



Smithsonian
***Donald W. Reynolds Center for
American Art and Portraiture***
National Portrait Gallery

News

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“Presidents in Waiting” Opens at the National Portrait Gallery Jan. 20, 2009

On Inauguration Day 2009, the National Portrait Gallery will open “Presidents in Waiting,” an exhibition that focuses on the office of the vice presidency and the individuals who first served in that office and then later became president. It continues through Jan. 3, 2010.

The office of the vice president was created by the framers of the Constitution to provide a quick and peaceful succession in the event of the president’s death or incapacity. Fourteen of the men who were vice presidents became president either by winning election on their own, upon the death of an incumbent or, in one case, by the resignation of the president. This exhibition examines the role of the vice president throughout American history and how the office evolved.

Originally, the runner-up in a presidential election became vice president. This process was changed by the 12th Amendment, as a result of the 1800 election, in which a tie vote between the candidates threw the election into the House of Representatives, resulting in the nation’s first constitutional crisis. The development of political parties and straight party-line voting was not foreseen by the framers of the Constitution and forced the change.

“The role of the vice presidency has been debated throughout the history of our country,” said Martin E. Sullivan, director of the National Portrait Gallery. “‘Presidents in Waiting’ is a show that will be of interest to all who love the lore and legends of political history.”

“Ford Motor Company Fund is pleased to partner with the Smithsonian in bringing this part of the presidency to life,” said Jim Vella, president, Ford Motor Company Fund, the philanthropic arm of Ford Motor Company. “Education is a top priority at Ford, and exhibitions such as ‘Presidents in Waiting’ help keep history alive in an interesting and fun way.”

The show examines the vice presidencies of John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, Martin Van Buren, John Tyler, Millard Fillmore, Andrew Johnson, Chester Arthur, Theodore Roosevelt, Calvin

Coolidge, Harry Truman, Lyndon Johnson, Richard Nixon, Gerald Ford and George H.W. Bush. It includes video of interviews granted exclusively for the exhibition with former vice presidents Walter Mondale, Bush and Dan Quayle and the current vice president, Richard Cheney.

The exhibition uses portraiture in its many forms to portray these vice presidents. On view are a painting of Jefferson as secretary of state during the Washington administration by Charles Willson Peale, on loan from Independence National Historical Park; a Roosevelt-Truman campaign poster; a photograph of Johnson being sworn in as president on Air Force One; campaign buttons from Reagan-Bush campaigns; and the original letter from Adams to Abigail Adams in which he makes his often-quoted lament about the vice presidency: “My country has in its wisdom contrived for me the most insignificant office that ever the invention of man contrived or his imagination conceived.”

The Smithsonian’s National Portrait Gallery curators are Sidney Hart, senior historian, and James G. Barber, historian.

This exhibition and all related programs and publications are made possible by Ford Motor Company Fund.

The National Portrait Gallery

The Smithsonian’s National Portrait Gallery tells the history of America through the individuals who have shaped its culture. Through the visual arts, performing arts and new media, the Portrait Gallery portrays poets and presidents, visionaries and villains, actors and activists whose lives tell the American story.

The National Portrait Gallery is part of the Donald W. Reynolds Center for American Art and Portraiture at Eighth and F streets N.W., Washington, D.C. Smithsonian Information: (202) 633-1000; (202) 633-5285 (TTY). Web site: npg.si.edu.

About Ford Motor Company Fund and Community Services

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