

# A President's Day

## Overview

The functions of the executive branch and the various roles of the president may be somewhat abstract to students in middle grades. This lesson provides them with concrete examples as they examine one long and varied day in President Kennedy's life—September 25, 1962. On this day they can see the president performing specific roles, such as Party Leader, Head of State, Head of the Executive Branch, Commander-in-Chief, and Moral Leader. Students also review what the Constitution has to say about the president's job, consider how it has changed over the years, and collect additional information on the presidency today based on current news sources. Finally, after collaborating on a “help wanted” ad for the job of president, they write personal essays on what the job means to them.

**Grade level:** 5-8

**Subjects:** Social Studies, Civics and Government

**Time required:** 3-4 class periods

**Essential question:** What roles, responsibilities and daily activities are part of a modern president's job?

## Objectives

Students will:

- identify specific areas of responsibility that go with the office of president of the United States;
- compare what the US Constitution says about the president's powers and duties with what a modern president actually does in the course of a day's work;
- recognize ways that the job of president has changed over the course of time;
- form personal judgments about which aspects of the president's job are most significant, most challenging and most rewarding.

## Connections to Curriculum (Standards)

*Center for Civic Education:* III-B: What does the national government do?

*Massachusetts History and Social Science Frameworks*

Gr. 5 Concepts and Skills/Civics and Government 9: Give examples of the responsibilities and powers associated with major federal and state officials.

USG.3.6: Explain the functions of departments or agencies of the executive branch in the governments of the United States and the state of Massachusetts.

## Historical Background and Context

For all its significance to the nation and the world, the position of president of the United States has a remarkably brief job description—Article II, Section 2 and 3 of the U.S. Constitution easily

fits on a single typed page. And while the country has gone through unimaginable changes since George Washington's day, and the Constitution itself has been amended many times, the words describing the President's powers and duties remain exactly as they were written in 1787. Those words, however, do not fully reflect the many unwritten obligations and new roles that more recent occupants of the Oval Office have been expected to fulfill.

As the first president to be born in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and to appear regularly on TV, who steered the country into the space age and away from the precipice of a nuclear war, John F. Kennedy helped to define the modern presidency. Half a century later, even as the pace of technological, political and social change continues to accelerate, a day at work in the Oval Office is not so different from what it was when JFK presided over the New Frontier.

## Materials

- *A President's Day* – reading for students that uses JFK's schedule for Sept. 25, 1962 to illustrate several key presidential roles
- Document: The President's Engagements - Tuesday, September 25 (1962)
- Handout: "The President's Job According to the Constitution"

## Procedure

### 1. *Preliminary discussion*

Point out to the class that just as they follow a daily schedule in school, the President of the United States has a schedule too, although it may vary a great deal from day to day. Ask: *What are some things a President might do as part of a day's work?* Write down responses on the blackboard. After students generate a list, explain to them that they will be comparing their ideas with a particular day in the life of one of our presidents.

### 2. *Read article*

Have students take turns reading aloud from "A President's Day" handout. They should also have a copy of JFK's official schedule for Sept. 25, 1962 to refer to as they read. Explain that this list of President Kennedy's appointments was typed up by his secretary and left on his desk at the beginning of the day. However, things seldom go exactly according to plan, even for the president. Ask students to take note of the actual times he spent at each meeting or event (which are shown next to the photographs) and compare with the original schedule. Pause to discuss the pictures and any unfamiliar vocabulary words. You may also wish to record students' observations and questions related to each of the day's events.

(*Note:* The questions in the article may be used to extend the lesson, as suggested below.)

### 3. *Compare the initial list with President Kennedy's day*

Review what was written on the board in the preliminary discussion and check off those things that JFK actually did. Then have students name the roles and responsibilities described in the article and ask if any of these were mentioned earlier. If not, add to the list.

4. *Consider other possible daily activities*

Point out that along with the various meetings, appointments and events on his schedule the president would have spent time on a number of other daily activities. Ask students: *What's missing from our list? For example, do you think President Kennedy had any phone calls related to his work? And what about the mail? Every day, hundreds and sometimes thousands of letters arrive at the White House addressed to the president. When could he have taken time for reading and answering his correspondence? See what other ideas come from the class and record them.*

Students are likely to mention things that are not exactly part of the job, but worth noting. The president would have had another couple of meals in addition to his working breakfast. Did he have them with his family? Could he have taken time to play with the children? He might have read the papers, listened to news on the radio or watched television. (A heavyweight championship fight was on TV that night and he was always interested in sports.) He also needed exercise—a daily swim in the White House pool helped to relieve the back pain he suffered from his war-time injury. When could he have found time for this? If they don't bring it up themselves, ask students if they think presidents ever take naps during the day. In fact, JFK did take a short one that afternoon. The book, *Johnny, We Hardly Knew Ye* by David F. Powers and Kenneth O'Donnell includes this information and other interesting anecdotes concerning Sept. 25, 1962 (p. 257-67) and you may wish to share some more of these details with your class.

