

# INTRODUCTION

“I am heartily rejoiced that my term is so near its close. I will soon cease to be a servant and will become a sovereign,” wrote eleventh president James K. Polk. Nearly identical sentiments revealing an enormous sense of relief surface repeatedly as America’s chief executives prepare to leave behind the responsibilities of the presidency. Although many had fought furiously to reach the pinnacle of power, most were glad to hand over its reins to their successors.

This book is an attempt to provide not only an objective account of each presidency and an appreciation of each man’s character and abilities, but perhaps equally important, describe events and people shaping the lives of those who have taken the presidential oath of office. By and large, each man had the intellect and ability to hold the post, sometimes rising to meet the challenges of his time. Each was also human, complex, and contradictory, with flaws and foibles that often resulted in his being revered or dismissed. Historians often attempt to discern commonalities among this small group of men in the hope of determining what attributes best prepare a person for the presidency. The following illustrates some of these shared characteristics.

Most of the presidents were middle-born, with the greatest of that number being the second child of the family. Episcopalian has been the predominant religious affiliation (eleven), with Presbyterian having the second highest number (six). While being an attorney is the primary occupation, many presidents could also list academic or military experience on a résumé. Most had served in some type of elected office before moving to the nation’s highest. Fourteen had previously served as vice presidents; five were US senators; and nineteen had been elected to the House of Representa-

tives. (John Quincy Adams’s tenure in the House was after his presidential term.)

When running as a presidential candidate, most winners have been Republicans (eighteen). Fourteen have been Democrats; and the rest represented earlier political parties. Most

were in their fifties at the time of their inauguration, but Theodore Roosevelt still holds the record as the youngest president, at age forty-two (John F. Kennedy was the youngest elected president, at forty-three), and Ronald Reagan was the oldest when he was sworn in, at age sixty-nine.

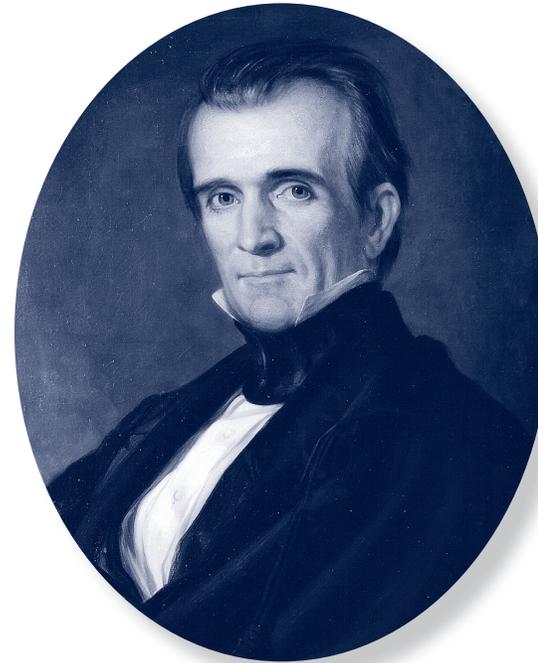
Much about the presidency has evolved and grown over the lifetime of the institution. George Washington had five cabinet members and a handful of staff to run the executive branch. His salary was set at \$25,000 (although he refused it) and that salary would not increase for nearly one hundred years. The current White

House office staff numbers over four hundred, but each cabinet member rules a sizeable bureaucracy. Presidents now earn \$400,000 yearly and, beginning with Truman, are also paid a pension.

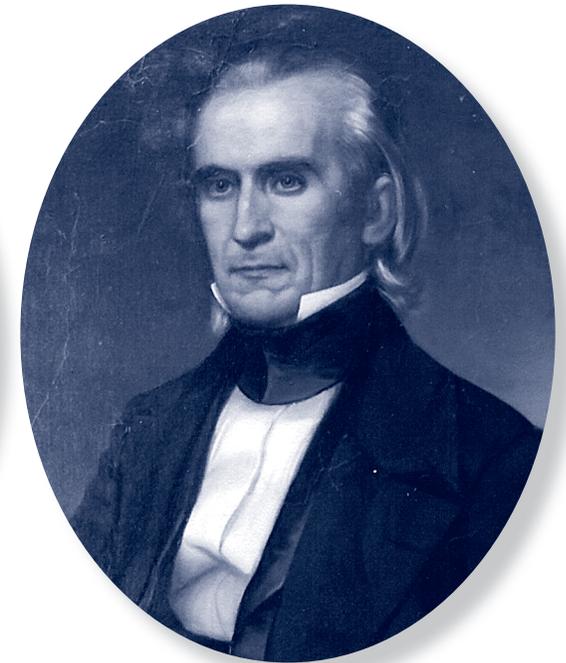
Not only has the office of the presidency changed over the last two centuries, but the theory of democracy continues to evolve, inspiring discussion and passion along recurring political themes. Debate marches on about the need for more or less government in the lives of its citizens, especially in terms of regulating, taxing, and supporting the masses. Should power reside with the federal or state governments, the executive, legislative, or judicial branch, or should we attempt a balance, and how? Should we be isolationists or the world’s superpower and police? These questions continue to divide the nation and have often influenced and shaped an administration.

“*It isn’t how long you are president that counts, but what you accomplish as president. I’ve had my chance; I did fairly well with it. I made some kind of a place in history for myself. Someone else might have done better than I did, but I could not; for I did my best.*”

—Theodore Roosevelt



PRESIDENT JAMES K. POLK, 1846



PRESIDENT JAMES K. POLK, 1849

The upward climb to the presidency often reveals itself to be much easier than undertaking the tasks and responsibilities of the office. Enemies abound and their actions have resulted in the deaths of four presidents and multiple attempts on the lives of others. Another four died of natural causes during their term. Unquestionably, the job of running the country—whether a century ago or today—takes its toll on a person. One merely needs to examine photographs taken “before” and “after” presidential terms to discern the shocking change exacted by the time spent in the nation’s highest office. (The two official portraits of President Polk shown here, painted by the same artist, are a dramatic example. The first was painted at the beginning of his term, in 1846, and the second at the end of his term in 1849.)

Finally, every president is concerned with how he will be viewed by future generations. With the fate of his country and more recently, the world, upon his shoulders, each occupant has contemplated how he would be remembered, hoping that his decisions would be greeted positively by posterity.

Historian Arthur Schlesinger Sr. introduced the practice of rating presidents in 1948, and other surveys have been conducted since that time. The majority of chief executives are typically ranked in the average category, with the “great” including Washington, Abraham Lincoln, and Franklin D. Roosevelt. Those often in the bottom ranking include Andrew Johnson, Franklin Pierce, Warren G. Harding, and James Buchanan. Such lists, however, should be treated with caution, I believe. How does one compare the presidency of a Franklin Roosevelt dealing with the nation’s worst fiscal depression and then World War II with, say, a Calvin Coolidge who was president during the booming 1920s? Those who served in the nation’s highest office would probably concur with fellow president Theodore Roosevelt: “It isn’t how long you are president that counts, but what you accomplish as president. I’ve had my chance; I did fairly well with it. I made some kind of a place in history for myself. Someone else might have done better than I did, but I could not; for I did my best.”