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Presidential Funerals and Burials: Selected Resources

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Summary

This fact sheet provides resources on presidential funerals and burials in the United States. It contains a brief overview of past practices and selected online resources related to official and ceremonial protocols, past presidential funerals, congressional documents, and other documents and books.

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Brief Overview of Past Practices

When a President dies, a number of activities and events are set in motion. The vast majority of these activities and events are governed by custom rather than statute, and may be influenced by the wishes of the deceased President's family.

Official Actions and Responsibilities

Typically, the incumbent President issues a presidential proclamation that serves as an official announcement of the death.¹ In recent decades, these proclamations have, in accordance with federal law,² directed that U.S. flags should be flown at half-staff for 30 days; the proclamations have also given specific guidance regarding where the flag should be flown at half-staff. In the proclamation announcing the death of Ronald Reagan, President George W. Bush issued the following directive:

the federal flag shall be flown at the White House and on all buildings, grounds, and naval vessels of the United States for a period of 30 days from the day of his death. I also direct that for the same length of time, the representatives of the United States in foreign countries shall make similar arrangements for the display of the flag at half-staff over their Embassies, Legations, and other facilities abroad, including all military facilities and stations.³

Other responsibilities are delegated to the Commanding General, Military District of Washington, U.S. Army, who is responsible for state funeral arrangements, as described in detail in the Army pamphlet entitled *State, Official, and Special Military Funerals*.⁴ This document also lists those entitled to a state funeral, including the current President, ex-President, President-elect, and any other person specifically designated by the current President. An excerpt from the pamphlet on key responsibilities and delegations follows:⁵

3. Responsibilities.

- a. The President notifies the Congress that he has directed that a State Funeral be conducted. The Congress, which has sole authority for use of the U.S. Capitol, makes the Rotunda available for the State Ceremony through its own procedures.⁶

¹ The first incumbent president to issue such a proclamation was John Tyler, in 1841 (announcing the death of William Henry Harrison, who died of pneumonia 32 days into his presidential term), see John Tyler: "Proclamation 46—Announcing the Death of William Henry Harrison," April 13, 1841. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, The American Presidency Project, at <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/200557>.

² From 4 U.S.C. §7(m): "The flag shall be flown at half-staff 30 days from the death of the President or a former President," and "10 days from the day of death of the Vice President, the Chief Justice or a retired Chief Justice of the United States, or the Speaker of the House of Representatives."

³ For an example of a recent presidential proclamation with specific directives on where the flag should be flown at half-staff, see George W. Bush: "Proclamation 7794—Announcing the Death of Ronald Reagan," June 6, 2004. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, The American Presidency Project, at <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/211297>.

⁴ U.S. Headquarters of the Departments of the Army, the Navy, the Air Force, and the Treasury, "State, Official, and Special Military Funerals," OPNAVINST 5360.1, December 1965, at <https://archive.org/details/DAPAM1-1/mode/2up>. The U.S. Army Military District of Washington Joint Force Headquarters National Capital Region identifies this pamphlet as "the primary regulation that provides direction on state, official and special military funerals;" see http://www.usstatefuneral.mdw.army.mil/docs/default-document-library/faq-sf-military-questions.pdf?sfvrsn=a486b034_0.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

⁶ For example, see <https://www.congress.gov/bill/108th-congress/senate-concurrent-resolution/115>.

b. The Secretary of Defense is the designated representative of the President of the United States. The Secretary of the Army is the designated representative of the Secretary of Defense for the purpose of making all arrangements for State Funerals in Washington, D.C. This includes participation of all Armed Forces and coordination with the State Department for participation of all branches of the Government and the Diplomatic Corps.

c. The Commanding General, Military District of Washington, U.S. Army as the designated representative of the Secretary of the Army, will make all ceremonial arrangements for State Funerals in Washington, D.C. and will be responsible for the planning and arranging of State Funerals throughout the continental United States.

Many variations and combinations of ceremonies and traditional events and activities honoring the former President are possible. A short list of these possibilities includes the following:

- A former President's remains may lie in repose for one day and then be moved to the Capitol Rotunda to lie in state, during which time a funeral ceremony and public viewing may occur.⁷
- A former President, as former Commander-in-Chief, is entitled to burial and ceremony in the Arlington National Cemetery.⁸ If, however, the former President is to be buried outside of Washington, DC, honors may be rendered at a train station, terminal, or airport that serves as a point of departure for the remains.⁹
- Other honors that may be rendered during ceremonies include musical honors,¹⁰ gun and cannon salutes,¹¹ and a U.S. Air Force coordinated flyover.

