Presidential Roles

Express Roles

The United States Constitution outlines several of the president's roles and powers, while other roles have developed over time. The presidential roles expressly defined, or enumerated, in the Constitution include those of Commander-in-Chief, Chief Executive, Head of State, Chief Diplomat, and Legislator.

Article II, Section 2 of the Constitution defines the president's role and powers as Commander-in-Chief. In this role, the president controls the United States military by working through the Department of Defense. Originally called the Department of War, this department was established by the first Congress to advise the president on military matters.

Members of the Department of Defense include the secretary of defense, who is also a Cabinet member, as well as the Joint Chiefs of Staff, who are the leaders of each branch of the military. These people and their respective staffs are responsible for giving the president advice in his role as Commander-in-Chief.

In addition to working with the Department of Defense, the president also works closely with the House and Senate committees on armed services and the appropriation committees that designate funding for the military. These groups help determine military expenditures and defense policy for the United States.

Although the Constitution gives military control to the president, this power is shared with Congress. Congress has the power of appropriations and to declare war. Congress last used its power to declare war in 1941, when it approved the United States' involvement in World War II.

In 1973, after many years of escalating American involvement in the Vietnam War, Congress passed the War Powers Resolution. The war, which did not enjoy broad popular support, had grown when successive administrations committed more and more troops and equipment to it. The War Powers Resolution stipulates that a president must get Congressional approval if he wants to commit troops on an emergency basis, even for a limited time.

Whether or not the president abides by the War Powers Resolution is a political decision. While every president has claimed that the resolution is unconstitutional, it has proven to be politically more efficient to go along with it than to challenge it.
Occasionally, the president appeals to the public to prompt Congress to give him powers to conduct war when he sees fit. Public fear of the spread of Communism helped President Truman garner congressional support for the United States' involvement in the Korean War, which lasted from 1950 to 1953.

Fear of Communism also played a role in the passage of the Tonkin Gulf Resolution, which authorized United States military involvement in the Vietnam War. President Lyndon Johnson urged passage of this resolution in August 1964 after a supposed North Vietnamese attack on U.S. destroyers located in the Gulf of Tonkin. Similarly, in 2002, Congress passed and President George W. Bush signed the Iraq Resolution, authorizing use of military force in Iraq.

As Commander-in-Chief, the president also exercises power over military leaders to ensure that national security goals are met. For example, President Truman removed General MacArthur as the Supreme Commander of Allied Powers during the Korean War when MacArthur overstepped his powers and threatened China with nuclear weapons.

Another presidential role, that of Chief Executive, is principally defined in Article II, Sections 1 and 3 of the Constitution. As Chief Executive, the president is the champion of the United States Constitution. He is sworn to uphold and defend its laws, as well as to make sure those laws are executed.

Two roles—Administrator and Crisis Manager—can be seen as extensions of the Chief Executive role. As an Administrator, the president is the head of an immense Bureaucracy, which includes the Cabinet, government agencies, commissions, and other entities. In fulfilling his role as Administrator, President Clinton tasked Vice President Al Gore with making the government more efficient by figuring out how and where to apply quality-improvement measures similar to those used in large corporations.

In addition to appointing people to positions within the Bureaucracy, the president proposes budgets for the agencies. As modern presidents have taken a greater role in budget development, the role of Chief Financial Officer has also been added to their agendas.

As a Crisis Manager, the president handles national crises, such as the Oklahoma City bombing during Bill Clinton's presidency and the September 11, 2001, attacks during George W. Bush's presidency. People in the United States and throughout the world judge the president on how well he functions during times of crises. John Kennedy was not viewed as a strong president until his forceful handling of the Cuban Missile Crisis.

While Kennedy, Clinton, and Bush received high approval ratings for their role as Crisis Manager, not all presidents have handled crises decisively and quickly. Two presidents who lost public approval following crises were Herbert Hoover and Jimmy Carter. President Hoover's response—or lack of response—to the Stock Market plunge and
Depression in 1929 eroded people's confidence in him and marred his presidency. President Carter's handling of the Iran Hostage Crisis was perceived as weak and ineffective.

Article II, Section 3 of the Constitution names the president the **Head of State** and **Chief Diplomat**. As Head of State, the president attends state dinners, acts as the ceremonial leader of the nation, and meets with foreign leaders in Washington, D.C. Additionally, the president represents the people of the United States at official functions, such as funerals or weddings of important foreign officials, treaty signings, and goodwill trips abroad.

Closely related to the Head of State role, being Chief Diplomat involves meeting with foreign diplomats, appointing ambassadors, and fulfilling obligations to negotiate treaties, agreements, and understandings with foreign powers. These responsibilities are typically executed with help from the Department of State.

Several U.S. presidents, including Ronald Reagan, were highly regarded for their skillful diplomacy. President Reagan's relationship with British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and Russian President Mikhail Gorbachev were some of the strongest ties among world leaders in modern times. It was President Reagan's rapport with Gorbachev that helped them establish an arms-reduction agreement, called the INF Treaty, in 1987.

As Chief Diplomat, the president can enter into **executive agreements**, which do not require the Senate's approval. These agreements typically expand on existing legislation or treaties. One noteworthy executive agreement, referred to as the Lend-Lease Policy, was reached in 1940 between the United States and Great Britain. At the time, Britain was already at war with Germany and needed more ships to combat the German submarines. President Franklin Roosevelt agreed to give Great Britain 50 destroyers in exchange for 99 years of access to military bases from the North to South Atlantic.

The president's role as **Legislator** is partially enumerated and partially traditional. According to Article II, Section 3, the president must present to Congress a State of the Union message each year. This message in modern times has indicated the legislative package the president intends to send to Congress, including the budget he is preparing. In most years, a president will give this address to a joint session of Congress. However, presidents can opt simply to send the message to Congress to be read. President George W. Bush followed this procedure in 2001.

Beginning with the first 100 days of Franklin Roosevelt's administration, Congress has looked to the White House for the legislative agenda. White House personnel send bills to Congress, actively lobby individuals and groups to support the president's agenda, and use the Bureaucracy to encourage the passage of favored programs and bills.

President Lyndon Johnson, one of the nation's most prolific legislators while serving as a
Texas Senator, was able to translate his Senate skills to the role of chief legislator. In the 1960s, he and his administration created the Great Society programs to expand federal funding for social services. With support from the Bureaucracy and political allies, they successfully lobbied Congress to pass many of the programs.

Commander-in-Chief, Chief Executive, Head of State, Chief Diplomat, and Legislator—having so many roles severely limits the president's time. Presidents are often so busy that they become reactive, responding to crisis situations as they occur. The demands on the president's time regularly require him to set aside his Agenda, limiting the time he has to spend promoting his policies.

The president's time is often not his own and is dictated by the roles and duties he must Constitutionally or traditionally fulfill. It has been suggested that the job of the president has become too large with too many roles. One solution that has been suggested is to use vice presidents more effectively. The Constitution defines only two roles for the vice president. One is to be President of the Senate, where the principal duty is to cast the tie-breaking vote, when necessary. The other role is the help determine whether a president is disabled.

Historically, vice presidents have remained in the background, playing only minor public and policy-making roles. In the last several administrations, however, the vice presidents have played a more vital role. For example, Al Gore and Dick Cheney have both had high-profile responsibilities under their respective presidents, including making appearances and speaking on the president's behalf.

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