

## **ROLES OF THE PRESIDENT**

At any given time, of course, only one person is the President of the United States. The office, with all of its awesome powers and duties, belongs to that one individual. Whoever that person may be, he—and most likely someday she—must fill several different roles, and all of them at the same time. The President is simultaneously (1) chief of state, (2) chief executive, (3) chief diplomat, (4) chief legislator, (5) commander in chief, (6) chief economist, (7) chief of party, and (8) chief citizen.

### **(1) Chief of State**

To begin with, the President is chief of state, the ceremonial head of the government of the United States. He or she is, then, the symbol of all of the people of the nation—in President William Howard Taft's words, "the personal embodiment and representative of their dignity and majesty."

In many countries, the chief of state reigns but does not rule. That is certainly true of the queens of England, Denmark, and the Netherlands; the kings of Norway, Sweden, and Belgium; the emperor of Japan; and the presidents of Italy and Germany. It is just as certainly *not* true of the President of the United States. The President both reigns and rules.

### **(2) Chief Executive**

The President is the nation's chief executive, vested by the Constitution with "the executive Power" of the United States. That power is immensely broad in domestic affairs as well as foreign affairs. Indeed, the American presidency is often described as "the most powerful office in the world." It is his or her job to oversee one of the largest governmental machines the world has ever known. Today, the President directs an administration that employs some 2.7 million civilians and spends some \$3.8 trillion a year.

But remember, the President is not all-powerful. He or she lives in an environment filled with constitutional checks and balances in which there are many practical limits on what he or she can and cannot do.

### **(3) Chief Diplomat**

Every President is also the nation's chief diplomat, the main architect of American foreign policy and the nation's chief spokesman to the rest of the world. "I make foreign policy," President Truman once said—and he did. Everything the President says and does is closely followed, both here and abroad.

### **(4) Chief Legislator**

The President is also the nation's chief legislator, the principal author of its public policies. Most often, it is the President who sets the overall shape of the congressional agenda—initiating, suggesting, requesting, insisting, and demanding that Congress enact most of the major pieces of legislation that it does.

The President and Congress do sometimes clash, and the President does not always get his or her way on Capitol Hill. Still, working with Congress occupies a major part of the President's time.

### **(5) Commander in Chief**

In close concert with his or her role in foreign affairs, the Constitution also makes the President the commander in chief of the nation's armed forces. The 1.5 million men and women in uniform and all of the nation's military might are subject to the President's direct and immediate control. The Constitution does give Congress some significant powers in foreign affairs and over the military, but the President has long since become dominant in both fields.

### **(6) Chief Economist**

Some observers have suggested that modern Presidents must also be the nation's chief economist. That is, the President is expected to keep a close eye on the nation's economy and to take immediate and effective action when conditions dictate. Since the collapse of communism in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe in 1989, and paralleling the rapid expansion of Asian economies (especially those of China and India), the management of America's trade relationships has been an expanding aspect of presidential responsibilities. This change has created unique challenges for the President. Opening foreign markets for American goods requires lowering or removing trade restrictions and tariffs on goods imported into the United States.

As chief economist, the President must constantly balance many conflicting demands, including those of consumers, labor unions, and manufacturers. At the same time, the President must remain ever sensitive to the effect that American economic policies can have on our relationships with countries around the world.

## (7) Chief of Party

The President is, automatically, the chief of party, the acknowledged leader of the political party that controls the executive branch—and is virtually unchallengeable in that role. As you know, parties are not mentioned in the Constitution, but they do have a vital place in the workings of the American governmental system. Much of the real power and influence of the President depends on his or her ability to play this critical role.

## (8) Chief Citizen

The office also automatically makes its occupant the nation's chief citizen. The President is expected to be "the representative of all the people." He or she is expected to take the high road and champion the public interest against the many different and competing private interests. "The presidency," said Franklin Roosevelt, "is not merely an administrative office. That is the least of it. It is, preeminently, a place of moral leadership."

---

Listing the President's roles is a useful way to describe the President's job. But, remember, the President must juggle all of these roles simultaneously, and they are all interconnected. In addition, as presidential power has grown over time, so has the number and scope of the roles he or she must fulfill. Note, too, that none of them can be performed in isolation. The manner in which a President plays any one role can affect his or her ability to execute the others.

As but two illustrations of the point, take the experiences of Presidents Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon. Each was a strong and relatively effective President during his first years in office. But Mr. Johnson's actions as commander in chief during the agonizing and increasingly unpopular war in Vietnam seriously damaged his stature and effectiveness in the White House. In fact, the damage was so great that it helped persuade LBJ not to run for reelection in 1968.

The many-sided and sordid Watergate scandal brought President Nixon's downfall. The manner in which he filled the roles of party leader and chief citizen so destroyed Mr. Nixon's presidency that he was forced to leave office in disgrace in 1974.

---

## THE UNITED STATES CONSTITUTION

### ARTICLE II

#### Section 2

- ❖ **Clause 1:** *The President shall be Commander in Chief of the Army and Navy of the United States, and of the Militia of the several States, when called into the actual Service of the United States; he may require the Opinion, in writing, of the principal Officer in each of the executive Departments, upon any Subject relating to the Duties of their respective Offices, and he shall have Power to grant Reprieves and Pardons for Offences against the United States, except in Cases of Impeachment.*
- ❖ **Clause 2:** *He shall have Power, by and with the Advice and Consent of the Senate, to make Treaties, provided two thirds of the Senators present concur; and he shall nominate, and by and with the Advice and Consent of the Senate, shall appoint Ambassadors, other public Ministers and Consuls, Judges of the supreme Court, and all other Officers of the United States, whose Appointments are not herein otherwise provided for, and which shall be established by Law: but the Congress may by Law vest the Appointment of such inferior Officers, as they think proper, in the President alone, in the Courts of Law, or in the Heads of Departments.*
- ❖ **Clause 3:** *The President shall have Power to fill up all Vacancies that may happen during the Recess of the Senate, by granting Commissions which shall expire at the End of their next Session.*

#### Section 3

- ❖ *He shall from time to time give to the Congress Information of the State of the Union, and recommend to their Consideration such Measures as he shall judge necessary and expedient; he may, on extraordinary Occasions, convene both Houses, or either of them, and in Case of Disagreement between them, with Respect to the Time of Adjournment, he may adjourn them to such Time as he shall think proper; he shall receive Ambassadors and other public Ministers; he shall take Care that the Laws be faithfully executed, and shall Commission all the Officers of the United States.*