5. *Review what's written about the presidency in the U.S. Constitution*

Have students read "The President's Job According to the Constitution" (which summarizes ten powers and duties described in Article II, Sections 2 and 3). Ask them to identify which ones were carried out by JFK on Sept. 25, 1962. The others can be added to the list.

6. *Reflect on what has and what hasn't changed about the president's job*

Ask students how the job of president might have changed from George Washington's time to when John F. Kennedy was in the White House. *What was different about the country and the world when that "job description" in the Constitution was written? What were some things that were part of a day's work for President Kennedy that President Washington could have done too? What were some things that would have been new and unfamiliar to George Washington? Record students' responses on the board.*

7. *Collect evidence about the president's job today*

As a homework assignment, ask each student to collect examples of three different roles or responsibilities the president has been fulfilling during the past week, and to bring in their evidence (e.g., newspaper headlines, clippings of articles, printouts from the White House web site). Use their findings to create a bulletin board display. Have the class look at the display and ask them if it reflects any further changes in the job since the time John F. Kennedy was president in the 1960s. Add any new items to the previous list.

8. *Write a "help wanted" ad for the job of president*

Point out to students that they now have a lot of specific information and ideas about the president's duties. Ask them to imagine that they belong to a citizens' group concerned about getting the most capable candidates to run for president, and they've decided to write an ad to put in newspapers, billboards, and on the internet as a way of publicizing their effort. Divide students into teams and ask them to write a "help wanted" ad listing the chief executive's key roles and responsibilities. Then ask everyone to vote for the one they think best describes the job.

## Assessment

Ask students if the job of president has any appeal to them, and whether they could conceive of running for the office themselves one day. *Why or why not?* After time for class discussion, have students write a brief personal essay responding to these questions: *Which parts of the job do you think would be most challenging? Which do you think would be most rewarding? Which aspects of the job do you see as most significant?*

## Extensions

1. Discuss questions included in "A President's Day" relating to the roles described in the article:
  - Party Leader (p.2): *"Burro" is another name for donkey. Why does the donkey stand for the Democratic Party and the elephant for the Republican Party? (Do some research to find out.)*
  - Head of State (p. 3): *JFK believed that cultural exchanges were a good way to improve relations between countries. Can you think of other ways to do this?*
  - Head of the Executive Branch (p.4): *What qualities do you think a president should look for in choosing cabinet members?*
  - Commander-in-Chief (p.5): *Do you believe it's necessary for a president to have been in the military to be a good commander-in-chief? Why or why not?*
  - Moral leadership (p. 6): *If you were president, what injustices in our country would you want to fight against? What good causes would you most want to support?*

Alternatively, ask students to respond individually as part of a homework assignment.

2. Ask students to imagine that at the end of this very long day, despite the lateness of the hour, President Kennedy pauses quietly before the portrait of George Washington in the East Room (the painting that was saved by Dolley Madison when British soldiers set fire to the White House in 1814). As he gazes at his predecessor's picture, JFK wishes he could have a conversation with President Washington about some of the things that have been on his mind today. *If you were President Kennedy, which of the day's activities would you most want to talk about with George Washington? What do you think Washington might have to say about it, and what questions might he ask?* Write an imaginary dialogue between the two Presidents.
3. All of President Kennedy's daily schedules can now be found on the Library's web site. Go to [www.jfklibrary.org](http://www.jfklibrary.org) and click on "White House Diary" under Interactive Exhibits. Choose one or more of these schedules and have students compare with Sept. 25, 1962.

**Additional Resource**

*What the President Does All Day* by Roy Hoopes is a children's book featuring photos of President Kennedy at work. It was originally published in 1962 and was re-issued by HarperCollins in 1974. The book is currently out of print but you may be able to locate a copy in your local library.

# A PRESIDENT'S DAY



**John F. Kennedy Presidential Library & Museum**

## A President's Day

The presidency has changed a great deal since George Washington's time. For one thing, the new capital city of the United States wasn't established until after Washington left office. (Of course it would be named after him.) And he never got to live and work in the White House. That wouldn't be finished until John Adams took over.

What hasn't changed though is the difficulty of the job. The duties "are essentially endless," according to Dwight D. Eisenhower (known affectionately as "Ike"), who served two terms as Chief Executive. What *are* some of those duties—and how do modern presidents spend their time?

