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Gene Healy: Staying sane when you are the President

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July 21, 2009

It's hard not to worry about the president's grip on reality.

I don't mean Barack Obama specifically--he seems fairly even-keeled as chief executives go. No, I mean all modern presidents. Each lives in an atmosphere that can make even the most well-adjusted personalities intoxicated with power.

And given the massive power the modern president wields, we ought to give more thought than we do to how the Oval Office environment can warp character.

One of our greatest--and sanest--chief executives, Calvin Coolidge, wrote in 1929 that it was hard for the president to "avoid the malady of self delusion," living as he does in an "artificial atmosphere of adulation and exaltation."

Coolidge, who had a meager staff of 38, didn't know the half of it. Today's president lives in a bubble of hundreds of sycophants, flies a tricked-out 747, and knows that he's the most powerful man in any room he enters. Indeed, the president's social environment looks like a mad psychologist's experiment designed to test the validity of Lord Acton's axiom that absolute power corrupts absolutely.

Silent Cal couldn't have imagined the atmosphere of celebrity adoration that envelops today's chief: "OMG! Obama swatted a fly! So cool! He went to Ray's Hell Burger! Just like any normal person with a massive Secret Service detail!" How long could any of us remain "grounded" in an environment where we're constantly treated like a god?

Cornell psychologist Robert Millman argues that many celebrities suffer from "Acquired Situational Narcissism." ASN is psychiatry's answer to questions like, "what's Russell Crowe's problem, anyway?"

As Millman explains, otherwise emotionally healthy people often develop delusions of grandeur after they strike it big in Hollywood. When "a celebrity walks into a room," Millman writes, "everyone looks at him: he's a prince." After a while, what happens is that our star "gets so used to everyone looking at him that he stops looking back at them."

Celebrity pathology is harmless fun when we scan US Weekly on the checkout line. If fame and fortune go to an actor's head, he ends up like Tom Cruise, jumping up and down on Oprah's couch, no harm done to the wider world. But if the president loses his grip, there's rather more at stake.

Past presidents, drunk on adulation and tormented by responsibilities no movie star faces, have indeed lost their grip. In an Oval Office meeting in 1967, asked by a reporter why America was in Vietnam, LBJ unzipped his fly, wagged the presidential member at his questioner, and exclaimed, "this is why!" Two presidential aides consulted psychiatrists about Johnson's sanity.

Richard Nixon's aides had similar concerns as Watergate flared and Nixon's behavior became increasingly erratic. The latest batch of Watergate tapes, released last month, add detail to that picture.

Barack Obama seems to recognize the psychological dangers that accompany life in the presidential "bubble." In *The Audacity of Hope*, he describes a meeting with President Bush, where, as a new senator, Obama was struck by Bush's "messianic certainty," and "reminded of the dangerous isolation that power can bring."

By all accounts, Obama has tried to guard against Oval Office isolation. He's encouraged dissent among his aides and made a point of keeping his Blackberry.

But those steps are hardly equal to the temptations the modern president faces.


It's nice that Obama has kept his hand-held device; it shows, as John Podesta put it, his desire to "stay connected to people." Yet few have the president's email address, and those who do are scared to use it.

With the best will in the world, no president can avoid that fate. The Founders' presidency was a comparatively humble office, a "chief magistrate" constrained by constitutional limits and enjoying few of the trappings of great power. But as presidential responsibility and power have swelled, the presidency has become larger than life.

Examiner columnist Gene Healy is a vice president at the Cato Institute and the author of "The Cult of the Presidency."

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