

FURTHER REVIEW

GOVERNING BODY

By Charles Apple | THE SPOKESMAN-REVIEW

It takes more than clear judgment to be the leader of the free world. It also takes good health.

Sometimes, though, that's not what we get.

On July 1, 1893 — 125 years ago — top-secret surgery was performed on President Grover Cleveland.

Here's a look at notable physical ailments and setbacks suffered by our nation's chief executives.

MOUTH CANCER

Grover Cleveland
JULY 1, 1893



A rough spot on the roof of Cleveland's mouth that had been bothering him turned out to be a nonmalignant tumor. It needed to be removed right away, but Cleveland didn't want to alarm the public. He insisted the procedure be done in secret.

An elaborate ruse was laid: Cleveland took a "vacation" on a private yacht, which was sailed into Long Island Sound. There, surgeons put Cleveland out with nitrous oxide and ether and worked for an hour to cut out the tumor and replace the president's palate with a rubber prosthesis.

A month later, Cleveland delivered a speech to Congress and didn't sound like his jaw had been cut apart. His secret was safe — for nearly a quarter-century: In 1917, one of his surgeons spilled the beans to the Saturday Evening Post.

STROKE

Dwight Eisenhower
NOV. 25, 1957

While running a Cabinet meeting, Eisenhower suddenly found himself unable to speak or move his right hand. He took three days off to rest but it took a while longer for his speech to return to normal.

HEARING

Ronald Reagan
SEPTEMBER 1983

A pistol went off near Reagan's right ear while he was filming a movie in the 1930s. The damage worsened over the years. In 1983, the president began wearing what the New York Times called "a technologically advanced hearing aid." He later began using one in his left ear, as well.

HEART ATTACK

Dwight Eisenhower
SEPTEMBER 24, 1955

Officially, Ike's heart attack was a left anterior myocardial infarction. He was treated with rest, medicine and put on a diet. This held Eisenhower over until his next medical crisis: An obstructed bowel in 1956. Ike had four more heart attacks after leaving office and died in 1969.

HEART DISEASE

Warren G. Harding
AUG. 2, 1923

Over the last 25 years of his life, Harding increasingly suffered from chest pains and shortness of breath. While vacationing, Harding overexerted himself playing golf in Vancouver, British Columbia, and died in his sleep in a San Francisco hotel a few nights later.

ADDISON'S DISEASE

John F. Kennedy

Kennedy suffered from a rare endocrine disorder that left him so ill at one point in 1947 that a priest administered last rites. Yet, the Kennedy campaign in 1960 denied he suffered from Addison's disease. JFK's disorder was a slow atrophy of the adrenal glands, worsened in part by the use of steroids for his back problems.

POLYPS

Ronald Reagan
JULY 13, 1985

Reagan underwent surgery to remove cancerous polyps from his colon.

ALCOHOLISM

Franklin Pierce

On Jan. 6, 1853 — two months before his inauguration — Pierce and his family were in a horrific train crash in which his son was nearly decapitated before his eyes. He became convinced God had taken his son to remove distractions from his presidential duties. Pierce turned to alcohol to soothe his guilt.

POLIO

Franklin D. Roosevelt

Roosevelt contracted polio in 1921 and was paralyzed from the waist down. He used a wheelchair and eventually learned how to walk short distances with heavy iron leg braces and a cane. He took great care to not be photographed in a wheelchair or receiving assistance walking. The media cooperated.

STROKE

Woodrow Wilson
OCT. 3, 1919

Wilson suffered a severe stroke that left him paralyzed on his left side and with only partial vision in his right eye. He was confined to bed for weeks and his condition kept secret from even his closest Cabinet officials. Wilson's wife assisted with his administrative duties. The entire incident led to the passage of the 25th Amendment on presidential incapacity and succession. Historians now think Wilson may have suffered a number of strokes beginning as early as 1896.

MELANOMA

Franklin D. Roosevelt

A book published in 2010 says Roosevelt developed a melanoma over his left eyebrow. The authors speculated the cancer may have metastasized to his stomach.

CARCINOMA

Ronald Reagan

Reagan had three separate surgeries — two in 1985 and one in 1987 — to remove skin cancer cells from his nose.

PNEUMONIA

William Henry Harrison
MARCH 4, 1841

The 68-year-old president gave a two-hour inaugural speech in a frigid drizzle. He caught a cold, which developed into pneumonia and killed him. He was president only 31 days.

CHRONIC BACK PAIN

John F. Kennedy

Kennedy was famous for his back issues — he was once written up in a medical journal. His issues predated his World War II service as a PT boat captain. The steroid treatment Kennedy took for his back may have caused more harm than good.

BOWEL OBSTRUCTION

Dwight Eisenhower
JUNE 9, 1956

Eisenhower suffered from Crohn's disease — a chronically inflamed bowel. At one point, he needed surgery to remove an obstruction and bypass 10 inches of his small intestine. To speed his recovery, the president quit smoking.

BIPOLAR DISORDER

John Adams

Many who knew and worked with the second U.S. president agreed he was emotionally unstable and prone to great tantrums. His health deteriorated with increasing stress.

DEPRESSION

Warren G. Harding

As a young newspaper publisher and budding politician, Harding checked himself into a sanitarium five times between 1889 and 1901 to treat "fatigue, overstrain, and nervous illnesses."

DEPRESSION

Abraham Lincoln

Lincoln suffered from great bouts of depression, especially following the death of his son, Willie, in 1862. Even as a young man, Lincoln wrote from time to time about the possibility of suicide.