Recent Practices

Most recently, following former President George H. W. Bush's death on November 30, 2018, President Donald J. Trump announced the death and issued a proclamation that U.S. flags on all federal facilities be flown at half-staff for 30 days. The proclamation also appointed December 5, 2018, as a National Day of Mourning throughout the United States.¹² On December 1, 2018,

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 8; "the remains will normally lie in state in the Capitol Rotunda for approximately 24 hours, depending on the ceremonial requirements and desires of the President and the next of kin."

⁸ Arlington National Cemetery, "Eligibility for Interment (Ground Burial of Casketed or Cremated Remains)," at <https://www.arlingtoncemetery.mil/Funerals/Scheduling-a-Funeral/Establishing-Eligibility/Ground-Burial>. Two former Presidents are buried in the National Cemetery: William Howard Taft and John F. Kennedy.

⁹ U.S. Headquarters of the Departments of the Army, the Navy, the Air Force, and the Treasury, "State, Official, and Special Military Funerals," Army Pamphlet 1-1, December 1965, p. 9, <https://archive.org/details/DAPAM1-1/mode/2up>.

¹⁰ Musical honors include the playing of "Ruffles and Flourishes," in which drums play the ruffles and bugles play the flourishes. Presidents receive four flourishes, the highest honor. "Hail to the Chief" is then played. For a brief guide to the U.S. Army Ceremonial Band's ceremonial music (and downloadable music files), see <http://www.usarmyband.com/watch-listen/ceremonial-music-guide.html>.

¹¹ For more information, see U.S. Headquarters of the Departments of the Army, the Navy, the Air Force, and the Treasury, "State, Official, and Special Military Funerals," OPNAVINST 5360.1, December 1965, p. 69; and U.S. Department of Defense, American Forces Press Service, "Military Tradition to Be Evident in Ford Funeral Events," December 29, 2006, at https://www.army.mil/article/1163/military_tradition_to_be_evident_in_ford_funeral_events.

¹² Donald J. Trump: "Proclamation 9830—Announcing the Death of George Herbert Walker Bush," December 1, 2018. From the American Presidency Project at <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/proclamation-9830-announcing-the-death-george-herbert-walker-bush>.

President Trump also issued Executive Order 13852, which directed the closing of federal offices and agencies on the national day of mourning.¹³

Former President Bush then lay in state in the Capitol Rotunda from December 3 to December 5,¹⁴ with subsequent services on December 5 at Washington National Cathedral.¹⁵ Services for the former President were also conducted on December 6 in Houston, Texas, with interment following at the George H. W. Bush Presidential Library and Museum.¹⁶

Military Participation, Ceremony, and Protocol

State Funerals in the United States of America (Military District of Washington Joint Force Headquarters, National Capital Region)

This website contains information on the evolution of state funerals, military honors for former Presidents, ceremonial traditions of past state funerals (including lying in state or repose), military honors, and FAQs. See the menu at the top left of the home page to access this information.

<http://www.usstatefuneral.mdw.army.mil/>

State, Official, and Special Military Funerals (U.S. Departments of the Army, Navy, Air Force, and Treasury)

This web-archived Navy pamphlet outlines state and official funeral policy, and it contains detailed information on funeral eligibility, procedures, and sequences of events.

<https://web.archive.org/web/20201018060622/https://www.secnav.navy.mil/doni/Directives/05000%20General%20Management%20Security%20and%20Safety%20Services/05-300%20Manpower%20Personnel%20Support/5360.1.pdf>

Past Presidential Funerals

White House Historical Association

The White House Historical Association has published a number of online articles and other content on past funerals. A few selected articles are as follows:

- *A Presidential Funeral*
<https://www.whitehousehistory.org/a-presidential-funeral>

¹³ Since at least 1969 (the year of Dwight D. Eisenhower's death), the incumbent President has issued an executive order, a proclamation, or both providing for a temporary closure of government departments and agencies. The 2018 Executive Order is at <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2018/12/04/2018-26552/providing-for-the-closing-of-executive-departments-and-agencies-of-the-federal-government-on>.

¹⁴ U.S. House of Representatives, History, Art and Archives: "Individuals Who Have Lain in State or in Honor," at <https://history.house.gov/Institution/Lie-In-State/Lie-In-State/>

¹⁵ Jim Garamone, "America bids goodbye to President George H.W. Bush," United States Army, December 6, 2018, https://www.army.mil/article/214680/america_bids_goodbye_to_president_george_hw_bush.

¹⁶ Emma Bowman, "George H.W. Bush to Lie in State at the Capitol and Be Buried in Texas," National Public Radio, December 2, 2018, <https://www.npr.org/2018/12/02/672639505/george-h-w-bush-to-lie-in-state-at-the-capitol-and-be-buried-in-texas>.

