

Presidents on the Presidency

The Presidents of the United States come from a variety of backgrounds. Their ranks include businesspeople, farmers, lawyers, generals, a history professor, and a tailor. Many were wealthy, but some were of modest means. Despite their diversity, they all respected the awesome responsibilities of their office. Some reflected on the burdens of such power.

The presidency of the United States carries with it a responsibility so personal as to be without parallel. . . . No one can make decisions for him. No one can know . . . all the reasons why he does certain things and why he comes to certain conclusions. To be President of the United States is to be lonely, very lonely at times of great decisions.

—HARRY S. TRUMAN, 1955

Every problem that you take up has inevitably a terrific meaning for millions of people, so there is no problem that comes up in the Presidency—even some that appear trivial—that is handled as easily as you would handle your own daily living.

—DWIGHT D. EISENHOWER, 1956

Every day, almost every hour, I have to decide very big as well as very lit-

tle questions. . . . It has been very wearing, but I have thoroughly enjoyed it, for it is fine to feel one's hand guiding great machinery . . . for the best interests of the nation as a whole.

—THEODORE ROOSEVELT, 1902

I can with truth say that mine is a situation of dignified slavery.

—ANDREW JACKSON, 1829

In addition to reflecting on their duties, Presidents frequently have lamented the isolation “at the top.”

One of the things about the presidency is that you're always somewhat apart. You spend a lot of time going by too fast in a car someone else is driving, and seeing people through tinted glass. . . . And so many times [I've] wanted to . . .

reach out . . . and connect.

—RONALD REAGAN, 1989

So much is expected . . . that I feel an

insuperable [overwhelming] diffidence [insecurity] in my own abilities. I feel, in the execution of the duties of my arduous Office, how much I shall stand in the need of the countenance and aid of every friend to myself . . . and of every lover of good Government.

—GEORGE WASHINGTON, 1789

There's such a difference between those who advise or speak or legis-



late, and between the man who must make . . . the policy of the United States. It's much easier to make the speeches than it is to finally make the judgments. . . . If you take the wrong course, and on occasion I have, the President bears the burden. . . . The advisers may move on to new advice.

—JOHN F. KENNEDY, 1962

I am tired of an office where I can do no more good than many others, who would be glad to be employed in it. To myself, personally, it brings nothing but unceasing drudgery and daily loss of friends. . . . My only consolation is in the belief that my fellow citizens at large will give me credit for good intentions.

—THOMAS JEFFERSON, 1807

Examining the Reading

Reviewing Facts

1. Describe President Theodore Roosevelt's attitude about the presidency.
2. Compare the viewpoints of Presidents Jefferson and Kennedy about presidential critics.

Critical Thinking Skills

3. Making Inferences Why might a President characterize the presidency as “a situation of dignified slavery”?

More About Personal Perspectives

Some Presidents have acted in what many observers considered to be an arrogant manner while they served in office. It is therefore surprising to find that not all of them thought they were worthy of the presidency. Warren G. Harding said, “I am a

man of limited talents from a small town.” Dwight Eisenhower, when criticized for not being a more forceful leader, snapped, “Now look, this idea that all wisdom is in the President, in me, that's baloney . . . no one has a monopoly on the truth.”