The Job of a U.S. President

Inquire: The President in the U.S. Government

Overview
The president of the United States (POTUS) — what powers does he/she have under the Constitution? What role is he expected to perform as the president of the United States? What resources or strengths does he need to complete his responsibilities? And, what happens if the president dies or becomes incapable of performing his duties?

These are all questions that were, to some extent, answered by the framers of the Constitution as they tried to foresee what the new country would need in a chief executive. However, even in their most optimistic dreams, they could not have imagined how America has grown and changed in the last 220-plus years, or how different the world would be in the 21st century.

In this lesson, we will look at these and other questions as we try to define and characterize the job of the president of the United States.

Big Question: What happens if the president is killed or incapacitated?

Watch: The Job and the Tools Necessary to Perform the Job

Overview
The evolving power and enlarging scope of responsibilities have made the modern presidency a big job. Some even say it is impossible for one person to handle.

Presidents as Crisis Managers
The Constitutional power as Commander in Chief has evolved into the important modern role of crisis manager. In the 20th century, as the United States gained world leadership powers, the president has become a key player in international crises. In the case of war (e.g. the Korean War, the Vietnam War, and the Persian Gulf War) or less famous regional conflicts (e.g. those in Kosovo, Somalia, or Haiti), the president must go into emergency mode and concentrate on the immediate problem. Domestically, crises such as urban riots, hurricanes, or forest fires may occur that require the president to coordinate government responses to the situation.

Presidents as Symbols and Administrators
More than anyone else, the president symbolizes the country, its people, and its beliefs. In this role, a president performs many ceremonial duties, such as receiving foreign dignitaries, throwing the first
baseball of the season, and walking on red carpets while waving to crowds. These actions are not trivial. Strong presidents must exude confidence, not just in themselves, but in the American people as well. The best ones have had an intangible charisma that engendered public confidence.

Presidents as Agenda Setters

Setting a political agenda has been a growing role in recent years. While the founders clearly intended Congress take the lead in setting the political agenda, today the public looks to the president. Social security, welfare programs, taxes, inflation, public education, and healthcare are just some of the many programs driven by the president's agenda. In foreign policy, presidents often act first, and then consult Congress.

Strong presidents have used the State of the Union address, given yearly at the start of each congressional session, to set an agenda. Modern presidents also use the mass media and social media to bring attention to their proposals and to place pressure on legislators, even threatening a veto if Congress ignores their wishes.

Can any one person hope to hold the president's job successfully? The great author John Steinbeck commented, "We give the president more work than a man can do, more responsibility than a man should take, more pressure than a man can bear." Yet, recent presidents somehow have managed to endure — although the job has exacted a tremendous toll on each of them.

Read: Presidential Powers and Roles

Overview

In the Constitution, the president has expressed powers and expressed roles to perform his or her duties. However, just like Congress, there are also implied powers, and even inherent powers necessary just to be president.

So, what are the president’s powers, and what role does he play in the American political landscape?

The Four Powers of the President

The presidential powers in the Constitution can be divided into four categories:

1. **Executive Power**
   a. *Execute the Laws*: The president is the chief executive. His/her primary job is to ensure the laws of the United States are enforced. Eisenhower and Kennedy sending in troops to enforce desegregation are examples of the president enforcing the laws.
   b. *Direct the Administration*: At the top of the federal government pyramid, with over two million employees, is the president. The smooth, efficient, and effective running of this huge entity is the president’s job.
   c. *Appoint and Remove Many Officials*: The Constitution gives the president the responsibility to appoint "Ambassadors, other public Ministers and Consuls, Judges of the Supreme Court, and all other Officers of the United States" with the "advice and consent" of the Senate. The president must appoint about 4,000 to positions in the federal government.
2. Legislative Power
   a. **Recommend Legislation**: The president is elected on a campaign of promises and ideas. As such, he is the primary architect of much of the legislation during his term, and Congress often looks to the president for ideas and guidance on legislation.
   b. **Veto Legislation**: The president has the power to veto any and all bills from Congress, forcing Congress to attempt to override the veto with a two-thirds majority. This gives him/her significant influence over legislation Congress wants to pass.
   c. **Call Special Sessions**: This used to be a bigger power when Congress did not meet year-round. However, the president does have the power to call Congress into sessions that would interrupt vacation plans, etc.

