Meet the Presidents
February 14 – ongoing

Selected PR Images

A special permanent gallery on New-York Historical’s fourth floor features a detailed re-creation of the White House Oval Office, where presidents have exercised their powers, duties, and responsibilities since 1909. Visitors to New-York Historical can explore the Oval Office, hear audio recordings of presidential musings, and even sit behind a version of the President’s Resolute Desk for a photo op. The Suzanne Peck and Brian Friedman Meet the Presidents Gallery traces, through artwork and objects, the evolution of the presidency and executive branch and how presidents have interpreted and fulfilled their leadership role.

Rembrandt Peale
George Washington (1732–1799), 1853
Oil on canvas
New-York Historical Society, Bequest of Caroline Phelps Stokes

The Constitution defines the president’s power and duties in broad strokes. George Washington was the first to put them into practice and was keenly aware of his singular place in history. Willing to assert his authority, he was just as willing to acknowledge the office’s constitutional limits. He was a president, not a king.

Unidentified maker
George Washington inaugural armchair, 1788–89
Mahogany with pine and poplar
New-York Historical Society, Gift of Edmund B. Southwick

On April 30, 1789, George Washington began his presidency at Federal Hall on Wall Street, the nation’s first capitol (1789–90). He took the oath of office while standing on the building’s balcony, then sat in this mahogany chair before speaking to Congress. Every president since has followed Washington’s lead in delivering an inaugural address to the legislature. His actions established many of the practices and customs of the American presidency.
President George Washington sent a representative to central New York for treaty talks with the sovereign Six Nations of the Haudenosaunee, also known as the Iroquois Confederacy. Washington followed diplomatic protocol in dealing with the Native nations. Before the talks, he sent a tomahawk-pipe to Cornplanter, a Six Nations negotiator. By combining a weapon with a peace pipe, the gift symbolized a turn from war to peace. The parties signed the Canandaigua Treaty in 1794.

President Abraham Lincoln was the nation’s commander-in-chief throughout the Civil War. He conferred regularly with generals and the secretary of war, and often directed military strategy. Lincoln also freed slaves by proclamation, established a draft to put more soldiers in Union blue, and delivered the Gettysburg Address. The speech honored fallen soldiers who had died to ensure that a “government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.”
Chinese immigrants began arriving in California around 1850, working for low pay to support families at home. Local workers resented them and began “The Chinese Must Go” campaign. In response, Congress passed a bill suspending the immigration of Chinese laborers for 20 years. President Chester Arthur thought the long exclusion period violated the spirit of an existing treaty with China, so he vetoed the bill. This eventually led to the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act, America’s first law to restrict immigration based on race.

No president has faced a greater economic crisis than Franklin D. Roosevelt. Elected early in the Great Depression, he took immediate steps to create the economic relief and recovery programs known as the New Deal. He worked so effectively with Congress in his first 100 days in office that this period has since become a measure of a president’s early success.

Beyond his legislative achievements, President Franklin D. Roosevelt connected with the American people, using radio talks to calm fears and inspire confidence.
President Harry Truman reads the Japanese surrender message surrounded by members of his Cabinet and others, August 14, 1945
Harry S. Truman Library & Museum

President Harry Truman’s Oval Office announcement that the Japanese had surrendered effectively ended World War II.

Page from Marsha Sorotick’s scrapbook, 1962
New-York Historical Society Library

In 1962, New York high school student Marsha Sorotick began a scrapbook about John F. Kennedy’s presidency for a school assignment. Not long after, Kennedy gave an urgent TV address, informing Americans that the Soviet Union had placed nuclear missiles in Cuba within bombing range of U.S. cities. Sorotick’s scrapbook had a serious new focus: “We felt like maybe during the night, they’d blow us up.”
President John F. Kennedy addresses the nation during the Cuban Missile Crisis, October 22, 1962
John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum

As commander-in-chief, President John F. Kennedy could have tried to destroy the missiles with a military strike. Concerned about the risk of nuclear war, he instead asked national security advisers to develop other options. He ordered a naval quarantine to prevent Soviet ships from reaching Cuba and communicated directly with Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev. After 13 tense days, the Soviets removed the weapons.

President Lyndon B. Johnson talks with Martin Luther King Jr., Whitney Young, and James Farmer, December 3, 1963
LBJ Library photo by Yoichi Okamoto

Presidents are also the leaders of their party. However, serving both nation and party can be challenging, and leaders must sometimes choose between the two. President Lyndon Johnson put national needs first when he supported civil rights legislation that Southern Democrats had condemned.

President Richard Nixon and Elvis Presley,
December 21, 1970
Richard Nixon Library

The White House Oval Office is both a ceremonial space and a working office. Presidents host world leaders and dignitaries there, as well as hold private meetings. They also address the public, sign bills into law, hear policy briefings, and conduct daily business from this symbolic room. Here President Nixon greets entertainer Elvis Presley.
President Ronald Reagan and Soviet General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev have their first meeting at the White House, December 8, 1987
Ronald Reagan Presidential Library & Museum

Presidents can furnish the Oval Office to suit their own tastes. This re-creation of the room evokes key elements of its appearance during Ronald Reagan’s second term. First Lady Nancy Reagan oversaw the office’s redecoration. She brought in Hollywood decorator Ted Graber and opted for a formal design that conveyed grandeur, power, and authority.