

Introduction

The opening phrase of the U.S. Constitution, “We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union,” indicated that the form of government the document outlined was meant to be dynamic and evolving. Power ultimately rests with the people and their votes, and means are available to improve on imperfections of the government and its laws. This holds true for the presidency as well, an office that has significantly recalibrated and expanded (and, occasionally, contracted), often from president to president, with and without the people’s consent. Now the most powerful position in the world, the American presidency is still historically adolescent, and it is certain to endure significant change as the new century unfolds. But, as *The Handy Presidents Answer Book* demonstrates, history often has a remarkable way of repeating, or at least resonating, with current events.

The evolution of the American presidency is an intriguing, adventuresome tale, filled with historic moments upon which the Republic twisted and turned. For instance, in 1841 William Henry Harrison became the first president to die in office, less than a month after being sworn in. There was no precedent as to what should happen next. The Constitution was vague, and many believed Vice President John Tyler would act as interim president until Congress decided on a successor. Tyler cut short the debate by having himself sworn in and assuming the office. After some additional discussion, Congress agreed. His opponents derisively referred to him as “His Accidency” or “Vice President Acting President Tyler.” But his decisive action was an important development for the country, eventually formalized in the Presidential Succession Act of 1947 and the Twenty-fifth Amendment, adopted in 1967.

With the United States created in part as a reaction to imperial English rule, the role, or mere existence, of the chief executive was debated passionately at the Constitutional Convention of 1787. The delegates practiced what they preached. The notion of a chief executive was first met with an “embarrassed pause” by the assembled, according to James Madison, who made lengthy notes on the proceedings. Edmund Randolph (a delegate from Virginia) broke the silence that followed James Wilson’s (Pennsylvania)

suggestion by reminding the delegates that they wanted “no semblance of a monarch,” and the Convention moved on to other matters. But the delegates later returned to the idea of a chief executive, debated various approaches to such a position, forged a system of checks and balances, and eventually enumerated powers that continue to guide the presidency midway through three centuries of federal leadership.

To better understand the shaping and influencing of the presidency, the challenges confronted by each president, and the development of the political system as we know it today, *The Handy Presidents Answer Book* addresses more than 800 broad, fundamental questions about the office itself as well as specific issues about each president and their campaigns, elections, and achievements, or lack thereof. It also covers the notable losers who might have led the country down a different path, such as progressive William Jennings Bryan. Bryan, who ran as a Democrat in 1896, 1900, and 1908, eventually became secretary of state under Woodrow Wilson in 1913 before resigning in 1915 in protest over the handling of the sinking of the British cargo and passenger ship, *Lusitania*, torpedoed by a German submarine in the midst of World War I.

Handy Presidents's question-and-answer format provides information in an easy-to-read, straightforward manner. Programs, policies, and philosophies are balanced with attention to the human factor—personalities, experiences, families—that play no small role in the life of leaders. Life in the White House is also inspected, from staff to chores to pets to romance. *Handy Presidents* notes, for example, that two presidents have married while in office (John Tyler and Grover Cleveland). But only Cleveland held his wedding at the White House, an event that would send today's media into frenzy for months.

The Handy Presidents Answer Book employs a unique arrangement that follows the development of the presidency—from its origins at the Constitutional Convention of 1787 to legacies of the presidents. Each of the book's fourteen chapters is divided into sections that focus on a specific element of the chapter's main topic. The chapter “The President Leads: Foreign Policy,” for example, has the sections “Programs and Statements,” “Treaties and Trade,” and “Crisis and Diplomacy” to help readers more easily locate and follow questions and answers pertaining to those topics.

In addition, each section generally progresses along a chronological sequence, helping the reader to follow history as it developed and to compare and contrast the actions of presidents. On occasion, the chronological approach is abandoned when several questions on a topic are better clustered together than artificially spread apart by a strict chronology. For example, the section “Social Programs and Civil Rights” in the chapter “The President in Action: Domestic Issues” begins with a question on the suspension of rights that occurred with the Alien and Sedition Acts of 1798. Since similarities exist between government suspension of rights in 1798, the Sedition Act of 1918, and the USA PATRIOT Act of 2001, the information is better served by grouping the questions and answers together than by a chronological structure that would have placed events from three different centuries at the beginning, middle, and end of the section, respectively.

The first three chapters of the book set the stage. After addressing the origins and development of the responsibilities and duties of the president, *Handy Presidents* turns its attention to the electoral process with a chapter on presidential campaigns. It follows the campaign trail wherever it may lead. For instance, popular demand led political parties to woo the likes of military heroes Zachary Taylor and Dwight D. Eisenhower, neither of whom had ever held elected office. Other candidates emerged more conventionally, from such methods as the modern state primary system to the more traditional “smoke-filled rooms” at party and state conventions and caucuses. The development of campaign financing is traced. The practice of financing public elections dates back to George Washington, who, while running for a seat in the Virginia House of Burgesses, appealed to voters in his district with rum and hard cider. Expenditures remained rather understated until 1828, when professional campaign management emerged and the practice of buying votes became considerably more expensive.

