POWER IN CHECK
CHESS AND THE AMERICAN PRESIDENCY
Chess has influenced the American presidency since the administration of George Washington. While a game replete with kings and queens might at first seem antithetical to democratic leadership, commanders-in-chief have continually appreciated chess’ practical benefits and cultural significance, playing to escape the pressures of a stressful job, hosting successful players from around the world, and utilizing the game as a metaphor for larger national and international issues.

Curated by Shannon Bailey, Chief Curator, and Emily Allred, Curator, World Chess Hall of Fame.

Maker unknown
American Bicentennial: 1976 vs. 1776
Date unknown
King size: 5 ½ in.
Plaster
Collection of the World Chess Hall of Fame, gift of Harvey and Teddi Robbins
At the same time, chess, with its two opposing sides, provides a perfect medium for artists to illustrate the stakes of elections. One advertisement pairs Edmund Burke’s quote “All that is necessary for the forces of evil to prevail in the world is for good men to do nothing,” with a photograph of a chess set and a reminder to vote.
The World Chess Hall of Fame (WCHOF) has a large collection of politically themed chess sets, illustrating presidents from George Washington to Donald Trump. Many of these are new donations to the WCHOF’s collection from Bernice and Floyd Sarisohn, two prolific American chess set collectors. Their donations include sets depicting historic moments, like the historic 2008 election in which Barack Obama became the first African-American person to serve as president. Others catalogue darker moments in the history of the presidency, like the 1972 Watergate scandal chess set.

**Maker unknown**

**Watergate Chess Set**

c. mid-late 20th century

King size: Nixon: 4 ½ in.

Ceramic and paint

Collection of the World Chess Hall of Fame, gift of Bernice and Floyd Sarisohn

**Maker unknown**

**Democrats vs. Republicans**

c. 2000s

King size: Kennedy: 5 ¼ in.

Resin

Collection of the World Chess Hall of Fame, gift of Bernice and Floyd Sarisohn

**Maker unknown**

**American Presidents vs. USSR and Russian Politicians**

c. 2016-2020

King size: 2 ¾ in.

Lacquered and painted wood

Collection of the World Chess Hall of Fame
Power in Check: Chess and the American Presidency includes a colorful array of chess sets, cartoons, and photographs illustrating the connections between the game of kings and the presidency. Among the highlights are Doug Anderson’s playful chess set illustrating the 1996 election in which Bill Clinton and Bob Dole competed for the presidency. The comical chess set includes the candidates and supporters, illustrating the energy of a campaign. Another highlight is a chess set made from wood from a tree at Thomas Jefferson’s home of Monticello, which was believed to have been planted by the president himself. A photograph of the legendary Polgar sisters—Susan, Sofia, and Judit—meeting with George Bush illustrates some of the chess world’s strongest players alongside the United States’ commander-in-chief. Visitors to Power in Check will also be able to listen to journalist and Grandmaster Lubomir Kavalek’s reading of President Richard Nixon’s telegram congratulating Bobby Fischer for his victory in the 1972 World Chess Championship. Alongside these artifacts, the exhibition will feature a digital interactive that will allow visitors to learn more about each president’s relationship with chess.
ZSUZSA
ZSÓFIA
JUDIT

POLGAR

TACTICS

77 chess combinations

László Polgár
Polgar Tactics: 77 Chess Combinations
1991
3 3/8 x 2 9/16 x 3/4 in.
Paper
Collection of the World Chess Hall of Fame,
gift of John Donaldson

Maker unknown
Russian Politicians vs. American Politicians
c. 1990s
King size: 2 3/4 in.
Board: 11 1/2 x 11 1/2 in.
Box: 5 3/4 x 11 1/2 x 1 9/16 in.
Wood lacquered and painted
Collection of the World Chess Hall of Fame

Lois Harlowe
Civil War Chess Set
c. mid-late 20th century
King size: Abraham Lincoln: 7 5/16 in.
Ceramic and paint
Collection of the World Chess Hall of Fame,
gift of Ray Harlowe

Jack Knightlinger
President Ronald Reagan and the National Elementary School Chess Champions from Indianapolis, Indiana
1983
8 x 9 15/16 in.
Photograph
Collection of the World Chess Hall of Fame,
gift of John Donaldson

Maker unknown
Dwight Eisenhower vs. Adlai Stevenson
1952
King size: Eisenhower: 3 11/16 in.; Stevenson: 3 9/16 in.
Wood
Collection of the World Chess Hall of Fame,
gift of Bernice and Floyd Sarisohn

László Polgár
Polgar Tactics: 77 Chess Combinations
1991
3 3/8 x 2 9/16 x 3/4 in.
Paper
Collection of the World Chess Hall of Fame,
gift of John Donaldson
1. George Washington (b. 1732-d. 1799)
First President
In office: April 30, 1789-March 4, 1797
Political Party: None

2. John Adams (b. 1735-d. 1826)
Second President
In office: March 4, 1797-March 4, 1801
Political Party: Federalist

3. Thomas Jefferson (b. 1743-d. 1826)
Third President
In office: March 4, 1801-March 4, 1809
Political Party: Democratic-Republican

4. James Madison (b. 1751-d. 1836)
Fourth President
In office: March 4, 1809-March 4, 1817
Political Party: Democratic-Republican

5. James Monroe (b. 1758-d. 1831)
Fifth President
In office: March 4, 1817-March 4, 1825
Political Party: Democratic-Republican

6. John Quincy Adams (b. 1767-d. 1848)
Sixth President
In office: March 4, 1825-March 4, 1829
Political Party: Democratic-Republican

