

American presidential candidates depend mostly on their individual charisma and their unique ability to represent the self-perception and desires of the country in their own personalities. On the other hand, vice presidents are chosen for more businesslike reasons such as their abilities in politics, horse trade, and keeping influential voting inside. But what happens when power passes from the president to the vice president?

The answer to this question can be found in Jared Cohen's *Accidental Presidents*. It is essentially a study about the men who became president of the United States after their bosses died of illness or were assassinated.

In the history of the US, this happened eight times. Some of these cases are far more interesting than others. It is a fact that everyone remembers Lincoln and Kennedy but there are also people like Garfield and McKinley who are often forgotten. Then there are four other presidents who died from natural causes: Harrison, Taylor, Harding, and Roosevelt. In this summary, we'll closely explore the decisions of these so-called "accidental presidents" who replaced their old bosses and how they changed the course of American history.

John Tyler, the first "accidental president," opened a way to the annexation of Texas to the United States.

In 1840, the Whig party's candidate William Henry Harrison won the presidential election. His nickname was "Old Tippecanoe" and this 68-year-old general was the republic's oldest head of state. That was not the only record he set: He was inaugurated on March 4 but died 31 days later on April 4, 1840. So far, it is still the shortest presidency in American history.

The Whig party at that time lacked constitutional guidelines so they decided to choose Harrison's vice president John Tyler as his replacement. He was a native Southerner and the Whig party added him to the ticket to help win Virginia. The campaign slogan became "Tippecanoe and Tyler too" and it clearly shows that Tyler was merely an afterthought who happened to be the vice-president who would replace Harrison who unfortunately died of pneumonia.

As Tyler was an outsider, neither Whigs nor their Democratic opponents trusted him. Whigs doubted his political credentials and the latter had not forgiven him for his personal attacks

on them during the 1840 campaign. Tyler was being attacked from all sides and he was literally in a gridlock.

Tyler's strategy was to divide and conquer. If he could manage to get rid of some voters from both Whigs and Democrats, neither of them would be able to win the 1844 election. In such cases, the House of Representatives would determine the next government. In the end, as Tyler planned, it would give him the presidency.

The last thing he needed was a signature policy. This was around the time he started talking about the idea of annexing Texas. Texas was an independent state since 1836 and it was a perfect candidate to join the Union. However, annexation was a political uproar for both parties.

Why you might ask. The biggest problem was the balance between supporters of slavery and the opponents of it. A new state would disrupt the balance between Southern slave states and Northern free states. If Texas were to become a slave state, it would give a high advantage to the supporters but if it were to become a free state, then it would work in favor of the opponents.

Tyler, on the other hand, was sure that this gambit was a winner. In 1844, he signed a treaty that opened some kind of a way to its annexation. The issue dominated the presidential election as Tyler predicted. However, there was a slight problem. He fell into third place and soon withdrew from the race. The wheels were already in motion for this plan. Before leaving the office, Tyler signed an annexation bill on March 3, 1845. His successor, James Polk managed to convince Texas and on December 29, 1845, Texas became the twenty-eight state of the US.

New territories were a threat to the delicate balance of states in the US until Millard Fillmore changed everything with the Compromise of 1850.

The annexation of Texas set in motion a chain of events that would affect the future of America. First of all, Mexico refused to accept the borders that were drawn by the US and

wanted to claim the state for itself. Eventually, a war between the nations broke out and it resulted in the United States' victory. The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo was signed in February 1848. The US decided on the terms for peace: Mexico had to forfeit all of present-day California, New Mexico, Arizona, Nevada and Utah and a good amount of Colorado, Wyoming, and Texas.

Seven months later, Americans headed for election. The Whigs chose Zachary Taylor, a Kentucky-born general known for his exploits in the Mexican-American War, as their candidate. The reason why Taylor was selected was simple: his popularity. Harrison's death was still very fresh in office. Thus, Whigs wanted to choose someone reliable as Taylor's running mate. Millard Fillmore, a New York congressman, was chosen.

