

Modern Presidents Die Young

Medicine



DOLLY MADISON lived to queen it over Washington's society for many years after she departed from the White House

BY MARJORIE MACDILL

Presidents die young. And a cold-figured statistician looking at the life of the leading presidential candidates passes the following judgment.

Lowden and Reed, now 66, could expect eleven years of life if they were ordinary men such as those whose records were used in compiling the life tables that determine insurance rates. But if they become president, they face a sacrifice of seven and a half years of life. Such is the average toll that has been levied upon American presidents since the Civil War. Remembering of course that this is a cold statistical evaluation without any consideration of the personal health of these two candidates, it is to be expected that either will just barely live out one term of office if he should be elected president.

Hoover, now 53, Smith, now 54, and Ritchie, now 51, have much brighter outlooks. Expectancy tables grant them $18\frac{1}{2}$, $17\frac{1}{2}$ and $20\frac{1}{2}$ more years of life, respectively, if they dodge the presidential chair. Deducing the sacrificial years in the event that they are elected, all of

these candidates will have plenty of time left to complete two terms if the people are willing. Dawes, now in his 63rd year, can expect 13 years more of life if spared the rigors of the presidency and should, statistics say, finish out a term of office without difficulty if elected.

An investigation conducted by Dr. Louis I. Dublin, statistician of the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company, indicates that the physical wear and tear of being president cuts off a disconcerting number of years from the normal expectancy of life of those elected to the highest office in the gift of the people.

It is upon the basis of his findings that one is able to speculate upon the statistical probabilities of longevity for those who desire to become next president of the United States.

Presidents do not live as long as they did in the early days of the republic.

Eight years and nine months is the average price the twelve men in the chief magistracy of the country, who have died since the Civil War, have had to pay for their high office. If the two men still living who have occupied the office live out their full normal span the figure is only decreased to seven and a half years.

Yet, taken as a whole, the presidents are by no means a short-lived group.

"The average age at death of the twenty-seven presidents who have died is 68.41 years," declared Dr. Dublin, "and our one living ex-president, Chief Justice Taft, is 70. According to the life tables, the twenty-seven deceased presidents would have been expected to live 458.46 years after their inaugurations—they actually lived 373.14 years. The men who become this country's chief magistrates must, in the very nature of things, be a relatively long-lived group; for no one is elected to this highest office in the gift of the people until he has reached middle age, at least. As a matter of fact, the average age of our twenty-nine chief executives, at the time they were inaugurated, was 54.31 years. Theodore Roosevelt, at 42, was the youngest. There were, in all, six, Polk, Pierce, Grant, Garfield, Cleveland and Roosevelt, who were between 40 and 50 when inaugurated. There were eighteen who assumed the of-



JOHN ADAMS, who attained the greatest age of any president thus far. He died at ninety, within an hour of his friend Thomas Jefferson

fice at ages from 50 to 60 years, and five, Buchanan, Taylor, William Henry Harrison, Jackson and John Adams, were between 60 and 70. William Henry Harrison was the oldest, at 68, followed by Buchanan at 65. It was to be expected that this group, made up of twenty-nine men of the highest type, who had lived on the average more than 54 years when they assumed office, would, on the average, survive to very close to the traditional three-score and ten years."

Dividing the presidents into two groups, one beginning with Washington and ending with Buchanan, and the second beginning with Lincoln and ending at the present time, a very different picture is presented from that suggested by Dr. Dublin's composite data on the whole group.

"The average age at death of the fifteen presidents of the earlier, or pre-Civil War era," he explained, "was 73.8 years, whereas that of the twelve deceased presidents of the post-Civil War period was only 61.67 years. It becomes immediately apparent that it is the weight of the longer lives of the earlier chief executives which brings the average age at death for the entire group up to the figure we quoted, namely, 68.41 years. This becomes still more plainly evident when we compare for each president, the number of years actually lived after accession with the number of years he would have been expected to live in accordance with the expectation of life prevailing in his day. (Turn the page)

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"In the earlier period, fifteen men were elected, or succeeded to the presidency. As nearly as can be gauged by the aid of the more reliable among the life tables, the combined expectation of life of these fifteen men, when they assumed the office, was 229.65 years. The actual number of years lived by these fifteen chief executives was 250.02, or 20.37 years in excess of the expected. On the average then, these earlier incumbents lived 1.35 years in excess of their expectation of life at their presidential inaugurations.

