Accidental presidents pdf

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Eight times in American history, vice-presidents have ascended to the presidency as a result of death in office by the president. While modern voters may evaluate vice-presidential candidates on their fitness to be a mere heartbeat away from the White House, it took eight "accidental" successions, including four assassinations, before this nation provided for that as a matter of constitutional law, with the passage of the Twenty-Fifth Amendment. In Accidental Presidents: Eight Men Who Changed America, Jared Cohen examines the presidencies of those who found themselves in the nation's highest office by the accident of death. According to Cohen, in the early days of our country, and up into the mid-20th century, presidential candidates didn't select their running mates but generally had them foisted upon them by their party based solely upon the vice-presidential candidate's ability to draw votes from areas of the country in which the presidential candidate lacked that ability. Of the eight accidentals, the author concludes that only two were successful: Theodore Roosevelt, William McKinley's successor, and Harry Truman, who succeeded Franklin Roosevelt. Ironically, Theodore Roosevelt ended up as McKinley's vice president against his own wishes, but simply because Republican party bosses wanted him out of New York, where he interfered with their personal ambitions. The vice presidency seemed the ideal place to sentence him to irrelevancy, and Roosevelt was nominated on the first ballot in 1900, in a near-unanimous vote. The sole dissenting vote was cast by Roosevelt, himself. Less than a year later, an assassin's bullet felled McKinley, and the reluctant Roosevelt found himself in the White House. Subsequent history shows that he took quite a liking to it. Truman, the other successful accidental, also fought against being nominated for the vice presidency, and FDR, campaigning for his fourth term in 1944, didn't care who his running mate was. Cohen tells us that the president's only concern was winning the election and that "there was no perception that he had been steamrolled by his own party." But FDR was likely already dying when his last term commenced, and in a matter of weeks, Truman "inherited a greater burden and with less preparation than any accidental president." Yet he rose to the occasion, ending World War II with probably the most significant presidential decision in history to that date, authorizing use of the atomic bomb on Japan, then he shepherded the country through the Korean War and the beginnings of the Cold War. Other impactful accidentals, though somewhat negatively, were the two Johnsons: Andrew Johnson, Lincoln's successor following the Civil War, and Lyndon Johnson, John Kennedy's successor in the turbulent civil rights and Vietnam eras of the 1960s. As for the earlier Johnson, the author notes that history has been "justifiably critical of him for squandering the postwar Reconstruction and peace," and that the "consequences for civil rights were devastating." He was the first American president to be impeached, surviving removal from office by a margin of one vote in the Senate, and was defeated in his first, and only, try for the presidency on his own merits. In contrast to the earlier Johnson's adverse impact on civil rights, the latter Johnson championed the civil rights movement. Unfortunately, as the author contends, he bungled the Vietnam War, to some extent because he was ill-served by foreign policy advisors he inherited from JFK. "The tragedy for Johnson is that Vietnam overshadows his domestic achievements. The loss for the country is that had Vietnam not gone south, LBJ may have had another four years in office to continue advancing civil rights." While much is known about the two successful accidentals, Roosevelt and Truman, and the partially-successful Lyndon, the latter Johnson, much of the book's treasure lies in earlier, lesser known accidentals. The trailblazer on this path was John Tyler, who is most remembered as the president who teed up the annexation of Texas to the Union by a joint resolution of Congress. His successor, James Polk, presided over the actual annexation. Conventional wisdom has it that William Henry Harrison, whom Tyler succeeded, died of pneumonia 30 days after delivering a one hour forty-five minute inaugural address in a frigid rain. Later historians believe that Harrison, as well as James Polk, Tyler's successor, actually died from enteric fever, caused by "a field of human excrement that, in the absence of a proper sewage system, flowed into a marsh near the White House." Surely an apt metaphor can be found there for D.C. politics. The accidental Tyler thus succeeded this nation's shortest-lived presidency, excluding that of Daniel Rice Atchison, who may have technically served for one day. When Polk's term ended at noon on a Sunday, Zachary Taylor refused to take the oath of office on the Sabbath, instead holding off until the following day. That temporary absence of a sworn president and vice-president elevated Atchison, the president pro tempore of the Senate, to the presidency as a one-day placeholder. One of the more interesting accidentals is Chester Arthur, forced onto the ticket with James Garfield against Garfield's wishes, then elevated to the presidency against his own will as a result of Garfield's assassination. He spent most of his vice presidency trying to sabotage Garfield's agenda then, after learning that the president had been shot, "was horrified by the idea of potentially having to take Garfield's job. The vice presidency had been the pinnacle of what he wanted in life, all the prestige and none of the work." Theodore Roosevelt was the next accidental and, as previously noted, successful presidency, but then a few presidencies later, Calvin Coolidge spent most of his accidental years cleaning up the scandals that his predecessor, Warren Harding, left upon his death. Coolidge sufficiently escaped the taint to be elected in his own right in 1924, only to retire following that term