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Presidential Funerals and Burials: Selected Resources

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Summary

This fact sheet is a brief resource guide for congressional staff on funerals and burials for Presidents of the United States. It contains an overview of past practices for presidential funerals and selected online information resources related to official and ceremonial protocols, past presidential funerals, congressional documents, and other documents and books.

Contents

Brief Overview of Past Practices.....	1
Official Actions and Responsibilities.....	1
Recent Practices	2
Resources.....	3
Military Participation, Ceremony, and Protocol.....	3
State Funerals in the United States of America (Military District of Washington Joint Force Headquarters, National Capital Region)	3
State, Official, and Special Military Funerals (U.S. Departments of The Army, Navy, Air Force, and Treasury).....	3
Past Presidential Funerals	3
White House Historical Association	3
Washington National Cathedral	3
Presidential Libraries and Museums	4
The Library of Congress	4
Videos of Services and Memorials for Selected Presidents	4
Congress and Presidential Funerals.....	4
Individuals Who Have Lain in State	4
The Lincoln Catafalque in the U.S. Capitol.....	4
Memorial Addresses and Tributes in the U.S. Congress	5
Architect of the Capitol—Database of Images	5
Selected Books	5

Contacts

Author Contact Information	5
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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 By federal law, U.S. flags should be flown at half-staff for 30 days.² In recent decades, presidential proclamations have also given specific guidance where the flag should be flown at half-staff, such as “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

The Commanding General, Military District of Washington, U.S. Army is responsible for state funeral arrangements, as described in detail in the Army pamphlet entitled *State, Official, and Special Military Funerals*.⁴ According to this document, the current President, ex-President, President-elect, and any other person specifically designated by the current President are entitled to an official state funeral. 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
- 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.

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 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,” Army Pamphlet 1-1, December 1965, available at http://armypubs.army.mil/epubs/DR_pubs/DR_a/pdf/web/p1_1.pdf. 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. 1.

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

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 of ceremonies and traditional events and activities honoring the former President are possible. A short list of possibilities may include 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 Gerald R. Ford's death on December 26, 2006, President George W. Bush announced the death, and also issued a proclamation that U.S. flags on all federal facilities be flown at half-staff.¹² Two days later, President Bush issued Executive Order 13421, which proclaimed January 2, 2007, a day of respect and remembrance for the former President and ordered the closing of federal offices and agencies.¹³ A funeral took place in the Capitol Rotunda on December 30, 2006, where former President Ford lay in state, with subsequent services on January 2, 2007, at Washington National Cathedral. Funeral services for the former President were conducted on January 3, 2007, in Grand Rapids, MI, with interment at the Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library and Museum.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 2; "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.

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," Army Pamphlet 1-1, December 1965, p. 58; 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 George W. Bush: "Proclamation 8093—Announcing the Death of Gerald R. Ford," December 27, 2006. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, The American Presidency Project, at <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/272582>.

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.

Resources

Military Participation, Ceremony, and Protocol

Note: .mil web addresses may be more easily accessed using Internet Explorer

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.

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

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

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

http://armypubs.army.mil/epubs/DR_pubs/DR_a/pdf/web/p1_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>

Arlington's Ceremonial Horses and Funerals at the White House

<https://www.whitehousehistory.org/arlington-s-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 view images, documents, and other materials on presidential funerals, see the Association's digital library:

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

Washington National Cathedral

Since 1901, Washington National Cathedral has been the location of funeral and memorial services for several U.S. Presidents:

<https://cathedral.org/history/prominent-services/presidential-funerals/>

Presidential Libraries and Museums

Presidential libraries and museums provide preservation of and access to historical materials, including funeral information.¹⁴ Similar or other materials may 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 contains a number of historical papers, images, audio recordings, films, narratives, and other content related to Presidents and corresponding funerals and ceremonies. For help with finding specific items, librarian and reference specialists at the main reading room can provide assistance:
<http://www.loc.gov/rr/main/>

Videos of Services and Memorials for Selected Presidents

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>

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: <http://www.dwightdeisenhower.com/155/Final-Post>

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 (currently on display at the U.S. Capitol Visitor's Center):
<https://www.aoc.gov/blog/lincoln-catafalque-us-capitol>

¹⁴ For example, funeral service information at the Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library and Museum website, at <https://www.fordlibrarymuseum.gov/grf/Funeral/faq.asp>.

Memorial Addresses and Tributes in the U.S. Congress

Concurrent resolutions have authorized commemorative compilations of tributes delivered in Congress for several former Presidents. These volumes are prepared by the Congressional Research Service under the direction of the Joint Committee on Printing. For example, see President Ford's tribute collection:

<https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/CDOC-110hdoc61/pdf/CDOC-110hdoc61.pdf>

For further assistance in locating these tribute collections for Presidents (or other individuals), please contact CRS.

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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