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# The U.S. Presidency

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# The U.S. Presidency:

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## *An Introduction*

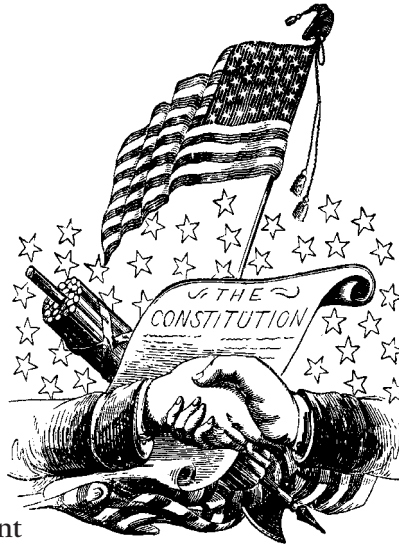
Today, after over two hundred years of American history, the office of the president of the United States is the most powerful political office in the world. The American president serves as the chief executive of the world's largest, and most productive economy and is commander in chief of one of the most powerful and technologically advanced militaries in history.

In today's global economy, whoever serves as America's president makes decisions which shape the lives, not only of the citizens of the United States, but of people in every hemisphere.

American presidents have not always wielded such power. Over two centuries ago, the United States Constitution redefined the structure of American government. This important document divided national power into three branches—the legislative branch (embodied in the Congress, which makes federal laws), the judicial branch (embodied in the federal court system, which interprets the laws), and the executive branch, which vests proscribed powers in the president.

While in 1789—at the time of the signing of the Constitution into law—the power of the presidency (in its infancy) did not extend beyond the boundaries of the United States, over the ensuing decades and centuries, the presidency grew, expanding its sphere of influence to one of global preeminence.

Throughout these pages, we will trace the complicated evolution of the American presidency. We will examine the distinct legacies and unique contributions of the extraordinary men who have held this most prestigious office since 1789, and discuss the powerful convergence of personality and circumstance which transformed the office of our nation's chief executive into the most powerful political office in the world.



Some of the men featured in this book were powerful leaders who reshaped the dimension and scope of presidential power.

### **The Men Who Served Their Country**

Some of their names are well known even to casual students of history. Men such as George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Andrew Jackson, Abraham Lincoln, Woodrow Wilson, Franklin Roosevelt, and Ronald Reagan brought strong personalities to their role as president.

Others brought less personality, less success, and less change to the office. Some names are less known to us. Men such as Millard Fillmore, Franklin Pierce, Zachary Taylor, William Henry Harrison, and his grandson Benjamin Harrison had little impact on the presidency.

At times, the historical circumstances of a president's term gave shape to his leadership. Abraham Lincoln, for example, a witty and wise lawyer from Illinois, became one of the greatest of American presidents because he led the northern states to victory in the Civil War. Other wartime presidents such as Woodrow Wilson and Franklin Roosevelt rose to greatness by meeting the challenge of international conflict. Others are remembered because they used the power of the presidency to change public policy or to rescue the nation from economic crisis.

Not only does the president have the power to enforce laws, he may also encourage the formation of new laws. Typically, in a president's State of the Union message, delivered to Congress every January, he will suggest a legislative program. By this suggestion, he makes it clear to Congress what laws he would like enacted.

When proposed laws reach the desk of the president which he does not like, he holds the

power to veto them. If he vetoes a proposed bill, he sends it back to Congress. They may override his veto by a two-thirds vote.

Additional powers of the president include the ability to pardon any citizen of the United States of a crime, with the exception of impeachment. He may also grant a postponement of a punishment.

Although political parties did not officially exist when the Constitution was written, the president is now viewed as the leader of his political party. He may use that power to appoint members of his political party to government positions, or help set the party's national agenda.

Despite the powers held by the president, he does not carry out his duties alone. Presidents rely on hundreds of advisors—experts who understand complex issues and subjects and can communicate these to the chief executive.

Among a president's most important advisors are those who serve as heads of cabinet departments. Although the Constitution does not mention a "cabinet" by name, the first such advisors were created in 1789 and included a secretary of foreign affairs, a secretary of war, a secretary of the treasury, and an attorney general.

