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First to Travel Outside of the U.S.

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First to Travel Outside of the U.S.

Who was the first president to travel outside the United States?

One hundred years ago the U.S. was getting used to the idea that it was a world power, the new nation of Panama was trying to establish itself, and the ever vigorous Theodore Roosevelt was elected president in his own right. Let these three facts converge in your mind and you can understand why TR would become the first sitting president to venture beyond U.S. territory. He did so in 1906 when he traveled to Panama, a country that he had practically willed into existence three years earlier when it became clear that Colombia would not bend to the will of the U.S. and lease land for a canal in the Isthmus of Panama.

TR, never chary of exercising a muscular foreign policy, fixated on constructing the 51-mile water highway because it would give the U.S. Navy much quicker maneuverability between the Atlantic and Pacific oceans. Upon completion of the canal, a ship's voyage between New York City and San Francisco was shortened from about 15,000 to 6,000 miles. This TR thought essential in the aftermath of the Spanish-American War (1898), when the U.S. found itself in possession of far-flung lands stretching from Guam and the Philippines to Puerto Rico. Also the nation needed better coastal defenses against potentially hostile regimes.

TR's 1906 journey to Panama would set the precedent for his successors to travel abroad when it was perceived that important foreign policy objectives were at stake. In 1919, for instance, Woodrow Wilson would be the first sitting president to travel to Europe in the aftermath of the First World War.

TR, incidentally, racked up two other notable firsts when he was in the White House. He was the first sitting president to travel in an automobile, and he was the first of our chief executives to win the Nobel Peace Prize.

(Question from Steve S. of Spokane, WA)

