

KEY - Episode 1

The Ultimate Guide to the Presidents: “Assume the Position” - 1789-1825

George Washington

00:00-19:45

1. What made this new office of president so different in the world?
 - There was nothing to really compare it to. Most other countries were ruled by kings.
2. The Founding Fathers established strong courts, a strong legislature, but planned for a weak executive. Why?
 - They felt that King George III was an abusive executive. They didn't want to follow the example of foreign nations, which all had strong executives.
3. Why did the Founding Fathers create the Electoral College?
 - The delegates didn't think the common people would know the candidates well enough to choose among them.
4. Why did Washington create a cabinet of advisors?
 - He wanted a group of trusted people to help him decide what was proper for a president to do.
 - His decisions were setting new precedents for the future and he wanted to make good ones.
 - He wanted to be able to consult with people who were brilliant in their respective fields, to receive their counsel and to have them run executive departments.
5. Why was the location of the new nation's capital city controversial?
 - The various regions (e.g. the South) wanted to control it, and they did not want the other region to control it.
6. Washington wanted to leave the presidency after his first term. Why?
 - He wanted to retire to his own home/farm.
 - He had exhausted himself in the service of his country.
 - He didn't like being criticized or challenged.
7. War broke out in Europe, prompting Washington to respond. What did he choose to do and why do you think he chose that action?
 - He issued a neutrality proclamation.
 - Possible answers: He knew the U.S. was unable to get involved in a war; he didn't want the U.S. to function like a part of Europe; he was afraid the new nation could not survive a war.
8. What precedent did the above proclamation set?
 - That it is the president and not Congress that sets American foreign policy.
9. What significant precedent did Washington set upon leaving office?
 - That a president would only serve for two terms.
10. As a general rule, how did the Founding Fathers view political parties?

- Their feelings towards party politics were generally very negative.

John Adams

19:45-25:45

11. Adams had a great background that made him appear perfect for the presidency. What did he lack?
 - “He wasn’t George Washington.” He was short, squad, balding, overweight – in general, he didn’t have the presence necessary to really be a leader.
 - He did not appear as they expected a president to appear (possible discussion: What do we expect a president to look like? How do we expect him/her to act?)
12. What did the Alien & Sedition Acts do? Why were these acts especially problematic?
 - They arrest people who spoke out against the government.
 - They are problems because they are unconstitutional (they trample the 1st amendment, which was very new).

Thomas Jefferson

25:45-31:15

13. Historian Libby O’Connell said, “One of the things that Jefferson brings [to the presidency] is this sense of acting out democracy.” What do you think she means by this?
 - Possible answers: Jefferson felt that he was a representative of the people, and so he ought to act like the people. Jefferson attempted to practice what he preached. Jefferson felt the presidency should be low key.
14. What power did the Supreme Court claim in Marbury vs. Madison?
 - The power to rule actions of the other branches unconstitutional.
15. In what ways did the Louisiana Purchase represent a challenge to Jefferson’s principles?
 - Jefferson believed the action was unconstitutional, since it says nothing about a president’s power to acquire territories.

James Madison

31:15-37:34

16. Describe James Madison.
 - He was kind of a nerd. He would have anxiety attacks. He seemed like a wizened old man even at a relatively young age.
17. How did Dolly Madison define the role of first lady?
 - She made it the first lady’s duty to act as a kind of hostess for diplomatic guests. She helped make the White House a center for Washington and the nation.
18. The U.S. declared war against Britain in 1812. Why was this a huge problem for the U.S.?
 - The U.S. was grossly unprepared for the war, whereas Britain was completely ready.
19. In August of 1814, the British captured Washington, D.C. and set fire to the White House. How do you think this impacted Americans psychologically?
 - Possible answers: It would have been devastating to see their own capital burning. It would have been frightening - perhaps many wondered if the U.S. would return to a revolutionary-war style conflict, or if the U.S. would survive at all. It also may have simply made them angry like Pearl Harbor or 9/11.
20. How did the War of 1812 change the way Americans viewed themselves?

- They went from viewing themselves as Virginians, Pennsylvanians, etc. and began to see themselves as Americans.

James Monroe

37:34-44:10

21. In what ways was James Monroe the last of his kind?
 - He was the last of the revolutionary generation; the last of the founders.
 - He was the last to wear knee breeches and a tricorner hat.
22. What issue had the previous presidents avoided that Monroe had to finally confront? Why did he have to confront it?
 - slavery
 - Missouri applies for membership in the union.
23. What did Monroe claim in the Monroe Doctrine?
 - The Americas are in our sphere of influence and Europe should butt out.
24. How did the post-Monroe time represent a new era for the presidency?
 - The presidents up through Monroe basically inherited the presidency, since they'd served during the revolution. Future presidents had to "earn it themselves."
 - It was the end of the founder-presidents, who used their time to establish precedents for the future.