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Presidential Succession

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Presidential Succession

What is the chain of succession should a president die in office? How far down the chain has it gone?

Succession has never gone further than from a president to a vice president (in all, on nine occasions, when eight incumbents died in office and one incumbent resigned). Prior to 1947, if a president died, became severely disabled, or resigned, succession would have proceeded in this order:

- vice president;
- secretary of state;
- secretary of war (later defense); and
- other cabinet secretaries in the order in which their departments were created.



The Presidential Succession Act of 1947 slightly modified the successors and is operative to this day. The act added two individuals fairly high up in the order of succession:

- president;
- vice president;
- speaker of the House (added because elected -- thus in theory more accountable to citizens);
- president pro tem of the Senate (added for the same reason);
- secretary of state;
- other Cabinet secretaries in the order in which their departments were established, so treasury secretary; defense secretary; and so on down to the homeland security secretary, since he heads up the last department that was created.

To understand the order of succession is to know why one Cabinet secretary is not present at the president's annual State of the Union address. If a catastrophe took out Capitol Hill, the surviving secretary could assume the presidency.

Americans who recall the Reagan presidency might remember one incident that caused equal parts confusion and consternation. When Ronald Reagan was shot on March 30, 1981, Secretary of State Al Haig, meaning well, said he was "in control." Vice President George H. W. Bush was not in Washington, DC, at the time, but Secretary Haig seems to have forgotten that the speaker of the House and president pro tem of the Senate were in town and, more to the point, ahead of Haig in line of succession because of the Presidential Succession Act of 1947. Perhaps Secretary Haig reacted to the stressful situation by automatically reverting to what he had learned in grammar school, when the old order of succession was taught.

There are two surprising historical footnotes to this notion of presidential succession.

Hauenstein Center associate George Nash masterfully tells one of them. The Election of 1916 was closely fought between incumbent Woodrow Wilson and challenger Charles Evans Hughes; the electorate was tense because it was widely believed that the U.S. would be forced into World War I. Woodrow Wilson worried, too, which prompted him to come up with an arresting idea. In those days, prior to ratification of Amendment XXV, four months elapsed between Election Day and Inauguration Day. To Wilson, that was too long a period when the nation was poised on the edge of war. This is the plan Wilson hatched. If he had lost his bid for re-election, he would have his secretary of state, Robert Lansing, resign. With the Senate's cooperation, he would then nominate his Republican opponent, president-elect Charles Evans Hughes, to be the new secretary of state. Then -- here is the interesting twist -- he (Wilson) and Vice President Thomas Riley Marshall would resign, thus paving the way for Hughes to assume the presidency much sooner than the following March. The entire plan depended on the cooperation of the Senate, but was never implemented since Wilson defeated Hughes and was returned to the White House.

For the second footnote, fast forward to 1973-1974, to the tumult surrounding President Richard Nixon once the Watergate break-in came to light. James Cannon tells of a succession plot to end all plots in his biography of President Ford, *Time and Chance*. In October of 1973, Nixon's first vice president, Spiro Agnew, was forced to resign in disgrace. The Republican Nixon would be nominating a replacement who would have to be confirmed on Capitol Hill. But Congress was led by Democrats. New York Congresswoman Bella Abzug hatched a scheme to thwart Nixon and -- worse -- the plain intent of the Constitution. She and several other Democrats floated the idea that the Senate obstruct Nixon's VP nominee. In other words, they would insure that there would be no vice president. Then, when the president resigned because of public pressure from Watergate, succession would pass to the other party, to the Democratic speaker of the House Carl Albert (since there would be no VP). When Congresswoman Abzug presented the scheme to Speaker Albert, he refused to go along with the extra-constitutional scheme. Some historians have argued that this is the closest to a coup d'etat the U.S. has ever come.

And most people think presidential succession is a boring topic!

(Question from WUOM listener [Ann Arbor, MI])