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Palin's Words Raise Red Flags

By [BOB HERBERT](#)

The country is understandably focused on the financial crisis. But there is another serious issue in front of us that is not getting nearly enough attention, and that's whether Sarah Palin is qualified to be vice president — or, if the situation were to arise, president of the United States.

History has shown again and again that a vice president must be ready to assume command of the ship of state on a moment's notice. But Ms. Palin has given no indication yet that she is capable of handling the monumental responsibilities of the presidency if she were called upon to do so.

In fact, the opposite is the case. We know that there are some parts of Alaska from which, if the day is clear and your eyesight is good, you can actually see Russia. But the infantile repetition of this bit of trivia as some kind of foreign policy bona fide for a vice presidential candidate should give us pause.

The McCain campaign has done its bizarre best to shield Ms. Palin from any sustained media examination of her readiness for the highest offices in the land, and no wonder. She has been an embarrassment in interviews.

But the idea that the voters of the United States might install someone in the vice president's office who is too unprepared or too intellectually insecure to appear on, say, "Meet the Press" or "Face the Nation" is mind-boggling.

The alarm bells should be clanging and warning lights flashing. You wouldn't put an unqualified pilot in the cockpit of a jetliner. The potential for catastrophe is far, far greater with an unqualified president.

The United States has been lucky in terms of the qualifications of the vice presidents who have had to step in over the last several decades for presidents who either died or, in Richard Nixon's case, were forced to leave office. Harry Truman and Lyndon Johnson became extraordinary presidents in their own right. Gerald Ford successfully guided the nation through the immediate aftermath of one of the most traumatic political crises in its history.

For those who think Sarah Palin is in that league, there is no problem. But her unscripted public appearances would lead most honest observers to think otherwise. When asked again this week about her puerile linkage of foreign policy proficiency and Alaska's proximity to Russia, this time by Katie Couric of CBS News, here is what Ms. Palin said she meant:

"That Alaska has a very narrow maritime border between a foreign country, Russia, and on our other side, the land — boundary that we have with — Canada."

She went on, but lost her way midsentence: “It’s funny that a comment like that was kind of made to — cari — I don’t know, you know? Reporters ...”

Ms. Couric said, “Mocked?”

“Yeah, mocked,” said Ms. Palin. “I guess that’s the word. Yeah.”

It is not just painful, but frightening to watch someone who could become the vice president of the United States stumbling around like this in an interview.

Ms. Couric asked Ms. Palin to explain how Alaska’s proximity to Russia “enhances your foreign policy credentials.”

“Well, it certainly does,” Ms. Palin replied, “because our, our next-door neighbors are foreign countries, there in the state that I am the executive of. And there—”

Gently interrupting, Ms. Couric asked, “Have you ever been involved in any negotiations, for example, with the Russians?”

“We have trade missions back and forth,” said Ms. Palin. “We do. It’s very important when you consider even national security issues with Russia. As Putin rears his head and comes into the airspace of the United States of America, where do they go? It’s Alaska. It’s just right over the border. It is from Alaska that we send those out to make sure that an eye is being kept on this very powerful nation, Russia, because they are right there. They are right next to our state.”

It was surreal, the kind of performance that would generate a hearty laugh if it were part of a Monty Python sketch. But this is real life, and the stakes couldn’t be higher. As Ms. Palin was fumbling her way through the Couric interview, the largest bank failure in the history of the United States, the collapse of Washington Mutual, was occurring.

The press has an obligation to hammer away at Ms. Palin’s qualifications. If it turns out that she has just had a few bad interviews because she was nervous or whatever, additional scrutiny will serve her well.

If, on the other hand, it becomes clear that her performance, so far, is an accurate reflection of her qualifications, it would behoove John McCain and the Republican Party to put the country first — as Mr. McCain loves to say — and find a replacement for Ms. Palin on the ticket.

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