"Since 1861, we have had fourteen presidents, twelve of whom have died. We find that the combined expectation of life, at accession, of the twelve deceased executives, from Lincoln to Harding, was 228.81 years. These twelve men actually lived, however, only 123.12 years, or 105.69 years less than their normal life expectancy at their ages of accession to the presidency. This group of twelve men, on the average, lived 8.81 years less than their normal expectation when they assumed the office. The combined expectation of life at accession, of the two living men who have filled the office is 40.96 years. If that expectation is fulfilled the number of years lived by the fourteen presidents from Lincoln to Coolidge, after accession, will be 164.08, or still 105.69 years below the expected; and the average life tenure of the fourteen, since they assumed office, would still be 7.55 years below the expected, as compared with 1.35 years above the expected for the fifteen men who were the country's chief magistrates prior to the Civil War.

"Of the fifteen presidents during the era 1789-1861, nine lived to exceed their life expectations at accession; of the twelve deceased presidents since 1861, only a single one, Grover Cleveland, lived beyond his normal expectancy at his inauguration to the presidency: by 1.3 years. Three of the twelve presidents who have died since 1861, Lincoln, Garfield and McKinley, lost their lives through assassination. The presidency has in recent decades been a hazardous occupation; but even had these men lived out their life expectations the post-Civil War presidents would still fall far short of living as long as the life tables allot to men of the ages at which they were inaugurated."

The oldest man to be elected to the presidency has also the record for falling victim the quickest to the demands



A CHART showing the longevity of the 14 Presidents since 1861. The average of the 12 deceased chief executives in this group was nearly nine years below expectation

of his high office. "Old Tippecanoe" Harrison was carried into the White House on the enthusiasm of the famous log cabin and hard cider campaign at the age of 68. That inauguration day was what inauguration days usually are from the point of view of weather. So the old veteran of the Indian warfare of the Northwest Territory caught cold from riding bareheaded in the rain to the Capitol. His conscientious labor trying to satisfy the throngs of office seekers that beset him on every hand, aggravated the cold which turned into pneumonia and terminated fatally when he had only been president a month.

The next oldest president to take office, James Buchanan, incidentally the only president to remain a bachelor throughout his stay in the White House, presents to posterity a pathetic figure. However able he may have been in his prime he is remembered as a weak, vacillating old man, overcome by the magnitude of the events ultimately leading up to the Civil War that he was called upon to face.

On the other hand, Andrew Jackson, another of the older presidents, could hardly be said to be lacking in

firmness and decision in his old age. The old warhorse went into political retirement after leaving office but nevertheless continued to dominate his party from within the walls of his beloved Hermitage until the day of his death at 79.

The very early leaders of our country seem to have been a particularly husky lot. John Adams, who attained the greatest age of any of the men who have been president, lived to over ninety, finally expiring within an hour of Thomas Jefferson, a mere youngster of 83. In spite of their bitter political antagonism these two octogenarians were fast friends in their declining years. Both lived lives of quiet retirement but retained active interest in the affairs of the nation. The letters they exchanged attracted wide attention from the press of two continents and provoked the following rather extraordinary comment from the *London Morning Chronicle*.

"What a contrast the following correspondence of the two rival Presidents of the greatest Republic of the world, reflecting an old age dedicated to virtue, temperance, and philosophy, presents to the heart-sickening details, (Turn to page 201)

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occasionally disclosed to us, of the miserable beings who fill the thrones of the continent. There is not, perhaps, one sovereign of the continent, who in any sense of the word can be said to honor our nature, while many make us ashamed of it."

John Quincy Adams, the distinguished son of a famous father, was a member of Congress for 16 years after he retired from the presidency. At eighty he suffered a stroke of paralysis at his desk in the House of Representatives and was carried unconscious to the Speaker's room. There he spoke his last words, the famous sentence: "This is the end of the earth. I am content." Thus he maintained even in death his justly conferred nickname, "Old Man Eloquent."

