

# The Intentional Design of the Oval Office Creating a Symbol of the Presidency

By

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The typical office is a desk and chair in a small room that holds a feeling of tension and productivity. Usually, whoever steps foot in that room wants to sit down and get to work. The famous Oval Office in the West Wing of the White House is referred to as an office. Built in 1909, it is the main office of the president where daily work duties take place, but it is also more than that.<sup>1</sup> The interior design of the room is ever changing with each presidency, and all presidents take a slightly different approach.<sup>2</sup> However, many architectural and aesthetic aspects remain the same, and serve as a symbol of democracy. The strategic design of the Oval Office allows it to be more than a place of work, but a symbol of the presidency and its history. The shape and size, the artwork, the focal points, and the aura of the Oval Office bring together a room that is symbolically powerful.

The shape and size of the Oval Office symbolize the presidency and its powers (Figure A). The oval shape is tied to a traditional greeting originally used by President George Washington. This greeting involves guests forming a semicircle and allows all guests to feel equally in power.<sup>3</sup> The idea of the president respectfully and inclusively greeting visitors is what the presidency is about and is therefore represented in the circular shape of the office. In addition, the oval shape adds a pronounced effect visually, which sets it apart from other rooms. Moreover, architects designed the room to be a medial size on purpose so that it is “comfortable” to whoever is inside, and not overwhelming.<sup>4</sup> This symbolizes the presidency humbly, and in a way that does not brag. If it was a very large office, the presidency and its level of power might be perceived differently from foreign guests. The height of the ceiling is unusually tall,

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<sup>1</sup> “Why is the Oval Office Oval?,” *The White House Historical Association (WHHA)*, accessed January 31, 2022, <https://www.whitehousehistory.org/questions/why-is-the-oval-office-oval>.

<sup>2</sup> Larry Buchanan and Matt Stevens, “The Art in the Oval Office Tells a Story. Here’s How to See It,” *New York Times*, May 5, 2021.

<sup>3</sup> WHHA, 2022.

<sup>4</sup> Erskine Bowles, interview by Harriet Brantley, Charlotte, January 31, 2022.

measuring eighteen feet, six inches.<sup>5</sup> This allows the room to have an airy, open feel, representing the presidency more peacefully, despite any argument or hostility.<sup>6</sup> Lastly, the many windows allow an abundance of light to flow into the room, illuminating it, along with the bright lights inside the Oval Office that are never turned off.<sup>7</sup> Even in the middle of the night, the office is shining, and if there is gloomy weather outside, the room remains bright.<sup>8</sup> This is done to symbolize the never ceasing hope of the presidency, and therefore, democracy. These simple components of the room make it more than an office where work gets done and start to make it a symbol.

The artwork the president selects to go in the Oval Office symbolizes who inspires them and what their goals may be. Each president that serves gets to hang any artwork, photographs, or busts that they please. Also, they decide the color pallet for the room including drapery and rug color. For example, President Biden hung a picture of Franklin D. Roosevelt directly above the fireplace; and now he is embracing Roosevelt's "New Deal spirit" from proposing many spending plans (Figure B).<sup>9</sup> Clearly, the artwork in the Oval Office can foretell what the president's hopes are, and who they admire. Moreover, foreign leaders who come into the Oval Office to meet with the president will often be sure to look around the room at what is on the walls and tables before the meeting starts.<sup>10</sup> There is no doubt that one can learn about the president's personality and values from their artwork. It gives an impression of the president before a person has even met them. The office is intentionally designed in a way that leaves

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<sup>5</sup>Noel Grove, *Inside the White House* (Washington D.C.: The White House Historical Association, 2013), 90.

<sup>6</sup> Bowles, 2022

<sup>7</sup> "President Clinton's Tour of the Oval Office" (C-SPAN), posted July 20, 2018, accessed January 31, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=heh-OyhF4YY>.

<sup>8</sup> Barack Obama, *A Promised Land* (New York: Random House, 2020), 205-206.

<sup>9</sup> Buchanan and Stevens, 2021.