One of the best ways to find out would be to observe a president during the course of a day's work. So why don't we do just that!

Let's imagine being at the White House on the last Tuesday of September in the year 1962...



John F. Kennedy now occupies the Oval Office. His secretary, Mrs. Lincoln (no relation to Abe), has typed out a list of his engagements. It shows names of people with whom he'll be meeting today.



Let's see what roles and duties President Kennedy is carrying out as he keeps these various appointments.

The president is considered to be the leader of his political party. (George Washington didn't have this role because parties weren't formed yet.) President Kennedy belonged to the Democratic Party. As the **Party Leader**, he held a weekly breakfast meeting with the vice president and other Democrats who had important positions in the US Congress. That's how he started the day on September 25, 1962.

After breakfast JFK went outside with his guests to address the Burros Club, whose members worked for Democrats serving in the Congress.

One subject on all their minds was the upcoming Congressional election. Naturally, they wanted to see their fellow Democrats win as many seats as possible. The president planned to travel around the country to campaign on behalf of his party's candidates.



9:30 – 9:37 a.m.  
In the Rose Garden with members of the Burros Club

“The record that this Congress has made...is one of the most impressive since World War II...It is a record on which the Democratic members of the House and of the Senate can run in November.”



Speaker of the House John W. McCormack is at the far right standing next to Vice President Lyndon B. Johnson.

✧ “Burro” is another name for donkey. Why does the donkey stand for the Democratic Party and the elephant for the Republican Party? (Do some research to find out.)



As **Head of State**, the president is in charge of international relations and often meets with foreign heads of state, ambassadors and government officials. On this particular morning, President Kennedy met in the Oval Office with leaders from two other countries.



10:00 – 10:52 a.m.  
Nguyen Dinh Thuan, government official from Vietnam



11:00 – 11:58 a.m.  
Robert Menzies, Prime Minister of Australia



12:41 – 12:47 p.m.  
Ambassador Antonio Carillo Flores and members of the Ballet Folklórico of Mexico

He later went out to greet a group of folk dancers and singers from Mexico who were brought to the White House by their country's ambassador. In his remarks, the president recalled how he and Mrs. Kennedy had enjoyed seeing the group perform during a recent state visit to Mexico.

“We want to express, Mr. Ambassador, our very warm welcome to you. You were very generous to all of us on our visit to Mexico City and made us feel that we were not visiting a foreign country but, instead, visiting the home of friends, and we were particularly impressed by your dancing.... Muchas gracias. Viva Mexico!”

- ✧ JFK believed that cultural exchanges were a good way to improve relations between countries. Can you think of any other ways to do this?

The president is also **Head of the Executive Branch** of the US government. The Executive Branch carries out laws passed by Congress (the Legislative Branch) and performs other essential services. It includes a number of large departments—such as Defense, Treasury and Justice. The president is responsible for appointing the people in charge of each department.



12:15 – 12:25 p.m.  
Willard Wirtz takes the oath of office in the Cabinet Room.

President Kennedy had recently chosen Willard Wirtz to head the Department of Labor. This was the day that Mr. Wirtz was to be sworn in and JFK attended the ceremony.

“I am delighted to have this opportunity...to witness the swearing in of our new Secretary of Labor, who succeeds a most distinguished Secretary who set an extremely high standard for Mr. Wirtz, a standard which we know he will meet.”

The group of people who head the main executive departments are known as “the Cabinet.” They serve as advisors to the president. The Cabinet member JFK trusted most was the Attorney General, Robert F. Kennedy—who was his younger brother.

Usually, a president consults with the Attorney General about matters concerning the Justice Department. But JFK had such complete confidence in his brother (whom he called “Bobby”) that he talked with him regularly about many other matters as well.

That afternoon Robert Kennedy came to the White House for a meeting about a very serious situation involving Russian missiles in Cuba. Afterwards, the two brothers talked alone for nearly 20 minutes.



With Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy

✧ What qualities do you think a president should look for in choosing Cabinet members?

Just before he saw the Prime Minister of Australia, President Kennedy took time out from his official duties to greet some special visitors. Their names were Barney Ross and Ben Kevu. Barney served in the Navy with JFK during World War II. Ben was a native of the Solomon Islands. He helped to save Kennedy, Ross and other survivors of the PT-109, who had been shipwrecked after their boat was sunk by a Japanese destroyer. This was the first time that John F. Kennedy had seen his rescuer since 1943.



10:54 – 11:02 a.m.  
Barney Ross and Ben Kevu



Ensign Ross and Lieutenant  
Kennedy In 1943

The former navy lieutenant was now the **Commander-in-Chief**, and he had to make decisions about sending young men and women in the armed forces to dangerous places around the world. This is one of the toughest parts of any president's job.