and turn the White House over to Herbert Hoover just in time for the beginning of the Great Depression. In politics, as in life, timing is everything. The author notes there have also been several close calls, such as failed assassination attempts on Harry Truman, Gerald Ford, and Ronald Reagan, and illnesses of James Madison, James Polk, Woodrow Wilson, and even Dwight Eisenhower who suffered three medical emergencies while in office, including a heart attack. Because the thesis of the book is about ascension to office due to a president's death, it does not include Gerald Ford, who may well have been accidental-squared, first reaching the vice presidency only because of Spiro Agnew's resignation under a cloud of scandal, then stepping into the Oval Office because of Richard Nixon's resignation under his own cloud of scandal. But that, one supposes, is a topic for another book. Epigraph Foreword Chapter One First to Die Chapter Two Over My Dead Body Chapter Three Lincoln's Choice Chapter Four Prince Arthur Chapter Five A Most Ambitious Man Chapter Six Averting Scandal Chapter Seven That Damn Mule! Chapter Eight Give 'em Hell Harry! Chapter Nine The Last Time Chapter Ten Close Calls Afterword Author's Note Acknowledgments About the Author A Note on Sources Notes Bibliography Index To my amazing daughters, Zelda and Annabel, who with each passing day fill me with joy and happiness The Presidents on Assassination . . . [I stayed up] waiting for important dispatches from the front . . . [As I dreamed I felt] a death-like stillness about me . . . [and heard] mournful sounds of distress [and as I entered the East Room, I saw] a sickening surprise [a coffin guarded by soldiers] . . . 'Who is dead in the White House?' I demanded of one of the soldiers. 'The president. He was killed by an assassin!' —ABRAHAM LINCOLN RECALLING HIS DREAM TO WARD HILL LAMON Well, if assassination is to play its part in the campaign, and I must be the sacrifice, perhaps it is best. I think I am ready. —JAMES GARFIELD As soon as I am aware of the condition of my beloved president, I will set about clearing my good name about having hired an assassin to harm our president. —CHESTER ARTHUR TO JAMES BLAINE I give you my word, I do not care a rap about being shot; not a rap. —THEODORE ROOSEVELT Since you can't control these things [assassination attempts], you don't think about them. —FRANKLIN ROOSEVELT I was beginning to realize how little the founding fathers had been able to anticipate the preparations necessary for a man to become president so suddenly. —HARRY TRUMAN If anybody really wanted to shoot the president of the United, States it was not a very difficult job—all one had to do was get a high building someday with a telescopic rifle, and there was nothing anybody could do to defend against such an attempt. —JOHN F. KENNEDY TO AN AIDE THE MORNING OF HIS ASSASSINATION John Wilkes Booth On April 14, 1865, the established actor and Confederate sympathizer snuck into the presidential box at Ford's Theatre and assassinated Abraham Lincoln with a single-shot Deringer pistol. Charles Guiteau The mentally unstable office seeker shot President James Garfield at the Baltimore and Potomac Railroad Station in Washington, D.C., on July 2, 1881. He was hanged on June 30, 1882. Leon Czolgosz Portrait of the anarchist, who on September 6, 1901, shot President William McKinley in a receiving line at the Pan-American Exposition in Buffalo, New York. He was tried, convicted, and electrocuted on October 29. Lee Harvey Oswald A former marine who had spent time in the Soviet Union before killing President Kennedy on November 22, 1963. He was shot and killed by nightclub owner Jack Ruby two days later. Foreword My office renders me so completely insignificant that all Parties can afford to treat me with a decent respect which accordingly they do, as far as I observe, or hear or suspect. They all know that I can do them neither much good nor much harm.1 —John Adams as the first vice president John Tyler, Millard Fillmore, Andrew Johnson, Chester Arthur, Theodore Roosevelt, Calvin Coolidge, Harry Truman, Lyndon Johnson: Eight times a vice president has become president upon the death of his predecessor—history altered by a heartbeat. This is the story of how these eight men, neither the voters' nor their party's choice, dealt with that power and changed history, for better or worse. These men ascended to the presidency without the Constitution having specified an order of succession. The founders didn't think of everything. They made compromises to get things done, such as giving each state two senators to get the smaller states to sign on to proportional representation in the House of Representatives. Succession was no different, particularly given how little thought had been given to the vice presidency itself. The fact that the country navigated these abrupt transfers of power eight times during a one-hundred-and-twenty-two-year period and amended the Constitution only after John F. Kennedy's assassination in 1963 offers a powerful response to the originalist, or literal, interpretation of the Constitution. In many cases, the men who came to fill the shoes of dead presidents had been spouses in a marriage of political convenience for a president to win a state or appease a particular constituency. Only five—John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, Martin Van Buren, Richard Nixon, and George H. W. Bush—completed terms as vice president and went on to win the presidency. Their election relieved them of that vice-presidential image of irrelevance. In the eight instances when the vice president succeeded to the office, a set of common challenges made the path to success much harder. Each had to earn the respect of the men loyal to his predecessor, or find a way to discard them. They had to honor the loss while at the same time getting back to governing. All had to find the balance between continuing the policies of the man who was elected (including navigating the ambiguity left behind) and responsibly fulfilling their present duties. Each had to step out of the shadow of his