Over the years, other cabinet positions have

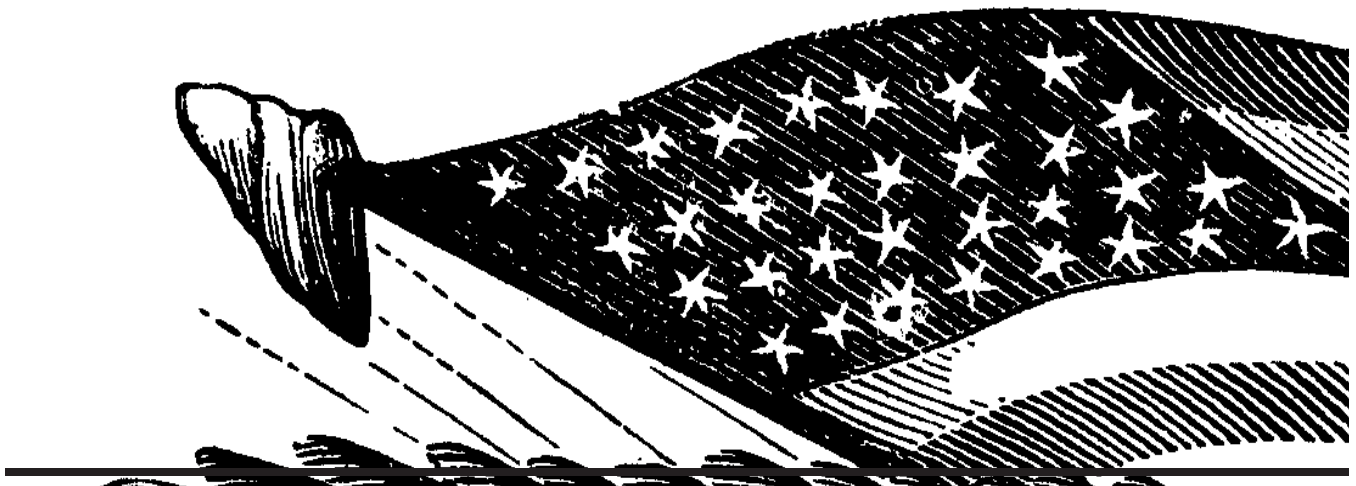
been added. Today, they include the departments of state, treasury, defense, justice, interior, agriculture, commerce, labor, health and human services, education, housing and urban development, transportation, energy, and veterans affairs.

### **The Diversity of the Presidency**

For over two centuries the American people have elected a president every four years. Elections take place on the first Tuesday after the first Monday of November. By exercising their right to vote, American men and women have elected 43 men who have served in the office of the president.

They held the office for varying lengths of time from William Henry Harrison (elected in 1840)—who served only one month—to Franklin Delano Roosevelt [1933–1945]—who held the presidency for over 12 years. (No president will ever be in office for as many consecutive years as FDR. The 22nd Amendment to the Constitution—ratified in 1951—now limits presidents to two terms or a total of ten years.)

Each man made his mark on the presidency regardless of the length of his term. But who were these men? What can we say about those who



have been elected to the highest office in the land? What do they have in common? How different were they from one another? How did each man serve as a representative of his time?

One of the easiest observations to make about the men who served as president is that each one was unique. While all were American citizens who resided in the United States for at least 14 years as required by the Constitution, and all were white males, there are few other traits that they shared equally.

Historians predict that within the next generation, Americans will elect either a woman or a minority person as president.

While the Constitution specifies that a person must be at least 35 years of age to serve as president, the ages of the presidents vary widely. Examining their ages on the day they entered the presidency, the record shows that, including Bill Clinton, eight men were in their 40s, ten in their 60s, and a majority of 25 were in their 50s.

The youngest president was Theodore Roosevelt who was 42 when President McKinley was assassinated in 1901, thrusting Roosevelt into the presidency. The oldest was Ronald Reagan who turned 70 just weeks after his inauguration.

Thirty-two presidents were college educated. More attended Harvard than any other university or college. Most of the presidents were lawyers by profession. Some were farmers or planters. Others were soldiers. In fact, some men such as George Washington [1789-1797], Andrew Jackson [1829-1837], Ulysses Grant [1869-1877], and Dwight D. Eisenhower [1953-1961] were elected to the presidency almost entirely on their war record as commanding generals. A few were teachers or educators, including Woodrow Wilson and Lyndon Johnson. One, Andrew Johnson, was a tailor.

Typically, the presidents of the United States have been members of organized political parties. Early presidents belonged to political parties which do not exist today such as the Federalists, Democratic-Republicans, and Whigs. Most of the presidents belonged to either the Republican Party (17) or Democratic Party (14). Only one—

George Washington—did not belong to a political party at all.

### Coming from All Corners of America

The men who have served as president have come from all regions of the country. Of the first twelve presidents, seven came from Virginia—one of the thirteen original colonies. Others have hailed from other southern states, such as Carter's Georgia or Clinton's Arkansas. Seven presidents have come from Ohio and five from New York. Texas, California, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania, are among other states that were homes to other presidents.

Throughout this study, we will focus on the men who have served as president—men who came from many different walks of life, each adding his distinct legacy to the history of the American presidency.

### Review and Write

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1. What do you think are the three most significant responsibilities of the president of the United States?

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2. Do you have favorite presidents? Who are they? Whom do you admire most among America's presidents? Why?

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