

No One is “Mentally Fit” to be President

“Most voters in six 2020 swing states,” an early September CNBC/Change Research poll finds, “do not consider either President Donald Trump or Democratic presidential nominee Joe Biden mentally fit to be president.”

In Arizona, Florida, Michigan, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin, 51% consider Trump mentally unfit for the office, while 52% feel the same way about Biden. Biden holds steady at 52% nationally, while Trump’s unfitness number ramps up to 55%.

Frankly, I find those numbers surprisingly low. No, not because both Trump and Biden are clearly narcissistic sociopaths. Nor because the two of them frequently and publicly behave and speak in ways consistent with dementia or brain damage.

Yes, those things are disturbing, but they’re not anomalous. Most if not all politicians are sociopaths, and at least one (Ronald Reagan) suffered from dementia while still in office and remains well-remembered by many.

The problem is the idea that any human being is even remotely “mentally fit” to the office of President of the United States as that office exists today.

George Washington presided over a federal government weaker than any of the 14 then-existing state governments, boasting a population smaller than that of Los Angeles alone today, lacking foreign territories or possessions, and for the most part eschewing foreign policy entanglements.

Donald Trump presides over a too-strong federal government and a sprawling global empire. He rules a population of more than 300 million at home — nearly 3 million of them employed by that government itself — and complicates the lives of billions around the planet with military interventions, economic sanctions, election meddling, etc.

Washington’s writ ran as far as he could plausibly (and personally) lead an army on horse.

Trump, like other recent presidents, can order a drone strike halfway around the world on a whim, and is never more than seconds away from a briefcase containing the codes for consuming the planet in nuclear fire.

Who can be trusted with that kind of power? Whose IQ and moral fiber are up to mastering it, using it wisely, resisting corrupt temptations, and exercising monumental self-restraint? No one, that’s who.

Even if the US Constitution’s original restraints on presidential power still held, and they

haven't for more than a century, the duties of the office are just too inherently complex for a single manager to do well, and too lucrative and empowering to avoid attracting corrupt megalomaniacs like Trump and Biden and their hangers-on.

As a Libertarian who considers my party's presidential nominee, Jo Jorgensen, a trustworthy human being who's likely competent to any doable task, I'd like to believe that if elected she would (with the help of a hostile Congress) rein in the office, shrink its power to back within constitutional limits, and begin dismantling the post-World War Two imperial project.

But even a Libertarian president would merely be a stopgap solution to the problems the presidency itself represents. Until we rethink not just who we allow power over us, but how much power we allow them, we're increasingly exposing ourselves to both social and physical extinction.