predecessor and earn the presidency in his own right. Each transition is treated as its own chapter, with the exception of FDR, where the combination of high stakes and certainty of death warrant extra attention. There is no strict pattern that determined performance, although in two of our most extraordinary cases—Abraham Lincoln and Franklin Roosevelt—they made poor choices, given the wartime context. In Roosevelt's case, he got lucky because Harry Truman proved up to the job, the best of the lot other than the great Theodore Roosevelt. Lincoln's vice president, Andrew Johnson, proved the biggest catastrophe of the eight. We can't understand what a miracle Truman is without understanding both the lackadaisical effort that went into FDR's choice of a 1944 running mate and the extraordinary performance of Harry Truman as president. Truman had big shoes to fill, but so did the other seven. They had their own biases. Most had been excluded from their predecessors' inner circles. Their ambition to make their own mark led them down very different paths. Some rose to the occasion, others failed. The chapters show mixed performances—some started and ended wars, while others accelerated and slowed social progress. Each story also raises questions about how history might have been different had the president survived. The stories of eight men who became president by accident are remarkable in what they reveal. They are all part of a history of presidential succession which has been frivolous and has left the country exposed to Constitutional crisis or vulnerable to luck and chance. The framers paid little attention to succession and despite eight deaths in office, the matter of succession has been trivialized by voters, candidates, and lawmakers. William Henry Harrison became the first Whig president, but died after just thirty days in office. The Constitution was vague on whether the vice president assumes the office, or simply fulfills its duties as acting president. John Tyler became the nation's first accidental president. He was reviled by the Whigs and kicked out of his own party. He annexed Texas and precipitated war with Mexico. CHAPTER ONE First to Die Chief Tecumseh1 had every right to be vengeful. At the age of six, the future Shawnee chief watched a Virginia militia kill his father during the 1774 Battle of Point Pleasant. Just a few years later he bore witness to the violent consequences his tribe would suffer for siding with Britain in the American Revolution. And at twenty-one years old, he joined an unsuccessful resistance movement against settler expansion in Tennessee, only to watch his older brother, Cheeseekau, die in combat. Despite repeated setbacks, he continued fighting, returning to the Midwest in 1794 to fight with the Shawnee in the Battle of Fallen Timbers.2 But persistence once again failed him as Shawnee battle tactics fell short against an overpowering American military. As the story goes, it was there at Fallen Timbers that Chief Tecumseh first encountered William Henry Harrison, a young, ambitious aide-de-camp to General Mad Anthony Wayne and future president of the United States. At the battle's conclusion, General Wayne leveraged his victory, along with a combination of coercion and bribery, to negotiate the Treaty of Greenville, which ceded more than three million acres of Shawnee land to the American government. Angered by the one-sided nature of the treaty, Chief Tecumseh and his surviving brother, Tenskwatawa—nicknamed The Prophet—founded a village called Prophetstown, which they intended to be the epicenter of a larger Native American confederacy that would stem the tide of white settlers who threatened their land. But those plans never materialized, and in 1811, Tecumseh and Harrison found themselves once again facing off, this time in the Battle of Tippecanoe. In that decisive battle, Harrison, who was now an established politician and seasoned major general in the Army, dealt Tecumseh and the Shawnee a devastating blow.3 Over the course of a generation, the two men grew in stature within their communities, but it was Harrison who found success while Tecumseh came to know only the death and destruction of his people. As legend has it, a lifetime of animosity led Chief Tecumseh to place a curse on the American presidency. The terms of this curseI stipulated that Tecumseh, who caused the Sun to darken and Red Men to give up firewater . . . [can] . . . tell you [that William Henry] Harrison will die. And after him, every Great Chief chosen every 20 years thereafter will die. And when each dies, let everyone remember the death of [the Shawnee] people.4 While curses and vengeful Indian chiefs make for a colorful tale, the story of the accidental presidents began with the presidential campaign of 1840, which was an unprecedented political spectacle. The election was a rancorous charade that offered just enough games and gimmicks to attract what at the time was a record 80.2 percent of eligible voters.5 The newly established Whig Party ran the aging retired general William Henry Harrison—nicknamed Old Tippecanoe—against incumbent Democrat Martin Van Buren—a Jacksonian Democrat who had the misfortune of taking office five weeks before the country's worst economic crisis in its history. Van Buren's presidency was doomed from the start, and following a barrage of Whig attacks that painted him as an out-of-touch elitist, his prospects for reelection were bleak. For purposes of the campaign, William Henry Harrison was a simple man born in a log cabin who rose through the ranks of the military to become an American hero. His story was inspiring and offered a remarkable tale of beating the odds at a time when so many people were losing hope. While the hero part was true, the rest of the narrative was a myth; a fabrication meant to present the retired general as Everyman. His wealth and privilege were obfuscated through campaign intrigue so prodigious that presidential elections would never be the same. Whether his story was fact or fiction mattered little as the voters got drunk on the idea of Old Tippecanoe, quite literally, as