

# THE **ULTIMATE** GUIDE TO THE PRESIDENTS™

**THE OFFICE OF PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES IS ONE OF THE HALLMARKS** of the American experiment. Those who have served in the nation's highest office have been from different personal and political backgrounds, with vastly differing philosophies and personalities.

*The Ultimate Guide to the Presidents™* explores the lives, decisions and unique contributions of the men who have served as U.S. President, from George Washington to Barack Obama.

Organized chronologically, *The Ultimate Guide to the Presidents* is a fast-paced eight-hour series that looks at each president and the challenges, expectations and responsibilities they faced. With commentary from historians and unique visuals, this series is a journey into the heart of the American political system told through the prism of the nation's foremost leaders. Students will see how each individual president has shaped the executive office and will gain insights into the ways leadership has changed those who have held this prestigious position of power.





## CURRICULUM LINKS

*The Ultimate Guide to the Presidents* would be a good fit with American history, politics, civics, and government courses. It is appropriate for eighth-grade students and above. Teachers may want to use specific segments of this program to align with their course units and lectures on particular eras of U.S. history.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What were the unique circumstances of George Washington's presidency? How do you think he set the stage for later presidents?
2. Compare the personal and management styles of the presidents. Which president do you think was most effective? Which was least effective?
3. How did the presidents differ in their view of the executive office? Pick one or two presidents to use as examples in order to answer to this question.
4. Which U.S. President do you think had the most challenges while in office, and how did he deal with these challenges?
5. Through watching this series, you will see that some common themes and issues emerged throughout the history of the executive office - dealing with the national debt, determining the limits of power during wartime, and foreign policy are just a few of them. How did different presidents handle these issues? What were the consequences of these different approaches?
6. This series explores both the personal and the political lives of the presidents. Describe the role of some of the presidents' wives, children, or other family members. How did presidential families influence life in the White House? How might some of the presidents' personal lives have affected their work?
7. Some presidents are considered American icons while others are almost forgotten. Which of the "forgotten" presidents do you think should be better remembered, and why?
8. What are some of the ways the American Presidency has changed over time? Do you think these changes have been positive or negative?
9. Which U.S. President do you think was most popular during his presidency, and why?

## EXTENDED ACTIVITIES

1. **Executive Office 101.** The U.S. Constitution outlines the powers and responsibilities of the executive branch of government. Ask students to review this section of the Constitution and summarize the roles of the executive office in bullet points or in a short essay.
2. **In the Know.** Place the names of each president into a box or hat and have students choose one of the names. Working individually or in small groups, students should become an "expert" on this president. They should learn about their personal history, key turning points in their administration, and major events during their presidency. Then, each student or group can create a presentation about their president, in PowerPoint format, on posters, or in short oral reports or plays.
3. **Off the Presses.** Each American President had a unique style and personality. Students can imagine they are a newspaper reporter given the valuable opportunity to interview one of the presidents. Which president would they choose to interview? What five questions would they ask the president? Students should be sure to research the president and their policies before compiling their questions, and then can present these interviews with answers they think the president may have given.



**4. From the Pen of the White House.** Ask students to put themselves in the shoes of one of the presidents and write a letter to a friend from the perspective of that leader. Students can think about the following questions when writing these letters: Who are you, and when are you writing your letter? What are some of the issues affecting your term(s) in office? What decisions have you made, or do you plan to make to solve these problems? Remember, you don't know what will happen next!

**5. On the Campaign Trail.** A campaign manager has a complicated job in choosing how to present the candidate to the voters. Ask students to choose one of the presidential campaigns discussed in the series and imagine they are the campaign manager for one of the candidates. How will they "sell" the candidate to the public? Students can make posters advertising their candidate and can also try writing a campaign song or slogan.

## RESOURCES

### BOOKS

Brinkley, Alan and Davis Dyer. *The American Presidency*. (Houghton Mifflin, 2004).

Gaffney, Dennis and Peter Gaffney. *The Seven-Day Scholar: The Presidents: Exploring History One Week at a Time*. (Hyperion, 2012).

Milkis, Sidney and Michael Nelson. *The American Presidency: Origins and Development, 1776-2002*. (CQ Press, 2003).

Smith, Carter. *Presidents: Every Question Answered*. (Hylas, 2004).

Waldman, Michael. *The Most Important Speeches of America's Presidents, from George Washington to Barack Obama*. (Sourcebooks, Inc., 2010).

