



John Tyler

John Tyler, the first vice president to assume the presidency after a president's death.

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John Tyler: The President Who Refused to Be “Acting”

President he succeeded: William Henry Harrison

Term of office: April 6, 1841–March 4, 1845

When William Henry Harrison died only thirty-one days after taking office, the nation faced a question it had never confronted: What exactly happened to the vice president?

The Constitution said the powers and duties of the presidency would “devolve” upon the vice president, but it did not clearly state whether Vice President John Tyler became president or merely served as an acting substitute. Some members of Harrison’s Cabinet expected Tyler to consult them before making decisions. Political opponents addressed him as “Acting President” and mockingly called him “His Accidency.”

Tyler rejected that interpretation. He took the presidential oath, moved into the White House and insisted that he possessed the full authority of the office. He reportedly returned unopened correspondence that did not address him as president. His position established the “Tyler Precedent”: when a president dies, the vice president becomes president in full.

Tyler’s political record was less successful. Although elected as a Whig, he opposed much of the party’s economic program. His vetoes led most of his Cabinet to resign, and the Whigs formally

expelled him. With neither major party supporting him, Tyler spent much of his presidency politically isolated.

His administration nevertheless achieved several diplomatic successes. The Webster-Ashburton Treaty settled portions of the disputed boundary between the United States and British North America. The Treaty of Wanghia opened formal trade relations with China. Tyler also reorganized the Navy and encouraged American expansion into the Pacific.

His most important—and controversial—policy achievement was advancing the annexation of Texas. Congress approved annexation shortly before he left office, and Tyler signed the resolution in March 1845. The action increased tensions with Mexico and intensified the national argument over the expansion of slavery.

Historians generally rank Tyler in the lower tier, citing his ineffective leadership, support for slavery and later allegiance to the Confederacy. Nevertheless, his handling of the succession crisis was decisive. Every later vice president who inherited the presidency followed the path Tyler created—a principle eventually incorporated into the Twenty-Fifth Amendment.