the campaign hosted hard cider events in log cabins throughout the twenty-six United States. Liquor distributors had a field day and wanted the campaign to last forever. Some, like E. C. Booz, the innovative whiskey distiller from Philadelphia, resorted to shameless tactics such as filling whiskey bottles designed as log cabins and calling it Old Cabin Whiskey, which some have even credited as the origin of the word booze.6 And where alcohol was not sufficient, the Whigs resorted to other measures. Party supporters built gigantic papier-mâché balls to roll from town to town in a public display of support. Music, songs, and dances were choreographed and written. The Whigs produced gimmick after gimmick, avoiding taking a position on any major issue. In the backdrop of all of this was John Tyler, Harrison's running mate, and the second half of the catchy campaign slogan Tippecanoe and Tyler Too. He was supposed to be a footnote in history, thrown onto the Whig ticket in 1840 to help carry Virginia, which they lost anyway, and offer a nod to states' rights, which didn't really happen either. He was a pragmatic choice, a national figure with a dignified southern charm.7 He had run as a Whig in Maryland and Virginia four years earlier, and he could help bring along southern anti-abolitionists and states' rights zealots.8 Some argued that he was antinationalist and most (perhaps including Tyler himself) believed that he was a Jacksonian Democrat at heart. But these factors aside, there weren't many viable candidates who would actually accept the job,9 and time was running out. Despite some rumblings and objections, even the detractors became complacent with the idea of parking Tyler in the vice presidency. What harm could he cause in such an irrelevant position? The two won a commanding victory on top of an already firm Whig control of the government. The party had 85 percent of the gubernatorial seats, nearly 57 percent10 of the House of Representatives, 51 percent of the Senate, the majority of state legislatures,11 and now for the first time, the presidency. Victory gave the Whigs control over eighteen thousand federal appointments, which meant they could kick the Democrats out of the federal government and disperse jobs to party loyalists.12 On March 4, 1841, the new president rode into Washington on a train, the first president to do so.13 For the parade down Pennsylvania Avenue, he climbed atop a white horse—his favorite, Whitey—waved to an estimated fifty thousand14 adoring fans, and then delivered his inaugural address from a podium on the eastern portico of the Capitol.15 At 8,445 words, the speech lasted an hour and forty-five minutes, the longest in history. It mirrored the campaign in its lack of direction and substance. Some antsy spectators left their seats and ambled around out of sheer boredom, while others stamped their feet to manage the frigid weather.16 At sixty-eight, Harrison was the oldest man to win the presidency—later eclipsed by Ronald Reagan and then Donald Trump. Eager to prove that he was able-bodied, the new president braved the brisk weather without a hat, gloves, or overcoat, which appeared to many observers to lead to his catching a mild cold. The cold weakened him, but he was out and about shortly thereafter: as president, he enjoyed strolling around unescorted, proving that he really was a man of the people. Three weeks after the inauguration, however, shortly after returning to the White House after one of his jaunts, he fell ill from what his doctors diagnosed as pneumonia of the lower lobe of the right lung, complicated by congestion of the liver.17 By April 4, the president was dead, having served thirty days in office. Despite the original diagnosis sustaining for 173 years, the New York Times reported that the true cause of death was more likely enteric fever, which would have been caused by the field of human excrement that, in the absence of a proper sewer system, flowed into a marsh near the White House.18 II Lying slightly reclined and surrounded by his niece and nephew, three cabinet secretaries, and Reverend William Hawley,19 Harrison reserved his last words for a cryptic plea to his successor: Sir—I wish you to understand the true principles of government. I wish them carried out—I ask nothing more.20 His successor, however, was nowhere near the president's bedside to hear these words. Harrison was delirious in his final hour and while his words were directed at Tyler, they were in fact spoken to his personal physician, Dr. N. W. Worthington.21 John Tyler, resigned to the irrelevance of the vice presidency, had already dashed out of Washington the same day as the inauguration to his home in Virginia. Other than an occasional trip to the Senate, he intended to spend his four-year term outside the nation's capital. There was no precedent for this situation, nor had there been any planning. With the president dead and the vice president several hundred miles away, Secretary of State Daniel Webster mustered the cabinet and insisted that they draft a memorandum for the vice president.22 Webster dispatched his twenty-three-year-old son, Fletcher, chief clerk for the State Department, and Robert Beale, the doorkeeper of the U.S. Senate, to deliver the tragic news. The two men took the first possible train to Richmond and chartered a boat to make the final leg of the journey.23 They arrived at dawn, exhausted and standing before Tyler's home.24 Webster knocked on the door, but perhaps in his gentlemanly way did not knock loud enough to wake the vice president. Beale, who was the less polite of the two boys, gave the door a good pound until Tyler awakened, came downstairs in shock that someone in this respectful town would disturb his slumber,25 and answered the door in his pajamas and nightcap. As the story goes,26 the messengers telegraphed the tragic news with their facial expressions, but remained calm and collected, conveying that they had been instructed by the Secretary of State to deliver these dispatches to you without delay. Upon reading the letter, Tyler cried, My God, the President is dead,27 