

The hardest transition of all: From president to regular Joe

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After all the headlines, adulation and parties -- not to mention 24-hour attention by a squadron of White House aides, chefs and maids -- there comes the sudden realization for a departing president that he's -- well, history.

No more Air Force One or sylvan retreats at Camp David. No more Marine Corps "Ruffles and Flourishes." No more presidential-motorcade red-light running -- or traffic stopping when you go out to eat.

The Cinderella moment comes at the stroke of noon EST on Jan. 20 as one president walks off into history, and another takes his place.

"The year begins in gloom," John Quincy Adams wrote in his diary. "My wife had a sleepless and painful night. The dawn was overcast, and as I began to write, my lamp went out, self-extinguished. The notice of so trivial an incident may serve to mark the present temper of my mind."

Carl Sferrazza Anthony, author of "America's First Families," a history of White House occupants, said only a few presidents have been happy leaving the White House, and many have had difficulties making the transition back to private life.

"It's hardest on the real activist presidents, those who had a genuine vision for the country, and a relish for fighting - they are the ones regretful for leaving," he said.

Anthony said it doesn't take long for former presidents to miss the life they had in a home where they had 132 rooms and 34 bathrooms.

"It's when they can't get a plumber or electrician instantly" that they realize they're back in civilian life, he said. Most modern ex-presidents say the one thing they miss from their White House days is Air Force One, and the ability to fly anywhere anytime they want.

President Clinton was the first president since Woodrow Wilson to set up a retirement home in Washington. Clinton's \$2.8 million Embassy Row home is about a half-mile from Wilson's retirement townhouse. William Howard Taft retired to become a professor at Yale University at the end of his presidency. But he returned to Washington, living in an apartment, to serve as chief justice of the United States until his death in 1931. George W. Bush is heading home to Dallas, where he recently bought a home.

Taft was one of the few chief executives genuinely happy to leave the White House; he sought the job only to satisfy his wife's ambitions, according to Anthony.

"I am glad to be going," Taft said at the time.

Harry Truman, the first president to face term limits, also looked forward to returning home to Independence, Mo., and escaping from a building he described as "the big white jail." More typical was George H. W. Bush, who found the transition period painful.

"I've seen several transitions before," he told a reporter on his last day in office. "And let me tell you, they didn't seem nearly this long. There's a direct relationship between the length of the transition and losing. You win, it seems much too short. You lose, it lasts forever." He spent his last hours walking his dog Ranger around the White House driveway, and drafting a note for Clinton wishing him well.

Ronald Reagan spent his last hours in power feeding the squirrels on the White House lawn.

Others have been preoccupied with crises. By the time of Abraham Lincoln's first inauguration, seven Southern states had seceded from the Union and there was little time for festivities.

Jimmy Carter spent his last minutes trying to end the 444-day Iran hostage crisis that cost him the presidency. Carter even took a telephone with him to Reagan's swearing-in and was engaged in last-minute talks as the two drove to the U.S. Capitol. But it was left to the newly inaugurated Reagan to announce that very afternoon that the 52 hostages were released from Tehran and were flying home.

Since 1921, it's been traditional for the outgoing president to host the incoming president with a White House tea or coffee before the 10-minute motorcade to Capitol Hill. For the departing president, it's a one-way trip. Only the new guy returns to the White House.

Those final minutes haven't gone well for several presidents. For example, Andrew Johnson said he would have nothing to do with Ulysses Grant and refused to ride to Capitol Hill with him. Johnson spent the time during Grant's inauguration drafting letters; then he got into a carriage and rode home to Tennessee.

Truman was prepared to welcome Dwight Eisenhower in 1953, but Eisenhower was still nursing grudges from the election when he called at the White House. Eisenhower refused to get out of the car, even though Bess Truman had prepared "a spread" for him.

Truman later recalled that the bitterness only worsened when he confided to Eisenhower that he had had Ike's son John flown home from Korea for the inaugural -- a presidential intercession in military affairs the old general did not appreciate.

Former White House usher J.B. West recalled that both men were sour. "I was glad I wasn't in the car," he said.

John Adams, bitter over his defeat, simply left the White House early on the morning of Thomas Jefferson's inaugural, declaring he saw "nothing wonderful" in the transition. He later explained his early departure by saying he was still mourning his son Charles, who had died three months earlier.

Woodrow Wilson also had a forlorn exit. After suffering from a stroke, he spent his last hours in the White House alone in a wheelchair while his wife prepared their Washington retirement home.

Herbert Hoover and Franklin Roosevelt plainly didn't hit it off. Hoover's last days were spent trying to deal with a worsening bank crisis and attempting to get a reluctant Roosevelt to back his economic revitalization plan. A get-to-know-you meeting between the two was delayed for a half an hour.

When the two met at the White House, Roosevelt said he realized Hoover was too busy to call on him at his hotel, at which Hoover thundered: "Mr. Roosevelt, when you have been in Washington as long as I have been, you will learn that the president of the United States calls on no one." From then on Roosevelt would have nothing to do with Hoover, and the two went off to Capitol Hill as to an execution.

George Washington set the pattern for the role of ex-presidents, returning to his estate in Mount Vernon. He became a surprisingly active voice in a number of national controversies, including the young nation's difficult relations with France and Britain.

After a miserable and ineffectual term in the White House, John Quincy Adams is the only president who returned to Congress, becoming a member of the House of Representatives for nearly 17 years and a tireless opponent of slavery.

Others sought to resume their political careers but with little success. For example, Martin Van Buren twice failed to win back the White House after his defeat in 1840, and Theodore Roosevelt fell short in his efforts to unseat Taft with his independent Bull Moose Party challenge.

Others have fought from retirement to restore a tarnished image. Grant spent his dying years writing his memoirs in hopes of restoring a reputation tainted by fraud and corruption. Carter has used his retirement to build homes for the poor with Habitat for Humanity and to monitor disputed elections overseas.

Eisenhower retired to become a gentleman farmer in Gettysburg, Pa., and party elder statesman. Gerald Ford has spent his retirement years serving on corporate boards, amassing a personal fortune and indulging his passion for golf.

Some presidents cashed in. Before he was diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease, Ronald Reagan received \$ 2 million for a 10-day speaking tour of Japan. Reagan's successor Bush received a payment of \$80,000 in stock for making a speech in Japan. Carter climbed out of debt with the help of money from the 15 books he has written.

Bill Clinton has found private life lucrative as well. So far, from speeches and book contracts, he's raked in more than \$30 million since he left office in 2001.

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