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CONTINUITY OF GOVERNMENT EFFORTS

*Garrett M. Graff**

It's a pleasure to be here among such an august group of scholars and historians, whose research I have drawn from and histories I have read as I've been doing my own research on continuity of government, Watergate, 9/11, and the JFK-LBJ transition on November 22, 1963.

I'm here today to talk a little bit more broadly from a historian's perspective about the idea of continuity of government, a little bit more broadly than we've been discussing it in the Presidential Succession Act¹ realm, and to talk about it a little bit more in how it would've actually looked and felt over the course of the Cold War in actuality, had any of this come to pass rather than in the theoretical.

I believe it is deeply important to put the Presidential Succession Act in the context of the Cold War when it came about, in part, because I believe that it is this marriage of the American presidency and nuclear weapons, and the advances of nuclear technology, that drove the collapse of space and time that reshaped the way that America thinks about its presidency. One of the things that you have to understand about presidential succession is the way that it is linked to presidential communication, and for much of America's history, we simply didn't have that close a tab on our president.

For long periods of time, the president would be away from Washington and communication would be very slow. In September 1935, when Franklin Roosevelt went to dedicate the Hoover Dam, his motorcade became lost in the canyons on the route back to Las Vegas.² He disappeared and was out of contact for an entire afternoon.³ No one knew where the president was nor when he might reappear. As late as 1945, when Harry Truman took office, the vice president didn't even receive Secret Service protection⁴ and went about his day on his own around Washington, checking in from time to time on whether anyone needed him.

* Author, *Raven Rock: The Story of the U.S. Government's Secret Plan to Save Itself—While the Rest of Us Die*. These remarks were delivered as part of the program entitled *The Presidential Succession Act at 75: Praise It or Bury It?*, which was held on April 6, 2022, and hosted by the Fordham University School of Law. This transcript has been edited, primarily to conform with the *Fordham Law Review's* publication requirements, and represents the speaker's individual views alone.

1. 3 U.S.C. § 19.

2. See GARRETT M. GRAFF, *RAVEN ROCK: THE STORY OF THE U.S. GOVERNMENT'S SECRET PLAN TO SAVE ITSELF—WHILE THE REST OF US DIE* xvi (2017).

3. See *id.*

4. See *id.*

Within a few short years, though, as Soviet missiles reduced monumental decisions to only fifteen-minute windows, such prolonged periods with the president incommunicado or the vice president's whereabouts unknown would be history. The need to command such powerful weapons on a hair-trigger alert pushed the Office of the President into a new era of technology and new procedures, built around a commander in chief who required instant, reliable communications, powerful new transportation, and detailed instructions that ensured that there would never be a leadership vacuum. A different way of thinking about so many of the presidential toys—the majesty of Air Force One, the gleaming Marine helicopters, the hulking armored limousines, and the expansive motorcades—is to think of them as communications tools necessary to remain in contact with the Pentagon and to launch nuclear weapons from wherever the president may be.

The nuclear age transformed the presidency from a single person working in the White House to a much broader idea: a long line of men and women stretching through both houses of Congress and through every Cabinet agency. The presidency literally had an A Team, a B Team, and even a C Team in the Cold War.⁵ In the event of an emergency, each team and its designated president had a different role and different evacuation destination. The Alpha Team, which in most cases included the elected president, would remain in Washington and by design be sacrificed in the opening minutes of a nuclear attack.⁶ The Bravo Team would head to Mount Weather, the sprawling secret bunker in the hills of Virginia built to withstand nuclear attack.⁷ The Charlie Team would head out to other bunkers and relocation facilities around the Capitol, some of the nearly 100 different bunkers and airborne command posts available within an hour of Washington that the government would activate in an emergency.⁸

Each, of course, of the offices in the presidential line of succession has its own unique line of succession. Dozens of civilian and military officials populate the line, creating a possible path where the principal deputy undersecretary of defense for acquisition technology and logistics, and the U.S. attorney for the District of Minnesota, quickly end up being among the most important figures in American politics.

What began in the 1950s as an all-encompassing, nationwide push for civil defense to ready every household, workplace, village, and city for a Soviet attack—school children of a certain age will, of course, remember Bert the Turtle and the duck-and-cover drills of the 1950s and 1960s—gradually shrunk with advancing military technologies to just a single plan: the evacuation of the nation's elite leaders to bunkers hidden under mountains.

What does that actually look like in the moment? One of the topics of this program is the time it would take for the courts to decide, or members of the

5. *See id.* at xvii.

6. *See id.*

7. *See id.*

8. *See id.*

presidential line of succession to decide, how or when they would choose to succeed to the presidency. Through much of the Cold War during the continuity of government operations, it actually looked like something very different. Members of the presidential line of succession had a telephone number at the Pentagon they were supposed to call in an emergency.⁹ There was no comprehensive or organized way to tell who had survived an attack and who had not.¹⁰

The system would've left a Navy captain, Air Force major, or whoever happened to be on duty answering that particular phone in the joint war room to choose, effectively by themselves, who to designate as the presidential successor. The possibility exists, as described in a report Defense Secretary Robert McNamara's team pulled together, that the man to wield presidential authority in dire emergencies might be selected by a single field-grade military officer.¹¹

In the decades ahead, the system got a little bit better, but not much. As late as the Reagan administration, the Pentagon and the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) realized that they needed to institute more elaborate mechanisms to ensure a successor's legitimacy. Their plan called for special coded communications that could prove a successor's identity and establish the highest-ranking officials still alive within the U.S. government.¹² The system still exists today and is still overseen by FEMA, and today it encompasses a secret combination of GPS trackers, cell phones, and secure communication systems.

At the same time, though, there was still a great deal of concern about how you prepare a so-called lesser or minor Cabinet official to step into the presidency. In the Reagan years, they answered this with a unique, highly secret program known as the Presidential Successor Support System, the PS3.¹³ The PS3 was an innocuous-sounding program run by the National Program Office, which was run by Vice President George H.W. Bush.¹⁴ It involved pre-selecting five separate PS3 teams of former respected officials, like Howard Baker, the one-time Senate Republican leader; former CIA Director Richard Helms; former UN Ambassador Jeane Kirkpatrick; former Cabinet Secretary James Schlesinger; and even folks like Donald Rumsfeld and Dick Cheney, who all were given special instructions for evacuation.¹⁵ In an emergency, the pre-assigned PS3 teams would report to different bunkers, command posts, and continuity facilities to be ready to serve our presidential successor.¹⁶ So, when someone like a commerce secretary or agriculture secretary would arrive at an emergency site, he or she would find a White House staff and government already in waiting, including an

9. *See id.* at 102.

10. *See id.*

11. *See id.*

12. *See id.* at 315.

13. *See id.* at 313–15.

14. *See id.*

15. *See id.*

16. *See id.*

experienced leader like Don Rumsfeld or Dick Cheney already selected and in position as their chief-of-staff designee.¹⁷

The full records of the PS3 program will be declassified in the years ahead, and we have no idea whether there's a similar program that exists today. But this problem of how you prepare a successor to assume the presidency, not in a theoretical sense, but in an immediate sense when minutes and hours matter, is one that our government is still wrestling with.

Today, a third generation of doomsday staffers are settling into life inside these bunkers, many of which still remain staffed twenty-four hours a day, 365 days a year, in the wake of 9/11. While some new facilities have been built since 9/11, the majority of our government's plans to preserve itself and our nation during an attack in the twenty-first century still rely on plans developed during an era where slide rulers existed as some of the most advanced technology available to the planners.

17. *See id.*