7. Andrew Jackson (b. 1767-d. 1845)
Seventh President
In office: March 4, 1829-March 4, 1837
Political Party: Democratic

8. Millard Fillmore (b. 1800-d. 1874)
Thirteenth President
In office: July 9, 1850-March 4, 1853
Political Party: Whig

9. Abraham Lincoln (b. 1809-d. 1865)
Sixteenth President
In office: March 4, 1861-April 15, 1865
Political Party: Republican

10. Ulysses S. Grant (b. 1822-d. 1885)
Eighteenth President
In office: March 4, 1869-March 4, 1877
Political Party: Republican

11. Rutherford B. Hayes (b. 1822-d. 1893)
Nineteenth President
In office: March 4, 1877-March 4, 1881
Political Party: Republican

12. James A. Garfield (b. 1831-d. 1881)
Twentieth President
In office: March 4, 1881-September 19, 1881
Political Party: Republican

13. Grover Cleveland (b. 1837-d. 1908)
Twenty-second and Twenty-fourth President
In office: March 4, 1885-March 4, 1889 (first term)
March 4, 1893-March 4, 1897 (second term)
Political Party: Republican

14. Theodore Roosevelt (b. 1858-d. 1919)
Twenty-sixth President
In office: September 14, 1901-March 4, 1909
Political Party: Republican

15. William Howard Taft (b. 1857-d. 1930)
Twenty-seventh President
In office: March 4, 1909-March 4, 1913
Political Party: Republican

16. Woodrow Wilson (b. 1856-d. 1924)
Twenty-eighth President
In office: March 4, 1913-March 4, 1921
Political Party: Democrat

17. Warren G. Harding (b. 1865-d. 1923)
Twenty-ninth President
In office: March 4, 1921-August 2, 1923
Political Party: Republican

18. Calvin Coolidge (b. 1872-d. 1933)
Thirty-first President
In office: August 2, 1923-March 4, 1929
Political Party: Republican

19. Herbert Hoover (b. 1874-d. 1964)
Thirty-first President
In office: March 4, 1929-March 4, 1933
Political Party: Republican

20. Franklin D. Roosevelt (b. 1882-d. 1945)
Thirty-second President
In office: March 4, 1933-April 12, 1945
Political Party: Democrat

21. Harry S. Truman (b. 1884-d. 1972)
Thirty-third President
In office: April 12, 1945-January 20, 1953
Political Party: Democrat

22. John F. Kennedy (b. 1917-d. 1963)
Thirty-fifth President
In office: January 20, 1961-November 22, 1963
Political Party: Democrat

23. James Carter (b. 1924)
Thirty-ninth President
In office: January 20, 1977-January 20, 1981
Political Party: Democrat

24. William Clinton (b. 1946)
Forty-second President
In office: January 20, 1993-January 20, 2001
Political Party: Democrat

25. Barack Obama (b. 1961)
Forty-fourth President
In office: January 20, 2009-January 20, 2017
Political Party: Democrat
1. Martin van Buren (b. 1782-d. 1862)  
Eighth President  
In office: March 4, 1837-March 4, 1841  
Political Party: Democratic

2. William Henry Harrison (b. 1773-d. 1841)  
Ninth President  
In office: March 4, 1841-April 4, 1841  
Political Party: Whig

3. John Tyler (b. 1790-d. 1862)  
Tenth President  
In office: April 4, 1841-March 4, 1845  
Political Party: Whig

4. James Polk (b. 1795-d. 1849)  
Eleventh President  
In office: March 4, 1845-March 4, 1849  
Political Party: Democrat

5. Zachary Taylor (b. 1808-d. 1850)  
Twelfth President  
In office: March 4, 1849-July 9, 1850  
Political Party: Whig

6. Franklin Pierce (b. 1804-d. 1869)  
Fourteenth President  
In office: March 4, 1853-March 4, 1857  
Political Party: Democrat

7. James Buchanan (b. 1791-d. 1868)  
Fifteenth President  
In office: March 4, 1857-March 4, 1861  
Political Party: Democrat

8. Andrew Johnson (b. 1808-d. 1875)  
Seventeenth President  
In office: April 15, 1865-March 4, 1869  
Political Party: Democrat

9. Chester A. Arthur (b. 1830-d. 1886)  
Twenty-first President  
In office: September 19, 1881-March 4, 1885  
Political Party: Republican

10. Benjamin Harrison (b. 1833-d. 1901)  
Twenty-third President  
In office: March 4, 1889-March 4, 1893  
Political Party: Republican

11. William McKinley (b. 1843-d. 1901)  
Twenty-fifth President  
In office: March 4, 1897-September 14, 1901  
Political Party: Republican

Thirty-fourth President  
In office: January 20, 1953-January 20, 1961  
Political Party: Republican

13. Lyndon B. Johnson (b. 1908-d. 1973)  
Thirty-sixth President  
In office: November 22, 1963-January 20, 1969  
Political Party: Democrat

Thirty-seventh President  
In office: January 20, 1969-August 9, 1974  
Political Party: Republican

15. Gerald Ford (b. 1913-d. 2006)  
Thirty-eighth President  
In office: August 9, 1974-January 20, 1977  
Political Party: Republican

Fortieth President  
In office: January 20, 1981-January 20, 1989  
Political Party: Republican

Forty-first President  
In office: January 20, 1989-January 20, 1993  
Political Party: Republican

18. George W. Bush (b. 1946)  
Forty-third President  
In office: January 20, 2001-January 20, 2009  
Political Party: Republican

19. Donald Trump (b. 1946)*  
Forty-fifth President  
In office: January 20, 2017-Present  
Political Party: Republican

* No evidence that he is a chess player. Donald Trump made the ceremonial opening move at the 1994 Candidates Tournament.
Power in Check:
Chess and the American Presidency

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Curated by Shannon Bailey, Chief Curator, and Emily Allred, Curator, World Chess Hall of Fame.

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