

Emily Jones

Ms. Smith

American History

6 April 2004

Student (writer) information:

- Use your own name
- Use correct date style

Font:

- Times New Roman
- Size 12

The Presidency of William Henry Harrison

Title:

- Center
- Title case

Double space

The administration of President William Henry Harrison was unusual in that, although it set many precedents for those who followed him, it was the briefest of all presidential administrations, lasting only 31 days. He was one of the first presidents elected because of his immense personal popularity, and not for his political expertise. His campaign was the first to be waged and won by the media instead of based on the issues. He also set in motion important foreign policy issues. Brief as it was, his administration had great impact on the future of the United States.

The disorganized Whig Party hoped that it could win the Presidential election of 1840 by focusing not on the political issues of the day, but rather by emphasizing the great personal popularity of its candidate. William Henry Harrison was a well-loved and respected military hero who had become famous first in the War of 1812 and then in the Indian Wars. It was in the Indian Wars that he received the nickname that was so closely associated with him:

"Tippecanoe." He had defeated the Shawnee Indians at the Battle of Tippecanoe in 1811 (Davis and Edwards 45). So, at the age of 68, the retired general was persuaded by the leadership of the Whig Party to run for the presidency of the United States **1**.

The first of many precedents which later candidates would follow was set at this time. Harrison's was the first large-scale, multi-media campaign for the presidency, the most expensive campaign up until that time. Songs and ballads were written, banners and pamphlets prepared,

Paper size – Letter
 Margins – Top, bottom, l. & r. - 1"

and campaign buttons were widely distributed. The slogan, "Tippecanoe, and Tyler, too!" was widespread. John Tyler was Harrison's vice-presidential candidate **2**. Any negative comments made about Harrison by the opposition were quickly turned to his advantage by clever campaign managers. The Democrats, for example, whose candidate was President Martin Van Buren, hoped to make it appear that Harrison was an uncouth bumpkin, unsuited for such high office. The Whigs, however, used this to show that Harrison was truly a man of the common people, whereas Van Buren was "an aristocratic elitist" **3**.

Only one week after taking office in March, 1841, Harrison was presented with the grave crisis known as "The Caroline Affair." This dispute with Great Britain ultimately led to the Webster-Ashburton Treaty in 1842 (Foreign 96). Yet at the time, it placed so much stress on the elderly president that he sought relief by busying himself with the daily chores involved in running the white house ("William Henry Harrison" 432).

It was while purchasing vegetables for the white house kitchen one cold March morning that he aquired a chill. This compounded the cold he had caught at his own inauguration, and neumonia developed. He died on April 4, 1841, after serving one month in office **4**.

The full effects of Harrison's brief term are still being felt today. Many precedents were actually established at this time, among them the ability of an older man to win the presidency and perform its duties capably. Only Ronald Reagan was older than William Henry Harrison when elected. Had Harrison not served, Reagan may not have been able to win his office with such ease ("Why" A5).

Harrison's death in office set into motion a great debate about the sucesion of the president:

Indent long
quote 1" from
left margin

For years the quandary that in all probability would inevitably have to be faced had troubled many who studied the constitution, but no official pronouncement on the subject had been made. In other words, the problem had been anticipated but had not been resolved. In 1825, William Rawle, in his *View of the Constitution of the United States*, had stated his belief that a vice-president would assume the presidential office for the remainder of the current term. (Peterson 46)

Harrison's vice-president, John Tyler, assumed the office and began to function as president, not as acting president. Debate raged at the time, and in fact continued until Amendment XXV to the Constitution was passed in 1949, settling once and for all that the vice-president did in fact become president on the death or resignation of the holder of that office ("William Henry Harrison" 450).

Perhaps due to its very peculiarity, the administration of William Henry Harrison stands as one of the most interesting in U.S. history. It set precedents in terms of presidential campaigning styles and expenditures, and qualities desirable in a presidential candidate, as well as Constitutional issues unresolved until recently. Even his death sparked a controversy that raged until modern times. It was an administration like no other, yet in many ways it established patterns that are still followed today.

Harrison's death itself set a curious precedent, popularly known as "The Zero Factor." Coincidence or otherwise, every president since Harrison elected in a year ending in zero (e.g., 1860, 1900), until Ronald Reagan, died in office, either by assassination or due to illness **5**. Harrison, by his death, set this phenomenon in motion.