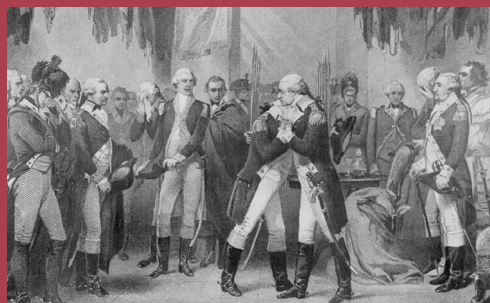


CIVICS IN REAL LIFE

Presidential Transition

Civics is all around us. There is a lot to know about the government and how "We the People" interact with the government and each other. Let's help each other expand our civic literacy.

In a scene from the incredibly popular Broadway play, "Hamilton," King George III learns that George Washington is stepping down from the presidency, and asks, "Is that true?" Perplexed, the king goes on to ask if the United States is "going to keep on replacing whoever's in charge." And the answer to his question, as we know, is yes.



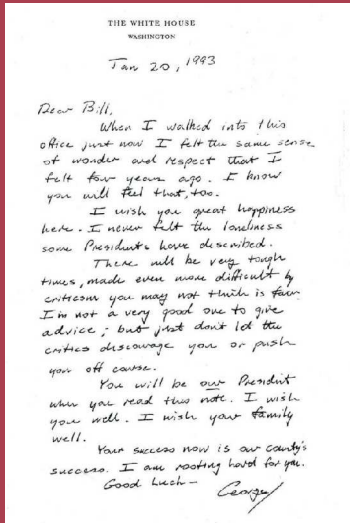
Washington's example of peacefully stepping away from the presidency at the end of his second, four-year term in 1797 set the peaceful presidential transitional wheels in motion, but it was the election of 1800 that cemented this approach to a transition of power as an important principle. In that election, power passed from the hands of the Federalists under John Adams, who had succeeded Washington, to the Democratic-Republicans under Thomas Jefferson. This confirmed that it was possible to have a peaceful presidential transition even between two different political parties.

Since then, no matter how many terms a president serves, they have all followed Washington's lead and peacefully handed the mantle of leadership over to their successor when their time as president is over.

For 166 years, this transition in leadership and transfer of power occurred not as a matter law, but as a matter of tradition. In 1963, Congress changed this, and codified this transfer of power with the passage of the Presidential Transition Act.

When this Act was passed, Congress identified its purpose as "to promote the orderly transfer of the executive power in connection with the expiration of the term of office of a President and the inauguration of a new President," and to warn that "any disruption occasioned by the transfer of the executive power could produce results detrimental to the safety and well-being of the United States and its people." Bipartisan legislation, signed into law in 2020, amended the 1963 Act to provide clarity around responsibilities as well as require presidential candidates publicly release ethics plans for their transition team prior to the election.

Consequently, the Presidential Transition Act requires governmental agencies to work with, and assist, first and second term transition teams of presidents-elect. In doing so, the United States government is ensuring the orderly and peaceful transfer of executive power come Inauguration Day.



A Letter Writing Tradition

In a long-standing tradition, many outgoing presidents have left a personal letter for their successor that wishes them well and provides some insight and advice about the things they've learned from being in office. Below is the text from the letter the outgoing president George H.W. Bush wrote for the incoming president Bill Clinton.

January 20, 1993

Dear Bill,

When I walked into this office just now, I felt the same sense of wonder and respect that I felt four years ago. I know you will feel that, too.

I wish you great happiness here. I never felt the loneliness some presidents have described.

There will be very tough times, made even more difficult by criticism you may not think is fair. I'm not a very good one to give advice, but just don't let the critics discourage you or push you off course.

You will be our President when you read this note. I wish you well. I wish your family well.

Your success now is our country's success. I am rooting hard for you.

Good Luck -
George

To Think and To Do: Review the Preamble to the Constitution, which lays out multiple purposes of government. How does the peaceful transition of presidential power exemplify the Preamble in action?

Learn MORE about Presidential Transition. Free registration may be required.

- Center for Presidential Transition, from Partnership for Public Service
- Presidential Inaugurations: Traditions & Transitions, from The White House Historical Association



Lou Frey Institute