- *Arlington's Ceremonial Horses and Funerals at the White House*
<https://www.whitehousehistory.org/arlington-ceremonial-horses-and-funerals-at-the-white-house-1>
- *Modern Mourning Observations at the White House*
<https://www.whitehousehistory.org/modern-mourning-observations-at-the-white-house>

To search for and view images, documents, and other materials on presidential funerals, see the Association's digital library:

<https://www.whitehousehistory.org/digital-library>

Washington National Cathedral

Washington National Cathedral has been the location of funeral and memorial services for several U.S. Presidents. The following is a video on presidential funerals from the Cathedral's YouTube channel:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YymMSf8XE8c>

All the Presidential funerals held at the Cathedral are also listed in the Cathedral's historical timeline:

<https://cathedral.org/discover/history/timeline/>

Presidential Libraries and Museums

Presidential libraries and museums provide preservation of and access to historical materials, including funeral information.¹⁷ Materials might be viewable online within digital collections at each individual library's website:

<https://www.archives.gov/presidential-libraries>

The Library of Congress

The Library of Congress has collected many historical papers, images, audio recordings, films, narratives, and other content related to presidential funerals. Collections may be searched and might be viewable online.

<https://www.loc.gov/>

For help finding specific items, librarian and reference specialists at the main reading room can provide assistance:

<http://www.loc.gov/tr/main/>

Videos of Services and Memorials for Selected Presidents

- George H. W. Bush: <https://www.c-span.org/video/?455342-1/president-george-hw-bush-state-funeral-service>
- Gerald R. Ford: <https://www.c-span.org/video/?195963-1/gerald-ford-michigan-service-burial>
- Ronald W. Reagan: <https://www.c-span.org/video/?182165-1/ronald-reagan-funeral-service>

¹⁷ For example, funeral service information at the Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library and Museum website, at <https://www.fordlibrarymuseum.gov/grf/Funeral/faq.asp>.

- Richard M. Nixon: <https://www.c-span.org/video/?56426-1/president-nixon-funeral>
- Lyndon B. Johnson: <https://www.c-span.org/video/?182212-1/lyndon-johnson-funeral-service>
- Harry S. Truman: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4Nfo1UjjJXE>
- Dwight D. Eisenhower: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z6sxKCFMoDo>
- Herbert Hoover: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AtZLxjsX39Q>
- John F. Kennedy: <https://www.jfklibrary.org/asset-viewer/archives/JFKWHF/WHN28/JFKWHF-WHN28/JFKWHF-WHN28>
- Franklin D. Roosevelt: <https://www.c-span.org/video/?298665-1/president-franklin-roosevelt-funeral>

Congress and Presidential Funerals

Individuals Who Have Lain in State

Eleven U.S. Presidents have “lain in state” at the U.S. Capitol Rotunda:
<http://history.house.gov/Institution/Lie-In-State/Lie-In-State/>

The Lincoln Catafalque in the U.S. Capitol

The Architect of the Capitol (AOC) provides a brief history of President Lincoln’s funeral and his catafalque. When not in use, the Lincoln catafalque is kept in a specially constructed display area in the Exhibition Hall of the Capitol Visitor Center.
<https://www.aoc.gov/blog/lincoln-catafalque-us-capitol>

Memorial Addresses and Tributes in the U.S. Congress

Concurrent resolutions have authorized commemorative compilations of tributes delivered in Congress for several former Presidents. For example, see President Ford’s tribute collection:
<https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CDOC-110hdoc61/pdf/CDOC-110hdoc61.pdf>

To locate these tribute collections for Presidents, <https://www.govinfo.gov/> may be searched.

Architect of the Capitol—Database of Images

The AOC has an onsite database of approximately 1,000 images of state funerals at the Capitol for the following presidents: Kennedy, Hoover, Eisenhower, Lyndon B. Johnson, Reagan and Ford. The images depict presidents lying in state in the Rotunda and related funerary ceremonies occurring at the Capitol. For more inquiries into accessing the images, congressional staff may fill out an agency contact form at <https://www.aoc.gov/contact-form>.

Selected Books

- Martin Nowak, *The White House in Mourning: Deaths and Funerals of Presidents in Office* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2010).

- Brady Carlson, *Dead Presidents: An American Adventure Into the Strange Deaths and Surprising Afterlives of Our Nation's Leaders* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2017).
- Brian Lamb and C-SPAN, *Who's Buried in Grant's Tomb: a Tour of Presidential Gravesites*. (New York: Perseus Books Group, 2010).
- Ambassador Mary Mel French, "Ceremonies: State and Official Funerals," in *United States Protocol: The Guide to Official Diplomatic Etiquette* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2010).

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Acknowledgments

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