and urged the two young messengers to come into his home. Tyler was disheartened, but remained composed. He was a gentleman with a reserved manner that many mistook for weakness. But he rarely overlooked even the subtlest detail and when reading the letter he noticed a few omissions. The message, which was signed by the entire cabinet, mentioned nothing about Tyler now being president and stopped short of urging his return to Washington. Furthermore, the signatories addressed the letter to John Tyler, Vice-president of the United States.28 These were not careless drafting mistakes, nor were they inadvertent omissions. Harrison fell ill in the early weeks of his presidency, but only in the previous week did it appear as though he might die. Preparing for the worst-case scenario, members of the cabinet began debating and deliberating on the implications. While no official record of these meetings exists, Nathan Sargent, a prominent journalist covering the Whig beat, wrote that the cabinet deliberated on how to address Tyler and concluded that Mr. Tyler must, while performing the functions of President, bear the title of Vice-President, acting President.29 Assuming Sargent's account is correct—and it likely is given that the full cabinet signed on to the letter—there were probably two reasons for this: First, these were all Harrison men with a low opinion of both the vice presidency and its current occupant. Second, the Whigs believed in a weak executive and Harrison was a known quantity. He had pledged a single term and promised to be deferential to the legislature. In cabinet meetings, he subscribed to a process of one man, one vote, whether you were the president or the postmaster general. Tyler was more of a wild card and none of Harrison's men knew how his views and style would manifest themselves. More important, none of them trusted him and, in fact, they probably didn't like him much. They questioned his commitment to the Whig agenda—national bank, internal improvements, weakening of the executive branch, raising the tariff. They knew he kept the outside counsel of a trusted group of Virginia states' rightist confidants. Tyler woke his wife and children, shared the somber news, ate his breakfast, and called a family meeting. His wife, Letitia, was gravely ill and partially paralyzed, so the future of their seven30 children weighed heavily on her. The family deliberated and agreed that Tyler should rush to Washington after which two of his children, Robert and Priscilla, would join him the following week. Pending her health, Letitia would follow sometime thereafter.31 With the family decisions temporarily settled, Tyler focused on navigating the political complexities of assuming the presidency. In search of wise counsel, he paid a visit to another close friend and Williamsburg neighbor, Nathaniel Beverley Tucker, a law professor at the College of William and Mary.32 Tyler admired and trusted Tucker both for his legal mind and states' rights advocacy.33 Tucker was a fascinating character, part legal scholar and part political novelist, whose written works attracted praise from the likes of Edgar Allan Poe.34 Tucker suggested he honor Harrison's single-term pledge and announce immediately that he would not seek election in his own right in 1844.35 But Tyler was not ready to declare himself a one-term president—although he gave it serious thought—and instead focused on getting to Washington as quickly as possible, moving into the White House, and meeting the diplomatic corps to demonstrate continuity of government. The cabinet's letter created a sense of urgency, not because of what it contained, but because of what it didn't. Each passing hour left Tyler exposed to a scenario where the wheels of succession planning would spin without him. Recognizing this, he said farewell to his family and set off for Washington early that Monday.36 He and his entourage made the journey, an exhausting and emotionally draining 230-mile trip—through a circuitous route combining trains, boats, and carriages—in twenty-one hours.37 The speed of the journey was not lost on Tyler, who finally checked into Brown's Indian Queen Hotel38 —a magnificent five-story white structure located at Sixth and Pennsylvania Avenue—at 4:00 a.m. on April 6.39 Tyler considered himself president from the moment he arrived in Washington40 and saw no need to formalize this with a separate oath.41 He was meant to be a peripheral part of the administration and barely knew General Harrison. According to one contemporary biographer, what little he did know he did not much like.42 He had been disgusted by what he perceived to be the deception of the American people through a campaign built on myths and lies. His predecessor served too short a time to leave behind any vision or policies. Left to his own devices, Tyler would simply follow the light of my own judgment and the prompting of my own feelings.43 But before charting his own path, he would need to make sure his ascension to the presidency was unquestioned. John Tyler and the men in his inherited cabinet read the same article in the Constitution and arrived at completely different conclusions about its meaning. The Article II succession clause of the Constitution states: In Case of the Removal of the President from Office, or of his Death, Resignation, or Inability to discharge the Powers and Duties of the said Office, the Same shall devolve on the Vice President.44 Nobody was confused about Tyler assuming the duties of the president, but divergent interpretations of the Same and devolve revealed a gaping hole of ambiguity that bred further confusion around an unprecedented situation. Looser readings at the time concluded that the Same refers to both the office and the duties, while the stricter interpretations applied this only to the latter. None of the original drafters of the Constitution were alive (James Madison was the last to die in 1836) so no one had firsthand accounts of what was intended by the succession clause.45 The drafters hadn't left much of a paper trail on the matter, mainly because they had little enthusiasm for the