Even though Taylor won the election, his presidency was not a happy one. The territories that the US acquired from Mexico threatened the Missouri Compromise. It was legislation passed in 1820 to ensure a balance between slave and free states. Northerners insisted on admitting new free states. Southerners, on the other hand, threatened to secede as those free states would give them a huge advantage. Taylor, as a military man, threatened them to send in federal troops if they tried it.

However, the decision was not his to make as he died of acute food poisoning on June 9, 1850. Fillmore replaced him in the White House. Fillmore was against slavery, like most Northerners but he also had a pragmatist character. Compared to Taylor, Fillmore was not going to die on this hill. After his inauguration, Fillmore decided to work on a plan together with Kentucky legislator Henry Clay. It later became known as the Compromise of 1850.

Clay's idea was simple to process: California would be a free state, and Utah and New Mexico would decide themselves. Therefore, the future of the Union was postponed with this idea. Either side of the argument was not fully satisfied, however, it was something both supporters and abolitionists could live for the time being.

Andrew Johnson sold out America's emancipated slaves, thus, wasting a historic opportunity.

Around 1864, it was almost guaranteed for the Unionist North to win against the Southern Confederacy in the Civil War. The more important question was what would come after November's election.

Abraham Lincoln, the abolitionist Republican president of the US since 1860 led a radical reform against the slaveholding South. He was against slavery in many ways and he had already issued the 1862 Emancipation Proclamation to free Southern slaves. He approved the Thirteenth Amendment to the US constitution, by doing so, outlawed slavery in the US in 1864. However, his running mate Andrew Johnson had different ideas. He was extremely racist and owned slaves. He once said black people in America "have shown less capacity for government than any other race of people."

So you might wonder how did these two men with radically different views ended up in the same ticket. Lincoln knew that abolitionist program would greatly divide people. In order to win the 1864 election, he needed to appeal to War Democrats but also the Unionists who had less blatant views about the South's future in the Union. Johnson, a Tennessee senator who was famous for his racist speeches about "traitors" was a perfect opportunity for Lincoln to reach that demographic.

Even though Johnson helped with the election, Lincoln's second term was unfortunately very short. On April 15, 1865, Lincoln was assassinated in a Washington theatre by a man who sought revenge for South's loss in the war. Johnson was inaugurated the same day.

At first, Johnson's presidency frightened slaveholders. Even though he was considered to be racist, he fought against the secessionists throughout the war. He hated them so much that he even embraced Lincoln's civil rights policies. Yet, it was not completely an anti-racist stance, he merely wished to win the Civil War. He knew that if he were to get rid of the slaves of the South, he would seriously damage the Confederacy.

After the war had been won, Johnson changed his behavior. He wanted to admit the Southern States into the Union but he also knew that this would never be possible if he punished them too severely. Though he promised the hang Southern leaders, he pardoned them instead. Even the Confederacy's VP Alexander Stephens and its top general Robert E. Lee were forgiven.

By November 1865, Southern States began passing Black Codes and it was disastrous for civil rights. These laws prevented slaves from having any rights. In North Carolina, for instance, orphaned black children were forced to return to their families' former masters. In Kentucky, legislation passed and it stated that all contracts had to be verified by white citizens. It was basically slavery but they did not call it slavery. There was a historic opportunity for true equality in the US but it was crushed.

Chester Arthur's whole career was dependent on the patronage system which he helped dismantle it later.

By 1880, many Americans were tired of politics. Patronage was born and quickly became popular. The nation's highest offices were dealing with corrupt products of the spoils system, politicians who owed their positions to the old-boy network.

The Republican candidate James Garfield won that year's presidential election and hope entered the scene. He was a former teacher from a working-class background and his success was a product of himself. He was friendly with black Americans, immigrants and the poor. He helped with many educational reforms that later became the foundations of a more meritocratic and equal system.

