

Happy Presidents Day!

As you know, Presidents Day was originally known as “Washington’s Birthday” in honor of America’s first president, who was born on February 22nd. In many regions, Abraham Lincoln’s birthday (February 12) is also celebrated.

Over the years, the holiday has expanded to become a celebration of all presidents—hence the name “Presidents Day.” And while Washington and Lincoln still tend to get the most press, we think it’s good to remember that many others have served as Chief Executive, too. So many of the rights, freedoms, and privileges we enjoy today are due to men and women whose names and deeds are shrouded by history. This is even true of presidents. Some presidents were better than others were, of course, but all deserve to be commemorated.

Sadly, some presidents were unable to serve for very long due to their untimely deaths. This has often rendered them mere footnotes in history; the answer to a trivia question and nothing more. And yet even these presidents were able to accomplish important things during their time in office. So for this Presidents Day, we thought we could take a brief look at who a few of these men were and what they did.

William Henry Harrison (9th President from March 4 to April 4, 1841)

Harrison holds two unfortunate records: he was the first president to die in office, and the president with the shortest tenure in United States history. Actually, Harrison holds three records, because he is also known for delivering the longest inaugural address on record. The speech lasted almost two hours, and was given on a very cold and rainy day in early March.

About 22 days after the inauguration, Harrison came down with what seemed to be a bad cold. His doctors did everything they could, but Harrison soon grew worse. He died 9 days later, only a month into his term. Scientists now think he succumbed to typhoid fever as a result of drinking contaminated water.

Because he died so early into his presidency, Harrison never had the chance to do much of note other than call a special session of Congress. But there is some evidence that he would have been a very active president. From the start, Harrison was committed to reforming how the government was run, visiting every federal department to see how it operated and how it could be improved. He also seemed intent on making the presidency a more independent office, one that would not be subservient to powerful individuals in Congress and elsewhere.

His last words were made to his doctor, but historians think they were intended for Vice President Tyler: “Sir, I wish you understand the true principles of the government. I wish them carried out. I ask nothing more.”

Zachary Taylor (12th President from March 4, 1849 – July 9, 1850)

Like Harrison, Taylor was a nationally recognized war hero. His reputation was what effectively catapulted him to the White House, as he was a man without a firm political ideology. He took office during a tumultuous time in American history. The southern states were making increasingly loud noises about seceding, while the three new territories acquired during the Mexican-American War were all demanding statehood.

Despite owning slaves himself, Taylor did not wish to see slavery expanded to the new territories. His solution was to admit California to the Union as a free state, which would give the other non-slavery states more power in Congress. Taylor also worked to ensure New Mexico remained a distinct territory rather than be incorporated into Texas. Finally, Taylor proved to be a surprising defender of religious freedom, promising the Mormon Church that they would be allowed to continue practicing their beliefs in relative independence within the newly organized Utah Territory.

Unfortunately, Taylor died of cholera only a year into his presidency. His last words summed up a lifetime of service to the country. “I am about to die. I expect the summons very soon. I have tried to discharge all my duties faithfully, and I regret nothing.”

James A. Garfield (President from March 4, 1881 to September 19, 1881)

Garfield, our nation's 20th president, was fated to serve only a little longer than Harrison. But, like Harrison, there is evidence that he intended to be an active, transformative president, and he was able to launch an ambitious agenda before he died.

For much of the 19th century, the government operated on something called the "spoils system." You've heard of the phrase "To the victor go the spoils"? That describes how the government used to work. Whichever party won the presidential election made key appointments based solely off of who their friends were, or who had helped them gain power. Garfield (and his predecessor, Hayes) worked to change that by instituting a merit system where only people who met certain qualifications could be considered for government jobs.

Hayes was also somewhat ahead of his time when it came to civil rights. In his inaugural address, he announced a plan to make full citizens of all African Americans, with more secure voting rights and access to a better education.

Sadly, Garfield's work in undoing the spoils system contributed to his death. Charles Guiteau, a former supporter who had been denied an ambassadorship he wasn't qualified for, assassinated Garfield in a train station less than a year after the election. Among his last words were, "My work is done."

Forty-four men have served our country as president. (Donald Trump, of course, is currently the 45th.) Some served for eight years, some for far less. Some had the talent and time to accomplish great things. Others did not. But to quote Zachary Taylor, everyone who has ever served took on perhaps the hardest job in the world and "tried to discharge their duties faithfully." For that, they deserve remembrance and respect.

So this Presidents Day, spare a thought for not just the Washingtons and the Lincolns, but all those who tried to carry out "the true principles of government."

On behalf of all of us here at Hudock Capital, we wish you a happy Presidents Day!

Sincerely,

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