idea of a vice president, and in fact, only a few favored the inclusion of a vice president.46 What limited debate the drafters had over succession was inconclusive. Charles Pinckney of South Carolina and Alexander Hamilton of New York suggested that should the president die, resign, or be deemed incapable of performing his duties, the president of the Senate should assume the duties of president, pending a new election.47 There was some discussion about what was meant by an inability to perform presidential functions—most notably by John Dickinson of Delaware, who asked, What is the extent of the term disability[?]48 In September 1787, Hugh Williamson, who represented North Carolina at the Constitutional Convention, acknowledged the lack of attention the drafters gave to the nation's second-highest office, suggesting such an officer as vice-president was not wanted. He was introduced merely for the sake of a valuable mode of election, which required two to be chosen at the same time.49 These fragments of debate offered no blueprint for how to handle Harrison's death. Webster and the cabinet sought the counsel of outside experts. They called on William Thomas Carroll, chief clerk of the Supreme Court, to summon Chief Justice Roger B. Taney, who was then in Baltimore. Taney, the temperamental jurist who sixteen years later would write the majority pro-slavery opinion in Dred Scott v. Sanford, refused to offer his take on the Tyler question, citing his belief that the communication from [executive branch] to the [judicial branch] ought to be direct and from the proper origin . . . [and he] did not wish to appear to be intruding in the affairs of the executive branch without a formal request from the cabinet or from John Tyler.50 Taney believed his conclusion was the right legal judgment, but he also understood that this was a political lose-lose. As a Jacksonian Democrat, he detested Henry Clay, who at the time served as Senate leader, although this was not yet a formal elective position.III He understood that if the Acting President interpretation prevailed, the government would be handed over to Clay, who as the Whig party leader would have been the actual source of power. Balancing the equation, Taney also had no love lost for John Tyler, who had voted against his confirmation as secretary of the treasury.51 It appears that John Tyler knew exactly what he was walking into. Ready to stand firm and meet the controversy, he gathered the Harrison cabinet to state, not debate, that he was president of the United States. Six men joined Tyler at the table: Secretary of State Daniel Webster, Secretary of the Treasury Thomas Ewing, Secretary of War John Bell, Attorney General John J. Crittenden, Postmaster General Francis Granger, and Secretary of the Navy George E. Badger. While the cabinet may have intended to bully or trap Tyler into serving as an Acting President, the Virginia politician had two things going for him: information and time. A tip from his friend James Lyons about the seriousness of Harrison's illness and the long journey had given him breathing room to plot his move. That first cabinet meeting lasted from early morning to late afternoon and focused almost entirely on the details of Harrison's funeral,52 which was scheduled for the following day and was also without precedent. The discussion over funeral details53 did not overshadow the elephant in the room, which was the question of Tyler's status. As the talk moved from funeral arrangements to other matters, Webster noted that Harrison made all policy decisions by majority vote in the cabinet. His subtle injunction was the bait that Tyler had been waiting for. He took it and without hesitation explained that he would do things differently.54 I am the President, and I shall be held responsible for my administration, he told them. I shall be pleased to avail myself of your counsel and advice. But I can never consent to being dictated to as to what I shall or shall not do . . . when you think otherwise, your resignations will be accepted.55 Harrison's men accepted their new president, reluctantly. Webster suggested that Tyler formalize his ascension to the presidency by taking the oath of office, which Tyler agreed to do. William Cranch, the chief judge of the Federal Circuit Court, issued the oath of office and subsequently issued a sworn statement saying that Tyler had appeared before him and although he deems himself qualified to perform the duties and exercise the powers and office of the President . . . without other oath than that which he has taken as Vice-President, yet as doubts may arise, and for greater caution, [he] took and subscribed the . . . oath before me.56 The cabinet was the least of Tyler's worries. His real concern was the Whig Party, which he viewed as a scrappily constructed hodgepodge of politicians who agreed on almost nothing except for their hatred of Andrew Jackson. As the president observed, the cabinet left him surrounded by Clay-men, Webster-men, anti-Masons, original Harrisonians, old Whigs, and new Whigs, each jealous of the others, and all struggling for the offices. While Tyler was prepared to dismiss his entire cabinet if they didn't fall into line, he also recognized that replacing the cabinet would take time and cause more problems.57 Furthermore, retaining the cabinet was necessary to keep the Whig Party intact,58 at least for the time being. There was a continuity of government argument. The president made his decision regarding the cabinet and was prepared to live with it. He would later regret keeping all of Harrison's men, but he needed early stability and time to fend off two looming challenges: First, William Henry Harrison, in his only act as president, had called for a special session of Congress to be convened on May 31, 1841, to address the immediate financial challenges facing the country. While there was nothing controversial about that decision, Tyler knew that this session would open a Pandora's box of Whig factions. The second challenge was Henry Clay, the fiery Whig party leader who aspired to the presidency and believed he was the