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The American President

<http://www.americanpresident.org/home6.htm>

Co-produced by Kunhardt Productions and Thirteen/WNET in New York; series and educational outreach Web site sponsored by the New York Life Insurance Company

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Just as the historical profession has essentially weaned itself from the presidential synthesis, PBS has been actively promoting presidential historians and presenting presidential documentaries, from episodes of *American Experience* to *The American President*. The latter ten-part series, first aired in April 2000, featured narration by Hugh Sidey and commentary by Richard Neustadt, along with such celebrity narrators as Tim Russert as Millard Fillmore, Andrew Young as Thomas Jefferson, Bob Dole as Herbert Hoover, Dan Rostenkowski as Chester Arthur, and, yes, Don Imus as Andrew Johnson.

The *American President* is the TV series' eponymous Web site. Designed for educational outreach, in coordination with the National Council for the Social Studies, the site promises to provide teachers and students "with exciting tools and resources" that will "make learning about the presidency interactive and fun." To a considerable degree, it accomplishes those objectives with information that is abundant, accurate, and well illustrated.



The Web site provides descriptions of each episode in the series, interviews with the producers, and presidential "galleries" chockablock full of "fast facts," biographical sketches, summaries of foreign and domestic issues, samplings of quotations and images, recommended readings, lesson plans, issues to ponder, and a glossary of nicknames, campaign slogans, and related references. Beyond its own offerings, *The American President* provides links to additional Web sites (rated by teachers) for each president. These sites in turn offer their own links to other resources, creating a seemingly infinite cybernetwork of presidential data.

Perhaps because it was launched during an election year, *The American President* gives the impression that the presidency is a perpetual campaign—which perhaps it has become. Game-oriented students can engage in an interactive "War Room," playing campaign managers who guide their candidates through the presidential primaries

and general election, confronted by funding shortages and the revelation of each candidate's "dark secret." During the 2000 campaign, students were invited to submit essays assessing the candidates and their party platforms and to register their opinions on the election's unusual outcome. Somewhat tangentially, an online journal also tracked the campaign of an English teacher who ran unsuccessfully for a seat in the Iowa House of Representatives.

Tracking forty-one chief executives (not including George W. Bush), the site treats each one equally, from William Henry Harrison's single month in office to Franklin D. Roosevelt's dozen years. Like the television series, which focused on the character and personalities of the presidents and arranged them by their family connections, political independence, and leadership abilities, the Web site concentrates on the individuals. What seems missing is a sense of governance. Students using the site will find as much or more information about presidents' homes, spouses, and children as about their dealings with the cabinet, the Congress, and the courts. The brief summaries of each president's domestic and foreign policies give little insight into how that president conducted his administration, the goals expressed in his state of the union messages, or his ability to achieve those goals in his dealings with the Senate, the House, and the Supreme Court—all the factors that determine a president's success or failure in office. For all of its admirable assets, *The American President* neglects much about the American presidency.

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