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Life After the White House

by *The Week* Staff on January 21, 2017

Once they've relinquished the highest office in the land, many presidents enjoy rewarding second acts. Here's everything you need to know:

What do ex-presidents do?

It varies widely. "There's no rule of thumb," says historian Douglas Brinkley. Dedication his presidential library in 2013, Republican George W. Bush quoted Alexander Hamilton, who worried that the nation would have its former chief executives "wandering among the people like discontented ghosts," potentially sowing discord. "Actually, we seem pretty happy," Bush countered, glancing toward Bill Clinton, Jimmy Carter, and his father, George H.W. Bush. The younger Bush, 70, has spent his contented post-presidency painting, writing a lucrative memoir, delivering \$175,000 speeches, and generally avoiding politics — he pointedly refrained from criticizing Democratic successor Barack Obama. But as Obama, 55, yields the Oval Office to Donald Trump — who questioned his legitimacy and vows to unravel his legacy — he'll likely join a group of presidents who did not go quietly into that good night. Presidential biographer Jon Meacham says that for some former presidents, leaving the White House is a form of liberation. "They are — finally, at last — free to be whatever they want," Meacham says.

Which ones were most active?

After a bitter re-election defeat by Andrew Jackson in 1828, John Quincy Adams came back to Washington as a member of the House of Representatives, and served with distinction for 17 years before suffering a fatal stroke on the House floor at 80. Nicknamed "Old Man Eloquent," Adams was a passionate foe of slavery. By contrast, pro-slavery Virginian John Tyler went on to serve in the Confederate Congress; Andrew Johnson, who was impeached and acquitted, rebounded to become the only ex-president to serve in the U.S. Senate, representing Tennessee. "Thank God for the vindication," he said. (It was short-lived — five months later, Johnson died of a stroke.) In 1912, Theodore Roosevelt mounted a third-party campaign against the re-election of his former vice president and chosen successor, Republican William Howard Taft.

Why would he do such a thing?

The reform-minded Roosevelt was frustrated by Taft's conservatism, so he created the Progressive — or "Bull Moose" — party. Roosevelt split the Republican vote, sabotaging Taft, and finished second in the three-way race behind Democrat Woodrow Wilson. But the humiliated Taft wound up with his dream job: In 1921 Warren G. Harding named the onetime Ohio judge Chief Justice of the Supreme Court. Serving until shortly before his death in 1930, the portly ex-president resembled "a smiling Buddha" on the bench, observed journalist William Allen White, "placid, wise, gentle, sweet." Most historians agree that, like Adams, Taft belongs to a select group whose post-presidencies outshone their tenure in the White House.

Who are some others?

Swept from power in a Franklin D. Roosevelt landslide, Republican Herbert Hoover left Washington in 1933 a political pariah, blamed for ignoring conditions that precipitated the Great Depression. But Harry Truman later tapped him to lead post-World War II relief efforts and help streamline the federal bureaucracy, and by his death in 1964, Hoover had earned a

measure of respect. "I outlived the bastards," is how he put it. One-term Democrat Jimmy Carter was similarly unpopular after Ronald Reagan crushed him in 1980. But in 1982, he established the Carter Center, devoting himself to humanitarian causes, monitoring 103 elections in 39 nations, and leading a campaign to eradicate guinea worm disease in Africa. He was awarded a Nobel Peace Prize in 2002. But Carter's post-presidency hasn't been without controversy.

How so?

He has angered pro-Israel Republicans and Democrats with his outspoken advocacy for the Palestinians, and ruffled feathers by bluntly critiquing successors from both parties — whether it was Bush 43, for the Iraq War, or Obama, for his foreign policy record. Of Obama, Carter said, "I can't think of many nations in the world where we have a better relationship now than we did when he took over." Bill Clinton sought to follow in Carter's humanitarian footsteps, with mixed results. On the one hand, his family foundation has raised some \$2 billion for various causes, including disaster relief and the dissemination of low-cost HIV drugs in AIDS-ravaged Africa. But lavish corporate and foreign donations, especially while his wife, Hillary Clinton, was secretary of state, raised "pay-for-play" allegations. The Clintons, who draw \$200,000-plus speaking fees, have raked in an estimated \$150 million since leaving the White House. "I was one poor rascal when I took office," Bill Clinton said in 2009. "But after I got out, I made a lot of money."

What's next for Obama?

He won't go hungry, either. Eloquent, charismatic, and still popular, Obama could command gaudier speaking fees than any ex-president, and his presidential memoir may draw a \$45 million advance. But as he pads his bank account, he'll also be working on rebuilding the Democratic Party, which lost hundreds of congressional and statehouse seats during his tenure. Then there is the matter of his legacy. With Trump vowing to reverse almost every Obama policy, the 44th president has told top Democrats he isn't going to be silent. "Obama's post-presidency," says historian Cody Foster, "just got exponentially more interesting."

Nixon's final comeback

After Richard Nixon resigned the presidency in the wake of the Watergate scandal in August 1974, "his career and life lay in ruins," says biographer Elizabeth Drew. But the resilient Nixon hatched a secret plan — code-named Wizard — to resurrect his reputation. Determined to become "a senior statesman, a sage," Drew says, he wrote a best-selling memoir, sat for interviews with British talk show host David Frost, lectured, and traveled twice to China. He began dispensing political and foreign policy advice to politicians in both parties, and privately consulted with Presidents Carter, Reagan, and Bush 41. In the 1980s, Nixon was voted one of Gallup's 10 most admired men in the world, and when he died at 81 in 1994, the Clintons, along with four ex-presidents and more than 100 members of Congress, attended the nationally televised funeral. In his eulogy, then-President Clinton said, "May the day of judging President Nixon on anything less than his entire life and career come to a close."

Possible response options:

- If you had just finished being President of the United States, what do you think you'd want to do? Explain.
- Which of the presidents mentioned in the article had the best post-presidency experience, in your opinion?
- What do you predict that Barack Obama will do now that he has left office?
- Choose one passage and respond to it.