

**Simon Wessely ponders the dilemmas facing doctors if a statesman's illness threatens to paralyse government**



Were these old men too sick to rule? Brezhnev's long decline, Reagan's operations and Pompidou's battle with cancer may all have changed the course of history

# When a leader cracks up

**L**ive this nightmare, I am the consultant psychiatrist on call for my hospital when I am asked to go to the admissions ward. A woman has been admitted, but is creating a disturbance and refusing to take her medication. I go to the ward, and realise I am the only person who has recognised that the new patient is Margaret Thatcher. Far from persuading her to take the medication, I end up taking it myself to shut out the noise.

Having to deal with a patient even more opinionated, dogmatic and imperious than even the average hospital consultant, is every doctor's nightmare. It is a rare event, thankfully, except for one curious group of doctors, those who look after the health, physical and mental, of the world's leaders.

In their new book *When Illness Strikes the Leader* Jerrold Post and Robert Robins show that the medical advisers to heads of state have a difficult task. It is no longer true that the royal physician who lets his illustrious patient die will suffer the same fate, but professional ruin and notoriety will follow any physician who by his mistakes allows his most important client to die, and so changes the course of history.

Sir Morrell MacKenzie was the most famous ear, nose and throat surgeon of Victorian England, and would have been commemorated as such but for one mistake. He was called to Berlin to examine the crown prince, the future Frederick III of Prussia. A pleasant, liberal Anglophile, the prince had begun to lose his voice. Cancer was suspected, but MacKenzie was adamant there was no malignancy. By the time he had changed his mind Frederick was

terminally ill. He was succeeded by his son, William II, the infamous Kaiser Bill, who did more than any other man to bring about the first world war.

MacKenzie's catastrophic mistake and subsequent ruin are absent from these entertaining pages, but the book has plenty of other fascinating anecdotes of the clash between power and medicine. It is the authors' thesis that in this conflict medicine usually comes off worst. There are indeed many examples of grim collusion between medicine and political purpose, such as the undignified end of General Franco, kept between life and death to ensure an orderly succession.

Post and Robins also describe the plight of the Kremlin doctors, who had to convince the world that first Brezhnev, then Andropov and lastly Chernenko, were hale and hearty, although every press picture told a different story. The optimism that greeted the arrival of Mr Gorbachev was not anticipation of perestroika, but international relief that at last there was a Soviet leader whose every breath did not seem likely to be his last.

The authors constantly draw attention to the role of the physician in keeping knowledge of their illustrious patient's infirmity from the public. The doctor is often carrying out their patient's wishes but the authors argue that such cover-ups have had catastrophic consequences for history. True, the French public only knew that Georges Pompidou had had cancer when he failed to turn up for a state occasion because he was already dead — but did it matter? It was an open secret that Menachim Begin was severely depressed from the

moment of his wife's death, but Israeli policy seemed little affected. Certainly Franklin Roosevelt was desperately ill at Yalta — but even the authors cannot claim that Poland was lost to democracy in consequence.

Indeed, the impaired mental functioning of certain world leaders is hardly a well-kept secret. The authors discuss in detail Ronald Reagan's incapacity after the failed assassina-

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## A ruler can admit to a heart complaint, but never ever to a mental disorder

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tion attempt, and claim the president was more cerebrally impaired than the White House news management suggested. A second section deals with the temporary transfer of presidential power from Reagan to Bush when Reagan had an operation to remove a colonic polyp. Afterwards, when senior White House aides had to determine when Reagan had regained his intellectual faculties, they asked the president to read aloud a two-line letter. To everyone's surprise he managed it. And this was accepted as proof of the old man's lucidity.

It is not surprising that illness occasionally strikes the world leaders. Most are old men, and prone to physical illness. But leaders are also the successful product of a system of survival of the fittest that would make Darwin blush, and are often rather more robust than the rest of us. And as Post and Robins show, the great good of society never ever suffers from mental illness — instead they are "exhausted", which is always the result of "pressure of work" or "devotion to duty".

Alan Bennett's play *The Madness of George III* was an unforgettable account of the confusion and paralysis that gripped the king's doctors in attempting to face up to the unmentionable — the madness of king. One found the prospect so terrifying that even in his diary he was forced to resort to evasion: instead of his usual English he could only confide "*Rex noster insanit*".

It is just about acceptable to announce that a leader has a heart problem, but a neurological problem is rarely mentioned, and a psychiatric one, never. Usually this does not matter. The system coped well enough with a presidential stroke (Eisenhower), a paranoid defense secretary (Forrestal), a psychotic foreign secretary (Castlereagh), and a depressed, and latterly demented prime minister with a fondness for the bottle (Churchill). Just occasionally the combination of a sick leader and a colluding doctor has made a material impact on history.

Post and Robins consider the case of Woodrow Wilson, whose incapacitating stroke was kept by his doctor from both the American people and government, but devote insufficient space to the consequences. A sick

Wilson was unable to persuade Congress to accept the Versailles Treaty and the League of Nations. A fit Wilson would have retained the political instincts and abilities to modify the treaty to make it acceptable, rather than attempt to drive it through. There was almost certainly a majority in the country for the League. The result was the beginning of American isolation, with malign consequences for the course of European history.

**B**oth the authors have apparently advised successive presidents on "the political psychology of world leaders". What do they do? After all, except for the truism that if someone has done something before, he may well do it again, psychology and psychiatry are notoriously bad at predicting future behaviour. One can imagine Neville Chamberlain's political psychologist telling him "Well, Herr Hitler has broken his promises before — my psychological analysis is that he will break them again."

Chamberlain's failure to act was not because he lacked the services of a political psychologist, but because he decided not to act on what he already knew. As Norman Dixon has shown in this masterly *Psychology of Military Incompetence*, bad decisions are rarely the result of not receiving vital information, but of failing to act on the information one already has. The job of a psychiatrist or psychologist is like that of the historian — not to predict the future, but to understand the past.

● *When Illness Strikes the Leader* by Jerrold Post and Robert Robins is published this month by Yale University Press (£19.95).