

THE WHITE HOUSE HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

Classroom: Grades 9-12

Presidential Transitions: "The Torch is Passed"

B. LBJ Ascends to the Presidency: The Aftermath of JFK Assassination

TEACHER'S TEXT

Lesson Overview

The year 2000 marked the two-hundredth anniversary of the occupancy of the White House. George Washington is the only president who did not live in the "President's House," as it was called at the time, though he had much to do with its planning and development. Each president who has lived in the White House has altered or improved it in some way. Yet as constitutional guidelines dictate, presidential power is held only under certain conditions. New presidents are elected, and on Inauguration Day, within a period of only a few hours, out moves a family who called the White House home and in moves another. The house is also the president's office, but no matter what the crisis or circumstance, there comes a time when the chief executive leaves the business of the nation to his successor. The house endures, as does the nation's government—albeit with changes and alterations—but its chief occupants come and go. Thus the house is a symbol of the orderly transition of power characteristic of the federal republic. On several occasions in American history, during unusual or difficult situations, this concept of orderly transition has been tested. In each case the republic endured.

This lesson examines four such transitions, described briefly below. A study of each will strengthen students' understanding about the stabilizing effect of both precedent and constitutional limits on the transfer of executive power in the United States:

Part A: The Inauguration of Thomas Jefferson After the First Change of Political Party Power, March 4, 1801

This was an event of great significance because it marked the first occasion under the new Constitution when executive power passed quietly from one political party to another. Though the Constitution did not anticipate political parties, two had emerged: the Federalists and the Republicans. The rivalry between the parties was fierce. The Federalists accused Thomas Jefferson, the leader of the Republicans, of being a dangerous radical, his followers "mad men" who, if they came to power, would bring a "reign of terror" comparable to that of the French Revolution at its lowest point. The Jeffersonian Republicans denounced President John Adams as a monarchist, a man who

under the right circumstances might seek to become king. They accused his Federalist compatriots of being "ready to conspire with the enemies of the country," especially the British. The differences between the two groups were so pronounced that when Jefferson won the presidency, he called his triumph the "Revolution of 1800." Yet, despite the viciousness of the debate that preceded the election, the Federalists accepted their loss of control, not only of the executive branch but also of Congress. 1 The republic lurched, and rolled on.

Part B: The Early Days of Lyndon B. Johnson's Presidency Following John F. Kennedy's Assassination on November 22, 1963

Eight times in the history of the republic a vice president has become president because of the death of his predecessor. On November 22, 1963, President John F. Kennedy was assassinated in Dallas, Texas. The nation and the world were in a state of anguish and shock. The loss of a leader who was so young and vital, so charming and full of promise, seemed incomprehensible. Few had given any thought to the possibility of Kennedy not completing his term in office. Lyndon Baines Johnson, the vice president, had been chosen primarily to "balance the ticket." Yet, on that November day, Johnson was sworn in as president aboard Air Force One before it left the ground in Dallas. Though fears abounded about a conspiracy of assassins, and some questioned the nation's security, the new president calmly took up his duties the following morning. Despite the people's grief and deep concerns, Johnson, through "his public appearances, his use of language, his management of the press promoted feelings of continuity and unity."² The republic mourned, and began again.

Part C: The Appointment of Gerald R. Ford to the Vice Presidency, and His Subsequent Rise to the Presidency Following Nixon's Resignation, August 9, 1974

When Gerald Ford took the oath of office, he declared, "I assume the Presidency under extraordinary circumstances. . . . This is an hour of history that troubles our minds and hurts our hearts." It truly was an unprecedented time. Ford was the first vice president chosen under the terms of the Twenty-Fifth Amendment, replacing Spiro Agnew, who resigned after pleading "no contest" to charges of fraud. Then, in the aftermath of the Watergate scandal, Ford succeeded the first president ever to resign, Richard M. Nixon. President Ford nominated as his vice president Nelson Rockefeller, who was confirmed by both houses of Congress and was sworn in on December 19, 1974. As the writers of *The National Experience* point out, "For the first time in history, both the President and the Vice President had come to office and power not, like all their predecessors, through election but through appointment."³ It was a measure of the Constitution's efficacy that this unusual situation caused no crisis in public opinion. The republic argued and questioned, then pressed on.