<sup>10</sup> Bowles, 2022

room for presidents to add their personal touch so that they can be reflected in the room (Figure C). Given that the president can add a fragment of themselves and their aspirations into the room in the form of artwork automatically makes it more than a workspace.

The presidency is well represented by dramatic focal points in the Oval Office (Figure D). The Resolute Desk is a main focal point of the room, and what people's eyes are drawn to. It dates to 1854, when Americans rescued the English Resolute Ship. Later, Queen Victoria had a desk made from its original timbers and gifted it to America in 1880.<sup>11</sup> This desk has a plaque that says, "a memorial of the courtesy and loving kindness."<sup>12</sup> It is a symbol of the nation's duty and service to other countries, which makes it more than a work desk. Moreover, there is a photo with John Kennedy working at the desk, and his son, John Kennedy, Jr., as a toddler sticking his head out of the front opening of the desk.<sup>13</sup> This picture became famous and adds to the personality of the room, giving it a youthful feel. Many people remember this picture and are reminded of it when they think about the Oval Office. The Resolute Desk is not just a working desk, it is a symbol of memories made in the Oval Office and the importance of the United States' role as an ally to other nations.

Other focal points in the room are the Presidential Seal and the two sofas, which help to emphasize important roles of the president. The Presidential Seal essentially shows the nation's bird, a bald eagle, holding an olive branch in one claw and arrows in the other. This symbol is centered on the rug of the Oval Office and is also on a flag behind the desk. Its details can change slightly depending on the state of the country. An example of this alteration is how during World War I and World War II, the eagle's head was turned facing the spears. However,

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<sup>11</sup> C-SPAN, 2018

<sup>12</sup> Laura Bush, *Spoken from the Heart* (New York: Simon & Schuster, Inc., 2010), 247.

<sup>13</sup> Grove, 2013, 94.

after World War II, President Truman changed it so that the eagle's head faced in the direction of the olive branch.<sup>14</sup> Since the olive branch represents a type of peace, he felt it was necessary to change the seal to reflect the nation after the war. This proves how little details in the Oval Office create a representation of the nation and the presidency. The final focal point in the room are the two sofas that face each other. This is typically where guests greet the president and where gatherings happen. The position of the two sofas in relation to each other is purposeful so that in meetings, the feeling of togetherness is promoted, as well as the power of facing one another.<sup>15</sup> It also forms a type of circle when chairs are added around the sofas, which makes everyone feel included. Greetings and meetings with foreign leaders are when they get their impressions about the nation and the president. Therefore, it is important that the nation be represented in a whole way, and this feature of the Oval Office helps make that happen. The focal points of the room draw attention to what matters in the presidency and make it a place of big-picture thinking, rather than just one where phone calls are made.

On the contrary, one could argue that the Oval Office is predominately used by the President and their staff for work and daily tasks. In this room, meetings are held regularly, and the duties of the president are carried out (Figure E). If it was more of a symbol, the room would be treated like a museum; however, it is not. The room is a fully functioning office: while Clinton was president, he took three hours every day to think, reflect, and read in the Oval Office.<sup>16</sup> This is what offices are used for. Additionally, just like the Oval Office, the workrooms of other national leaders such as China's Xi Jinping and Russia's Vladimir Putin have similar items one might consider symbolic such as flags and decorations (Figure F and Figure G).<sup>17</sup> But

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<sup>14</sup> C-SPAN, 2018

<sup>15</sup> Bowles, 2022

<sup>16</sup> Bowles, 2022

<sup>17</sup> Izin Akhabau, "In Pics: How do Political Leaders' Offices Compare?" *BBC News*, November 5, 2015.

they are nonetheless working offices. The Oval Office is like those of other national leaders, and all those leaders get work done in their offices. The Oval Office's main job is to serve as a place of practical work function.

