

How fit was Palin for the second spot?

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Isn't it staggering to think how close Sarah Palin came to becoming the 45th president of the United States?

Part of the answer involves how much effort we devote to nominating the top of the presidential ticket - and how little goes into picking the second spot.

Palin's character was on display Friday when she abruptly resigned in the middle of her only term as Alaska governor. When an elected official quits early, she's breaking a contract with voters. This means more disruption for her state, which now will have its third governor in three years. Her reasons must be legitimate. Health is one. A genuine crisis in the family is another. So is a political scandal that thoroughly saps the politician's ability to remain in the job.

Palin's premise - her desire to avoid lame-duck status - is not.

It's an odd sentiment coming from a governor who sought the vice presidency last year under Republican nominee John McCain's platform of putting "Country First."

What Palin's resignation doesn't tell you, Todd Purdum's profile in Vanity Fair just might. Unnamed sources on McCain's campaign describe her as unprepared, uncooperative and having a casual relationship with the truth.

Palin was running with a nominee who, had he been elected the nation's 44th president, would have been the oldest man ever to take the oath of office. For a while last year, that looked like a real possibility. McCain had endured years of physical deprivation and torture in a North Vietnamese prisoner of war camp. And he had lived through a serious bout with cancer.

"They all knew that if their candidate - a 72-year-old cancer survivor - had won the presidency, the vice presidency would be in the hands of a woman who lacked the knowledge, the preparation, the aptitude and the temperament for the job," Purdum wrote.

None of which was widely known when the campaign was under way.

If Palin, or anyone else, wants to challenge President Obama in three years, she will face a grueling national campaign. Her background will be thoroughly vetted. Every statement will be scrutinized. Voters in state primaries will judge her fit or unfit for the White House.

But the constitutional system that placed Palin on the 2008 president ticket has not changed in 205 years. Only after the presidential nomination is secured is a vice presidential candidate selected. Usually, the presidential nominee chooses.

The process has produced vice presidents such as Walter Mondale, George H.W. Bush and Al Gore.

It's also yielded Spiro Agnew, who resigned after pleading guilty to corruption, and Dan Quayle, who never had the public's confidence.

Voters focus on the top of the ticket, but since 1900, five vice presidents have inherited the White House. Two more eventually got elected in their own right. Half the time since World War II ended, a former vice president has been running the government.

A half-century ago, Democratic presidential nominee Adlai Stevenson tried something different. He threw open the vice presidential nomination to the 1956 convention.

The delegates made a reasonable selection - Sen. Estes Kefauver, D-Tenn.

And the man who lost that vice presidential nomination to Kefauver didn't turn out too badly either.

His name was John F. Kennedy. -M.T.