Part D: The Inauguration of Ronald Reagan as Jimmy Carter Struggled to End the Iranian Hostage Crisis, on January 20, 1981

On November 4, 1979, three thousand fanatical Iranian students invaded the U.S. Embassy in Tehran and seized sixty-six Americans as hostages. It was the most fateful day of the presidency of Jimmy Carter. By the November 1980 election, the hostages had been in captivity more than a year. Ronald Reagan's electoral landslide was in part attributed to Carter's inability to secure the release of these hostages. Until the final moments before Reagan's inauguration, Carter worked feverishly in the Oval Office to finalize the negotiations with the Iranians. Despite the fact that a settlement had finally been reached, the Iranians delayed permission for the planes carrying the hostages to leave. Regardless of Carter's efforts to resolve the crisis, at exactly 12:00 noon that January 20, Ronald Reagan took the oath of office as the president of the United States. At 12:33 p.m., the first aircraft lifted off a runway in Tehran. As the planes left Iranian airspace, President Reagan, attending a luncheon at the Capitol, made the first official announcement of his presidency: the hostages were free. The republic rejoiced.

Learning Outcomes:

By successfully completing this lesson and accompanying activities, students will:

1. Strengthen their understanding of certain National Standards for History objectives, especially those that enable them to:

reconstruct patterns of historical succession and duration in which historical developments have unfolded, and apply them to explain historical continuity and change.

2. Demonstrate an understanding of specific lesson objectives, including being able to:

compare and contrast four unusual or difficult historical situations in which the concept of orderly transfer of power was seriously tested;

define and indicate an understanding of the constitutional guidelines for the transfer of power from one president to another, including amendments added since the government's inception;

describe precedents enhancing the concept of orderly transfer, including at least two related to the White House;

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CLASSROOM LESSON

In that week before Thanksgiving, President John F. Kennedy and his wife Jacqueline traveled to Texas. The trip was political—Kennedy was unsure of his support in this southern state. In the previous two years, very little Texas money had come into the coffers of the Democratic National Committee, and more and more Texas voters who opposed Kennedy's civil rights stance were joining Republican ranks. He wanted to raise money and improve his image in this important pivotal state for the 1964 election. Vice President Lyndon B. Johnson and his wife, Lady Bird, would meet the Kennedys in San Antonio when they arrived on November 21. The president needed Johnson's help. He hoped that the vice president's considerable political influence in his home state might help mend a rift in the Democratic Party there. That fateful afternoon in Dallas, November 22, 1963, Johnson and Lady Bird were in the fourth car of a motorcade taking the Kennedys to a downtown business district where the president was scheduled to make a speech. Johnson remembered distinctly hearing the rifle shots that took Kennedy's life, then the confusion and shock that followed as a secret service agent pushed him to the floor of the Lincoln, shouting, "Get down! Get down."¹ Forty-five minutes later at Parkland Memorial Hospital, the head of Kennedy's Secret Service detail came to tell the Johnsons that the president's wounds were very serious, and the vice president should fly back to Washington immediately in case there was a widespread conspiracy that could threaten him as well. Ten minutes later the agent returned with the news that the president was dead.²

A News Flash

CBS-TV interrupted its afternoon soap opera, *As the World Turns*, to give Americans their first inkling of what loomed on the national horizon. A distraught Walter Cronkite relayed a UPI report from Dallas that three shots had been fired at Kennedy, adding that apparently "the president was 'seriously wounded.'" Then, a few minutes later, Cronkite delivered the dreaded news: "From Dallas, a flash, apparently official, President Kennedy died at 1:00 p.m. central standard time, 2:00 eastern standard time, some thirty-eight minutes ago."³ The seasoned professional commentator took off his glasses and wiped tears from his eyes. From these early telecasts the word spread like wildfire. The nation, and soon the world, was in a state of grief and anguish. How could such a young, vibrant

president, so full of plans and promise, be dead? In Dallas, Lyndon Johnson understood immediately the need to act quickly so the people would not panic. His ability to think on his feet and make quick decisions, skills that had been tamped down by his shadow role as vice president, now came to the fore. Though he would later be criticized for it, he immediately insisted that he would take the president's plane, Air Force One, back to Washington. Not only that, but he would have the swearing-in ceremony before taking off.