real power broker in the Whig-dominated government. Harrison had proven to be more independent-minded than Clay expected59 —although short of a Manchurian candidate, it is unclear that any president could have met Clay's expectations of allowing him to essentially run the government—but he anticipated greater success at manipulating Tyler. The Sage of Ashland was in for a rude awakening. On April 9, John Tyler delivered a pithy inaugural address. After briefly acknowledging the tragedy of his predecessor's passing, he called for an increase in the size of the Navy, avoidance of public debt during peacetime, stabilization of the currency, and greater scrutiny over abuse of public offices. And in case the audience didn't hear him, he made the last point several times over.60 Tyler importantly sought to clarify the right of succession in the Constitution. He noted, For the first time in our history the person elected to the Vice-Presidency of the United States, by the happening of the contingency provided for in the Constitution, has had devolved upon him the Presidential office. Unlike his predecessor, he made no mention of serving one term in office. He referred to himself as president and suggested that in succeeding, under circumstances so sudden and unexpected there may be some who engage in assaults on his administration.61 The assaults would come but not until the special session. When the special session convened on May 31, Tyler spoke to a joint session of Congress. Well aware that the skepticism about his inheritance of the presidency continued, he sought to put the issue to rest. By the provisions of the fundamental law the powers and duties of the high station to which [Harrison] was elected have devolved upon me, he told them; and in the dispositions of the representatives of the States and of the people will be found, to a great extent, a solution of the problem to which our institutions are for the first time subjected.62 Tyler would have been naive to assume that his words alone would muffle the critics. That same day, one of his allies in Congress, Virginia congressman Henry A. Wise, proposed a standard resolution, within which he formalized Tyler's status as the president of the United States.63 A heated exchange followed,64 led by Congressman John Quincy Adams, a former president. Adams would write in his diary: [Tyler's assumption of the Office of the President] is a construction in direct violation both of the grammar and context of the Constitution, which confers upon the Vice-President, on the decease of the President, not the office, but the powers and duties of the said office.65 John McKeon, a congressman from New York, moved to strike president and replace it with vice-President, now exercising the office of the President. He went on to suggest that a grave constitutional question had been raised, and it should be put at rest for all future time.66 Despite the strong opposition of Adams and McKeon, the Wise resolution passed in the House without any alteration in the wording.67 The next day, the two senators from Ohio, William Allen and Benjamin Tappan, came out against Tyler's assumption of the presidency. John C. Calhoun, the former vice president and senator from South Carolina, came to Tyler's aid—not surprising since they were both staunchly pro-slavery—and inquired instead about the vacant vice presidency. The debate dragged on for a bit longer until the Senate followed the House in adopting a resolution,68 voting overwhelmingly, 38 to 8, to recognize John Tyler as the president of the United States.69 Passage of the Wise Resolution may have formalized Tyler's presidency, but it did little to stop his critics from mocking him behind his back. He was called everything from His Accidency to usurper. Some, like John Quincy Adams, continued their grumbling, suggesting that if Tyler really was a strict constructionist, as he claimed to be, he would call into question whether the Vice-President has the right to occupy the President's house, or claim his salary, without an Act of Congress.70 Tyler remained defiant. Throughout his career, he returned any letter unopened if it addressed him other than as President of the United States. Tyler never wavered from his decision. It set a precedent that would pave the way for seven future presidents: Millard Fillmore, Andrew Johnson, Chester Arthur, Theodore Roosevelt, Calvin Coolidge, Harry Truman, and Lyndon Johnson. If Tyler's precedent established a right of succession for future vice presidents, his presidency demonstrated how unexpected ascension to power may change the course of history. While it is true that Tyler fortified the presidency by winning the constitutional arguments over succession,71 his subsequent policy decisions would lead the country down a very different path and illustrate that abrupt transitions can pivot the country's trajectory. President Without a Party Tyler was doomed from the early weeks of his presidency, not because of the controversy over his ascension, but because of Henry Clay's tenacity to get what he wanted. Perhaps the largest personality of his day, Clay was both charming and obnoxious and possessed a unique oratory gift, which often served him well. He was a performer, a man of presence with piercing eyes, high cheekbones, messy long hair that dangled in front of his ears, a dimple in the middle of his chin, and a small back arch in his posture that almost made him look as if he had been genetically designed as a debater. His political and social crafts were legendary and he could navigate both a political labyrinth and royal court with ease and charm. One biographer describes how no matter how badly he behaved he constantly dazzled people who came in contact with him, even when they differed strongly with him on policy and principles.72 He liked a good political fight and surrounded himself with drama that he both created and absorbed. In April 1826, Clay formally challenged Senator John Randolph to a duel, after the latter accused him of crucifying the Constitution and cheating at cards.73 He appreciated the power of narrative and