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Why McCain and His Running Mate Demand Special Scrutiny

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by Nancy C. Unger

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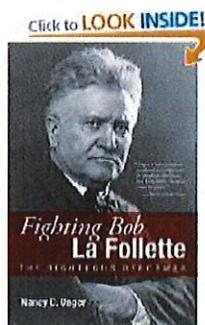
The supporters of presidential candidate John McCain aggressively pooh-poooh concerns about his age and health history. That which hasn't killed him, they argue, has made him stronger. But a study of past American leaders reveals that those who think McCain's long history of toughness makes him invincible had better think again.

Of the eight presidents who have died in office, four were killed by assassins. Youth and a clean bill of health remain no match for bullets. The running mates of even young and vigorous presidents should be completely qualified to take over all presidential duties in a heartbeat. But older candidates with a history of health concerns and their running mates require special scrutiny.

Admittedly, McCain does have an extensive and admirable history of triumphing over physical adversity. From the torture he endured during his years as a prisoner of war to his more recent battles against malignant melanomas, McCain has persevered. Certainly he has worked extraordinarily hard as a U.S. senator, hailed by his admirers as a maverick for his fearless, unrelenting pursuit for what he believes is right, no matter what the consequences.

But even tireless fighters are forced, sooner or later, to limit the number and intensity of their bouts. They may go down fighting but they do, ultimately, go down.

At age 72, however, despite a lengthening roster of health concerns, McCain is speeding up rather than slowing down. He is currently immersed in an exhausting campaign. If he's successful, he'll immediately begin a marathon that will last a minimum of four years.



The rigors of the campaign alone have killed men younger than McCain. Wisconsin Senator Robert "Fighting Bob" La Follette was 69 when he ran for the presidency in 1924. Like McCain, he deflected concerns about his physical condition, proclaiming, despite much medical evidence to the contrary, "I was never in better fighting trim in my life."

Like McCain, La Follette sincerely believed that he had the vitality to serve two terms. His campaign literature highlighted the achievements of leaders past the age of 70, including Benjamin Franklin, John Quincy Adams and Henry Clay.

The effort of his failed presidential bid contributed significantly to La Follette's death the following year. Had he won, the nation would have been led by his vice-presidential candidate, Burton K. Wheeler. A Democrat from sparsely populated Montana, Wheeler was a virtual unknown, having been in the Senate less than a year when he joined La Follette's ticket.

The crushing challenges of the office (ones that presidents could not have anticipated during their campaigns) have destroyed men who began their terms at younger ages and in better health than McCain. Woodrow Wilson was first elected under the slogan "He Kept Us Out of War," but events ultimately drew him, and the nation, into World War I.

Wilson served out his second term in office in name only, his health broken by his desperate, and failed, attempt to persuade the American public to support his plans for the postwar peace. The series of strokes he suffered at the age of 63 would have killed an older, less vigorous man. Instead, they left him "only" permanently incapacitated.

Like McCain, Franklin Roosevelt suffered from a pre-existing condition (polio). Pictures of Roosevelt taken during his final year of life show the effects of the accelerated aging process that come with a presidency fraught with trials -- like the one facing McCain. Roosevelt was so aged from carrying the weight of the world on his shoulders -- first, the Great Depression, then World War II -- that it's hard to believe that when he died in office of a cerebral hemorrhage he was only 63.

Even the most indomitable will cannot forestall death. The fates of La Follette, Wilson and Roosevelt serve as a reminder of the frailty of even the greatest hearts -- and the importance of highly qualified vice presidents. In view of McCain's age, health, the toll of his current strenuous campaign and the challenges ahead should he win, his fitness, as well as the fitness of his running mate to step in and lead the nation, demand special scrutiny.

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