or Nixon and Ford, the relationship between the chief executive and his constitutionally designated successor was not infrequently one of mutual contempt, if not outright hatred. To some extent, given the highly subjective character of bourgeois politics, the element of conflicting ambitions played no small role in the hostile relations between the president and the individual who had the most to gain personally from the commander-in-chief's death.

However, there have always existed deeper social and political issues at the root of the antagonism. From the earliest days of the Republic, the formation of the presidential ticket required the creation of a coalition of disparate social forces and interests. Political necessity often required the presidential nominees of major parties to select their running mates from a list consisting of the names of their chief rivals. The "balanced ticket" that emerged from the process enabled the parties to reach beyond the favored social, economic and regional constituencies of the individual candidates.

The "unity" of the presidential ticket rarely survived the election. Once the presidential candidate was in the White House, he did all he could—within the limits of political propriety—to limit the power and influence of his "second-in-command." As John Nance Garner, the once-powerful Texas senator who served under Franklin Delano Roosevelt for two terms, commented bitterly, "The vice president is about as useful as a cow's fifth teat."

Even if a president would have liked to show greater consideration to the sensibilities of his vice president, the political concerns of his own constituencies placed clear limits on the extent of his political generosity. The deft maneuvering of a master of bourgeois politics like Roosevelt reflected, in the final analysis, a balancing of conflicting social forces. This required that Roosevelt remain elusive about his own intentions. All the political factions that whirled around the White House tended to believe that Roosevelt was on *their* side. He, in turn, was careful never to tip his hand too quickly or openly.

One of Roosevelt's most ruthless displays of hard-nosed maneuvering among political factions within his own party was his decision to drop Vice President Henry Wallace from the national ticket in 1944. Among

the last to know of Roosevelt's decision was Wallace himself.

Not every president possessed the political virtuosity of a Roosevelt. But to the extent that a president's political authority really depended on the active support of mass constituencies, he would be inclined to avoid too close an identification with the political interests of his own vice president, lest he offend influential constituencies associated with other political figures.

When President Eisenhower was asked, for example, to name one important idea that his vice president, Richard Nixon, had contributed to his administration, he replied famously, "Give me a week and maybe I'll think of one."

What then is the significance of last weekend's official transfer of power?

First and foremost, the entire operation demonstrates the extent to which presidential power has become estranged from any significant mass social base. Neither Bush nor anyone else in his administration feels obligated to answer to any broad-based constituency beyond a plutocratic social elite and the upper echelons of the state bureaucracy (especially its military contingent), in whose interests the affairs of the government are conducted. The transfer of power assumes a purely technical and administrative character.

Moreover, the ostentatious declaration that the vice president would be the acting president reaffirms both the insignificance of Bush and the dominant role of Cheney. Just as he instructed Bush to make him his vice president, Cheney ordered Bush to make him acting president. While Bush probably did not understand the broader implications of what he had been told to do, one can be quite certain that Cheney did. The formal transfer of power demonstrated not only Cheney's paramount political position, but also that of the corporate-military elite of whom he is the most brutal and unabashed representative.



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