A chapter on presidential elections follows, topics ranging from the act of voting to the counting of the votes (apparently still a challenge) and the development and real-life misadventures of the electoral college, which the founding fathers advocated as a method to lessen election corruption and manipulation. Let’s hope they had a sense of humor. *Handy Presidents* supplies the scoop on remarkable elections—landslides, surprises, upsets, and controversies. Harry S. Truman’s upset of Thomas Dewey remains the standard by which we judge modern cliffhangers, though the election of 2000 is obviously another high point on the low road of presidential contests. There it is joined by the election of 1824, when war hero Andrew Jackson won the most popular *and* electoral votes but still managed to lose the election. Splitting the vote with John Quincy Adams, Henry Clay, and William Crawford (respectively, the secretary of state, speaker of the house, and secretary of the treasury), he failed to receive the necessary electoral majority. In accordance with the Twelfth Amendment, the election was thrown into the House of Representatives, which, led by its speaker, voted by a narrow margin for Adams. Four years later, Jackson had his revenge with a sweeping victory against the incumbent Adams. Not surprisingly, Jackson became the first major American politician to advocate abolishing the electoral college, a debate still going on today.

Winners of presidential elections and those who assumed the office are profiled in two chapters. “The President Takes Office” covers presidential inaugurations, ducks behind the curtain to look at life in the White House, examines the personalities, styles, and families of the presidents, and measures the initial benchmark for evaluating a president—the first one hundred days in office. “Presidential Administrations” concentrates on presidents interacting with their teams, including the development of the vice presidency, cabinet, and other advisory positions, with attention devoted to those officials who exerted the most influence on presidential policies and the character of the administration. Here we answer questions such as, “Has a woman ever served as vice president?” Only men have held the office, though in 1984 Democrat Geraldine Ferraro became the first woman to run on a major party ticket, joining Walter Mondale.

To capture the complexities and dynamics of serving as president, seven chapters address the president in action, including his role as commander in chief. The expansion of executive power is followed, as well as presidential leadership in domestic affairs (including social reform, civil disturbances, slavery, and civil rights), economic policy, and foreign policy, including war, peace, crisis, and diplomacy. *The Handy Presidents Answer Book* then confronts the sudden challenges and interruptions that often happen during a presidency—illness, death, assassination, and scandal. *Handy Presidents* examines the mortal coil, including those presidents who hid illnesses during their tenure in office, the strange death of President Harding, and the continuing medical problems of Presidents Eisenhower and Kennedy. Among other fascinating, often tragic events worthy of an American Shakespeare, you'll learn how simple twists of fates doomed or spared presidents, including the story behind the eyeglass case that saved Theodore Roosevelt's life during an assassination attempt.

Interaction between the president and two other branches of the federal government is covered in two chapters. "Presidents and Congress" highlights effective and contentious relationships with the legislative branch ranging from issues of war, economic hardship, and civil rights, to confrontations over federal spending, legislation, use of executive power, and partisan positions. Impeachments, McCarthyism, Watergate, and other crimes and misdemeanors all have their day in the sun. "Presidents and the Judiciary" includes attempts by presidents to influence the federal courts—from Thomas Jefferson's attempts to scale back the federal court system, to Franklin D. Roosevelt's plan to "pack" the Supreme Court, to the "litmus test" of conservative philosophy employed in the judicial appointments of Ronald Reagan, George Bush, and George W. Bush. The influence of the judiciary on the presidency is also addressed, from *Marbury v. Madison* (1803), in which the Supreme Court defined its power of judicial review, to more contemporary rulings on such issues as affirmative action and "enemy combatants." The focus on the presidency concludes with "Legacies of the Presidents," which includes historical and contemporary assessments and rankings.

"I desire you would remember the ladies," wrote future first lady Abigail Adams to her husband, John Adams, while he was in Philadelphia in 1776 attending the Continental Congress that would approve the Declaration of Independence. "Be more generous to them than your ancestors," she advised. We remember Adams and other first ladies in the concluding chapter. Among other intriguing factoids on presidential spouses, you'll discover that in the mid-nineteenth century, Sarah Polk was an activist first lady resembling Hillary Clinton in her role as political confidante to the president.

In all, *Handy Presidents* offers a wide array of factual, anecdotal, historical, and contemporary perspectives on the presidency and the challenges facing those who have held the office. An enormous number of print and Web resources were consulted to collect and organize the information, from plentiful government resources to exhaustive and detailed biographies, articles, and overviews of presidents, historical

eras, and political ideologies. An appendix of resources provides more information on most of these sources.

Sprinkled throughout are helpful charts—on the closest presidential elections, the number of vetoes by each president, the most inventive campaign slogans, and more—plus illustrations and key passages from significant documents and speeches. Finally, for those wanting lighter fare, additional trivia on the presidents, landmarks associated with the presidents, and a list of all the presidents and vice presidents appear as appendices. The Constitution of the United States, including amendments, is printed at the end of the book.

Encompassing complex matters to entertaining trivia, *The Handy Presidents Answer Book* accommodates a variety of reader needs ranging from specific information quests to more leisurely overviews. Whatever your information aspirations, we invite you to immerse yourself in a non-partisan, wide-ranging resource that, like a candidate, pledges to have something for everyone. We hope to have played our part in an informative and enjoyable manner, with an arrangement that brings the information into clear context.