

reputation” and undermine national security. Not least, it raises uncomfortable questions of medical confidentiality. And exactly what constitutes impairment and how is it determined?

Nevertheless, many legal experts, political scholars, and mental-health experts contend that the nature of world events today demands that the Oval Office be occupied by someone instantly able to muster good judgment. At the same time, the advancing age of presidential contenders amplifies executive vulnerability. Despite the 25th Amendment, the very lack of guidelines and procedures to evaluate whether a president is fit to serve may be imperiling national security.

Jimmy Carter certainly thought so. In 1994, Ronald Reagan revealed that he was suffering from Alzheimer’s disease, sadly confirming what many had suspected, especially during his second term. Carter, his presidential predecessor, was stirred to action by the Reagan revelation. He convened a Working Group on Presidential Disability to come up with a way to carry out the aims of the 25th Amendment. It was

coheaded by a neurologist, James Toole, of the Bowman Gray School of Medicine in North Carolina, and a historian, Arthur Link, whose studies of Woodrow Wilson—incapacitated by a series of strokes while in office—made him an authority on presidential impairment.

The group, which also included former White House physicians and constitutional scholars, agreed that the best way to determine fitness for office was through everyday observation as well as neuropsychological tests. Accordingly, it recommended that presidents appoint a senior White House physician to be given high rank and special responsibility to the 25th Amendment.

But a president’s physician has potentially conflicting responsibilities—maintaining patient confidentiality, on the one hand, and informing others in government and the public, on the other. The group disagreed over how to handle the pressure such an individual might be under to conceal information about impairment. The Working Group recommended that



## SURVIVAL (BECAUSE) OF THE FITTEST

**FITNESS FOR DUTY EVALUATIONS ARE STANDARD FOR THOSE WHOSE JOBS AFFECT PUBLIC SAFETY.** *by Katherine Schreiber*

OF THE 326 MILLION inhabitants of the United States, only one is empowered to launch a nuclear weapon that endangers the existence of the seven-plus billion people sharing the planet. The only requirement for holding that power is being a natural-born citizen over 35 years of age who has resided in the country for at least 14 years. But the black suitcase (the “nuclear football”) containing the launch codes that accompanies the president everywhere is carried by military aides who undergo rigorous screening to assure their physical, psychological, and even financial fitness. It may be one of the more cosmic ironies that those who must carry out an order for nuclear destruction are extensively vetted, but the person who makes the decision is not.

Every year, hundreds of thousands of people in the United States, including **military officers** and **government workers** needing security clearance, undergo some formal test of fitness for duty. Fitness for duty screenings aim to reveal underlying medical or mental health conditions that might keep a person from carrying out the essential tasks of the job.

From **pilots to railroad engineers, soldiers to police officers, firefighters to nuclear power workers** and **those who manage hazardous waste**, men and women whose jobs affect public safety routinely undergo tests of fitness that bear on emotional stability, decision making, and stress resistance. Even **NFL players**—those who handle non-nuclear footballs—are required to undergo evaluations as part of the player-selection process; they’re examined not just for their physical stamina and strength but also for their ability to

be coached, their intelligence, drive, and emotional stability, and their work habits.

In addition to those whose hiring hinges on demonstrating fitness for duty, employees in any field who give hints that they might be a risk to their own safety or anyone else’s can be asked to undergo such a test, says Gary Fischler, a police and public safety psychologist based in Minneapolis. Behavioral displays of paranoia, talking incoherently, slurring words, repeatedly failing to follow orders, and generally seeming out of touch with reality, to say nothing of displays of hostility and aggression, could prompt an employer to take a closer look at a worker.

“We want our safety to be placed in the hands of people who can manage the [physical or mental] stresses of their occupation, make critical decisions under pressure, follow protocol, and not surprise us with erratic whims that put us or anyone else in danger,” says Fischler.

The earliest known tests of fitness for duty—dating back more than 2,000 years to the Qin dynasty in China—sorted citizens into occupations and selected those scoring highest to serve in public office. Modern protocols took shape during World War I, to ensure the intellectual and emotional capacity of military recruits streaming into the war machine. The tests took much of their impetus from Charles Darwin, who inspired intense interest in measuring individual differences, and gained steam from the growing industrialization of the workplace. After World War II, schools adopted intelligence and achievement tests to sort students while industry adopted personality tests to identify those who might disrupt efficiency.

For those whose jobs affect public safety, ongoing physical and emotional health is not taken for granted. Pilots, for example, must submit

to medical examination annually; those over 40 must apply for recertification every six months. Broad questions during the medical exam are aimed at assaying psychological well-being (Have you ever been diagnosed with a mental illness? Have you ever smoked marijuana or used illicit drugs?). Affirmative or cagey responses can earn a pilot separate psychological evaluation. Aspiring or established pilots who fudge their medical or mental health history can be slapped with a \$250,000 fine or even jail time.

Many large corporations also evaluate fitness for duty, most often by way of personality tests, aptitude tests (reasoning ability, IQ, or situational judgment), and skills tests. According to a 2014 Global Assessment Trends Report, 73 percent of companies worldwide use skills or knowledge testing to screen applicants; 62 percent deploy personality assessments.

**C-level officers** have traditionally escaped such vetting. But things have shifted since the turn of the millennium. According to a 2013 study of 95 companies published in *Consulting Psychology Journal: Practice and Research*, 90 percent of companies around the world now subject applicants for top positions to personality and cognitive testing.

All the screenings in the world, however, can do only so much, says Michael Welner, clinical professor of psychiatry at the Mount Sinai School of Medicine in New York City and chairman of The Forensic Panel. “Power affects judgments that relate to public safety. Psychological screening, under the circumstances, protects the public far less than does the willingness of those in power to apply the rule of law to prevent others from abusing power.”

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