At noon, officers of the Army and Air National Guard came to give their Commander-in-Chief a painting showing the Battle of Bunker Hill. In accepting it, JFK spoke of the important part played by volunteers serving in the Guard.

“I want to express my great appreciation to the Guard for this very generous gift to the White House. I think this is a first class painting....And the battle scene is symbolic, I think, of the civilian preparedness to serve.”



12:00 – 12:10 p.m.  
Presentation of a painting, “The Whites of Their Eyes”

✧ Do you believe it's necessary for a president to have been in the military to be a good Commander-in-Chief? Why or why not?

To really make a difference, a president needs to provide **moral leadership** for the country. That can mean speaking out against injustice. It can mean encouraging citizens to be steadfast and hopeful in times of crisis, or challenging them to serve others who are in need. In so doing, a president helps to bring out the best in the American people.

Presidents are also asked to speak on behalf of various worthy causes. President Kennedy would set aside time on this busy day for two charitable efforts that were close to his heart.

First, he met with directors of the United Negro College Fund to help give a boost to the fund-raising campaign they were about to launch. JFK realized that others would be more likely to contribute knowing that the president was a strong supporter. (He had also donated the Pulitzer Prize money he received for his book, *Profiles in Courage*, to the UNCF.)



12:26 – 12:40 p.m.  
Directors of the United Negro College Fund



11:30 p.m.  
Leaving the National Theater with Mrs. Kennedy

Later that evening, the president made an appearance at a special benefit performance of a new musical about life in the White House. The first lady was there too, along with other members of the Kennedy family. The purpose of the benefit was to raise money for two of the Kennedys' favorite charities, helping children and adults with disabilities.

- ✧ If you were president, what injustices in our country would you want to fight against? What good causes would you most want to support?

Even though it was nearly midnight, the Kennedys went to another event after leaving the theater. They were to be the guests of honor at a late supper party for about 600 people at the British Embassy. The party was hosted by Ambassador David Ormsby-Gore, an old friend. President and Mrs. Kennedy enjoyed themselves so much that they didn't return to the White House until 2:45 a.m. Another full day of work would begin just a few short hours later in the Oval Office.



✧ There are many additional duties and activities that go with being the Chief Executive. Can you name a few others?

And, of course, the presidency has continued to change since John F. Kennedy was in office. Do you suppose if George Washington were around today that he would still be interested in the job? Would **you**?

It's okay; take your time to think about it. You can let us know in about 30 or 40 years...

## THE PRESIDENT'S ENGAGEMENTS

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Tuesday, September 25

8:45 a. m.	Leadership breakfast.
9:30 a. m.	Burros Club and a group of Democratic aides.
10:00 a. m.	H. E. Nguyen Dinh Thuan Coordinating Secretary of State for Security of Viet-Nam
10:15 a. m.	Benjamin Kevux Barney Ross (Off record)
11:00 a. m.	The Right Honorable Robert Menzies Prime Minister of Australia
11:30 a. m.	Presentation of a painting to President by Army and Air National Guard of the U. S.
11:45 a. m.	Swearing in of W. Willard Wirtz as Secretary of Labor.
12:00 noon	Meet with group of members of the United Negro College Fund.
12:30 p. m.	Meet the members of the Mexican Folklore Ballet Company.
12:45 p. m.	Geo. Ball (Lunch)
4:00 p. m.	McCone, CIA (Off record)
5:00 p. m.	General Taylor, et al. (Off record)
8:30 p. m.	Attend opening of "Mr. President" at National Theatre.

## **The President's Job According to the Constitution**

*The U.S. Constitution contains the only official "job description" for the President of the United States. According to Article II, Sections 2 and 3, the President:*

- 1) Is the Commander-in-Chief of the armed forces of the United States, and of each state's militia when the nation has need of it
- 2) Has power to obtain information and opinions from heads of the executive departments
- 3) May grant pardons and reprieves for crimes against the United States
- 4) Makes treaties with other countries with the approval of the Senate
- 5) Appoints ambassadors, federal judges and heads of executive departments – all subject to the approval of the Senate; the President also has power to fill any vacancies that may happen while the Senate is in recess
- 6) Must report to Congress from time to time about the state of the union and recommend whatever measures he thinks are necessary
- 7) May call members of Congress together on extraordinary occasions, as well as adjourn their meetings when they cannot agree on their own about when to do this
- 8) Receives foreign ambassadors and other public officials
- 9) Is responsible for enforcing the nation's laws
- 10) Issues commissions to all officers of the United States