### WEBSITES

**Learn more about U.S. Presidents on History.com:**  
[www.history.com/topics/the-us-presidents](http://www.history.com/topics/the-us-presidents)

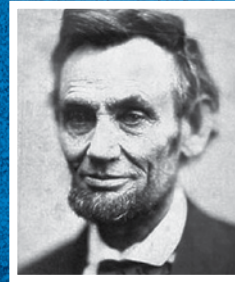
**History.com site on U.S. Presidential Elections:**  
[www.history.com/topics/presidential-elections](http://www.history.com/topics/presidential-elections)

**The Miller Center's Presidential Speech Archive:**  
[millercenter.org/president/speeches](http://millercenter.org/president/speeches)

**The American Presidency Project:**  
[www.presidency.ucsb.edu](http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu)

## PRIMARY-SOURCE ACTIVITY

Excerpt from Abraham Lincoln's First Inaugural Address, March 4, 1861



"In your hands, my dissatisfied fellow-countrymen, and not in mine, is the momentous issue of civil war. The government will not assail you. You can have no conflict without being yourselves the aggressors. You have no oath registered in

heaven to destroy the government, while I shall have the most solemn one to 'preserve, protect, and defend it.'

I am loath to close. We are not enemies, but friends. We must not be enemies. Though passion may have strained, it must not break our bonds of affection.

The mystic chords of memory, stretching from every battle-field and patriot grave to every living heart and hearthstone all over this broad land, will yet swell the chorus of the Union when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature."

(Read the entire speech at the Miller Center's Presidential Speech Archive.)

## DOCUMENT-BASED QUESTIONS

1. What do you think Lincoln meant when he said that the issue of war was in the hands of his "fellow-countrymen"? Do you think that was true?
2. Why do you think Lincoln would be "loath to close" and end his speech? Why do you think he may have felt like there was much more to say?
3. According to Lincoln, what can the "mystic chords of memory" do to help preserve the Union? Why do you think he used this concept to appeal to those who may have advocated for civil war?





# Episode Guide:

## THE ULTIMATE GUIDE TO THE PRESIDENTS™

### **Episode 1: Assume the Position** (1789-1825)

*Washington, Adams, Jefferson, Madison, Monroe*

The United States of America was a bold invention - a new experiment in government with three branches: a court, a congress and an executive. This episode traces the founding of the democracy and the first five leaders to hold the highest office.

### **Episode 2: Power to the People** (1824-1849)

*John Q. Adams, Jackson, Van Buren, Harrison, Tyler, Polk*

America in 1824 saw the era of the Founding Fathers coming to an end. Over the next 25 years, six presidents would reflect the country's sometimes uneasy transition as the nation expanded westward.

### **Episode 3: A House Divided** (1849-1865)

*Taylor, Fillmore, Pierce, Buchanan, Lincoln*

America by the mid-1800s was triple its original size. But with new territory came old confrontations. Slavery, the question that had been avoided since the country's birth, now had to be answered. The nation explodes into civil war.

### **Episode 4: Executive Retreat** (1865-1901)

*Andrew Johnson, Grant, Hayes, Garfield, Arthur, Cleveland, Harrison, Cleveland, McKinley*

America after the Civil War was a traumatized country in desperate need of leadership. Over the next three decades, a series of struggling presidents took a back seat to Congress and to captains of industry.

### **Episode 5: Call of Duty** (1899-1921)

*Theodore Roosevelt, Taft, Wilson*

America at the beginning of the 20th century found a growing chasm between rich and poor. But one president took back the reins, fighting for the common man. Enormous international conflict emerged, testing America's strength and the resolve of the nation's highest leaders.

### **Episode 6: Changing of the Guard** (1920-1945)

*Harding, Coolidge, Hoover, Franklin Roosevelt*

America in the 1920s was a country poised for a fresh start. The economy was beginning to "roar," and the presidents at the helm were happy to take a backseat to Congress. But as America crashed into depression - and then another world war - the times called for a leader, one who would set the table for presidential power in the 20th century.

### **Episode 7: Hail to the Chief** (1945-1964)

*Truman, Eisenhower, Kennedy, Lyndon Johnson*

In 1945, at the end of a devastating global war, America emerged as a superpower, but the Cold War presented the nation with a new crisis. The struggle against the spread of communism abroad and the corrosive effects of inequality at home demanded a new resolve and steadfast leaders.

### **Episode 8: Mantle of Power** (1965-2013)

*Johnson, Nixon, Ford, Carter, Reagan, George H.W. Bush, Clinton, George W. Bush, Obama*

The power of the presidency has often been burdened by the personal struggles or shortcomings of the men who occupied the office or by a Congress determined to reassert power. Despite the substantial growth of the power of the office since it was first imagined, it remains a shining symbol of America's noble experiment in democracy.