3. Diplomatic Power - Military Power
   a. **Make Treaties and Executive Agreements**: The president is the chief architect of America’s foreign policy, and only he can negotiate treaties (which must be approved by the Senate) and executive agreements (which do not require Senate approval).
   b. **Recognize Other Nations**: After the Castro revolution in 1959, in 1961, the United States withdrew its formal recognition of Cuba, ending all trade and involvement with Cuba. In 2015, President Obama took action to recognize Cuba and re-opened diplomatic relations with the island country, as only the president can.
   c. **Act as Commander-In-Chief of All Armed Forces**: Perhaps the most important of the president’s powers beyond the executive powers is the position as commander-in-chief of the most powerful military in the history of the world. There are potential limitations as to time (see the War Powers Act) and Congress has to approve expenditures, but, in short, the president can take whatever military action he deems necessary and proper against any country, entity, or person in the world.

4. Judicial Power: The president has four judicial powers he can exercise:
   a. **Grant Pardons**: The president has the power to pardon anyone charged with and/or convicted of a federal crime, which makes the crime and the conviction as if it never happened. The person is innocent as if never found guilty.
   b. **Grant Reprieves**: This power allows the president to pause any prosecution (all investigations, trials, etc.) and pause the proceedings, until the president unpause the actions. The person remains potentially liable, but nothing can happen during the reprieve.
   c. **Grant Commutations**: At the president’s discretion, he/she can decide that anyone who was convicted and sentenced has been punished enough, and end the punishment. The person is still guilty, but the sentence is over.
   d. **Grant Amnesty**: This is the president’s “group power,” and is applied when there are a large number of people with the same issue. For example, President Jimmy Carter granted amnesty to all the Vietnam draft dodgers in 1977. President Ronald Reagan issued a blanket amnesty to all illegal immigrants who had been in the U.S. since 1982 with certain requirements.

The Eight “Chief” Roles of the President

In performing these powers, the president assumes eight “chief” roles as president of the United States:

1. **Chief of State**: This means the president is the recognized leader of the United States; the president is the person the world sees as America’s representative to the world.
2. **Chief Executive**: As discussed above, the president is responsible for ensuring that all the laws of the United States are carried out and obeyed.
3. **Chief Administrator**: As also discussed above, the president is at the top of the massive U.S. governmental pyramid. All of the over two million employees ultimately report to the president.

4. **Chief Diplomat**: The president is responsible for creating and implementing a foreign policy he believes will be in the best interest of the United States.

5. **Commander in Chief**: Again, the president has complete control over the most powerful military in the history of the world, and it is his job to use that power to protect the U.S. from any and all enemies.

6. **Chief Legislator**: As the person who the people look to for direction with regard to legislation, Congress also looks to the president. For example, in 2008, President Obama ran with a promise of a universal healthcare bill, and subsequent to Obama’s election, Congress did pass the Universal Healthcare Act.

7. **Chief of Party**: As long as he/she is president, the president is the head of whichever party he/she represents.

8. **Chief Citizen**: The president represents everyone, all residents, and all citizens of the U.S. It is his job to care for each person and to try to take care of any and all issues impacting the people in the U.S.

The powers are extreme, but the responsibilities are enormous. Balancing the needs of the people in every area of the U.S. geographically, economically, racially, ethnically, gender-wise, age-wise, is an almost impossible job for any one person. Nonetheless, it is the job all candidates for president intentionally undertake.

**Reflect: Which Powers are the Greatest?**

**Poll**

Assume you are going to be president for the next four years. However, a Constitutional amendment has stripped you of one set of your four powers, as discussed in the Read section above. What power would be your first choice to lose? In other words, the loss of which power would be the least problematic to performing your job?

- The Executive Powers
- The Legislative Powers
- The Diplomatic and Military Powers
- The Judicial Powers

**Expand: Presidential Succession - Death and Incapacity**

On September 6, 1901, President William McKinley was struck down by assassin Leon Czolgosz at the Pan-American Exhibition in Buffalo. McKinley died eight days later. Vice President Teddy Roosevelt assumed the office of president, per the Constitution, once McKinley was pronounced dead. However, for eight days, the United States effectively had no president, no chief executive. More importantly, it had no command-in-chief. Had a foreign nation attacked in those eight days, the U.S. would have been without vital leadership.