However, that hope was destroyed. On July 2, 1881, he was shot twice by a madman named Charles Guiteau. He believed that Garfield prevented him from getting a political position. Garfield lingered on for eighty days but eventually died and he was replaced by his running mate, Chester Arthur.

Compared to Garfield, Arthur owed everything he had to the spoils system. In fact, the only reason why he was given vice presidency was because of his New York backers'

persistence to Garfield. If he had not chosen Arthur, they would make sure that the state did not turn to Republicans.

When Arthur entered the White House, Americans were terrified. Arthur had a notorious reputation as a wheeler-dealer and many still remembered scandals he'd been involved in the earlier decades. However, the worst thing was that he met Guiteau a couple of times before. Many Americans were convinced that he had a hand in Garfield's murder. Though the theory was not completely true it managed to obscure the little good he had done.

There were two major issues at that time: civil rights and corruption and Arthur rose to the occasion. He was one of the first presidents to appoint black Americans to important positions such as the surveyor of the port of New Orleans. Also, when the Supreme Court said that civil rights legislation was unconstitutional, he denounced the decision immediately.

However, his greatest achievement was the Pendleton Act. It was an 1883 law that designated that government positions must be awarded based on merit. It is true that the president retains some personal discretion over appointments but the Act is considered to break the back of the spoils system.

Theodore Roosevelt used his predecessor's assassination cleverly to make reforms.

In November 1899, William McKinley's vice president died while in office. At 54, he was eight years older than the average life expectancy, however, McKinley did not want to fill the position of VP. In fact, if not for the 1900 election, he would have left it empty. Since he could not find a running mate himself, the party had to find someone.

That someone was Theodore Roosevelt. He was a progressive New Yorker and he hated corruption. He was also known for his advocacy of poor Americans. Roosevelt spent a lot of time during his time as the city's police commissioner and governor. His selection as VP is thought to be engineered by New York's top Republican political operator, Thomas Platt. He wanted to move Roosevelt upstairs and give him an important position with little power so that he would stop sticking his nose where it was not wanted.

The plan worked and McKinley-Roosevelt returned home victorious and pledged to keep things pretty much the same as they were. The presidency would be too dull and unremarkable if not for a Polish American steelworker named Leon Czolgosz. He was one of the millions who'd been made poor due to an economic crash in 1894. Czolgosz became an anarchist militant and on September 5, 1901, he fired two shots at McKinley and inflicted a fatal wound. After a week, the president died.

It was finally time for Roosevelt to shine. He abandoned the previous president's cautious policies and started an energetic campaign for social reform. At first, it seemed an unlikely moment for such changes in American politics. The change had been the product of war and the country was pretty much in peace.

However, Roosevelt had something in his mind. He argued that anarchism was an ideology that attracted people who preferred "confusion and chaos to the most beneficent form of social order." The only way to stop it was to wage war on the conditions that led people like Czolgosz to rise: poverty. He believed that social reform was a matter of national security.

It was an extremely effective tactic, and over the next three years, Roosevelt managed to push a huge amount of measures through Congress that restrained the power of American "trusts", large corporations whose behavior had eventually triggered the crash of 1893.

Though Calvin Coolidge continued Warren Harding's policies, corruption was inevitable.

The early twentieth century was a chaotic time in the history of the US. Class conflicts and political radicalism were increasing day by day. There were also international problems: in 1917, the US gathered its forces and entered the First World War on the side of the Allied Powers. After that conflict, Americans were ready for some peace and quiet. In 1920, the Republican candidate Warren Harding was chosen as he promised to just that.

The economy was growing steadily and political debates started to cool down making Harding's administration very popular and memorable. However, the voters did not know the whole story about him at that time. Harding was an adulterer who loved getting drunk on

booze and playing cards with his old friends from Ohio. The worst thing is that when his acquaintances built a criminal empire in Washington using his presidency, he stayed silent.