Though there are more ex-presidents' wives than there are ex-presidents living, the first ladies of the land, taken collectively have not been as long lived as their lords. Anna Symmes Harrison, wife of William Henry Harrison, who died a month after he was inaugurated, the shortest term served by any president, holds the record for longevity to date. She died at the venerable age of eighty-nine. Gentle and quiet Lucretia Garfield survived her husband's assassination for many years, finally dying in 1918 at the advanced age of 85. These are exceptions, however, for not many first ladies of the last few decades have rounded out the traditional three score years and ten.

The sprightly Dolly Madison lived to a ripe old age, regal and charming as in the days of her prime. Washington will probably continue to point out for many years to come the spots where the famous belle took up her residence in the turbulent times following the burning of the White House by the British. From the time that she relinquished her sway over the Executive Mansion until her death at 77, she kept Washington society more or less under her dainty thumb.

For many years it was the proper thing for all the foreign diplomats, statesmen and celebrities to stop at her house on H Street, now a part of the Cosmos Club, immediately after calling at the White House.

Until the day of her death she appeared on all state occasions in clothes of the style that prevailed in the heyday of her fame, a full skirt, generally black velvet, gathered on a short waist that open down



DR. LOUIS I. DUBLIN, whose figures have revealed that presidents don't live as long as they used to

the front over soft white tulle . . . and a turban wound around her independent and charming head. The turbans were famous as were the little slippers imported from Paris that scandalized the more democratic citizens of the new republic who could not forget that Mistress Dolly had originally been a Quaker. She was a dominant figure at the young capital for nearly forty years, passing away eventually in 1849.

The actual number of the whole group of presidents, twenty-nine in all, is too small to use as the basis for absolute statements. Nevertheless the facts are so clear-cut as to make it fairly obvious that the modern demands of the office of chief executive have shortened the lives of our latter day presidents. What shall we do with our ex-presidents, the problem that arises after every inauguration, has in recent years been somewhat summarily solved by death, though running for re-election seems to have been the favorite solution of the past.

The physical breakdowns of former presidents Wilson and Harding are too recent to be enlarged upon here. The untimely demise of the energetic Colonel Roosevelt affords striking contrast to the peaceful survival of placid and genial Chief Justice Taft. There are several items, however, that Dr. Dublin points out, that preclude the unreserved conclusion that it was solely the strains and dangers of the chief magistracy which shortened the lives of these men.

"Who shall say," he explained, "whether the men of the pre-Civil War period were, or were not, the sturdier group? Ability to pass a physical test has never been a prerequisite of the presidency—and if it had been, the exactitude of the more modern physical examination would have shown impairments, if any, during recent decades, which would have gone undetected even a half century ago, to say nothing of the earliest days of United States history. It may be that the earlier presidents withstood better the physical stresses of the office because they were stronger men; and that they survived the presidency longer, not because the office from 1789 to the Civil War entailed less mental stress than it now does, but because the presidents themselves were better able to withstand the demands of the chief magistracy on account of their greater vitality. Again, it would be difficult to adduce absolute proof that the shorter life spans of our post-Civil War presidents are properly chargeable solely to the great and growing demands of the office itself upon the vitality of the incumbents. Practically every president was in 'politics' for more or less time preceding his election as chief magistrate. The physical and mental strain of other offices which our presidents have filled—governorships, governor-generalships, vice-presidencies, senatorships, and Cabinet posts—may have had much to do with shortening their lives.

"But even when due allowance is made for these conditioning items, there is still unmistakable evidence that the earlier group lived considerably longer, on the average, after becoming president, than men of their day would be expected to live, whereas the later group died, on the average nearly nine years earlier than men of their day would be expected to die. This is a very sharp contrast—so sharp, indeed, that it cannot be entirely explained away by the presumption of better physical equipment of the early presidents. The change has taken place, moreover, during a period when medical and sanitary science has been making pronounced advances, when the life expectation of the population in general has been increasing, and when influences operating for the prolongation of human life have been far more numerous and more effective than those tending toward its curtailment."