In 1901, this was not a huge issue. Even with the advent of more modern, electronic communications, it would have been virtually impossible for any major world power to have mounted an attack and reached the shores of the U.S. in that time frame.
At 12:30 p.m., on November 22, 1963, President John F. Kennedy was struck down by assassin Lee Harvey Oswald as he traveled past the Book Depository in downtown Dallas, Texas. Kennedy was pronounced dead 30 minutes later at 1 p.m. Vice President Lyndon Baines Johnson assumed the office of president, per the Constitution, once Kennedy was pronounced dead, but he was not sworn in until 2:38 p.m., two hours after Kennedy was shot. Even if Johnson had been sworn in immediately upon Kennedy’s death, for 30 minutes, the U.S. effectively had no president, no chief executive. More importantly, it had no command-in-chief. That 30 minutes is exactly the amount of time it would take a Russian ICBM with a nuclear warhead to reach the U.S.

There is no doubt Russia and all other enemies of the U.S. would have known about Kennedy being shot within minutes of the shooting. In 1963, the first strike capabilities of Russia and others made this time frame a serious problem and a serious threat.

In response, the U.S. passed the 25th Amendment to the Constitution. The 25th, among other things, allows for the next in line in succession to be sworn in upon delivery to Congress of a statement signed by the vice president (or next in line in succession) and a majority of the Cabinet secretaries that the president is unable to perform his/her duties. This would have allowed LBJ to have been sworn in within minutes of Kennedy being shot.

The 25th also allows the president to transfer power temporarily to the next in line in succession if he/she knows he/she will be incapacitated (under anesthesia for a surgery, etc.), and then resume power when the temporary incapacitation is resolved.

Further, the 25th sets out the process for replacing the vice president, which was not clearly set forth in the original Constitution.

But, what if Lee Harvey Oswald had killed Vice President Johnson? Who follows the vice president in the line of succession to the presidency? The current presidential line of succession was adopted by Congress in 1947 (and last revised in 2006). Here is the chart, setting out the line of succession:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Office</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Vice President</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Speaker of the House of Representatives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>President pro tempore of the Senate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Secretary of State</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Secretary of Treasury</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Secretary of Defense</td>
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<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Attorney General</td>
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<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Secretary of the Interior</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Secretary of Agriculture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Secretary of Commerce</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
TV writers, novelists, and movie makers have all come to the same conclusion. The only time this list would ever be important would be in a complete catastrophe, and the best place for that to occur would be the one time each year that every member of Congress, every Cabinet secretary, every member of the Supreme Court, the president and the vice president are all together. That would be the president’s State of Union Address, when each person on the succession list is in the audience listening to the president’s address… except one.

One Cabinet secretary is taken to a secure and secret location during the State of the Union, guarded by the Secret Service and kept safe, just in case there were a catastrophic event. This person is referred to as “the designated survivor.”

Presidential succession — it has become far more important and far more mandatory that there be an almost immediate transfer of power. The 25th has given the U.S. the ability to make the rapid transfer if ever the need arose.

Lesson Toolbox

Additional Resources and Readings

Power to the President: What Does the President of the U.S. Actually Do? | History
- A video briefly discussing the roles and responsibilities of the president
  https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PS6BLJuHvY8

Presidential Power: Crash Course Government and Politics #11
- A video discussing the expressed powers of the president of the United States
  https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5l02sK5LoVL

Presidential Powers 2: Crash Course Government and Politics #12
- A video discussing the presidential powers by looking at those NOT found in the Constitution — implied or inherent powers
  https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fnHb-zyWh14
Lesson Glossary
None

Check Your Knowledge

1. Under the 25th Amendment, if the president is allowed to transfer power temporarily to the next line in succession due to being incapacitated, they would not be able to resume power when that temporary incapacity is resolved.
   A. True
   B. False

2. As chief diplomat, the president is responsible for creating and implementing a foreign policy he/she believes will be in the best interest of the United States.
   A. True
   B. False

3. To appoint and remove many officials is one of the executive powers of the president.
   A. True
   B. False

Answer Key:

Citations

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