

THE EVOLVING AMERICAN PRESIDENCY SERIES

Series Foreword:

The American Presidency touches virtually every aspect of American and world politics. And the presidency has become, for better or worse, the vital center of the American and global political systems. The Framers of the American government would be dismayed at such a result. As invented at the Philadelphia Constitutional Convention in 1787, the Presidency was to have been a part of a government with shared and overlapping powers, embedded within a separation-of-powers system. If there was a vital center, it was the Congress; the Presidency was to be a part, but by no means, the centerpiece of that system.

Over time, the presidency has evolved and grown in power, expectations, responsibilities, and authority. Wars, crises, depressions, industrialization, all served to add to the power of the presidency. And as the United States grew into a world power, presidential power also grew. As the United States became the world's leading superpower, the presidency rose in prominence and power, not only in the U.S., but on the world stage.

It is the clash between the presidency as invented and the presidency as it has developed that inspired this series. And it is the importance and power of the modern American presidency that makes understanding the office so vital. Like it or not, the American Presidency stands at the vortex of power both within the United States and across the globe.

This Palgrave series recognizes that the Presidency is and has been an evolving institution, going from the original constitutional design as a Chief Clerk, to today where the president is the center of the American political constellation. This has caused several key dilemmas in our political system, not the least of which is that presidents face high expectations with limited constitutional resources. This causes presidents to find extra-constitutional means of governing. Thus, presidents must find ways to bridge the expectations/power gap while operating within the confines of a separation-of-powers system designed to limit presidential authority. How presidents resolve these challenges and paradoxes is the central issue in modern governance. It is also the central theme of this book series.

Michael A. Genovese
Loyola Chair of Leadership
Loyola Marymount University
Palgrave's *The Evolving American Presidency*, Series Editor

The Second Term of George W. Bush

edited by Robert Maranto, Douglas M. Brattebo, and Tom Lansford

The Presidency and the Challenge of Democracy

edited by Michael A. Genovese and Lori Cox Han

Religion and the American Presidency

edited by Mark J. Rozell and Gleaves Whitney

Religion and the Bush Presidency

edited by Mark J. Rozell and Gleaves Whitney

Test by Fire: The War Presidency of George W. Bush

by Robert Swansbrough

American Royalty: The Bush and Clinton Families and the Danger to the American Presidency

by Matthew T. Corrigan

Accidental Presidents: Death, Assassination, Resignation, and Democratic Succession

by Philip Abbott

Accidental Presidents

*Death, Assassination, Resignation, and
Democratic Succession*

Philip Abbott

palgrave
macmillan



ACCIDENTAL PRESIDENTS

Copyright © Philip Abbott, 2008.

Softcover reprint of the hardcover 1st edition 2008

All rights reserved.

First published in 2008 by
PALGRAVE MACMILLAN™

175 Fifth Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10010 and
Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire, England RG21 6XS
Companies and representatives throughout the world.

PALGRAVE MACMILLAN is the global academic imprint of the Palgrave Macmillan division of St. Martin's Press, LLC and of Palgrave Macmillan Ltd. Macmillan® is a registered trademark in the United States, United Kingdom and other countries. Palgrave is a registered trademark in the European Union and other countries.

ISBN 978-1-349-37435-9

ISBN 978-0-230-61303-4 (eBook)

DOI 10.1057/9780230613034

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Abbott, Philip.

Accidental presidents : death, assassination, resignation, and democratic succession / Philip Abbott.

p. cm.—(The evolving American presidency)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-230-60766-7

1. Vice-Presidents—United States—Biography. 2. Presidents—United States—Biography. 3. Presidents—Succession—United States. I. Title.

E176.49.A33 2008

973.0099—dc22

2007048029

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Design by Newgen Imaging Systems (P) Ltd., Chennai, India.

First edition: July 2008

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Transferred to Digital Printing 2009

To
Kevin Louis Abbott



Assassination Attempt, September 5, 1975 (Courtesy Gerald R. Ford Library)

Contents

<i>Preface</i>		ix
One	Succession and Democratic Theory	1
Part I Independent Strategies		
Two	John Tyler: “I can never consent to being dictated to”	23
Three	Millard Fillmore: “God save us from Whig Vice Presidents”	39
Four	Andrew Johnson: “I care not about my dignity”	57
Five	Theodore Roosevelt: “There’s only one life between that madman and the presidency”	73
Part II Homage Strategies		
Six	Chester A. Arthur: “He isn’t Chet anymore, he’s the president”	93
Seven	Harry S. Truman: “I felt like the moon, the stars, and all the planets had fallen on me”	109
Eight	Lyndon Baines Johnson: “For millions of Americans I was still illegitimate, a naked man with no presidential covering, a pretender to the throne, an illegal usurper”	131
Part III Minimalist Strategies		
Nine	Calvin Coolidge: “I thought I could swing it”	155
Ten	Gerald Ford: “I am acutely aware that you have not elected me as your President”	171
Eleven	Conclusion: Refounding Succession	191
<i>Notes</i>		207
<i>Index</i>		227

Preface

Presidential scholars, as well as the general public, classify presidents in many ways. There are successful presidents and failed ones, presidents who speak eloquently and those who do not, generous presidents and vindictive ones, imaginative presidents and stolid ones, lucky presidents and unlucky ones, popular presidents and unpopular ones, those who are reelected and those who are not. There are also cold war presidents, Reconstruction presidents, war and peacetime presidents, modern presidents and postmodern ones, and, of course, Democratic and Republican presidents.

One of the most intriguing classifications is “accidental presidents.” Presidents in this category are successes and failures, lucky and unlucky as well as all the other different kinds of chief executives. However, how these presidents assume office seems to determine in large part their fate. Rather than becoming president by election, they assume office by the death, assassination, or resignation of the current occupant. In a fundamental way, accidental presidents are the stepchildren of presidential classifications and indeed of democratic theory in general, for, while they share many features of other presidents, their common characteristic, holding office without benefit of direct election, makes them exceptional. Not only were Millard Fillmore, Harry Truman, and Lyndon B. Johnson very much aware that they shared a basic position in common with the first accidental president, John Tyler, but also each of them finds himself with a few basic strategies available to govern under these special circumstances. This book identifies and examines how and why a particular strategy was selected by an accidental president, why it was a success or failure, and if their political lives could have been or should have been be made easier.

As always, I have benefited greatly by suggestions and comments from a large number of colleagues, both in political theory and presidential studies. As always, I have especially profited from the advice and support of my family, particularly Patricia Abbott who took time away from her own writing to help with this project. Someday, my new grandson, to whom this book is dedicated, will too join this group of invaluable supporters.

PHILIP ABBOTT
Detroit, Michigan