like William Henry Harrison he concocted an exaggerated story of his rise from obscurity, even coining the popular term self-made man,74 which he applied to himself. His craft and presence inspired an entire generation of up-and-comers, including Abraham Lincoln, who idolized him. He dazzled crowds, engendered fierce loyalty, and enraged both friends and foes with his frequent and unreasonable demands on them. And when his demands went unmet, as President Tyler would soon find out, he was capable of unleashing an unruly assault on his victims that rarely left them standing. By the time Clay founded the Whig Party in 1836, he had already held almost every major position of power—speaker of the house, secretary of state, and party leader of the Senate. While he was a difficult personality, his power and influence was unquestioned. But at sixty-four years old, he still had a more ambitious vision for himself that started and ended with the presidency. When he failed to secure the Whig nomination in 1840, he began immediately thinking about 1844, which meant aggregating power under President Harrison. Believing that strong maneuverability was best achieved by retaining his spot in the Senate, Clay turned down a position as secretary of state before being offered the post and advocated instead for his political frenemy Daniel Webster. Webster, who also harbored ambitions of the presidency, was well aware that he was destined to play the role of Clay's understudy in the Senate, and thus viewed the State Department as his own fiefdom75 through which he could broker a deal with England over the disputed Maine boundary and elevate his status as a statesman.76 Following Harrison's inauguration, Clay's plans hit some unexpected bumps in the road. He was surprised to find the mild-mannered general more independent than he had anticipated. President Harrison rejected most of Clay's attempts to install his cronies in government positions and ignored his insistence that political foes be blocked from appointments. But Clay's real wake-up call came on March 11, when the cabinet convened to make a decision on whether to call an extra session of Congress, something that he had strongly advocated. Webster, who was eager to keep Clay on the sidelines as long as possible, urged the president not to consent to a special session of Congress.77 The six-man cabinet was split down the middle and the president broke the tie with a negative vote.78 Clay responded hastily with an overzealous letter to President Harrison urging him to reconsider the special session, even including draft language of his reconsideration.79 The president was furious and responded immediately with accusations of impetuousness. He reminded the senator, Much as I rely upon your judgment there are others whom I must consult and in many cases to determine adversely to your suggestion.80 Clay was apoplectic. He had expected a White House dinner invitation and instead he was left with one of his greatest abasements. He was so rattled by the president's response that a friend found him fuming in solitude, pacing the floor of his room in great perturbation while crumpling Harrison's note in his hand. And it has come to this! he lamented to that same friend. I am civilly but virtually requested not to visit the White House—not to see the president personally, but hereafter only communicate with him in writing!81 Clay responded to Harrison on March 15, describing himself as mortified . . . by the implication that [he] had been . . . dictating and suggested that his enemies were poisoning the president's mind towards [him].82 He stormed out of town, and overcome by stress he suffered a physical collapse by the time he reached Baltimore.83 Harrison and Clay would never see each other again. On March 17, President Harrison reversed his position and summoned an emergency session of Congress to meet on May 31, 1841, though not because of Henry Clay's insistence. Secretary of the Treasury Thomas Ewing—who, ironically, Clay had opposed for the position—warned of a runaway deficit exceeding $11 million unless additional revenue was quickly raised.84 Ewing argued that any hesitation on the part of the president could result in a deepening of the dire economic situation. The president's death on April 4 complicated Clay's political position. John Tyler was fifty-one years old, making him at that time the youngest man to serve as chief magistrate. Born during George Washington's first term, he represented a generational shift as the first president born in the new United States. Tyler was tall and slender, roughly six feet and somewhat gaunt in his appearance.85 He was elegant, more than imposing, carrying himself with the grace and sophistication of a proper southern gentleman. While much of his character has been recorded with bias, typically negative, most agree that he was a man of deep conviction, committed to states' rights and a strict constructionist interpretation of the Constitution. He was known to be exceptionally well-read and a lively conversationalist who loathed confrontation, which many mistook for weakness. He was neither flashy, nor overly emotional. He had few vices, mainly the indulgence of light profanity and fine champagnes.86 More than any other figure of his time, Tyler displayed remarkable resilience in the face of an unprecedented bombardment of critique and slander in the press, including from his own party. During a March 1842 visit to the White House, Charles Dickens described the president as look[ing] somewhat worn and anxious, and well he might, being at war with everybody—but the expression of his face was mild and pleasant, and his manner was remarkably unaffected, gentlemanly, and agreeable.87 Tyler's ascension to power was initially hopeful for Clay, who believed he could reclaim much of the influence over the president that he had squandered with Harrison. He did not believe the young and accidental president would be willing to oppose him and in the early days of his administration, Tyler, who owed much of his good fortune to

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