
Toward a Prozac Presidency?

"*Travails of the Chief*" by Robert E. Gilbert, in *The Sciences* (Jan.-Feb. 1993), New York Acad. of Sciences, Two E. 63rd St., New York, N.Y. 10021.

Calvin Coolidge (1872-1933) is remembered as an indifferent president who favored short workdays and long naps. When he died, only four years after leaving the White House, writer Dorothy Parker asked: "How can they tell?" But Northeastern University political scientist Gilbert says that Silent Cal had not always been so given to lassitude.

Elected governor of Massachusetts in 1918, Coolidge proved a vigorous executive and won national acclaim for breaking the Boston police strike of 1919. Elected to the vice presidency the next year, he became president in August 1923 when Warren Harding died of a stroke. "Coolidge moved swiftly and surefootedly to consolidate his hold on the reins of government," Gilbert writes. "He worked long hours and appeared to enjoy himself immensely. In his first message to Congress he set forth in direct, unequivocal language his positions on a wide range of issues. He spoke as a strong, even activist chief executive—quite the antithesis of his historical reputation."

The turnabout in Coolidge's political ways, Gilbert says, came in the summer of 1924, when he was on the verge of a landslide electoral triumph. His 16-year-old son, Calvin, Jr., died of blood poisoning, which had developed from a blister. The tragedy shattered the president. "Unbeknownst to all but a few intimates, Coolidge began suffering

from a paralyzing depression," Gilbert writes. He "withdrew almost completely from interaction with Congress and showed little interest even in the departments of his own government. His workdays shrank, and his naps grew longer and more frequent." Coolidge was only 60 when he died of heart disease.

One way or another, it seems, the stress of life can take a heavy toll in the White House. Leaving aside the four presidents who were assassinated (Lincoln, Garfield, McKinley, and Kennedy) and the six who are still living, Gilbert points out that 21 chief executives died before their time. Only 10 defied the actuaries. The longest-lived ones, ironically, were the first 10 (George Washington through John Tyler), who died at an average age of 77.9 years—well *beyond* their life expectancy.

Stress makes depression and other psychological woes an occupational hazard of the presidency. Yet there are no adequate safeguards to protect against a recurrence of the Coolidge phenomenon.

The 25th Amendment, enacted in 1967, puts the burden on the vice president and the Cabinet to act if the president becomes incapacitated. Determining if a president is physically incapacitated can be difficult enough, Gilbert notes; challenging a president's mental fitness is almost unimaginable.

Suppose in the case of Coolidge, apparently suffering from a major depression, that Vice President Charles G. Dawes had declared the chief executive "psychologically impaired," and then set about removing him from office. The public reaction can only be imagined, Gilbert says, but it "seems unlikely that even Silent Cal would have remained mute in the face of such a challenge."

FOREIGN POLICY & DEFENSE

The New Jingoists

"*The New Interventionists*" by Stephen John Stedman, in *Foreign Affairs* (special issue, 1992-93), Council on Foreign Relations, 58 East 68th St., New York, N.Y. 10021.

The intoxicating post-Cold War freedom from old constraints has spawned a new breed of American interventionist. Invoking the moral obligations of the international community, these "new interventionists"—an odd coalition of Wilsonian internationalists and former anticommunist crusaders—

now call for the United Nations to intervene in civil conflicts in the former Yugoslavia, Somalia, and elsewhere. Stedman, a professor at the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies, contends that many of these "new interventionists" are unrealistic.

To begin with, he notes, civil wars are no more frequent now than they were before the Cold War ended. There are 18 civil wars raging today; in 1985 there were 19. Such conflicts have been among the hardest to settle politically, and today's "should not be expected to be more amenable to