Things have changed when Jess Smith, one of Harding's allies, committed suicide in May 1923. Harding was convinced that his corruption will be revealed because of Smith. The president started to become paranoid and extremely stressed. In the end, there was not anything significant about his corruption but Harding died of a stroke on August 2 due to extreme stress.

Harding's running mate, Calving Coolidge became the thirteenth president of the US the next day. He was moderate conservative and also the former governor of Massachusetts. Coolidge's first job was to deal with Harding's mess. In time, the details and secrets about Harding's administration became known to the public and there was an outcry.

However, Coolidge himself was pure and untainted. Even though he promised clean the mess of Harding and get rid of corruption, voters still doubted him and his motives. Why? Many of them still admired Harding's political record and Coolidge promised not to disturb the status quo. He also told Congress "Whatever his policies were, [they] are my policies."

There was not really a thrilling policy platform for the upcoming 1924 election. Americans wanted some kind of a caretaker, not a visionary person. Thanks to the booming economy at that time, Coolidge won the election easily. Over the next four years, he became known as "Silent Cal." He was steadily controlling the country's highest office and led the ship of state to prosperity.

Lyndon Johnson followed JFK's example and extended civil rights to black Americans.

One of the most shocking events throughout the history of the world was the assassination of America's young Democrat President John F. Kennedy in November 1963. What happened truly? Some believed that there was some kind of evil Marxist conspiracy. Others suspected a right-wing coup. Fear was definitely in the air.

There were a lot of reasons to be terrified of America's black community. Kennedy's victory in 1960 had been greeted with extreme happiness. Kennedy was the first prominent white politician to consider segregation unconstitutional and declare it as moral evil as civil right leader Jesse Jackson later put it. His death, therefore, seemed the end of a brief period of hope and equality.

Kennedy's successor Lyndon B. Johnson, or LBJ for short, was a very odd man in many ways. He was a Texan career politician who was accused of vote-rigging. "Landslide Lyndon" he was called and he was more of a wheeler-dealer rather than an idealist. He was chosen as vice president to help Kennedy win against anti-civil-rights Southern Democrats. Yet, he was associated with segregationists and became notorious because of his use of the N-word.

The Civil Rights Movement seemed to suffer a terrible reverse. However, it later became clearer that LBJ was an unlikely champion that the Civil Rights Movement needed. Similar to his namesake Andrew Johnson, LBJ changed extensively after entering the White House. This accidental president was on the right side of history.

He was re-nominated by the Democrats to contest in the 1964 election. LBJ asked Americans' authorization. If they were to elect him, he pledged to pass legislation to make "those who are equal before God" equal in voting booths, classrooms, factories, restaurants and basically everywhere. Though there was a divisive platform, he managed to achieve a great victory. In July that same year, he passed the first Civil Rights Act.

It outlawed racial discrimination and segregation in employment, education, and housing. Any kind of segregation in public or state-supported institutions was banned. It was undoubtedly the most important civil rights legislation passed since the Reconstruction era. So, for what reason LBJ decided to change?

The answer is pragmatism. There were events like the 1963 bombing of a black Baptist church by the Ku Klux Klan in Birmingham, Alabama. The tide of opinion was changed in favor of the Civil Rights Movement. LBJ cleverly read the mood of the country and its people and managed to act before things got more chaotic. After all those years of horse-trading, he had plenty of favors to call in. He'd done so and managed to push the Act through Congress.

Accidental Presidents: Eight Men Who Changed America

by Jared Cohen Book Review

It is a fact that chance has played a major role in American history. Eight presidents who died in office, left the most important matters of the day in the hands of their successors, “accidental presidents” who had no way of knowing that one day they would end up in the White House. Their choices affected the fate and the future of the nation. These accidental presidents set in motion events that eventually led to huge changes such as redrawing of America’s border to shift the balance of power and even civil rights for minorities especially black Americans.

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