Claiming Legitimacy

Johnson had several reasons for these actions, not the least of which, according to a Kennedy associate, was "a compelling desire to calm a frantic people and reassure a shocked world." Moreover, though he had actually succeeded to the office of the presidency when Kennedy died, Johnson wasn't sure of that. He believed his swearing-in would establish his "legitimate hold on the presidency." If there was a conspiracy and he needed to take some counteraction, he wanted the clear authority to act. 4 Finally, as if to seal the legitimacy of the transfer of power, he insisted that the slain president's wife stand beside him as he was sworn in aboard Air Force One. At 2:30 p.m., less than an hour and a half after Kennedy's death, Lyndon Baines Johnson took the oath of office. When the plane touched down late that evening at Andrews Field near Washington, the people of the United States had a president. Johnson made his first televised statements there, then was taken by helicopter directly to the White House.

It was 4:34 a.m., November 23, when the casket of John F. Kennedy, now covered by an American flag, was carried into the White House and placed upon the catafalque in the East Room.⁵ Neither the nation nor Johnson could have believed that the vice president would be called upon to fill out the term of this young president who now lay dead. In fact, many believed that Johnson was in a dead-end job. Once he had been powerful—the youngest Senate majority whip in 1953, Senate majority leader two years later at the age of forty-six.⁶ In 1955, the same year he rose to majority leader, and just as his name was circulating as a possible presidential candidate, Johnson suffered a massive heart attack. He had to slow down, something that was very difficult for a man of great ambition and energy. Unable to regain political momentum after his recovery, he lost his 1960 chance for the presidency to the young John F. Kennedy. To the amazement of many who had seen Johnson wield power for thirty-two years, Johnson agreed to "balance the Democratic ticket" and become Kennedy's running mate. That November the Democrats won by a narrow margin. For the most part, Johnson was relegated to the role of chairing advisory committees and making goodwill trips—to Senegal, the Philippines, Thailand, India, Pakistan, and South Vietnam. As vice president to the youngest man ever elected president, many believed that Johnson's days as a powerful national figure were over. President Johnson must have thought of what John Adams had written when he was vice president: "I am vice president. In this I am nothing, but I may be everything." ⁷



President Kennedy's funeral cortege leaves the White House



LBJ and friend

Taking the Lead

Johnson would never have wished to acquire presidential power in this way, but now he was everything. Yet coming to the role under such tragic and dramatic circumstances, he worried that he could not meet the responsibilities of the office. He later said,

I took an oath. I became President. But for millions of Americans I was still illegitimate, a naked man with no presidential covering, a pretender to the throne, an illegal usurper. And then there was Texas, my home, the home of both the murder and the murderer. And then there were the bigots and the dividers and the Eastern intellectuals, who were waiting to knock me down before I could even begin to stand up. The whole thing was unbearable.⁸

In looking back on those days, Johnson would later say,

A nation stunned, shaken to its very heart, had to be reassured that the government was not in a state of paralysis . . . that the business of the U.S. would proceed. I knew that not only the nation but the whole world would be anxiously following every move I made—watching, judging, weighing, balancing. It was imperative that I grasp the reins of power and do so without delay. Any hesitation or wavering, any false step, any sign of self-doubt, could have been disastrous.⁹

The United States has a constitutional framework that defines a set of procedures for a vice president who succeeds to the office of the presidency, but it was not inevitable that the transition would be as smooth as it was. Johnson's biographers note that, despite his fears, the president's positive actions were important to the outcome. As the biographer Doris Kearns Goodwin said, "Here was a case where the exercise of talent joined with personality and opportunity to produce a brilliant display of leadership and political skill."¹⁰ The historian Robert Dallek had high praise as well, describing Johnson as an inspiration to the country:

His public appearances, his use of language, his management of the press promoted feelings of continuity and unity. To be sure, traditions of political stability and shared

assumptions about cooperative efforts to advance the national well-being eased Johnson's burden. But an almost uncanny feel for the appropriate word and gesture honed by thirty-two years in the political arena were as important in making him equal to the task.¹¹

Johnson took specific actions as well. He declared a national day of mourning so the nation could gather strength from spiritual, family, or community sources. In a very practical way, he gathered his own resources. Though the cabinet officers of a previous president traditionally resign, in a meeting with Kennedy's cabinet at the White House on November 23, Johnson asked them to stay on, telling them, "I need you." He also had another concern. He believed it was important to give the American people an answer to the questions everyone was asking: Who was behind the murder of Kennedy and why had he been killed? Yes, Lee Harvey Oswald had been arrested as the alleged assassin, but Oswald had been shot in Dallas by a nightclub operator, Jack Ruby, a few days later. Had there been a conspiracy? Who was to blame? Johnson appointed a bipartisan panel to investigate the death, led by Chief Justice Earl Warren. Though the findings of the Warren Commission Report—that Oswald and Ruby both acted alone—have been disputed and debated since its release, Johnson's initial efforts to discover the motives for the assassination allayed people's fears.¹²

On November 27, President Johnson addressed a joint session of Congress from the podium of the House. In his televised remarks, both the Congress and the people of the nation heard him deliver a masterful speech. He told them, "All I have I would have gladly given not to be standing here today. The greatest leader of our time has been struck down by the foulest deed of our time. . . . An assassin's bullet has thrust upon me the awesome burden of the presidency." Johnson invoked the memory of Kennedy and linked that solidly to his hopes for the country he now led, saying:

On the 20th day of January, in 1961, John F. Kennedy told his countrymen that our national work would not be finished 'in the first thousand days, nor in the life of this administration, nor even perhaps in our lifetime on this planet.' But, he said, 'let us begin.' Today, in this moment of new resolve, I would say to all my fellow Americans, let us continue.¹³

Continuing

In the days following the assassination, 70 percent of the country had doubts about how it would "carry on" without Kennedy. Gallop polls a year later showed Johnson had a 79 percent approval rating. In December 1964, he was at the top of the list of the ten most-admired men in the world: Dwight D. Eisenhower, Winston Churchill, and the humanitarian Albert Schweitzer followed.¹⁴ Lyndon Johnson had said in a press conference, shortly after Kennedy's death, that his objective was to create a sense of continuity and unity in the country. This he had done. Though Johnson had some rough political battles ahead, the republic would continue.

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LESSON 1: Endnotes

An Introduction for Teachers

1. Richard N. Current, T. Harry Williams, Frank Freidel, and Alan Brinkley. *American History, A Survey*, p. 180.
2. Robert Dallek. *Flawed Giant: Lyndon Johnson and His Times 1961-1973*, p. 55.
3. John M. Blum, Edmund S. Morgan, Willie Lee Rose, Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., Kenneth M. Stampp, and C. Vann Woodward. *The National Experience, A History of the United States*, p. 866.

The Early Days of Lyndon Johnson's Presidency

1. Robert Dallek. *Flawed Giant: Lyndon Johnson and His Times 1961-1973*, p. 48.
2. Ibid.
3. Joe Garner. *We Interrupt This Broadcast*, p. 48.

4. Dallek, p. 50
5. William Manchester. *The Glory and the Dream*, p. 1006.
6. Philip Kunhardt Jr., Philip B. Kundhardt III, and Peter W. Kunhardt. *The American President*, p. 119.
7. *Ibid*, p. 135.
8. Doris Kearns Goodwin. *Lyndon Johnson and the American Dream*, p. 170.
9. *Ibid*, p. 172.
10. *Ibid*, p. 171.
11. Dallek, p. 55.
12. *Ibid*, p. 58.
13. Lyndon Baines Johnson. *Address Before A Joint Session of Congress, November 27, 1963*.
14. Dallek, p. 59.