The overall visual and historical aura of the Oval Office causes the room to be influential and hold the richness of the nation. Because of the history that has been made in the Oval Office, there is a certain mood or aura whenever someone steps inside. Presidents such as George Bush have used this mood to remind people of their power as president. They would bring people who opposed them to the Oval Office to “underscore the significance of the issues” that divide them.<sup>18</sup> The fact that the president takes time to do this portrays how symbolic the room is, and how much of an influence it has on those inside. People, especially tourists, usually pause before entering the room to take all the richness in.<sup>19</sup> The Oval Office is in the West Wing of the White House where there is less going on, which makes for a calm environment where people can really experience the room. This location was purposeful so that the room can be isolated from chaos and its symbolism can be fully recognized. People's moods seem to be dominated by the sheer power of the room when they walk in, making any negative feelings that they may have had disappear.<sup>20</sup> If someone's mood can be altered by the room, that proves it is a powerful place, and so much more than an office.

Another reason for the rich historical aura of the Oval Office is that several important and monumental announcements have been made in the office.<sup>21</sup> The president's address to the nation on 9/11, Richard Nixon's decision to resign, and many more (Figure H). The fact that the

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<sup>18</sup> Cannon, 2004.

<sup>19</sup> “President Obama on the Oval Office” (C-SPAN), posted August 31, 2010, accessed January 14, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q8gnBnKZ0HA>.

<sup>20</sup> Bowles, 2022

<sup>21</sup> Grove, 2013, 97.

nation is seeing the president in the Oval Office on television during these vulnerable times turns it into a sacred place; and a place that people will always remember. Furthermore, the president signs bills that have been approved by Congress in the Oval Office, which is a big aspect of the presidency, and includes lots of publicity in the office. All the pictures from those signings not only familiarize people with the room, but also portray how that room is a symbol of the president's role as Chief Executive. The many crucial matters that are decided on in this room leave marks on it. They may not be visible, but one can certainly feel that they are there. The room becomes much more than an office: it becomes a tangible version of history.

Designed and crafted into something that is a representation of the very principles that formed the government of the United States of America, it would be a terrible understatement to call this room just an office. Democracy and the executive branch are carved into the walls of the Oval Office. The reason laws are in place, the reason policeman direct traffic; the reason that every individual has rights, and the reason everyone has freedom to live in their desired way is because of America's government. Traditional office spaces seem to be less significant in this age due to new technology and other styles of work. However, the Oval Office remains immensely important because of what it represents and the power it holds in its walls.

Figure A: The Oval Office during Christmas time in 2001. Image shows a view of the shape, size, and height of the room.<sup>22</sup>



Figure B: President Biden's portrait of Franklin D. Roosevelt above the fireplace.<sup>23</sup>



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<sup>22</sup> Leslie Calderone, provided by email, February 1, 2022.

<sup>23</sup> Buchanan and Stevens, 2021.



Figure C: Another example of the president's artwork. This is during the George W. Bush administration.<sup>24</sup>



Figure D: The three main focal points of the Oval Office. The Resolute Desk, the Presidential Seal on the rug, and the two striped sofas.<sup>25</sup>



<sup>24</sup> Calderone, 2022.

<sup>25</sup> Calderone, 2022.

