

A Brief History Railroads and U.S. Presidents



For nearly a century, rail was the most efficient way for Americans to travel long distances. From the 1840s through the 1940s, U.S. presidents used trains just like others did – to get from one place to another. While they traveled in grander style and attracted crowds along the way, presidents rode trains primarily because they were the most efficient way to travel, particularly over long distances.

By the late 1800s, expanding presidential duties made it difficult to take long trips outside Washington, and their ability to communicate with the American public suffered. Presidents were becoming increasingly dependent upon the media to represent their views to the American people. The White House realized the best way to deliver a message directly to the American public was to travel the hundreds of thousands of miles of rail that reached into small towns across America.

By the late 1890s and for the next 50 years, presidential train trips were organized for the purpose of maximizing public outreach. Routes were designed more for the public impact and less as a means to reach a final destination:

- Benjamin Harrison traveled 10,000 miles across the U.S. by rail in 1891. The term POTUS (President Of The United States) was coined during Harrison's administration as an identifying symbol on the train orders for his numerous special trains.
- The 1896 presidential campaign between William McKinley and William Jennings Bryan was the first conducted by rail. Bryan logged 10,000 miles and gave 3,000 speeches.
- Theodore Roosevelt was the first president to use an entire train dedicated to campaign staff. He used the train to deliver 673 speeches while traveling more than 21,000 miles. True to his reputation for adventure, Roosevelt often traveled in the locomotive cab. Unlike many presidents who used cab rides as publicity stunts, Roosevelt learned how to actually operate a locomotive pulling a heavy freight load. He served as president from 1901-1909.
- William Taft traveled more than 100,000 miles by rail during his 1909-1913 term, reaching every continental U.S. state except North Dakota.

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- Woodrow Wilson in 1916 became the first sitting president to actively campaign for re-election, traveling more than 34,000 rail miles. In 1919, Wilson used a 10,000-mile train trip to convince the nation to support America's entry into the League of Nations over the objections of Congress.
- Franklin Roosevelt traveled nearly 250,000 rail miles on 399 trips during his 12 years in office (1933-1945), the equivalent of 10 times around the world. He conducted several secret trips to boost morale at America's military bases during World War II. He was the first president to have a train pulled by diesel locomotives in place of steam, and he was the first to use an airplane for official travel. Roosevelt had a special car made for him called the Ferdinand Magellan. It was heavily armored and weighed 285,000 pounds – the heaviest in the world.
- Harry Truman, certain to lose re-election in 1948 according to polls and pundits, covered 30,000 rail miles in the last months of his campaign. He delivered 343 speeches to an estimated six million people and surprised the world by convincing American voters to return him to the White House. Truman later said, "I went by train. I wanted to talk to them face to face. I knew that they knew that when you get on television, you're wearing a lot of powder and paint that somebody else has put on your face, and you haven't even combed your own hair."
- Dwight Eisenhower was the last president to make regular use of train travel. One of the main reasons was because his wife, Mamie, hated to fly. During his 1952 campaign, Eisenhower traveled more than 51,000 miles, making 232 stops. Many of those miles were by air for Dwight, but Mamie stayed on the train the entire time.
- Lyndon Johnson, heeding advice from Truman years before, sent his wife Lady Bird Johnson to conduct the campaign by rail in 1964. By then, the train was more of a sideshow and less of a communication tool. The "Lady Bird Special" from Washington to New Orleans represented the first time a first lady had campaigned for her husband. Lady Bird's press secretary said, "There, from the back of the train, is where the government and the people meet."
- Ronald Reagan conducted a one-day whistle stop tour from Dayton to Toledo in 1984. He borrowed the Ferdinand Magellan, FDR's rail car, for the 133-mile excursion.