Grand Valley State University
ScholarWorks@GVSU

Ask Gleaves | Hauenstein Center for Presidential Studies

6-12-2004

The President's Funeral

Gleaves Whitney
Grand Valley State University

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/ask_gleaves

Recommended Citation
Whitney, Gleaves, "The President's Funeral" (2004). *Ask Gleaves.* Paper 96.
http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/ask_gleaves/96

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Hauenstein Center for Presidential Studies at ScholarWorks@GVSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Ask Gleaves by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@GVSU. For more information, please contact scholarworks@gvsu.edu.

The President's Funeral

Can you explain how funerals for presidents work?*

In America the ritual of viewing the body of a deceased president goes back to the mid-nineteenth century. Americans want to see the face of a statesman they esteem. It is an old ritual, cathartic and unifying to a people who desire to look upon their leader one last time. So caskets usually are not closed.[1]

When Abraham Lincoln's body made the 13-day, 1,700-mile journey from Washington D.C., to Springfield, Illinois, more than a million mourners (out of a population of about 32 million people) viewed either the funeral train, hearse, casket, or face of the slain president's body, which had benefit of recent advances in embalming. As one scholar put it, Lincoln's body was considered public property; as the funeral train made stops, reporters would file articles with graphic details of how the face appeared.

By contrast, President Reagan's body was concealed from public view. And that was the family's perogative. There is no federal law mandating an open or closed casket when the body of a president lies in state.

According to the U.S. Senate historian, Presidents Garfield, McKinley, and Harding all lay in state in an open casket. In fact, most statesmen have lain in state in an open coffin, a tradition streching back to 1852, with the death of Henry Clay, who was the first to lie in state in the Rotunda (even though the dome had not yet been completed).

The Reagan family's decision to keep the casket closed was unusual, but hardly unique. Kennedy's body was also concealed from view because his widow, Jackie, insisted on a closed casket. In Death of a President, William Manchester wrote of anguished, behind-the-scenes debates among Kennedy's family and closest aides. Most of them argued that the casket should be open while the body lay in state. Jackie didn't like the idea -- she wanted a closed casket. Defense Secretary Robert McNamara pleaded, "It can't be done, Jackie. Everybody wants to see a head of state." Robert Kennedy agreed. Private concerns had to take second place to public customs. The American people would want to see their slain president and have the opportunity to say farewell one last time. But Jackie held her ground. "It's the most awful, morbid thing," she insisted. "They [the people] have to remember Jack alive." And so the casket remained closed as some 115,000 mourners filed through the Capitol Rotunda.

To your last question: there is no law requiring presidential funerals to be in Washington, D.C. The body does not have to lie in state in the Capitol Rotunda, and the funeral does not have to be at the Washington National Cathedral. The particulars are up to the family. When President Lyndon Johnson died in 1973, his remains lay in state in the Capitol Rotunda, but the funeral took place in the Texas Hill Country that he called home. When Richard Nixon died in 1994, the family had the funeral and interment in Yorba Linda, California, Nixon's birthplace. His remains were never taken back to Washington, D.C.

To read more about this fascinating topic, see the book by Emory University religion professor Gary Laderman, The Sacred Remains: American Attitudes toward Death, 1799-1883. Also, if you get the chance, visit the Smithsonian Institution's exhibit, "The Glorious Burden: the American Presidency," which has displays of how we mourn our dead presidents, as well as Ford's Theatre in Washington, D.C., to learn more about Lincoln's funeral, and the Sixth Floor Museum in Dallas, Texas, to learn more about Kennedy's funeral.
(Question from E. Johnson of Houston, Texas)

---

* Full question: Why are the caskets closed for presidential funerals and other ceremonies? Is this a governmental rule -- that no one view the president's body? Does the family view the body before it is turned over to the government? Are presidential state funerals optional or mandated to be held in Washington DC?

[1] See Ann Gerhard, "A Tangible Grief: Lying in State Gives the Public a Ritual Comfort," Washington Post, June 8, 2004, pp. C1, C2.