Figure E: Gerald Ford busy at work in the Oval Office.<sup>26</sup>

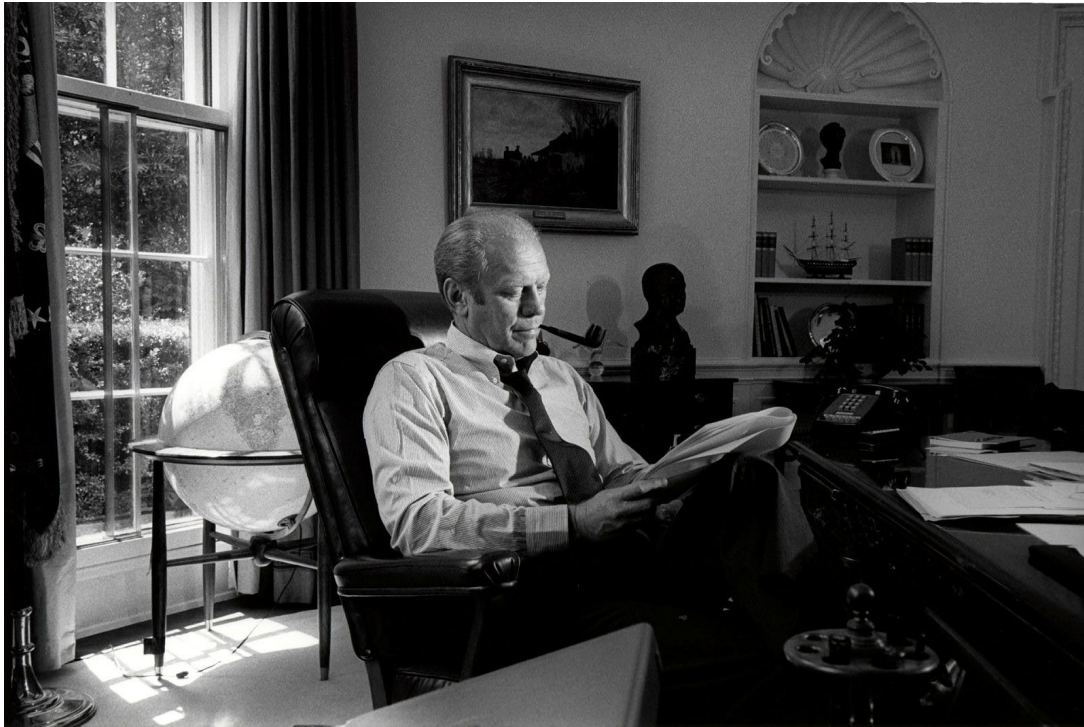


Figure F: Russia's leader Vladimir Putin in his office with flags and a statue.<sup>27</sup>



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<sup>26</sup> Calderone, 2022.

<sup>27</sup> Akhabau, 2015.



Figure G: China's leader Xi Jinping in his workspace with lots of flowers and plants.<sup>28</sup>

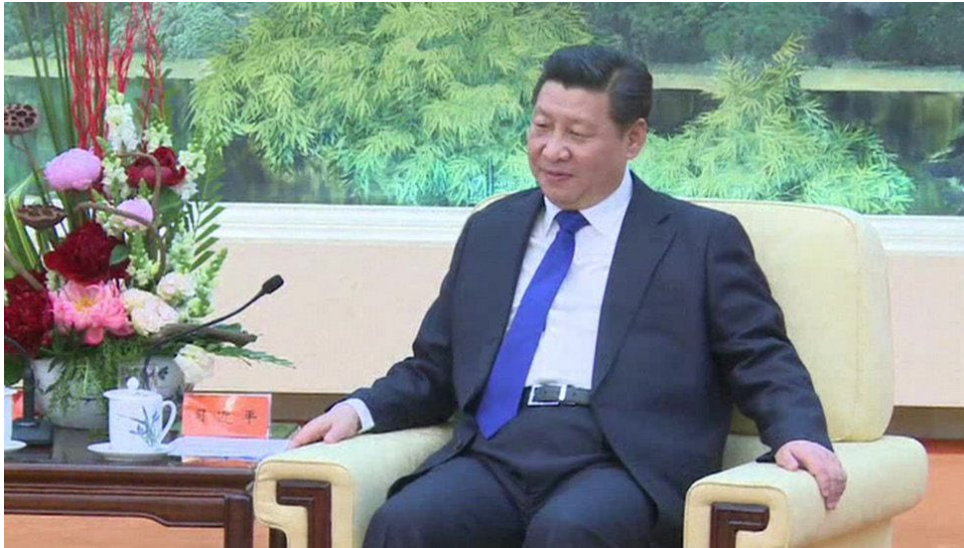


Figure H: John F. Kennedy giving an address from the Oval Office during the Cuban Missile Crisis.<sup>29</sup>



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<sup>28</sup> Akhabau, 2015.

<sup>29</sup> Calderone, 2022.

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I pledge my honor that I have neither given nor received aid on this paper.

X Harriet Blanteau